**XCOM: The Advent Directive**

by [Xabiar](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Xabiar)

**Summary**

Australia has been annexed, the United Nations is in chaos, the world is under siege and the Ethereals have taken the field. Facing the full might of the Ethereal Collective, the Commander must rally XCOM, the newly formed ADVENT, and several other allies and rivals to unite the divided nations by any means necessary, for failure now will mean the fall of humanity once and for all.
Introduction

This story is based on XCOM: Enemy Within with the Long War mod.

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Please note that the reviews contain major spoilers.

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This story may contain material some may find disturbing.

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This story is a sequel to XCOM: The Atlas Protocol

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I do not own any characters explicitly mentioned in XCOM: Enemy Unknown/Within/2

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Beta Reader (Chapters 0 – 12): Ashardalon125

Beta Readers (Chapters 13 – 23): BloodsplatBOOM, Thuzan117 and Ashardalon125

Beta Readers (Chapters 24 – Present): BloodsplatBOOM, Edumesh, Thuzan117 and Ashardalon125

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There are currently three spin-off stories written for this series by other authors, and mostly relate to subjects that appear as the story develops. It is recommended you read through Act III before starting them, but it is not required. All spin-off stories linked are considered canon in the in-universe continuity:

XCOM: New Blood by OfficialWeedTesterguy

XCOM: Pantheon Rising by Areleh

The Chronicles of Salvation by Edumesh

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Galleries for Seals, Emblems, and Character Art are in the following Links

Cover Art, Seals, and Emblems are done by HailtotheKing

Cover Art

Seals and Emblems

ADVENT Legions

Characters

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Dramatis Personae

(Please note that not all characters are listed)

XCOM-Affiliated:

The Commander – The Commander of the XCOM

Ariel Jackson – Central Officer of XCOM Analysis and Communications

Moira Vahlen – Head of XCOM Research and Development

Raymond Shen – Head of XCOM Engineering
In the aftermath of the destruction of the alien Dreadnought, many different parties make moves to take advantage of the peaceful lull. The Council of Nations decrees to send a representative to keep an eye on XCOM and the increasingly independent Commander. As a compromise between the differing factions in the Council, Herman Diederick is chosen to represent the Council’s interests and sent to the Citadel to begin reporting. In addition to sending a public representative, the Council also creates a secret counterintelligence squad led by a former UN assassin to keep an eye on XCOM and their covert operations.

Around the same time, the illusive, ancient, and secretive organization known as EXALT forges a faux alliance with the aliens, planning to utilize them to gain their technology and remove the ones they view as standing in their way of total world control: XCOM and the United Nations. The aliens accept their agreement and begin providing them with advanced tech and weaponry.

XCOM continues work on developing tech and tactics to use against the alien threat, and begin devoting resources to several new XCOM initiatives: Genetic Modification and the MEC Project, both heavily based on the alien substance identified as MELD. In addition, the Commander orders
XCOM Intelligence to begin work to find out more about EXALT.

After stopping several alien attacks, EXALT lures XCOM into a trap and surprises them, taking out several of their best soldiers. Soon after XCOM Intelligence locates a shell company utilized by EXALT, and eventually locate one of their hidden bases with the help of the Council Shadow team. With the advantage of surprise, and the new MEC troopers, XCOM easily wipes out the EXALT installation.

Soon after the raid in EXALT, the Commander receives an offer from the President of Russia to visit, and they form a secret alliance, planning to send resources through proxy countries to circumvent the restriction on trading alien tech with Council Nations. Through this XCOM forges alliances with several more countries, including Ukraine and Armenia, much to the dismay of the Council, who are further antagonized when the Commander orders an airstrike in Newfoundland to destroy a chrysalid breeding ground.

Soon after that, Dr. Vahlen begins applying her genetic modifications to XCOM soldiers, after first performing experiments on prisoners to weed out adverse effects, and they prove to be extremely effective against EXALT and alien forces. Israel also begins acting suspiciously and XCOM Intelligence is directed to determine the reason for it. After infiltrating an Israeli military camp, they retrieve several major documents, including one entitled Operation: ADVENT, which detailed Israel’s plans to start a war with various Middle Eastern nations.

EXALT suffers several defeats at the hands of XCOM, prompting the aliens to begin questioning if their alliance is truly beneficial. Several times they remove psionic subjects that EXALT is experimenting on for their own purposes, though one escapes and EXALT sends out people to track her down.

Following a failed attempt by EXALT to discredit XCOM, the Supreme Leader of North Korea contacts the Commander, and after some negotiations, agree to join as an ally of XCOM. Shortly after that, an Ethereal by the name of Aegis telepathically contacts the Commander, and reveals the location of one of EXALT’s major bases. XCOM acts on this information, and takes control of the base and speaks for the first time with the Director of EXALT.

Due to the EXALT base being in China, and previous tensions between them and XCOM, China withdraws from the Council and pulls their funding. In response the Commander allies XCOM with Taiwan and ASEAN. Shortly after, an XCOM soldier turns himself into custody, revealing himself to be an alien infiltrator, and provides XCOM with a wealth of information, including the location of an alien base controlled by Sectoids on Earth. XCOM sends two squads to assault the base and they take it successfully, though suffer serious losses at the hands of a deadly psionic Hive Commander.

After the loss of their base, and EXALT consistently losses to XCOM, the Ethereals take a direct interest in EXALT and send down the Ethereal known as the Ravaged One to direct EXALT to their specific goals. The Ravaged One then lures XCOM into a trap and easily wipes out the squad, warning XCOM to surrender or face a war with the Ethereals.

Just after XCOM recovers from that attack, the Ravaged One launches an attack on New York, one that takes the lives of several more soldiers, and hundreds of thousands of civilians, but is ultimately driven back with the combined might of XCOM psions, soldiers and the local police and soldiers. EXALT at this point decides to put in motion their plan to betray the aliens, having made a tenuous truce with XCOM earlier for the sake of the world.

With the world in a precarious position, the Commander reveals the Advent Directive; his plan to replace the United Nations and establish a world government with true power and authority, one
which XCOM would be an ally to. He convinces multiple countries of the necessity, and prepares to unveil it when the time is right.

The aliens decrease their attacks, giving XCOM a brief period of peace which is shattered when the Ravaged One leads an attack directly against the Citadel, killing nearly a third of XCOM’s soldiers and several of their command staff before being killed by the combined might of the XCOM psions.

After the unsuccessful attack, EXALT puts their plan in motion to destabilize the world as a final requirement for their alliance, and manipulates Israel and Brazil into going to war with nearby nations, threatening to throw the world into chaos as the aliens prepare a retaliation. Soon after the Commander himself meets the Director, and he requests that she take command of the new ADVENT organization and disperse the remaining EXALT members into its ranks for the greater good, on the condition that EXALT has to die forever. She agrees and prepares to take control of the new world government.

It ends with the aliens launching an all-out attack on Australia and taking the continent. At the same time XCOM responds to an abduction report and discover the Ethereal Aegis waiting for them who turns himself into XCOM custody. As the aliens continue to stabilize Australia, the world frantically attempts to ready itself for a war they are unprepared for and the Commander wastes no times in preparing his first response, starting with the execution of the Demeter Contingency.
Prologue - The Last Command

Skyranger, en route to Council of Nations HQ

A little bit of extra practice.

The pistol in his hand levitated a few inches into the air and with a twitch of his fingers, he sent it lazily spinning in a circle.

It was getting much easier, and he was getting used to the stares that he got from a rather basic act of telekinesis. Especially from his former team.

Or what was left of them, anyway.

“That’s going to take some getting used to,” Ethan commented, eyeing the pistol as the Commander released his telekinetic hold on the weapon and it fell gently back into his hand. Ethan himself was clad in the new red and black armor of the ADVENT Officers, while the rest of them wore the new armor of the Lancer Division, most notably displaying the rounded black helmets derived from Israeli tech.

“I’ll keep it to a minimum,” the Commander promised, amused, and imagined several smiles were underneath the helmets of the men and women around him.

Reunions had been rather understated with everyone being busy preparing to reveal ADVENT, as well as trying to figure out the best way to defend against the upcoming attacks. It would take some time for the aliens to completely subdue Australia…but that time was very, very short.

Which meant that the Demeter Contingency had decisively gone into effect hours after the initial attack.

After Aegis had shown up and surrendered.

That…that was an issue that had to be dealt with later. Truthfully he wasn’t quite sure what to think of it yet. But he was sure that Aegis was not going to suddenly turn on them. He had no reason to, as he had shown during the brief fight with Patricia.

If he had wanted to win, he could have.

The question was why he hadn’t. That was a question to have answered after the Council was disposed of, the United Nations destroyed and ADVENT established. If all went according to plan, it would happen within the next day.

But he couldn’t quite shake the feeling like not everything was going to go according to plan. It never did. But the plan had been meticulous and he had the best team possible to carry it out. Franklin, Sophie, David, Hamilton, Rey, Travis, Jordan and Ethan. Some of his team that were still willing to fight beside him for one last mission.

A mission that was personal for all of them, but especially for his team. Though contrary to what it apparently seemed, he felt no need to take revenge. Like it or not, the Council had put him in charge of XCOM, and that deserved something. As the scope of the war progressed, the Council had gone from something of an irritating rival to a powerless, vindictive group. He could no longer
muster up any strong feelings for them. His rationale was simple now: They were an obstacle in uniting the human race, and needed to be removed.

But it was not the same for the rest of his team. It was the United Nations who had broken their promise for fair trials and it was the United Nations who had essentially sentenced them to torture and slow painful deaths, had EXALT not rescued them.

They deserved justice, and the Commander saw no reason to exclude them from the destruction of the organization that was responsible for the worst times of their lives. Revenge or justice, in this case it seemed the same to him. Unlike others, he never really considered the two mutually exclusive.

It hadn’t been hard to find volunteers. Every one of his former team had requested to join him, but in the end, there was only a limited number of spots on a skyranger, and he could only take the best. In this case, those around him.

If nothing else, he was happy that all of them had found a new life within EXALT, as questionable as the entire organization was. But they’d taken his people in, and that was something he couldn’t ignore. It really was fascinating just how well most of them had assimilated into EXALT. Almost all of them had spouses, and many had children.

Unfortunately, those children would grow up during an alien invasion, if they survived at all.

“Question,” Rey asked, lacing her fingers together and resting her arms on her armored knees. “Once you took over XCOM, did you try and find us?”

The Commander gave her a wry smile. “Of course I did. And then learned that everyone was dead. Executed, so the records went. EXALT did a good job, definitely fooled me.”

“Maybe a little too well,” Ethan grumbled. “I’d always wondered if it was a good idea to be that thorough, in case it turned out that some of us weren’t dead and would try to reconnect. Would kinda put a damper on that.”

“Be honest,” Franklin chided. “How many of us really expected the United Nations to spare the Commander?”

“Certainly not me,” the Commander answered, and all of them chuckled at that.

“I saw the execution,” Ethan said. “You had quite an audience for it as well.”

“No shortage of witnesses for that execution,” Sophie chimed in. “Guess the drugs were fake.”

“Oh no,” the Commander snorted at the memory. “Whatever they used was very real. And painful. They might not have wanted to kill me, but they sure didn’t have any problems being gentle.”

“Can’t blame them, I suppose,” Ethan conceded.

“This is Big Sky to Diamondback Team,” Big Sky said, making all of them snap to attention. “We’re coming in now. Showtime, Commander.”

“Copy that,” the Commander said, mentally running through the list while his soldiers turned to look at him as he stood up in the middle of the skyranger. “Stick to the plan, remember? When the time comes, I’ll send the signal.”

“Schematics and data still good?” Travis asked.
“Should be,” the Commander nodded. “Between eighteen and twenty-four security personnel, not including staff. Should be easy enough for you to take out.”

He could hear the smile in Rey’s voice. “Don’t worry about a thing, Commander. We’ve only gotten better since you last saw us.”

“Once I deal with the Council, I’ll help you clean up,” the Commander confirmed. “I don’t think it’ll take long. Most aren’t soldiers.”

“Don’t think it would matter one way or another,” Hamilton pointed out ruefully. “Not much you can do against someone who can lift you in the air with a thought.”

The Commander rolled his eyes, feeling their simultaneous amusement and trepidation at that. Showing it or not, they weren’t all entirely comfortable with the idea that he could lift things with a motion. “It doesn’t work quite like that,” he said. “And telekinesis is a lot more than just thinking it. You’re confusing it with telepathy.”

“Weird all the same,” Hamilton answered, quickly raising a hand. “Uh, no offense, Commander.”

“None taken,” he answered as the skyranger began dipping. “I don’t expect everyone to be on board with the whole idea.”

“Well, if there’s anyone who I would trust to use strange magical abilities, it’d be you.” Sophie said.

He smiled at her. “Appreciated.”

“Coming in for a landing,” Big Sky said, the skyranger shuddered as it rested itself on the ground. “Ramp deploying. Good luck, Commander.”

With a hiss the ramp began lowering, and he stepped forward to begin his descent down. He turned back to his team waiting in the shadowed skyranger and gave them his salute. With no hesitation, they returned it and he turned back down to continue forward to the waiting Council.

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Black clouds darkened the skies as the Commander strode forward through a light drizzle that was no doubt going to get worse. Of course it was raining. Fitting, he supposed, it was an accurate reflection about how this day was going to go. The Council Headquarters was a lot more modest than he’d expected. In terms of size, at least. It was definitely one of the most ornate places he’d seen, even from the outside with the elegant landscaping, marble pathways and fresh-looking paint.

Directly at the entrance stood four security guards, looking more nervous than they usually were, though if that was because of him or the alien invasion, he couldn’t say. Likely the latter, but in any event he knew that their Kevlar vests and ballistic weapons would offer them no protection against Ethan and his team.

Leaning against a pillar and protected from the rain, behind the guards, stood Tamara Vasilisa, the former CT agent-turned-diplomat and current Councilor of Russia. Excellent, just the person he wanted to see and who would likely give him an idea of what to expect.

One of the guards held up a hand. “ID?”

All of them knew he was the Commander of XCOM, but protocols were necessary and he handed his XCOM ID and badge to them. They clearly didn’t want to delay him and waved him through
after a cursory glance. Now that he was near, he could definitely sense them better. They were nervous, but not of him.

The aliens then. Made sense.

Tamara pushed herself upright from the pillar and approached him, stone-faced with concern. Not a good omen, for what little that mattered. “You took your time getting here,” she muttered as they began walking towards the doors. “I know your opinion of the Council, but now is really not the time to be antagonizing them.”

“Relax,” the Commander told her calmly, pushing the door open. He found it interesting that she was dressed in a light bulletproof vest and bore the uniform of one expecting combat rather than one of a pure diplomat. He wouldn’t be surprised if they all were similarly prepared, especially given the circumstances. “I’m a little busy with the invasion of Australia if you didn’t notice that. The Council is a secondary priority.”

She rubbed her forehead. “Commander…I respect you here. I’m one of the few that still do, but even you have to realize this has gotten much bigger than what you can handle. You may think you and your…fifty soldiers can somehow protect the entire world, but—“

“I know,” the Commander interrupted, raising a hand as they passed several wide-eyed aides. “And I’ve made preparations. Preparations I assume President Savvin has yet to inform you of?”

She blinked, shooting him a sharp and confused look. “Explain.”

It wasn’t a request, but at the moment it would have to be treated as one. “I’ll explain after the meeting. But trust me, I know that XCOM can’t handle everything. It’s impossible.”

“I know it isn’t ideal,” Tamara admitted, returning her attention forward. “But we have to leverage the UN the best we can. Like it or not, they are the best chance that exists to try and form some kind of cohesive defense—“

“No.”

“Unless you prefer the countries going on their own, then yes,” she continued, not missing a beat. “Or do you know something I don’t?”

“The latter,” he confirmed, following her lead as they stopped in front of an ornate door. “I came to the same conclusion you did. But unfortunately, I don’t have time to fix broken systems. We don’t have time.”

She crossed her arms, fixing him with a piercing stare. “Commander, I don’t oppose radical changes, but the Council…I don’t think you know how bad it is now. Any support I, and you, had is pretty much gone. You’ve been too independent, you have too much history.”

The Commander sighed and rubbed his forehead. Well, he might as well know. Play along a little bit before it all went down. “How bad is it? Tell the truth.”

“They’re going to ask you to step down, firstly,” Tamara stated emotionlessly. “They have a majority and nothing is going to sway them. Agree and you might get an advising position in XCOM, maybe even retain some measure of command if you play your cards right. Refuse and they will arrest you here and now, and this time they will execute you.”

Tamara was clearly expecting him to be somewhat worried, but all he did was raise an eyebrow. “Is that right?” He said, more curious than anything. “Tell me…do they really think that will work?
Do they really think that XCOM is just going to accept that?”

Tamara pinched her nose, looking around to make sure they were alone. “I was afraid you were going to say that,” she muttered under her breath. “But think really carefully before you openly defy the Council. We need unity now and the United Nations isn’t going away. I can’t tell you what to do, but I’m not sure that breaking away will be the best strategy. Because this time…if XCOM becomes a rogue organization…the Council will go public with your identity.”

“Unsurprising,” the Commander commented. “But I’d like to know; how did it even get to this? Last I checked, there was more or less a stalemate.”

“It was after Herman gave his big speech and quit,” Tamara muttered. “One I agreed with, if I’m being honest. But it had the opposite effect he wanted. All it did was make the councilors feel insulted. No one likes being eloquently told they’re idiots. Then after the attack on the Citadel, it came to light that both Bradford and Van Doorn had been killed.”

She fixed him with a resigned stare. “Truthfully, Commander, that’s the main reason things are where they are. The only reason many agreed to let you work in peace was because they trusted Van Doorn, and to an extension, Bradford, to be a moderating influence. With them gone…your only known council is a radical scientist, a Chinese Triad leader and an elderly engineer.”

“I’m assuming they didn’t look at Central Officer Jackson,” the Commander muttered. “And for the record, Psion Patricia Trask is also in my council.”

“They don’t really expect you to promote people unless they agree with you to an extent,” Tamara pointed out. “Which is a legitimate concern.”

“If that were the case, I wouldn’t have put Van Doorn, Shen or Bradford on it,” the Commander stated, staring down at her. “But yes, it is a legitimate point, although one I contest.”

“And then there’s your alliances with…a large number of countries,” Tamara said slowly. “You do what you have to…but allying with the like of Iseul, Luana and Habicht isn’t doing you any favors. They’re dictators, or at least have the characteristics of some. There are quite a few who are worried about a power grab of sorts. And with XCOM refusing to condemn Israel…you can see the concern.”

“If you’re expecting me to have sympathy for the idiots who deciding provoking Israel was a good idea, then I’m afraid I’m going to have to disappoint you,” the Commander stated icily. “Unless Israel gives me a reason not to support them, I hope that they end that war quickly. With Russian and American help, of course.”

“Look, I agree that the Middle East needs to be dealt with,” Tamara said in resignation, frowning. “But I’m telling you why the Council doesn’t feel like you’re the best choice to lead the defense of humanity.”

“Fair enough,” the Commander said with a nod, then looked toward the door. “I think I’ve kept them waiting long enough. Let’s go in. And…” he glanced over at her. “Follow my lead exactly. I have this under control.”

He sensed she was highly skeptical of that claim, but elected not to follow up that particular statement. “Let’s go.”

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It was more or less like what he’d pictured the actual Council Chambers to be like. A circular room
which held the councilors above the lone stand in the middle. The desks themselves were a
conjoined semi-circle, with the councilors spaced out between them. Nameplates were in front of
the respective people, which was useful for him since some of the pronunciations were…unique.

Tamara walked up and quietly took her seat as the Commander weathered the unflinching gazes of
all the councilors on him. The emotions in the air were mixed. Some were worried, others were
sad, still more felt justified and satisfied. In any case he had few friends here. This wasn’t the
meeting he had anticipated, it was a judgement.

One he suspected the verdict had already been decided upon.

Not that it mattered in the end. But he might as well be courteous for the time being. And try to
refrain from resting his hand on his gauss pistol.

There was nearly a half minute of silence before the Speaker leaned forward, his fingers laced
together with a gavel a few inches to his right. “Commander,” he began slowly. “Thank you for
coming.”

The Speaker in person actually wasn’t too far from the silhouette he’d been used to. The Speaker
was a bald man, with an older rounder face than he’d expected, with some wrinkles around the
mouth and cheeks. His voice was still the deep baritone, even without the synthesizing. But now he
distinctly looked resigned, which pretty much confirmed the worst was going to happen.

Still, his first choice of words were interesting. “Thank you, Speaker,” he answered, looking
around the room. “Though I do believe I was the one who suggested this meeting. I thought it was
time for something in-person.”

“And you still managed to be late,” Isabella Narmon, the UK councilor bit out. “Though I’m sure
you’re aware that time is precious at this point.”

He gave her a smile which seemed to infuriate her. “Of course, councilor. Though considering the
current crisis at the moment, that has to take priority for me. As I’ve said before, my focus is
protecting humanity, not-”

“Quiet.” Ennor practically spat, raising a hand. The man looked awful, and the Commander could
completely understand why. Losing the entire country, no, continent, to the aliens would take a toll
on anyone, and he did feel a measure of sympathy for his family who he did sincerely hope were
still alive. “You’ve made your feelings about the United Nations and this body very clear.”

“And I’m afraid that we cannot allow you to operate in the haphazard and dangerous way you have
been,” Councilor Adaora of Nigeria said, her voice hard as she looked down on him. “Your actions
are divisive and antagonistic. Thanks to your actions, we now have China, Germany and Brazil
working apart from us, major allies we need in the coming fights. Your support for Israel is
emboldening them to fight a pointless war at the wrong time, as it is with Brazil.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “I make no apologies for those so-called divisive actions.
Brazil’s collapse was due to EXALT meddling, China was simply reactionary and short-sighted
and I shouldn’t have to remind you about how you attempted to dismantle Germany in an attempt
to discredit me.” He raised a hand to forestall the coming comment. “Whether you realized your
mistake later or not is irrelevant, you helped drive Germany to collapse and I had nothing to do
with it.”

He saw several councilors frown at that and exchange looks. Unsurprising, given that that
particular operation hadn’t been approved by the whole Council, according to Ennor. It probably
wouldn’t change minds, but it did feel good to say.

“Nevertheless, you took advantage,” Councilor Meredith of Canada stated. “A true subordinate of the Council would have encouraged these countries to rejoin the Council. Not simply gather them for his own cabal of rogue nations.”

“And there is your mistake,” the Commander said. “You fail to see that our relationship, specifically between XCOM and the Council, is strictly that of an ally. I have and will maintain that I am perfectly willing to work with you, but I’m under no obligation to make you stronger or encourage nations to capitulate to your ineffective and destructive leadership.”

That certainly didn’t win him any friends if the intakes of breath and stoney faces were anything to go by. Fair enough. “If you were so concerned about me gathering allies outside the Council, then maybe you should have asked them to join you. But no, that would never occur to you. The countries I decided to work with are too small, too insignificant to compare to the world power your nations wield. You would never take Israel or North Korea because of your pride, just as you would never take Taiwan or the countries of ASEAN because of your cowardice.”

Yes, there was definitely anger in the room now, and Tamara was staring at him in disbelief. Clearly, she hadn’t expected him to be this confrontational. “If you’re angry about that,” the Commander continued. “Good. You should be. But actions speak louder than words, and unlike you, I actually follow through on what I believe. While you were obsessed with me, I was focused on actually uniting the world with one cause, and the only cause that matters.” He pointed upward. “Defending our species from the alien threat.”

“And in doing that you encouraged two wars, and the entire continent of Australia is wiped out!” Ennor shouted, face pulsing red. “You failed, Commander. If your goal was to protect the world, then you failed!”

“The first strike was always going to be a failure,” the Commander insisted calmly, looking Ennor calmly in the eyes. “There was nothing you, or I, could do about that. It could have easily been Russia or Argentina who was the first victim, and they would have likely met the same fates. I am sorry about what’s happened, but this needs to be looked at objectively, not out of emotion.”

“Tell that to me when your home has just been destroyed!” He growled. “You had a directive and you failed. End of story.”

“No,” the Commander stated, growing more serious. “We are at war now, not just XCOM, but the world. Your authority over military matters is no more. You don’t know anything about strategy, tactics or actually winning a war. I do. So let me do my job.”

“I’m afraid that there are going to have to be significant changes,” Councilor Lacy of France interrupted slowly, seemingly disturbed after what he’d said. “This war is no longer something that can be handled by one organization, even XCOM, wouldn’t you agree?”

He nodded towards her. “Certainly. I know XCOM can’t defend against this invasion alone.”

“Which is why XCOM is going to be turned over to direct UN control,” Lacy continued, watching him closely. “It will become an official public branch, and will act as the main army of the United Nations in conjunction with NATO.”

“Unfortunately, this will mean you cannot be the Commander of XCOM anymore,” Councilor Tiran of America said, admittedly looking unhappy. “So for the good of the world…we need to ask that you need to step down. I’m sorry, but do this, and we can discuss your role in this war, as we
agree that you still have a place.”

About what he expected. Before he gave his answer, the Commander looked at Ennor. “Let’s say that I step down willingly. Why should I believe you? As I recall, the United Nations has not been entirely reliable when it comes to making deals with me. You even lied to me about being executed.”

“Because Councilor Tiran is right,” Ennor said grimly. “Like it or not, you are still too useful a resource to just throw away. But your place is not as someone who can actually affect the world as you have been. And because I hold to deals I make, but believe what you will.”

“However, refuse and there will be…issues,” Councilor Meredith warned. “We cannot have XCOM acting as a rogue organization, and you will be arrested when you leave here. The loyalty of your soldiers is a problem that will take some time to sort out, but I’m certain your internal council will comply when they learn who you are.”

The Commander smiled at him, chuckling. “I’m afraid not, Councilor. They already know. Bradford and Van Doorn knew as well, as I told them before the attack on the Citadel. And I know they won’t just let me be taken away.”

That revelation appeared to take the councilors by surprise, except Meredith, who just narrowed his eyes. “Perhaps, assuming you aren’t lying. But it changes nothing.”

“Give us your answer, Commander,” the Speaker ordered, raising the gavel. “We cannot delay this any longer.”

“Very well,” the Commander took a breath. “No. I will not step down, and I will not surrender to the likes of you.”

He saw Ennor’s lips twitch, as he presumably struggled not to smile. “Your decision is noted. And this meeting is adjourned.”

The two guards at the end of the room began walking to him, presumably to escort him out. The Commander raised a hand, calling upon his power to make them stop in their tracks. The psionic energy wasn’t strong yet; they still had no idea, though he could sense the confusion of the soldiers. “Wait,” he said. “I do think I’m allowed to say one last thing.”

The Speaker nodded and motioned for the soldiers to remain stopped. With that the Commander released his power. “Go ahead, Commander.”

He smiled, and clicked the button on his wrist giving Ethan the signal. “Councilors, I think that you are unaware of why I actually called this meeting, and it wasn’t for the reason I gave.”

Ennor frowned. “And what other reason could there be?”

“To speak with you before I made my final decision,” the Commander answered. “To see if there was some way I could reasonably solve this situation. Unfortunately, that appears to be impossible.”

Lacy frowned. “You have the arrogance to believe that you could come here and negotiate or demand things from the Council?”

“I had wondered,” the Commander agreed. “For what I’ve done, you owe me that much. But no, Councilor, I didn’t come here for that.”
Now everyone was confused. “I think we’ve heard enough from this,” Ennor said, narrowing his eyes. “Stop talking in riddles or leave.”

“It’s actually very simple, Councilors,” the Commander said smoothly, his lips curling into a humorless smile. “I am not here to reason with you. I am not here to negotiate with you. I am here to kill you.”

Within an instant his hand had grabbed his pistol and he raised, aimed and fired. And the Council watched in shock as the Speaker’s head was blown apart by the gauss round. He turned around and shot the two guards, the magnetically-propelled rounds piercing their vests and helmets with ease, before turning back to the Council.

Now they were in a pure state of panic. Several of them were armed and were raising their weapons, while others were screaming and trying to hide. The Commander focused on Councilor Antonio of Mexico next and fired several rounds into him, sending his body collapsing back into the wall, blood spattering the desks and floor.

The Commander jumped forward towards the armed Councilor Lacy, an inhuman leap that they clearly hadn’t expected, given that he hadn’t told them about his genetic modification. He landed on top of her and quickly put a bullet through her head.

Two opposing sides. Now he gathered the power and focused it towards the two closest people, which happened to be Meredith and Councilor Kyo of Japan. His wrists became sheathed in distorted purple energy and they shouted as they were lifted in the air.

“He’s one of them!” Someone screamed, and he smiled.

He tossed Meredith towards several more councilors who were trying to flee, before turning his focus towards Kyo, concentrating the grip around his head with a twist of his hand, the head snapped sharply to the side and the Commander let him drop to the ground. Councilor Tiran was right behind him, a terrified expression on his face as he fired wildly towards the calm Commander.

The Commander extended a hand, directing his telekinetic grip towards the hand holding the pistol and twisted. Tiran screamed as his wrist was almost ripped off from being torn completely around. He fell to his knees, looking up just in time to see the Commander put a gauss round through his head.

He looked around, and focused on the group of councilors struggling to the door. He leapt towards them, cutting them off and causing them to stumble back in terror. “Alright, stop!” Councilor Adaora pleaded, tears running down her face. “We surrender! Please!”

“You don’t have to kill us!” Councilor Desta of Egypt insisted, face white as a sheet while he trembled. “We’re no threat! We’ll reconsider, I promise!”

The Commander pursed his lips. “The time for that is long passed. You signed your death sentence when you insisted I abandon XCOM.” With that he fired several rounds into each of their heads, ensuring that councilors Desta, Adaora and Kagiso would never serve again.

The Commander focused around the room, and sensed another councilor hiding under one of the desks and raised his pistol towards that spot and fired. A scream confirmed that he was killed. “Die! Monster!” He turned towards the shrill female voice just in time to see Councilor Isabella throw one of the wooden chairs at him; a pretty impressive throw, to be honest.
He raised a hand and telekinetically caught it, watching her face drop as she realized it hadn’t worked, then directed it back at her at a terminal velocity. The hard wood slammed into her face and crushed it in a spray of blood, cartilage and brain matter. One more down.

He caught a glimpse of Tamara huddled into a corner, trying to stay as out of it as possible. But she wasn’t a threat, not yet anyway. He leapt onto the elevated floor to hunt for the rest of them. He heard whimpering beneath one of the desks and fired until it stopped making noise. He glanced underneath and confirmed that Councilor Kanti of India was dead.

“You won’t get away with this,” Councilor Meredith breathed from the ground, his leg twisted at an odd angle. “The UN… they—”

He fired and ended his life. One left, by his count.

“He’s right,” the Commander turned to see Ennor standing against the wall, drained and defeated, accepting his fate. “You can’t win this. The UN will investigate. They will find you. And they will kill you like the monster you are. You’ve doomed the world with what you’ve done here.”

The Commander walked over to him, the same humorless smile on his face. “No, they won’t; no I haven’t and I’m going to tell you why.” He gestured at the carnage around the room. “The Council was never the whole issue. It was merely a symptom of another problem. One that is being cured at this very moment.”

His eyes widened as he realized what he was saying. “No… you can’t…”

“Today is the death of the United Nations,” the Commander stated, pointing a metallic finger towards him. “The end of a stagnant and threatening organization which cares more for politics and appeasement than the alien threat. There can be no united humanity when they exist. Which means they need to be removed and something else needs to be put in its place.”

The Commander lowered his hand. “You failed, Ennor. In attempting to destroy and discredit me, you’ve brought about the destruction of everything you care about. But before you die, know that I will win this war. Australia will be freed and the humanity will emerge stronger, safer and united.”

He raised the pistol, looking into the hopeless face of Ennor before pulling the trigger. “But not with you.”

The shot rang out and Ennor slumped to the ground, the blood staining the walls. No longer was he the proud, haughty councilor, now he was just a broken dead man. And the thing was… he honestly wished there had been another way. As much of a piece of work Ennor was… he didn’t deserve to die. None of them did.

But unfortunately, there was no other way.

He turned back towards where Tamara was standing, pistol in hand, looking at him with a combination of horror, disbelief and fear. “You killed them…” she said numbly. “You really killed all of them.”

“I did,” he confirmed, stopping as her pistol twitched. “Relax. If I was going to kill you, you would be dead by now.”

“And why let me live?” She demanded.

“Because I don’t kill my allies,” the Commander said simply. “Russia was always an ally here, and I intend to respect that.”
“Did Savvin know?” She demanded, nodding towards the dead councilors. “Did he know you would do this?”

“He knew I had a plan for the United Nations and Council,” the Commander answered. “Not details. Only a few people knew the full extent.”

“Right,” she swallowed and holstered her pistol. “What happens…?”

The Commander turned to the door and motioned her to follow him. “This way,”

They pushed the doors open and stepped into the scene of a slaughter. The bodies of guards and aides littered the halls, their limbs splayed and twisted in unusual angles, their bodies mangled by the gauss weapons, their faces bearing expressions of surprise and shock.

“Take them outside,” the synthesized voice of Ethan ordered and he saw him with Travis and Rey directing a group of about seven aides and staff forward, most of them were crying and shaking in terror. Ethan strode towards the two of them, his voice synthesized by the helmet. “The defenses have been eliminated, Commander. I presume the Council is dealt with?”

“Correct,” the Commander said. “And are the charges set?”

“The others are working on that now,” Ethan confirmed. “I’m moving the prisoners outside to make disposal easier. I estimate no more than five minutes. This isn’t a large establishment and the bodies here are easily treated.”

“Finish up, then meet me outside,” the Commander ordered, moving towards the exit, Tamara at his side.

“You’re going to blow it all up,” Tamara muttered, looking somewhat shocked at the bodies she stepped over.

“Yes, though this will only be a footnote in history,” the Commander said. “As influential as the Council is, that influence is only known to a few. This will simply be another alien attack which only drove home their intentions towards us after the destruction of the United Nations.”

“So you really weren’t making that up,” she said in amazement. “How…”

He smiled as they stepped outside into a raging rainstorm. “The same as here. Gather the leaders in one place, have a few dedicated people and bring down the establishment. The difficulty of such acts is overestimated. The hard part is what comes after.”

“And what does come after?” She asked with trepidation as they walked towards about a dozen prisoners kept under watch by Travis and Rey. They were soaked now, but neither seemed to mind.

“The creation of the new United Nations,” he answered, observing the building with his hands clasped behind his back. “ADVENT. You will see soon, and it will accomplish what the United Nations could not.”

“And what of me?” She asked. “I might attract suspicion since several people do know my role here.”

“There are several options,” the Commander said, turning to her. “You could have your identity changed and work somewhere within ADVENT suitable for your diplomatic skills. Or you could join XCOM. You were a CT agent and by all accounts, a good one. If you wish to apply those skills again, there would be a place for you with XCOM.”
She swallowed, and looked to the building as Ethan and his team came out. “I’m clearly not a good diplomat, Commander,” she said, quietly enough that he had to strain to hear it through the sound of the downpour. “When it mattered, I simply didn’t have what it took. This here…it’s partially my fault. I could have done something different and I didn’t. Being a soldier is simpler; less chance of…this.” She turned to the Commander. “I’ll join XCOM, if you’ll allow it.”

He nodded. “Gladly. But remember that what happened here is not your fault. That lies squarely at the feet of the likes of Ennor and Meredith. There is no reason to feel guilt for what happened, and in the end, I was the one to make the call, not you.”

She sighed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Charges are set,” Ethan confirmed, pulling out a trigger. “Watch the fireworks.” He pressed the button and the Council headquarters exploded in a brilliant explosion of shrapnel, fire and the symbiote substance, giving the solidification of an alien attack. The napalm his team had distributed around the building earlier would also ensure the fires would burn long through the rainstorm.

“Well done,” he said, turning to the remaining prisoners. “Dispose of them.”

“Kill them?” Ethan asked, raising his weapon.

“Yes,” the Commander agreed. They might have been useful for ADVENT or XCOM test subjects, but seeing as how their only crime was being at the wrong place at the wrong time, being condemned to that fate was not something they deserved.

“Form a line,” the Commander ordered his team, drawing his pistol. At this point, the captives were figuring out what was happening and their voices pleaded and begged for them not to do this. But it didn’t matter what they wanted, or even what he wanted.

What mattered was necessity, and necessity demanded these people die.

“Fire,” the Commander ordered, and shot his pistol at a young woman, the first of them to fall dead. Within seconds the gauss rounds tore through their unprotected bodies and they collapsed in a heap of blood, bones and flesh.

“Clean this up,” he ordered with cold efficiency, and they began doctoring the bodies to make it seem like they had been killed by alien weaponry, or otherwise just torching the bodies. And with the building burning in the background, the rain pouring down and the bodies around him, he could rest assured that the first part of the Demeter Contingency had been completed.

The Council had been dealt with.

Now it was up to Zhang and XCOM Intelligence.

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United Nations Headquarters, New York

Abby pulled out her rifle and slung it over her shoulder. That particular motion would generally not get any attention, as she was officially part of the security here and the United Nations was holding a general assembly at the moment, to discuss the response to the alien attack in Australia. All part of the plan, and she now had to do her part.

First, she needed to gain control of the security cameras and lockdown permissions. Something
she’d planned out extensively and knew exactly how to accomplish. For a place with so much
significance, they made the same problem with their security most did: Having it in one area.

Granted, the area was a bit larger than normal, but not enough to make her job difficult. She
glanced behind her to see Ciro, her partner on this op, also preparing. “Ready?”

“Ready as can be,” he answered with a nod. “Let’s go.”

Personally, Abby was somewhat nervous, because if their next contact was delayed, it would be…
problematic. The method that would be used to neutralize the entire building was extremely
effective, but very, very dangerous, and she knew better than anyone here how bad it could get.

But then again, she was the one responsible for dispersing the gas, so it wouldn’t start without her.

They stepped into the elevator and pressed the button taking them to the floor the building was on.
“Going up,” the pleasant female voice said.

“Just to be clear,” Ciro said under his breath. “We don’t need them alive?”

She fixed him with a cold glare. “We’ve been over this. No. We don’t.”

He swallowed. “Got it.”

The door opened with a pleasant ding and they stepped out into the busy hallway and began
walking to the security room. They had appropriate clearance so they simply presented their
badges to the guards standing in the hallway. “Expecting trouble?” One of them asked, half-joking.

Abby shrugged. “If the aliens can attack Australia…well, they could attack here.”

The second guard sighed. “Good point. Glad you’re making sure that doesn’t happen.”

“It’s my job,” she said, taking her badge back and continuing onward.

First door on the right was security and camera footage. They likely wouldn’t need their guns for
this, since it was a smaller room. They opened the unlocked door to reveal a room with a dozen
monitors spread out, with bored guards pretending to watch the footage.

One looked up, dark bags under his eyes indicating he was exhausted. “Yes? Who are you?”

“Inspecting,” Abby said, not actually answering the question as she took a look around. Six
personnel. Doable. “Just making sure everything is working.”

He shrugged and looked back at his screen, which happened to be on the General Assembly itself.
She nodded toward Ciro who moved to another analyst, to presumably ask a question. She leaned
down as if to do the same, pointing to the screen. “Everything functioning?”

“Yes-“ he began, just before she stabbed a knife into his throat, cutting off whatever he was going
to say. She held the blade in as the blood spurted out, coating her hand and his uniform. With her
other hand she clasped over his mouth, preventing him from making any noise. A few seconds later
she let him slump forward gently and glanced around quickly.

Good, no reaction and Ciro had performed similarly. She moved to the next target, a woman who
was watching the lobby with a bored expression on her face. Abby didn’t bother asking a question
and clamped a hand over her mouth and slit her throat with one smooth motion.

She’d never imagined she’d be using her surgical skills like this, but she’d cut well and the woman
fatally bled out very quickly. Abby supposed it helped that they wore headphones to get the best audio, though it blocked outside sounds pretty easily.

Ciro had also killed another, which left only two. With as little ceremony as the first two, she walked up behind the man and performed the same act as she had on the woman, and slit his throat then held him until he stopped moving.

“All done,” Ciro said, pushing the corpse onto the ground and kneeling down to pull out his EMP charge. She did the same and placed it on the computers closest to her. Not that it would make much of a difference, but she figured she might as well destroy the wiring itself beyond repair and pulled everything apart that she could.

“Let’s step outside now,” Abby suggested, leaning down to wipe the blood off her gloves as best she could. She really wished she’d brought a second pair now since the literal feeling of blood on her hands was thoroughly unpleasant. Unfortunate, but she’d be ditching this uniform soon anyway.

They stepped outside and she pressed the detonator. There was no sound, of course, but she did observe the cameras suddenly blinking off. Abby smiled. Excellent, one part down, now to lock down the rest of the building. She clicked a button on her wrist to let the rest of the agents on this mission know they were clear to execute their orders.

“Now the guards,” Ciro said, referring to the two guards that had cleared them. Even with suppressors on their rifles, Abby knew the sound would attract their attention and she didn’t want them calling backup.

She walked to the end of the hallway just before the corner. “Hey, could you help me?”

One of them sighed and began jogging to her. “Yes?” He asked as he got closer, rounding the corner.

She pointed at the now defunct camera. “Shouldn’t that be working?”

He blinked. “Huh, yeah, it should be. Hold o-“

He gasped as Abby stabbed him in the throat with her knife, grabbed his vest and swung him towards the nearby wall, pinning him to it with a dull thud as he slowly bled out, disbelief in his eyes as she kept pressure on the wound.

“Hey, we need help!” Ciro called to lure the final guard over.

She paid no attention to the sound of footsteps running over, nor the sudden gasp of “What?” just before Ciro killed him as well. Once she was certain the man in front of her was dead, she reached up and pulled his eyelids shut, stood and sighed. “Done. Let’s lock this place down.”

The final place they had to go was actually the third door on the left, which controlled everything else of import to the building. Namely the elevators, doors and alarms. Abby realized that by destroying everything in the security room, she had also likely disabled more sophisticated communication between the remaining guards. Quite a few people were probably going to be wondering why the Wi-Fi was down.

Unfortunately, they wouldn’t be able to call for help.

She opened the door to the room and stepped in. “Security issue,” she declared upon entry. “Who’s in charge?”
“I am,” a middle-aged woman stood up, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “Is there a problem?”

“Potentially,” Abby confirmed. “We might need to lock the building down. Security cameras just went down across the building.”

The other seven people in the room gasped and exchanged worried glances. “Security’s been notified,” Abby continued, wondering how long the ruse could be pushed. “But we need to act for the safety of everyone here.”

“Al-alright,” the woman stuttered, clearly shaken. “But I need to contact your superior-”

“All you’re going to do is waste time,” Abby growled, stepping forward. “I was just in the security room. Everything’s fried, including communication with the outside. He sent me to tell you, so unless you want to be responsible for a catastrophe lock the building down.”

“Right, right, sorry,” she stuttered, motioning her over to a console and began typing. “Should I sound the alarm?”

“Lock it down first,” Abby ordered, taking a good look at the console. Good, everything was marked to easily be set or reversed. The woman complied, flipping each floor to a state of locked and protected.

“One,” she declared, moving to hit the alarm. “Tell him-“

She never finished as Abby blew her head off with her rifle and Ciro acted just as quickly, executing the two closest to him in quick succession. Abby instantly turned around and shot the first surprised, then terrified woman behind her, and her colleague sitting next to her. Ciro executed two more and Abby shot the last one in the head right before he was likely going to plead for his life.

It all happened within thirty seconds. Quick, precise and efficient.

And sickening.

But she had to ignore those feelings. A lot more people were going to die by her hand today, and theirs would be far more horrible. “Let’s go get our suits,” Abby said, unlocking the elevator which would take them to the ventilation control. And get the key so this is locked.

Ciro rummaged around the dead administrators pockets and pulled out a string of keys. “Got it,” he said. “Though we really should have someone here to watch it.”

“This floor is locked down,” Abby said. “No one is getting in here.”

“There are still other people on this floor,” Ciro reminded her.

Abby sighed. “Correct, but they can’t change anything now. We lock this door and head to ventilation. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said and found the key to lock the door.

Abby sent the second signal to the rest of the agents, and together they rushed to the ventilation area, where their next team member was waiting to help.

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United Nations Headquarters, Ventilation Control
“Perfect timing,” Agent Boran complimented as they rushed up. He was already in his gear. Unmarked XCOM Aegis armor that would provide protection from the gas that was about to be unleashed. “You both did well. Any trouble getting here?”

“None,” Abby said, shaking her head and immediately taking off her vest to get fitted into her own Aegis armor. “Everyone is confused, but calm. For now, and I don’t think that will last. But we have control here.”

“I’ll be heading down to control the lockdown directly again,” Ciro added as he also stripped and began fitting into the armor. “I see you got everything in alright.”

“Of course I did,” Boran stated, apparently surprised that was a concern. “As long as the manifests are in order and the documents are signed, people really don’t give trouble. Easy enough to smuggle the armor in…and the gas, of course.”

His voice became subdued as he finished. Abby had a good idea why. Of all the ways to die, Sarin gas was probably one of the worst. But of the agents she had researched, it was one of the most efficient and easiest to disperse. And speed and efficiency was what they needed now.

Once the gas was dispersed, everyone in the building would be dead within twenty minutes at most. Probably sooner since this particular batch was as pure as it came.

She flipped the black helmet in her hand and placed it over her head and heard it seal with a soft click. She really did like being back in armor again, and it was definitely an improvement from the previous iteration. The HUD booted up and immediately identified both agents, as well as schematics of the building.

Showtime.

“Where did you put the canisters?” She asked.

He motioned her to follow to one of the vents, one of which was open and primed for dispersion, the canisters were set in two neat rows beside it. “This is the master vent. We put it through this at full blast, and the entire building will be flooded. We have more than enough.”

“Ciro, get back to the lockdown room,” she ordered, lifting one of the canisters and attaching a nozzle to it. “Boran, turn on the vents on my mark.”

“Copy,” he said, and walked over to the station. “Ready and waiting.”

Keeping an eye on the canister pressure, she then went forward with the next steps of the protocol, setting her helmet to the correct channel. “This is Agent Gertrude. Gas dispersal imminent. Prepare to move forward.”

“In position,” one voice identified.

“Ready and waiting,” another said.

“Outside is under control, will send in the team on my mark,” the familiar voice of Patricia said. “Outside security is dealt with, and rest are unconscious.”

“Copy that,” Abby said. “Commencing dispersal.” She nodded toward Boran and he turned on the vent to roughly half-blast while she released sprayed the gas into the vents. To any observer, it would look like she was spraying nothing, but if they paid close attention they would notice small distortions around the nozzle.
Pure Sarin gas was odorless and colorless. No one would see the deadly gas come upon them, nor smell it. There was a reason it was a banned substance, but a highly effective one.

The canister ran out and she quickly switched to the next one and continued dispersing it into the vent. She repeated the process for each canister, taking about one minute for each. She had estimated it would take at least twenty gallons to properly kill everyone in the building, so she’d elected to ensure there would be twenty five. With each tank containing two and a half gallons, it should take her ten minutes, which would allow plenty of time for dispersal.

“Dispersion complete,” she announced, tossing the canister away. “Moving to ensure the General Assembly is taken out.”

“Confirmed,” Patricia acknowledged. “Teams are setting charges now. Ciro, remove lockdown for back entrance.”

“Affirmative, Psion.”

Abby stood and grasped her gauss rifle. “Let’s go,” she told Boran who followed her as they walked out of the room. They stepped out into a bloodless warzone. Corpses of the various people on this floor surrounded them, most clutching their throats or curled into balls on the floor. Abby didn’t bother to ensure they were dead. Sarin didn’t leave survivors, even if there’d been medical staff on site.

Abby grimaced as she stepped over the corpse of a young woman who had been trying to claw her way to the exit. The carnage didn’t stop there either. A dead elderly couple were seated on chairs; two businessmen passed out on the ground; a couple both holding onto each other just before expiring. Abby gritted her teeth and pressed on.

“Unlock elevator three,” she said as they walked into it. “Then prepare to unlock the general assembly doors.”

“Copy,” Ciro answered and they stepped into the elevator and she pressed the floor they were going to.

“Going down,” the infuriatingly pleasant voice said. As if everything was alright.

“Don’t dwell on it,” Boran said, guessing at what she was thinking. “We did what we had to. You were under orders.”

“I know,” she said quietly, staring aimlessly into the silver doors. “But I’m not going to forget what I’ve done here. They deserve that much.”

She wasn’t entirely sure, but she suspected that her kill count might now rival the Commander. At the very least she had become one of the most dangerous perpetrators of state-approved terrorism. All for the greater good.

The door dinged open and she stepped out to see that the Sarin gas had yet to fully complete its task here. If Hell existed, she was certain that some of it would be like this. The screams, pleas and sobs of men, women and children permeated the air, as people gasped, wheezed and choked around them.

Dozens writhed on the ground, others struggled for the exit, only collapsing after the gas took a deeper hold on them. Still more were already slumped to the ground, a firearm or knife in their hand as they’d killed themselves rather than suffer any longer.
Their arrival barely caught the attention of the dying crowd, blinded as they were by their own pain. “Help us!” A woman pleaded, stumbling toward them, coughing as she struggled for one breath.

And Abby did. She really wanted to.

But those weren’t her orders.

There was only one way she could help the woman. She raised her rifle and fired a round at her head, sparing her from a slow, suffocating death. Realizing that they weren’t here to help, the crowd that had managed to notice them stumbled back, trying to flee from the soldiers clad in black. Abby didn’t bother asking for directions to the general assembly. She knew the schematics.

“Lock down the elevator,” she ordered. “And release the lockdown on the general assembly.”

“Affirmative,” Ciro answered quietly.

Abby kept going forward, then stopped at the sight of a knot of dead children in front of her. A school tour group if their uniforms were anything to go by. Just taking a field trip to see the place where world leaders met. All dead now, collapsed over each other, one by a teacher who had wrapped a jacket around his face in a vain effort to prevent him from breathing the gas.

They’d probably died quickly.

Not that it was any consolation to her.

Tears pricked her eyes that she was unable to wipe away now, blurring her vision as she looked upon the corpses of the children she’d killed. She wanted to look away, purge it from her mind. But she couldn’t. She _needed_ to remember. Remember what she’d done here, use it to never forget what the price of victory and necessity was.

“Agent Gertrude…” A tentative voice asked, and a hand was laid on her shoulder. She looked back to see Boran staring at her through his helmet. “We have a mission to complete,” he finished quietly. “Keep it together a little longer, alright?”

At least he wasn’t diminishing what she was feeling here. And he was right. They had to make sure the General Assembly was dead. She blinked to clear away the tears and gripped her weapon firmly once more. “Yes sir. Let’s get this done.”

She really should have cut her external audio feed. It would have made it easier. But it would have been wrong to diminish the consequences of her actions here. So she listed.

She listened to the dying gasps, screams and sobs of hundreds around her.

She pushed past those stumbling, pleading for help.

She executed those crawling toward her, the only form of mercy she could display.

They stood in front of the general assembly and pushed it open to behold the mass of representatives, negotiators and politicians all in the same dying state as those outside. But they were in the last stages before death. Many were already lying on the floor, sightless eyes looking forward.

She actually recognized several of the people in the pool of corpses, their faces contorted in pain and suffering. No one here would die a peaceful death. As more and more fell over dead, Abby
pulled out her symbiote grenade and tossed it on several of the corpses. Boran followed her lead, and dropped several more throughout the room. If anyone managed to recover anything, they would find the clear evidence of alien meddling.

And direct their righteous fury at the aliens.

“Symbiote grenades planted,” Abby stated, pulling out the next tool. A new high-powered explosive referred to as X-4, specifically designed for destroying established structures. And it would need to be placed in specific places. So they did so, sticking the explosive where the schematics were marked.

“X-4 charges planted,” Abby said, looking around. “All of the general assembly is dead.”

“Return to exit coordinates,” Patricia instructed. “The rest of the teams are finished. Rendezvous at the pre-assigned coordinates.”

“Copy,” Abby confirmed and they existed that room and made their way back through the floor. Everyone had died now. All that were left were corpses of hundreds of personnel, aides and civilians. At least there were no more sounds.

So they just kept walking, right until they reached the exit and pushed it out and stepped into the cool night air.

It looked so peaceful. The lights of New York City twinkled around her as they made their way to the skyranger waiting for them. The others were there, already boarded.

“Everyone is here,” Patricia confirmed. “Detonating charges.”

A rumbling boom reached her ears, and she watched the United Nations Headquarters, seen by some as the symbol of global unity, collapse in front of her in a mix of steel, fire and rubble. The thundering crash was almost deafening, but then faded. With that the skyranger closed the ramp and they lifted up, then spent the journey in silence.

It was done.

The leadership of the United Nations was dead, and the collapse of the rest of it would be inevitable.

And she was a vital instrument of its destruction.

A hand rested on her shoulder, and she looked over to see it came from Patricia, who gave her a small nod. No words needed to be exchanged, Patricia likely knew how she was feeling, and was one who might be able to comprehend the burden all on board this skyranger now felt.

They were XCOM. They did whatever it took to protect humanity, no matter the cost.

Even if their own humanity was sacrificed in the process.

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Supplementary Material

The Advent Directive

SECTION 0: Declaration and Overview
Subsection 0.1: Introduction and Purpose

Introduction: With the arrival of extraterrestrial beings to our planet, we recognize that we must adapt to these changes before it is too late. The world has been splintered over various conflicts of religious, political and ideological natures, and ADVENT recognizes that these divisions are detrimental to the future of our species.

We cannot afford to fight one another, human against human. For decades the world had held certain nations, cultures and people on pedestals, yet refused to offer the same to other countries. Ignorance and lying were allowed in the name of freedom. Corruption and broken promises became the laws on the land. The nations of the world were only focused on their own ambitions, not for the greater good of our species.

ADVENT rejects these failings and will seek to correct the mistakes of the past and bring our species into the future, united as one voice, one force, and one power. ADVENT will not uplift some countries while leaving others behind; all are equal and have one voice from which to voice the needs of their nation.

Ignorance will be replaced with knowledge, and those who intentionally attempt to deceive or lie will no longer be tolerated. The leaders of the world will be held accountable for their decisions, and corruption and greed will be purged from the governing body of ADVENT. Most important of all, there will be a singular vision that all in ADVENT share: The prosperity, security, and advancement of humanity.

Purpose: The goals of ADVENT are to enact the three core tenets of ADVENT: Prosperity, Security and Advancement.

Prosperity: Under ADVENT, citizens will no longer need to fear living without basic human necessities. All have a place within ADVENT, be that as a private citizen or in service to the State. Schooling will be free, allowing children to follow their purpose without fear of crippling debt. Medicine and healthcare will be provided to those who require it, and in time, the ills of poverty will be reduced to nothing. Law-abiding citizens under ADVENT will have a quality of life far beyond what they have experienced before, and ADVENT is dedicated to seeing this become a reality.

Security: Under ADVENT, citizens will be protected from threats beyond simply petty crime. The ADVENT Peacekeepers will no longer be a reactionary form or law enforcement, but one that proactively hunts down major threats to the State and its citizens. Dissent which poses a violent threat to the ordinary citizen will no longer be tolerated and will be put down and will help actively suppress dangerous ideologies.

ADVENT Peacekeepers will receive highly specialized training, and will have oversight from military, internal and civilian branches to prevent abuses of power, all abuses of which will be taken seriously in our goal to truly protect the citizens under ADVENT. Criminal justice will no longer be a process that takes years, and judgements will be handed down based on evidence, facts and science, not fear, wealth or public opinion. Prisoners will no longer simply be a burden on the taxpaying citizen, but will become a productive force utilized by the State for maximum efficiency.

Furthermore, the ADVENT military will protect its citizens from the greater threats, be they alien or terrestrial. ADVENT soldiers will be highly trained and drawn from the best our society has to offer, and will be the most advanced military force on this planet. ADVENT’s military leaders will no longer be bound by decisions of international bodies, but will be free to defend ADVENT’s citizens the best that it can with no fear of international condemnation. ADVENT will not tolerate systemic abuses of power by foreign nations on its citizens, and will intervene at the discretion of
ADVENT’s military body, and the Chancellor of ADVENT.

Advancement: Under ADVENT, there will be no dismissal or ignorance of the sciences which propel our species forward. Various scientific groups will be funded for both military and civilian purposes, and will all have the underlying goal of increasing the overall quality of life for all citizens in ADVENT.

Renewable solutions, genetic engineering, cloning, disease and medical research will all be initiatives undertaken and supported by the ADVENT, be they independent or State-sponsored. Military initiatives undertaken will be enhanced weaponry, chemical warfare and cleanup, and alien biological analysis and utilization.

It is also understood by ADVENT that scientific advancement comes with certain risks and needs, which is why ADVENT will fully support the usage of animal and specific human testing to help refine and improve the various projects undertaken within ADVENT, all of which will be heavily monitored to prevent unethical experimentation. In addition, scientists under ADVENT will not have certain projects restricted based on ethics, resources or apparent legality as all projects will first be approved by the ADVENT Research and Development agency.

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Forward Observation Station, Mars Orbit

“Emergency crews are continuing to sweep the wreckage of the collapsed headquarters. To date there have been no confirmed survivors, and we have just been updated that multiple United Nations offices across the world have been destroyed. We continue-“

Swipe right.

“The immediate impact of the sudden loss of any sort of United Nations command structure has sent shockwaves throughout the world, even as the aliens continue to land in Australia. With no world leadership structure, the question is now how an effective defense can be mounted-”

A good question. Swipe right.

“We’re now receiving reports of multiple world leaders preparing for some major event. Details are still coming in, but it appears to be a response to the alien attack this morning on the United Nations leadership. Currently Presidents Tredvant and Savvin are confirmed to be attending as well as Chancellor Habicht of Germany and…uh…”

“We will be right back before we confirm further.”

It was infuriatingly going like he’d expected. Swipe right.

“XCOM has yet to make an official statement, but we have confirmation that they will be addressing both their plans to assist in handling Australia, and their response to these attacks on the United Nations.”

“Yes, and everything points to them also attending this announced event with what appears to be the national leadership of United Nations countries. There is a strong likelihood that this will be the first public appearance of the Commander of XCOM, who has been one of the most obscure figures in the world scene to date.”

“Off,” he ordered, and the holographic screens displaying the multiple human networks flashed off, letting him stare blankly into the red sand of the planet below him. Mars, so the humans called it. Named after a human deity of war, according to the history he’d read on them. Rather fitting, if he was being honest, and rather ironic that the grand strategy of the war was to be waged from here.

Even more intriguing was that despite the humans never setting foot on this planet, there was clear evidence of previous civilizations. Or previous watchers, which only added to his theory that this entire situation was not nearly as much of a surprise to the Ethereals as they were letting on. While Quisilia was irritatingly vague about what exactly had comprised the Ethereal Empire before their fall, he wouldn’t have been surprised if at one point this was an Ethereal installation.

Which would explain how they knew about the humans. The question was, of course, how long they had known.

And if they had known, why didn’t they act before now?
Dangerous thoughts. Especially since Mars was not the only planet in this system to contain obscure and dilapidated outposts and equipment. Pluto, Venus and Jupiter had all at one point been held by someone. But he supposed it didn’t matter; whoever it was, they were long gone now. But it would make for an interesting project after the Humans were assimilated.

Regardless, it was very clear that the Humans were going to make this as difficult as possible for them. All signs pointed to a unification, and if these planted attacks were any indication, the Commander was not concerned about it being a peaceful one. For it was the Commander who had to be behind this.

He was of the opinion that the Commander was the sole reason why the Humans were in this fight to begin with. Or at least how they’d survived so long without collapsing under their incredibly divided and schizophrenic political and cultural structures. The Commander reminded him of the old Union Leaders of the Andromedons; brutal, uncompromising, charismatic, intelligent and incredibly dangerous.

Although now he doubted the Commander, nor XCOM, was working on their own. He had no doubt been recruiting allies and the chances of the traitorous EXALT being involved was high. He sniffed at the thought. EXALT had been handled exceptionally poorly and bluntly, though that could all boil down to the Ethereals deciding they knew better.

And maybe they did, but from where he stood, things were not looking as successful as they could have been.

He heard the barrier dissipate behind him and he turned around to see his Vitakarian assistant walk in, her steel gray skin dully reflecting the pale light off her scalp. He frowned, her eyes seemed a less vibrant blue than it should be. Likely the oxygen levels fluctuating again, he’d have to look into that later.

“Zar’Chon,” she greeted stiffly, which immediately told him that she was nervous. He resisted the urge to sigh. Why they insisted on sending newer recruits than the veterans he’d requested was something he’d have to speak to his staff about. It was entirely possible that one or more of the Ethereals was intervening, since that seemed to be what they enjoyed doing most nowadays.

Hands still clasped behind his back, he inclined his head. “Zar’gamlia’usar, correct?”

She blinked. “Yes, though you can-“

“Gamlia then,” he interrupted, knowing what she was going to say. “I’m not normally this blunt, but we do have a mission to subdue and assimilate a hostile species. What exactly do you have for me?”

To her credit, she held together under his bluntness, as he should expect from one of the Zararch. “The latest plans from the Battlemaster regarding the status of the invasion and captured continent,” she pulled a small data drive and handed it to him. “In addition, the latest Zararch reports from our agents in the Collective are on it as well.”

“Thank you,” he answered, turning away. “Dismissed.”

He didn’t bother to see if she’d actually left. When his agents heard his orders, they followed. Time to see exactly what the Battlemaster was planning for Earth. He walked over to the small cylinder that stood in the middle of his briefing room and stuck the drive into it.

The holographic words “Authorization required.” Popped up as usual. A necessary security
measure, but one that was irritating most of the time. He held his right hand over the cylinder and let it scan the gray skin of his palm. The hologram then updated with the regular “Identification accepted: Zar’Chon’ravarian’vitiary.”

That out of the way, Zar’Chon Ravarian twisted his left wrist around and slid the small metal panel to the side and pressed the button that synched the augmented arm with the data from Gamlia’s drive. It flashed blue, he shut the panel, turned his wrist back over and opened up the holographic projector on his palm.

The file list came up and he quickly scrolled through it, once more thankful for his neural implants to perform the mundane acts like scrolling and selection and not have to do it manually. If that were the case, then there was very little point to using holograms for information. Still, it was going to take some time to go through everything.

Then he got that feeling again.

He could never figure out if it was just a strange extra sense he had, or if it was just Quisilia toying with him every time he decided to talk. “The Battlemaster is planning to first strike the land the Humans call Japan,” Ravarian said out loud, knowing the Ethereal would emerge sooner or later. “Battle strategy up now.” With his free hand he took the appropriate hologram and amplified it independent of the one on his palm.

The utterly silent Ethereal stepped out directly in front of him as if emerging from nothing, though by now, he knew better. His purple robe with the embroidered gold lines and patterns was as immaculate as ever, housing his entire body inside. The helm that the all Ethereals were so fond of was as polished as ever, a smooth blend of weak metal that extended below the neck into the robe, and formed into curves on the top, which also curved down over the eyes. What made Quisilia’s helm more unique than others was that the lower face was exposed, though he suspected that in battle, some covering would come down.

Which made it all the more disconcerting when Quisilia elected not to speak verbally. He tended to speak verbally for the most part, but definitely wasn’t above switching it up. Ravarian fixed him with a stare. “How long were you standing there?”

“Since the young Vitakara entered this room,” he answered, his low baritone accompanied by a rasping whisper at the end of each word. Tame by Ethereal standards. “And her presence here was nothing more than an error. I do not intend to make your job difficult.”

Ravarian nodded. “Good. Then I assume you’re up to date on the situation on Earth?”

Quisilia walked around to face the hologram, his footsteps making no noise. “Are you referring to our invasion or our attacks on the Human United Nations?”

“Both.”

“The Commander continues to surprise me,” Quisilia mused, pulling up the hologram of a muted Human news station. “His methods continue to show he will do whatever it takes to beat us. Admirable, and yet predictable.”

Ravarian frowned. “This is not new to us. I suggested we remove him after he played the German country against us. But as you told me, there are ‘plans.’” He motioned at the hologram. “With all due respect, we need to act, otherwise he is going to unite the Human nations into a true fighting force.”
Quisilia looked at him. *And you believe the humans are that great of a threat?*

“Only if we let them become one,” Ravarian answered, resisting the urge to react to the unnatural telepathy. “They killed the Ravaged One. That shouldn’t have happened. I know that you portray yourselves as invincible, but both of us know that isn’t the case. The Humans should not have been able to kill him.”

“The death of the Ravaged One was a necessary evil,” Quisilia said, not looking away. “But I agree. Unfortunately, assassinating the Commander is out of the picture.”

“Why?” He asked in disbelief.

“Before I answer, I will reiterate that nothing will be shared beyond us without my authorization,” Quisilia said, the helmeted eyes boring into him. “Aegis has defected to XCOM.”

That…had to be…bad? Although there was one problem. “Who, or what is Aegis?” He asked, puzzled. From the sound of it, it could be one of the many secret projects the Ethereals ran, or it could be one of the Andromedons. It probably wasn’t anything from the Zararch, otherwise he’d know about it.

“An Ethereal,” Quisilia answered simply. “One of our most influential.”

He was unable to keep a neutral expression, and his jaw lowered slightly. An Ethereal defecting wasn’t just *unthinkable*…it should have been *impossible*. He’d long suspected that the Ethereals weren’t as united as they’d let on…but he’d had no idea that it had been so divided to the point where one of their own would betray them.

*For good reason, Quisilia communicated. The disputes of our species would not be comprehended by the assimilated races. And the betrayal caught even us by surprise.*

Ravarian took a breath. Just one. “I see. That…complicates things.”

“Yes, the plan has changed,” Quisilia agreed. “But we are not concerned. We believe Aegis defected for…ideological reasons. He will not kill an Ethereal.”

“But he *will* kill Collective soldiers, give XCOM our technology, and protect the Humans,” Ravarian pointed out grimly. “I can’t say for sure since this is the first I’ve heard of him, but is that incorrect?”

“Our numbers can be replaced,” Quisilia dismissed, telling him all he needed to know. “Ultimately, this is irrelevant and will only delay us. The overall goal has not changed, but our immediate plans have. Before the anti-alien sentiment gets out of hand, I want the Zararch to make contact with pro-alien organizations or ones that can be swayed to us.”

About time. He’d only suggested that plan from the beginning. Better late than never though. “Of course. I have some targets in mind.” Ravarian pulled up a holographic globe and pointed to one of the continents. “This is South America, and thanks to EXALT, they have incited the country of Brazil to invade several nearby nations. Reading the psychological profile of the Human in charge, she is aggressive, easily manipulated and has a tendency to take a military approach.”

“We provide protection,” Quisilia mused. “A good start. What of the conflict in the Middle East?”

“Too ineffective,” Ravarian disagreed immediately. “There are too many nations interested in control for any sort of operation to be successful. A better target would be to attempt to take control of the Chinese criminal organizations.”
“That did not work last time, if I recall.”

“I made unfortunate assumptions about the species,” Ravarian admitted. “Mistakes I’ve learned from and will not repeat. But while I oversee those operations, the Battlemaster will conduct the ground campaign.”

“To great effect, I’m sure,” Quisilia said, turning lazily to look down on Mars. “What of the infiltrator you placed in XCOM?”

Ah, right. That was another mission that was past its time to end. “Nartha will be arriving within a few days. Gateways have not been established on Earth yet.”

“It is possible they won’t be for some time,” Quisilia warned. “With Aegis defecting, our normal strategies will need to be adapted or cut. But it is good to hear he will be returning…I will look forward to examining him.”

“In the meantime, it appears that the Humans are going to make an announcement about their defense against us,” Ravarian said, bringing the muted hologram to face him. “Let’s see what their plans are.”

***

Geneva, Switzerland

Saudia stood in front of the mirror, uncharacteristically…not nervous…but apprehensive. For the first time she was going to address the world. Not the small council she’d kept in EXALT, but millions of regular people across the world.

It highlighted just how much she’d hadn’t actually expected to take EXALT to the place it was now. It had been her goal, but now she was like the dog who’d caught the car it was chasing. Now she had to decide what to do with it. Thankfully, that was the easier part. But speaking to the world, as the voice of ADVENT? That was sticking out in her mind as much harder.

Not the least of which is that her emergence would no doubt bring questions. Questions she’d already heard whispered by the staff around her.

*Who is she?*

*Where did she come from?*

*Why is she in charge?*

*Why are we trusting her?*

*Because the Commander of XCOM trusts her.*

She snorted. How ironic that the main reason that people seemed to be willing to give her the benefit of the doubt was because of the Commander. Who she *did* admittedly owe her position to. She disliked the feeling of being indebted to him, but he’d made it clear he’d only put her in charge because of pure practicality.

She agreed with his reasoning…but knew that he wouldn’t hesitate to remove her if she suddenly posed a threat to him. He didn’t appear to expect her to act like a debt was owed, so she’d done her best to consider everything between them even.
It never would be, but she could try.

In the meantime, the entire planning of this event had been an experience for her. It was… interesting to interact with people on her level that weren’t part of EXALT. People like Gwan, Treduant, Habicht and Savvin. People who she’d conducted operations against without their knowledge. Ironic that they were all committed to one goal now.

And that goal was one she had made her central theme of her speech: *Unity*.

Surprisingly, or not so surprisingly, Iseul had been rather helpful when she wrote her speech. She supposed it made sense for the Supreme Leader to have a good grasp on what to say to a crowd to properly entrance them, but he appeared to have genuinely been interested in helping. Whatever his motivations, she was pleased with the result.

What she was to say would go down in history, so it was essential that it not only be passable, but memorable. It needed to remain in the minds of the people long after she’d spoken the last words, it needed to occupy their thoughts until they felt motivated to *do something*. Did she have that capability?

She had the potential. That at least she knew. She could understand the mind of a soldier. She could understand the motivations of a criminal or politician. But an ordinary civilian…that was alien. She couldn’t imagine going through life and not feeling motivated to *do* something with it, to at least *try* and make an impact. To change things in some way.

But those people made up the majority of the population, so they must be sufficiently motivated to contribute. If words failed, there were other ways.

But that was a worry for another day.

“You can comment anytime,” Saudia said to her silent husband who was leaning against the wall, clad in his armor minus the captain’s helmet. “Sufficient?” She asked, turning around.

“More than that,” Ethan answered, walking over to her with a smile. “You look like a Chancellor.”

When all was said and done, she had to admit that she definitely looked the part. In the end she’d decided on her dress uniform for EXALT, minus the emblem on the sash, which had been replaced with the stylized ADVENT logo which to her appeared to have more in common with the alien glyphs than human language.

Black pants, boots, a plain black jacket with the red sash going around her right shoulder to the opposite waist and matching gloves. Combined with her height and demeanor, and with a pistol strapped to her waist in plain view, she had to admit she could come across as an intimidating and commanding figure.

That would work to her advantage today. The media would honestly probably care more about the Commander speaking than her at the moment, since he was set to say something after her. But she was to set the tone, not just for ADVENT, but for her leadership.

“How are you feeling?” Ethan asked, taking her hands. “Ready?”

“I’m ready,” she admitted with a sigh, running her thumb over his armored fingers. “Though somewhat concerned, as always. A lot rides on this.”

“And you’ll do fine,” Ethan reassured her. “I read what you wrote, and it’s very good. Everyone here is behind you, even if they don’t know you well.”
“It’s not them I need to reach,” Saudia insisted, letting go of his hands to motion in the general direction around her. “It’s the people. I have to sell them unity, hope and ADVENT. And I know that I’m going to have enemies trying to discredit me everywhere. This is my only first impression, no matter how it goes, it will only go downhill from here.”

He grew a little more serious. “I know what you mean, and I’ll do whatever I can to help. But in the end, Saudia, they don’t matter. You know that.”

“Yes, I know,” she agreed. “But it makes things easier. A friendly population is much easier to utilize than a skeptical one.”

“Mhmm, words of wisdom,” Ethan said with a smile. “But you’ve done enough that one speech shouldn’t cause this much worry to such an accomplished woman.”

“Flatterer,” she chided, but ultimately felt a little more at ease. “Easy for you to say, you’re just going to stand behind me and look menacing.”

“Don’t discount that,” Ethan said, walking over to the couch to pick up his helmet. “In all seriousness, I do think the amount of military personnel here is making the media nervous. They aren’t used to seeing so many armored soldiers walking around them.”

“Good,” Saudia said, looking at the hanging clock in front of the door. “It might temper their wild speculation for the first day.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want to keep them waiting,” Ethan said, putting on his helmet, obscuring his face behind the red and black ornate helmet. He extended a hand formally to the door. “Would you like to take point, Chancellor, or should I?”

She smirked and strode forward. “I’ll take point, thank you. Let’s go.”

***

Exiting the building took slightly longer than she would have liked, mostly due to the unfamiliarity of the place, as well as having to stop and wait for her official guard, three other men and women wearing the same uniform as Ethan. The only thing that distinguished them as the Chancellor’s Guard from regular officers were that their shoulder capes were a pure white with the ADVENT insignia emblazoned in the center.

Saudia pushed the door open to the outside and was immediately hit with dozens of sudden flashes from cameras and shouts for her attention. They apparently weren’t expecting an armed guard, at least not one carrying fully loaded weapons, and the mass of journalists and media took a step back as she led them out.

“No questions for now,” she told them, sweeping her head around the throng as she kept going forward. “That will be at a different time.”

It of course didn’t stop them from yelling questions after her.

“What are you planning to do about the aliens?”

“What is happening to the United Nations?”

“Did XCOM have something to do with this?”

She ignored them, walking down the sidewalk which had ADVENT soldiers in their black armor
stationed regularly. She wanted this to be extremely controlled, and the soldiers would give anyone second thoughts about trying to start something, as well as keep the media in line. She did not plan to be lax in enforcing boundaries.

As a matter of fact, Ethan had reported that one reporter had been escorted off the premises after he’d tried to get into a restricted zone, despite a soldier telling him not to and the barriers with the words *do not enter* plastered on them. His own fault, and she had no issue kicking him out. It had seemed to have the intended effect, as the rest of them had stayed in their respective zone.

The leaves from the landscaped bushes around her rustled as a cool breeze blew through them. It was a beautiful day, one that couldn’t have been timed better. The sky was cloudy, a pleasant breeze was constant and the temperature was moderate. Compared to Antarctica, this really was a paradise. That being said, she missed the Bastion and it was unfortunate it had to be abandoned.

But considering that it was too isolated to really stage an effective defense, especially against the aliens, it was a necessary sacrifice. Geneva was a sufficient replacement, once it was improved to more…practical accommodations. Renovations to turn it into the official Executive Building were well underway, and she was looking forward to properly catching up on what her respective science and engineering divisions had accomplished since her first meeting with them.

“Let them begin coming to fill the area under the podium,” Saudia ordered as they approached the place where the speech was to take place. The elevated stone entrance to the columned building behind her made a suitable backdrop, and the open fields were large enough to accommodate the large crowd that had gathered, as well as her soldiers.

However, the ones waiting on the stage were almost as significant as her, at least in how so many of them were gathered together. It was a major deal for the leaders of just two countries to be in the same place together, here she counted….well, quite a few more than that.

The Presidents of America, Russia, South Korea, Armenia, Taiwan; the Supreme Leader of North Korea; The Prime Minister of Israel; the Chancellor of Germany and the Marshal of Brazil. All in all, it was a gathering of elites the world hadn’t seen in decades, perhaps ever. That alone should demonstrate the gravity and significance of ADVENT better than any speech could, and they would be in the background at all times, standing behind with their personal guards while she addressed the world.

“And so it begins,” the Commander said wistfully as he walked up beside her. Saudia motioned her guard to take their positions as she joined him in observing the multiple conversations taking place between the world leaders. “I didn’t think I would see something like this.”

“Not like this,” Saudia agreed, crossing her arms. “But it is…encouraging. At least for today.”

“They feel optimistic,” the Commander said, looking up at her. “While that will not last, it is good to know they are willing to work together.”

The Commander’s psionic abilities were still a concern, but there unfortunately wasn’t anything she could do about that. She was somewhat surprised in his own choice of attire. Instead of the traditional black XCOM fatigues he normally wore to diplomatic meetings, he’d instead chosen to show up in his scratched, scorched and dented silver armor.

She supposed it made sense, and would definitely make his purpose clear to those watching. While she had been relatively open about what her speech was going to consist of, the Commander had been incredibly secretive. Knowing him, he might deliver some scathing remark she didn’t entirely want to deal with. But the Commander wasn’t an idiot, and probably wouldn’t do something like
that on the first day.

“Chancellor,” Ethan said, coming up to her. “They’re ready.”

“Showtime,” the Commander said with a smile, and together they walked up the stone stairs. The respective leaders quieted and began lining up in neat rows, flanked on all sides by her ADVENT soldiers. The Commander was flanked by two of his own XCOM soldiers as he took a position in the back, but with a clear view to watch her.

Saudia stepped onto the podium, and her guard took their positions, two to each respective side of the podium, and two behind her. They stood in perfect military poise, their hands clasped behind their backs. She adjusted the microphones up a tad to accommodate her height, then rested her hands on the sides as she looked into the crowd.

Cameras, flashes and dozens of microphones were pointed towards her, with the faces of those in attendance waiting in rapt attention for her to begin. Complete silence filled the air, save for the breeze rustling the leaves around her. A light on her podium flashed to green, indicating she was cleared to begin.

So she did.

“Greetings, citizens from across the world. After the tragedies that have recently taken place in this world, you no doubt have questions, and are hoping for answers. While I will not be able to address every question or concern you may have, rest assured that I will be in the coming days, but for now it is imperative that some basic information be shared and understood by all.”

Saudia let her gaze sweep across the crowd. “I am Saudia Vyandar, the Chancellor of ADVENT, as designated by the esteemed leaders of the world behind me. My name is unfamiliar to you, but that is simply because of the nature of my work before my appointment here. I’ve led a global intelligence organization, working to prevent and protect everyday citizens from the numerous threats that arise in everyday life. This has led to me having firsthand experience with the alien threat we face today, and is ultimately why I was chosen, because I have the knowledge, drive and passion to understand the threat we face and defeat it.”

She paused. “But actions speak louder than words, and I intend to prove to you of my intentions. But beyond myself, there is much else that needs to be addressed. I can unfortunately confirm that the entire United Nations leadership is dead; murdered in the alien attack that killed thousands of innocent people. The motivations for this attack are still unknown, but they are done likely as an attempt to destroy our leadership, divide our people and cripple our resolve. The aliens believe that we are weak-willed enough to be stunned into submission or splinter out of fear, but I can assure you now, that will not happen.”

She gripped the podium tightly. “I value honesty, so the harsh reality is that this was a possible contingency that was planned for. This was the worst-case scenario that sadly came to fruition, despite our best efforts. But this will only have the exact opposite effect the aliens have intended for us. By attempting to weaken us with these acts of terror, the only thing they have accomplished is bringing us together, and we will emerge to face them as one.”

Saudia steeled her tone slightly to drive this point home. “And that is what we require now. I do not speak just for myself, the ones behind me or the soldiers on the front lines. But I speak for what is required if we want humanity to survive. We are a diverse species, with many differing beliefs, opinions and outlooks. We have become bogged down by trivial debates between each other, fights over superficial issues and topics and intolerance and polarization everywhere.”
“We must rise above that. We stand at the crossroads today. Australia was the wake-up call, and these attacks are the warning. We have to stand together as one united humanity. As one united people. We should not see each other as simply Russian, American, Chinese or Canadian, we cannot become solely defined by our nationality, nor should we believe their respective ones have all the answers. But we need to see each other as humans; humans fighting, living and surviving together in one common cause.”

Saudia raised her index finger upward. “The aliens? They are united and focused on one goal: the subjugation of our species. The answer to them is not simply our soldiers, weapons or technology, it is if we are united or divided. That will ultimately determine the outcome of this war. Divided by our differences we will lose this war, but united by our cause we can protect ourselves from the encroaching threat.”

Saudia paused for a brief moment to let it sink in. “This is the end to which ADVENT is established; an initiative that was to be introduced over a period of decades through the United Nations. But we cannot wait any longer, we cannot afford the delays and debates about the strengths and weaknesses. ADVENT is not simply a united army to push back the aliens, it is the future of humanity.”

“ADVENT exists to execute three specific directives,” she continued. “Security, prosperity and advancement. Under ADVENT our citizens will be protected by the best soldiers in the world; a true multinational army that will be dedicated to ensuring that the alien threat is pushed back and defeated. Crime will be stamped out under our Peacekeepers, as we can no longer afford to be lenient while the world is at stake. The nations will be protected by each other, and ADVENT will come to the aid of any member nation attacked by a hostile force, be they alien or otherwise.”

She swept her gaze once more on the crowd. “We also recognize that the future rests in the hands of the people, and thus it is appropriate to recognize you as such, and give you all the advantages necessary to ensure our continued survival. People will no longer need to worry about the crippling fear of debt acquired by medicine, schooling and living. It will be provided from ADVENT, to achieve our goal of improving the lives of all citizens, not just the influential or wealthy. Political representatives in ADVENT will no longer be leashed to the traditional political parties, businesses, lobbyists or wealth that has corrupted so many others, but will be qualified representatives of the people, and chosen by them in fair democratic elections.”

She still appeared to have their attention. “Finally, the goal of ADVENT is also not just to accept who we are as a species, but actively attempt to push past our boundaries to achieve that which we once thought impossible. Some believe that uniting our species is impossible, and yet I say that it will happen, as evidenced by the men and women behind me. Some believe that the aliens cannot be defeated, I say it is already possible, as evidenced by the fine work of XCOM. Some will also no doubt believe that the picture I paint at this moment is nothing more than a fantasy; a dream that cannot ever match up to reality.”

Saudia smiled. “And while I disagree, as will be demonstrated over the coming days, ask yourself this: Is it not what we should strive towards? Is it not the goal to achieve a global unity of our species? To have a society where all are taken care of and have the ability to advance on their merits? To have a military that protects the people from threats, and a government to represent them accordingly?”

Saudia smiled. “And while I disagree, as will be demonstrated over the coming days, ask yourself this: Is it not what we should strive towards? Is it not the goal to achieve a global unity of our species? To have a society where all are taken care of and have the ability to advance on their merits? To have a military that protects the people from threats, and a government to represent them accordingly?”

“In the end, the question truly is if our unification is not merely a solution to our survival, but a necessity. And if it must be a necessity, why not take the opportunity to craft the best iteration of our species possible? It is to this end that ADVENT was created, why I was chosen, and what I will continuously work towards during my tenure as Chancellor of ADVENT.”
“The nations of the world face a choice: Fight this threat alone, or join us and fight it together. What is decided will ultimately determine the fate of our species. So I say to them all, choose wisely, for the time has run out. There are no second chances in this war, and there is no turning back.”

Saudia stepped back. “That is all, and I believe that what will be unveiled over the coming days will prove both my and ADVENT’s intentions. And I am also pleased to present before you the Commander of XCOM, who’s led the major offenses against the alien threat to this date.” Saudia stepped off the podium and watched the Commander take the stage.

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It wasn’t a bad speech, not at all. Had he not been responsible for the framework of ADVENT, the Commander would have personally been too cynical to really believe anything that Saudia was saying. He would have been the one saying it was impossible. But in this case, he knew better, though Saudia was downplaying the sacrifices that would undoubtedly come to bring the vision of ADVENT into reality.

And that was not going to make everyone happy.

And so he took the stand, looked out into the cameras as the people watched and waited for the shrouded leader of XCOM to reveal himself to the world. “As Chancellor Vyandar stated, I am the Commander of XCOM,” he began. “Since the first abductions, I have been orchestrating the defense against the alien threat, and the time has come to do so in a more open manner.”

He trailed off for a moment. “While our operations have been, and will remain, secret, our mission is the same as it always has been; to protect and defend humanity from extraterrestrial threats. Much like ADVENT, we were a contingency; a last-ditch effort that no one expected to use. But much has changed over the past year, and I, along with my senior advisors, have ensured that XCOM will lead the charge in the fight to defend our world.”

The Commander paused, sweeping his gaze around. “Vigilo Confido. That is the motto ascribed to us. Ever vigilant. Ever watchful. So we are and continue to be, and while our role will solely be related to the alien threat, we will be watching beyond them. The aliens are subtle, devious and intelligent. They do not solely rely on armies, and I have learned that their goal is not simply to conquer our species. It is not to enslave or kill.”

He looked directly into the main camera. “No, their vision for us is far more insidious. They want us to be what they cannot; adaptable, versatile and powerful. They want us as a willing subservient race, and will promise much to convince you that their plans aren’t solely for their own benefit, but for yours. But to accomplish their goals would only serve to strip out what makes us human. Our diversity, ingenuity and individuality. For under the aliens, there is no independence; there is no freedom; there is only subservience to their leaders.”

The air around him was charged with interest. Yes, he had their attention. “You have seen glimpses of the aliens themselves, and their leaders are as ethereal as I have been before today. They are beings of power that are said to be able to take on entire armies, New York was the result of one such being.”

The Commander’s lips curled into a toothless grin. “But they are not invincible. They are not omnipotent. They can be killed. They led an attack on our main base of operations with the intent to kill us once and for all. But they failed. They could not win against us before and XCOM will not let them win now.”
He motioned to the crowd. “Don’t be deceived into thinking that the aliens have every advantage. The soldiers around you can stand against their armies; ADVENT has been created to ensure that anything they can throw at us, we can defeat. And their leaders are few, they cannot simply be thrown at us, for each one killed will only makes us stronger.”

The Commander lowered his hand back to the podium. “This war is bigger than what I or XCOM can realistically counter. We lack the numbers to wage a war, but we have enough to make a difference. XCOM will support ADVENT as an independent ally, one as committed to defending our species as we are. Both our organizations will be communicating closely as the war progresses.”

The Commander paused, then lowered his voice slightly. “I do want to reiterate a point that Chancellor Vyandar stated in her own address to you today. She stressed the importance of a united humanity and I will do so as well now. This is not the first war I have partaken in, and I have seen firsthand how wars were won or lost because of the unity of each side or lack thereof.”

“Division and polarization have been the downfall of civilizations before, not just the armies. The people at home are often forgotten as inconsequential, even in the military. But they often hold just as much sway, they can be the reason for the push to victory, or their division is why the battle is lost. But there is another component that goes hand-in-hand with unity and that is trust.”

He smiled. “That is the one lingering question in the back of the minds of those watching, isn’t it? How can we trust you? How can we trust those leading us to make the right decisions? I stand with Chancellor Vyandar in believing that actions speak louder than words, so simply look at what XCOM has accomplished: We were responsible for responding to multiple alien incursions that have not graced the media; we were responsible for crashing the Dreadnought over China; we ensured that both Hamburg and New York were not razed to the ground; we have staved off direct attacks to our bases of operations and we dismantled the shadow organization known as EXALT. We have done more that you wouldn’t be able to confirm on your own, but I hope that is enough for you to trust that we are fully committed to our mission of defending you from the aliens.”

He paused. “The nature of Chancellor Vyandar’s work prevents me from giving the same reasons, but I can assure that she is just as dedicated not only to stopping the alien threat, but uplifting humanity into a new era of prosperity and security. She has extensive experience leading from behind the scenes, and I am confident that her skills are already translating well to preside over the most prestigious body this world has seen.”

The Commander looked to the center camera. “So in addition to a call for unity, I also call for trust. Trust in ADVENT leading you, and trust in XCOM for protecting you. And in turn, we place our trust in you in deciding the future of our species. As Chancellor Vyandar said…there are no second chances here. The crossroads for our future has appeared, and I will do everything in my power to ensure that we succeed in this war.”

He gave his salute and inclined his head. “Prepared or not, the time for action is now. Thank you, and Vigilo Confido.”

To his mild surprise, the ADVENT captains beside him imitated his salute and as he looked out, he saw the rest of the soldiers copying him. It was an unplanned, but uplifting display he couldn’t help but feel pride at. The rest of the reporters noticed as well, and it spoke to the level of respect and authority XCOM commanded to elicit this reaction from soldiers of another organization.

In any case, he couldn’t think of a better ending, and simply stepped down from the podium. And with that it was done, the announcement of ADVENT was complete. Now it was time for the real war to begin.
The lack of a crowd outside of the media made the lack of applause noticeable, but a faint murmuring soon filled the air as everyone started talking after it was clear that the speeches were over. From what she could tell, most of the people closest to her approved of the direction, at least Patricia hadn’t sensed any sort of anger, resentment or outrage that would accompany strong disagreement.

Although everyone had definitely wondered if the Commander was going to be the wildcard here, since he’d kept what he was going to say to himself, only revealing that it would be in line with Saudia’s speech, and lo and behold, it was.

The question Patricia had was what the reactions would be elsewhere. From her view it had gone well, though she was admittedly biased and ultimately knew that all the talk of unity was simply a means to get public pressure on the more reluctant nations to join ADVENT. That appeared to be Saudia’s playbook: Diplomacy first, force second.

Besides, there was still a lot that needed to be established, and just the countries involved now were going to take months to fully implement the entire military, intelligence and Peacekeeping Division. But it would happen, she’d seen enough proof of that from looking over the reports sent to the Commander.

Of course…that wasn’t what was occupying her mind now. It was past time they interrogated Aegis on why the hell he was here. And of course he had to show up right before the Demeter Contingency was activated and directly after that ADVENT had to be unveiled. Which left very little room to actually sit down with the Ethereal who’d so kindly surrendered to them.

Her face turned hard under her helmet as she watched the Commander and Saudia talk, recalling how Aegis had rather easily put down her entire squad. It would have been embarrassing if it wasn’t a terrifying implication of just how underdeveloped they were to properly combat the Ethereals. Aegis had of course been vague after they’d taken him on the skyranger.

It was one of the most awkward rides back she’d ever had, but they hadn’t exactly had much time to debate, and stuck him in alien containment where Vahlen had been analyzing the Ethereal with a rapt expression on her face. Everyone around Aegis had been strangely confident as they worked, with no hint of nervousness at all.

An unnatural lack of caution, that she suspected was attributed to the aura he emitted she’d sensed before. For whatever reason, he had the ability to harden the resolve of those around him; negate debilitating emotions and conditions like fear and caution. It was both useful and disturbing how easily she’d been affected, and even more insidious since she didn’t particularly feel the need to block it.

With the Ravaged One, it had been simple. Pain was bad and she’d been happy to block it. Aegis had the opposite effect. She wanted to feel secure about what she was doing; she wanted to be without fear. And because of that, she felt like there was some hidden catch she wasn’t aware of. So ever since then she’d fought to prevent herself from being affected by him in that way. Not until she knew how exactly it worked.

That being said, it was interesting. She wondered if all Ethereals had this kind of aura around them. A passive telepathic presence developed over likely centuries of practice. If so…hmm, perhaps it could be replicated. She supposed she could do it to a degree, seeing as how she’d mentally synched her squads together in the past, but that had been after intense concentration, not something she did on instinct.
Another question to ask him when they returned to the Praesidium.

“What did you think?” She asked Carmelita who stood beside her, clutching her alloy cannon. The woman had been tense ever since arriving here, and Patricia knew it was likely being in such close proximity to Iseul. Whatever the Commander thought of him, it wouldn’t erase the friends she’d lost during the Korean shadow war. The fact that both countries were now technically part of one government under ADVENT didn’t seem to help.

“Both of them weren’t telling the whole truth,” she answered flatly, admittedly relaxing a little bit. “I’ve seen enough propaganda to tell. Saudia’s speech had the mark of Iseul in places, and the Commander is attempting to appeal to the basic intelligence of the public.” She snorted. “Ha. It’s sad that even an alien invasion isn’t enough to get everyone to work together.”

“Agreed,” Patricia said wearily. “But I have a feeling that is going to change when the attacks start.”

“I suppose so,” Carmelita said, looking over to where Presidents Chia and Treduant were talking. Chia waved her over. “Looks like she wants me,” Carmelita said. “I’ll be back.”

“Go ahead,” Patricia said, admittely curious why Chia wanted to talk with her. But it admittedly would be a nice change from just standing around and looking intimidating. She felt extremely out of her league and out of place here. The sheer amount of presence these people exhibited was staggering, and little more than a year ago, she had been a mid-ranking soldier in the Royal Marines.

She had admittedly come a long way since then, but this made her…uncomfortable. She was a soldier and psion, not a politician. She also suspected that they wouldn’t be quite as friendly if they knew she could read their minds at any time.

Now there was someone coming up, a very distinct mind. “Patricia Trask, correct?” Iseul asked coming up beside her. Her armor made her tower over him by a few inches, but he didn’t seem perturbed. “I’m not sure we’ve been formally introduced.”

“Yes, correct,” she said, not sensing anything hostile from him, and took his extended hand. “Do you make a point to greet every soldier this way?”

He gave a humorless smile. “Only the ones worth knowing. The Commander does not choose just anyone to accompany him, and I can see the uses for a psion.”

She was somewhat surprised he knew, and she could easily sense he believed what he was saying and it wasn’t a trick of some sort. “I’m curious how you came to that conclusion.”

He nodded toward her. “Your armor. The color is rather distinct, and I have seen the footage of you from New York. Correct me if I am wrong, and besides…there is something different about you that I can’t place. Call it a feeling.”

Patricia raised an eyebrow. “You don’t make assumptions based on feelings. I know that much about you.”

“Correct, I make educated guesses on what I know to be true,” he answered easily. “And what I know for certain is that you are not like others, Psion. The Commander must trust you a great deal to permit you to work with him so closely.”

Ah, now she was beginning to see what his point was. “Be careful with accusations, Supreme Leader. No, I am not influencing the Commander.”
“So blunt,” he said with a smile. “So tell me then, is it possible for you to influence someone without them aware of it?”

She narrowed her eyes, aware that any effect was lost from behind her helmet. “Of course I can. That doesn’t mean I do it. And I’d appreciate it if you either got to your point, or accused me properly.”

Iseul turned completely serious. “If you insist. I’ve learned what I could about you, and by all accounts you do not seem a threat. But I am not convinced that psionics are something that can be properly handled by XCOM. The fact that you are so highly promoted within it is dangerous, since your kind are dangerous, would you disagree?”

“No, your concern is reasonable;” she had to admit. Much as she hated hearing ‘your kind’ he unfortunately had a point. “But you forget that this is the Commander. Do you really think he doesn’t have an answer for…us?”

“No, I think he does,” Iseul admitted. “But I’m not sure it is the correct one. If it was, you would not hold any position of influence.”

She almost chuckled. That meant that he was unaware that the Commander himself was a psion, which would prove…interesting when he found out. But at this point she was getting a little tired of this conversation, and didn’t exactly want Iseul raising unnecessary questions. She reached out to his mind, easing it open a little to make it easier to suggestion.

It was interesting that if the target was unaware, it was easier to sway an intelligent person than one less so. Their minds were organized to a fault, making it easier to spot crevices. She raised a hand and then simply lowered it to her side while saying. “The Commander has a plan, you don’t need to worry about it.”

She pressed those words into his mind as well, as he’d been distracted by the motion she’d done with her hand. “I suppose you have a point,” he repeated dully. “The plan the Commander has is likely sufficient. There are more important things to worry about.”

“Let’s move on then,” she said.

“I agree,” Iseul said, eyeing the Commander and Saudia speaking. “I will leave before your South Korean soldier comes back. I doubt she would like to see me.”

“No,” Patricia agreed as he walked away. “She wouldn’t.”

Iseul’s suspicion of psionics was a somewhat important piece of information to learn. It would probably be best if the Commander heard it from her before he accidentally revealed it himself. But she probably shouldn’t worry. The Commander was much better in these situations than she was.

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The Praesidium, Barracks

Rare was the time where the soldiers crowded around the television to watch something on the news, but this was one such time. All of them had been silent as they watched the Commander and this new Chancellor give what essentially amounted to a replacement for the United Nations. Personally, Sierra Morrow found it…difficult…to believe that ADVENT was going to be some kind of utopia, especially given the current situation.
What she did think was that this had been in the works long before the alien attack on the United Nations had gone down. “The Commander’s been busy,” Leonid, one of the Russians commented. “There is no way he didn’t know this was happening.”

“Of course he knew,” Sierra agreed, swinging her arm absentmindedly over the couch, a habit she had yet to break. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he was involved in creating it. He was former CIA. They like doing this kind of stuff.”

“And I suppose you’re an expert on intelligence?” Mordecai said with a wry smile. “Special forces and intelligence work are not exactly synonymous.”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes at him. “True, but I wager I know more US history than you, and more about the CIA.”

“Perhaps,” he said, standing up. “It will be interesting to see how this works out.”

“Yeah,” Sierra said, unable to keep a frown off her face. Despite how…encouraging it was that a global alliance was already being formed, she wasn’t entirely comfortable with how it had all come together. It all seemed too well planned, and she wasn’t thrilled with how an entire army had apparently just come out of nowhere.

“I’m kinda surprised America seems to be joining this ADVENT,” Karen Dais, one of the Canadian CSORs commented, flicking a pen lazily between her fingers. “Sierra, can the president do that?”

Sierra scratched her chin. “Hmm…let’s see…alliances would fall under the executive branch I believe…but this seems a lot bigger. It seems like whatever nation joins ADVENT is subject to its laws.”

“A world government,” Lesedi clarified, the South African sniper looking rather happy with the idea. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

“Agreed,” Jona, the Swiss Grenadier nodded, brushing her snow-white hair behind her ear. “It’s what we need, like it or not.”

Sierra and Leonid exchanged a glance, and from his blank expression she knew he wasn’t quite as on board with the idea of a world government as some of them. Neither was she. “You won’t have a peaceful transition to a world government,” Leonid said, leaning back in the couch. “One: The people aren’t going to like suddenly being under a world government that they feel doesn’t represent their interests. In particular, America and Russia are very…patriotic. Savvin might push for it, but I don’t see America following suit.”

“Don’t forget that China will probably just laugh and say no,” Sierra agreed. “And I can agree with America. For the record I’m not entirely sure America should join yet, not until Saudia proves herself and we know a little more about ADVENT. Anyway…” Sierra looked back to Karen. “To answer your question, no, something like this would need to pass Congress at the very least. And since it would likely nullify our Constitution, it is not going to get bipartisan support from the Democrats and Republicans. There is no way they will willingly submit to an international power.”

She was interrupted by a chuckle from another soldier sitting on a chair behind them, his black skin illuminated by the florescent light directly above. What was his name…Joseph? And some strange last one. She did remember he was a Green Beret. “What’s so funny?”

“You haven’t kept up with the news, I guess,” he said looking over to them, raising his tablet.
Sierra frowned. “What are you talking about?”

He tossed the tablet to her which she caught easily and looked at what appeared to be a government document. “Senate bill 117B,” he continued. “I have a habit of checking exactly how my representatives are voting and this bill was passed about a week ago.”

Sierra did a quick scroll-through, somewhat irritated at the length. “You can’t just throw something forty-one pages long at me and expect me to know what the hell I’m reading. So it’s a bill? They do it all the time.”

Joseph stood up and walked over to them. “Not just any bill, it was introduced by President Treduant herself. Want to guess what it does?”

“Stop being smug and tell her.” Leonid chimed in, crossing his arms.

“It gives every executive agency complete autonomy in times of declared war,” Joseph explained. “In essence, it renders the government free to operate without the legislative and judicial branches. And of course, the military answers to the Commander-in-Chief.”

Sierra went cold as she realized the implications. “She wouldn’t do that. There will be riots in the streets. This kind of decision can’t be made unilaterally.”

“Except that it can,” Joseph confirmed, taking his tablet from her fingers. “I have no idea how she managed to get this through both the House and Senate in so little time, but she did and I wondered what the purpose of this bill actually could be. Considering ADVENT, I think we know now.”

Leonid whistled. “And I thought Madam Treduant was the woman who listened to the people.”

Sierra raised an eyebrow. “Where the hell did you get that idea? She’s the one who gets things done, and admittedly that lines up with what people want most of the time. I liked her, she’s a principled woman…still,” she shook her head and glanced at the TV. “This is going way too far for her…assuming she does declare America is joining ADVENT.”

“She was at the address,” Karen pointed out quietly. “I think that’s exactly what she is going to do.”

“She’s probably doing what’s necessary,” Lesedi said. “We don’t have time for all the congresses to debate over if they should help fight the aliens.”

“It’s not that simple,” Sierra scowled, trying to think. “This isn’t just bypassing Congress, this is undermining our country. This is throwing out everything we’ve built in favor of whatever the hell ADVENT is. And I can guarantee that they won’t hold the same values and rules as our Constitution.”

“If it comes between defending against the aliens and your constitution, which would you prefer?” Lesedi challenged. “Because I don’t think there’s much of a choice, for America or anyone else.”

“You wait and see if the new world order is actually good before preemptively signing on,” Sierra countered. “We need information, facts and evidence before even considering joining something like this.”

“The Commander is backing it though,” Jona added. “He wouldn’t be doing it unless he was confident it would work. He’s American too, if that makes you feel better.”

“Eh, I don’t know if the Commander really sees himself as just American,” Leonid said, motioning
toward the TV. “I mean he did say kinda imply that nationalism was a problem and we needed to focus on the aliens. From everything I’ve seen of him, he’s going to do whatever works best against the aliens.”

Sierra had gotten that feeling as well. Worse was that she had a suspicion that what he would like wasn’t exactly democratic. It wasn’t much to go on, just from how he’d acted, what he’d written and how he operated. The contingencies in particular had unnerved her the first time she read them, clearly prioritizing efficiency and results above all else. And the thing was...a democratic republic wasn’t exactly the most efficient form of government. That he was working with Nowinski and Supreme Leader Gwan told her that he didn’t really care how people operated as long as they shared his goals.

“In any case, there isn’t much we can do,” Lesedi said, standing up. “We’re XCOM now.”

“Copy that,” Leonid smirked. “Probably better this way. I trust the Commander a hell of a lot more than any politician.”

“A shame he isn’t one,” Jona said, and they chuckled at that.

Sierra didn’t join in. She sort of wished she could just fully commit her loyalty to XCOM, but she was still American and that wouldn’t change. A glance with Karen shared the same feelings. And in terms of trusting the Commander...she respected him now, though she wasn’t quite sure she trusted him yet.

Well, she did trust him not to get her killed for no reason, but not necessarily about making the right decisions.

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The Praesidium, Practice Range

Jamali still wasn’t entirely used to the curved and bubbly architecture of the Sectoids. The Praesidium was alien in every sense of the word, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that they didn’t belong here. The hum of the elerium generators was pervasive, yet he’d personally adapted to the pulses rather quickly, as had they all.

Still though, it felt unnatural. Out of place.

Like he did now.

It did speak to the level of respect all of them had for each other that none of them had made comments, insinuations or the like about where he’d come from. They weren’t exactly supportive, or anything like that, but they didn’t broach that topic and he returned the favor.

But it was never out of his mind and now it was coloring his outlook. He genuinely, truly, could not understand what unholy force had gripped the leaders of his nation to stoop so low as to not only assassinate foreign leaders, but kill their families as well. It was sickening, and he hadn’t slept the past nights after Israel had begun the attacks on Jordan, Syria, and soon to be, Iraq.

His homeland and first loyalty. A loyalty he wasn’t sure he could keep anymore.

True, it wasn’t without its faults to say the least. Iraq had embraced the extreme during the War on Terror and had paid the price. Jamali was well aware that many of his countryman were bitter and vengeful against Israel, the West, anyone who’d allowed the demon known as the Commander loose and hadn’t done anything to stop him until it was too late.
He’d been a lot younger then. And growing up seeing his country mocked and dismissed over the years had been troubling and difficult. But also as he grew older, he was able to tell it wasn’t without reason. It wasn’t undeserved, as harsh as that truth was. But it was a truth that he’d kept to himself as those around him wanted nothing more than revenge. They were too blinded to see that Islam, and by extension, Iraq, had been responsible for its own downfall. The religion had been hijacked by extremists, brought into the mainstream while purposefully ignoring aspects of the Quran that condemned everything the Caliphate stood for.

As he’d seen it now, after Mecca was destroyed, there should have been some serious internal self-examination after the Caliphate was finally defeated. And…there had. Though not by choice. Worse that the War had created a true hatred for the religion itself to the point that it wasn’t safe to openly practice it, even in western nations like the United States.

Laws had soon been passed regulating the practice significantly in multiple countries, and now the open practice of Islam was only openly tolerated in a very few places outside the Middle East, such as Canada and Switzerland. Jamali had wondered if the religion would ever recover, though with the attack on Israel, it seemed like that would be the actual death knell for Islam, as well as the regular way of life he’d experienced.

He scowled, once more trying to wonder what had possessed Saudi Arabia, Iran and Yemen to think that this was the solution. If it was simply vengeance, it would have happened a long time ago. Was it opportunism? An alien incursion would admittedly have everyone distracted, but if they seriously thought Israel was just going to ignore an attack, they must have been seriously impaired.

He finally reached the practice range set up. It was clearly modeled after the one in the Citadel; various cutouts and targets of various aliens populating the range at various distances. The room itself was empty, thankfully, all of the others watching the address by someone called Saudia. He’d never heard of her, but could guess what she was going to say: “This was such a horrible attack by the aliens, now unite and fight them.” Only with a lot more eloquence than he could be bothered to muster at this point. Not that he’d particularly believe her anyway.

ADVENT, the United Nations, he couldn’t muster up strong feelings for them. Truthfully he’d never really thought of them much, mainly because they’d never really done anything of note. What was truly horrible to him were the people who’d died in the attacks, not that the organization itself was coming apart.

And he supposed ADVENT was the replacement for the United Nations, maybe with a more military focus. He supposed he’d get the details later, but that conflict wasn’t the one he was watching now. And from the latest reports there, he needed to take his mind off it for a while. He took a stance, raised his pulse rifle and took aim at the cardboard cutout of a Borelian soldier, one of the recent additions.

The pulsing beam sliced through it with ease and he quickly moved to the next one, then the next until every target was sliced into charred, crisp pieces lying on the floor. He lowered his weapon and surveyed the damages. He really wondered if he was wasting his time here. Very rarely did he ever have shots that were hitting targets standing in the open, not to mention that pulse weapons weren’t like ballistics. A sustained beam pretty much negated any need for precise aiming even if it took far more power.

And his reflexes probably couldn’t improve more than they already were, although they did need to be maintained. However, this little jaunt did occupy him for…he glanced at his watch…thirty minutes. He grunted and turned to leave, hitting the button to notify that the targets needed to be
“You could have left some for me,” a voice chastised, a dry one with a soft tint. Jamali turned to see a smaller woman walk in, a gauss rifle slung over her shoulder. Short curly black hair framed a concerned face, which was overlooked by the scar from her right ear to lower chin. Right, even if he didn’t recognize her from her accent and brown skin, he would be able to tell by her posture that she was special forces, probably Israeli.

He shrugged. “They’ll replace them in a few minutes. Sorry.”

“Unneeded,” Fakhr al Din answered, raising a hand. “I’m curious why you aren’t watching up there with the rest of them. Seems pretty important.”

“Not to me,” Jamali answered, not wanting to elaborate. “I doubt it will change anything. Military alliances are expected.”

“Mhmm,” she said, crossing her arms. “Look, I know why you’re down here and I don’t blame you. Trust me when I say I know what it’s like to have Israel invade your home.”

He frowned and appraised the smaller woman. “You’re Israeli special forces though. Sayerert Makul if I remember you correctly.”

“Oh, I am,” she confirmed. “But I wasn’t always. You do remember Palestine, right?”

He winced. Ah, that made much more sense. “Right. I didn’t realize that happened to you.”

She sighed. “I don’t make a habit of telling. Anyway, in retrospect it makes sense why it happened. They antagonized Israel too much and they got sick of the threats and acted. If they went that far, I can’t say I’m surprised to see them take on the rest after they were attacked.”

“It makes sense,” Jamali said, frustrated. “But what I can’t figure out is why? None of it makes sense. They had to know what they were doing.”

Fakhr’s face contorted in confusion. “I agree. And I’m not sure we’ll ever really know. But for what it’s worth, I’m sorry it’s happening to you as well. Contrary to what you might think, not all of us want a war with your country.”

“Thank you,” he said with as much sincerity as he could muster. “But I’m curious…why join the IDF after what happened?”

She was silent for a few moments. “Guess I wanted to prove something. I can’t say the Israelis treated us badly, but they definitely looked down on us, were suspicious despite in theory being all ‘one nation’ now. No, we were Palestinians first, Israelis second, if at all. Never openly either, but there were enough looks, gestures and tones to get the general idea that we were not welcome.”

She shrugged. “The only way to change that is proving them wrong. So I did my part. People are stubborn in their prejudices and like it or not, Israel is my home and I feel obligated to defend it. And even if I can’t attribute it completely to me, I do like to think I changed the minds of several officers about fielding native Palestinians.”

Jamali nodded. “Good for you. Hopefully…it will end quickly,” he sighed. “The IDF is moving on Iraq now. Russia is moving into Iran and America is concentrating on Yemen and Saudi Arabia. I hope it ends before too many people die.”

Fakhr nodded, leaning against the wall. “I think that it will. Don’t forget we have the aliens to deal
with. Focus on that, and not something you have no control over. You’ll just make it worse for yourself.”

“Probably a good idea,” he agreed reluctantly, despite probably going to still keep up-to date on the status of the war. “I guess you saw the address, right? Anything interesting?”

She snorted. “Oh yes. And from what I’ve inferred and seen, I do think ADVENT is going to change the world.”

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Supplementary Material

The Advent Directive

SECTION 1: Organization and Structure

Subsection 1.1: Introduction

Upon initialization of ADVENT, the organization of this body will be divided into several different branches, both civilian and military. The first of these will be federal or civilian positions, which will govern over the general population and represent their interests. The main organs of this are as follows:

- The Legislature, which consists of the ADVENT Congress of Nations, presided over by the Chancellor of ADVENT (See Section 2 for further details)
- The Judicial branch, which is responsible for the enforcement, sentencing and reviewing of ADVENT State law (See Section 3 for further details).
- The Executive branch, overseen by the Chancellor of ADVENT which includes multiple agencies responsible for ensuring that ADVENT remains in prime condition. The Executive Branch also has direct influence over the ADVENT Military and Peacekeeping Forces.

In addition to the civilian and federal branches, the final major organs of ADVENT are the ADVENT Military, ADVENT Peacekeepers and ADVENT Intelligence.

- The ADVENT Military consists of the armed forces of ADVENT, and oversees troop deployments, strategy, intervention and their internal research and engineering programs. The ADVENT Military is subject to the Executive Branch and the current Chancellor, though can be overridden if certain conditions are met (See Section 8 for further details).
- The ADVENT Peacekeeping Forces are responsible for the protection of ADVENT member nations, as well as the enforcement of laws passed by the Legislature. Peacekeepers will be strictly used to maintain domestic security which encompasses all criminal elements that occur in member states. Peacekeepers are subject to both the Judicial and Executive branches, though as with the ADVENT Military, exceptions are in place should certain conditions be met (See Section 7 for further details).
- ADVENT Intelligence focuses on information gathering, analysis and application. It is the organ used for covert ADVENT operations against both civilian and military application, at the discretion of the Intelligence Director. ADVENT Intelligence answers directly to the Executive branch and ADVENT Military Leadership (See Section 6 for more details).

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Brought to Light

The Praesidium

This was admittedly not what he was expecting. Although to be fair, Oliver Ilari had no idea what to expect from XCOM. Perhaps a base of clear alien design should have been obvious, but he’d always thought that XCOM had operated from a…well, human base.

Well, then again, the Commander had said that XCOM had been attacked, so it was plausible that this was a recent move. In which case it raised the question of just how exactly XCOM had an entirely alien base as a backup.

The discussions about XCOM itself had been wide and varied within NATO. No one could decide if it was UN-run or not. Some days it seemed to be, then the next it seemed completely independent of them. No one could figure out where they were operating out of, or who they answered to. The most common theory had been that XCOM was some American program, and Oliver had personally supported that.

None of them had actually given any legitimacy to the possibility that XCOM was independent.

And now all evidence seemed to point that it was, which was legitimately shocking for him. Although it only made him suspect that it was a recent development, since something this large couldn’t just come out of nowhere. Well, now it looked like he was going to get some of his longstanding questions answered.

The irony did not escape him.

“This is amazing!” Analyn Roxas said as they descended the ramp, her eyes widening as she looked at the glittering alien metal. He wondered if it would be enough to make her pause for a few seconds. The Filipino woman had chatted with him the entire flight, especially once she’d learned he’d been with NATO. She was in rather good spirits considering the state of the world at the moment.

“It certainly is…interesting,” Anna Pavlova said softly, hugging her pack to her chest. The muscular American was surprisingly soft-spoken, especially considering she part of the Air Force TRF. “I wonder if this base was once run by the aliens.”

“Wow, I wonder how you could come to that conclusion,” Nati Avraham commented brusquely, striding down without giving the architecture a glance. “Does this look human?”

Anna opened her mouth to answer, then closed it, her lips morphing to a disapproving frown as he clearly wasn’t interested in an answer. “Don’t pay him any mind,” Analyn said with a smile, nudging her as they began moving deeper into the base. “Israeli Military doesn’t have a sense of humor.”

Oliver snorted behind them. He couldn’t really contest that too much. The few encounters with the IDF that he recalled had been strictly business and the soldiers had treated it as exactly that. Not that he minded, it was one of the things he admired about their country. But it also seemed hard for them to switch ‘off’ when it was appropriate.

“Everything you hoped and dreamed?” Another soldier asked, walking up beside him. Another one who hadn’t spoken much on the flight over. He was definitely Asian, a bit smaller than Oliver and had short black hair.
“It’s certainly something,” Oliver agreed, now acutely aware of the pulsing he was feeling as they walked down the shimmering hallway. “I don’t believe I got your name?”

“Of course,” he said with a smile. “Sai-Kee Tan, Republic of China Armed Forces.”

Taiwanese then, interesting. “Oliver Ilari, NATO.”

Sai-Kee’s face grew somber. “Ah, I see. It’s unfortunate what’s happened.”

“That it is,” Oliver agreed with a sigh. “All indications are that NATO is going to be reformed into whatever ADVENT wants.”

Sai-Kee adjusted his pack as he looked over inquisitively. “You don’t approve? It seems logical.”

“Yeah, it’s logical,” Oliver agreed reluctantly. “But I’m not sure it’s what NATO should be doing. We were created to stand against Russian aggression, not fight aliens and definitely not answering to an unproven organization.”

“Isn’t that…” Sai-Kee looked forward, pausing a few seconds. “Somewhat…obsolete? Russia isn’t really a threat anymore. Don’t we have bigger issues to deal with?”

“Tell that to Iran right now,” Oliver said, shaking his head. “But you’re also right. I guess I’m sort of stuck in the past. Probably best to listen to the new Chancellor and the Commander and move past that. Seems petty when compared to the aliens.”

“Can’t disagree,” Sai-Kee nodded. “Even China doesn’t seem like such a big problem now. Guess realizing how small we are in the universe puts things into perspective. I mean,” he shrugged. “The aliens probably outnumber us a million to one. Even if every human were able to fight, we’re one planet. They have…well, we don’t know.”

Oliver noted a couple of XCOM soldiers walking past in full armor. “Maybe,” he said as they rounded a corner, somewhat keeping up with Anna and Analyn. “But I’m definitely not convinced their soldiers are better. XCOM has what? Under a hundred people? And by all accounts they’ve managed to hold on until this point.”

“True,” Sai-Kee agreed with a smile. “And we’re part of it now. Feels good.”

“Well, it should be an experience in any event,” Oliver said as they entered a room he assumed was the barracks. There were conventional bunks that seemed at odds with the alien architecture of the base. He found an unclaimed one and tossed his pack onto the cot, wondered where to go next.

Oddly enough there had been no welcoming committee, just instructions from the pilot on where to go.

It was interesting how…non-military it was. Which struck him as odd since by all accounts the Commander was a very organized person. Or maybe he just expects you to be able to find the damn barracks without an entire escort. He probably has more important stuff to worry about.

That rationale made quite a bit of sense. Although it was still unusual for new soldiers to be trusted like that with no guidance. Maybe it was even a test…

He grunted. Drop the conspiracies. You’re too old for that. “They’re still sending more,” a voice commented, and he looked over to see it belonging to a young Asian woman with her arms crossed and a wry smile on her face.

He raised an eyebrow. “How many have come so far?”
“Nearly thirty, by my count,” she answered. “Definitely not complaining though. We need everyone we can.” She extended a hand. “Shun Anwei, welcome to XCOM.”

He took it and gave a firm shake. “Oliver Ilari, NATO,” he paused and appraised her. “Hmm…let me guess. Japanese Intelligence?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Close, actually. How did you guess intelligence?”

He nodded towards her. “Your body. Not quite that of a soldier, even if that’s been your job recently. I’ve worked with enough soldiers and agents to know when one is transitioning to another. You must be skilled if someone thought you’d fit here better.”

She smiled. “I’m flattered. But not Japanese. Former Chinese Intelligence, the more militant aspect, anyway.”

Well, wasn’t that interesting. “Former Chinese Intelligence,” she emphasized. “Before you get too suspicious or excited,” her tone grew a little colder. “I’m not exactly welcome back in China now.”

That was even more interesting, though he could guess the reason. “You prioritized XCOM over China.”

“How observant,” she commented dryly. “Doesn’t help that I was essentially sent as a political pawn and set up. But I don’t regret it. It’s nice working for someone what actually has an interest in your well-being.”

Oliver nodded. “You mean the Commander.”

“Correct,” she said. “Probably not obvious right now, but you’ll understand when you meet him. You’re in good hands. All of us are.”

It must be true on some level; he must have had some kind of effect if he’d somehow convinced a Chinese agent of all people to virtually defect. Very curious. Oliver leaned against the bunk. “Well, you seem to know your way around. So what stuff should I know?”

She smiled. “You want the tour?”

“I think I would.”

“Then follow me,” Shun said, motioning for him to follow. “I should warn you that XCOM isn’t like anything you’ve been in before.”

“I’m getting that impression.” Oliver said, and followed her as she began showing him around the base.

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The Praesidium, Training Area 1

Nuan Kun sized up the two people before her, one looking at her with outright hostility and the other appraising her with a cold impersonal stare. North Koreans were so easy to provoke, and she didn’t feel particularly bad about it. Chan Jin-Taek stood several inches taller, but if he hoped to intimidate her, he was sorely mistaken.

Iida Keyoko was roughly her height, and was managing to only stand there and look both annoyed and furious, but clearly trying to refrain from something she’d regret. Chan wasn’t so restrained.
“[Careful what you say, puppet. You’re not in China anymore.]”

Nuan didn’t give him the satisfaction of a reaction, only crossing her arms. “[And I’m not one of your brainwashed citizens. Or soldiers.]”

“[You’re one to talk,]” Iida almost spat. “[It’s not like China is known for its intelligent and independent populace…oh wait-]”

“[At least our citizens knew about the alien threat,]” Nuan said, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. “[How long did it take you to tell them?]” She clicked her tongue. “[I’m disappointed. All the money we sent to you, and your citizens probably can’t operate a computer, with how sheltered they are.]”

Iida took a step forward and this time it was Chan putting a hand on her arm to restrain her. “[No answer?]” Nuan asked with a raised eyebrow. “[I’m sure you’ve spent your whole life being told you’re some kind of superpower. Maybe you believe it. But you all tend to forget that the only reason your “great” Supreme Leader is in charge is because we allowed him to be.]”

“[Then that proves just how decrepit your idiot leaders are,]” Chan spat, no longer restraining Iida. “[Supreme Leader Gwan hasn’t been on your side for decades.]”

“[Oh, but he never acted on his traitorous urges until he was protected,]” Nuan pointed out with a smile. “[He wouldn’t have dared go against us unless he got protection from XCOM. He is a coward and an insignificant tool. We should have just annexed your country instead of trusting it with Gwan.]”

Her smile faded slightly as she noted both of them tense and ball up their fists. Perhaps she shouldn’t have said that. “[Remember what I said,]” Chan hissed, taking a step forward and Nuan resisted the urge to step back. “[You’re not in China anymore. And the Commander probably won’t mind if we teach some insolent Chinese agent a lesson.]”

“[Brawling is unbecoming of a soldier,]” Nuan warned. “[At least don’t act like savages.]”

She was hoping they actually listened, since she knew quite well that if it came to a fight, she wasn’t skilled enough to reasonably defend herself, especially against two. She hadn’t intended on this ending up quite so…volatile, but they had truthfully brought it on themselves. She’d just heard them commenting on what role they thought the Supreme Leader was going to play in ADVENT and she’d chimed in something along the lines of “Probably one that doesn’t require a lot of thought.”

How exactly was she to know they would become so offended? She’d heard of how bad North Korean brainwashing was, but this was ridiculous. And people called the Chinese indoctrinated communists, ha.

Although her ignorance of that little fact might now lead to her getting beaten up, and that was not exactly how she wanted to spend her first days in XCOM. As it happened, it seemed her appeal to their better natures was not working and they were coming in.

“Hey!”

The words yelled in English caught her attention and she looked to the right to see a small young Asian woman with cropped black hair storming up. There was something in the way her body was moving that immediately put Nuan on alert. It was like watching a predator approach, in complete control and bearing an expression devoid of any sympathy.
Nuan didn’t recognize her, but the two North Koreans clearly did and immediately pulled back. Now that she was closer Nuan noted that something was wrong with her eyes, they had some kind of golden rim to them that gave her an almost…demonic appearance. The fact that she was clearly angry didn’t dispel that image.

“[What is going on?]” She demanded in Korean, looking between the three of them.

Well, she could answer that. “[I believe the two of them were about to, ah, “Teach me a lesson”]”

The woman fixed her with unsympathetic and cold eyes. “[I could have guessed as much. What exactly prompted that?]”

“[I may have insulted them.]” Nuan admitted.

“[And just why would you think that is a good idea?]” The woman asked softly, Nuan just now realizing how melodic her voice really was.

Nuan shrugged. “[In retrospect, it wasn’t.]”

She narrowed her eyes. “[It usually isn’t. You’re one of the new recruits, correct?]”

“[Yes. Nuan Kun, Liberation Army Strategic Support.]”

“[Carmelita Alba.]” she answered in response. “[So here’s how it works. The general rule is not to insult people here, which should be common sense, but apparently something that some people need to be told. Stop provoking people.]”

Nuan felt herself flush at the reprimand, but then Carmelita turned to the North Koreans. “[And both of you need to stop getting offended every time someone says something vaguely negative about your precious country or Supreme Leader. Some people don’t like North Korea. Suck it up and deal with it. The world doesn’t revolve around you, so stop getting provoked over infuriatingly small things. It’s insulting to everyone else here.]”

Carmelita now looked between both parties. “[Where you come from doesn’t matter here. I don’t care what either country did to you in the past, but here you will be working with each other so you better get used to it. They-]” she pointed to the North Koreans. “[Are not your enemy. She-]” she pointed at Nuan. “[Is not your enemy. Our only enemy are those aliens coming from space. Nothing else matters. Do I make myself clear?]”

“[Yes, sir.]” Iida and Chan said instantly.

“[Understood.]” Nuan conceded, feeling somewhat mollified after that speech.

“[Good.]” Carmelita said, stepping back. “[I don’t want to have to find this again. If you must beat each other up, do it in the ring.]” At that, she abruptly turned away and strode off. Iida and Chan did the same, clearly wanting to get as far away from her as possible. Nuan just stood there, watching the space where Carmelita had walked off.

Who exactly was she? Probably a ranking soldier, especially since the two North Koreans had reacted so strongly and deferred so easily to her. Carmelita…an interesting name. Didn’t sound Korean, but exceptions existed, and the amount of immigrants that knew Korean was limited, so probably not from the west. Didn’t talk like a North Korean either…so…South Korean then?

Maybe?
It would seem exceptionally unlikely that such a woman would be able to tolerate North Koreans, let alone them actually deferring to her. “Ah, I see you met Carmelita,” a new voice said and she turned to see another man walking up, tall, with black hair and most interestingly, a metal hand. “She can be intense, but she’s one of the best soldiers I’ve worked with.”

“I can believe it,” Nuan said, turning to him. “And who might you be?”

“Mordecai Korhn,” he answered smoothly. “I must say I didn’t expect the Chinese to send anyone else. I assume you are here to to replace Miss Anwei?”

“I am here because China desires to be represented in the leading anti-alien defense,” Nuan answered carefully, trying to ignore mention of the traitor. “While XCOM and the People’s Republic have had differences—”

“Spare me,” he interrupted bluntly, raising his metal hand. “I was Kidon, and I know China quite well. And I can tell you that you’re going to make enemies if you flaunt who you are. We don’t care.” Mordecai crossed his arms. “We fight aliens, and that’s what’s important. All of us hate politics at this point since it’s sort of why this mess exists in the first place, and yes, that includes China. But do your job and we won’t judge you.”

He paused. “And if you think that’s too difficult, remember that Carmelita came from South Korea. If anyone has a right to be resentful of the North Koreans, it’s her, but she lost someone she cared about to the aliens. Most of us have and that puts things into perspective. As far as we’re concerned, this is a fresh start for everyone and we’re all working to the same goal. Understand that?”

Nuan narrowed her eyes. “I understand the reasoning.”

He gave a humorless smile. “You probably won’t for some time. But you will eventually. We all do,” he began walking away, then paused, a thoughtful look on his face. “Oh, and don’t hesitate to challenge someone to spar if you feel like a fight. You’ll find plenty of takers. And if you don’t know how…” he gave her an amused shrug. “Well, I’m sure you’ll find someone to teach you.”

He walked away and left her standing alone again. After a few minutes she scowled and strode over to the treadmills, thinking furiously. This was definitely not how she expected XCOM to be, so she would have to adapt as always.

At least it was more exciting than Beijing.

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The Praesidium, Barracks

Patricia did really wonder what the Commander was waiting for. It was well past time they properly interrogate Aegis, but he was still apparently discussing something important with Saudia, though he’d presumably be back within several hours. In the end it probably didn’t matter, since Aegis clearly wasn’t going anywhere.

In the meantime, she was rather comfortable resting against Creed on the couch. “I assume you watched the address?” She asked as he adjusted his arm around her.

“Of course I did,” he answered. “Not bad ones, from either of them. I should really ask you what you thought of the whole thing, since you can read minds and all that.”

She shrugged against him, feeling several people have their curiosities piqued as they saw them
together. *Do something else,* she sent more as an afterthought, not really relishing having anyone eavesdrop on their conversations. Privacy was unfortunately something of a luxury that only a very few had here.

“It seemed positive overall,” she answered, sounding vague even to herself. “You know I don’t read specific thoughts unless I have reason to. Iseul might be a problem later.”

“No surprise,” Creed grunted. “He *is* the dictator of North Korea.”

“Not that,” she sighed, sitting up straight. “He’s very…distrustful of psions. Me in particular. He clearly thinks I’m a security risk and have “too much influence” over the Commander.”

Creed didn’t exactly feel surprised at that. “Only because he doesn’t know you. It’s a fair concern though, and then I assume he doesn’t know the Commander…”

“Doubt it,” Patricia said. “In any event, I made sure he won’t be causing problems for the time being.”

Creed looked down at her, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“I psionically suggested to him that it wasn’t an issue and he should focus on more important things,” she answered absentmindedly. “Worked surprisingly well.”

“Patricia…” Creed said slowly. “That…was probably something you should *not* have done. You do realize *that* is the reason he might have concerns?”

Patricia frowned and looked up at him, not having expected a rebuke. “No, it was justified. We have more important things to worry about now, and Iseul is the type that would start some kind of witch-hunt against all psions based on things he can’t prove. I prevented that from happening, at least for a while.”

Creed didn’t exactly seem convinced. “Maybe,” he admitted. “But that isn’t going to make people more…accepting of your abilities.”

“It’s not like I mind-controlled him,” Patricia defended. “But I’m not going to refuse to tamper with minds if I feel it’s warranted.”

“I’m not saying you’re necessarily wrong,” Creed placated, sighing. “At least in this case. But I’m just telling you how it might be perceived.”

Patricia appraised him for a few seconds, biting her lower lip. “You’re uncomfortable,” she said slowly after sensing his discomfort with the conversation…or with her. “With me.”

Creed snorted. “Come on, you know it’s a bit more complicated,” he said, picking up her cold hand and placing the palm against the side of his head. “You don’t have to try to figure things out from just my emotions. You’ve been in my head before, I don’t mind you checking occasionally. Prevents misunderstandings.”

She gave a warm smile. “I…thanks for reminding me. You’re-“ she cut herself off as she sensed a sharp and familiar mind coming up, unfortunately focused on them. She let her hand fall to his chest and let it trail down.

“That really is rather sweet,” the familiar accented voice said, which might have been mistaken for mocking had Patricia not sensed that she was just very amused. “I wouldn’t have expected it from either of you to be honest. Had no idea you were even a thing.”
Creed looked up in annoyance at the comically small woman walking around the couch, a face lined with scars and chopped brown hair framing it. “Hello Zara,” Patricia muttered as the soldier took one of the chairs opposite them. “Took you long enough to get here.”

“Wait…” Creed muttered, his features clenching as he pinned Zara with a hard stare. “We’ve met, haven’t we?”

“Do I really look that different without the bandanna?” She asked sarcastically. “Or is it the XCOM uniform?”

“You have got to be kidding me,” Creed stated flatly, disbelief emanating out of him. “You’re that EXALT soldier.”

Zara gave him several mocking claps. “Well done. In all seriousness, this base is really nice. Even better than the Bastion.”

Creed glanced at her, then at Patricia, then back at Zara. “Sorry, but what the fuck are you doing here?”

Zara leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “Well, when the Commander came to us with his oh-so-generous offer to disband, I didn’t want to get stuck in some officer position in ADVENT, so I asked if I could join XCOM. And here I am.”

“You forgot to mention this to me,” Creed muttered to Patricia. “Just slipped your mind?”

“Somewhat,” Patricia admitted, realizing now that she probably should have said something. “But for what it’s worth, I did approve it.”

“She killed our soldiers!”

“Of course I did,” Zara said, raising an eyebrow. “We were enemies. Now we’re allies. Simple as that. And don’t hide behind dead soldiers as a reason to dislike me, since by my count, XCOM killed a lot more of my soldiers that we ever did yours. So as far as I’m concerned, we’re even. Sound fair?”

Creed closed his mouth and narrowed his eyes. “Well even if I wasn’t, I don’t think I have much choice here.”

“Nope,” Zara nodded. “But I don’t intend to betray you. We have a common enemy in the aliens and I’ll fight just as hard for XCOM as I did for EXALT to defeat them.”

“And after the war?” He asked.

“You expecting something to change?” Zara asked bluntly. “EXALT is dead and is never coming back if that’s what you’re worried about. Besides, I have no intention of making an enemy of the Commander.”

“Smart,” Patricia commented. “But I do think you’ll fit in provided you can follow orders.”

Zara pursed her lips. “Provided they don’t get me killed.”

Patricia’s wristband buzzed. Ah right, that would likely be Jackson wanting to discuss some recent developments. “Well, you two get to know each other,” she said, leaning up and giving Creed a quick peck on the cheek. “Duty calls.”
Jackson had one finger to her headset as they gathered around the holotable. It was somewhat strange doing this with the Commander not being present, but it needed to be done and he’d be sure to catch up later. “Big Sky just checked in,” Jackson informed them, letting her hand fall to her side. “Commander’s on his way back. Should only be a couple hours.”

“Then we interrogate the Ethereal,” Zhang grunted. “Should be illuminating.”

“Should be,” Jackson agreed, pressing several buttons on the holotable. “In the meantime, we need to be ready to respond to the aliens.”

Which was something Patricia was also acutely aware of. “What’s the status of Australia?”

Jackson brought the hologram to rest on the continent, which was covered in varying shades of orange and red. “The status is bad,” Jackson said unhelpfully. “The aliens have cut outside internet access and disrupted most forms of communication. They’ve taken the major cities and are beginning a concerted effort to annex the nearby cities.”

“The ADF is doing its best,” Zhang said, pointing at the center of the continent. “More of the army survived than it should have and they’re at the northern center to be evacuated. What’s left is being transitioned to a guerilla force. They know the area much better and can turn the land to their advantage.”

“They’ll still need support.” Patricia reminded him.

“Correct,” he nodded. “I’ll be sending them some additional agents. I know ADVENT will be supporting them as well. The information they’ve gathered so far has been…interesting, to say the least.”

Jackson raised an eyebrow. “Such as?”

Zhang picked up his tablet he’d set on the edge of the holotable. “Such as that Australia isn’t exactly being kind to them. The integration seems to be going slower than they’d like, and the aliens seem to be avoiding specific wildlife like spiders and oddly enough, bees.”


“Unknown still,” Zhang shrugged. “But it does seem to indicate that the aliens might be more susceptible to wildlife than we assumed. They also avoid the seas altogether. Smart considering the kind of life that inhabits them.”

Jackson scratched her chin, looking thoughtfully down at the holotable. “That is interesting. Do you think Vahlen…”

“Vahlen’s actually been working on some new genetic mods,” Patricia interrupted, picking up her own tablet and handing it to Jackson. “It is somewhat…invasive, even for her. She’s also been adapting some of the ideas EXALT had for genetic modification.”

Jackson looked up, her eyebrows scrunched together. “EXALT? They didn’t ever really apply MELD to their soldiers, correct?”

“We never fought them,” Patricia corrected, recalling reading the descriptions of the various
EXALT projects. “But they definitely tried. Actually got pretty far along in some of them. Once they transitioned into ADVENT, they send all their files to us. Vahlen took the most promising and has been working on them, in addition to her jellyfish project.”

“And the Manchurian Project, correct?” Zhang said.

“And that,” Patricia confirmed. “But the Commander wants most, if not all of our soldiers to get genetic enhancements. So Vahlen’s been trying to expand the pool of modifications.” Patricia sighed. “We’re going to need to get a new shipment of test subjects soon, make a note of that, Jackson.”

“Will do,” Jackson said wearily, dutifully making a note. “Does the Commander want to make modification mandatory? I thought he was against that.”

“He won’t make it mandatory,” Patricia shrugged. “But he’s going to push for it, at least the small ones. The Secondary Heart in particular is probably the least impactful, but will increase the stamina and survivability for all our soldiers. Vahlen’s also looking into…uh, generic, modification that just does something simple, like increased strength or reflexes. Weaker mods, but not as extensive as the muscle density one.”

“Seems fair enough,” Jackson nodded, rubbing her forehead. “I’m also going to suggest sometime that Vahlen focus her genetic programs beyond external. I wouldn’t turn down a modification that could let me function without sleep.”

“Go for it,” Patricia suggested. “But from talking with her, modifications directly to the brain are extremely difficult. It’s why she’s been hesitant on researching ways to try and enhance my psionics. She just doesn’t have enough information and we can’t really experiment on psionic prisoners.”

“EXALT tried that, apparently,” Zhang noted.

“And look how that turned out,” Patricia countered. “We can focus on psionic testing once Vahlen launches the Manchurian Program. In the meantime…”

“In the meantime, we need to prepare for when the aliens attack,” Jackson redirected, moving the map further north. “The next major attack will probably be Japan, China or somewhere in Africa. The aliens were smart in choosing Australia. They have a staging ground to launch attacks almost anywhere in the world.”

“China isn’t going to be much of a help.” Zhang grunted. “But they can hold their own, especially since they’ve got that dreadnought.”

“We can’t worry about China,” Jackson agreed with a nod. “But it appears that Saudia is sending quite a few soldiers to the Korean peninsula and Japan. They’re still not fully transitioned yet, so they’re relying on local ADVENT garrisons for the main defense. Several US carriers are also near Japan.”

Patricia looked at the map and frowned. “Why would the aliens attack there first? Wouldn’t it make sense to take the Philippines, New Zealand or any other nearby country?”

“It would,” Zhang confirmed somberly. “And I believe they will. But we don’t have any way to reasonably combat them. There aren’t enough soldiers that could be moved there, and the proximity is too close to Australia to be held for long.”

“So they’re being sacrificed.”
“Correct.”

Patricia sighed, but it unfortunately made sense. “What about the Americas?”

“If they really wanted to cause issues, they’d attack South America,” Jackson said, moving the map to the respective continent. “Marshal Luana is continuing her borderline illegal invasion of the neighboring countries and if reports are to be believed, the power has somewhat gone to her head.”

Zhang didn’t show it outwardly, but Patricia definitely sensed his agreement. “Luana may become a problem soon, and the contingent of Peacekeepers ADVENT is sending may only make it worse. I may send some more agents to determine exactly what she hopes to accomplish with this war. Retribution has already been taken, this is just overkill.”

“I could go,” Patricia suggested. “She wouldn’t be able to resist me, or any psion.”

“I agree,” Zhang nodded with a scowl. “But this is ADVENT’s jurisdiction now. Brazil is officially an ADVENT nation and is now subject to their laws, and there are specific conditions that allow the removal of heads of state, and the usage of psions. But XCOM is not to get officially involved.”

Patricia smirked on his emphasis on “officially.” “And unofficially?”

“Unofficially, this will be a good test for Saudia,” Zhang stated emotionlessly, though she sensed an iron resolve within him. “But I would not expect this to be resolved for a while. We and ADVENT have more important issues to deal with.”

“True,” Patricia muttered. “We also need more psions. I have a couple candidates I’m going to bring to the Commander.”

“Good to hear,” Jackson nodded. “And in other good news, Shen confirmed that the Goliath is ready to deploy.”

“Not a moment too soon,” Patricia said approvingly. “Let’s hope it works as well as he simulated.”

Jackson snorted. “You seen that thing? If there’s going to be anything the aliens will be terrified of, it’s a twenty-foot tall robot of death.”

“Don’t forget that the aliens also have their own vehicles we haven’t seen yet,” Zhang warned, narrowing his eyes. “And a target that big might would attract air attacks, not to mention the Ethereals will prioritize it with their psionics.”

“Stop killing our dreams,” Jackson chided. “Besides, Shen put quite a few anti-air countermeasures in the suit, so those should help.”

“Keep your expectations in check,” Zhang said. “That’s all I’m saying.” He picked up his tablet. “I have to delegate some assignments for my agents. Let me know when the Commander returns.”

“Will do,” Patricia promised as he walked out the door.

“Do you have your list of candidates?” Jackson asked once he’d left.

Patricia nodded, and sent another file to her. “Yes, here they are.”

“Thanks,” she answered, focusing on her tablet while Patricia rested her hands on the holomap, trying to envision how this world could be defended, and where the aliens would strike next.

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This was such a substantial upgrade that Abby wasn’t even sure she was in the right place. While the original Intelligence Control had been functional, but very small, this was almost on the level of Mission Control. There were quite a few analysts in front of several of the dozen computers, with more hooked up to analytical and cryptanalysis equipment she still wasn’t sure how to work.

Soft white light illuminated the room, making the alloy the base was made of sparkle and reflect, further increasing the illumination. In the center was the now-expected holotable, at which Director Zhang was standing in front of now.

Abby took a breath at the entrance, then moved forward. An ironic metaphor right now for where she was emotionally. Don’t think about it. Not yet. Just keep pushing forward.

Move on. But even if psychology wasn’t her field, she knew it was only temporary and running away from what she’d done wouldn’t work out in the long run. But she really didn’t have a choice, or so she thought now. XCOM needed her now, there wasn’t time for periods of reflection. Zhang didn’t exactly seem to buy her explanation that she was ‘fine’ but he’d just frowned and told her to get some rest.

Although that wasn’t easy either. She never remembered her nightmares when she woke up, but she knew she had them because she would always wake up either nauseous or terrified, usually some combination of the two. It wasn’t hard to pinpoint the cause, and as a result any sort of rest she got was shot to hell.

If it got worse, it was eventually going to impact her performance in which case her options would likely be limited officially to some kind of psychiatrist. Which might help, but she felt…reluctant to share anything she was feeling with a stranger, even if objectively she knew that it was the best thing for her.

Unofficially…something in her needed to be removed. Her memories or feelings, because she couldn’t continue unaffected with both in her mind.

But that raised a host of new issues, so she was keeping psionic intervention as a last resort. But it was good to know that option existed, should it become necessary.

“Director,” she greeted, giving a brief salute. “What’s the assignment?”

He pressed a button on the holotable and the colored hologram of Australia was brought up. “If you were unaware, Australia is now alien-controlled territory,” he began, moving around the table until he was opposite her. “Based on the location, we can safely assume that the aliens intend to use it as a staging area for their future assaults.”

Abby nodded, she’d assumed as much when she’d heard about the attack. “Do we have an idea where they’ll strike next?”

“We have some guesses,” Zhang admitted. “In a few hours we might have more. But that is irrelevant to why you’re here.” He zoomed the hologram deeper into the continent, near the center north. “Our issue is that we don’t clearly know what is happening, and knowing how the aliens treat captured cities would be invaluable to our efforts to combat them, because more will fall.”

“And you want me to infiltrate one of the cities?” Abby asked. “Pose as a civilian?”

“No, initially you’ll be working with the
ADF, or what’s left of it.”

“Understood,” she nodded. “Who’s in charge?”

“Lincoln Harper, ADF Field Marshal,” Zhang answered, motioning her to a beige file that was resting on the holotable corner. Abby picked it up and one of the first images was of a man with graying hair, haggard face and weary blue eyes. Appeared to be the one, according to the note on the side. “He’s been rallying the ADF and transitioning the best soldiers he has into a guerilla force.”

“What about the rest?” Abby asked, looking into the passionless face of Zhang. “I doubt all of them would be suitable for guerilla tactics.”

“Correct,” Zhang confirmed. “The majority of the surviving military has evacuated with what civilians they could rescue. They are being integrated into ADVENT now, though most of them are still in Japan. What remains is mostly special forces, ones who know the territory and will exploit it as much as possible.”

Abby tried not to sound skeptical. “I somehow doubt the aliens are going to be scared by the wildlife.”

“That’s one reason I want you there,” Zhang continued, looking slightly amused. “Because the one agent I have there already does confirm that the aliens are definitely being more cautious in the wilderness than should be expected. If the aliens are concerned about the environment, we need to know exactly what that is.”

“What else?” Abby asked.

“We need to know the forces they are deploying, and how they’re keeping the cities under control,” Zhang said. “There are reports of new alien types we haven’t seen before.”

“Any Ethereals?”

“My contact there did appear to find one,” Zhang confirmed grimly. “Unfortunately we have no idea what it can do, except some kind of mass mind control. Furthermore, it hasn’t been seen anywhere since. But it’s entirely possible that there is at least one Ethereal in Australia…” He paused. “Speaking of which, there has been a development you need to keep in mind when discussing matters with Marshal Harper.”

Abby waited. “What is it?”

“Shortly after the first attack in Australia, we received reports of another abduction and quickly responded,” Zhang said, his piercing eyes pinning her own. It was an intensity she was unprepared for. “Psion Trask led a team and it turned out to be exactly what we didn’t expect. There was no abduction, the citizens were simply knocked out.”

Abby went cold. “It was an Ethereal. Did we…did we kill another one?”

The first thought had actually been to ask if everyone had survived, but since Patricia was clearly still alive, that was a silly question. But if it had gone wrong or right, she thought there would have been something said.

“It was an Ethereal,” Zhang confirmed slowly. “But no, we didn’t kill it. The Ethereal surrendered.”
Abby coughed, mostly out of not knowing what else to do. Zhang was the least humorous person she’d ever met in her life. He would not start making jokes now. “Sorry, sir…but…what?”

Zhang snorted. “About my reaction as well, Agent Gertrude. But yes, the Ethereal surrendered and is currently being held under heavy guard in the labs and the new alien containment, for what little good it does. He will be thoroughly interrogated within a few hours, which was delayed since we needed to execute both the Demeter Contingency and Advent Directive, but if he is to be believed, he wants to help.”

“And just why would you trust an Ethereal?” Abby demanded. “You do remember what they can do.”

“I don’t trust him,” Zhang growled at her, making her take a step back. “Give us some credit, Agent. But there are several reasons we believe he is mostly genuine. Patricia engaged the Ethereal at first and he beat the entire team with ease. The Ethereal that attacked the Citadel was apparently one of the weaker ones.”

“Damn it,” Abby muttered. “Of course it was.”

“The second reason is that this Ethereal is…known to us,” Zhang continued. “Aegis, he calls himself. He’s had intermittent telepathic contact with the Commander over the past few months, which he has kept us updated on.”

“The Commander somehow managed to convince an Ethereal to defect,” Abby said flatly. “You’re kidding.”

“That remains to be seen,” Zhang cautioned. “It is more likely that this Ethereal has an agenda of his own, and we are his best chance to enact it. We know very little about the Ethereals and their culture, this could be genuine or it could be a political move. They don’t think like us.” Zhang clasped his hands behind his back. “The point is that if Aegis’ defection is genuine, we will likely make rapid advancements and learn things we likely shouldn’t. Until the Commander deems it important, this information is not to be shared with anyone. Given what the public knows about the Ethereals, as well as ADVENT, the last thing we need is to have people believe we are compromised. Understood?”

“Understood,” she confirmed. “But what about the soldiers? They deserve to know we have an Ethereal here. How don’t they know already?”

“Because Aegis is in an area only very few can enter,” Zhang said. “Rest assured the Commander agrees. But he wants to interrogate Aegis first, learn what he knows, before sharing it with the rest of XCOM. So don’t mention it to anyone else at this point.”

“Got it,” Abby said. “When am I leaving?”

Zhang glanced at his watch. “One hour. Pack what you need and go to the Hangar. Shattered Sky will be taking you to Australia.”

Abby raised an eyebrow. “New pilot?”

“One of several,” Zhang confirmed. “And a slightly modified skyranger for intelligence operations.”

“Sounds good,” Abby said, saluting him. “I’ll report as soon as I arrive.”

“Understood, Agent Gertrude,” Zhang said, returning her salute. “And I will update you with any
pertinent information once Aegis is interrogated.”

“I almost wish I could watch.” Abby said.

“Be careful what you wish for,” Zhang said, his lips curling up. “If it goes well, you might have a chance to talk with him.”

Abby thought about what she would ask an Ethereal, shook her head and turned to exit. That train of thought would only lead to a bunch of questions she really didn’t have the energy to ponder. The revelation alone was enough to process, which she had a feeling she was going to do the entire ride to Australia.

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The Praesidium, Alien Containment

The Commander held his hand over the sensor which displayed the XCOM logo as a hologram and drew upon his psionic power. The air around his hand distorted and the hologram flashed to a solid blue, and the door opened up.

“Do you want me to protect you from his aura?” Patricia asked as they walked into the containment areas. The room had once held likely dozens of alien species, prone as the Sectoids were to experimenting on them. They had prepared well. Each cell was designed with a kind of one-way substance, was completely isolated from each other, had complete environmental controls over temperature and oxygen and most interestingly, several had some kind of stasis generator that completely froze a subject in place.

Shen was still analyzing those machines to reverse-engineer them so they could be applied elsewhere. As of now there was no alien being held that warranted that, and though there were several Vitakara who hadn’t been sufficiently useful or trustworthy enough for Vahlen to use, there were a good amount of them working with her.

He still wouldn’t trust them until the Manchurian Project was finished, but until then, the chips in their brains and organs should be enough to deter any foolish rebellion. Not to mention Vahlen had made it very clear that should any one of them go against her orders, they would be the next test subjects.

As it was, she was standing in front of the circular glass container containing their Ethereal friend. It was almost the same as the one in the Citadel, but built from purely alien materials and created specifically for holding psionic individuals. Four arms extended from the ceiling of the cell with oval sensors that emanated a faint pulsing blue light, a form of disruption, Vahlen claimed, that would make it difficult for a psion to concentrate enough to unleash their powers.

The only issue he had was that, when the concept of alien containment had been created so long ago, it had been designed to hold a Sectoid. Not even a Hive Commander. Still, Vahlen had stressed that the cell was more to disrupt the psion, not suppress them. Even still, in the future that wouldn’t be good enough.

And it didn’t exactly appear to be working either. The unnatural sensation of embodiment and assurance was…not unpleasant. But he could sense the psionic suggestion affecting his mind, reinforcing those feelings. While he doubted that Aegis did it intentionally, he didn’t want to have his judgement impaired, nor anyone else’s.

“Shield us if you can,” he told Patricia as he approached them. She nodded and he immediately
sensed power gathering around her. Luckily she’d told him that it wasn’t particularly difficult, especially if she concentrated on an area, not specific people. All of them were here too, good. Time to get some answers.

“Has he done anything?” The Commander asked Vahlen. She turned, smiling as she saw him, though knew this wasn’t the time for any intimate moments.

“No,” she answered. “He’s just sat there, barely moving at all.”

The Commander looked into the white cell, at the true form of Aegis who’d taken an interest in him for unknown reasons. Like all the Ethereals they’d encountered, this one had a kind of robe that hid the body itself completely. Unlike the Ravaged One, Aegis’ was a navy blue, with what looked like silver embroidery running down the robe.

It was pristine as well, or just extremely well preserved like it had never been worn. Perhaps it was a quality of the material itself, or Aegis just preferred keeping his clothing in top shape. Either way, it only added to his intimidating appearance, culminating in the helmet.

The helmet itself seemed to have been based on the Ravaged One; at least it was very similar with the curved angles and edges hiding the eyes, and of course the gaping hole in the middle that he still wasn’t sure was supposed to represent a mouth or not. Like the rest of him, it was pristine and shining in the harsh light of the cell.

“Do we talk now, or should we let him out?” Zhang asked, his arms crossed.

“Does it make a difference?” Jackson asked. “Didn’t we only put him there because we didn’t know where else?”

“Good point,” Patricia said, her irises a deep purple as she suppressed Aegis’ aura which was fading almost instantly. “I think that if he wanted to hurt us, he would have done it by now.”

“If you decide to hold our conversation with this glass between us, I would ask you please shut off these… disruptors,” Aegis said, his deep echoing voice as loud and clear as if he was standing next to them. “It is an irritant that I have tolerated, but does nothing to limit my powers, Doctor Vahlen.”

Vahlen’s only response was a sigh and she moved to adjust the cell controls. “I suspected as much,” she muttered. “Unfortunate, but something to improve in the next iteration.” She looked behind her to the Commander. “Should I let him out?”

Objectively, the smartest thing to do would be to still hold this with some barrier between them, but the Commander saw no reason to actually do so. Whatever would happen, Aegis was unlikely to attack them. If he did, it was doubtful that any of them would survive, glass or no. “Do it.” he said.

A door behind Aegis opened and the Ethereal stood, and with a surprising amount of fluidity for an alien his size, turned and exited and walked down the ramp to face the small council. He really was extremely tall, the Commander noted, acutely aware of having to look up at the Ethereal. It was… strange being so close to not only an alien, but learning the secrets of what was likely the most powerful alien species in the galaxy.

“All of you have questions,” Aegis began, looking at each of them. “That is apparent, and I will answer what I can.”

All of them exchanged glances, and unconsciously waited for the Commander to continue. He supposed it didn’t make much of a difference who went first, as they wouldn’t be leaving until they had a reasonable amount of information. “Very well,” the Commander said. “Who are you,
“Who I said I was,” Aegis said. “I was the Aegis of the Skyllian Sector, once the domain of the Ethereal Empire. Now I am simply Aegis, again once of the Ethereal Collective.”

Already interesting information. “Aegis is a title then,” the Commander noted. “Not a name.”

“We have discussed this, Commander,” Aegis said, looking down at him. “Much like how your title is interwoven into who you are, so it is with me. An Aegis was... is a defender, protector and watcher, as am I. I would not have taken this as my name had I not embodied those ideals to the fullest.”

“You were once,” Patricia said. “I suppose your… Ethereal Empire… doesn’t exist anymore?”

“No.” Aegis said flatly. “It does not.”

“The Ethereal Collective is the successor to it, I assume?” The Commander guessed.

He sensed the Ethereal hesitating. “Yes and no, Commander. It is true that we are the leaders, but the Collective is no longer mostly comprised of Ethereals, nor is our directive the same.”

Vahlen raised an eyebrow. “And what directive is that?”

“To protect this galaxy and avenge our species,” Aegis answered. “The story is a long one, so I suggest you ask unrelated questions before I tell you.”

“Why are you here?” Zhang asked bluntly.

“The Collective or myself?”

“Both.”

Aegis nodded his helmet. “Because we were instructed to go here.”

Even the Commander felt the shock run through each other, as it did with him. If the Ethereals were instructed to come here… “When you say that you were instructed to come…”

“I mean my species, the ones you call Ethereals,” Aegis confirmed. “We received no explanation, no reason, just several sets of coordinates. We sent scouts which found your world and believed we had simply been given another species for our Collective.”

“Wait,” Patricia said, raising a hand. “You answer to another alien species?”

“Yes... and no,” Aegis said. “We are working towards the same goal. These aliens suffered a similar fate to our own and want to prevent it from happening again. We do not answer to them, but they are... suggestive. The Imperator suspects they may be as old as the galaxy itself, perhaps more. Billions of years, compared to our relatively short existence.”

“And what exactly do you know about them?” The Commander demanded. “How could you know that?”

“Because of their interactions with us,” Aegis said. “They are not the ones of a species that is concerned with even the affairs of our own species. There is an arrogance to them, a dismissal, they certainly have their own agenda and likely view us as a means to carry out their defense of the galaxy. They have no name for themselves, only identifying themselves as the Sovereign Ones.”
“Perhaps you should tell the whole story,” Vahlen suggested slowly. “From the beginning.”

“I will start where it is relevant,” Aegis stated. “Approximately two hundred thousand years ago the Ethereal Empire spanned roughly a quarter of the known galaxy, with further expansion against other alien races planned. Compared to your world, it was a utopia. Our mastery of genetic engineering had enabled us to eradicate disease, disability and undesirable traits that plague underdeveloped species, such as your own. All Ethereals were driven by one goal and one goal only: The ultimate perfection of our species.”

“So like the Sectoids.” Jackson commented. “An Empire dominated by those in charge-“

“Do not compare us to those beasts,” Aegis growled, his voice deepening. “Contrary to what you understand, Ethereals were not forced into achieving this goal, it was a natural desire. Selfishness, greed, hate, those traits we simply removed, leaving only the ones that would allow a positive impact. And it was working. Each generation of Ethereals was stronger, smarter and better than the last.”

“How was this achieved?” Vahlen asked curiously. “Was your species grown, or did modification happen in the womb…or however you gave birth?”

“Most Ethereals were grown, created from a combination of various stored DNA,” Aegis answered. “Natural births are rare for Ethereals, even before we developed technology allowing us to grow more of our kind. It was offset by our long lifespan, but true Ethereal children are gifts; and they were often the purest of us. Our biology naturally took the superior DNA from both parents and distilled it into the child. But as I said, it was very rare, even at the height of the Empire, but it was what all Ethereals strove for.”

“Out of curiosity, how long is your lifespan?” Patricia asked.

“Our natural lifespan was roughly one thousand years,” Aegis answered. “However, once we mastered genetic modification, aging was a problem we negated completely. Every Ethereal alive today is effectively immortal. We will never die of old age.”

“How?” Vahlen and Shen asked at the same time.

“I am not a scientist,” Aegis said, with what appeared to be a mimicry of a shrug. “But it was described once as a…switch. A genetic switch hidden within us that dictated our aging. Our modern bodies are simply engineered to never wear out or become slow. There is a…maintenance process of sorts, required genetic upkeep. But it is a trifling annoyance at worst. It is also not something we have been able to replicate with any other species. The Vitakara, Mutons, Andromedons…and Humans.”

The Commander frowned. “Andromedons?”

“The aliens in the armored suits who are fond of toxins,” Aegis explained. “I will describe them later. Only the Sectoids have a similar mastery over themselves, and even the Hive Commanders will only live for five thousand years.”

Andromedons. Huh. The Commander wondered if it was possibly related to the Andromeda galaxy. That would be an extremely massive coincidence if it wasn’t the case. “Narth said there were rumors that the Ethereals were suffering from some kind of genetic disease,” the Commander recalled. “Is that true?”

“Ah, the defector,” Aegis mused. “A rumor that is based in truth. Yes, some of us are beginning to
exhibit signs of genetic breakdown. Should it go untreated, we will all perish, it is true. But what Nartha did not know was that this is not the first time we have been afflicted with this “disease.” I believe that it will be the two hundredth and second time it has arisen, and we will cure it as we have before. It is related to our immortality, and the genetic maintenance I was referring to. Even if we did nothing, it would take nearly a century to actually kill us.”

“Fascinating,” Vahlen murmured. “You mentioned that your biology naturally takes the superior genetics to create a better Ethereal. Was it discovered your species was engineered by outside forces? Because I don’t know how you could find a switch on aging, not to mention the ability to remove unsavory traits, if you were completely natural.”

“It is not secret,” Aegis said. “It was… commonly accepted that we were the result of tampering from outside forces. Perhaps an attempt to create a perfect species, or perhaps a failed experiment. It mattered little to us, as whomever had created us was long gone. We simply continued their work.”

“And did you manage to do it?” Shen asked. “Create the perfect Ethereal?”

“The Empire was close to creating them,” Aegis said slowly. “Upon some reflection, I do not believe we would have ever reached our goal. ‘Perfect’ is subjective. A warrior will have a different idea of perfection than a scholar and so on. I now know that we didn’t create the perfect Ethereal, just yet one more superior iteration. Had we not been attacked, I believe these debates would have quickly consumed the Empire as the commonly accepted ‘perfection’ became splintered and divided.”

“Who were you attacked by?” The Commander asked. “A rival alien species?”

“Initially, yes,” Aegis confirmed. “All of them at once. Lesser species, of course, and we easily repelled their inferior numbers and technology. But it was a surprise, and it was also clear that there was something wrong with them. All of them had at one point been subjected to some kind of mind-alteration and were either driven insane or were autonomous versions of themselves, driven by some kind of mental programming.”

Aegis paused for a few seconds. “The attacks continued ceaselessly, as they threw their numbers against us with no regard for their own lives. By now we knew that these attacks and coordination were being orchestrated by something else, so we launched our own offensive into one of the territories and saw what had happened.”

“Which was?” Patricia asked.

“The first attacks were distractions, as we’d suspected,” Aegis continued. “The rest of the species were being converted into much more powerful and altered versions of themselves. Mixes of prosthetics, cybernetics and extensive genetic modification. All of them were designed specifically to nullify all of our advantages. Armored brutes to withstand our weapons and psionic storms; soldiers without brains to resist our mind control; psionic abilities we didn’t know existed and tools that nullified our weaponry. Discovering the first converted planet was a bloodbath, and we were easily destroyed. That was when the war began in earnest.”

Aegis’ tone grew more somber. “The attacks caught us flat-footed, as we knew there were no other species even close to us, and were too arrogant enough to treat this as a serious threat. Many outlying worlds fell to the Synthesized army, for that was the only term we deemed appropriate for what was described. It was an unending horde being produced from within the inner galaxy, and even with our weapons and psionics, one that began overwhelming us.”
“How did you have no idea this was happening?” Zhang demanded. “Did you not have spies? Any sort of reconnaissance?”

“We did,” Aegis admitted. “But we were not interested in the other species unless it suited our interests. Several lesser species once made the mistake of attacking us, and we responded by wiping out their species, stripping their genetic code, taking their traits and improving our own. Over time the other species learned to avoid us, unfortunately to our downfall.”

“Arrogance,” Zhang muttered under his breath.

“It was,” Aegis agreed. “But arrogance borne out of generations of being the apex species of the galaxy. It is irrelevant now, as a concerted war effort began within the Empire and we went to war.”

“And what does that look like?” Patricia wondered.

“It would be easier to show you,” Aegis said, withdrawing a purple hand, palm loosely raised in their direction. “A memory of what we once were.”

The Commander exchanged a look with Patricia, and she gave a nod. Aegis had been relatively straightforward so far, so this likely wasn’t a trick. “Go ahead,” he told Aegis. “Show us.”

“Then watch.” Aegis said, and his palm flashed purple and everything went white.

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He stood in front of an army of ten thousand strong, the Ethereal soldiers standing in gleaming chrome armor, capes flapping in the wind as their unified helmets looked towards the Battlemasters and the ranking Aegis of this sector. Each soldier was armed according to their station, denoted by the colored stripe across their armor.

Blue denoted the defenders he would be leading, psionic masters specializing in defense on a smaller scale; green and yellow denoted the mid and long-range fighters, plasma and beam weapons in their hands, enhanced with cybernetics and focused by the aura of the Overminds. Purple revealed the destructive psions, whose power would rip this world and the Synthesized in it asunder; black showed the assassins, the ones who clouded the sensors and minds of the enemy and systematically slaughtered them.

And finally, those in red would be the ones fighting and dying on the front lines, under the directions of the Battlemasters, the large arrays of blades they wielded would soon be tested in a battle many were unprepared for. He stood on the elevated balcony, the spires of the Watchtower behind him as the Battlemaster of Skyllian stood to his right, and the respective Overmind further still. Behind them were still more; the elite of each, the lesser Overminds cloaked in orange robes and the disciples of the Battlemaster bearing greatswords and distinctive helms, a symbol of how far they had come.

The electronic scream that resonated in their ears far longer than it should have tore across the atmosphere, and he extended his power to the fleet above, discovering it was losing to the twisted ships of flesh and steel. He looked up and saw the first of the ships approaching, all on a suicide path to the Watchtower, and behind them was what they had dreaded.

A Director Flagship, what they all suspected to contain the leaders behind the Synthesized. It functioned in ways beyond simply a capital ship that dwarfed their own, but also had leg-like appendages that allowed it to land on planets and directly command the forces, and its unique
brand of the Gift was enough to test that of the Overminds.

He raised his hand, knowing what needed to be done and his hand flashed and a purple-tinted bubble formed around him, and expanded to encircle the entirely of the Watchtower within seconds. Ships crashed against his barrier or were shot out of the sky by the soldiers who were already moving towards the Director Flagship which had landed what appeared to be several miles away.

And with a roared command from the Battlemaster, the army of Ethereals began to wage war on the scourge that had come to take their home.

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The Commander blinked and was suddenly back in the cells. The rest of them appeared similarly disoriented at first. “That…was certainly something,” Jackson coughed. “That Battlemaster…was he-“

“As it happens, yes, that is the same one alive today,” Aegis confirmed. “We were victorious that day, though it was one of the few victories we enjoyed, and most of those were early in the war. As more Ethereals fell to the Synthesized and their forces, our control became less and less.”

“The flagships,” Shen said, frowning. “What was special about them? Aside that they could operate in space and land.”

“Because they were somehow conduits for the Gift,” Aegis explained. “It was an amplifying force beyond anything we could conceive of, and it allowed unprecedented control over their own forces, and not even Ethereals were immune to its mental power. And roughly about mid-way through the war, a new problem emerged.”

“What was?” The Commander asked.

“Ethereals suddenly began betraying us,” Aegis said sadly. “For no explained reason they began fighting, sabotaging and killing us. Not just regular soldiers and citizens. Battlemasters, Aegis’ and Overminds were corrupted somehow, and it was only after capturing and analyzing them did we figure out that their minds had somehow been altered by the Synthesized themselves, psionically, though we never did learn how it was accomplished.”

Vahlen frowned. “Why not? That would seem to be rather important.”

“Because of two reasons,” Aegis explained. “A new tactic was being utilized, and it was, simply put, the destruction of worlds. The Director Flagships were the key, but waging conventional battle was costing too many Ethereals, so a way had to be devised to destroy the Flagships without sacrificing too many Ethereals. And a way was discovered.”

“You baited them to a planet?” Zhang guessed.

“Yes,” Aegis said. “Or we moved many Ethereals there and quickly evacuated them, or left civilian colonies or city planets mysteriously undefended, hoping that would bait them into landing and capturing the population.”

“And it worked.” Shen muttered under his breath.

“Initially, yes,” Aegis said slowly. “They would land and we would use one of the Reapers, Ethereals engineered for maximum psionic destructive potential. Their power was strong enough that those around them would begin disintegrating from the sheer power they wielded, and they
used that power to warp the worlds they faced, creating devastating psionic storms that wiped out planets in a matter of hours—including any Flagships on the surface.”

The Commander furrowed his eyebrows. “And just why didn’t you use them in conventional warfare? Why not against a fleet or army?”

“Because they were not fools,” Aegis hissed. “They knew the Reapers were the greatest threat they faced, and they prioritized them above all others. One Reaper might destroy a fleet, but the Flagships had an uncanny ability to pinpoint the location of one and kill them. It didn’t help that at their height, only one thousand Reapers existed. It was all that could be created because the remainder of resources had been poured into what was deemed the only hope for the Empire.”

“And what was that?” Zhang asked.

“The Imperators,” Aegis revealed. “The quintessential Ethereal, as perfect as it could be. The power of a Reaper, the defensive talent of an Aegis, the dominating telepathic might of an Overmind and the physical prowess of a Battlemaster. We knew the Imperators could turn the tide of the war and initially…they did. We regained ground, killed thousands of Flagships under the direction of the Imperators.”

“I am going to guess it didn’t work forever,” Patricia guessed. “Since you’re here right now.”

“No, because they adapted,” Aegis said. “Worlds were ignored in favor of Imperators, they continued somehow converting Ethereals into traitors, used for assassination and spying. It was costly, but they were killing Imperators faster than they could be regrown. We were going to lose everything, and finally one Imperator created a contingency plan for the species to survive.”

Aegis paused. “He persuaded several various Ethereals, the best, brightest and most powerful to give up the war and preserve themselves in cryostasis until the war ended and they could rebuild and analyze the threat unhindered. Some turned him down, and others, like myself, joined as we had realized that all that remained was a slow and agonizing defeat forestalled by each brief Imperator victory. And so we gathered on an unnamed planet hidden from even the other Imperators, with all the gathered knowledge the Imperator could gather, and froze ourselves and the war passed in an instant.”

“And when you woke, everything was gone,” Patricia whispered.

“ Barely ruins remained,” Aegis confirmed. “We had been resting for nearly two hundred thousand years, far beyond what was likely necessary, but the last Imperator had apparently taken no chances. Equipped with our knowledge, purpose and remaining technology, we began exploring what was equivalent to a new galaxy.”

“I expect that was…difficult,” Vahlen said. “Did you even have a plan? Or did you plan to wander aimlessly?”

Aegis fixed her with a helmeted stare that reeked of condescension. “Perhaps you should think about that for several minutes, Doctor Vahlen. Yes, the Imperator had a plan. We would locate other species, uplift them into soldiers with our knowledge with the ultimate goal being to prepare them for when the Synthesized would return, because we knew they would. We quickly found evidence of other alien species that had been destroyed in the centuries we were asleep, which told us that they would come again, but this time we would be prepared.”

“Which species did you encounter first?” The Commander asked.
“The Sectoids we made contact with accidentally,” Aegis said. “The Imperator sensed psionic potential and we found the Sectoids. They initially were…resistant to us, though the Overmind bent the minds of the Hive Commanders to work with us, a fact they are unaware of to this day. We quickly discovered that despite their potential, they lacked the psionic ability to be worthy commanders in our new Collective.”

“And the Vitakara?” Shen asked.

“They fulfilled the role of spies and intelligence quite well,” Aegis explained. “Though they are ultimately viewed as disposable due to their lack of psionic sensitivity, their genetic malleability and heightened intelligence makes them a worthwhile investment, and they are loyal to us as we saved them from their genetic plague.”

“A question,” the Commander interrupted. “Just how large is your Collective? In terms of planets or army size.”

“Not nearly large enough to wage a dedicated war with the Synthesized,” Aegis revealed. “The current size of the Collective is roughly one thousand occupied planets, with many being small colony worlds. It is enough to easily overwhelm your planet.” He shook his head. “But the size is less relevant than you think. Because soon after uplifting the Vitakara, we were contacted by the Sovereign Ones, who demanded to know what we were doing.”

Aegis’ tone was slightly amused. “They were apparently surprised that we were survivors of the Empire, much less that we were planning to rebuild an army to oppose the Synthesized. Once it was clear what our intentions were, they offered to help us, provide their knowledge and own technology to improve beyond what we currently had. We accepted mostly out of necessity, as their knowledge helped us map out the current galaxy, including what new alien species have advanced to the point of space travel, but those are irrelevant at the moment.”

“You don’t seem to know much about them,” Patricia noted. “Despite seemingly working with them.”

“Because we don’t,” Aegis said. “And that is a point of conflict within us. The Imperator does not trust them, and believes they are attempting to use us in some larger plot. I don’t dispute that the Sovereign Ones have their own agenda, but the fact is that they suffered the same fate as us once, and I believe they are fully committed to destroying the Synthesized. Not all gain their attention, and out of all the advanced species in the galaxy, they chose us to be the vanguard.”

Aegis looked directly at the Commander. “Or so I had thought. When they revealed the location of your world I wondered why they were intervening now, as they had not done so before. As the testing of your kind progressed, I believed it was because they had successfully identified a superior soldier species to our others, one that was capable of wielding the Gift…” Aegis trailed off.

“In some ways…the Imperator was justified in his sacrifice of the Ravaged One, because it confirmed to me why we had been shown your world. Why your species was important. It is because we are not the species that is destined to lead the defense of this galaxy,” he said, withdrawing a hand and pointing a finger at the Commander. “It is yours who is to be the vanguard.”

There was dead silence at that. Simply put, the Commander wasn’t sure what exactly to feel. On one hand, he doubted Aegis was lying, Patricia or Vahlen would have sensed something, and it explained why an Ethereal would defect to them. But on the other hand it seemed…frankly unbelievable, even with what they knew now. If what he was saying was true though…they were
in way over their heads.

And at the same time, it would explain why the Ethereals were so desperate to control them...or ally with them, as the case may be. “I suppose this particular theory isn’t exactly popular?” The Commander guessed.

“The Imperator flatly disputes it,” Aegis said. “But his judgement is...clouded. He has yet to come to the realization I have: Our species is dying. He believes eventually we can rebuild the Ethereals, rebuild the Empire of old, but I know better. Even clones would take half a century to grow at the minimum, and there are simply too few of us left. We may be among the most powerful beings in the galaxy...but humanity has the potential to be just as great as us. No one disputes that, the only question is what role we believe your species should play in the future. I happen to believe it should be as allies to us, with yours taking the lead while we advise from behind. The Imperator wants a subservient psionic army, one as powerful as the Empire but his to command. However, I fear he is no longer objective when it comes to preparing for the future. He is too suspicious of the Sovereign Ones, too certain of our own superiority, too arrogant to see the threat you pose not just to our species, but to others as well. If he missteps here, the galaxy will feel the repercussions for decades. I do not want to see the galaxy consumed by a pointless war several centuries in the future.”

“Unless he just decides to come down and end this quickly,” the Commander said. “We’ve done well, but an Ethereal that can destroy a planet is something we have very few defenses against.”

“You’re both underestimating and mischaracterizing,” Aegis hissed. “He does not want a mindless army of Humans. He wants to shape your species into what he views as a superior iteration of yourselves, ones rivaling us, but completely loyal to him. You do not accomplish that by destroying the world of the species you wish to use! He has a plan to accomplish this, and unfortunately, I do not know what that plan is. His contact was...intermittent recently, and by the end, I believe he suspected my loyalties were wavering. But by taking this drastic step I do believe that several others will begin to ask questions.”

“Such as what?” Vahlen asked.

“Such as why we went to Earth,” Aegis said. “The Sovereign Ones told us, yes, but the Imperator took the credit himself. His word is considered above reproach and I was the only one who went to confirm myself and found the truth. He will ignore the concerns of the others at his own peril.”

After a minute or so of silence, the Commander finally spoke again. “Well then. That was informative, and explains why this happening. The question now is where to go forward. How is the Ethereal Collective going to take Earth?”

Aegis audibly breathed heavily. “I do not know. Battle operations were obscured to me before I left, likely on orders of the Imperator. I can only speculate based on what I know of the Ethereals behind the invasion.”

Not what he was hoping for, but far better than nothing. “We can discuss specifics later, but what exactly did you bring to help us? Aside from your own skills, we did find that cube on you that we assume holds information.”

“If you wish to wage war against the Collective, you will need to be as advanced if not more than them,” Aegis said. “Within that cube are schematics for Sovereign-level plasma weapons, armor, aircraft, as well as several additional schematics that I believe you will find a use for. You have been...innovative with the substance you call MELD, though lack a way to recreate it. That is now corrected.”
Vahlen’s eyes widened and the Commander felt the excitement grow in the room. With the ability to manufacture MELD at will…that alone could change the course of the war. Of course there were probably drawbacks such as a lack of resources…but those were issues that could be circumvented.

“In addition, you will need access to the Gateways,” Aegis said. “They were given to us by the Sovereign Ones, a method of instantaneous travel between two points. It is our main method of transportation in the Collective. Our fleets do not travel thousands of light years over the course of weeks, but simply configure the nearest Gateway to the one built on the edge of your solar system.”


“You would likely be able to answer that better than I, Engineer Shen,” Aegis said. “The theory is…beyond me. Even Revelean, our leading scientist does not fully understand how it works, which naturally makes him suspicious. But they work, I can assure you, and with Gateways configured at the right points, XCOM would have the ability to reinforce anywhere in the world.”

The Commander smiled. Regardless of if the story Aegis had relayed was true or not, this was where his specialty was. He would sort out what to make of Aegis’ belief of humanity being some kind of chosen species to defend the galaxy later, but the fact remained that they were at war with the Ethereal Collective, and these were the kind of tools he would use to orchestrate their defeat.

They refused to simply conquer with force? Fine, he would play the Imperator’s game.

Then make him pay dearly for it. Willingly or not, he would not let Humanity become a pawn in an intergalactic game between species hundreds of thousands of years old. Perhaps it was arrogance to believe that he could overcome them despite their age, knowledge, technology and power, but he also knew that there was no other choice.

“Finally,” Aegis finished. “Your psions will need to be properly trained. They have made impressive strides, but there is no time for natural learning. You and your psions must become powerful enough to rival Ethereals, Patricia Trask, and I will provide the means to do so.”

Patricia smiled, her eyes glowing purple. “That, I look forward to.”

“I think I’ve heard enough to make a decision,” the Commander said. “We can debate the intricacies of our role in the greater galaxy later, but as it stands now, we have a planet to defend and a war to win. You can clearly help us, and seem to want to, so will you assist us against the Ethereals?”

Aegis inclined his head. “I will fight on your side, and protect your soldiers and species. But I will not kill an Ethereal. But I will not stop you from doing the same.”

The Commander nodded. “Acceptable enough, Aegis. Welcome to XCOM. We have a lot to do now.”

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Supplementary Material

The Advent Directive

Subsection 1.2: Legislative, Judicial and Executive Structures
Legislative Structure:

Overview: The purpose of the ADVENT legislature is to provide each member nation with an equal voice in matters affecting the entire ADVENT state, and to ensure that misconduct, interference and obstruction are kept to a minimum:

Number of Representatives: Each member nation shall be limited to 1 representative in the ADVENT Congress of Nations. Each representative will have equal rights and privileges, and this status can be transferred between the current Head of State of a member nation and the representative under highly specific circumstances.

Head of the Congress of Nations: The Chancellor of ADVENT will act as the head the Congress of Nations, though will only be permitted to vote in the event of a tie.

Appointment: The representatives will be decided via a democratic election, with the candidates being approved by the current Executive Branch before such an election takes place. Representatives will hold their position for four years, up to a maximum of twelve. After this they are approved for several restricted State positions which are detailed further on.

Military Intervention: The ADVENT Congress of Nations does not have binding authority on the ADVENT Military, as well as the executive branch, though laws can be passed that can affect the military itself.

Bypassing of the ADVENT Chancellor: In the event that the Chancellor of ADVENT vetoes a passed bill, it can be overridden by a three-fourths majority. In addition, the overturning of executive actions by the chancellor must simply pass a majority vote.

Judicial Structure:

Levels of Judicial Courts:
- City
  - The lowest court that will deal with local disputes and minor crime.
- Ward
  - An equivalent court to the City level, but encompassing large cities with a population size of larger than 500,000
- Region
  - The court that deals with disputes and crime that affects multiple cities in the designated region.
- Nation
  - The highest court in the ADVENT member nation that holds court on issues and crime affecting the entire nation.
- Sector
  - The court that deals with cases that affect an entire continent mass, or equivalent area.
- Global
  - The highest court in ADVENT, settling disputes and issues that affect the entirety of ADVENT.
- Supreme
  - The court that hears challenges to laws to determine if they are in accordance with the Advent Directive. Note that this court is not higher than the Global Courts.
Types of Courts:

- Civil
  - Handles non-Criminal civil disputes such as vehicle accidents, divorce, etc.
- Non-violent Crime
  - Handles non-violent crime including financial crime, white-collar crime and illegal drug usage. Covers juvenile and adult cases.
- Violent Crime
  - Handles violent crime, including murder, rape, domestic abuse, armed robbery, etc. Covers juvenile and adult cases.
- Financial
  - Handles various financial cases, including bankruptcy, contract disputes, etc.
- Appeals
  - Hears closed cases where an appeal is made to reconsider the outcome.

Judge Appointment: Judges are appointed by the Executive Branch (See Section 3 for more details), which specifically is Mayors for City and Ward-level judges; Governors for Region-level judges; Heads of State for Nation-level judges; and the Chancellor of ADVENT for Sector, Global, and Supreme-level judges.

Executive Structure:

Authority: The level of authority largely depends on the current position of the executive in question. The main ranks are as follows:

- Mayor: Oversees a city, answers to the regional governor.
- Governor: Oversees a region, answers to the Head of State.
- Head of State: Oversees an ADVENT member nation, answers to the Chancellor of ADVENT,
- The Chancellor of ADVENT: Oversees the entirety of ADVENT and the military.

Appointment: Each will be chosen via democratic election with all candidates approved by ADVENT Election Oversight (See Section 5.7).

Cabinet Selection: All overseeing members of the Executive Branch are permitted to choose their own cabinet, as long as candidates are screened and approved by their respective Agencies as well as ADVENT Intelligence.

Agencies: The Chancellor of ADVENT has the authority to appoint the heads of the various ADVENT Agencies, pending approval from the ADVENT Congress of Nations, XCOM Intelligence and the respective agencies themselves (See Section 5 for more details).

Military Usage: The Chancellor of ADVENT has command over the entirety of the ADVENT Military, Intelligence and Peacekeepers, though can be overridden in specific circumstances by all three (See Sections 6, 7 and 8 for more details).
Envisioning the Future

ADVENT Command, Switzerland

The more Saudia looked at the glowing red hologlobe, the more she wondered what the point of it actually was. It wasn’t exactly an effective way of communicating information, but then again, she supposed that looks were important to an international organization. Not that it mattered, as she wouldn’t be using that expensive paperweight for any actual work. It would serve just as well impressing the various people that came through.

She looked at the tablet in her hand detailing her itinerary for the next few days. Literally all of her time was going to be spent familiarizing herself with the inner workings of ADVENT now that everything was in full production. She’d spent time appointing people to various agencies, but hadn’t visited every site yet, which she needed to do regardless since the situation was different now.

It was only a matter of time until the first attack, and all of them were scrambling to predict exactly where to prepare for. Then there was the matter of both the Middle East and Brazil, not to mention bringing more countries into ADVENT. International opinion at the moment seemed to be taking a wait-and-see approach with ADVENT, especially Europe which was vexing, but they would likely come into the fold shortly.

On top of that there was the much smaller issue of ensuring that the world didn’t undergo a financial collapse, but fortunately, she had planned for that ahead of time and had developed some ways to lessen the impact. The Americans were not going to like it, especially the larger companies, but unfortunately for them, she needed them working for ADVENT.

But that was something she’d discuss with Jasmine in more detail. Right now she was waiting for another of her recent hires who was supposed to be arriving…she glanced at the time on her tablet. Any minute now, it seemed. The door behind her swished open and in strode her new Chief Diplomat of ADVENT, Firdaus Hassan.

Hailing from Singapore, he was, by her estimation, exactly what was needed in a diplomat of any kind. Willing to negotiate and highly persuasive, but at the same time uncompromising in fulfilling his duties. Ultimatums were sometimes needed, and they had to be delivered with conviction, which was a quality Diplomat Hassan had expressed.

“Chancellor,” he greeted cordially, a clear, but not distracting accent coloring his voice. To her mild surprise, he placed his right fist over his heart, emulating the XCOM salute she’d witnessed. Interesting how that was catching on. She supposed it might as well be standardized soon since most assumed it was the proper way to begin with.

“Diplomat Hassan,” she greeted, inclining her head. “A pleasure to meet you again.”

He smiled and placed a small stack of files on a nearby table. “You as well, Chancellor. We have quite a lot to cover here.”

“That we do,” she agreed, walking over beside him. “And now that ADVENT is official, what is the reaction?”

“As of right now, mostly positive and at worst, neutral,” he answered, pulling out a neatly
annotated map. “Public opinion is high, but that is not surprising. That being said, most of the European countries are still holding out, largely at the insistence of the EU, whose leadership is extremely wary of us.”

“Unsurprising,” Saudia commented. “So bypass them.”

“Unfortunately it isn’t as simple as that,” Hassan cautioned. “The largest European countries are tied tightly to the EU, and leaving it is no easy matter.”

“They can leave,” Saudia pointed out. “Germany is proof of that.”

“Ah, technically, Germany is still part of the EU,” Hassan corrected. “There are very specific articles that allow the withdrawal from the EU, which Germany has not triggered, but for all intents and purposes, they are not a part of it, and the only reason the EU hasn’t economically sanctioned them is because they’re worried about German retaliation, and since they have access to alien technology, they don’t want to risk a Brazilian situation.”

Saudia frowned. “Understandable, but they can still leave, yes?”

“Yes, but the process takes years, even if they wanted to,” Hassan said, stepping back. “And both of us know there is no time for that. However, I don’t think we need to worry about that, provided that we appeal to their natures.”

“And I suspect you know what those are,” Saudia guessed, though she could make some assumptions of her own.

“Self-preservation is all well and good,” Hassan said. “But the fact is that at the moment, most of Europe is insulated from the greater alien threat.”

Saudia sniffed. “They’ll feel differently when the attacks hit.”

“I agree,” Hassan nodded. “But in the meantime, we need to show that ADVENT is superior economically and stronger than anything the EU can provide. And beyond the technology, military power and protection we can offer, you are looking into a new backed currency for ADVENT, correct?”

“Yes,” Saudia said.

“That will likely be just enough to convince them,” Hassan said with a smile. “All that remains is for them to simply ignore the EU. Once enough countries take part, they will collapse and the rest of Europe can be assimilated. Once the larger countries like the UK, France and Italy join, the smaller ones will quickly follow suit out of fear. Those will not be difficult to convince.”

“That covers Europe,” Saudia said, nodding. “But it doesn’t sound like those will be the source of any problems.”

“unlikely,” Hassan agreed. “As you have probably guessed, cooperation with China is unlikely to happen. Let me just say that they are not exactly happy that we’re encroaching on their territory. Now that Taiwan and all of ASEAN is protected by ADVENT, they consider themselves “boxed in.””

“Correct,” Saudia said. “But China isn’t stupid. They know they can’t win on their own.”

Hassan scratched his chin thoughtfully. “I’ve had dealings with the Chinese government, so here is what I believe their goals are: Yes, they know they can’t win the war on their own. They don’t
intend to. They want to survive it independent of ADVENT. And truthfully, should things remain static, they are one of the few nations who could do it.”

Saudia appraised the hologlobe. “They have manpower, alien material and economic clout. I wouldn’t imagine they would survive whole…but I see your point. They may value independence over assimilation.”

“China does not want to answer to any foreign power,” Hassan confirmed. “More to the point, they are more concerned that ADVENT would remove the Chinese government altogether and install the Taiwanese back in power.”

“Considering that Taiwan is technically the true government of China, I would not be opposed to that,” Saudia muttered. “Though that would be a matter for Congress, not me.”

“It’s not just that worry either,” Hassan continued, pointing towards west China. “There are countries that China has taken over that want their independence. Should China become part of ADVENT, there is a high likelihood that territories like Tibet will be granted independence from Chinese control. Thus leading to a crash of Chinese influence in the world, which they have come to enjoy. They are a global superpower and have enjoyed the benefits that brings, so it is understandable they would be loath to give that up under ADVENT.”

“Selfish,” Saudia muttered under her breath. “And a problem. China will be vital when the aliens begin concentrated attacks. We can’t lose that country because of idiotic governments.”

“Then might I suggest we make them more…amenable to our suggestions?” Hassan asked, raising an eyebrow. “China cannot be self-sufficient forever, but if they hold onto the wealth of trade agreements, imports and exports, they will last as long as we do.”

Saudia got an idea of what he was aiming for. “Starve them out,” she said approvingly. “Cease all trade with China until they join ADVENT. Supplement whatever we lose with that of other nations in ADVENT. Gradually, of course. Ceasing trade with China is impossible to happen overnight.”

“Agreed,” Hassan said. “Which is why I would suggest you make preparations for such immediately. I would prefer the Chinese ambassador know we are serious before we give him an initial ultimatum.”

“You expect him to refuse,” Saudia noted.

“Of course he will refuse.” Hassan waved a hand dismissively. “But the longer the war progresses, China will become weaker and weaker. They must be isolated completely first though before they will even contemplate joining us.”

“And in the worst case, we have the Directive itself.” Saudia said.

He frowned. “Yes, I’m aware. But I would be extremely careful. A war with China would be disastrous now.”

“You don’t need to remind me,” Saudia said, rubbing her forehead. “Two now are bad enough.”

“Though the outcome in the Middle East will likely end up benefiting us,” Hassan said, motioning to the region. “While the war itself is…regrettable…it removes the issue of the Middle East and the instability within it.”

“I somehow doubt it,” Saudia muttered, narrowing her eyes at the hologlobe. “For some reason, I doubt the populations are going to be receptive to Israeli control.”
“Of course they won’t,” Hassan amended. “But their political threat will be neutralized. And the Peacekeepers will deal with any unrest. Brazil is a larger concern for us, since Marshal Luana is not exactly acting in accordance with the Directive.”

“I’m aware of that,” Saudia said, grimacing in recollection. “The news is being overshadowed right now fortunately, but she is not doing wonders for our public image down there.”

“I will warn you that if she is to continue unrestricted, it will turn South America against us,” Hassan warned, lacing his fingers together as he appraised her. “Unfortunatly the good Marshal has a low opinion of diplomats and was not receptive to my suggestions. I’m afraid that the position has gone to her head.”

“I’ll deal with her myself,” Saudia said. “If she continues, she needs to be aware of the consequences. I believe she isn’t aware that breaking the Directive is grounds for immediate arrest by the Peacekeepers.”

“Oh, more likely, believes that she is too important to be replaced,” Hassan suggested with a smile. “In the meantime, I will attempt to ensure that she doesn’t start any additional unnecessary wars.”

“Luana will be dealt with,” Saudia promised. “What of North America?”

“A more challenging issue than I first anticipated,” Hassan admitted, looking to the hologlobe. “Mexico is remaining neutral for the moment and will likely continue to do so until we establish ourselves more firmly. They are moderately tied to China, though not exactly friendly with them. Should we begin isolating the Chinese, I believe that will make Mexico more amenable to joining ADVENT, especially if we can provide everything they would lose from the Chinese.”

“I would prefer they join sooner than later,” Saudia said. “They would be useful for agriculture exportation. But we can do for quite a while without them. What other challenges are there?”

“As expected, there has been an extreme amount of legislative backlash to President Treduant more or less unilaterally taking America into ADVENT,” Hassan revealed, sounding slightly amused. “Public opinion is extremely torn at the moment, and amusingly enough, it has had the effect of splitting the bases of both Republicans and Democrats.”

Saudia raised an eyebrow. “How so?” She’d always found the polarization between both main parties of American politics morbidly fascinating, so was curious how they were being affected.

“The Republicans are split between those who support it for the sole purpose of fighting the aliens, and then you have the odd mix of constitutionalists who believe her actions are ‘un-American’ and ‘traitorous’, and then the conspiracy theorists, anti-globalists and other extremists of the Republicans. An odd alliance if I must say so, but they are united in this.”

He motioned aimlessly with a free hand. “And on the other side, the Democrats are having somewhat of a crisis of faith, with the supporters of a more interconnected society and those also prioritizing the aliens supporting Treduant. And of course the opposition are, amusingly enough, angry at her for the same reason as Republican constitutionalists, seeing her as a ‘traitor’ and of course there is a sizable section that believes ADVENT is equivalent to a fascist government that will abuse its power through force.”

“That is a drastic generalization,” Saudia said, not particularly concerned with that point. “It’s certainly more authoritarian than the former United States government, but I do not see that as a bad thing.”
“Speaking bluntly, Chancellor, what you believe doesn’t matter,” Hassan stated. “Perception is key, and our initial actions are going to either dispel or reaffirm fears. Protestors are already organizing in the United States, and it is likely Congress is going to attempt impeachment.”

Saudia snorted. “The United States government has no power anymore. They cannot remove Treduant even if they wanted to, since their military and agencies are being incorporated into ADVENT. I’m not concerned with their opinion. If they present issues, there are procedures in place to deal with them. That’s what the Peacekeepers were established for. The laws are public, and they have no excuses if they break them.”

Hassan sighed. “Correct, but I’m warning you that full…enforcement…of the laws is not going to be perceived well my certain other countries. Namely Canada at the moment, since they have flatly refused to consider joining because they also see ADVENT as ‘An authoritarian superpower with the means and potential to silence dissent in the media, peaceful protest and selective candidacy for positions of government.’”

“Fear-mongering,” Saudia dismissed with a wave. “If they actually bothered to read the regulations on everything they supposedly have problems with, they would realize that ADVENT only targets media outlets who continuously publish false information, and deal severely with violent protest. And that anyone can apply to run for a government position, but unlike other previous iterations, there are actually standards that will need to be met. Money is no longer a guaranteed means of winning elections. And said candidates would be screened by an independent agency, not the Executive Branch.”

“I don’t disagree,” Hassan said tactfully. “But it is an issue of both trust and uncertainty. You are assuming that everyone in ADVENT will follow the regulations, but the Canadians see the possibility of abuse as too high. Frankly, Chancellor, it is not an entirely unreasonable position, and one you can’t disprove by words alone.”

“Perhaps not,” Saudia nodded. “Perhaps I’ll travel there myself and explain in more detail.”

“I would not suggest that unless it is an emergency,” Hassan advised. “That’s what I’m for. The aliens are a more pressing issue than Canada at the moment, and the situation is unlikely to change. There are better uses of your time than winning the Canadians over, and even if you went, they likely won’t be convinced by you.”

Saudia was silent for a few moments. While he was objectively right, the Canadian proclamation against ADVENT seemed almost like a dare for her to defend it. It was a challenge she didn’t want to ignore, especially since she knew she could refute it easily. But she supposed she might as well get used to the reality that she couldn’t manage or respond to every criticism of her or ADVENT.

“I suppose you’re right,” she said, turning back to him. “I believe that covers the diplomatic state of the world, though you also mentioned you had a breakthrough with Prime Minister Sakata?”

He brightened. “Yes, what I hope to be the first major ADVENT diplomatic success. Prime Minister Sakata is certain he can bring Japan into ADVENT, though wants to speak to you first before making it official.”

“Excellent,” Saudia smiled. “I want to do it as soon as possible then.”

“You are taking a trip to Asia within a few days, yes?” Hassan asked. “Should I add a short detour to Japan during that time to your itinerary?”

“Certainly,” Hassan promised with an easy smile. “A good start here, I think. I look forward to what else we can do.”

“As do I,” Saudia said, picking up her tablet and adding that to her list of things to do. One down, quite a few more tasks to complete.

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Brazil, ADVENT Research Facility

One of the benefits of transferring EXALT resources into ADVENT was that all that had to be changed in most cases was the logo and bringing in new people. Brazil had served as the center of EXALT research, so Saudia saw no reason why that needed to change now. It was somewhat of a relief to not have to be as careful in selecting potential scientists, since secrecy was no longer a concern.

But still, the number of people who had the qualifications to lead research into the alien technology was limited, even with XCOM furnishing much of their own research to assist. Progress was, as Darian promised, ‘advancing’ but she preferred to see it for herself. The glass doors of the labs slid open soundlessly and she strode in, breathing in the sterile air.

Many new scientists filled the spaces that had once been exclusively held by the Eridan family, but times were changing and people had to be moved around. Though Saudia had ensured that all who were at this particular facility were experts in their field. However, this time she only wanted to speak to two of them who were standing on the end, one familiar, and the other new.

The two men seemed to be having an intense discussion, though paused as they saw her approach and turned to face her. “Chancellor,” Tygan greeted, inclining his head. “A pleasure to see you again, and I must congratulate you on your promotion.”

“That sentiment is shared, Chancellor,” Kim Munju, the new Chief of Alien Research, said. The aged scientist clearly had a mind sharp as ever, despite his graying hair, if the reports Supreme Leader Gwan had sent were true. Outside of XCOM, he was probably the only one with as much comparable experience with raw alien technology. “I have, of course, been working since my appointment, though there are certain issues that need to be solved.”

“Yes,” Tygan said slowly, giving his new colleague a disapproving look. “There are certain… disagreements… I have with Dr. Munju regarding our path forward.”

Saudia nodded. “Explain.”

“It concerns the MELD substance,” Kim explained, picking up a tablet. “Our current supply is limited, and thus that means aspects of research conducted must be prioritized until we either recover more, or XCOM provides us with some of their stockpile.”

“Nevertheless, that would not dismiss the current dilemma,” Tygan interrupted in his borderline robotic voice, raising a hand. “Were this another substance, there would be a clear line of authority. But as MELD relates to genetics as well as… other applications… this needs to be decided by either you or Dr. Eridan.”

“Noted,” Saudia said. “Dr. Tygan, where would you prefer we focus our research?”

“Cheap and simple genetic modification,” Tygan revealed, picking up a tablet and handing it to her. “I have conducted previous research that has shown the ability of the MELD substance beyond simple military applications. With a sufficient investment, I theorize that we could eliminate every
disease that has befallen humanity. Cancer, AIDS, Malaria, infertility, any genetic deficiency or virus could be eliminated with just a small application of MELD.”

That…was extremely significant. Saudia had admittedly not expected a focus on the potential civilian aspects of MELD, but it made sense. “How certain are you of this?” She asked, looking over the formulas and images, trying to understand them. It was simply gibberish to her, but she doubted Tygan would give her false information.

“Certain enough to believe it warrants further study,” Tygan reaffirmed, clasping his hands behind his back. “I am, of course, aware of our limited supply. I would not advise it unless I was confident in my theory. As you can imagine, the implications have a global impact, and of course they could be modified for any alien contagions we encounter.”

“An admittedly useful application for our soldiers,” Kim begrudgingly said, though he didn’t seem particularly pleased.

“In addition, I have not forgotten our military,” Tygan continued. “XCOM has clearly had success integrating non-human DNA into their soldiers, and I want to continue work, though in a way that increases the survivability of our soldiers. Thus I propose we open research into the regenerative capabilities of various animals, such as the jellyfish, and apply the rapid healing to our soldiers.”

That was an application that seemed almost too good to be true. “Is that even possible?” Saudia asked, crossing her arms.

“Anything is possible, Chancellor,” Tygan answered. “But the theory of integrating non-human DNA into humans was proven by XCOM. MELD in truth is highly advanced nanotechnology, and these nanites can be programmed to do whatever we wish. Imagine soldiers whose skin mends in seconds from burns or cuts, or bones that revert to a pre-programmed state whenever broken. With enough modification, one soldier could be almost impossible to kill.”

Tygan held up a finger. “This can also be applied to our equipment as well. MELD nanites could be programmed to fix broken or disabled parts, and if we truly wanted to invest resources, machines could be built to manufacture equipment or weapons in the field. The possibilities are many, Chancellor.”

Given what XCOM had accomplished, Saudia was sure that it was possible, and she was rather impressed by the line of research Tygan proposed. “Excellent work, Dr. Tygan. I’m curious as to how there can be dissent here? Dr. Munju, would you elaborate?”

“It is not a disagreement about the usefulness, but prioritization,” Kim disputed, inclining his head briefly as she turned her attention on him. “While curing disease and making our soldiers difficult to kill have nice, packaged and predictable results, they do little to solve our ultimate problem. What is our priority, Chancellor? Improving the quality of life for Earth, or stopping the aliens?”

Saudia frowned. “If the aliens aren’t stopped, the quality of life won’t matter.”

“Exactly,” Kim said approvingly. “While Dr. Tygan’s ideas are well suited for times of peace, one, we are at war, and two, they lack imagination. They are generic and predictable solutions when the application of MELD is only limited by what we can dream.”

He handed her several pictures of alligators, spiders, beetles and snakes. “If we wish to truly protect our soldiers, we cannot take half-measures and look to the superior qualities of other creatures. Alligator skin to protect soldiers from chryssalids and projectile attacks, adapting the web shooting of spiders and the venom projection of bombardier beetles and cobras to our own soldiers. XCOM
has taken the appropriate steps and it seems pointless not to continue their work to its fullest potential.”

“And at that point, what exactly do we have left?” Tygan demanded. “Can one who undergoes such changes even be considered Human any longer?”

“Humanity is not some static state,” Kim dismissed. “Why must we confine ourselves of one form when there are others we can become which are superior? We have the capability to do so, Tygan, why are we less human for enhancing ourselves. We are not the apex species here, but we have the potential to be.”

Saudia was certainly not opposed to integrating foreign DNA into humanity…but even she wasn’t entirely comfortable with the extreme level of conversion Kim was proposing. The Commander would likely see little issue with it, but she didn’t subscribe to that philosophy. At some point the human in question would not be technically a human, but some strange hybrid. Not inferior, but certainly not human, and definitely not more.

“In addition to the biological side, there is that to do with cybernetics that has not been fully explored,” Kim continued, handing her some sketches. “The MECs are one of the great achievements of XCOM that we should attempt to emulate. The robotic ones we currently plan on using are…sufficient, but lack a human mind to command. However, if we are to utilize MELD on vehicles and other heavy equipment, I do not think it should be focused on human integration. But for humans, with MELD we can craft a superior human, enhanced with prosthetics stronger and better than their current limbs.”

“And again at what point are we not improving soldiers, but merely creating robotic drones, who are barely different from machines?” Tygan demanded. “Why not just create machines if that is what you believe is superior?”

“Because the human mind is what is the essence of our species,” Kim stated fondly. “It is superior and cannot be simply replaced by a machine. There is a reason we have human operators behind all machines, because we can adapt and plan in ways a machine can’t.”

Kim waved a hand. “To continue beyond the scope of simple biological and cybernetic modifications, there is an aspect that even XCOM doesn’t cover, or at least one I haven’t found.”

“Which is?” Saudia asked.

“Weaponization,” Kim said with an eerie smile. “MELD is composed of nanites, so why not simply program those nanites to hunt and kill?” He held up a finger. “One MELD nanite is invisible to the naked eye, but with the correct programming it alone is enough to burrow into a brain and explode or tear it apart. What defense do the aliens have against that? Imagine battlefields saturated with a cloud of nanites that kills any alien that enters it, or better, hunts them.”

“And I only see potential for our own destruction in that application,” Tygan interrupted, wrinkling his nose. “The application holds merit, but the risks far outweigh the potential gains. We are then one mistake from either killing our soldiers, or worse, our species. And what happens, Dr. Munju, if a non-ADVENT state acquires these weapons or schematics? You have just introduced a weapon of mass destruction that could be nearly impossible to stop.”

Tygan shook his head. “No, Chancellor, I can support weapons that kill the aliens, but I cannot support a nearly unstoppable weapon that could be easily abused, or worse, turned against us. Even as a last resort, I maintain that option should never be used. MELD is a Pandora’s Box and if we do
not treat it as such, we risk our own destruction or worse.”

“And if we do not take every advantage, we are guaranteed our destruction!” Kim shot back. “If we have an application that can kill Ethereals, we should use it! Not shrink back in fear of what might happen. The worst case scenario can be applied to everything Dr. Tygan, do not hide behind it as a means to stall progress!”

“And is the possibility of extinction not worth extra consideration?” Tygan demanded, steel creeping into his voice, though he did not raise it. “Would you take that gamble?”

Kim fixed him with a cold stare. “If the future of our species is at stake, absolutely, doctor.”

“Enough!” Saudia commanded, raising a hand. Once she had their attention, she lowered it and continued. “You have both done well, and your ideas have merit, all of them. But you are right, Dr. Munju, we must prioritize. At the moment, I agree that we need to focus on keeping our soldiers alive. Dr. Tygan, I want you to begin research into applying regenerative capabilities to our soldiers and equipment.”

She looked towards Kim. “Take your most promising blueprints for cybernetic modification and begin research immediately. Should Tygan’s research prove successful, we can begin looking into other possible integrations. I also agree with Tygan regarding a nanite plague. While certainly useful, I am not confident it is safe enough to develop, and we are nowhere near the point where such a measure should be considered.”

He pursed his lips, but nodded. “Understood, Chancellor. Though I disagree with your and Dr. Tygan, your reasoning I can understand.”

Saudia narrowed her eyes. “And I am going to clarify that you will not open any projects related to weaponization of the MELD. Do I make myself clear?”

He nodded. “Of course, Chancellor. I will perform my tasks as directed.”

“Good,” Saudia stepped back. “Don’t waste any time. I suspect there are only days until the aliens attack and we must be ready to respond as soon as possible.”

“Yes, Chancellor,” Tygan affirmed, inclining his head. “I will begin research immediately.”

“I expect updates,” Saudia said, turning away. “Good luck to both of you and don’t forget we are counting on your results.”

“Trust me, Chancellor,” Kim promised, his eyes never leaving hers. “All of us are aware of the stakes. I assure you that we will not fail as we have no choice.”

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Seoul, South Korea

“[Daddy? Wake up, daddy!]”

Duri Eun-Jung groaned as the sound of his daughter’s voice reached his ears. “[What is it, Mari?]” He muttered sleepily, not opening his eyes. “[Daddy’s sleeping.]”

He heard her giggle at that. “[The soldiers are marching,]” she said excitedly. “[They just passed us.]”
That drew him further from his stupor. They were marching? Why? Adrenaline shot through him instantly as the possibility of an attack reached his mind. No! No…calm down. If there’d been an attack there’d be alarms blaring and he’d be getting frantic calls from command. Still…he looked to the clock resting on the nightstand. Just after eight, still pretty early.

Which meant it was probably going to be a busy day.

He rolled his head back on the pillow until he was looking at the blank ceiling. “[You want to go watch them march?]”

He looked down to his eight-year old daughter who returned his gaze with bright eyes, unabashedly excited at the possibility. She’d always been fascinated with anything involving the military and he’d done his best to accommodate her, even if sometimes he was woken up on days he would really prefer to sleep in. “[Yes!]” She said excitedly. “[Can we? Before they finish?]”

“[Yes, sir!]” She said enthusiastically, snapping into a mock salute. The seriousness of her expression was extremely cute and he resisted the urge to chuckle, only waving her off as she quickly dashed off.

The sheets beside him shifted and Sandara opened her eyes blearily at him, careful not to wake their sleeping five-year old daughter who had once again snuck into their bed in the middle of the night. Nabi clearly preferred their bed to her own, and she was still young enough where he felt fine permitting it. Especially these days, the children needed all the comforting they could get.

“[Mari?]” She asked knowingly with a smile gracing her beautiful face.

“[Soldiers are marching and she wants to go watch them,]” he answered, reaching over and brushing a lone strand of black hair out of her eye. “[They’ll be wearing the new armor too, so I’m preparing for a lot of questions.]”

Sandara’s face immediately became concerned as she realized the implications. “[Early for them, isn’t it.]”

It wasn’t a question.

“[Seems so,]” he nodded grimly. “[There’s a good chance-]”

“[Don’t say it,]” she interrupted softly. “[Just…not until we know for sure.]”

“[Alright,]” he promised, leaning over and giving her a quick kiss on the forehead. “[Now I better not keep Mari waiting. I gave her ten minutes. Won’t look good if she beats me, would it?]”

Sandara gave a forced chuckle. “[No, it definitely won’t. Go on, I’ll see you later.]”

Careful not to disturb Nabi, he got up from the bed and quickly went into the restroom to make himself somewhat presentable. Throwing water on his face wiped away any last strands of fatigue and he stared at the reflection in the mirror, something he’d fallen into doing recently. The man that faced him was just another black-haired Korean, maybe with skin a shade darker than normal, brown eyes and a short nose. Not anyone unique by any means.

Duri Eun-Jung, alien fighter, defender of humanity. Not once had that been a title he’d ever thought he’d ascribe to himself, yet here he was. Of all the enemies he’d prepared to fight, the
North, the Chinese…aliens had never been on that list.

And yet, here they were. It was what he and his soldiers had been training for, but there was a difference between preparing to fight humans, and something alien. But he supposed soon he’d find out just how good they really were.

In the end, he supposed it didn’t matter what he looked like, because the only face that mattered was the black visor of the ADVENT Captains, the uniform of which stared at him though the mirror, propped up in preparation for actual use. While he wasn’t entirely comfortable wearing what had previously been North Korean armor, he had to admit it was better than anything he was used to.

“[Soon,]” he muttered to the armor as he got dressed, and put it out of his mind as he prepared to spend what might be the last outing with his daughter for a while.

Perhaps forever.

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Russia, Center of ADVENT Engineering and Development

This meeting was one Saudia was personally interested in since it was one of the few where she’d felt confident placing a former EXALT member in charge. Feng Mercado was the most brilliant engineer EXALT had, and she could not find another who could really compare, though there had been several who’d come close and she’d given them appropriate positions.

However, she was aware that some of the other engineers were not exactly pleased to be working under someone they hadn’t heard of until several weeks ago.

This current installation had once been EXALT, similar to the Eridan research facility and had similarly been converted for ADVENT usage. Not as nice as the one that had been in China before XCOM had raided it, but it was more than sufficient for the development of experimental equipment and concepts.

The machines were humming and clanking in the background, which she tuned out and headed for two figures who were standing in front of a holographic projection displayed in red light of what she could only assume was a vehicle of some sort, though she suspected it was not to scale. Feng stood proudly in front of it, his hands clasped behind his back and looking as professional as ever in his suit with the ADVENT emblem proudly embroidered on the pocket.

Just by looking at him, most would imagine him to be too young to hold as much experience as he had. A popular stereotype was that Asians didn’t age, which Saudia found amusing, but it was oddly true for Feng. Completing the picture was the ever-neat moustache that somehow worked with his professional image.

In contrast was the woman standing next to him, who wore ADVENT work attire stained with grease, soot and other accumulated grime from the workshops. She definitely not be called neat, but it was definitely clear she wasn’t concerned about getting her hands dirty, although Saudia did note her hands were clean. Good that she had made an effort not to look like she’d just come from the workshops.

Saudia wouldn’t have really minded either way. The Chief of Fabrication was someone she expected to continuously be testing the equipment Feng designed and helping refine it. Ofelia De Leon had been somewhat of a surprise to find, hailing from Panama, but her resume and listed
experience was more than enough for Saudia to enlist her help in ADVENT.

“Chancellor,” Feng greeted smoothly as she approached. “A pleasure to see you again.”

“Same,” Ofelia grunted, the Hispanic woman adopting a similar stance to Feng as she walked up.

“At ease,” Saudia said, waving a hand indicating they could relax. “I assume you have updates for me.”

“That we do,” Feng confirmed with a smile. “Though I’ll let dear Ofelia here begin.”

“Stop calling me that,” Ofelia growled, stepping forward to the console controlling the massive holodisplay. She cleared her throat and continued. “We have begun full production on the initial iterations of the armor for our military, as per your directions.”

The holograms depicting the various armor sets appeared. “Already we’ve severely exhausted our supply of alloys, even diluting the content mixed with metals from Earth,” she continued, pointing at the sets. “But it will survive at least one direct blast from plasma weapons, and provides more than sufficient protection from ballistic weapons.”

Saudia raised an eyebrow. “You aren’t happy with it?”

“Of course I’m not,” Ofelia stated emotionlessly. “Our armor needs to survive more than one shot. But until we get more alloys, that’s not going to happen so I need to make do with what I’ve got.”

“The good news is that we have enough to outfit most of our military,” Feng interrupted. “Which is a more important point. It can be improved later, Ofelia, so no need to trouble yourself over it further.”

Ofelia ignored him and continued, keeping her gaze fixed on Saudia. “We’ve also been provided the Shieldbearer prototype, though development is being delayed until Dr. Mercado has refined the design. Until then, most of the Russian Shieldbearers will be helping Israel subdue the Middle East.”

“The Russians had an excellent concept,” Feng elaborated on, a smile on his face. “But their iteration is...flawed. The shielding technology is primitive and borderline useless, more a fault of the vision of the Russians than their engineers. It has the potential to be one of our most powerful units, but not as it currently stands.”

Saudia didn’t change her expression. “Elaborate.”

“Of course,” he continued without missing a beat. “The Russians conceptualized the Shieldbearer armor as a means to create some kind of invincible soldier. Understandable, but it has a severe lack of creativity.” Feng waved aimlessly. “Heavily armored units have their place, but it makes little sense to have multiple kinds. The Lancer Division fulfills that role quite easily.”

Feng pressed a button on the console and the suits were repositioned in a square, with the Shieldbearer in the middle. “I see a much more useful role the Shieldbearers can perform,” Feng continued. “The shield could be applied to other units beyond the unit itself.” He pressed another button and a simulated red shockwave emitted from the Shieldbearer and each armor set was overlaid by an additional barrier of red.

“I am still working out how to make it work correctly,” Feng admitted. “But I’m confident I will solve it in weeks. It is certainly possible. Ofelia?”
“Dr. Mercado is correct,” Ofelia confirmed with a nod in his direction. “Initial testing proves the theory is sound. The issue is both the range and power of the shield itself is extremely low.”

“Good enough,” Saudia nodded. “A unit like that could be extremely useful. I assume our weapons are also up to standard?”

“Without a doubt,” Ofelia confirmed, for the first time smiling brightly. “Arms manufacturing is not an issue. Gauss weapons can be developed without alien alloys in all variants.”

“Are there any downsides?” Saudia asked.

“Only in durability,” Ofelia clarified. “We were careful not to compromise power, but the weapons will eventually fall apart with repeated use. But we know exactly how long, and Dr. Mercado has devised a recommendation for the phasing out and renewal for the ADVENT military.”

“No need for such formalities, Ofelia,” Feng interrupted. “We’ve used first names so far, no point in changing for the Chancellor. Moving on, we’ve also looked into applying the laser weapon technology of XCOM.” He sniffed. “It is a highly inefficient implementation if I do say so myself.”

Well, wasn’t he confident. Saudia was amused at that, but kept her expression neutral. “How so?”

He pressed a button on the console and a holographic replica of a laser weapon appeared. “The problem with laser weapons is the incredible amount of energy they consume,” Feng continued. “In all other aspects, lasers are superior to gauss weapons against unarmored targets and only require an instant to kill. XCOM…” wrinkled his nose. “They like to use their laser weapons as equivalents to crude cutting tools. Wasting previous energy in the hopes they slice an alien in two.”

He shook his head. “The energy output makes it inefficient to put in human hands, else soldiers would run out of power in minutes. I am unsure how XCOM overcomes this issue, but it is irrelevant as I have devised a far more effective solution.”

He nodded to Ofelia who pressed another button on the console and the image of a bipedal mechanical unit appeared. Ah, right. The result of the American Mechanized Defense Unit Project. A ten-foot metal robot in white plating that clasped a massive machine gun all controlled by an angled and clearly robotic head. A rocket launcher was also attached to its back for good measure.

“Like the Russians, the Americans had the right concept,” Feng said, motioning proudly to the MECs. “And unlike the Russians, their vision was appropriate for what they wanted. I have simply updated the model to incorporate laser weaponry. Unlike humans, machines are precise and do not waste without purpose. I can think of no better application of it than to the machine itself.”

“Testing overwhelmingly supports this,” Ofelia added. “The MDU was tested and has eliminated up to six targets within two seconds by only using a fraction of the energy and with response times far beyond what a human can accomplish.”

“Ah, but wait, there’s more,” Feng smiled and the image of an armored turret appeared. “I simply adapted the technology for a turret design of mine. I believe we could easily install them on our bases, and since they incorporate laser technology, would eliminate most threats instantly. Lasers are near-instantaneous after all, and it only takes a millisecond for one beam to pierce an opening.”

And this was why she’d put him in charge. Not even XCOM had thought to employ the technology they had at their disposal in this way. “Excellent work,” she complimented. “Both of you. How soon will production begin?”

“Up to you, Chancellor,” Ofelia said with a shrug. “Both basic models can be built without using
alien alloys, though they will be substantially weaker, but incorporating laser weaponry will consume a portion of our stockpiles.”

“I want at least a several dozen fully upgraded MDUs,” Saudia said. “We need some to combat the aliens. But I also want those turrets at every major military installation, especially Japan and Korea, do not worry about fully armoring them. Is that feasible?”

“Certainly,” Feng said. “Earth metals are not difficult to come by, and the hit to our stockpiles for the laser upgrade will be negligible if they win us wars. Also,” he raised a finger, and several more variants appeared. “I’ve also taken the liberty of designing several additional types to fulfill other roles. One specializes in long-range combat,” he motioned towards a MDU with the rocket launcher extending several feet above it, and holding what appeared to be some kind of large sniper rifle. “And another utilizes that rocket launcher more frequently.” She looked to the unit in question which had a much larger rocket launcher attached to its back, and smaller ones built into the arms as well. It didn’t carry a weapon.

“Again, excellent job,” Saudia said approvingly. “Is there anything else?”

“That there is,” Feng said, scratching his chin. “For the immediate future, we will make do with the vehicles and aircraft currently, though I have made improvements incorporating Gaussian and laser technology, but there are no new models. But I am aware that more will be needed, and one such prototype I’ve developed is the ADVENT Troop Transport.”

The hologram changed to the vehicle she’d seen walking in. It appeared to be a smaller adaption of a helicopter body, but instead of any blades or landing gear, there were four pillar-like appendages attached to the sides, two in the front, two in the back. “As it stands now, current technology is ill-fitted for quick and safe deployment,” Feng continued, motioning to the vehicle. “This prototype would allow rapid inserting into hot zones within fifteen seconds or less and would be able to withstand barrages from enemy fire. I’m looking to incorporate aspects of the Shieldbearer technology into it as well, perhaps when soldiers deploy.”

He shook his head. “Plans for the future. But the Troop Transport would be one of the fastest aircraft, comparable to an XCOM skyranger in allowing rapid reinforcement from distant garrisons. And it will not be run using traditional fossil fuels, but instead a renewable source that I expect will become more common.”

“Elerium?” Saudia guessed, since the number of fuels that fit that was very small. She wasn’t sure that the strange alien substance was a fuel, but it had powered quite a few alien weapons and equipment, so it must emit some kind of energy.

“Correct,” Feng said with a nod. “Unfortunately, we are still in the process of learning how best to utilize it. XCOM’s research is…limited, and it will take some time to understand it. But when we solve the mystery, I will have the Troop Transport ready to deploy.”

“Keep me appraised,” Saudia ordered. “But again, both of you have done exceptionally well. Keep up the good work and if you need additional help, be sure to request it.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Feng reassured her with a smile. “We will not hesitate, but if I may make a suggestion, please ensure we win the initial battles. Until we have a way to recreate or synthesize the alien alloys, our output will unfortunately be limited.”

Saudia gave him a humorless smile. “Rest assured, Dr. Mercado, I have no intention of losing this war.”
Japan, Tokyo

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building was one of the most interesting buildings Saudia had seen. There was something different about its architecture that made it stand out from the buildings around it, beyond that it was where the local government of Tokyo met and deliberated. It also made for an excellent spot to meet between two world leaders.

Prime Minister Sakata had certainly not spared his Security Police, since she’d been under the eyes of at least six officers she had seen at all times, and four were escorting her now. It made sense, though it was slightly annoying being barely able to move without bumping into one of them.

But better that than being assassinated.

The elevator dinged and it slid open. One of the officers motioned for her to exit and she followed his lead into the hallway. She was unfamiliar with the architecture, but trusted the officers would let her know when she was in front of the right door. Sure enough, one of the officers stopped her in front of a nondescript room. “This way, Chancellor,” he said, and unlocked the door with a key.

“Prime Minister Sakata is inside,” the officer said, stepping back. “We will remain here.”

She nodded and opened the door to step into what seemed to be nothing more than an ordinary conference room with a large oak table with chairs, and floor-to-ceiling windows displaying the vast expanse of Tokyo. Prime Minister Reizo Sakata of Japan stood facing the window, and immediately turned to her as the door opened. Sakata was not an old man, but he looked aged now compared to the pictures Saudia had seen, which was hardly a surprise considering the burden he must be facing.

“Chancellor, welcome,” Sakata greeted warmly, extending a hand which she took. “Thank you for speaking with me.”

“How altruistic,” Sakata commented dryly. “But it is appreciated nonetheless. I understand your time is likely limited, so I will get to the point. I have addressed the Diet and we believe joining ADVENT is in our interests.”

What she’d expected. “On behalf of ADVENT, I would be privileged to accept,” she said.

“And what would be the immediate effect?” Sakata asked slowly. “We are aware of the changes to our government that would be need to be made, but those will take time.”

Saudia clasped her hands behind her back. “The immediate effect would be the insertion of soldiers into Japan. I am certain you have guessed it, but we also believe the aliens will likely strike Japan next and we need to prepare. Much of civilian population would need to either enlist or evacuate.”

“A conclusion we have come to as well,” Sakata confirmed grimly. “There are bunkers that exist from World War II we could utilize, but those are insufficient to house the thousands of civilians that occupy just Tokyo. But it is good that your priorities are in the right place.”

“We have little time to waste,” Saudia told him. “I will be meeting with our Military commanders and the respective heads of North and South Korea as well as America so we can prepare. Now that Japan is with us, we will expect you there to help coordinate the defense.”
“A task I am willing to undertake,” Sakata promised, nodding. “The evacuation will take time, though. Several weeks at least.”

Saudia pursed her lips. “We don’t have that kind of time. If there is no other way, evacuate the coasts first since those will likely first fall under alien attack. Realize that we’re expecting an attack within days, not even a week. Fail to act in time and thousands will die.”

A single nod was her response. “With ADVENT’s help, we might be able to do it.”

“See to any other arrangements you need to make,” Saudia advised. “I have one stop to make in America and then will be coordinating with our Military until an attack happens somewhere.”

“I will inform the Emperor of our decision,” Sakata said. “An address by him will grab the attention of the public and perhaps lower panic.”

“Whatever you feel is appropriate,” Saudia said. “And—“

“One more thing,” Sakata interrupted, raising a hand. “I will also be announcing our decision immediately after this. Since you are here, I would like you to join me as a public statement of unity. It will certainly solidify our agreement internationally and the public deserves to see the woman leading the world.”

Saudia shrugged, not bothered by the idea either way. “If you insist, though I have no speech planned.”

“A pity,” he mused. “I was quite impressed with your address in Geneva, but in this case it isn’t needed. Just a few minutes afterwards posing for cameras, then you can be on your way.”

“Let’s do it,” Saudia said, inclining the head. “Our timetable isn’t getting any shorter. Japan is on borrowed time and I would prefer not to waste it.”

“I agree,” Sakata said with a smile, moving past her. “Then let’s go.”

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New York, United States of America

The city was still recovering from both the alien attack, and the bombing of the UN Headquarters, but much of it still remained, and Saudia had wished she had made a trip to visit it at least once during her tenure as Director of EXALT. But the city was still impressive to her, even if it was clearly less busy than was typical.

There was also a franticness to the people walking around; there was no slow walking and enjoying the sights. Saudia had noted that it was not uncommon for people to glance up at the sky every once in a while, as if waiting for another UFO to come and begin bombing them. In general people seemed only interested in getting from one place to another, otherwise feeling exposed outside.

She could definitely understand that feeling, though was confident that nothing would happen today. Saudia intended her visit to be low-key here, given the current state of America, so was just wearing regular civilian attire which she knew looked odd when she entered one of the skyscrapers and was soon surrounded by well-dressed professionals.

The receptionist raised an eyebrow when she told her the appointment she had, but just shrugged when it appeared in the system. She gave her a keycard and Saudia set off for the the twelfth floor,
taking only took a few minutes to arrive. As expected, Jasmine Vailan, her Head of Economic Analysis was waiting right on time.

Jasmine had actually been someone Saudia was aware of long before the aliens had come. She was a relatively obscure economist compared to those working in the States, since she spent most of her time working with the governments of many third world countries to help establish, fix or stabilize various economies, to usual success. It was a cause Saudia found admirable, and her successes made her the right pick to apply her expertise on a much larger scale.

“Saudia!” She greeted jovially once she came in. Jasmine was surprisingly informal compared to most of her staff, though given her own attire, Saudia didn’t particularly mind. “You came fast.”

“Right from Japan,” Saudia answered, sitting down into a chair, though was careful not to let exhaustion overtake her. Last major stop, then she’d have something of a respite.

“I saw,” Jasmine said, settling in a seat at the end of the table. “Nice job by the way. Having Japan in ADVENT is extremely reassuring for the Stock Market.”

“Good,” Saudia said, straightening up and looking the young American in the eyes. “You’ve had time to observe the fallout, so what’s your analysis?”

Jasmine bit her lower lips before she began. “It’s a good thing you warned me there’d be some … instability. Even with that, it was difficult to convince the WTO, Wall Street and the Federal Reserve to not completely flip out. You have any idea just how close we came to a worldwide crash when the UN essentially ceased to exist?”

“Closer than is ideal?” Saudia guessed wryly.

“Actually, no, I don’t think so,” Jasmine interrupted bluntly. “You know how many people do business in China?”

“Of course I do,” Saudia defended. “And I also know that whatever China provides, someone else can provide more and better quality.”

“Quality isn’t the point,” Jasmine stated. “It’s cost. China is cheap and that’s appealing. Best case
scenario here is that you have the price of everything rise by several dollars, and we both know that isn’t going to help.”

“I agree, prices rising is not something we need now,” Saudia nodded. “The population needs to remain calm. But there are solutions to prevent a sudden price hike while the companies find new trade agreements.”

“I was afraid of that,” Jasmine sighed.

“Isn’t it possible?”

“Yes…” Jasmine said slowly. “But I’m just imagining the response I’m going to get when I give them the news.”

“States of emergency,” Saudia said. “The needs of ADVENT come before that of corporations. The major distributors will still retain control over their companies, they will just be subject to ADVENT control. It’s not as though they’re exactly poor.”

“I’m imagining the commercials,” Jasmine groaned. “Walmart, Save Money, Live better, now a Division of ADVENT. Working for the common people, or some other crap like that. And I assume you’re still wanting to take over the weapon manufactures?”

“Of course,” Saudia said. “And defense companies that was working for the United States and any weapons manufacturer of import will be working directly for ADVENT. We have a war to win and they will contribute.”

“Oh, boy,” Jasmine said, leaning back in her chair. “Solaris is going to be thrilled. When he expressed interest in helping ADVENT, I don’t think he had being completely taken over.”

Saudia resisted the urge not to smile. “I think he’ll come around. And don’t exaggerate, it’s not like I’m mandating that everyone be fired and replaced.”

“No, you just want ADVENT to have the final authority on every major decision,” Jasmine mocked. “Much better.”

“Enough with the sarcasm,” Saudia said, lacing her fingers together. “Now, is that possible, and what might be the impact?”

“Let me think,” Jasmine looked up for a couple minutes. “Alright, before we make any of this public, we have to both set up alternate trade agreements, establish state takeovers of corporations and keep everyone important informed. Then once that’s in place, we say, ‘hey, we’re not trading with you anymore China, fuck off’ sit back and watch the fireworks.”

She grew a little more serious. “Joking aside, if…if this goes off without major issues, we’re still going to have several really bad days in the stock market, though thanks to our price freezing, it won’t be felt by the public for some time. But since everything was decided ahead of time, there should not be that much instability, certainly not enough to bring financial ruin to corporations of import.”

She frowned. “Although, there are going to be a lot of small businesses that are going to go under because they heavily rely on imports from China. I suppose if we want to alleviate that, we could set up some sort of state-sponsored program to help out. I’d have to think on that, though.”

“If it will help, do it,” Saudia nodded. “And what of international economics?”
“They will likely fall into two categories,” Jasmine said slowly. “Either they follow suit, since because of this, China is going to lose a lot of economic clout and will be seen as a trading partner with diminishing returns, or China will do everything in their power to not lose the partners they have. Mexico and many South American countries will be targeted by this. Long term, this will severely cripple China…especially as ADVENT grows.”

“Good,” Saudia stated with satisfaction. “Exactly as I want.”

“You’re the Chancellor,” Jasmine said, shifting in her seat uncomfortably. “I know China isn’t exactly playing ball, but this is, if I may say so, a bit extreme. Essentially isolating them will make the citizens suffer, you know that right? They’ll be hit with this the hardest.”

“I have little choice,” Saudia stated coldly. “If China wants to fight this war alone, they will fight it alone and I will not support such selfishness from anyone, not even a previous superpower.”

“Have you considered that China might respond militarily?” Jasmine suggested slowly. “This is all but declaring war on them without explicitly stating it.”

“No.” Saudia declared, steel in her voice. “China knows that would be signing its death warrant, and if they were foolish enough to attack ADVENT, then I am almost certain XCOM would become involved. The War in the Middle East and South America is bad enough, but China starting one would not be something they would ignore.”

“Fair point,” Jasmine acknowledged. “Boy do I have a lot of work to do. And we need to discuss your future plans. You still like the idea I proposed?”

“A new currency backed by alien metals and tech?” Saudia recalled. “Yes. Extremely clever, I must say. Exact values still need to be determined, but the idea is solid and would allow us to dictate the market.”

“Influence,” Jasmine corrected quickly. “We can’t dictate the market, unless you want us to become communists. But control over the currency will definitely allow us to predict it, and an actual backed currency will definitely reassure Wall Street. Although they will probably kinda hate you later when we finalize the regulation aspects of banking and Wall Street.”

“A topic for another day,” Saudia said, standing up. “Good work, Jasmine.”

“That’s my job,” she affirmed. “And you’ve given me plenty to do. Keep things calm and I can do the same on my end.”

“I’ll do my best,” Saudia promised. “Trust me, stability is a goal everyone wants to achieve.”

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Seoul, South Korea

“[What do you think the Major wants?]” Min asked while they walked through the Headquarters. He had on his new black ADVENT armor though like Duri, held the helmet under his arm. Truthfully the armor itself was extremely high-quality, but Duri had never really liked helmets, and would get used to it later. First he needed to know what Major Hye needed to speak to him.

“[We’re likely being deployed,]” was all he said as they rounded a corner. “[They don’t normally schedule large patrols early in the morning unless they’re worried about potential reprisal.]”

 “[Aliens,]” Min said.
“[Aliens,]” Duri repeated with a nod. “[Not surprised. It was only a matter of time before they moved past Australia.]”

“[Nervous?]”

Duri snorted. “[What do you think? I just hope the fighting is far away from Seoul.]”

“I doubt we’ll be attacked first,]” Min reassured him. “[The aliens have bigger fish. They’ve got China and Japan as much larger and appetizing targets.]”

“[Good point,]” Duri grunted. “[Alright, wait here. I don’t think this will take long.]” Min nodded and Duri stepped into the Spartan office of Major Hye. Said Major was sitting at his desk, and motioned for him to take a seat. Duri complied and noted that the gaunt face of Hye seemed even more drained than usual. He was old even by regular standards and Duri was continually surprised and impressed that the Major had yet to retire.

But he liked him, so he wasn’t eager for someone else to take his place. “[Sir, you wanted to see me?]”

“[Yes,]” Hye answered curtly. “[I’m sure you’re aware that some major restructuring is taking place to comply with ADVENT military standards.]”

“[To an extent,]” Duri admitted. “[I’ve not received much information either way.]”

Major Hye grunted. “[Not surprise, the kinks are still being worked out, but the short version is that you’re going to get a different unit very soon. A multi-national unit to be specific.]”

Duri frowned. That was…not what he was expecting. “[Why? I thought ADVENT was going to simply be restructuring the ranking, not completely changing military compositions.]”

“So did I,” Hye said with a shrug. “[But I suppose they want to do both. They really are intent on a fully international army, and have plans to phase it in. The ROK military proper won’t be affected directly for several months, but you will be since you’re being sent to Japan.]”

That was more expected. “[Why Japan?]”

“[Intel suggests that’s where the aliens are going to strike next,]” Hye said. “[ADVENT is rushing to get a reasonable defense prepared, and since you have experience with leading international units, I recommended you receive your own. Japan is going to be the first big test for ADVENT, and we need the best.]”

“I appreciate that, sir,” Duri said, pleased by the words. “[Although my experience is mostly limited to Americans.]”

“[And your unit is one of the best,]” Hye repeated. “[Stop complaining and accept it. I am going to warn you that your new squad is going to be slightly more diverse. Min will be going with you, but you’ll also be getting people from Sweden, Venezuela, America…and North Korea.]”

Duri grimaced. “[Was that really necessary?]”

“[The puppets are going to someone,]” Hye shrugged. “[I hate it too, but at least you know to watch them. XCOM might like Gwan, but I have no illusions as to his goals.]”

“[Are Sweden and Venezuela even part of ADVENT?]” Duri asked. “[Those seem…odd countries to be sending soldiers.]”
“[Sweden’s in talks at least,]” Hye said, clasping his hands together. “[Maybe they’re loaning a soldier or two. Venezuela was allied with XCOM, so I suppose they switched over to ADVENT when it was established. Doesn’t matter, you’ll need to work with all of them well. Can you do it?]”

Duri nodded. “[Yes, sir.]”

“[I believe it,]” Hye agreed, inclining his head. “[Get ready, you’ll be shipping out to Japan this evening. Eighteen hundred sharp, say your goodbyes and get what you need. We’re not relocating your family with you for obvious reasons.]”

Duri sighed. “[Understood, sir. I’ll prepare immediately.]”

“[Good luck,]” Hye told him. “[It was a pleasure to serve as your commanding officer.]”

Duri smiled. “[The feeling is mutual, sir. Don’t worry, I don’t intend to die over there.]”

“[I believe it,]” Hye said, a mischievous smile on his lips. “[Wipe those aliens out.]”

“[With pleasure, sir.]”

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Seoul, South Korea

There was a distinctly different feeling being in the military-controlled sections of ADVENT member nations. Seeing the armored soldiers around her marching in squads, with officers saluting as she passed reminded her of the time she’d spent in Venator territory during her time of EXALT. There was a distinct organization and predictability that made her feel much more at ease than when dealing with diplomatic matters.

Probably because most military members were straightforward and predictable, which made dealing with them easy by comparison. They didn’t particularly enjoy politics and she could respect that here. At this time, no one could.

“Take a break,” she told her guard as she spotted the woman she needed to see. “I know where to go from here.”

They complied and she walked over to the woman who noticed her and dismissed the soldier she was talking to and turned to face the approaching Chancellor. She wore a similar dress uniform to Saudia’s, minus the red sash. When Saudia had chosen who would be in charge of the ADVENT military, there were a wide range of options, but one of the largest challenges would be managing the vast array of member nations and their respective militaries, a criteria that very few could fill.

Fortunately, one such candidate with those qualification was the Former Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, Laura Christiaens who had been the General of Belgian Land Component. While she was too old to physically fight on the front lines, her administrative and tactical mind was as sharp as ever.

“Chancellor,” she greeted, saluting. “Welcome to Seoul, and I’m glad you arrived safely.”

Saudia returned the salute and the two women began walking down the hallway. “No reason to be concerned about my safety,” she commented. “People have a vested interest in keeping me alive.”

“As they should,” Laura nodded. “While I hope the rest of your trip was productive, we need to get
down to business here.”

“Are the rest of the command here?” Saudia asked, admittedly expecting the answer.

“All have arrived today, per your request,” Laura confirmed with a sharp nod. “In addition to Presidents Chia and Prime Minister Sakata have arrived, as well as Supreme Leader Gwan.”

To her credit Laura’s expression remained neutral even though Saudia knew she didn’t exactly approve of Iseul. Too bad, he was going to be needed here since if Japan was attacked and they couldn’t defend it, the Korean peninsula would likely be the next target. “And did XCOM send one of their own?”

“Yes, a soldier,” Laura confirmed. “Carmelita Alba. Former South Korean special forces.”

“Interesting that the Commander would send a soldier,” Saudia muttered. “Why not one of his own council?”

“I didn’t ask,” Laura said as she reached the door. “But all we need to know from XCOM is what role they will play in a defense and so they are not surprised by our own tactics. I do not have major concerns about XCOM. If Van Doorn trusted them enough to join, I will respect that.”

Saudia looked down at the aged women. “I didn’t realize you knew him.”

Laura gave a sad smile. “Oh yes, I worked with him quite often. An exceptional man and soldier. His death was a blow, even if he was no longer part of NATO.”

“My condolences,” Saudia said, inclining her head.

“Appreciated,” Laura said, waving a hand. “But he’d prefer we focus on defeating the aliens.”

They stepped into the room where the rest of the heads of the ADVENT Military had gathered, all converging around a newly-installed holotable depicting Japan and surrounding regions.

“At attention!” Laura snapped as they walked in and all the military figures snapped to attention, and the various heads of state gave her their undivided attention. Saudia stopped at the center of the holotable, flanked by Laura and Prime Minister Sakata.

President Chia and Carmelita were on the left side, with the latter apparently having decided to come in full armor, a dangerous looking shotgun attached to the back of her armor. Opposing them was Supreme Leader Gwan and Elizabeth Falka, of ADVENT Intelligence. Opposite Saudia herself were the Chief of Peacekeeping Operations, Amalda Stein, formerly of the German Feldjäger, and the Chief of Lancer Operation Helion Weekes, the Former Commander of the USSOCOM.

“We’re all aware of the situation,” Saudia began without ceremony, nodding to Elizabeth. “What are we doing to prepare?”

“Intelligence from Australia seems to indicate that the aliens are preparing for some kind of strike,” Elizabeth began. “Large transport UFOs have been spotted arriving and leaving, although they could also be attempting to secure the continent itself.”

“Much of the surviving ADF forces are evacuated,” Laura followed up. “They are being integrated into the ADVENT military now.”

“What is the timeframe for an attack?” President Sakata asked.
“Technically it could be hours,” Elizabeth warned. “Realistically it seems they’re wanting to do this as carefully as possible, but I would not expect longer than one week before their first move.”

“There is a matter we have to settle,” Iseul said, looking down on the map. “We are assuming that Japan is the next target. What if we are wrong and caught blindsided?”

“Because we look at their current actions,” Laura said, adjusting the map closer to Australia. “They are already moving on the Philippines and New Zealand, and more than likely that at least makes Japan a similar primary target. And if they want to attack Asia, there are little better staging areas than Japan.”

“Fair point,” Iseul conceded, frowning. “But I am concerned that we are acting too predictably here. The aliens cannot have missed our actions.”

“Remember that the aliens will focus on primary targets,” Carmelita interrupted, and Saudia was fairly sure she’d never heard the woman speak before, since she would have likely remembered the melodic voice. “They focus on direct threats to them. That means we can reasonably eliminate South America and Africa from possible attack.”

“Which leaves the West Coast of America and Asia,” Helion finished, nodding at Carmelita. “And attacking Asia logically involves the capture of Japan. In which case I am concerned we are ignoring a possible attack on the United States.”

“The United States is not forgotten,” Saudia assured him. “But if the United States is attacked, we can respond. If we lose Japan, we will not retake it without a concentrated effort.”

“Conceded,” Helion said. “In which case, how is the evacuation progressing, Stein?”

“As fast as the Peacekeepers can work,” Amalda answered, her accent slightly more pronounced than the others. “It isn’t a fast process, evacuating an entire country. The coasts are almost finished and we are working inland. Worst case scenario, they can be hidden in the bunkers until the fighting ends.”

“Has there been resistance?” Saudia asked.

“No, the population is well aware of the danger,” Amalda said. “Some aren’t particularly happy about leaving their homes, but when informed about the immediate danger, most prefer being alive to certain death. The few that actually posed issues are safely detained.”

“There was also a surge of volunteers wanting to help with the defense,” Sakata said. “I spoke with Commander Laura about my concerns with putting civilians on the front, regardless of their willingness. Her solution was an excellent one.”

“A logical one,” Laura downplayed. “Since the majority of refugees are being redirected to South Korea, I propose that any civilians wishing training be given it here. After several months, if needed, they would be an excellent reserve force that can be close enough to assist or defend as the case may be.”

“We’ll of course begin initiatives to accomplish this,” Chia promised. “We’re experiencing the same from South Korean citizens as well. We will have no shortage of willing defenders.”

“Returning to Japan itself,” Laura continued. “I’ve deployed multiple divisions of soldiers along the coast. Entrenchment and fortification is beginning in earnest, and there are two carrier strike groups standing by for the initial attack. It is unlikely the attack will come from the sea, so Gaussian anti-aircraft emplacements and equipment have been placed across the entire island.”
“Will that be enough?” Sakata asked, looking at Laura. “Our forces are vulnerable to air attacks, and their aircraft are better than ours.”

“Which is why we’re heavily utilizing the THAAD missile defense system,” Laura reassured. “At the very least our forces should be relatively safe from missile attacks, even alien ones. Aircraft will be dealt with by the deployment of S-400 missiles and the respective SAM.”

“I think our biggest concern is the numbers game,” Helion stated grimly. “Like it or not we have inferior numbers and they could drive us back by that alone.”

“Kill enough and they’ll pull back,” Carmelita advised. “If a strategy isn’t working, they won’t keep doing it. We have the advantage of the land, and if we can hold them to the coasts, they’ll eventually retreat and try again later.”

“And what is XCOM’s role in this?” Saudia asked Carmelita. “Does the Commander have a plan?”

“We’ll go where the fighting is worst,” Carmelita said firmly. “That or areas that are at risk of falling. Or in the event that an Ethereal arrives. If that happens, I advise that all forces nearby immediately retreat. You cannot kill an Ethereal alone.”

Laura looked at her skeptically. “One alien is not sufficient to order a retreat, even a powerful one.”

“You’ve never fought one, I see,” Carmelita shot back. “Unless you want to throw away soldiers, you’ll let us handle them. And you better pray one doesn’t show up or it will be impossible to hold the coasts.”

“I think that’s what we’re all hoping,” Saudia interrupted, raising a hand to defuse the sudden tension. “If any Ethereals are spotted, XCOM will be notified.”

“If the overall strategy is laid out, I suggest we get into specifics,” Laura continued, looking down at the map. “If you want, Chancellor?”

“Agreed,” Saudia nodded. “Continue, Commander.”

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Seoul, South Korea

Twilight was the backdrop for their goodbyes, and Duri couldn’t really think of a more appropriate one. Sandara had been distressed at the news, but both of them knew there wasn’t anything they could do about it and she had been resolved to appear fine for the girls. Nabi wasn’t entirely sure what was going on, except that daddy was going away for a while.

Mari knew better though, and she’d been really quiet after he’d told her, and he wasn’t sure how she was handling it. Now that they were all standing on the tarmac with the plane behind them, all of them looked like they wanted to cry, himself included.

But orders were orders.

He knelt down by Mari and gently rested his hands on her shoulders, looking into her watering eyes. “[Hey, don’t cry. I’m going to be coming back soon.]”

A few tears ran down her cheeks. “[But what if-]”

 “[Hey, none of that.]” he soothed pulling her into an embrace. “[Nothing is going to happen to me,
He felt her nod against him and he gently withdrew. “[You need to be strong for mommy, can you do that?]”

One jerky nod. “[Yes, sir.]”

He smiled and ruffled her hair. “[That’s right, don’t worry about me. I’ll be back before you know it.]”

He stood and walked over to his wife and youngest daughter who was clutching Sandara’s leg. “[Nabi, you be a good girl when I’m gone,]” he said, making his tone much lighter than he was feeling. “[I don’t want to hear mommy telling me you snuck into the kitchen and ate my cookies.]”

To his relief she giggled. “[No one likes your cookies, daddy.]”

He chuckled. “[Then I shouldn’t hear anything, should I?]”

She shook her head. “[Nope!]”

 “[Good girl,]” he congratulated. “[I’ll be back soon.]”

 “[Can we go to the park when you get back?]” She asked. “[We haven’t been there in a while.]”

 “[Yes we can,]” he promised. “[Count on it.]”

He stood and immediately drew his wife into an embrace, staying that way for a few minutes, not needing to say anything. “[Don’t worry too much,]” he told her quietly. “[There’s nothing you can do to stop it. I knew what I was signing up for.]”

 “[I know, I know.]” she said, just as softly. “[But I can’t help it. Just…try to come back, please.]”

He looked down at her worried face and gave her a reassuring smile. “[I don’t plan to die here. But there are some things in life out of our control. This is one of them.]”

 “[I suppose so,]” she said. “[I’ll be praying for you until you get back.]”

He smiled. “[I’ll second that. Two are more than one after all. I’ll keep in contact as much as I can. And don’t forget to look after yourself.]”

 “[I won’t,]” she promised. “[I love you.]”

 “[I love you too,]” he told her, stepping. “[Goodbye for now.]”

With the twilight at his back and his family waving goodbye, and their picture close to his heart, Duri Eun-Jung turned his back and became yet another soldier marching off to the war that would determine the future of humanity.

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Supplementary Material

The Advent Directive

Subsection 1.3: ADVENT Agencies
Description and Functionality: The purpose of ADVENT agencies are to fulfill certain roles within the Executive Branch and regulate various aspects with a focus on safety, efficiency and undisputed. Following Agencies are defined below, and more may be added at the discretion of the Chancellor of ADVENT in accordance with the Congress of Nation. (Additional information on each agency is in Section 5)

**ADVENT Department of Energy and Renewable Sources:** Conducts research on new forms of energy and effective management of sources currently in usage.

**ADVENT Bureau of Education:** Oversees the structure and integration of schooling and education at all levels and types.

**ADVENT Research and Development:** Conducts experimental research for both military and civilian usage and integration.

**ADVENT Engineering and Advanced Technology:** Develops and creates improved technology and gadgets for military and civilian usage.

**ADVENT Internal Affairs and Oversight:** Performs the role of oversight for all ADVENT agencies, the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches.

**ADVENT Election Oversight:** Oversees all aspects of elections, including the screening of candidates.

**ADVENT Diplomatic Service:** Performs the role of diplomats of ADVENT to all non-ADVENT nations.

**ADVENT Agriculture and Food Oversight:** Regulates and ensures that the agriculture industry produces high-quality products for usage within ADVENT.

**ADVENT Department of Infrastructure:** Oversees the creation, upkeep and architecture of infrastructure matters within ADVENT.

**ADVENT Adoption and Child Services:** Oversees and regulates all aspects relating to adoption and handles matters relating to child abuse or neglect.

**ADVENT Drug and Substance Research:** Conducts research on all known drugs, and determines ones acceptable for public consumption or usage in medical environments.

**ADVENT Department of Health and Medicine:** Oversees all aspects relating to civilian medicine and research. Also oversees regulation regarding doctors and additional medical professionals.

**ADVENT Department of Commerce and Economy:** Oversees all aspects of the ADVENT economy and handles enforcement of economical regulations on corporations, banks and investors.
Zanjan, Iran

If there was one thing Roman Kostov found somewhat tolerable in this country, it was that it wasn’t all desert. Cities were modernized and, aside from the heat, bearable. It was the outside deserts that made him feel very little outside of constant the irritation he held towards Iran. Although perhaps that was unfair to the country. After all, it wasn’t like it had a choice in whether or not it was a desert.

Didn’t mean he had to like it.

Anton and Elena took their positions beside the entrance, with Stanislav and Galina moving behind the house to protect against surprise exits. Maksim watched from afar, looking for stragglers and other unpleasant surprises. All of them were clad in the far superior ADVENT armor, although it had lost its black sheen after a single day in the Iranian deserts.

It was a purely cosmetic detail he appreciated about the Shieldbearer armor, that it was already white and he wasn’t as visibly affected by the elements as the other variants. The extra protection was a bonus, but it made the current offensives on Iran nearly trivial. Roman had very little idea where this tech had actually come from, but he was able to easily see the results.

The armor was more or less bulletproof against most conventional small arms used by the Iranians, which had allowed them to easily take the border cities with almost no casualties, and had additionally demonstrated the now-massive tech gap between the two militaries even without mentioning the Gauss weapons that punched holes through regular body armor. Not even Iranian tanks could survive a constant barrage of simple gauss rifles for long.

Simply put, they were taking a country in weeks when it should have taken months. The defense around Zanjan had been foreboding initially, with the Iranians taking entrenched positions in the city and setting up their missile launchers. Unfortunately their firepower was negated with the deployment of the new THAAD defense system, and their defensive line was easily broken by the Russian ADVENT soldiers.

It appeared the Iranians still hadn’t figured out that the best way to kill a Russian ADVENT soldier was to concentrate fire on him and exploit their dangerous sense of invincibility. That was an issue Roman was noticing. Soldiers were now taking risks they wouldn’t otherwise simply because they believed the armor would protect them. Admittedly in most cases it would, but it was a dangerous mindset to get into especially since Roman knew they would be moving to the aliens after this.

In the meantime, they were focused on purging the city of the remaining Iranian soldiers. After breaking their lines, most had gone into hiding or just surrendered. Marshal Vladimir had no wish for guerilla campaigns to begin in captured cities, and so he was mobilizing all the forces to systematically sweep the entire city of Iranian hostiles.

The mandate was very simple: Neutralize all hostile soldiers, capture if possible, arrest if suspect, subdue if resist. Do not prioritize civilian life over Russian soldiers.

Roman was unsurprised by the last order. Marshal Vladimir knew what desperate soldiers did when cornered, and hostage situations were inevitable. While not explicitly ordering them to ignore
the hostages, the implication was that a free Iranian soldier posed a threat to Russians, and that was simply not tolerable.

Roman didn’t mind. He viewed this entire operation likely how President Savvin did. An opportunity to purge the region of dissent, corrupting influences and terrorism for decades to come. It would of course not stop the inevitable uprisings, but Roman had been rather pleased to find out that this time there would be nothing stopping them from crushing the resistances irreparably.

But that would come later, and that was the job of the Peacekeepers.

His job was to deal with the threats here and now.

Elena put away her scanner and nodded up at him. Good, no explosives near the doors. Even ADVENT armor didn’t protect from mines or point-blank explosives. He slammed a fist on the door several times. “This is the ADVENT Russian Division! You are instructed to exit the building within thirty seconds and provide no resistance! Should you not comply we will enter and subdue any resistance. This is your only warning!”

He figured they didn’t understand Russian, so English the probably the next best thing. But it was not guaranteed and he wasn’t expecting them to actually come out since most soldiers weren’t keen on surrendering, and the civilians were either too confused or terrified to follow instructions. Nevertheless he stepped back and raised his rifle at the door. “[Anything?]” He asked through his helmet comlink to his squad, another wonderful feature of the ADVENT armor.

“[Negative,]” Stanislav answered from the back. “[Nothing on our ends]”

“[Same,]” Maksim reported from his sniping position. “[I’d say go for it. Pretty sure thirty seconds is up.]”

“[Guess so,]” Roman sighed, and readied his shield. “[Prepare to breach everyone, on the normal signal. Copy]”

“[Copy, Shieldbearer,]” Stanislav confirmed.

“[Copy.]” Elena nodded and Anton echoed her words.

Roman walked up to the door, fired a single gauss round at the locking mechanism and kicked it in with one practiced motion. A second later he activated the unique aspect of his armor: the shield itself. It manifested as a faint red covering over the armor itself, and had the useful ability of being able to deflect several bursts of projectiles. It never lasted more than a few, but those few were crucial when doing breaches of this nature. That being said, he still tried to avoid being hit. The batteries charging the suit did recharge over time but that took longer than was acceptable, He did have several spares in that case, but only a few.

How it actually worked was somewhat fuzzier, though he knew there were two variations of the shield. One for conventional weapons and one for alien ones. It utilized magnetic fields for the ballistic variant, which appeared to have the effect of deflection. He hadn’t had the opportunity to test the anti-alien weapon part, but figured it probably wouldn’t be quite as effective.

He swung his weapon around as he quickly scanned the small, but open living room. Nothing so far-a soldier in the tan uniform of the Iranian military sprang up from behind a counter and began firing his rifle while shouting at him in Persian. Roman sidestepped, took a quick second to aim before the fire became more accurate, and fired several shots at the man.

He screamed and went spinning backwards, crashing into a nearby table and knocking all the
dishes off, which fell to the ground with a crash. Roman grimaced, he’d taken a glancing blow. He took a brief second to look at the uniform, even as the man tried to right himself. Just a regular soldier, not worth trying to capture. Roman shot him several times in the head, turning it to mush and splattering the walls with red.

“[One hostile down,]” he reported as Anton and Elena came in behind him. Stanislav kicked in the back door and marched in, weapons raised with Galina close behind.

“[Exits are secured,]” Stanislav declared, motioning Galina to stay by the door.

“[Elena, with me,]” Roman ordered as they moved to the hallways. “[Anton, clear the rooms opposite mine.]”

“[Got it,]” Anton nodded and Roman and Elena walked into the segregated hallway from the rest of the living room. Roman motioned to the left and Elena followed as they reached the first door. He slowly reached over and turned the doorknob, pushing it open to reveal an empty bathroom. Just to be sure, he entered and pushed aside the shower curtains. Nothing.

“[Clear,]” he said and they proceeded to the next room. He repeated the same procedure and this time revealed what seemed to be a child’s room. Toys were strewn about on the floor, and the colors were of a much younger child, maybe between six and ten. “[Be advised we may have civilians,]” Roman warned.

They reached the room at the end of the hallway. “[Roman, got a stairway leading to a basement,]” Anton said. “[Instructions?]”

“[Hold position until the first floor is clear,]” Roman ordered, reaching over and turning to doorknob of the last room. “[Almost done.]”

He pushed in the door and swept the larger bedroom with his rifle until it rested on a two people, huddling in a corner. A terrified woman and a young girl who started crying the moment his rifle rested on her. “[Two civilians,]” Roman reported as the woman began shouting at him angrily in Persian while half-sobbing. “[Elena, take them outside and turn them in to the Peacekeepers for screening.]”

“[On it,]” Elena said, holstering her rifle and motioning the woman to follow her. Roman left her to take care of the civilians and walked back to Anton who was dutifully standing in front of the door that had a stairway leading down.

“[Ready?]” Anton asked, looking over as he approached.

“[I’ll take point,]” Roman said reaching over to the lightswitch. “[Killing the lights, switch to night-vision.]”

They made their way down, rifles raised as the stairs turned sharply a couple times until they were in what appeared to be a storage basement. Crates, barrels and boxes were stacked in ordered rows, which he didn’t fail to note were arranged in a way that could also form a barricade. Not that it would help against concentrated gauss fire.

“This is your final chance to surrender!” Roman called out as Anton took a position beside him.

Silence.

Roman pursed his lips and nodded to Anton. “[Killzone.]”
At that command they began firing into the crates, splintering the cheap wood and shattering the more fragile cases apart. The constant sound of gauss rifles was only briefly punctuated by several brief screams of pain. Both of them continued firing. If anyone was there, they had passed up their chance to surrender.

They had no time for mercy now.

“[Cease fire,]” Roman ordered, raising a palm. “[Forward.]”

They walked through the now-ruined basement, wood cracking and splintering where their boots touched. Glass and plastic crunched with each step they took. Roman spotted a corpse thrown against two broken barrels. His body was leaking blood and ripped apart from gauss rounds. “[One hostile down,]” he reported.

“[Make that two,]” Anton corrected, nodding towards a female corpse that no longer had a head. Roman nodded and kept walking until they reached the end.

“[House clear,]” he reported. “[We’re coming back up now.]”

“[Civilians are turned in to the Peacekeepers.]” Elena reported. “[Regroup outside. We’ve got a lot more houses to clear.]”

“[That we do,]” Roman grunted as they walked up the stairs, the sounds of more gunfire reaching his ears as more teams did their work purging the city of any resistance. That was just how it had to be. He looked down the street, at ordinary houses that nonetheless were all possible threats.

And it was their job to neutralize each one.

“[Come on,]” he ordered, reloading his gauss rifle. “[We’ve got work to do.]”

***

Zanjan ADVENT Command, Iran

“[I never thought my day would be spent raiding houses looking for isolated soldiers,]” Galina said as they strode into the temporary assigned barracks. It consisted of pretty much nothing but a few bunk beds and lockers, but it worked. Galina immediately plopped down on her bunk and pulled off her helmet and carefully set it at her side as she reached for her cloth she used for cleaning.

The rest of them did something similar. Roman pulled off his helmet and carefully set it down, then rested his head on the back of the wall and took a moment to breath. “[Look on the bright side,]” Anton said as he began taking off his armor. “[At least they couldn’t hurt us.]”

“[Yet,]” Konstantin grumbled as he laid on the cot, too exhausted to even take off his armor. “[They have to figure it out eventually.]”

“[Maybe,]” Galina shrugged, as she cleaned the bloodstains off her helmet. “[But I doubt it. We don’t leave enough alive to get something like that back to wherever their capital is.]”

“[Good point,]” Roman chuckled, straightening up again and appraising Galina. “[Question. Do you think we’d take more alive if any of us spoke Persian?]”

“[Doubt it,]” Stanislav said, rubbing his unkempt beard. “[People like this don’t surrender. Saw it all the time during the War on Terror. Fanatics don’t listen to reason or logic.]”
“[Bad example.]” Elena chided, coming to sit down by Roman, who lowered himself to also sit down by her. “[Those were terrorists, these are soldiers.]”

“[Still applies.]” Stanislav defended. “[They’re defending their home and are under orders. One or both of those, along with being isolated with invincible soldiers coming at you, probably means they aren’t thinking straight anymore.]”

He shrugged. “[But hey, I’m not here to psychoanalyze them. Just to put them down if they give us trouble.]”

“[Did that a little too well,]” Maksim commented, resting his sniper rifle on the wall and giving them disappointed looks. “[Do you have any idea just how boring today was?]”

Roman raised an eyebrow and they all chuckled. “[You would prefer getting shot at?]”

“[Yes, because you were so concerned about that,]” Maksim commented sarcastically. “[Seriously. Not fair if you have all the fun.]”

Konstantin took a sip from one of the water bottles he kept on him. “[Hey, I’d let one go to give you something to do, but I have no interest in getting chewed out, thank you very much. Trust me, I’ve never seen any operation like this run this tight.]”

“[I must have missed something,]” Elena said, looking to him. “[What do you mean?]”

Konstantin motioned outside. “[Out there I guarantee there are a couple hundred teams still working. This current operation is being run by Ivan, who you should know is extremely meticulous. He probably had everything mapped out before we even entered this region. Roman, help me out?]”

“[Can’t disagree,]” Roman admitted. “[Ivan was very clear that he wanted those houses we cleared done by a specific time.]”

“[Anything to make him happy,]” Galina said, brushing some blonde strands out of her eyes. “[At least we know that’s why you were in ‘no taking prisoners’ mode today.]”

Roman snorted. “[When am I not?]”

“[Eh, point taken,]” Galina conceded with a smile. “[But there have been times.]”

“[It’s nice to not have to worry about that,]” Maksim said wistfully. “[I’d always be worried some overly-naïve journalist will interview some poor widow who saw her terrorist husband shot in front of her, which will then lead to a global outcry and me getting discharged for doing my damn job.]”

“[Don’t need to worry about that anymore. Seriously,]” Roman said, pointing to his bunk where a file was poking from the edge. “[Read the ADVENT Rules of Engagement sometime. We’re pretty much allowed to defend ourselves if it’s justified. Someone pulls a gun on you, shoot them. They throw a punch, shoot them. And so on. Perfectly legal and justified, and if someone does complain….]” He tapped the armor. “[Why do you think we have body cameras?]”

“[Also explains why tampering gets you arrested,]” Anton noted. “[It’s sort of refreshing how this is written. Like they actually had a soldier do it.]”

Roman was about to say something when his earpiece beeped and he clicked it. “[Sir?]”

“[Come to my office,]” Colonel General Ivan Frolov ordered. “[We need to discuss moving
“[I’ll be there,]” he said and clicked the link off. “[Reporting to Ivan now. Wish me luck.]”

“[We’ll be ready to move if he needs us,]” Stanislav promised.

“[But I’ll be sleeping until then,]” Konstantin added into his pillow.

Roman smirked at that, grabbed his helmet and began walking to the “office” of Ivan which in reality was what had been more or less the center of government, now converted for military use. Roman looked over to the processing areas which had been set up shortly after occupation began. There were still long lines of civilians out the doors, and a short distance further were where the captured or surrendered Iranian soldiers were being processed. Roman didn’t know what they were doing to them, and frankly, didn’t care. It was a problem he was glad he wasn’t in charge of solving. Because prisoners were a serious liability with no redeeming features whatsoever here. All they accomplished was filling up jail space and otherwise served no useful purpose. Eh, but again, that wasn’t his problem, and he hadn’t looked into the ADVENT rules on prisoners of war.

The two captains stepped aside as he walked up. Aside from the color, Shieldbearer armor was bulkier and the helmet was more angular than regular troopers or captains. It was a much easier way to recognize superior officers without peering at badges. Ivan had set up his office close to the entrance, so it only took a minute to find it and Roman just walked in because the Colonel General didn’t like wasting time.

“[Shieldbearer,]” Ivan stated as he walked into the office. The aged man was looking over a holotable depicting Iran, color-coded to show territory captured by them so far. From his estimation it appeared that only a fifth of it was captured, which was admittedly more than it should have been at this point.

“[Colonel General,]” he returned, saluting and suddenly realizing that it was a hologram he was looking at. An actual hologram. They really were living in the future. “[You wanted to see me, sir?]” He asked, returning to the subject at hand.

“[Correct,]” Ivan said, his sharp eyes still on the map. “[I’m curious, what do you make of it?]”

“[We still have quite a bit to do,]” Roman said, not wanting to waste time wondering if this was some sort of test. Ivan didn’t work like that.

“[Of course we do,]” Ivan said, looking up at the first time to the veteran Russian soldier. “[But fortunately, the situation is much better than it appears.].” He pointed at the map. “[The land mass is large, but mostly unimportant. Once we take Tehran, the Iranians are effectively destroyed. It is their capital and once it falls, so does Iran.]”

Roman saw it now. “[We’re not far then.]”

Ivan gave a humorless smile. “[No, we are not. I have wanted to take the methodical approach to ensure that we push their army into Tehran, make it their final stand. But we are unfortunately going too slow.]”

“[I’m working my team as hard as possible, sir,]” Roman said. “[But work too fast-]”

“[That isn’t a comment on your performance, Shieldbearer,]” Ivan interrupted, raising a hand. “[You and your team have performed commendably. The issue is that in the grand scheme, this
war is nothing. A last gasp of an irrelevant and outdated culture, but one that will fight to the last breath."

"[The aliens.]" Roman nodded. "[We need to focus on them.]

"[You understand quickly,]" Ivan said approvingly. "[Good. But we unfortunately cannot simply leave the Middle East alone. They do not care about the aliens and must be brought in line with ADVENT. I have spoken with the officers in ADVENT Command. They want this war ended before the aliens begin multiple offensives. Impossible to end a war on this scale in months, let alone weeks, but Marshal Vladimir had given the orders to bring this war to a swift end and I intend to accomplish that.]"

Roman waited. "[How, sir?]"

Ivan straightened and clasped his hands behind his back. "[ADVENT rules of engagement are more lenient than I’m used to, so I intend to utilize that. See if you can find Hamedan on the map.]"

Roman complied and found the city south of where they were, and not far from Tehran itself. He pointed and Ivan nodded. "[That is our next target. And where I will test how far the Iranians are willing to go to protect their country.]"

"[Noted, sir,]" Roman said. "[I assume the engagement will be different?]

"[Correct,]" Ivan said. "[I see no point wasting time in drawn out firefights that take a week for us to move into the city where it can be done far sooner. What will happen is this: I will issue an offer for the city to surrender for one day only. Should they refuse, I will let them know that if they do not comply, I will raze the city to the ground.]

Roman blinked. He wasn’t exactly an empathetic person, but even he knew that was somewhat extreme, even for a pragmatist like Ivan. "[Sir, the civilians-]"

"[Will be warned as well,]" Ivan said dismissively. "[ADVENT ROE specifically states that civilian deaths are allowed if every attempt was made to prevent them. I will make it as clear as possible the attack is coming and give them adequate time to leave. If they stay, they have knowingly ignored the warning and have no special protections under ADVENT.]

Roman understood the logic, but still frowned. "[What if the Iranian Army doesn’t let them leave?]

Ivan looked at him with unflinching ice-cold eyes. "[This is not the way I want this war to go, Shieldbearer, but compared to the threat coming, this city is nothing, this war is irrelevant. If I must make an example of a city to end this war months earlier, then so be it.]

Roman looked at the map. "[This is a message to Tehran.]

"[Correct,]" Ivan stated, also looking at the map. "[I suspect Hamedan will not take my warning seriously. I do not expect them to comply and when their city is in ruins, it will send a message to Tehran that if they don’t comply, the same will happen to them. We will take over all Iranian channels and broadcast the footage from this over and over to make them see what we will do to them. If they will not listen to reason, then I will make them respond to fear.]

"[And what do you need from me, sir?]"

"[Your team will be one of those sweeping the ruins for survivors.]" Ivan stated coldly. "[You are to consider everything in that area hostile and remove them as such. We have enough prisoners as it is. Do you understand?]"
“[Yes, sir!]” Roman confirmed.

Ivan gave one nod. “[I understand what I am saying, but I also know you agree that we have little choice. Tell your team their assignment. The main bulk of our forces will move out in two days, and the Peacekeepers will keep order in the city. Prepare accordingly. Dismissed.]”

Roman saluted, and exited the office, a dark and grim cloud of responsibility hanging over him as he went to share the grisly details of their next assignment with his team. But Ivan was right. Their choices were limited and one war was more important than the other.

A few thousand lives were nothing compared to millions, after all.

***

Washington DC, United States of America

Traffic was always bad here, and today, of course, it was even worse. Had she not had larger things to worry about, Jaylin Tanika would be sufficiently irritated. Which wasn’t to say she wasn’t, but it was a more resigned irritation rather than something white-hot within her. It really was amazing how everything could change almost overnight.

At least it had seemed that way to her.

Not one day after the good Madame President had officially put the US into ADVENT, law enforcement had undergone major revisions. Ranks were being redone, laws were being changed to adopt the new rules of the ADVENT Peacekeepers of which she was now one, by virtue of previously being in Riot Control.

It had happened so quickly Jaylin still wasn’t sure if she should be pleased or not by the sudden decisions. It was likely dulled by the fact that her job was only getting harder after Treduant had made the proclamation. Because whenever something controversial happened, she damn well knew that there would be a lot of protests.

Especially in DC where anyone with any sort of political power now had one target: President Nicole Treduant.

And today was the day when they were expecting the largest protest in American history, and she was going to help make sure it didn’t devolve into rioting. In her experience though, that was exactly what she was expecting to happen. The projected demographics were all over the place, and over such a sensitive subject as independence, peaceful protest was not something she was expecting.

More importantly, for her it would be an interesting demonstration of how ADVENT wanted to run things. She doubted it would be too different, otherwise she doubted the chiefs would allow this Peacekeeper program to be integrated so smoothly. The good news for her was that it was at least looking like an upgrade.

When she’d seen the armor worn by the ADVENT soldiers, she had subconsciously wondered if they were due for a similar upgrade, and then dismissed it quickly. There was no way ADVENT would shell out that kind of money for their equivalent of a police force…but sure enough, they had and what she was wearing now was proof of it.

With the exception of the left arm, it was identical to the trooper armor with the addition of a white shoulder cape on whatever side the dominant arm was, which in her case was the right. The left arm was bulkier because it had a built-in transparent riot shield that could be activated with the
press of a button. And today Chief Rais had sent out a memo that their crowd-control equipment was also being overhauled, though he hadn’t been able to give out details.

Either way, Jaylin knew that there were going to be quite a few people upset. For some reason, there were people who had issues with police, and riot police in particular, and would no doubt try and discredit them in whatever way they could. It wasn’t difficult to cause controversy these days, and Jaylin found it somewhat irritating to be worrying about public response when she did her job.

Serve and Protect. That was the motto, but for her it did not extend to criminals and lawbreakers. You serve and protect the people who deserve it, it wasn’t an innate privilege and certainly not a right she was willing to afford to everyone. It wasn’t high standard either. Follow the law and you had nothing to worry about.

A sentiment that a certain portion of the populace didn’t seem to grasp.

Jaylin finally arrived at the station and quickly exited, nearly tripping over her boots as she still wasn’t used to the much heavier armor. Yet. It also appeared that not everyone had received the upgrade since as she walked by, most officers were in their regular uniforms, whistling in surprise and giving envious looks at the armor itself.

It did make sense that they would want to protect the riot police first, but she figured it was only a matter of time before the rest of the department got upgraded as well. “So how is it?” Secretary Vale asked as she walked up to check in, a pen tapping idly in his fingers as his vibrant gray eyes looked over her armor with unbridled curiosity.

“Heavy,” she answered, handing him her badge. “But actually pretty comfortable. I’m surprised they even gave it to us.”

“Can’t wait to get mine,” he chuckled as he scanned her badge. “Although they’ll probably only give them to patrol officers, not desk workers like me.”

“Guess we’ll see,” Jaylin shrugged. “Did the Chief leave any place he wanted me to go?”

“Shooting range,” Vale answered, handing her the badge back. “Got some new toys for you, I think.”

“Thanks,” she said, and began making her way to the shooting range. It only took a few minutes and she entered the packed shooting range with her colleagues all wearing the same black armor as her. Even unarmed they were an impressive sight. She spotted Rose and Troy chatting nearby and headed towards them.

Rose spotted her quickly and gave a wide smile. “Captain, glad you finally made it!”

“Have some faith,” Jaylin smirked. “You really think I would be late today of all days?”

“Not by choice,” Troy corrected, his neatly trimmed beard almost giving him a sinister appearance as he looked down at her. “It isn’t pretty out there.”

“That’s DC traffic,” Jaylin dismissed. “Tell me it isn’t pretty in a few hours. And speaking of that, what are we waiting for?”

“The chief to get down here,” Rose muttered, shooting an irritated look to the far exit. “He better hurry otherwise we’ll actually be putting down a riot. You know how these people are.”

“And they have a tendency to start early,” Troy added grimly, crossing his arms. “I just can’t wait.
How many outlets do you think will be covering this? Six?”

“This is getting national attention,” Jaylin grumbled, pushing a black strand of hair out of her face. “Every damn station will be covering this. No pressure on us, of course.”

Rose looked ready to agree before they were interrupted by the door opening and Chief Rais strode out, also wearing the same armor as them except for his shoulder cape which was white and red. “Listen up!” He ordered, his booming voice immediately silencing the chatter. Rais had a gift for commanding attention which completely matched his gruff and serious persona and face. If anyone saw it, they would (correctly) assume him to be someone who’d never had a happy thought in his life.

Although that wasn’t exactly fair, he just took his job way more seriously than was probably healthy.

“We have one mandate for today,” he continued, pacing back and forth in front of them. “Keep the peace. Failing that, control the situation. They’re expecting at least half a million people and we are not going to have DC turn into a warzone. Got it?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Right,” he continued. “You’ve already got your armor, now the new tools ADVENT has provided. And no, don’t ask me why, who or how. Either I don’t know or am not at liberty to say. Just be happy. You’ll have three main pieces of equipment.” He raised a grayish rifle thing, with a very odd barrel and no bullet cartridge she could see.

“First piece,” he bellowed. “The ARC Rifle, your main means of pacification and control. Fires bolts of electricity to stun or knock out troublemakers.” He turned away, aimed the rifle at a nearby dummy and fired. Jaylin didn’t see the bolt exit, but she heard the sharp static discharge and saw a blue flash hit the dummy. “Minimum setting is enough to knock out an adult,” Rais warned, turning back to them. “Can adjust up to lethal, but you are not allowed to do so without permission. Short version: This thing hurts so don’t use it unless you have to.”

Jaylin still had her eyes fixed on the rifle. Well that was something she hadn’t expected. That told her more about ADVENT’s priorities than some document ever could. You didn’t give that to your Peacekeepers unless you were expecting trouble, and you wanted that trouble gone. Regardless, she definitely wasn’t going to complain.

“You’ve got a short-range countermeasure as well,” Rais continued, pulling out what looked like a black stick an arm’s length long. There were bumps along the side, but Jaylin had a good idea of what it was. “The new and improved stun baton,” he continued. “Each blow delivers a shock when activated, and can be optimized to stun on impact.” To emphasize his point, he flipped a switch on the baton and odd white discharges manifested on the baton and vanished in milliseconds with sharp snaps. “Hurts like hell so don’t take these lightly. If we’re dealing with an insurrection, switch it to lethal mode.”

Jaylin blinked. Lethal mode? Rais shut off the electricity of the baton, turned the stick itself until she heard a click and when he pressed the button again, those bumps on the side snapped out into wicked-looking spikes, electricity arcing between the teeth. “These are just as sharp as they look,” Rais warned. “And the output is enough to send a healthy adult into cardiac arrest. As such you are only to use lethal mode when authorized and better yet, isolated. You have better chance of killing your partners than hostiles when this is active. If your life is genuinely in danger, that’s why you have this.”
He pulled out a black pistol, finger off the trigger. “The new standard-issue Gauss pistol. Again, don’t use this unless you fully intend to kill someone with it. This piece will tear any regular bulletproof vest to shreds and will pierce most cover. Packs a punch, so be careful with it. Questions? You.”

“Not that I’m complaining,” one black-haired officer said slowly—Robert, that was his name. “But this seems like a lot of…well, firepower. I thought there were restrictions on that for us.”

“There were,” Rais confirmed with a nod. “But the laws have changed thanks to ADVENT. Our job is to keep order and as long as it is done within the law, we are free to deal with criminals with appropriate prejudice.” He raised a finger. “Which brings me to a very important point.”

His gaze swept the room. “Just because you have the ability to neutralize someone, that does not mean you get to. You are only allowed to intervene if there is clear agitation. Someone throws bottles or rocks at you, knock them out and drag their ass to jail. That does not mean that you can shock someone who flips you off and calls you mean names.”

He tapped his chest. “So in case you didn’t know, we’ve got cameras in these now. You get someone killed? We’ll know if it’s justified. Someone tries to falsely accuse you of police brutality or whatnot? We can check and if they are lying, we punish them. Clear and simple. So the good news is that under ADVENT we have a lot more freedom to deal with criminals and deviants, so long as it is within the law. Bad news is that we’re under their oversight and it’s gonna be a lot more paperwork for everyone.”

He paused his pacing and faced them intently. “ADVENT wanted this point stressed: They will not tolerate any systemic abuses of power. You do that, you’re not getting a weeks-long review, you’re going to jail if the footage matches up. If they find you tampered with your suits camera, you’re going to jail. Cameras are always running on duty, and you are required to upload it weekly. Failure to do so will lead to prosecution. That clear?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Alright, that out of the way, let’s get to work,” Rais nodded. “There’s a good chance we’re going to have to stop the groups from fighting among themselves. Indications are that we’ve got the far-right militant groups marching with hippies, and so on, so don’t be surprised if you end up breaking up fights between them. More information will be given on the way. But we’re on a timetable, so let’s move out! Crates containing your new weapons are on the way.”

“This should be interesting,” Rose said as they followed the Chief out, and Jaylin could only nod in agreement.

Today was going to be a very interesting day indeed.

***

Kochi, Japan

Everything was going at full speed here. Entire squads dashed past him and engineering teams were moving missiles and THAAD Defense systems into place. More workers were establishing barricades on the coast for the inevitable attack. Duri took a few minutes to see what exactly they were doing.

To a certain extent, it appeared that the plan was to allow some space for the aliens to deploy soldiers, and have a line almost immediately after that of soldiers to shoot them down. It was bait,
without even counting the fact that Duri noted them setting mines on the ground. Kochi didn’t really have conventional beaches, and was packed with as many buildings as possible. Impressive, but not exactly helpful for defending against an attack.

On the flipside, it would be easy to outflank and outmaneuver the alien forces who wouldn’t be familiar with the territory. He supposed what he’d do would heavily depend on where he was stationed. But first he actually had to find where his team was supposed to be, which was—he unwrapped the paper in his hand—the converted barracks, region 42—not far from here.

Figuring it best not to waste time, he broke into a light jog and managed to hitch a ride on one of the carts going there and finally arrived at what had probably been a police station of sorts before being converted. It was highly disorganized, with unopened boxes and random scraps of metal and cloth strewn around as bunks were hastily erected and thin plastic walls were put up.

In any case, he finally found where his team was supposed to be, and sure enough they were all there. In fact they already seemed to be getting along. “Mutons,” one was saying, who Duri assumed was the North Korean of the team. He seemed awfully young with a flawless face and neatly trimmed black hair. He had a finger raised as he spoke to two others, a man and woman. “Those are the ones you need to be careful of.”

“The big ones,” the woman nodded, definitely an American from the accent. “I saw them from the New York attacks.”

The North Korean frowned. “I…no, those aren’t the usual ones. Those are a bigger version. The regular ones have green armor and are much smaller.”

“A relief, I guess,” the man said, who interestingly enough had a full, but neat beard. Duri couldn’t place the accent…Swedish, since he was pretty sure it wasn’t Venezuelan.

“Got company,” a Hispanic woman grunted from the corner, not pausing as she cleaned her sniper rifle. The rest of them looked at him, all standing at attention.

“At ease,” he said, flicking his hand. “Didn’t mean to interrupt,” he looked at the young North Korean. “Although names would be nice.”

“Captain Eun-Jung, correct?” The other man asked, approaching him and extending a hand. “Johan Eriksson, Swedish Army.”

“Duri’s fine,” he answered, taking the offered hand. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Cara,” the American woman said with a smile and a lazily lifted hand. “US Army. Actually spent some time in South Korea a few years ago. Beautiful country.” She pointed at the woman cleaning her sniper rifle. “That’s Miss Sanchez, she mostly likes keeping to herself.”

“Shut up, Boreal,” Sanchez muttered, rising. “I can speak for myself, thank you.” Now that she stood, Duri noted that she was probably the tallest out of all of them, with her raven hair falling to just above her shoulders. “It’s Beatriz Sanchez, Captain, Venezuela Army Sniper Corps.”

Duri gave a slight smile. “Glad to have you here. Snipers are always useful.”

Her lips twitched a little at that. “Yeah, I guess so Captain.”

Hmm. There was definitely something with her he’d have to look into later. In the meantime, there was one final team member. “Kang Il Sim, Captain,” the North Korean said, inclining his head. “I was updating Cara and Johan on the aliens we are likely to face.”
“I heard,” Duri nodded. “Where did you learn that? It’s correct, but as far as I know only the Captains were given specific intel.”

“Information on specific alien types was distributed to the entirety of the North Korean military,” Kang explained without emotion. “It was initially gathered from our own encounters with the aliens, and I suspect XCOM updated our lists later on.”

“You might have saved me some time,” Duri said, pulling a roll of paper from a pouch in his armor. “Have experience with Andromedons?”

Kang furrowed his eyebrows. “I’m unfamiliar with that unit.”

“Is that a code-word or are they actually called that?” Cara asked skeptically.

“Don’t know,” Duri admitted, handing her the information he’d received on it. “But that’s what XCOM is calling it. Seems even worse than a muton, at least the green ones.”

“Not a psion, though,” Cara said after reading for a few minutes. “So that’s something.”

“As far as we’re aware, the only psions are Sectoids and Ethereals,” Duri confirmed. “And XCOM has their own.”

“I wonder if we’ll get our own too,” Johan wondered thoughtfully. “In all of ADVENT, there have to be some who can do it.”

Duri heard Beatriz snort in her corner. “Of course there are. Thing is that XCOM wants them all to themselves.”

“C’mon,” Cara said wearily. “You really believe that?”

“Call it a feeling,” she muttered. “Besides, I’ve seen the Commander of XCOM before.”

Duri looked at her in interest. “You know who he is?”

“Nope,” Beatriz admitted slowly, looking up at him with weary eyes. “But he came to Venezuela once, official visit I think. Definitely American. I don’t know what happened other than that all the command staff were really spooked for months afterwards.” She shrugged. “That was fifteen years ago though, pre-War on Terror for you younger ones. But I don’t trust him.”

“Well, I have to say you’re wrong,” Kang stated boldly, casting a disapproving eye on Beatriz. “If not for the Commander and XCOM, we would likely be in a much worse position.”

“You believe that?” Beatriz asked wearily, setting her sniper rifle on the wall. “Or do you just think that because your Supreme Leader said so?”

Oh dear, this was not what he wanted to deal with. “Enough,” he ordered, raising a hand before Kang could give a righteously indignant response. “Insulting each other is not going to be allowed. You can have your opinion Beatriz, and Kang, you have to respect that.”

Kang shut his mouth. “Yes, Captain.”

“Whatever XCOM is, or is not, that isn’t what we should focus on,” Duri continued. “We’re probably going to be under attack soon and we need to prepare for what we’re facing.” He set his pack down and pulled out the map he’d been given. “Break time’s over, I’ve got the location of where we’re going to be.” He went over and pulled a table to the center and they gathered around it...
and he laid the map flat on it. “Time to get started. Beatriz, if you’re our sniper, where do you think your best positions will be?”

***

**Washington DC, United States of America**

The ARC rifle was much lighter than any firearm she’d ever wielded in her life. It seemed to weight almost nothing as she held it in her hands, watching as the huge throng of people marched in front of the White House. Jaylin had wondered what presidents did when people protested outside what was essentially your house. If *she* were president, she’d probably not pay any attention and go about her day.

But Treduant had displayed some amount of cunning, and an intolerance for threats to her, so it was unlikely she was writing this off. Her loss, if this was any indication Treduant had nothing to worry about because these people had no unified message, they were only united in their belief that what was happening *now* was wrong, and Jaylin was certain that the solutions of the different factions would clash the moment they were proposed.

Echoes of chants and cheers were shouted every few minutes, repeated by the crowd jubilantly. Catchy in a way, but only served to keep up a crowd’s energy and enthusiasm. As usual there were the vast array of signs and banners that of course had contradicting goals and motivations.

*Take our country back!*

*Impeach Treduant!*

*Traitors will be punished!*

*Freedom before Tyranny!*

*Peace not War!*

Jaylin had to shake her head at some of them. Peace? Impeachment? Tyranny? It was clear that some of these people didn’t actually know what they were asking, nor what they were talking about. Did some want *peace* with the aliens? Why exactly should Treduant be impeached? *What* tyranny? Because Jaylin knew very well that if this was simply because they didn’t approve…well, they didn’t have any legal power to demand anything they were supposedly marching for.

But there was a very clear current of anger in the air. It was *real* and it was enough to unite complete opposite political ideologies into one controlled mob that would ultimately accomplish little except wasting all of their time. There were a dozen more important things Jaylin could be doing, but no, these people wanted to make a point and thus she was ordered to indulge them.

At least the armor was serving a secondary purpose beyond protection. It was fortunately intimidating to quite a few people, with many avoiding eye contact and keeping a healthy distance from the armored Riot Police. Or ADVENT Riot Control, as they were designated now. Although now that several hours had passed, they were getting bolder.

And angrier.

“*See that one in back?*” Troy asked through their helmet comlinks. “*The one with the alien on the operating table?*” Jaylin looked to where he was suggesting and saw the sign in question, it looked like a crudely drawn sectoid with red blood over it (She knew they actually bled yellow) and what looked like a knife stuck in it. How tragic, all underscored by the words “*They are lying to you*” on
“What does that even mean?” Jaylin asked wearily. “I never thought I would see conspiracy nuts out in the open.”

“I can answer that,” Rose said, likely smiling if her voice was any indication. “So apparently, the aliens are actually benevolent and they are actually attacking the evil government as punishment for experimenting on them for years. All they truly want is peace.”

Jaylin resisted the urge to facepalm. “Clearly these idiots didn’t pay attention to New York. Or Hamburg. Or fucking Australia.”

“Hey, I never said they were smart,” Rose teased. “Just the deluded fantasies they believed. Like that guy over there.”

Jaylin sighed and looked to where some guy was holding a sign that read “Treduant is a pawn of the New World Order!” It was of course complete with a badly photoshopped image of Treduant in the middle of a globe, and surrounding her were equally badly photoshopped world leaders, Savvin, Gwan and amusingly enough, the XCOM logo as well. To top off the ridiculous sign was that it rested on some kind of satanic symbol…implying that the New World Order was a satanic cult? She didn’t know if she wanted an answer to that. So she summed up her feelings as best as possible.

“What an idiot.”

“Technically, you could make the case that ADVENT is a New World Order,” Troy pointed out coyly. “But the issue is if that’s actually a bad thing.”

“Not to mention it doesn’t actually include the whole world?” Jaylin added. “Where do people get these ridiculous ideas?”

“Oh, you’ll like this,” Rose chuckled. “You know who Jonas Culbert is?”

“No.”

“He is a…how do I put this?” Rose paused. “A conspiracy ‘entertainer’ and I use that term very loosely. Has a pretty large online show. And runs such logical stories such as that XCOM is a secret US organization born out of MKUltra, ADVENT is the New World Order, and get this, he also believed that there was a legitimate Illuminati organization that secretly ruled the world. Although I’m actually not sure he believes this stuff. I really hope he doesn’t. But unfortunately, quite a few people buy that crap.”

Jaylin looked over at her nonchalant friend casually holding her own ARC rifle as she observed the crowd. “Do I want to know how you know all this?” She asked.

Rose shrugged. “Eh, some people watch movies and play games for entertainment. I just get mine from the idiots of the world. It is both depressing, and comforting to know that no matter how stupid I act, there will always be someone who believes the world is run by lizard people.”

“You know, maybe we’re taking the wrong approach with the aliens,” Troy joked. “Perhaps humanity had its chance and we deserve to face the consequences.”

They all chuckled at that. “Utterly hilarious, guys,” another officer said, Brandon, she believed. “Could we focus? They seem to be getting antsy.”
“Alright,” Jaylin said. “Game faces, everyone. Only a couple hours to go. We get out of here with no incidents and we don’t end up on the news.”

“Sufficient motivation for me,” Rose said. “Hey, is that Senator Martain?”

Jaylin peered into the crowd and spotted the silver-haired man walking with a throng of enthusiastic people, with some Capitol Police officers close behind him. “Yep, it seems so.”

“How truly a man of the people,” someone commented dryly. “You know he’s going to use this for whenever his presidential run is.”

“Not for a while,” Jaylin said as he walked past. “Not since Treduant postponed the elections.”

“She’ll have to open them eventually,” Troy said. “I can see the ads now. ‘I stood with the people who were brave enough to oppose the tyranny of ADVENT’ or something like that.”

Jaylin chuckled. “Man of the people, mind of a politician.”

“Shield!” Rose called and Jaylin hit the button on her arm and the transparent shield on her left arm snapped into place and she held it over her head and looked to see a brick hit Troy’s shield. She closed her own and raised her rifle.

“Lock down the area!” She ordered, adjusting the volume on her helmet projection system. “Attention citizens! Hold your positions until the area is swept! Do not attempt to leave.” She scanned crowd and spotted a hooded figure pushing through the crowd. “One spotted,” she informed, moving to follow. “Rose, with me, everyone else close ranks.”

“Burn in hell, traitors!” A voice shouted and several more blocks and a flaming bottle were flung at the line of officers. More hooded figures sprang up in the crowd, yelling more nonsense and slogans and that was all Jaylin needed. The body cams had sufficient evidence now.

“Lock this block down!” She snarled, raising her ARC rifle at one of the hooded figures. The crowd melted before her weapon as it spat electricity and the figure went down with a shriek. “One down,” she declared, moving onto the next target. “Do not attempt to leave this area!” She warned the crowd. “Unauthorized exits will lead to prosecution.”

Everyone seemed metaphorically stunned that she’d actually used the weapon in her hands and shrank back fearfully as she pursued through the crowd following the initial figure who’d started this.

“Two more are down,” Troy reported. “Three more a fleeing. In pursuit now.”

“Antifa?” Rose asked as they rounded a corner. “Or someone else.”

“We’ll ask them later,” Jaylin said, as she caught a glimpse of the black hood. “But it looks like it.”

“Wonderful,” Rose muttered.

Jaylin finally had a shot thanks to people moving out of the way. Her helmet projector at maximum, she shouted. “You in the hood! Put your hands in the air or I will shoot!”

He skidded to a stop, seeing more Riot Control closing the gap. He turned around and threw open his arms. “Go ahead!” He shouted. “Do it! Show what happens to people who dare defy the almighty ADVENT!”
“Just do it,” Rose said. “We have evidence.”

They did, but Jaylin wanted to make a point with this. If the little thug was determined to make a statement, she was more than willing to oblige once she discredited him. And if he showed some restraint? Well, good for him. Instead, she slung her ARC rifle over her shoulder into the neat holster in the back, and rested her hand on her stun baton.

“Come peacefully and I won’t need to,” she ordered the young man. “Get on the ground and put your hands up. You are under arrest for public disturbance and assault on multiple officers. We have footage of you, so the best thing you can do is-“

“Oh, go to hell!” He interrupted, eloquently flipping her off. She smirked and kept walking forward. She unfortunately knew exactly how this was going to end and did not feel any sympathy whatsoever.

She stopped right in front of the defiant thug. “Are you finished?” She asked, like a mother scolding a child. If there was anything that got these young anarchists riled up, it was being as patronizing as possible.

“You think this is a game?” He demanded. “At least I stand for something-“

“Yes, yes,” Jaylin dismissed with a wave of her hand. “Do you want to give me your speech now or in the car to your comfortable cell?”

He finally did it and swung a fist at her, and she allowed the young idiot to hurt his hand as it hit her hardened helmet. He gasped, and instead of backing down, pulled out a small knife. Jaylin immediately reacted. Fists were one thing, but she wasn’t going to risk getting stabbed to make a point. Besides, if he was dumb enough to try and hit an officer in public, he completely deserved this.

She pulled out the baton and jabbed the blunt end into him, causing him to shriek in pain as electricity pulsed through his body, freezing him up. He collapsed he fell to his knees, even as Jaylin kept the baton firmly on his body, only pulling it off when she was certain he was unconscious. That done, she shut off the baton, placed back on her belt and handcuffed the man and unceremoniously slung him over her shoulder.

At this point she realized there were at least a dozen cell phones and cameras pointed at her, no doubt capturing the entire event. Well, she no longer had to worry about footage being misconstrued. She had the whole event recorded, and had been completely justified in her response. “I’ve got one hostile secured,“ she reported. “Definitely seems to be Antifa.”

“We’ve got ours as well,” Troy reported. “Loading them into the van for processing. These stun weapons are so much better. Much easier without a resisting perp.”

“Unlock the event now,” Jaylin ordered. “Let them finish their protest. I think they’ll be more behaved this time.”

“You’re the boss here. Doing it now.”

Yes, today had indeed turned out interesting.

***

Washington DC, United States of America
Jaylin breathed a sigh of relief when she pulled into her garage. The day was over and it had gone…mostly according to plan. Luckily the rest of the protest had proceeded without incident, and the people had given every Riot Control Officer a wide berth and were much more…subdued, especially once word got around what had happened.

Although she was somewhat dreading going inside, turning on the TV and seeing herself.

But she might as well face the music now. Not that she had anything to worry about, since she’d turned everything over and informed Rais exactly what had happened. She’d followed the law and had nothing to worry about. However, Rais had warned that the major outlets were asking for the video and he was going to provide it.

It would be interesting to see how this was spun, but at least she wouldn’t suffer beyond the realm of public opinion, which didn’t mean much to her since her circle of friends didn’t extend far outside the department.

Reaching her room, she quickly got out of the armor, which took her a longer time than she’d been expecting due to her unfamiliarity. But after actually testing it out…yeah, definitely a major improvement. Perfect 10/10, would arrest thugs again, as the kids would say. Or at least they had, popular phrases and that seemed to change pretty frequently.

Now in a regular T-shirt and jeans, Jaylin walked to her kitchen and was reminded that she needed to stock up. She really should have stopped somewhere on the way back, and she really didn’t have the motivation to actually cook something tonight. Eh, a bag of chips would be sufficient for tonight. She’d deal with her woefully empty pantry tomorrow.

Her snack in hand, she walked over to her couch, which sat opposite her TV where she spent an hour or so a day in front of. It was really only useful for news, since she didn’t watch entertainment, and it didn’t take long for her to get irritated at the state of the world before she shut it off in disgust. Although it had become far more interesting recently, with the destruction of the UN and establishment of ADVENT.

She settled back and flipped on the news to some CNN anchors. She knew they had names, but they were really too boring for her to really bother to learn them, and as far as she was concerned, all of them were interchangeable. For the sake of it, today they were…Trevor and Rachael. Trevor was currently facing the camera and speaking in the ‘breaking news’ voice. “Now to provide an update on the situation that developed today during one of the largest protests ever to take place in DC. We have reached out to the department, and they have provided us both with the names of the officers involved, and the footage of the incident itself.”

“The footage that initially sparked online controversy appears to have been altered, compared to the raw footage provided to us,” Rachael added, shuffling some papers on her desk. “It appears to confirm that the young man in question attempted to attack the officer in question, Jaylin Tanika, and that was the reason for her swift response.”

“And that he was ignoring an officer,” Jaylin muttered, wincing as the picture of her appeared on the screen. It was probably the most unrepresentative picture of her that she could think of. They’d told her to smile and she’d given what now looked like a horribly fake parody of it. She looked like some suburban mom with that smile and loose black hair than an actual officer.

Although she did get some amusement knowing that, somewhere, there was some people who would be completely shocked at the knowledge that there was such a thing as a black female riot control officer. She smirked at the thought. At least this would dispel the accusations of racism that would have no doubt some up if she had literally had any other skin color.
“Nevertheless, this appears to raise some concerns about how ADVENT appears to conduct its law enforcement,” Trevor continued in a monotone voice. “There have been swift condemnation of the force used to subdue the disrupters in question, which one senator has called ‘disproportionate’. We have reached out to both the department and the Chief of the ADVENT Peacekeepers.”

“Chief Amalda Stein replied with, quote: ‘If they didn’t want to get arrested, they shouldn’t have attacked officers and attempted to flee,’” Rachael finished. Jaylin nodded in approval. She hadn’t heard of the Chief of the Peacekeepers, but she was liking her already. It was really common sense. Play stupid games, win stupid prizes that landed you in jail.

The talking heads began droning on about legislature response and were calling in so-called ‘experts’ who Jaylin had seen before and were so irrelevant they only fooled people who had no idea of how things were run today. Her phone buzzed suddenly and she pulled it out and frowned at the number. Why was Rais calling now?

“Hello?” She asked, continuing to eat her chips.

“Watching the news?” he asked.

“Yep,” she confirmed. “Not as bad as I was expecting.”

“Tends to happen when the main controversy is dispelled,” he grunted. “Didn’t say it earlier, but good job.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Thanks, Chief. Need me for something?” It was unheard of for him to call just to offer some support.

“I’ve got some good news for you actually,” he said. “And some news you might or might not find good.”

Well, now she was curious. “What is it?”

“ADVENT Peacekeeping command has decided to promote you to a mobile team captain,” he said. “Essentially that means you can be moved around where they need you, and you get a larger command, better pay and benefits. All in all, a good deal.”

That it was, even if she’d never heard of the position before. “I’m not complaining, but what’s the catch?”

There was a pause on the other end. “Have you been following the situation in South America?”

“A bit,” she admitted. “Not the most important news story to me at the moment.”

“Well, Brazil just completely captured Paraguay,” he said, making Jaylin think furiously. Where the hell was that? “The short version is that the population is not under control and they need Peacekeepers. In this case, that means you.”

Ohh, now she understood. “I’m going to Brazil? Do I get a say in this?”

“No, you do not,” Rais admitted. “Short of quitting, you’re going where they send you, and that is where you’re needed.”

Well…she wasn’t entirely opposed to the idea. It actually might be a good idea to get out of the country for a bit. Not forever, of course, but if she was better down in Brazil, eh, at least she’d be in the center of world-changing events. And if she got to help restore order there, all the better.
“Ok,” she said. “When do I leave?”

“Two days,” he said. “There’s some paperwork and stuff you need to fill out and look over, but we’ll discuss that tomorrow. Get some rest, you deserve it.”

“Thanks, Chief,” she said. “You too.”

She heard a chuckle. “I wish. But it’s looking like a bunch of sleepless nights for me in the future.”

He was probably right. If this was any indication, things were not going to improve in the next few months in the United States of America. Hopefully she’d be called back if it got too bad, but in the meantime, she was apparently going to be keeping order in a captured nation.

Never a dull moment, it seemed. But despite that, she was sort of excited to see what would come next.

***

**Hamedan, Iran**

There was something thoroughly incomparable about an assembled military bearing down on an opposing army. Roman felt nothing but patriotic pride at the sight of the army of Russian soldiers and vehicles preparing for the coming battle, for he now knew there would be one because the time that Colonel General Ivan had afforded Hamedan was over.

Missile launchers mounted on vehicles and entrenched in the ground itself were primed and aimed at the city of sand-blasted stone and metal. If the Iranians were preparing counter-attacks of their own, Ivan had not seen anything of it. The only indication that the military was doing anything was the soldiers on the perimeter and several small tanks rolling around. No doubt that they thought that Ivan wouldn’t go through with his threat. If it was anyone *other* than Ivan, Roman would have probably thought it smart to call their bluff.

But Roman knew that Ivan was not bluffing…even if it seemed extreme. Even his own team was half-skeptical that Ivan would take such a risk to end the war quicker.

“[Anything different?]” Roman asked Maksim as he stood beside him on a sandy hill before the city. Maksim had his sniper rifle slung over his shoulder and was looking through some high-powered binoculars.

“[Negative,]” Maksim said, sweeping his enhanced gaze over the city. “[They don’t seem to be worried about anything. Or maybe they just have orders. They haven’t stopped anyone leaving.]”

Roman gave a grim nod. “[At least some are listening.]”

He could hear the frown in Maksim’s voice. “[Not enough, though.]”

“[No,]” Roman agreed, looking down to see several of their tanks moving up. “[Not nearly enough.]”

“[All Shieldbearer teams report to your designated transports.]” Ivan commanded, an unusually grim undertone in his voice. “[Initial bombardment will commence in ten minutes.]”

“[Our cue,]” Roman said, tapping Maksim on the shoulder. “[Let’s go.]”

Maksim tucked the binoculars away and both of them dashed through the mass of soldiers,
vehicles, tanks and explosives to get to the rows of armored trucks which the Shieldbearer teams would ride in to take the city, with the heavier tanks and main bulk of soldiers following close behind. The Shieldbearer teams would eliminate and scatter what remained of any Iranian soldiers, and the main army would secure what would soon be a ruined city.

The rest of them were already by the transport, saluting as he walked up. “[Here we go.]” Elena said quietly as she looked to the city in the distance. Her helmet was removed, technically a breach of protocol in hostile territory, but considering the circumstances, Roman was willing to overlook it. Elena had clearly not been comfortable with the plan, going so far to question Ivan’s sanity, though of course not where any superiors could hear them.

She had calmed down later, but she’d been quieter than usual over the past couple days. But in the end, she was a Russian soldier, and she would do her duty, even if she didn’t like it. Roman saw Konstantin glance over to a clock set up in the camp.

“[Time’s up.]”

Not one minute later, the whirring of the gears in the machines aiming the explosives at the city began moving, until there were audible clicks heard throughout the entire arsenal. The entirety of the assembled ADVENT-Russian military watched in silence as several dozen missiles were launched with earth-shaking roars and streaked towards the city and exploded in the distance.

Cascades of fire and shrapnel soon dotted the buildings in the distance, and the next volley was already being primed, and a few seconds later, were fired into the air, and like the first round, decimated another section of the city. In the lull between volleys, the shouts and screams of the Iranians in the city became audible.

A roar overhead shook the ground and Roman saw several heavy bombers flying over and released a payload of much smaller bombs onto what untouched parts of the city still remained. Now crumbling, burning and utterly in chaos, the time to strike was now. Roman rested a hand on an Elena that was completely expressionless. “[Time to do our job.]” He said softly, then louder to the rest of them. “[Load up! Time to go!]”

There was a chorus of affirmation as they climbed into the transport and were immediately sped towards the now-devastated city. Roman held his rifle at the ready as Ivan made their orders crystal clear. “[Shieldbearer teams, remove any resistance that remains. Captures are not necessary. Remove all threats in the area quickly. Good luck.]”

Several minutes later they pulled slammed to a stop and Roman leapt out the back of the transport, his team close behind him as the other transports also drove up. More Shieldbearers and their teams poured out and began entering the city which was consumed with smoke, dust and sand that obscured their approach.

Now that they were near, the screams and cries for help in Persian were clear, and those were their target. Remove all resistance, for that was their directive. Marching through the dust they simply followed the sound of people. “[Two ahead!]” Stanislav called, and Roman raised his rifle at the sight of two soldiers trying to help one of their wounded comrades.

Perfect for an arrest, if they didn’t pose a threat. Regardless of what Ivan wanted, Roman would accept a surrender should they ask for it. But it wasn’t to be as one of the soldiers spotted them, and pulled out a pistol, shouting to his friend. Roman blew his head off with a single well-placed gauss rifle shot, while Galina and Maksim executed his friends.

“[We move inward.]” Roman ordered, activating his shield as he heard sounds of desperate Persian
calls likely trying to organize what remained of their army. “[We have a lot of ground to cover.]”

But once it was done, there would be one more city that had fallen before the soldiers of ADVENT.

***

Kochi, Japan

Duri stood with Beatriz in one of the skyscrapers that overlooked the area where they would be stationed. This was probably the dream defense for any army. The home field advantage was emphasized here, allowing friendly snipers an almost perfect view of the immediate battlefield. Beatriz had specifically chosen a building that wasn’t the highest in the area, but more in the middle-range, and slightly closer to the action, which as she said, would “Let her take better shots at more targets.”

Right now she had her sniper rifle resting on the balcony railing, her helmet off and peering through the scope into the ocean beyond. There was a light breeze and her hair whipped in it, though it didn’t seem to bother her as she scanned the area, stone-faced. “Looking for anything in particular?” He asked after a couple moments of silence.

“Just waiting,” she answered, lowering the rifle and glancing over at him. “Not much else to do until then, right?”

Duri raised an eyebrow. “Nervous?”

Her lips twitched. “Sure, aren’t you?”

“Not as much as I probably should be,” Duri admitted, resting his forearms on the balcony. “Maybe if we had no idea what we were facing. But we do, and I know they can be killed. It helps knowing that they bleed and die just like us.”

“I’m curious,” she said. “Have you actually fought?”

“No official wars, if that’s what you’re wondering,” Duri said. “Have some combat experience, but not military. I was law enforcement before joining the military. North Korea seemed a bigger threat to me than petty crime.”

“Hmm,” she looked back over the ocean. “And what do you make of Kang?”

Duri was personally skeptical, but knew that wouldn’t be in the best interests of the team. “It’ll take some getting used to for me,” was all he said. “But if he does his job, then all the better.”

“A good attitude to have,” Beatriz nodded. “Some people can’t work with former enemies.”

“There’s a difference between enemies and those on an opposing side,” Duri shrugged. “North Korea was an enemy, but Kang was just fighting for them. He’d been brought up in service to the state because he wasn’t given a choice. If anything, I almost feel sorry for him.”

Beatriz gave an unexpected light chuckle. “He likely won’t see it that way.”

“Probably not,” Duri agreed, pushing himself up. “I’m heading down to our little tent. You still want to just watch?”

“For now,” she said, returning to looking into the horizon. “It’s quiet out here. Gives me time to
“Ok,” he nodded. “Get some rest though. I don’t want you tired when the fighting starts.” She gave a brief nod and he descended the building and hitched a ride to where his tent was. Upon arriving he saw Cara and Kang were sitting at a table playing some kind of card game. Duri figured it was calm enough to unpack some of his own stuff.

He walked over to his locker and began unpacking everything properly, and storing his armor and weapons in order, as it should have been. He pulled out the picture of Sandara and affixed it to the inside of the locker door, a smile on his face as he looked upon the picture of his wife.

“Girlfriend?” A voice asked-Johan, he recognized.

“Wife,” Duri corrected, turning to him while reaching down for the two other pictures. “And this is Mari and Nabi.”

Johan whistled. “Daughters too? You are full of surprises,” he took the pictures, looking at them almost enviously.

Duri chuckled at that. “Is it that much of a surprise?”

“Eh, probably not,” Johan admitted, handing the pictures back. “I’m somewhat impressed. I’m not sure I’d want to marry in the military, let alone have kids.”

“It wasn’t too bad,” Duri explained. “I was stationed in Seoul, so there wasn’t much separation. This is really the first time we’ve been separated because of deployment.”

“Are you worried?” Johan asked. “We’re not that far from South Korea.”

“I know,” Duri said wearily. “It’s good motivation for me. Stop the aliens here, and then South Korea and my family are safe.”

“I think we’ll do it,” Johan said. “If that’s any consolation. I’ve been watching the videos of XCOM fighting. All the aliens really have going for them is their tech. Take that away…”


“Sadly, no,” he chuckled, leaning against the bunk. “But I plan to one day. Wanted to wait till I was out of the military before starting anything. Seemed smarter that way.”

Duri smiled. “I can tell you from experience that love has a tendency to destroy our previous plans. But that’s a different topic, got any family?”

“Parents in Sweden, and a sister, Mona,” Johan said. “She and I were pretty close. We actually enlisted together.”

“Oh, is she in ADVENT as well?” Duri asked curiously.

“Technically, but I’m pretty sure she’s still in Sweden,” Johan said. “She’s a bit too reckless for front line fighting. Last I heard she was talking about some role in special forces. Trust me, she’s real demon when she’s angry.” He smirked. “But she’s the best sister I could hope for.”

“That’s good to hear,” Duri said, closing his locker. “For better or worse, I grew up without any siblings. Sometimes wished I had one, but then again…”
“You could have gotten a really annoying one,” Johan finished, smiling.

“Exactly,” Duri said. “So, what are they doing?”

“Cara?” Johan asked, looking behind him at the table. “Got it in her head to teach Kang Poker.” His voice lowered. “I’m pretty sure she’s setting him up to take all the money he’s stupid enough to bet. She’s pretty damn good.”

“And how would you know?” Duri asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Eh, practice,” Johan said with a smile. “I was friends with several American soldiers in Sweden and that was something they did for fun. I personally suck at it, but I know how it works.”

“More than me,” Duri conceded. “Well, I’m getting some sleep now. See you in the morning.”

“Sweet dreams, Captain,” Johan nodded with a mock salute, and Duri climbed into the bunk and was asleep in mere minutes. It was a deep and dreamless sleep, undisturbed by anything…

Until the shriek of the alarm pulled him wide awake. Soldiers were shouting and the rest of his team was similarly startled awake by the commotion. “Alien forces approaching,” the loudspeaker blared. “All forces report to their designated positions.”

His heart began beating furiously. “Armor up and get ready to move out!” Duri ordered, immediately beginning to throw his own armor on. It was showtime now. Do or die. The direction of the war would be determined by this first battle.

And he was not going to break under the pressure. Too many were counting on him to fail now.

He placed his helmet over his head and waited for the HUD to materialize. “Move out!” He ordered at the rest of his armored team. “We have some aliens to kill.”

***

*The Praesidium, Barracks*

They were here. It was time for the first actual battle against the Ethereal Collective and Patricia felt strangely calm. She pulled on her gauntlets and glanced down at her hands and concentrated. The air around them rippled and flashed purple and she smiled. While the time with Aegis had been short, he had given her some advice in case an Ethereal did show up.

But for everything else…

Well, they stood no chance against her. Perhaps she was overly optimistic, but Patricia believed that the aliens were going to get a sharp kick in the teeth with the combined power of XCOM and ADVENT. The Goliath was online, and the other MECs were going to be wreaking even more havoc on the alien forces.

She placed her helmet over her head, waiting for it to click into place before turning to the assembled soldiers behind her. They were the best humanity had to offer, and there was no finer force she wanted to lead into battle for Earth.

“Load up!” She shouted, turning and beginning her march to the hangar. “Time to give the aliens a proper welcome to Earth!” Emboldened by the swelling anger, pride and confidence, Patricia had a good feeling about the coming battle.
All she had to do was make it a reality.

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Supplementary Material

The Advent Directive

SECTION 7: ADVENT Peacekeeping Division

Subsection 7.1: Introduction

**Purpose:** The role of the Peacekeeping Division is the enforcement of laws established by the ADVENT Executive, Judicial and Legislative branches of the government to the fullest extent. It is to enforce order and curb disobedience to the state by the rights afforded to the Peacekeepers. It is to provide protection to the citizens of ADVENT from the criminal and degenerate elements of society and stamp them out by the methods afforded in this document.

**Subdivisions:** Within the Peacekeepers there are several subdivisions to focus on different aspects which will be elaborated on further in this section. A general overview is this:

**Subdivision 1:** State Officers – These officers fulfill the traditional role of law enforcement and will embark on regular patrols in designated areas and have the authority to arrest criminals they encounter and issue tickets and citations to lawbreakers. Upon the observation of suspicious activity, they are permitted to intervene with appropriate cause.

**Subdivision 2:** Riot Control and Pacification – These officers are utilized to put down disruptive and dangerous riots and violent outbreaks that pose a threat to ADVENT citizens. They will also be utilized to subdue the civilian populations of hostile areas to remove the threat of revolt or uprising. Riot Control officers are authorized to subdue hostile populations by what means they deem appropriate.

**Subdivision 3:** State Special Response (SSR) – SSR Officers act as the militant arm of the Peacekeepers, primarily used as anti-terrorism and for operations against criminal organizations, rogue government or military personnel, and gangs. SSR Officers answer directly to the Chief of the Peacekeeping Division, and have complete domestic authority in all matters related to the Peacekeepers.

**Brief Overview of Powers and Authority:** All officers have the right to defend themselves should their life be in danger, and this right cannot be struck down or changed. The proportional response will vary from officer to officer, but no effort shall be made to infringe upon the right of an officer to defend themselves.

This protection is afforded with the understanding that it will not be abused to exercise undue power over civilians including as such; any officer abusing their power will be stripped of all rights and charged accordingly with reparations given to the opposing party in question. Altering or destroying armor cam footage carries the same penalties, and shall not be tolerated by the Judicial Branch or Peacekeeping Division.

Officers have the expectation of complete obedience in the event of an arrest, and resisting or fleeing will result in extended sentences and that being used in courts against them. Officers do not have to give a reason for stopping a citizen, and are to be obeyed at all times. However, all civilian encounters must be documented with the Peacekeeping Division, or the penalties listed above will apply.
SECTION 7 Index:

7.1: Introduction
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7.8: Authority and Powers
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7.10: Limitations and Regulations
Kochi, Japan

“Here they come!”

Duri wasn’t sure who called it out, but he immediately saw the glints on the horizon, sparkling metal reflecting the morning sunlight. He could see a US destroyer some ways out into the sea before Kochi, which looked almost pitiful compared to the coming swarm of alien ships.

One, two, six, ten…he swallowed as what seemed to be an uncountable swarm drew closer. “In positions!” He ordered his team, as they knelt behind established metal barricades, similar to the other twenty teams that had set up position in front of where they expected the aliens to land. There was just enough space to bait them into coming, but with almost zero cover.

Would they take the bait?

Well, if not, there were fortunately other backups. But it was becoming quickly apparent that this was not going to be a battle they might even have a chance of winning. The UFOs were much clearer now, and there was a tangible thrum in the air from what he could only assume was from the alien engines.

“ADVENT Command to Kochi Defense, be prepared for missile defense systems and naval warships to begin deterrent measures. Be prepared for insertion.”

“Copy,” Duri acknowledged into his helmet, and he heard the echo from the rest of the ADVENT Squad Officers. “Beatriz, you still have a clear shot? See anything?”

“Clear on my end, Officer.” A pause. “The ships are big. Very big.”

Duri glanced up as a squad of four fighter jets roared overhead towards the oncoming fleet, and were soon accompanied by several dozen more squads. “Calvary’s here,” Cara chuckled, lifting her aut rifle in preparation for the attack. “Good luck to them.”

And that was when the battle began.

The air around the fleet began to be filled with missiles, gunfire and flak from the ADVENT fighters, splitting the unified alien coalition. Circular UFOs rose from behind the transports and began returning green plasma fire at the fighters, blasting several out of the sky instantly. All the fighters broke off into evasive maneuvers and engaged in a true dogfight with the alien interceptors.

The Destroyer floating in the bay in front of the city began firing, as did the missile systems installed around the city, shaking the ground from the volume of projectiles launched into the air. The leading transport was hit with a devastating barrage that ripped several gaping holes in its sides, and a second barrage made it stutter in the air, and begin a slow collapse downwards.

The soldiers cheered as it crashed into the ocean in front of the destroyer. One problem dealt with.
The only problem was that it was only the leading transport; there were ten more following and there wasn’t nearly enough concentrated fire to take all of them down. “Weapons ready!” Duri roared as the rectangular transports hovered over the water just in front of the tiny beach.

He did a quick count, and the sounds of the battle waged elsewhere faded as he concentrated. Four transports so far, carrying God knew what. With a hiss they opened and out charged a mix of the green-armored Mutons and Vitakarian soldiers. Borelians and Vitakarians if he identified them correctly, clad in silver armor and fully covered for war. These must have been their regular infantry, since he was pretty sure they had never been encountered by XCOM before.

“Open fire!” He ordered, and the battlefield was filled with the sound of hundreds of rifles, pistols, shotguns and autorifles discharging at the exposed alien horde. The mutons didn’t even try to hide, but stood in the open and returned green plasma fire at the entrenched ADVENT soldiers. Several dozen of the hulking aliens were cut down in the initial barrage, as were many of the Vitakarian soldiers, but others were only grazed.

“They’re establishing cover!” Kang warned as he shot one of the two Borelians attempting to stab two connected pieces of metal into the ground. Duri soon saw what those did, as several teams managed to establish them successfully, and between the two pieces of metal projected what was likely a red energy shield of some kind.

He shot at one Borelian who was hiding behind it and noted that the shield did seem to stop gauss weaponry. Good to know. “Cara! Suppress the team moving up!”

“Acknowledged!” She shouted and turned her autorifle on the team of three Vitakarians charging forward, presumably to establish some kind of defensive perimeter.

“*Heads up towards the back,*” Beatriz warned as he fired at a muton shooting at another ADVENT soldier. The alien screamed as his shots connected, and fell to the ground dead a few seconds later. “*Got some new ones coming.*”

Duri focused at the transport and saw a team of a dozen of what appeared to be…Andromedons charging out. But these weren’t the green-helmeted ones. These Andromedons had red-tinted helmets even though their hulking suits were largely the same. But they also seemed to have some kind of drone flying over each one of them, with each drone seemingly being unique.

“*VIPs,*” Duri called. “Beatriz?”

“*Targeting.*”

They were definitely the most important ones for the aliens, if the reactions were anything to go by. The remaining mutons immediately went to form something of a guard around them, and he personally saw the strange Andromedons ordering and pointing the remaining alien forces. Unlike even the Mutons, these aliens seemed unperturbed by the chaos and danger around them, shrugging off direct hits and focusing intently on the shield spikes planted by the Vitakarian soldiers.

“What are they doing?” Johan called as he shot a Borelian to death, and began shooting at a Muton on one knee that was trying to fire back.

“I don’t-” Duri began, when the beach littered with alien blood and corpses seemed to *flash* and all the energy spikes planted suddenly interconnected into walls of light that extended above the Andromedons themselves, effectively protecting the entire beachhead in an imperfect semi-circle. *Fuck.* Those Vitakara weren’t planning them randomly, this was *planned.*
At least the targets were clear. “Shoot the poles!” Duri ordered.

“At least they can’t do anything either,” Cara commented as she fired on a section of the red shield wall.

Maybe not, but they were definitely planning something. The red-helmeted Andromedons were patrolling the shield with a mechanical precision that worried him. From the transports came the Drones that XCOM had fought, likely for the purpose of repairing the shield.

“Clever,” he muttered to himself. “ADVENT Command, this is Officer Eun-Jung of Squad Eagle-224, requesting artillery strike at the following coordinates. Copy?”

A few seconds of delay, and then. “Copy, Officer. Standing by to receive coordinates.”

“Provide covering fire!” He ordered, risking a stand and switched on the marker built into his armor. A weak laser pointer shot from the marker in his wrist, and he aimed it at the center of the shield which was being pounded with barrages of gauss fire. “Target locked,” a voice confirmed. “Stand by.”

“Incoming!” Duri yelled, as a few seconds later shells streaked over his head and lit up the beach in a series of massive explosions. As the smoke cleared, Duri noted that there were definitely gaps in the shield, and some of the poles were sparking, but it wasn’t nearly enough, and now the aliens were preparing to retaliate in full force.

Out came flying creatures from the transports, Floaters he believed, but these weren’t the horrific blends of flesh and metal XCOM had described. These were flying units clad in gray armor and carrying plasma cannons. They shot above the barrier and towards the line of ADVENT soldiers and began wreaking havoc.

It was an aerial threat fast enough to fully occupy them, and they were too slow. Soldiers screamed as plasma melted their armor from shots from the evasive Floaters. Duri shot one out of the sky, and another fell from Cara’s concentrated burst, but two more swept around their flanks and wiped out an entire team with a single well-thrown plasma grenade. They were both taken out by ADVENT snipers, but the damage was being done even as the Floaters were slowly brought under control.

Except they weren’t. Not really. It was after he’d shot one when he realized how little they were actually doing. He must have shot it somewhere vital, since it was leaking a yellow fluid and it infuriatingly managed to slip past his shots and retreat beyond the red barricade. He almost moved to another of the two dozen flying targets, when he noticed one of the Andromedons heading towards it, and appearing to repair it.

He watched in morbid fascination as the alien seemed to shudder in pain and throw its head back in a scream as the Andromedon and its drone worked on it, sparks flying off the body, but then a minute later the Floater was roaring back into the fight, nearly as good as new. “The Andromedons are repairing them!” He warned to all the squads. “You can’t just wound them!”

This was not good.

Two Floaters streaked towards him, firing wildly as they attempted a strafing run. Kang risked standing, lining up a shot, and hitting one of them in the head and it crashed to the ground a few meters from where he was standing. One more shot finished it. The other was thrown off course by another shot from somewhere else, and Johan took advantage and blasted the Floater in the chest several times, apparently hitting one of its engines, then watched it spiral into a building with a
small explosion.

“Beatriz! Can you get a shot on the Andromedons?”

“Negative!” She answered, voice strained. “They’re smart. Hiding behind the shield. I can’t damage it either since they fix it almost immediately!”

“What’s the plan, boss?” Kang demanded as they weathered another strafing run by another Floater. “Those things will kill a lot more of us than we them. And those other ones aren’t going anywhere.”

“I know!” He scowled, trying to think. He took several shots that missed against another Floater trying to outflank a separate squad. It fortunately couldn’t kill any of them, and was shot a few times, but it simply flew away and back behind the barricade where it was fixed up by the Andromedons and drones.

The other aliens were standing in an orderly line behind the barricade, watching expressionlessly as the Floaters slowly whittled the ADVENT army down to nothing. “Beatriz! How many Floaters are left?”

“Uh, hold on,” he heard a shot. “Eight? Ten? Something like that. We’re running out of people, Officer.”

“Ok, new orders,” Duri said. “Only target the ones who are wounded and heading back for repairs and kill them. Suggest that to the other snipers.”

“Will do.”

“Kang, Johan, pick a Floater and don’t stop shooting it till its dead,” Duri continued. “Cara, target one of the shield nodes. Take at least one Andromedon away from repairing Floaters.”

“ACKNOWLEDGED,” she yelled, and began shooting the shield. He raised his rifle towards a Floater that had just tossed a grenade at a duo of soldiers which killed them in the ensuing explosion, and fired his weapon, hitting the Floater square in the back. It didn’t damage the engine, clearly, but it was damaged apparently bad enough to send it flying back beyond the shield. Come on, Beatriz…

Then it blew apart with a miniature explosion as one sniper must have shot the engine. The corpse slammed into the shield and fell outside it as a charred wreck. “Good shot!” Duri called to whoever was listening. To his dismay, he saw a new wave of Mutons coming out of the transports, which meant that the aliens knew their borrowed time was up and they were preparing a new offensive.

“ADVENT Command, we’re under heavy attack from Floater units and the aliens are preparing for a massive strike. Requesting reinforcements.”

“Request received, stand by.”

“Got it!” Kang whooped as another Floater crashed into the yellow-soaked sand. “Johan, focus on the one to the left!”

“I see it!” Johan confirmed. “Stay still, you bastard…”

“Squad Officer Eun-Jung of Kochi Defense, this is Gray Sky,” a new voice said. “Request understood and reinforcements are on the way. Hope you have enough room.”

Duri frowned, not sure what that meant. Whatever, it was good. Was that an XCOM designation?
He supposed it didn’t matter as long as they were coming. “Glad to hear it,” he glanced at the Muton and Vitakara army preparing to attack, even as the remaining Floaters were eradicated. “But please make it fast.”

With that, he aimed his rifle at another Floater, and continued contributing to the defense of Japan, one pounding gauss shot at a time.

***

Skyranger, En route to Japan

Nuan stopped herself from unconsciously tapping her gloved hand on her knee. Whatever reservations that had flown through her mind about XCOM, the people she was with, and pretty much everything else had been pushed aside as the very real realization that she might die set upon her as they flew towards a battle that was said to cover the entire country.

She was very good at her job, no doubt about that. But it was one thing to work with a special team in a relatively safe environment, and another to be on the front lines, plasma and bullets flying over your head. Nuan was extremely grateful for the helmet that covered her face, since anyone who looked at her would be able to very clearly see that she was scared.

It shouldn’t have been like this. Why was she this affected? It wasn’t like she’d never been shot at before.

This is different, a voice told her. An annoying, persistent voice that spoke uncomfortable truths. This is war of thousands, and you are only one.

She looked around the silent skyranger, wondering if she was remotely alone. All the rest had their faces obscured, so they were as expressionless as she was. But she knew they were veterans. They had seen the aliens. Iosif, Gyeong, Seok, the EXALT woman Zara, even the traitor Shun had fought before, and if there was anything Inori was feeling right now, it was probably anger. She’d expect nothing less from someone defending his homeland.

Only Anna was as much of a rookie as her, and even she had the calm demeanor of one accustomed to battle. Don’t panic and you’ll live. Someone had told her that, and she hoped it would be enough. She was here to support XCOM and ADVENT, not be a goddamn hero.

Don’t throw your life away for nothing. Don’t take stupid risks. Use your brain.

Easy to repeat now, but would it hold up when they landed? Was she strong enough?

She didn’t know, and that scared her.

No matter what she thought of these people personally, she was going to be trusting them with her life, and conversely, theirs with her. She didn’t want to, of course, but she would rather put her life in the hands of foreigners than try to survive on her own. It didn’t work that way, but she couldn’t shake the suspicions she had about them, a paranoia instilled by years of service that she couldn’t forget overnight.

But she had no choice now. She had to turn her back to the assassins and trust them…and hope she survived the fallout.

She flinched as a hand rested on her arm, and looked right to see it belonged to Iosif. “Don’t worry,” he told her quietly. “You’re going to be fine. Just follow my orders and do your job.”
How did he...ah, she almost forgot he was a psion. He didn’t have that odd presence that Patricia had. With her you knew something was off about her the moment she entered a room. Iosif was much more subdued. It seemed he kept his talents to himself, which she could respect. But one constant with all psions is that they could sense emotions and read minds.

She flushed, not sure how she was comfortable she was with him reading her. But maybe it couldn’t be helped. Maybe she was screaming emotionally. But she was almost grateful, and gave him a small nod in return as she consciously tried to lower her heartbeat to a reasonable level. And she privately hoped he’d keep his hand on her. She needed some human contact from someone who wasn’t as worried as her.

“This is the Commander to all teams,” the Commander said. “The aliens have engaged ADVENT forces in Japan, as expected. We are deploying teams where the fighting is worst, though be prepared to redeploy if necessary. All teams report in.”

“Angel Team, reporting in,” Patricia said.

“Astro Team, reporting in,” Carmelita confirmed.

“Oriole Team, reporting in,” Iosif finished.

“Good luck, teams,” the Commander said. “The outcome today will set the tone for this war. Today XCOM shows the world that the aliens can be defeated and sent back to the stars. Your pilots have received directions. Vigilo Confido, Commander out.”

“This is Lightning Sky to Oriole Team,” a smooth British voice said over the comm. A new pilot if Nuan had understood correctly. “You are being deployed near Shibetsu, at the north end of the island, where the aliens have taken the beachhead and are moving inland. ADVENT has set up strong defenses close by, but require heavy support.”

“And information?” Iosif asked, flexing his free hand. “Enemy composition? Losses?”

“Stand by,” a pause and the pilot continued after a few moments. “Appears to be mostly Andromedon, a new kind we haven’t seen before. Not many details. Drones have also been spotted and some…mechanical thing. No details. ADVENT is holding steady, but are taken slow losses where it seems the Andromedons haven’t suffered a single one.”

“How?” Inori declared, outrage clear in his voice. “They lack the means to kill one?”

“Unknown and unconfirmed,” Lightning Sky answered calmly, as he physically lowered the altitude of the skyranger. “Regardless, it seems Andromedons are hard to kill.”

“Yep, you can say that,” Shun muttered. “It took twenty-some soldiers to kill four when the Citadel was attacked. I can only imagine an entire army.”

“Good news is that there are several Japanese and American warships shelling the beach,” Lightning Sky informed. “You’ll get some reprieve there, but limited air support, unfortunately.”

“Noted,” Iosif said coolly. “Stick to the plan, soldiers. We’re entering a warzone. Stay close to me until we can safely get to cover. I cannot protect all of you at once. Understood?”

“Yes, Overseer!” They shouted.

“Prepare for insertion, Oriole Team,” Lightning Sky said, and the skyranger lights flashed to a solid red. Regrettably, Iosif took his hand off her arm and she was alone inside the shell of her
armor. But she stayed very close to Iosif, beside him at the front as the skyranger shook when it lowered. She didn’t know who was behind her, but it wasn’t important.

Swallowing, she tightened her grip on her pulse rifle. “You can do it,” Iosif said quietly, not looking down to her. “Just stay close.”

Then that was what she would do. Stay close to the psion who would protect them. Even if he was a Russian.

“We are coming in for a landing,” Lightning Sky warned as there was a sudden drop, then a shudder as the aircraft touched down. “Godspeed, soldiers.”

“Same to you,” Iosif said with a smile in his voice. “Don’t get shot down. We need a ride home.”

“The damn aliens aren’t scratching the paint on this. But do kill as many as possible. Makes my job easier.”

Iosif gave a low chuckle at that, then raised his left hand, clenched in a tight fist and Nuan watched, mesmerized as a purple ball of energy manifested itself around the fist, then as he unclenched it, grew larger to expand until they were encased in a shimmering purple sphere, Iosif at the center.

“Again,” Iosif rumbled, his voice layered from the psionic power. “Stay close to me.”

And with that, the ramp lowered and the sounds of battle finally reached her ears.

She swallowed once more. Do or die.

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Near Shibetsu, Japan

A town engulfed in flames was the first thing that Nuan saw, the second was the plasma beams in the air and the army in the distance. “Forward!” Iosif ordered and they charged out into the grasslands peppered by metal barricades with ADVENT soldiers fighting back against the encroaching aliens.

Behind them were established missile and artillery systems, and Nuan counted…hundreds of ADVENT soldiers, spread across the battlefield already marred with metal, bodies and blood. A green beam hit Iosif’s shield, but dissipated instantly and he kept going with no recognition of what had just happened.

“Dropping the shield,” he said. “Ten seconds, get to cover while we figure out what’s going on.”

“Understood!” Zara stated, already firing her plasma rifle into the aliens in the distance. Iosif nodded, and lowered his hand. He must have been also blocking out some of the sounds, since everything Nuan heard was much more intense. The artillery shook the ground, the air was filled with the sounds of gauss rounds being fired and plasma beams discharging.

Stay close to me.

So she stayed by Iosif as he pushed past the ADVENT lines who were continuously moving and reorganizing depending on where the attack was worst. “Situation report!” He demanded from an Officer organizing an ADVENT squad to target a group of Andromedons in the distance.

The Officer snapped to attention as she saw they were XCOM. “Not good, sir. We’ve lost the city decisively. We didn’t expect to get hit so hard here…and these aliens…they don’t die. We wound
them and they keep coming back. We can’t replace our own soldiers, but they seem to be doing it.”

Nuan surveyed the battlefield briefly as the Officer gave more details. A very open area, with some trees providing sparse cover between the ADVENT defenses and the city itself. No one was risking going beyond the safety, creating a no-man’s land that was almost certain death for anyone who tried to cross it.

The aliens also appeared to have locked their side down completely. They were definitely Andromedons, green-tinted helmets and all. Above them were drones, but aside from that, she spotted no other alien forces. She pursed her lips as she saw them taking turns firing at the ADVENT soldiers. Their rifles were different, or at least fired differently. Instead of bursts, it was a straight lance of plasma similar to a laser. Maybe more accurate and powerful, but likely not as efficient.

Nuan raised her rifle and started firing, using a concentrated beam to focus her shot. An Andromedon hiding behind a shed was skirted by her beam, and stepped out, arm smoking and leaking some kind of yellow gas. Interestingly, it immediately pointed her direction while she reloaded and…ran away?

A few seconds later two more Andromedons rushed over to where the first one had been and bean firing her direction. She ducked under the metal barricade as twin beams of plasma shot over her head. “You got their attention,” Zara commented as she slid into position near her, and began firing on the two Andromedons. “Anything interesting?”

“We’re getting shot at!” Nuan spit out, as she pulled out a smoke grenade, wondering if she should use it now. “What do you think is interesting?”

“Hold that thought,” Zara said, standing again. “Anna! Can I get some fire on those two?”

“I can’t hit anything from here!” She called back, standing regardless. “But I’ll do my best!”

The Andromedons fell into cover as the shed was almost torn to shreds from Anna’s gauss heavy autorifle. Nothing hit, of course, but it allowed Zara to set up a carefully aimed shot. “Stay still…” she murmured, just before the fiery laser spat from her own rifle and hit one Andromedon straight in the chest.

It immediately jumped back, but the damage was done, and it was leaking some black fluid, yellow gas and sparking from the hole in the suit. But similar to the last one, it ran off and the other Andromedon focused directly on Zara, forcing her back into cover.

“They have something repairing them,” Zara warned as more plasma beams flew overhead. “Each time they get hit, they run away and get help. No wonder they aren’t being killed.”

“I could have guessed that,” Nuan hissed. “But we’re too far away. Nothing is going to change until we gain some ground.”

“Nuan! Gyeong! Anna! Come with me!” Shun ordered, rushing up. “Iosif needs us.”

Nuan nodded and with Anna, dashed after Shun towards near the center of the ADVENT line where Iosif was standing with a team of ADVENT engineers and soldiers. “We’re going to advance forward,” Iosif stated, pointing to a distance about ten meters beyond the current wall. “Not much, but we need to do something otherwise we’re just going to get picked off one by one.”

“We protect them while they establish the defenses?” Nuan asked to confirm.
“Correct,” he revealed, shifting as a plasma bolt shot uncomfortably close over their heads. “I’ll provide protection, and you’ll need to provide covering fire as well.”

Nuan swallowed. “Understood.”

“I won’t be able to protect you forever,” Iosif warned the ADVENT soldiers and engineers. “Work fast.”

“Yes, sir!”

Iosif raised a fist and repeated the gesture he’d done earlier, and the entire group was soon encased in a purple sphere. “Move out!” He ordered, and they stepped into the exposed battlefield. Nuan took out a smoke grenade and popped it.

“Covering smoke!” She called and ignored her reservations and jumped to the front of the sphere, letting the smoke drift back and theoretically make it difficult for the Andromedons to get a clear shot. With one hand holding the smoke grenade, she used the other to pull out her gauss pistol and took some shots at the Andromedons.

Their move forward had attracted all of their attention, and Nuan couldn’t help but flinch as plasma pounded Iosif’s shield and she saw several shots that would have probably killed her outright. But luckily the sheer amount of firepower they were shooting out in return, particularly from Anna and a couple ADVENT gunners, was forcing them into their cover, with the rest of them adding what they could.

“Establish here!” Iosif called, falling to one knee seemingly to help him concentrate. The ADVENT engineers carrying the materials immediately began sticking them into the ground and creating a barricade. She would need to look over the schematics so she wouldn’t feel quite so useless next time. But now she could do her best to keep everyone alive.

The smoke grenade she’d been carrying was out and the cloud was dissipating, so she pulled out another one and planted it firmly in the ground and let the cloud cover them all, at the same time pulling out one of her flashbang grenades and throwing it towards a trio of Andromedons huddled behind a crashed car.

Unfortunately, it seemed to have no effect whatsoever.

As she also fell to one knee, shooting several beams towards other Andromedons, it made sense in retrospect. Why **would** aliens encased in suits be vulnerable to such a tool? They would have been idiots to not think that was a possibility. The ADVENT engineers, who were being helped by Gyeong, had finished constructing the barricade and Nuan quickly positioned herself behind it, grinning as she felt the firm metal at her back.

Alright. Alright. She was still alive.

“Now we actually need to kill some of them,” Iosif said, letting the shield collapse as they moved into actual cover. His voice was noticeably more strained compared to earlier. “Seok, you see that car?”

“I do,” came the voice of their rocketeer. “Is it volatile?”

“Appears so,” Iosif muttered, risking a glance out. “Let’s see how they like rockets. Everyone, pin the Andromedons behind that car down!”

Instantly that area was peppered with gauss and laser bursts, which had the desired effect of forcing
the trio of aliens hiding there to stay put. Only just a few seconds…”Rocket away!”

Nuan saw the projectile streak and slam into the car and it blew up with a massive explosion that blew one of the Andromedons in half, the other vaporized completely and the one who’d sensed the danger was blown back, the helmet completely destroyed.

And then it came back to life. “Problem!” Nuan called as the Andromedon suit shakily stood back up, the alien corpse within hanging out of the suit like a half-finished birth. It was scorched, leaking fluids and sparking like it would explode, but instead it tried to fire the ruined plasma weapon, which amusingly exploded in its hand, shredding the arm and a good portion of the upper suit itself.

“Shoot it before it runs away!” Anna called and Nuan fired her rifle at the legs of the suit. Luckily it was much slower without a conscious pilot and she cut through most of it before it began stumbling away, and to her immense satisfaction, it fell over and still tried crawling away. She pulled out a frag grenade, judged the distance, and threw it towards the ruined suit.

It landed a half-meter away and blew up and it stopped crawling. Nuan took a breath. One down… she glanced at the rest of the battlefield with a sinking heart. At least several hundred to go. “Seems they like explosives,” Anna called. “Iosif?”

“Agreed,” he nodded. “ADVENT Command, we need to request a bombing run on Shibetsu, now!”

“I’ve got another shot lined up,” Seok informed. “There’s a couple hiding behind some of those trees.”

“Take them out,” Iosif ordered, standing. “Officer! We need to make a stronger defense. Get some more engineers for round two. XCOM soldiers, with me!”

“Yes, Overseer!” They called and Nuan prepared herself for another harrowing run through the Andromedon gauntlet. She hoped Iosif wasn’t stretching himself too thin this early. He couldn’t do this forever. But until then, she’d do her best to keep him, and herself, alive. While they waited for the ADVENT engineers to prepare, Nuan and the rest of XCOM and ADVENT held down the line of Andromedons, doing little to definitively kill them, but preventing their advance.

Nuan hoped that bombing run hit soon and took out whatever that making sure these Andromedons didn’t die.

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Shizuoka, Japan

“The aliens are moving into the city, and ADVENT is struggling to contain them,” Carmelita updated as the skyranger swept down and landed with sharp jolt. “Goal is simple: Kill as many as possible. Lesedi, get into some elevated position; Pelin, Fakhr, provide support to the ADVENT soldiers, keep that rocket ready.”

“Yes, sir!”

Carmelita turned to face them as the ramp opened up behind her and jabbed a finger at him and the other designated scout. “Jamali, Sai-Kee, split up and report on what you see past the main fighting! Everyone else with me.”

An explosion rattled the ground, and with a swift turn away, Carmelita led the charge out into the now-ravaged city. Jamali saw the fighting was largely concentrated in the main city highway, with
both armies taking cover behind dividers, vehicles and buildings, of which there were numerous.

ADVENT soldiers were shouting at each other as they held a thin line, while the aliens relentlessly
charged their position.

“Mutons!” Iida called, already aiming and firing at the squad of green-armored aliens who were
turning over trucks for better cover. Green plasma fire flew past his head uncomfortably close as he
slid into cover and tried to get a clean shot. There were so many targets it was difficult to
concentrate on just one.

Jamali heard some clanking behind him, and looked back and saw to his relief one of the Marauder
MECs also charging into the fray. “We push now!” Carmelita ordered, grasping her alloy cannon.
“Matthew! Amahle! With me, everyone else provide covering fire then continue your
assignments!”

To the chorus of affirmatives, Jamali watched as Carmelita made an inhuman leap of at least
fifteen meters to land in front of a clearly surprised muton just before she turned its face into mush
and repeated the same thing with the two other Mutons right next to it. Jamali also noted there
were several Vitakara soldiers in the mix as well, clearly also surprised by the sudden aggression as
they turned to focus on the temporarily vulnerable human.

All a distraction as Amahle also charged to the center of the fray, wrists already leaking flames
which soon turned into torrents as she turned her massive flamethrowers to the front line. The
aliens screamed in pain as they were engulfed in blue and orange flames, too distracted to return
fire or flee as the rest of the XCOM and ADVENT soldiers were firing relentlessly.

“Smoke at my position!” Carmelita called as she methodically executed Muton after Muton,
ducking, leaping and decimating the brutish aliens at close range to which there was little they
could do. The hulking aliens were just not fast enough against the augmented woman.

“Headed your way!” Pelin called, and tossed the canister to roughly her position and within half a
minute nearly half the street was engulfed in a pink smoke.

“Move forward!” One of the ADVENT Officers called and with a cheer the black-armored soldiers
with XCOM moved closer towards where the two augmented soldiers were destroying the alien
line.

“Reinforcements incoming!” Fakhr called, falling to one knee and pulling out her rocket launcher.
Jamali looked to where she’d indicated and saw a group of a half-dozen Vitakara running up…
Borelian and Vitakarian to be specific.

“Hold the rocket, Fakhr!” Matthew called, standing out in the open and lifting a hand. “Save it for
when we need it. Take your shots.” The psion was suddenly sheathed in a shimmering purple
energy as twisted his hand palm up, and lifted. The group of Vitakara was suddenly suspended in
the air, arms flailing as they fruitlessly tried to escape.

Jamali executed one with a headshot, and Sai-Kee, Iida and Lesedi each killed one as well. To their
credit, the initial survivors adapted quickly, and began aiming despite being so exposed. The dead
alien suddenly fell to the ground and Matthew clenched his fist and the last two began contorting;
bones breaking into unrecognizable shapes and the skeletons collapsing in on themselves and once
they were a misshapen mockery of a humanoid figure, Matthew thrust his hand down and the
corpse slammed into the unrelenting concrete with a splat.

The power faded around Matthew and he shook his hand as if it was asleep. “I’ve wanted to do that
for a long time,” he said, satisfaction clear in his voice. Jamali did recall that the aliens had kept
him as a prisoner and experimented on him for months, so it wasn’t surprising he’d go out of his way to brutalize them.

It certainly seemed to be having an effect. The aliens were in a full retreat, even as Carmelita and Amahle continued annihilating the stragglers, with Matthew lifting several up into the air at a time before either crushing them, or leaving them hanging to be shot. The ADVENT soldiers were glancing at the psion in awe as he strode into the fray along with the two leading women, and oddly enough, it was the psion that the aliens seemed to be most afraid of.

No wonder EXALT had been so keen to create a psion for themselves if this was what one could do. He wasn’t exactly a stranger to it, but all displays he’d seen had been mostly…telepathic. This was a far more visceral display.

Carmelita raised a fist as the few surviving aliens ran off. “Hold, we shouldn’t advance too far, else we’ll be flanked. Jamali, head to the next street and help them there.”

Jamali nodded. “Understood, I’ll report as soon as possible.”

She nodded and he dashed off as she turned to the rest of the soldiers, and ADVENT began also moving their line forward while he headed straight towards the sounds of fighting. Although halfway there, he skidded to a stop. Think. It wouldn’t do any good to get there as quickly as possible and be killed within seconds because he hadn’t seen a stray alien.

So he continued at a much more careful jog, pulse rifle raised as he mentally took stock of what he had. One frag, one flash-bang and one smoke. A limited supply, but he could make it work. The fighting was definitely much closer now, and he came to a building corner and carefully peeked around it.

Right in front of him was a much smaller firefight between a line of ADVENT soldiers and a small army of Mutons who were pushing against them. He did a quick count. Sixteen regular ones, and a larger one in black armor of some kind. He was sure he’d never seen it before. Unlike the others, it seemed to be a commander, pointing and giving orders, and more noticeably, its face was armored, the helmeted eyes emitting a glowing purple light. In its hands it also held what looked like a plasma cannon of some kind.

Several other Muton soldiers had died, but there were clearly a lot more dead ADVENT than alien, punctuated by the sight of a several ADVENT soldiers getting caught with a thrown plasma grenade, killing one instantly while mortally wounding the other, who was dragged away by medics and replaced by more ADVENT soldiers.

“Overseer, got a potential situation here,” he informed Carmelita, making sure that no aliens were coming up to surprise him. “ADVENT positions are under heavy fire from an all-Muton team. This one seems to have a clear commander. Helmeted, black armor, plasma cannon. Copy?”

“She answered, more sounds of combat coming from her end. “Engage at will, take out the leader if possible. I’ll send Iida and Sai-Kee your way.”

“Understood,” he finished, and briefly thought about the best way to approach this. He couldn’t spend much time, so he needed to create a distraction in a way that didn’t bring all of them down at him at once. He was behind all of them, so it would put them in a difficult position initially, but they would adapt and he needed to kill as many as possible in that brief time.

But he had an idea. Risky, but it would give him the most time. First he raised his rifle at one of the regular Mutons and fired, then immediately threw his smoke grenade to the other side of the street,
swung his weapon to the next muton and also shot it in the head. As that body fell to the ground, he threw the flash-bang towards a knot of four who howled and clutched their ears and shook their heads as they puzzled together where it was coming from.

He briefly refrained from firing, letting them draw their own conclusions. The Muton leader swung his cannon around, accurately noted the smoke and logically assumed that was where he was. He shouted something in their guttural language and began firing at the smoke, two more coming to help him. The rest returned to firing at ADVENT.

Jamali grinned. It wouldn’t last forever, but it was working. He lined up a shot on the Muton closest to him and fired. He moved the sights a few inches and shot the one next to it. All of them were stupidly lined up in a row, making it trivial to kill almost five within the same amount of seconds. These pulse weapons were insanely accurate.

And then they learned that the soldier wasn’t in the smoke, but on the opposite side. The Muton leader swung his cannon to his position and suddenly he was under a hail of green plasma. Now this was a problem. Jamali quickly took the opportunity to reload, acutely aware that he was extremely vulnerable to a grenade, and looked around.

He smashed the window next to him and leapt into the building, then rushed to the window facing the battle. Opportunity to kill another one. He fell to one knee, aimed, and shot an unprotected Muton with a clean beam of fire. The building shook as the corner where he’d taken cover earlier was vaporized by a plasma grenade.

Jamali dashed out of sight again, taking refuge in the middle of the wall where he couldn’t be seen. Ever so quietly, he inched towards the edge of the vaporized corner and pulled out his frag grenade. With any luck the Muton leader would either think he was dead, or at least moved from this spot.

He made sure a Muton wasn’t going to surprise him from the window he’d just been at, and peeked around the charred brick. The Muton leader was still scanning the area, definitely thinking he was still alive, but the other two Mutons were back to taking cover behind a car. Perfect.

Jamali pulled out the pin and tossed the grenade not at the duo, but right under the car which he noted was leaking gas. The grenade alone might not have killed them…but an exploding vehicle certainly did. The car blew with a massive fireball, and the shrapnel tore the faces of the aliens apart, likely killing them instantly. It also got the attention of the leader, who turned to face the human who’d single-handedly decimated his fighting force.

But that was fine. As long as the alien wasn’t firing at ADVENT, he was doing his job. All Jamali needed to do was wait for his reinforcements. But as the wall he was hiding behind began cracking, he hoped they would arrive sooner than later. He was going to run out of tricks eventually.

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Shirako, Japan


Patricia sensed all these as the skyranger sped towards Shirako, where the aliens were taking a firm beachhead, apparently almost to the point of breaking the ADVENT lines, and without help they would be forced to consolidate and retreat. But it wasn’t an impossible task. Aliens had minds too, they were just…different. Just as malleable and vulnerable to suggestion.
Images from thousands of soldiers and alien beneath her appeared and vanished from her mind in milliseconds, individual sounds, voices and thoughts came together in an unintelligible whole, a broken symphony of minds that she had no idea of how to separate.

So she ignored them and let everything fade except for the men and women around her. Her breathing steadied and eyes closed. All of them were ready and prepared, focused and ready, thanks in part to her. She had unconsciously fallen into her battle trance during the flight over. All of them knew what to do and what their plan was, there was little need for her to repeat anything.

They were of one connected mind. The path ahead was clear.

Patricia didn’t bother to carry her heavy autorifle strapped to her armor. It was no longer her strength, nor main weapon any longer. She wondered if that was also why Ethereals didn’t seem to like using weapons. It was almost more of a distraction than anything else, since she was often using her hands for something else.

The skyranger shuddered as it landed and the muffled sounds of combat reached her through her heightened state, screams, gunfire and the cascade of emotions found on the battlefield. The instant the ramp descended, all of them charged out in perfect harmony and immediately began working as one unit.

Their sniper, Nati, immediately fell to one knee and began sniping from afar, picking off enemies with an enhanced focus that could only be induced by a psion. Blake and Analyn rushed to groups of wounded ADVENT soldiers and began fixing them up with a speed that was more than simply years of practice.

Their Engineer, Fiona, tossed out several smoke grenades in quick succession to ADVENT positions under immediate threat of collapse and then slid into cover, and began shooting at the closest aliens in sight. Charlotte followed suit, and readied her rocket launcher for the right moment to strike.

And Patricia herself stood for a few seconds, flanked by Allison and Creed who also began firing shots into the alien army. ADVENT had been pushed into the city limits, with the aliens in full control of the beach. The aliens had established plenty of cover and protection beyond the beach, although from the piles of corpses, ADVENT had made them pay dearly for taking even this much ground.

Luckily ADVENT had also set up plenty of defenses in the city perimeter itself, with snipers, missile launchers and artillery positioned in places of elevation that were doing the most to keep the aliens in their position. But if their line was broken…there wasn’t much left. Beyond the lines of human and aliens were the alien transports themselves, dozens of them lining the beach, with more possibly coming in.

UFOs streaked across the skies, pursued by US and Japanese fighters, while others attempted strafing runs and bombed entire buildings apart, although they seemed to be keen on avoiding the anti-air defenses ADVENT had established, and out in the distance, Patricia did see several US Destroyers, although they didn’t seem to be doing anything.

A plasma burst flew into a building near her and she frowned, figuring it was time to focus on the threat at hand. Drones. Mechtoids. And beyond them, she could sense…Sectoids, and their pet chryssalids. Why had they not used them yet…unless…

The psionic energy swirled around her as she extended an arm aimlessly ahead, and focused on the most prominent pool of psionic power and pushed. The alien had clearly not expected an attack and
its paltry defenses were crushed and she took control. Her familiarity with the Sectoid mind proved invaluable as she quickly found what she was looking for.

“They want to save the chrysalids for hunting,” she said, startling some nearby ADVENT soldiers with her psionically altered voice. “I will deal with them. Move up.”

Creed and Allison charged forward, dodging the plasma bolts flying their way. Patricia stood in the center, watching the mix of Sectoids, Mechtoids and drones take turns to shoot at ADVENT soldiers, and she risked closing her eyes to focus on the nearest alien minds. It was time to make her presence known.

“ADVENT Tokyo Command, this is XCOM Overseer Patricia Trask,” she said, concentrating to spread her reach as far as possible.

“Glad to have you, Overseer,” came a voice. “We could use it. Do you need anything?”

“Order all soldiers near Shirako to focus only on the mechanical units,” she said, her body tensing up and voice breaking as she gathered her power. “I will deal with the biological enemies.”

The man said something, but the chorus of alien voices drowned out whatever was said, and having broken into many of their minds at once, there was only room for simple commands, words and feelings. But she didn’t need much. Only one word to collapse an army.

Fire. You are burning.

One command, and with it brought the horrendous pain of burning alive. They were not physically suffering, of course, but to the mind, it made very little difference what was real or not. She opened her eyes and smiled.

The Mechtoids began emitting a mechanical screech, collapsing to the ground as they tried to process exactly what was happening, only knowing that they were dying. Sectoids fell down, writhing and screeching as their bodies were wracked with heatless flames. Drones exploded as ADVENT focused on them. A rocket from Charlotte turned a Cyberdisk into scrap, and the remaining mechanical units seemed to freeze for a few precious seconds as the entirety of the battle changed.

XCOM and ADVENT didn’t give them a chance to recover. Creed shot a couple drones out of the sky. Allison and several ADVENT soldiers combined their fire to destroy yet another cyberdisk. Blake and Analyn had spread out even further, fixing up ADVENT soldiers and saving them from a painful death or serious injury.

Nati was now focusing on the aliens debilitated from her psionic attack, placing direct headshots on downed Sectoids and Mechtoids with an inhuman precision. One shot, one alien. ADVENT soldiers were shouting words she didn’t hear, so deep in her trance that it was equivalent to being underwater. But in return, she could sense everything.

The soldiers, who had been resigned to retreat and death were hopeful and buoyant, and she enhanced those emotions with a brief thought. Every enemy spotted by her squad was noted in some part of her mind, and in the minds of each other, enabling them to move from enemy to enemy instantaneously, their actions so in sync with each other that there was never a time when XCOM’s presence wasn’t acutely felt.

And she felt death. Some human, but most of it alien. More foreign minds simply ceased to exist; it was a scale of death that was almost indescribable and as more alien minds winked out of
existence, the only path was forward.

A UFO sped across the sky, and she glanced up and locked on to the minds within. Simple Sectoid pilots. Weak and little more than tools, and tools they would remain. But not for the side they had once held. Very simple commands were all they understood, and thus, what she gave them.

*You will crash into your transport.*

No resistance. No question.

She watched, almost amused as the silver UFO streaked down from the sky with a piercing shriek right before it crashed into one of the transports with an explosion that brightened the day. ADVENT soldiers cheered at the sight, and all of them pressed forward against the now-disabled alien army.

“We’ll kill them at the beach!” One called gleefully. “Come on!”

Patricia reached the city perimeter, and looked across and noted with satisfaction that her effect had been as widespread as she’d been hoping. ADVENT had not advanced in a uniform line, but the remaining alien mechanical units were retreating. Drones were flying back and Cyberdisks had folded into disks and doing likewise.

*You are powerful, psion, but you cannot kill an army.*

The mocking, rasping voice of the Sectoid appeared in her mind, giving her a brief pause. A Hive Commander? No…Hive Commanders were…unique. The only ones who were allowed that luxury. This one here? The one attempting to threaten her? No, it was nothing.

So she struck back, located the most powerful psion that existed on the battlefield and forced herself in, much to its terror. *Perhaps not,* she communicated back. *But I can kill you. Kill your allies and turn your chryssalids loose on them.*

The command planted, she withdrew and stepped forward, trying to overlook the beach even though most of her view was blocked. She would likely not see the immediate aftermath of her order, but she knew she would see the carnage eventually.

“What is that?” Someone called, and Patricia glanced to the right to see…something walking out of one of the transports. It stood nearly fifteen feet high, dwarfing the mechtoids walking out with it, was supported by metal legs with clawed feet which were attached to some center pod with orange lights she guessed were photoreceptors.

Well, it had been a good possibility that the aliens hadn’t shown all their tricks. But even if she couldn’t control it, she had an additional army of chryssalids, Sectoids and Mechtoids to throw at it. She looked across the beach and saw at least twelve more of those machines walk out, with some accompanying forces.

Her targets were clear, now it was time to give the pawns their command. So she raised her hand, pinpointed the minds and began giving her orders to the alien masses beneath her.

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*Kochi, Japan*

*Where the hell are our reinforcements?*
Duri risked another quick attack and was immediately forced back down by the wave of return plasma fire at his position. “Beatriz, what’s it looking like?”

“Bad,” was the response. “There are a lot of them coming up. You need to retreat if you don’t want to be overrun.”

“Not a bad idea!” Cara called, as she shredded the armor of a Muton charging her position and fired another volley to kill it off completely. “We hold this position, we’re going to die!”

There unfortunately wasn’t much time for a debate. He could either try and hold this position, kill a lot of aliens, but maybe get his team killed, or make a brief retreat. There was really only one smart option. “Fall back!” He ordered, standing and firing suppressive fire at the aliens, forcing them back into cover or slowing them down at the very least.

It seemed the other squads had the same idea, the other Officers were ordering their squads back as well. Although not with nearly as much success for some of them. Duri watched sadly as one of the teams was destroyed by the combined firepower of a Muton and Vitakara squad. Sliding behind a concrete block, Duri appraised his new situation.

Right. Now what? They were pushed back to nearly the city edge, with plenty of cover, but the problem now was that they’d lost the beach for good, and the aliens could actually take an entrenched position. They apparently could afford to throw away soldiers. ADVENT didn’t have that luxury, and he wouldn’t do that anyway.

Two Borelians began taking shots at Johan and Kang, and he quickly rose from cover and fired several bursts at them. One hit square in the head, and forced the other down. Cara was sweeping her heavy autorifle back and forth along a large swath of territory where the aliens has established themselves. One Vitakarian stood and immediately jerked back as a well-placed sniper’s bullet took it out.

Duri’s lips twitched. Thank God for snipers. “This is Gray Sky, coming in for a landing,” came the voice of the XCOM pilot. “Stand by for Goliath support.”

“Whatever the fuck that means,” Cara commented as she knelt into cover and quickly reloaded. “But I’ll take it!”

A roar overhead caught his attention, and that of the aliens as well as they shouted and immediately began firing at it. Duri saw why, for what was attached to the skyranger was…he blinked. No, he wouldn’t be hallucinating now.

The skyranger hovered right behind Duri and released the payload, which was a massive armored…machine that stood at least fifteen feet high. Maybe even taller, and had equally large weaponry to match. It was in some sort of compressed state when it landed, but it rose and surveyed the battlefield, even as plasma fire burned into it.

“Goliath unit providing support,” it said in a monotone, synthesized voice. “Firing initial barrage.”

Several panels built into the shoulders of the Goliath popped out, aimed at the line of aliens in front of Duri, and unleashed a payload of micromissiles that shredded everything in a fifteen-foot radius. The aliens that weren’t killed instantly were wounded beyond all salvation, and Duri put down the survivors, even as the massive Goliath lumbered forward.

“Where the fuck did XCOM get that?” Cara shouted in disbelief. “How the hell-?!” An explosion
cut her off, but Duri echoed the sentiment. He’d known XCOM had machines called MECs; powerful ones too. But there hadn’t been any inclination of anything of this scale.

Not that he was complaining.

The Goliath took out its primary weapon, which must have been gauss-based, and began aiming at various groups of aliens. The cannon physically vibrated the air around it, and was surprisingly accurate for such a large weapon. But it was a machine, and machines were precise. In any case that was apparently cause for concern among the aliens who immediately began retreating and firing at the Goliath, which seemed to be taking no damage whatsoever.

It then raised its cannon up, lowered a free fist and shot out a torrent of flame that Duri felt through his armor, and the Goliath directed the gouts of flame all across the beach, sentencing any who were unfortunate enough to be caught in it to an extremely painful death. “Move up!” Duri ordered, glad to give that command after the previous retreat.

Although the Goliath might not need much help, since it seemed fine roasting and shooting the aliens all on its own. It hadn’t touched the shield yet, where those Andromedons were still hiding behind, as well as several hundred more Mutons who Duri noted were taking positions in the UFO transports themselves.

The aliens were losing now, and they knew it. Would they retreat? Or fight to the last one?

Duri reloaded his rifle and took aim at one of the Andromedons retreating to a transport, even as the Goliath slammed a fist into the red energy shield and collapsed the entire thing.

The line was held. Now it was time to take the fight to their transports.

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Near Shibetsu, Japan

“Inori! Get down!”

Nuan watched helplessly as Inori took a direct plasma shot to the chest from a lucky Andromedon shot, throwing him back onto the ground. She heard him coughing, and unsteadily push himself up against the barricade.

“I’m fine,” he gasped. “Don’t think I can take another one of those.”

“Stay down!” Iosif ordered, as he ducked back down as more Andromedons emerged from the city itself, dozens of them at a time now. They just didn’t stop coming.

“Stand by for airstrike,” a synthesized voice warned suddenly, and a squad of four fighter jets suddenly roared overhead, firing several missiles each that hit the town directly. Nuan couldn’t see the immediate aftermath, but based on the explosions, it appeared to be a hit. “Coming around for another run. Hang on-”

Plasma fire from several UFOs filled the skies and the fighters immediately broke off to deal with the new threat. “Did that actually accomplish anything?” Anna demanded as she tried to pin down a squad of Andromedons trying to take cover behind an exploded truck.

“Couldn’t have hurt,” Iosif called back, looking worriedly at the growing number of Andromedons. The damn aliens really were smart. Each time even one of them was partially wounded, they would just leave and be replaced by a healthy one. It was effectively a stalemate that Nuan had no idea
how to resolve. These aliens were at least partially machines, and would probably not tire as easily, but they were slower and easy targets, so they couldn’t just charge into the open.

Right?

“Think we’ve got a new one,” Zara commented, firing her weapon at a new squad of Andromedons emerging from the city. They were all regular soldiers barring one, an Andromedon with a similar green helmet, but the differences were that the helmet had some kind of symbol on it, and the left arm had some kind of attachment on it.

“I see it,” Iosif confirmed. “Possibly a leader.”

The assumption seemed to be correct, as the Andromedon began pointing and marching forward, and the Andromedons around him seemed to be reorganizing. The leader didn’t go into cover, just raise one massive hand, notably the one not holding the plasma rifle, and all Andromedon fire stopped, and they began pressing buttons on their suit.

“I do not like this,” Seok muttered. “We should take the leader.”

“Go for it,” Iosif ordered. “But good luck getting a shot to hit.”

Despite that, Nuan tried her best, but the beams were just off, and the Andromedon was just too far away to get anything accurate. “Acid!” Iosif suddenly shouted. “They shoot acid!” He thrust up his hands and the barricade was engulfed in a purple shield once more, just as every Andromedon on the field raised their left wrists and fired shells of green blobs, small on their own, but a deadly storm of corrosion when combined by the hundreds.

The barricade where they were at now was protected, thanks to Iosif, with the acid shells dissipating the moment they hit the shield, but the ADVENT line behind them wasn’t so fortunate, and Nuan heard screams of pain as the soldiers were hit by the barrage of sizzling liquid. “Check in!” Iosif called, as the Andromedons resumed their plasma attacks on them.

“I need a medic,” Seok hissed, gasping in pain. “Direct hit on my arm and leg. Hurts like hell, damn it!”

“I’m fine,” Zara said. “But that did its job. Quite a few soldiers got hit, and this area is now pretty much a toxic minefield. I don’t want to know if this stuff eats through boots.”

“You don’t have to sound so impressed,” Anna growled. “Shoot back!”

“Yes, of course,” Zara replied sarcastically, but continued shooting at the Andromedons.

“We need Patricia,” Iosif muttered, creating a psionic shield in front of an ADVENT team as they tried to repair their barricade. “Or a MEC. At some point they’re going to charge, and airstrikes and artillery are too imprecise.”

The ground suddenly shook and all of them exchanged looks. “That doesn’t sound good,” Nuan said slowly, and then she saw what the Andromedons had been waiting for. They were two-legged pods with clawed feet and a series of orange lights that resembled eyes.

“I think the Andromedons are as tired of this as we are,” Iosif said slowly. “We might be in trouble.”

One of the machines suddenly hissed, and several metal plates on the top part of the…main pod of the machine, she guessed, withdrew to reveal what she could only describe as a cannon of death.
The interior glowed red and she knew exactly what was coming next. Iosif saw it too. “Everyone get down!” He yelled as the shield was thrown up again and the machine fired.

Three massive laser bursts shot out of the machine with deep booms. The first Iosif didn’t waver, the second made the shield waver and the third one was barely absorbed with the barrier collapsing immediately afterwards, Iosif fell to the ground, breathing hard. Nuan rushed to him, and helped prop him up against the barricade.

“I can’t do that often,” he wheezed. “We need to fall back. We can’t hold this position if those things start firing again.”

“The other one is aiming here!” Anna called frantically. “Get down.”

“Everyone to me!” Iosif roared, standing up and weakly raising a hand to make the sphere materialize around them again. “We retreat toward the main barricade!”

“Copy!” They and the ADVENT soldiers yelled, consolidating around Iosif. The small ground was beginning to move back when the machine fired again, this time destroying the established barricade with a single laser volley, sending pieces of shrapnel flying everywhere, catching several ADVENT engineers and Inori who hadn’t managed to get under Iosif’s barricade.

“I’m getting him!” Gyeong called, preparing to move to pull Inori under Iosif’s protection.

“No! Stay!” Inori called, groaning in pain as he tried to reach for his rifle. “You need to get out of here!” Nuan was torn, he was right, and his leg was practically shredded by shrapnel so he would probably slow them down. But it felt wrong to just leave him.

“Get back here now!” Zara yelled. “They’re moving up. All of them are charging our position!”

Nuan looked back and she almost froze up on the spot. The Andromedons were coming after them now, eschewing cover and making a concerted push to take ADVENT's position. It was a slow, methodical march, and now she saw the elusive engineers that had been fixing the Andromedons so far emerge. These were similar in armor and stature, but had red-tinted helmets, didn’t carry weapons and were accompanied by a small drone-like machine.

“Everyone retreat!” One of the Officers screamed. “That machine is going to fire rockets.”

Nuan saw the machines seemingly plant themselves in the ground, and metal plates slid away from the top of their pods revealing what had to be missile tubes. A few seconds later all of them fired in quick succession with concussive booms.

That was what broke the ADVENT line, and all of them went scrambling back as the line was suddenly engulfed in multiple explosions that caught dozens of ADVENT soldiers before they could do anything but try and run away. “Everyone, run!” Iosif commanded, spinning around, and converting the sphere to a solid rectangle two dozen feet wide, giving everyone the chance to run away without fear of being shot in the back. “Now! I can’t hold this forever!”

The ADVENT soldiers and engineers complied, with the remaining XCOM soldiers still providing covering fire, even as they retreated step by step. The Andromedons had advanced to where Inori was, who was firing at what aliens he could. He screamed as one of the Andromedons shot his arm, while the leader reached down and picked him up by the throat.

With Inori firmly in his grasp, the Andromedon leader turned around and walked away while the remaining Andromedons continued their steady advance. “Are they gone?” Iosif demanded, the barrier wavering.
“They’re safe enough,” Gyeong assured him. “We didn’t lose any in the missile strike either. Zara’s got Seok and they’re behind us. We need to run too. We’ll have to make a stand at Nakashibetsu.”

“Alright, on my mark, run!” Iosif ordered. “Nuan, pop smoke now!”

“Done,” Nuan confirmed, dropping the canister and beginning a sprint away. Iosif lowered the barricade and they all dashed away as fast as they could, plasma fire lighting up the space behind them. And just like that, the aliens had captured their first city in Japan, a foothold had been established and they hadn’t been able to stop it.

Nuan sincerely hoped that the other battles were going much better than this one had.

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Shirako Beachhead, Japan

Kill the machines.

That was the mental command Patricia emitted to every alien she could invade the mind of. The chryssalids screeched, spittle flying from their mouths as they swarmed the massive machines which laboriously turned to appraise the situation. A plasma turret popped out from the top of them, and began shooting the chryssalids with ease, negating what little danger they posed.

But the distraction was enough to get ADVENT forces into position, and begin firing on the machines and Cyberdisks that came out. Flanking the machines was a kind of Mechtoid she’d never seen before. It was as if the Sectoids had taken the basic shell of the Mechtoid, and turned it into what could only be described as a walking tank.

No longer did it simply have plasma cannons for arms, these now seemed augmented with missile launchers of some sort, even as they were already bulkier and taller than the original Mechtoid. But it unfortunately had one fatal flaw, and that was an organic pilot, and organic pilots could just be controlled.

Patricia extended a hand towards two approaching enhanced Mechtoids, and focused on their subdued mental states. Enslaved to implants and machines, they were similar to MECs in that they were difficult to detect, and broad psionic commands had little effect. But a side effect of their invisibility was that there was little in their minds of begin with.

The machines are your enemy. She sent. Destroy them and then each other.

Instantly they raised their weapons to the nearest machine and started shooting, getting the attention of the machine which stomped behind to face them. Meanwhile the other aliens under the influence of her were quickly dying off from the combined fire of the Cyberdisks and the machines.

“Take cover!” Creed called, and Patricia frowned as she saw one of the machines fire missiles from the top of its command pod and those crashed down on an ADVENT position several dozen meters away, killing most of the soldiers there.

“Support their position!” She ordered her soldiers, and they began shooting pulse lasers and gauss-propelled rounds at the massive machines, which seemed to have very little effect initially. Patricia focused on the enhanced Mechtoids close to the other machines, and easily converted them to betray the aliens, but it seemed that even plasma was doing little more than scorching the paint.
A shot from Nati neutralized the turret on the machine with a miniature explosion of green. Patricia quickly located the sniper on one knee and concentrated on him. Be calm and focused, she pressed upon him, even as she saw the effects. Enhanced by her power, he easily transitioned from one target to the next, shutting down the turrets on the machines with ease.

But it still wasn’t going to be good enough, the machines still had missiles and a massive laser. Patricia just saw being used on another ADVENT position. The machines needed to be taken out now and fast. But fortunately, she had an idea of what to do. “ADVENT Command,” she said. “Send all fighters under UFO attack to my position. I will deal with them.”

“Younderstood, Overseer,” a voice answered. “There’s a few heading over now.”

One of the enhanced Mechtoids was blown to pieces by a laser barrage from one of the machines, another was stomped into the ground by another. Charlotte fired several rockets at several cyberdisks, destroying one and heavily damaging the others. Blake and Analyn were in completely different places, trying to save what ADVENT soldiers they could.

Allison and Creed picked off drones one by one, and finished off damaged Cyberdisks near the machines, which did seem to unsteady some which were in close proximity to the explosive Cyberdisks. And she was running out of ways to psionically shape this fight. Almost all of the Sectoids were dead, either by the guns of their own or ADVENT soldiers who just shot all aliens in sight, not that she could blame them.

The chryssalids were also all dead, and the few Mechtoids, enhanced and normal, were almost wiped out as they stood no chance against the machines, although one had managed to damage the leg of one. Still didn’t save it as a rocket barrage from the machine blew it apart.

But the upside was that it freed her mind to pay attention to new arrivals, like the two UFOs streaking overhead, peppering several fighters with green bolts as the human pilots tried to fly away. Patricia closed her eyes and concentrated solely on the Sectoids piloting their fighters, letting the sounds, screams and voices of the battle around her fade.

Abandon the hunt, follow my orders.

Words would not be enough to illustrate the complexity of her order, so she instead impressed in their minds a clear image of what she wanted them to do. The Sectoids initially resisted, but like the rest, they were no match for an experienced psion.

The air around her began vibrating, and she opened her eyes to a purple-tinted vision of the battlefield. Hoping she was correct, she looked up and smiled. Roughly ten meters above her, much to the surprise and terror of the ADVENT soldiers, were the two UFOs, weapons ready and pointing towards the line of machines.

She pointed. Fire.

The pilots obeyed her commands without question, firing green barrages of plasma at the line of machines, and at an intensity and speed that actually seemed to be doing some damage. Realizing the UFOs were somehow friendly, the ADVENT soldiers shouted, cheered, and renewed their attack as the machines focused on the newest threat.

Patricia did not care as she saw the UFOs take brutal hits from the massive laser cannons. They were just pawns to be sacrificed, but she did not especially care to have a UFO crash directly on top of her. But the situation was not quite that dire yet. One of the machines succumbed to the continuous barrage of plasma fire and blew apart with an explosion of red and fire.
However, now one of the UFOs was in bad shape, judging from the panic and terror she felt from the crew. Fair enough, then there was one final command to give. *Finish the line*, she send, along with another image of what she wanted to see accomplished. The UFO, weeping fluids and smoke shot off into the sky, then swung around in a wide arc until it lined up roughly with the machines on the beach.

After a second of hesitation, it shot towards them, gathering speed as pieces of the UFO were visibly sheared off by the force, but nothing stopped the suicide crash that it was intending. It hit the first machine at what was probably the speed of sound, tearing it apart before slamming into the one next to it with almost as much force before hitting the beach and sliding forward into still two more, collapsing the machines as they were too crippled to regain their balance, before finally coming to a stop, just as the elerium power core inside exploded, killing any of the crew that might have survived.

Five more of the machines remained, but they showed no signs of retreat as they continued firing at the remaining UFO, in addition to concentrating on ADVENT positions. Barricades were annihilated with one pulse from the laser. Clustered squads were wiped out by missile barrages. The aliens were determined to make them pay dearly, and Patricia figured it had gone on long enough.

She physically gestured to the machines, echoing the sentiment in her mind to the UFO she controlled. *End this.* The UFO suddenly sped towards the two machines it had been shooting at with a speed that nearly knocked her over from the blowback, and it shredded them apart before burying itself deep within one of the UFO transports, pushing the UFO into the sea and submerging it below the water.

Up above she sensed more UFOs coming. There was no careful planning this time. No images or maneuvering to get them into a special position. These were not UFOs anymore, but guided missiles waiting for her command. Out of nowhere a UFO streaked out of the sky to impact another machine, the explosion sending out a shockwave that knocked everyone nearby off-balance and threw several to the ground.

In quick succession the other two UFOs fell out of the sky like silver meteors; the machines they hit were torn asunder with no defense as the sheer force negated whatever natural defense their armor allowed. What remained was a beach on fire, scraps, shards and shrapnel littering the sand and ocean. No alien showed itself and a silence descended upon the battlefield, aside from the whispering of flame.

All that might possibly be left were outsiders…but at most there were less than a hundred, nothing compared to the thousands of soldiers ADVENT commanded here. Still, the UFOs needed to be cleared and she planned to continue doing her part.

Or would have, if the world hadn’t suddenly blurred around her and she fell to a knee as the adrenaline and rush of power faded out of her. She heard a mix of voices above her, one seemed to be…Analyn? Blake? She managed to sense Creed close by…was he the one holding her hand?

And why was she on the ground with her helmet off?

But her mind and body demanded rest after what she’d done, and she had no choice but to comply, and hoped that she’d done enough to win the battle, and that someone would bring her back to it.

***

Shizuoka, Japan
A roar from the larger Muton prompted Jamali to get out of his position, just in time too, as the weakened wall finally gave out and shattered from the concentrated bursts of the plasma cannon. However, the Muton was not going to last much longer because ADVENT was advancing, and their gauss weapons were punching through even the Muton’s armor.

But at this point, Jamali was pretty sure the Muton didn’t care about ADVENT anymore, and was purely motivated by revenge. He couldn’t really blame it. He probably wouldn’t be thinking clearly either if one person had managed to almost kill his entire squad.

That being said, he didn’t particularly like it.

Jamali took cover behind a counter and quickly updated what he knew about the Muton. ADVENT soldiers were much closer, and they had hit the alien’s knee, so the Muton was confined to the ground, shooting now at the ADVENT soldiers, killing one who got too close. Now was his chance. Jamali lined up his pulse weapon and fired a sustained beam at the head of the alien.

It was a direct hit and hit directly in the purple eye of the helmet, drilling through in seconds and piercing the soft skin below. The Muton let out one final roar and fell back. Jamali didn’t give it a chance in case it was faking, and aimed another beam at the face, keeping the beam there for several seconds. Smoke rising from the holes he’d burned, he stood, reloaded and walked out to the ADVENT soldiers.

“Are there any more?” He asked the Officer, who was almost staring at him reverently. Come to notice it, all of them were.

But she quickly got over it. “No sir, I think that’s the last in that group.”

“There’ll be more,” he said. “Keep moving forward. A couple more XCOM soldiers should be coming-“

“Jamali!” He turned at the sound of his name and saw Iida and Sai-Kee rushing up, skidding to a stop as they observed the carnage.

“I guess you had things under control,” Sai-Kee commented. “New Muton?”

“Commander of some sort,” Jamali said as Iida knelt down by it. “You recognize it?”

“Never seen it before,” Iida shrugged, standing up. “Vahlen will love it though.”

“Let’s win the battle first,” Jamali suggested. “How’s the rest of the assault progressing?”

“Never seen anything like it,” Sai-Kee said in awe. “Carmelita and Matthew are making a mockery out of the alien army.”

“Good for them,” Jamali said, looking down the street as he spotted movement. “But we need to advance. Officer,” he turned to the woman standing attentively. “Do you have any idea where they came from?”

“A small UFO flew over before the attack here started,” she answered, pointing down the street. “About ten minutes later the Mutons showed up. I would guess the UFO is still there.”

“Then that’s our target,” Jamali nodded. “Carmelita, you there?”

“Here!” Was the almost snarled response. “Status?”
“Alive, and we think there’s a UFO at the end of this,” he updated. “Raider-class by the sound of it, not a transport. We’re heading there.”

“Good plan,” she agreed. “Stay in contact.”

“Will do, Overseer,” he said, and ended the call. “We have our target. Officer, follow us. I doubt that was all they had.”

“Will do,” she said, waving the soldiers forward. “Come on!”

They carefully made their way down the street, acutely aware of the sounds of more battle in the distance, but eventually they all felt it: the low thrum of an alien UFO. And then the alien reinforcements arrived.

“Vitakara!” Sai-Kee called, and all of them ducked, slid, or fell into some kind of cover. Jamali knelt behind a concrete divider, and peered down the scope at the alien approaching. A dozen Borelians, along with…he frowned. Were those snakes?

“What the fuck?” One of the ADVENT soldiers muttered in disbelief. “Snakes?”

Snakes they seemed to be. Three meters tall, with arms carrying plasma rifles and their thin body covered in silver armor. The faces reminded him of vipers, a sleek and symmetrical face that was what you would see in nightmares. The worst part was that these things were fast. They slithered into cover within seconds after being spotted, taking positions far beyond the main alien force.

“Oyariah!” Iida called out as she spotted the last hulking aliens. “Although these ones are…different.”

Jamali froze for a brief second. What the hell was an Oyariah-ah, right. The rarer subspecies of Vitakara that was extremely tall, strong and dangerous. They apparently killed some at the Fury base, but Jamali didn’t exactly recall them carrying black shields nearly as tall as him, and massive hammers along with them.

“Fire!” Jamali ordered as the Vitakara scattered into cover to avoid the hail of steel and fire heading down the street. All except the Oyariah, who raised their shields and absorbed the shots. At least there were only two of them, but that wouldn’t really matter much if those hulking aliens got close.

Their positions entrenched, the Borelians began firing at them, green plasma streaking past them or hitting their cover. Jamali took aim at one of the Borelians, fired, and watched as the alien fell back, a smoking hole in its head. Iida was focusing down two more Borelians, clipping one in the shoulder and keeping the other one in cover.

Sai-Kee tossed out a canister at the man-sized snakes who were trying to move forward, using their slim bodies to their fullest potential as they crawled along cover that would have been too small for ordinary bodies. They hissed fiercely as the flashbang went off, one close enough that the impact made it writhe on the ground, and Sai-Kee quickly shot it several times in the head.

And that was when the rest of them made their suicidal move. Their small frames made it extremely difficult to hit them, and they sped up on the front line and suicidally attacked it. An ADVENT soldier yelped as one of the aliens wrapped itself around him, constricting his movement and breathing as it shot another soldier several times in the chest and head. It squeezed its coiled muscles once, killing the soldier instantly with a sharp crack and unfurled itself and tried to move on.
Or it would have moved on had Jamali not shot it in the face, and so it died, wrapped around the body of the dead ADVENT soldier. The snakes had tried the same thing with several more soldiers, with largely the same results, killing one or two, before being shot to death.

“Back! Back!” Iida spat as she frantically stepped back, firing at the last remaining snake Vitakara which was hissing and dodging her fire, trying to wrap itself around her. Jamali fired a sustained laser beam and kept it in one place, leading the alien to unintentionally slice itself in half while trying to avoid Iida’s gauss fire.

The other half of the snake writhed on the ground, quickly stopped by Iida placing several gauss shots directly into its head. “Thanks for that,” Iida told him as they returned their focus to the main battle.

“Anytime,” Jamali said, aiming at another Borelian who was rushing forward, and fired. He didn’t kill the alien, but did slice its arm clean off, essentially putting it out of commission. “We need to deal with those Oyariah now!”

The lumbering aliens were almost to the front line, and once they arrived, it would probably make the snakes looks easy in comparison, because these aliens were armed and armored to survive close-quarters combat. So that meant some risks had to be taken.

“Sai-Kee, you take the right, I’ll take the left,” Jamali ordered, reloading his rifle. “We need to debilitate them. “Officer! Iida! Covering fire now! We’re going up.”

“Popping smoke!” Sai-Kee called, and tossed a canister at the front line which exploded in a pink cloud a few seconds later, allowing them to charge forward into the hail of plasma. They needed to get behind the Oyariah for this to work, so Jamali dashed past them, hoping they wouldn’t notice, and even if they did, his plan would still work.

He glanced behind him, and saw the aliens slowly advancing, struggling against the hail of gauss fire shot their way. He glanced over to see Sai-Kee also in position, extremely close to the Borelian line. A quick nod, and Jamali raised his rifle, targeted the leg joint, and fired a clean sustained beam of red energy.

The alien screamed as the laser burned into first his armor, then flesh. It tried to remain standing, but was unable to bear the weight, and fell to one knee. Jamali quickly transitioned to the next vulnerable point, the opposing ankle, and fired. The alien turned to him and began crawling towards him, ditching the shield as it was effectively crippled.

“Iida?” He called, aiming for the head.

The crimson beam burrowed into the black helm of the Oyariah, giving him a glimpse of the orange eyes underneath it, and a hail of bullets from Iida ensured that it never reached him, and the titan fell still, not even giving a last gasp.

“Need some help!” Sai-Kee shouted as the other Oyariah, while hit, wasn’t crippled and was heading towards the lone XCOM soldier, caught between the furious alien and line of Borelian soldiers. The Oyariah knew it as well, and frustratingly had positioned his shield to ensure that Jamali couldn’t get a clear shot at him, and certainly not cripple him.

The alien took a swipe at him which Sai-Kee leapt away from with ease, but unfortunately right into the firing line of the Borelians. One plasma shot glanced his shoulder, and the other slammed directly into his back, sending him sprawling to the ground as the Oyariah stormed forward to finish the job. “Get back!” Sai-Kee yelled to him, frantically waving behind the alien. “Kill it
Jamali understood what he was saying. Sai-Kee was going to die, but the brief moment would let him get a clear shot at the alien. So he dashed back to the ADVENT line, plasma fire scorching the paint of his armor several times and turned back once more to see the Oyariah bring the hammer down directly onto Sai-Kee’s head with a crack the he could almost feel.

By that point, Jamali was sure Sai-Kee was dead, but it seemed the alien wanted to make sure and raised the hammer again, and that was when Jamali aimed at the knee and fired, as did Iida and half a dozen other ADVENT soldiers. The alien roared and collapsed to the ground, not dead, but a grenade thrown by the ADVENT Officer made it stop moving.

Down one soldier, with at least eight Borelians left, not counting whatever else was left in that UFO which he knew would be an outsider of some kind. But now they outnumbered the aliens significantly, and one by one they soon fell to ADVENT rounds, his pulse laser, or Iida’s gauss rifle. Jamali cut the leg off one retreating Borelian, and it was soon executed by another ADVENT soldier with a few rounds to the back.

Iida shot another Borelian hiding behind a car, riddling the corpse with holes as they steadily advanced forward. The Borelians didn’t go down without a fight, killing their fair share of ADVENT soldiers with well-placed shots, but not enough to make a difference as Jamali ended the last one standing with a sustained pulse beam to the heart.

All of them paused for breath once the last one fell, taking a moment to get their bearings once more. Jamali looked back up the street and realized just how many people had died here. Human and alien corpses littered the streets, blood coloring the pavement crimson and yellow as each side fought to the bloody end.

He did a quick count. Six ADVENT left, plus an Officer, and both of them. “How are your soldiers?” He asked the Officer, who was also looking over her troops as they reloaded and bandaged their wounds.

“We’re still good,” she said, exhaustion clear in her voice nonetheless. “We’ve still got a UFO, yeah?”

“This has to be everything,” Iida said, looking down the street, the end in sight. “I think we’re only left with an outsider, and maybe a few Sectoids.”

Jamali hefted his rifle. “Let’s finish this then, move out.”

They jogged towards the edge of the street that transitioned to the small beachhead where the UFO was resting on. The area around it looked dead, empty and like a trap. Jamali sighed. In most cases, he knew XCOM would want to keep as much of the alien tech intact as possible, Dr. Vahlen in particular was particularly obsessive over functional tech.

But frankly, right now he didn’t really care what she wanted.

“You still have a rocket?” He asked one of the ADVENT soldiers carrying a rocket launcher.

“Yes, sir,” he nodded. “But I don’t think this is going to put a dent in it.”

“Those UFOs have outsiders,” Jamali explained, eyeing the entrance with the multicolored shield. “I don’t know about you, but I really don’t want to go through another fight. The alien UFOs are powered by elerium generators, which are exposed in the UFO itself. Aim for the back of the UFO through the entrance and you’ll destroy it. Sound good?”
“You got it,” he nodded and positioned himself in front of the UFO, loading the rocket. “Ready on your command.”

“Fire,” the Officer ordered, and he shot the rocket which sped into the UFO and the muffled explosion reached Jamali’s ears. Then a second later, the entire back of the UFO blew out and a wave of plasma and fire shot out all the exits. The UFO still burning, Jamali gave a firm nod.

“Mission accomplished, Carmelita, the UFO has been taken care of.”

“You mean you blew it up,” she corrected. “Good job. We’re finishing up here. Looks like this area is secure. Report back as soon as possible. Status of everyone?”

“Sai-Kee is dead,” Jamali updated. “Iida and I are unharmed.”

“Update that to just you,” Iida corrected, slumping to the ground. “Since the fighting’s done, I want proper treatment now.”

Jamali frowned and knelt down by her, removing her hand from her stomach which had suffered a direct hit. Her own gauntlet was bloody as he pulled it away, appraising the damage. It wasn’t fatal, but it must have hurt a lot. “We need medical treatment for Iida,” he corrected Carmelita, waving one of the ADVENT soldiers to get some bandages and medicine. “We’ll meet up as soon as possible.”

“Copy, and good job.”

Yes, good job. Even if the street was littered with dozens of alien and human corpses, Jamali suspected it could have gone much, much worse. And it occurred to him that if they were winning…then there was a good chance that the aliens had lost this battle.

And that was almost worth everything.

***

Kochi, Japan

“Push towards the UFO!” Duri ordered as the Goliath continued pulling all of the alien fire, even as it destroyed several aliens at a time every few seconds with a burst of its massive weapon. Duri gained quite a lot of satisfaction seeing one burst from the massive gauss cannon rip through one of those damned Andromedons, shattering the helmet.

Of course, even that didn’t kill them.

The suits continued fighting somehow, pulling out some small plasma rifles and shooting at the encroaching ADVENT army while the rest of the surviving Mutons and Vitakara were retreating towards the UFO transports themselves.

“Beatriz! Can you see anything in the transports?” Duri asked, as they overlooked the exposed beachhead, planning the best way to go forward. The aliens might be fine with sending out soldiers into the killzone that was the beach, but he didn’t have such aspirations.

“Negative, nothing beyond the initial entrance.”

Duri glanced over to the Goliath moving down the beach, killing any alien foolish enough to still be in the open. He also saw the rest of the remaining aliens in the UFO, stationed behind erected barricades within the ship, firing out at them. However, the good news was that with them
effectively boxed in, it limited their sight range and possible reactions.

“Reload and get ready,” Duri said, as he saw the other squads also preparing to perform some similar actions. “We’re going to thread between the two transports and set up along the side.”

“Good plan,” Cara said. “Or we could wait for the Goliath.”

Duri looked at the massive MEC to see it slowly fall to one knee in front of the transport, raise a fist towards the entrance, shrugging off the green plasma fire, and shot a cone of flame into the transport, sweeping its wrist from side to side.

“Let’s not let XCOM get all the credit,” Johan chuckled. “Besides, someone’s going to need to actually clear the craft.”

Duri raised his rifle. “Let’s go!” They charged out of their cover and dashed to the space in between the massive silver UFOs, some plasma fire coming incredibly close to hitting, but they managed to get to the edge of the craft and leaned against the metal, which was surprisingly warm. Duri motioned them to get closer, and they snuck to the edge and peered in.

There were actually not that many left. Only a dozen in total. Seven Mutons, three Vitakarians and two Borelians. No Andromedons, thankfully, or maybe they were just hiding. The UFO was designed rather intelligently from what he could see. The panels that had been erected had clearly once been in the floor, which allowed enough room to hold an army, but also provided defenses in case the UFO had to be defended, such as in the current situation.

“Grenade on the Mutons!” Duri called, and tossed one towards two of the hulking aliens who were stationed behind a short panel. It was a near-perfect throw, landing next to one and killing it instantly while severely wounding the other.

“Cara! Suppress!” Duri yelled and she took his position, swinging out and laying down a brief barrage of gauss fire that forced them back into cover while Johan and Kang moved to the opposite side of the transport entrance and he took a position within the UFO itself.

“Reinforcements are heading your way,” Beatriz updated. “Two more squads.”

“Excellent,” Duri grinned, and raised his rifle and took aim at one of the Vitakarian soldiers. “Let’s give them some cover!”

Another Muton succumbed to Kang’s rifle, and Cara and Johan took out a Borelian a few seconds later. More ADVENT soldiers rushed up, taking positions in deeper in the craft itself, with Duri at the front. An ADVENT soldier close to him was sniped by one of the Vitakarians, and received a grenade thrown by another Officer in retaliation.

“Up above!” Cara yelled, pointing to the back of the UFO hangar they were in, just before it transitioned to a new part of the ship. The entrance further in was seemingly protected by some kind of multi-colored shield, which dissipated as more aliens walked out. Outsiders. The guardians of UFOs, with a half-dozen Sectoids also accompanying them.

Duri pointed at one of the two glowing orange aliens. “Take those out now!”

“Targeting!” Cara confirmed and the crystalline alien was suddenly under a steady barrage of gauss fire, sparking off the body as the alien raised its rifle and began shooting.

“Preparing rocket!” One of the rocketeers called, the launcher already on his shoulder. “Firing!”
Duri saw the rocket speed past the Outsiders, and realized that the target wasn’t them, but the Sectoids who had been taking cover behind the elevated platform leading to the next section of the UFO. All the small gray aliens were killed by the explosion that followed, the shrapnel tearing apart whatever alien hadn’t been smashed to a pulp by the initial shockwave.

The Outsiders had finally been forced into cover as the last of the alien defenders fell. Cara paused to reload, while the other ADVENT gunners advanced relentlessly. Another Officer tossed his grenade towards one of the Outsiders, forcing to step out and it started cracking as it was instantly assaulted with the weapons of every ADVENT soldier in the UFO and disintegrated like a burning piece of paper.

The remaining Outsider suffered a similar fate, not even able to get a single kill as the ADVENT gunners ripped it apart at close range within several seconds. “Move in!” One of the Officers ordered, pointing deeper into the UFO, and all of them followed that order, but Duri was confident that they would find no more aliens. Outsiders only emerged when the ship was in danger of falling, and the Sectoids wouldn’t risk themselves unless there was no one else left.

So even as he went along clearing the various sections, he knew they’d won.

Kochi had been saved.

***

Nakashibetsu, Japan

“Hold him down,” Zara ordered her as she carefully removed Seok’s armor to treat his acid burns. The survivors had been picked up by ADVENT transports and were heading straight for Nakashibetsu, the next stronghold of ADVENT since the defense of Shibetsu had failed.

Nuan and Anna held a respective arm, while Zara sprayed the med-kit on his chest. “God, that stings,” Seok hissed, panting heavily. “You almost done?”

“Shut up,” Zara said. “Almost. Acid doesn’t just go away, even with these med-kits.”

“We need to find out how the rest of the attacks went,” Iosif said, rifle aimed out the back of the transport even though there were no aliens in sight. “The Commander needs to know Inori was captured.”

He adjusted something on his helmet. “Lightning Sky, you there?”

“Here, and I don’t think you guys need to worry about pursuit. The aliens are retreating to the town.”

Nuan looked up. “What?”

“This was essentially the only place they were able to establish any kind of foothold,” Lightning Sky explained. “Almost all of the other offenses have been pushed back. I don’t think they have the soldiers left to push forward.”

“So…we won?” Seok asked weakly, pushing himself up. “Even though we lost the town?”

“Well, the aliens attacked all across the coasts, and only managed one capture,” Lightning Sky said. Nuan almost visualized the shrug. “I’d say that this was an overall victory. And now we know where they’ll attack next.”
“In a way, it might be for the best the city was lost,” Zara commented. “The aliens will be concentrated in one place and we’ll be able to keep an eye on them.”

“Except they could attack Korea or China from there,” Nuan pointed out. “They only wanted Japan as a staging ground for attacking Asia. And now they’ve got one, no matter how small it is.”

“The aliens won’t attack Asia until they control most of the country,” Zara defended coolly. “Unless they want to prompt ADVENT to attack them now and then isolate whatever force they send to Asia, they won’t do anything until they actually control the country. Which now they do not.”

“At least it’s over,” Shun sighed. “For now, anyway. But at least Japan is safe.”

Nuan couldn’t disagree with her on that. More importantly, Japan was safe and most of them were alive. She’d lived through the attack and she felt…better about the future. If this was her trial by fire, then she was certain she’d passed it.

But unfortunately, she knew it would only get harder from here. The aliens would not take this defeat lightly.

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*Forward Observation Station, Mars Orbit*

Several more transport icons turned red and Ravarian once more held his tongue. The holographic map of Japan was essentially now little more than a checklist of losses. They had nothing more to gain by sending more forces, and he was going to dissuade Caelior from continuing the attack if he kept up this insanity.

Luckily, he was pretty sure he wasn’t the only one who felt this way. At the moment he was grateful to Quisilia for putting a mental block around him so he wasn’t affected by the auras of multiple Ethereals simultaneously. He’d had that happen before and it had been…unpleasant. Although an advantage was that he learned that it worked both ways to an extent. The one emitting the aura also had their emotions revealed somewhat. Not plainly, of course, but there were spikes in intensity, and combined with verbal and visual cues, it essentially allowed him to read Ethereals to a small degree.

Before today he’d not even known Ethereal Caelior existed, and he was largely unimpressed with the Ethereal, and didn’t particularly care if the hooded Ethereal read his mind or not. His attire was certainly interesting, gray armor that only covered his torso, arms and legs, with a purple hood over the unseen helm of the Ethereal.

Ravarian finally put his hands on the holotable. “I trust you’ve seen enough, Ethereal Caelior?”

The hooded Ethereal looked down at him. “The battle is not lost yet,” he stated, the deep voice reverberating even deeper than other Ethereals. “You understand how paltry this number was, Zar’Chon?”

Caelior clearly intended that to be the end of it, but Ravarian had quite enough of it, which would be reckless at any other time, but the fact that Quisilia hadn’t telepathically dissuaded him in the first place indicated that the Unseen Ethereal was just as irritated as he was. “Perhaps not in the grand scheme of the war, Ethereal Caelior,” Ravarian continued, keeping his tone respectful. “But the losses are close to half a million, with very little ground gained to show for it. The tactics used were flawed, and we need to determine a different means of attack.” He pointed on the map. “We
now have a foothold. For now we should hold—"

His jaw suddenly clamped up and a firm pressure rested over his body, rendering him immobilized as Caelior simply looked at him. Quisilia materialized behind Caelior a second later, just as immobile as the Ethereal keeping him pinned in place. “Release the Zar’Chon, Caelior. Now.”

“If I wanted advice, Zar’Chon, I would have asked,” Caelior hissed. “You have little comprehension of our plans, do not presume to know otherwise.”

Ravarian was tempted to respond to that. However, he figured that might actually get him killed here. For the most part, the Ethereals he’d worked with had been…well, at least somewhat respectful to his position. Not Caelior though, for whatever reason. And now he wondered if Ethereals like Quisilia were the exception rather than the rule.

_No, Zar’Chon, the Little Storm is just upset that he failed so spectacularly._

Really. Well, he couldn’t really blame him in either case, although Ravarian now felt slightly vindicated because he’d predicted something like this _would_ happen if they simply threw their forces at the Humans. They weren’t _stupid_, and that was what Caelior had found out the hard way, at the cost of thousands of soldiers.

“Order the retreat.” Ravarian instinctively straightened at the voice of pure command, one that reverberated far longer in his mind than even Caelior’s. Off to the side, looking out into the stars and at Earth in the distance was the last figure in their small command room. An Ethereal who towered over all of them, clad in silver armor and crimson cape, with a scarred greatsword strapped to his back.

“The battle can still be salvaged,” Caelior said, turning to the Battlemaster. “We simply need more—”

“Order the retreat.” The Battlemaster repeated without turning to face him, raising an iron-clad fist to make his point. “You failed. I warned you not to underestimate the Humans and you did exactly that. I warned you what XCOM would do, and you did not prepare accordingly. I warned you that even with our advantages, our victory is not assured.”

The Battlemaster turned around to look down upon the Ethereal, who now almost seemed nervous. “And yet in your arrogance, believed that you knew better. That you would somehow be able to shape reality simply because you wield the Gift. You believed this battle so beneath you that you did not participate in it yourself, and hold yourself above all species. The Zar’Chon warned you of what _I_ warned you about, and you dismissed him simply because he is not one of us.”

The Battlemaster slowly and deliberately walked over to the hooded Ethereal, who Ravarian saw almost take a step back. “You are relieved of your command, Caelior. You lack the restraint, respect and courage required to command soldiers to fight and die for you. You are dismissed. Now _leave._”

Caelior wisely didn’t protest and almost fled the room, leaving Ravarian with a very smug satisfaction at the sight. But personal feelings aside, this was a setback they needed to recover from. “What is the next move, Battlemaster?” He asked, as the armored Ethereal appraised the holotable.

“We withdraw our forces and converge to hold the Human city of Shibetsu,” he answered. “We will establish an operational base there, which will hold against retaliation. But we can do little more at this point. The Humans won this battle. Let them celebrate their victory, for it was earned,
even if it was by incompetence and cowardice on our side. We will convene later, but now I must study their tactics to prepare for the invasion of America.”

“Understood,” Ravarian nodded. “I will begin work immediately.”

“Do so,” the Battlemaster said, turning away and heading for the exit. “Make this the last major victory they enjoy. And begin the acquisition of Special Operators. The Psions must be negated.”

“Yes, Battlemaster,” Ravarian promised, as the Battlemaster left the room and Quisilia vanished from sight, leaving him alone in the cold, dark room.

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Supplementary Material

The Advent Directive

SECTION 8: ADVENT Military

Subsection 8.1: Introduction

_Purpose:_ The military of ADVENT is to protect and defend from all threats terrestrial and extraterrestrial, by the usage of lethal force; in addition to offensive directives to quickly neutralize rising threats to the state of ADVENT and terminate them quickly and decisively. The ADVENT military answers to the Executive Branch of ADVENT, and to the Chancellor of ADVENT.

_Structure Overview:_ The structure of the ADVENT Military is briefly composed as follows:

**ADVENT Military Command:** The central command of the ADVENT Military, composed of all ranking members with positions open for the Chancellor of ADVENT and the Chief of Peacekeeper Operations for increased coordination although the Commander of the ADVENT Military can override the Chancellor of ADVENT should certain conditions be met.

**ADVENT Divisions:** These are various specialized branches in ADVENT, currently composed of. All further breakdowns are composed within the branches listed below:

- ADVENT Army Division
- ADVENT Navy Division
- ADVENT Air and Space Division
- ADVENT Special Forces Division
- ADVENT Special Response Division
- ADVENT Oversight Division

**ADVENT Legion:** A legion within a division contains at least 100,000 personnel including support staff, and can be larger. Legions are to be used to serve as the standard defense force of a medium-sized country, in addition to additional legions from other divisions.

**ADVENT Battalion:** A battalion within a division contains at least 50,000 personnel, up to the size of a legion, and would ideally be used to defend regions within countries and also as an occupying force.

**ADVENT Garrison:** A garrison within a division contains at least 25,000 personal up to the size of a battalion, and is composed of companies.

**ADVENT Company:** A company contains at least 10,000 personnel, up to the size of a garrison
and in composed of units.

**ADVENT Unit:** A unit contains at a minimum 1,000 soldiers, and composed exclusively of squads excluding all support personnel.

**ADVENT Squad:** A Squad is composed of between 6-10 soldiers, excluding all supporting personnel, and can be composed of various specializations and combinations.

*Note:* All ranks have a single commanding Officer, as well as additional support staff at ranks higher than Unit.

**Military Directive Overview:** The ADVENT Military exists to ensure that those who threaten the state are swiftly and surely dealt with in a lawful manner, and are willing to attack, defend and destroy those who would threaten the citizens of ADVENT and take whatever measures are necessary to ensure that certain threats never rise again.

Chapter End Notes

First major battle complete. Hope it was good (Next chapter shouldn't take so long to get out). Anyway, most of you probably know about the upcoming expansion for XCOM 2 (Which looks interesting for a multitude of reasons), and might wonder if I plan on incorporating some or any of it into this.

The short answer is maybe. I'll have to play it to be sure, but there are elements I already have ideas for converting for usage here. Not everything, but it's early enough here that I can feasibly incorporate major expansion elements without it seeming forced. But don't expect those for a while, and I can guarentee it won't be everything since some of it is strictly for the XCOM 2 timeline.

But no zombies. That is one thing I am *not* going to use whatsoever.
A Crystal Ball

Transport to Mars Forward Observation Station

It was strange to finally be actually back in a spacecraft. Discounting the times he’d been inside the Sectoid spacecraft while with XCOM, it had been nearly a year since he’d been in a legitimate, working, Vitakarian craft, much less an Infiltrator. The craft was only large enough for two, a pilot and passenger, which was why it was often used by the Zararch for operations.

It was very angular like most Vitakara spacecraft, which Nartha suspected had to do with aerodynamics and the like, though if that had any actual effect in space, he didn’t know. What he did know was that it was very fast and would get him to the Mars base that had been established while he’d been on Earth.

According to the pilot Zar’hallin’aucity, the Zar’Chon himself was conducting operations from there, as well as several Ethereals, which immediately concerned him. The good news was that if there were Ethereals at the station, they almost never bothered with anyone outside the leaders, and occasionally some officers, so it was unlikely one would just stop him randomly.

Then again, they could read minds so they might make an exception for him.

What he was more concerned about was that there would be an Ethereal present when the Zar’Chon debriefed him, and if that happened, he was as good as dead. He didn’t know anything they didn’t already know, so XCOM would be as safe as before…but he didn’t exactly want to die. Not when there was a chance for him to make some kind of difference.

Australia being targeted first didn’t surprise him, nor that the Collective had taken it fairly quickly. The Commander was smart enough not to wage a pointless war there when that allowed him time to establish defenses elsewhere. ADVENT was a surprise, but again Nartha was not surprised the Commander had taken steps to establish something like that.

Putting the woman in charge of EXALT in power was surprisingly in character for him, but Nartha did wonder what the others in XCOM thought. He assumed there had been many arguments and exclamations of disbelief. Honestly, Nartha was unsure the Commander would be able to get all the countries to work together peacefully, but the Commander knew that too and likely had a plan.

And speaking of plans, he needed to make sure that he wasn’t overlooking an obvious flaw in his own plan. The Zar’Chon was going to have questions, and Nartha was going to walk a very fine line between the truth and outright lying. The trick would be to make the explanations seem plausible in a way that didn’t raise more questions.

So the obvious one that would come up would be why the information he’d sent was less and less substantial every month, and fortunately an easy answer was that he had no choice since XCOM had become aware of a spy in their midst and he’d had to lay low. A reasonable explanation and one he doubted the Zar’Chon wouldn’t press too hard.

He would probably ask if he’d participated in the defense of the Citadel, and for that Nartha opted to tell the truth, for the simple reason of preserving his cover. It would have been impossible to escape without being caught, and him staying had allowed him to gain access to some very interesting XCOM intel.
It was a gamble, but one the Commander had approved, and by the time they realized something was wrong, it would be too late to change much. The Zar’Chon would probably ask him a few more questions on specific details about XCOM, probably Patricia, the Commander and whoever else he deemed influential. Knowing the Zar’Chon, those would likely be tests since he would likely know the answers well beforehand.

The Zar’Chon was definitely suspicious of him, so he had to assuage that as best he could. All of it would depend on if an Ethereal was present.

He reached into his pocket and felt for the three vials containing the Sectoid Virus; still there, still intact. If everything went well and he was sent back to Vitakar as was normal after operations, there were several military installation stops that had heavy Sectoid traffic, which he fully intended to exploit. Whether was would be enough to start the plague he didn’t know, but he didn’t have a choice. Heading straight to Helion-7 was out of the question, so he had to take more subversive measures.

“Nartha, we’re close to the Mars Forward Observation Station. Strap in, I’d hate to explain to the Zar’Chon you died to your own stupidity.”

“Just keep flying,” Nartha smirked, and complied with the instructions. Hallin seemed to have a mildly humorous side, since that was not the first time during the flight where he’d made quips like that. Funnily enough, he almost reminded Nartha of some of the Humans in XCOM. The species in general appeared to use humor far more than most he’d encountered, even in sometimes the most inappropriate of situations.

He did wish the Infiltrator had windows, since he truly did enjoy the sights of spaceflight, and the chance to see Mars up close was something he was curious about, even if it was nothing more than red dust and rocks. Well, he’d probably see it from the station, provided he was still alive. The Infiltrator suddenly became still, and Nartha realized they were probably in the hangar and then it began descending.

The moment it hit the ground, Nartha unstrapped and walked to the exit. “Thanks for the ride,” he told Hallin.

“Thanks. Good luck with the Zar’Chon.”

He would need it. Nartha descended from the small ramp that extended from the exit and stepped onto the metal floor of the Hangar. Aliens of all species were rushing about, fixing Sectoid spacecraft and carrying away wounded soldiers. Nartha blinked. Well, something had clearly happened and he was exactly sure what.

The amount of Runianarch medics didn’t exactly bode well for what he would expect to be a ‘victorious’ battle. Had they attacked somewhere and the Humans…won? A victory so soon? He kept his expression neutral as he waded through the hundreds of rushing medics and soldiers, and headed straight to the lift. This station appeared to be built identically to other observation stations, so the Zar’Chon would probably be on the top one.

But he had to make a stop first. It would be an exceptionally bad idea to walk into a debriefing with the Sectoid Virus on him, and thus he had to find a place to stash it. Luckily there were plenty of places that would work fine.

Section 4 was the Scientific and Medical floor, so he selected that on the pad and stepped into the lift. The colorful light flashed around him, accompanied by the low thrumming, and a few seconds later, he was propelled upward until he was in front of the correct floor. A small push from behind
propelled him out and he stepped onto the floor without missing a beat.

The Sectoids may not have been a bastion of purity, but they did know how to make excellent tech. Anyway, now he was here, and now he needed to find a place to put this that wouldn’t attract attention. Being a Zararch agent, he did have access to most areas without raising many questions, and whatever had happened provided an acceptable cover for him being here in the first place.

Nartha stepped into one of the emergency rooms where medics were bandaging and treating wounded Vitakara of all races. The wounds clearly weren’t life-threatening, but they certainly weren’t pretty. Many were missing limbs, others were in medically-induced comas and yellow ichor stained most of the white material in the room.

He opened one of the cabinets and made a show of reaching for one of the unstained cloths while placing the vials close to it. It was unlikely that any of the medics would use an unmarked vial, and in the chaos here, they probably wouldn’t see it at all. Closing the cupboard, he turned to give the cloth to one of the Vitakarian medics who froze the instant she saw him before, relaxing slightly.

“Sorry, agent,” she said, taking the cloth and applying it to a wounded Borelian. “I thought…well, you look…”

“Human, I know,” Nartha nodded, realizing that he did really stand out here. He’d almost forgotten that he wasn’t converted back into his normal state. Being human had just been something he’d gotten used to. But he was looking forward to returning to normal. “What happened here? I’ve just returned from Earth.”

“We attacked the country the Humans call Japan,” she explained. “They won.”

He didn’t even have to fake the incredulity in his voice. “They won? How?”

“That is a very good question,” she practically spat. “I have no idea. I’m not a tactician either, but some of the soldiers were talking about how badly managed the entire operation was. The Humans knew how to fight us, and when XCOM showed up…” she motioned to the rows of wounded soldiers. “This shouldn’t have happened. How could they…I mean…”

“Whoever was in charge underestimated them,” Nartha frowned, wondering who had been in charge. “I found out down there that underestimating them is a fatal mistake.”

“Go tell that to the Zar’Chon,” she said grimly. “If he won’t come down and see the bodies for himself, maybe he’ll listen to one of his agents.”

She was dangerously close to insubordination of both whatever Ethereal had been in charge, and the Zar’Chon for being borderline accusatory towards him, but Nartha didn’t feel the need to enforce that at this point. He simply nodded. “I will. You have my word.”

“Appreciated,” she muttered before moving to another patient, and he exited the room, deciding it was probably best to see the Zar’Chon now and see if he could figure out what was going on, and hopefully survive his debriefing.

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Northern Territory, Australia

Hot, humid and miserable.

That was exactly what Abby felt as she walked out of the skyranger into the Australian resistance
camp. Much of the vegetation that had existed where the tents and temporary structures were had been recently removed and chopped down. But they were still very much in the Australian wilderness, which Abby was somewhat curious about.

She’d heard plenty of stories about the supposed danger of the Australian wilds, and was curious how it matched up to reality. Then again, she wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to know. But first she had a job to do, and time was of the essence.

There were plenty of soldiers here milling around, standing guard or performing other tasks. All of them wore green camo of some sort, nothing identifying them as ADF in any way, which she noted was smart. Not that the aliens wouldn’t be able to accurately guess who they were, but no sense giving them an easy answer.

As the skyranger flew off, one soldier rushed over to her. “Agent Gertrude?” He asked, skidding to a stop, his hand twitching at his side, clearly unsure if he was supposed to salute or not. She didn’t really mind either way.

“Yes, that’s me,” she confirmed, appraising the soldier before her. Beard, brown hair, probably been scouting the past few days judging from his dirty clothes and mud splashed across his face. “And you are?”

“Jonah Fillion,” he answered. “I’ll take you to Harper’s team right away.”

She nodded and they began walking through the camp. Abby didn’t fail to note the white sheets over bodies and the general exhaustion that seemed to permeate the air. At times she wondered if her enhanced sight didn’t give her too many details of the people around her. Just from their facial cues she could fairly easily deduce what they had been or were feeling. Or at least make a very educated guess.

“It’s not good, is it?” She asked.

The young soldier grimaced. “The aliens are in control of our home. That alone is…difficult. The fact that we’re understaffed, resources are strained and everyone seems to have forgotten about us already in favor of…well, the rest of the world, yeah, things are ‘not good’ as you put it.”

“Not everyone has forgotten,” she reminded him. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

He shot her a weary look, then sighed. “True, and I do appreciate that. But, uh, don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re only one woman. Probably very good at your job, but only one.”

He did admittedly have a point. Still…“You’d be surprised what one person can do.”

“If you say so,” Jonah shrugged. “But if you do, then hey, I’ll take it.”

“I’ll do my best,” Abby promised. “Aside from Harper, anyone else I should know about?”

“That other XCOM agent, Hari May was here,” Jonah answered, nodding out into the wilderness. “She left a day or so ago. Might be on assignment.”

Right, Zhang had said there was another agent, whose mission appeared to be different from hers. “Has ADVENT sent anyone?”

“Yeah, some old guy,” Jonah said. “Some kind of tactician I think, though I’d never heard of him before. Lucas Harrison, name ring a bell?”
Abby shook her head. “No. Never heard of him.”

“He’s a bit strange,” Jonah admitted as they entered one of the temporary structures. “Brought a whole bunch of equipment that no one else is allowed to go near. Speaks a whole bunch of languages too. He had a fluent conversation in Spanish with Hari, and was talking to some Japanese official in their language. Guess he’s been useful since Harper keeps letting him stay.”

Interesting, but he probably wouldn’t be essential in whatever she was to do. “They’re through here.” Jonah gestured to the room in front separated by curtains. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Abby told him, and stepped through the curtains into the central command for the Australian resistance. It was surprisingly clean, albeit minimalist. The walls were a bare plastic white, with some maps of both local and global varieties posted, most with markings in blue and red sharpie. In the center was a wooden table with loose paper, pens, markers and files, with a map of Australia in the center of it.

Lincoln Harper, former Marshal of the ADF and now leader of the Australian Resistance stood over it, hands resting on the table as he poured over the map, his face as drawn and haggard as the image from the file Zhang had given her. Behind him was the only other piece of furniture in the room; a stand with a dull turquoise sphere on it, which seems to reflect the light around it, giving it a sort of underwater rippling effect.

“Marshal Harper?” She asked, making him look up. The man gave a weary nod.

“Agent, glad you made it safely. Send Director Zhang my thanks.” He began walking over to greet her properly. “Would you prefer to get started right away, or get settled here first?”

“I think it’s best we get to work,” Abby said. “The aliens won’t wait for us.”

Lincoln gave her a lopsided smile. “No, they won’t,” he said as he moved back to the table, with her close behind. “I appreciate the initiative you agents have. We need that. However, I do have some good news I just received. The aliens attacked Japan and were driven off.”

Her eyes widened. “That’s great!”

“It most certainly is,” a new voice interjected, one deep but weathered from age. Abby turned to see a new man enter the room, probably the ADVENT advisor Jonah had told her about. He was definitely an elder, with a full head of white hair and a wrinkled face. But surprisingly, he seemed extremely healthy, or maybe she just thought that because he was slightly taller than her. More than that, she couldn’t get any indication of what he was feeling from observing him. Not many people had that kind of control.

“Agent Gertrude, this is Lucas Harrison, who the Chancellor graciously sent to help us,” Lincoln introduced, nodding to the man as he took a side of the table between them. “He’s been helpful in planning our current strategy.”

“And with Agent Gertrude here, we can start putting it into motion,” Lucas finished with a slight smile, clasping his hands behind his back. “Miss Gertrude, how familiar are you with Australia?”

“How practical,” Lucas mused, looking down at the map. “I was more referring to your knowledge of the country itself. This continent is a fascinating place to study.”

Abby raised an eyebrow. “You’ve been here before?”
“Oh yes, many times,” he said, waving a hand dismissively. “The ecosystem in particular is an interest of mine, and one I will exploit here.”

“How?” Abby asked, crossing her arms. “It’s not exactly something we could control. And…well, this wildlife. Not exactly—”

“That’s where you’re wrong, though I don’t blame you,” Lincoln interrupted. “The aliens are surprisingly vulnerable to many of the same toxins we are, and Australia is home to some of the deadliest animals. Attract them to the right places, and they’ll take care of the aliens for us.”

“That still doesn’t explain how they can be controlled,” Abby insisted. “Or have you created a kind of lure?”

“Indeed,” Lucas nodded. “A creation of mine, modified for our needs. Initially I made it to repel all insect and dangerous wildlife away. I simply reversed the process to attract them. Almost too simple, though the range is still a slight issue.”

“Which admittedly still needs to be proven,” Lincoln said slowly, eyeing Lucas with a slightly suspicious glare. “You’ve been helpful here, but that particular strategy is one I’m skeptical of.”

“Of course,” he answered smoothly. “Which is why I want to run my field test now. Agent Gertrude and I will go to Warburton and prove it. Should it work, my theory is proved correct. Should it fail, then nothing is lost.”

Abby and Lincoln both looked at him. “I don’t think it’s safe for you to come along,” Abby suggested tactfully, not sure what he was thinking. “I’m more than capable of doing it on my own.”

“It’s far too much of a risk for one like you,” Lincoln pointed out. “You know how dangerous it is, and, to be blunt, you’re not in your prime.”

“I’m not as young as I was, it’s true,” he chuckled. “But I assure you, I’m perfectly capable to taking care of myself, and I will also remind you that I answer to the Chancellor, not you, and she has fully sanctioned any actions I take, including participating on operations.”

“My operations involve stealth,” Abby stated, staring the man in the eyes. “To also be blunt, you would compromise me. It’s too much of a risk that will get both of us killed.”

“And I don’t think you’re in a position to say that for certain until you see for yourself,” he defended easily. “I assure you, I am no stranger to the work you are familiar with. I promise to not be a hindrance.”

Abby looked away and down at the map, wondering how she could possibly handle this. Part of her wanted to continue to flat out refuse, since this was clearly a bad idea. Then again, it might create problems between ADVENT and XCOM and that was something that wouldn’t help anyone. Of course, the same thing would happen if Lucas was killed on the mission, and despite his assurances, Abby wasn’t quite the idiot he was hoping.

Another possibility is that it would sour relations here, since Lucas would not forget this…so perhaps her best solution was to try and perform the mission, take him along, and make sure he followed her instructions. A babysitting op was not what she had in mind, but it was maybe the only way this would go without it turning into an incident of some kind.

“Fine,” she relented. “But if you’re coming along, you’re following my orders exactly. Understand?”
“That is fair, agent,” Lucas conceded. “In which case, I suggest we should prepare. Harper, would you describe our operation zone?”

“Certainly,” he nodded, although he still didn’t seem comfortable with Lucas accompanying her. “Let’s begin.”

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Zar’Chon Chambers, Mars Forward Observation Station

The doors slid open soundlessly as Nartha stepped into the circular chambers the Zar’Chon was so fond of. Nartha wasn’t sure if that was something all Zar’Chons had, or if it was a personal preference for the current one. It was elegant in its simplicity; he could appreciate that for sure. Half the chambers opened into windows out into space, lighting was minimal (if a bit overdramatic), though likely because the room was set up perfectly for displaying multiple holograms at once, from a control console in the middle of the room, and displayed from the soft blue lights above.

The Zar’Chon himself stood in the middle of the room, facing a hologram of an XCOM soldier standing and pointing at…something in the distance, while being oddly distorted. “Zar’Chon; reporting for debriefing.”

“I know,” the Zar’Chon answered without turning, and motioned him over with a gesture. “Do you recognize this soldier?”

Nartha walked over to the hologram to get a better look. Red armor, scarred, odd distortion, the autorifle on the back…combined with the helmet, and that he’d spent enough time in XCOM to tell the slight differences between males and females who wore the armor, there was really only one person who this could be, and who would make a gesture like that in battle. “Patricia Trask,” he said after a few seconds. “A psion. I assumed they learned the hard way not to underestimate her.”

“You failed to mention she could effectively neutralize an entire army,” the Zar’Chon said slowly, turning to face him fully.

Nartha frowned. “She’s powerful, but not that powerful. Unless she’s getting training from an Ethereal, I’m not sure how she could possibly do that. At least I didn’t note anything like that.”

The Zar’Chon pursed his lips. “It appears she’s more powerful than either of us assumed, then. I presume you saw the bodies.”

It wasn’t a question, since the Zar’Chon knew he wasn’t blind. He wanted to know how much Nartha knew already. “We launched an attack on Japan, which failed. I went to the Medical floor to get an extent of the damage. From what accounts I heard, the battle was…poorly managed and dysfunctional…” Nartha paused. “Which is surprising. We have an advantage over the Humans. How did we fail?”

“The one who orchestrated the attack is no longer in a position of authority,” the Zar’Chon stated, turning to shut off the hologram. “The Battlemaster has taken over operations for the time being. Japan is a setback, but in terms of overall loss, this will not be felt.”

Nartha was extremely curious who had orchestrated the attack. Since he had apparently been dismissed, it likely wasn’t an Ethereal since if an Ethereal was in charge, they probably wouldn’t have lost. Which really only left one of the Runianarch or Lurainian leaders. Perhaps one of the mysterious Andromedons he’d heard so much about.
Either way, the news that the Battlemaster was now in charge was extremely bad for the Humans. “Is he here?” Nartha asked.

“Yes,” the Zar’Chon answered. “But currently planning. In the meantime, we have much to discuss about your time in XCOM.”

“That we do, Zar’Chon,” Nartha agreed, steeling himself to lie to the leader of spies. At least there were no Ethereals here, so he could do this. “What do you want clarified?”

“Your intel became much sparser the longer you were undercover,” the Zar’Chon stated, clasping his hands behind his back and looking down at Nartha expressionlessly. “Why is that?”

“Because XCOM learned there was a mole,” Nartha explained calmly. “Which I know shouldn’t have been possible, but they appeared to have learned more about Ethereal Script, and that subsequently made breaking our cipher easier. Even if they didn’t know who sent it, they knew someone was. I did not anticipate that, and attempted less visible methods. By the end I suspected they had broken the code and didn’t want to reveal what I had discovered.”

“You do recall we had other means of communicating,” the Zar’Chon reminded him neutrally. “That was not the only cipher you could have used.”

“No, but it was the most inconspicuous,” Nartha answered, thankful he’d spent time preparing for this. “The Citadel was one of the most secure locations I have been in. Everything sent out of there is seen, it is just a matter of what is the most visible. If I had switched to a different cipher, that would have been noticed and perhaps spooked the Commander into doing something drastic. I know you know he is certainly capable of such in order to catch a spy. I believe they wanted to isolate and identify me, and then feed me false information.”

“And how do I know that they didn’t already?”

Nartha’s lips curled into a small smile. “Because you wouldn’t be talking to me right now. You would consider me compromised and I would have been executed or brought for interrogation.”

Now the Zar’Chon gave a small smile of amusement. “A good answer. But the information you sent to me recently was so vague that I would not be able to verify what exactly it was, let alone if it was a trap or not. Did you learn anything substantial?”

“I did,” Nartha nodded. “Something that could affect the course of the war.”

The Zar’Chon waited. “I trust you will share it, and that you have proof?”

“I certainly do,” Nartha nodded and pulled out a Human flash drive. “I’m certain you know that XCOM is interested in genetic modification. The data here shows exactly what they are researching and what they are planning. For better or worse, Dr. Vahlen is very detailed.”

The Zar’Chon took the drive and placed it in his pocket. “This will prove useful. Good work. And is there more?”

“There is,” Nartha confirmed, pulling out three vials of clear liquid. “XCOM is planning to exploit the genetic similarity of the Sectoids. They’ve created a plague that if released, will kill most of the Sectoid species, perhaps even the Hive Commanders. I’ve seen the results, Zar’Chon, its real.”

The Zar’Chon furrowed his brow and took one of the vials and held it up. “A clever move by XCOM, and an effective one despite the dangers of bioweapons such as these. Curious the Commander would take such a risk, especially since it could end up killing his own species.”
Nartha snorted. “I believe the Commander had the same thought. Do you really believe the Commander *isn’t* using Human test subjects?”

“A fair point,” the Zar’Chon admitted, pocketing the vial. “But it is still risky, although given his profile, I am not surprised genocide is in his list of tactics. His pragmatism is almost admirable.”

“Most of XCOM agrees,” Nartha nodded. “And I believe he isn’t going to receive much opposition to wiping out the Sectoids. The assault on the Sectoid Hive pretty much cemented their fate in the eyes of most Humans. Pacifism will not last in this war, and we cannot rely on that.”

“No, we have seen the Humans will turn violent should circumstances demand it,” the Zar’Chon mused. “Not since the Andromedons has a species been so willing to fight amongst itself.” Nartha was silent at that, largely since he didn’t know enough about the Andromedons to comment.

“You met and spoke with the Commander, correct?” The Zar’Chon asked after a few minutes, turning to face the window into the void. “What are your impressions?”

How to sum up the Commander? “Disarming,” Nartha began. “Whatever expectation you have of the Commander, he is unlikely to live up to it at first. I suspect he tailors his initial personality based on whoever he is speaking to at the time. If you walk in expecting a raving war criminal, he will be a calm and rational. Expect a detached leader and he will make himself as personable as possible, as if he were one of the soldiers. He has no issue interacting with those of a lower rank, and will elevate those who show merit.”

Nartha paused. “But the most dangerous trait he possesses is his *persuasiveness*. The Commander has an answer for everything, justified to the best of his ability that is difficult to refute. This persuasiveness breeds confidence, and with that, *loyalty*. XCOM *trusts* the Commander, regardless of what they are asked to do, because they believe they are *doing the right thing*. The Commander tolerates opposing opinions, but he will utterly take them apart if they come into conflict with his own.”

The Zar’Chon didn’t move as he finished. “It’s not apparent at first,” he finished. “But the Commander is *ruthless*. He is perfectly willing to murder half of the human race if it means victory over us. Civilians are just unfortunate casualties; cities are mere staging areas; politicians are puppets that are used and discarded as he deems fit and the world is simply a chessboard where land is strategically gained and sacrificed. Even his own soldiers are, at the end of the day, mere pawns in his game of war. You are not dealing with a regular Human, Zar’Chon, you’re dealing with the Commander.”

This description made the entire situation seem so very ironic. He could attest to the Commander’s unwavering confidence and persuasiveness because he had fallen under it himself. He knew, intrinsically, that he was just another tool in the Commander’s arsenal, but was perfectly content with that. Pawns could be useful, after all, and better a pawn to the leader who would change the status quo than a leader who would simply endure the continuing farce.

“That matches up with what I have learned about him,” the Zar’Chon nodded. “Brilliant and ruthless, a dangerous combination and an unexpected rival. I did not expect the Humans to put up this much resistance, but I suppose with the right people in charge, much is possible. Let us move on. Patricia Trask.”

“I don’t know as much about her,” Nartha admitted truthfully. “Soon after officially becoming a psion, she began working much closer with the Commander. I wasn’t close friends with her to begin with, but she was a very…analytical woman. An excellent Squad Overseer, and competent psion. She did beat a Hive Commander…and an Ethereal.”
“Which means you were there when we attacked the Citadel,” the Zar’Chon noted, turning back to him. “Why is that? Especially since you received the extraction order.”

“You gave me little more than a day to leave,” Nartha defended coldly. “You don’t just leave the Citadel. All I would have accomplished was getting myself captured and that wouldn’t have been ideal for any of us. I would have needed at least a week’s warning, and even then there were risks. Yes, I did fight for XCOM, but only to preserve my cover. In fact, that was the only reason I was able to acquire the information and virus you now hold in your hand. The genetic labs were off-limits to soldiers normally, but no one really cared when you were attacking.”

The Zar’Chon’s expression didn’t change, but he gave a brief nod. “In retrospect, you are right. It is unfortunate you were put in that situation, but considering what you acquired, perhaps it is for the best.”

Nartha held in a sigh of relief. “What are your opinions on the soldiers,” the Zar’Chon asked suddenly. “As a whole, what can we expect?”

Oh dear. “The soldiers are…complicated,” Nartha sighed. “They come from across the world, have their own opinions, dislikes and conflicts. But they do have a tendency to unite, and the bond between XCOM soldiers is one of the strongest I’ve seen. People from regions who should be enemies will work together for the common cause of, in their view, ‘defending Earth’. It is a strong sentiment that is not easily broken.”

“You sound almost envious,” the Zar’Chon noted.

“Perhaps I am,” Nartha admitted. “We both know such camaraderie isn’t common in the Zararch.”

“For good reason,” the Zar’Chon agreed. “But I agree that the ideal is admirable, so long as it doesn’t affect you. Did you become close to any of them?”

“I became friends with some of them,” Nartha said, thinking of Samuel and Shun, one now dead, the other quite possibly the same. “But as a means to an end, of course. Some of the Humans aren’t too different from us.”

“I find that hard to believe,” the Zar’Chon said. “But you have spent more time among them, so I will accept that as a possibility. Regardless, despite the difficulties, your mission has produced results, and I will mark it as a success.”

He’d done it. “Thank you, Zar’Chon. Where will I be deployed next?”

“For now, you’ll get your standard reprieve and return to Vitakar,” the Zar’Chon answered, turning back to the window. “When you are ready to return, I suspect the Humans will be largely brought under control.”

“I appreciate that,” Nartha said, thankful his plan was falling into place. “It will be good to be myself again, and to see Vitakar.”

“I suspect your family will also be happy to see you actually alive,” the Zar’Chon nodded. “I already have a team ready to return you to your normal self. Utilize it before you leave, if you wish.”

“I’ll do so,” Nartha said, relieved. “Thank you once again.”

“Don’t mention it,” the Zar’Chon replied coolly. “Dismissed, agent.”
The moment he heard the doors close, Ravarian turned around to see Quisilia also looking at the exit Nartha took. It was always bizarre just how Quisilia operated. His habit of toying with various agents by literally standing behind him the entire time they talked was initially disconcerting, especially since they never once wondered if something was off.

And he was quite aware he wasn’t immune to this.

“What did you think?” Quisilia asked, turning to him. He sounded amused, oddly enough.

Ravarian pulled out the vials Nartha had given him. “His story lines up for the most part. He is definitely not telling the whole truth, but in light of what he brought, I think that can be overlooked.”

“Why?” Quisilia questioned. “If he is lying…”

“It has nothing to do with his loyalty,” Ravarian clarified. “But don’t think he was as unaffected by his time with the Humans as he claimed. Even among aliens and enemies, it is always a risk to form attachments. His time on Vitakar should dispel that influence.”

“How optimistic,” Quisilia said dryly. “And what do you make of the information he brought?”

Ravarian frowned at the Ethereal. Quisilia didn’t normally ask this many rhetorical questions, especially since he’d likely read Nartha’s mind during their discussion. What exactly was the point of this? “This Sectoid bioweapon is dangerous and clever. Depending on how it is constructed, it could be just as deadly to us as the Sectoids. We’ll need to create a counter immediately.”

“Genetic bioweapons are dangerous,” Quisilia agreed. “But you will accomplish absolutely nothing if you use the ‘bioweapon’ Nartha provided.”

Ravarian sighed. “Please enlighten me why, Quisilia.”

“Because Nartha is a traitor,” Quisilia answered, almost smugly. “He is an agent of XCOM.”

Ravarian stiffened, swinging his head to stare at the motionless Ethereal. Impossible. That was his first reaction. There was no reason he could see why Nartha would betray the Collective. What could he possibly hope to accomplish? But Quisilia wouldn’t lie about something like this. Despite the Ethereal enjoying toying with people, he was one of the few exceptions, especially with matters this serious.

“How?” Ravarian demanded incredulously. “Is it some kind of conditioning?” It was admittedly a rarely researched method, at least for applications in intelligence work, but he could easily see the Commander attempting it, or more likely, psionically influencing him to betray the Collective.

“No,” Quisilia said bluntly. “Nartha is doing it entirely of his own free will, which is…surprising, even to me. He certainly was not lying when he attested to the persuasiveness of the Commander.”

Ravarian pursed his lips in a hard line. “Then why? I doubt it was a simple conversation with the Commander that turned him into a traitor.”

“His primary motivation is surprisingly noble, in his eyes,” Quisilia explained, almost letting a chuckle escape him. “It is to, ah, free the Vitakara from the oppressive regime of the tyrannical Ethereals.”
Ravarian stared at the Ethereal in disbelief, then shook his head in disappointment. “Foolish and concerning. Clearly Nartha has no idea what a truly tyrannical species is if… that is his reasoning.”

“He does not trust us,” Quisilia elaborated. “He seems to think that the Vitakara are… under some form of enslavement to us, and we take advantage of that.”

“Shortsighted,” Ravarian muttered. “He appears not to understand that this is a Collective, one which the Vitakara are a part of. Of course we answer to the leaders of one.” He sighed. “This is extremely concerning on a number of levels. He was one of my best agents, and if he has those sentiments in the back of his mind, then others certainly do as well.”

“The sentiment of a Vitakara species independent from us is not uncommon,” Quisilia revealed. “But I tolerate it since most will not act on it.”

“You should have shared that with me,” Ravarian said, glaring at the Ethereal. “This is perhaps the worst time for that, because if Nartha is a traitor, the only reason he is here, and why XCOM let him go, is to cause trouble for us. And worse, he knows that an Ethereal can die, he’s seen what the Humans can do. With that information he could inspire enough Vitakara to act.”

“Which is likely why the Commander sent him,” Quisilia agreed. “Although it appears he did not anticipate me being here.”

“Well, it essentially makes this useless,” Ravarian scowled, glaring down at the vial. “And the data he acquired is likely forged as well.”

“Not entirely,” Quisilia disputed, extending a hand from his robe and the flash drive suddenly flew towards it. “Nartha didn’t lie about what XCOM was doing. The Sectoid bioweapon is very real, and he plans to distribute it himself. He hid it and is likely going to retrieve the actual bioweapon now.”

Ravarian opened a panel on his wrist to prepare to make a call. “Well, I’m sure he’ll be very cooperative when we interrogate him—”

“Wait,” Quisilia interrupted, raising a hand. “Let him go for now. Nartha presents us with an opportunity we shouldn’t waste.”

It didn’t take long for him to come to the same conclusion. “You want to use him. That is dangerous for an agent like him.”

“We have very little to lose,” Quisilia stated. “We will extract nothing from Nartha aside from what we already know. But if we let him orchestrate his rebellion, we gather all the dissenters into one place and when the time is right, execute them all.”

“A risky play,” Ravarian warned, closing the panel on his wrist. “But if we could use him to wipe out the Nulorian… he might be useful.”

“If he becomes too much of an issue, I can simply kill him,” Quisilia said. “We know he is a traitor and he believes he is undetected. Let him perform his mission. Let him try and poison the Sectoids. We can simply lock down contaminated areas to prevent the spread of the virus. Besides, I want to see how effective this plague is. Sectoids are easily replaced.”

“I’m not comfortable with letting him go,” Ravarian said. “But I see the logic, and the final decision is up to you.”

“Then let us use the XCOM spy,” Quisilia confirmed. “The Nulorian will never reveal themselves
“Regardless, I want a Special Operator put on him,” Ravarian ordered. “We still have Earth to deal with. You said the others would be arriving shortly?”

“Yes,” Quisilia confirmed. “Momentous times are ahead, Zar’Chon. It is a wonderful feeling.”

Ravarian didn’t visibly respond either way. “If you say so. In which case I should update our Earth databases. Knowing the Battlemaster, he will not attack without the latest intel.”

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_Medical Floor, Mars Forward Observation Station_

“Stand, walk several steps and return,” the medic instructed Nartha and he complied, taking care not to trip over everything. He’d thought adjustment back to a pure Vitakarian would not be difficult, since the differences between Humans and them were largely visual.

As it turned out, there were actually several very important differences, one of which was that everything was so much brighter now that his eyes were back to normal. They were also a distinct improvement from human sight, but he still winced after initially waking up. It was more disorienting than any flashbang, but the medic was helping him out just fine, and now he was getting more used to it.

“Excellent,” she encouraged, setting him down, picking up a tablet with a haptic display. “I took all of your vitals already, so all that remains is to log you into the system. This your first conversion?”

“Yes it is,” he confirmed with a nod. “An…interesting experience for sure.”

She grimaced. “You’re lucky Vitakarians and Humans looks so much alike. It’s much harder on Dath’Haram, or worse, Cobrian agents. The latter often have psychological issues when converting back. Most of the time there needs to be psionic intervention.”

“You’ve done this before?” Nartha asked curiously.

“Not independently,” she admitted, setting the tablet down. “But I’ve been trained and seen it before. I find it to be a fascinating process, although I doubt you would feel the same way.”

Nartha chuckled. “Probably not.”

“I’ve never asked,” she said. “How different is it? We don’t look that different from them, is it actually like that?”

Nartha appraised the Vitakarian medic. “The biggest difference is sight,” he explained. “Everything is much…darker, for Humans. They can’t see as well as we can. I almost forgot what it was like until I woke up.” He ran a hand over his bald scalp. “Hair is interesting as well. It’s…not irritating or anything like that, just…there. Humans have a fascination with it though. You would be surprised how creative they are.”

“Yes, it’s almost sad we’re fighting them,” she said wistfully. “They seem fascinating. Not brutes like Andromedons or Mutons. They have culture and history. I do want to visit Earth once the war is over and the Humans are assimilated. What’s it like?”

“Earth?” He wondered. “Very…ah, diverse. Similar to Vitakar, actually. They have deserts, jungles
and frozen landscapes. They seem to have been spared from most of the terrible weather as well. The worst they get are snowstorms and hurricanes,” he paused. “Although they like to call their snowstorms ‘blizzards’, but compared to Vitakar…it’s a snowstorm.”

Her tablet beeped and she sighed. “Thanks for talking with me, agent, but it seems I’m needed elsewhere.”

“Of course,” he said, standing up. “What is your name?”

“Zar’carida’noizar,” she answered, inclining her head.

“Keep up the good work,” he told her. “The more you can keep alive, the better.”

It wasn’t even a lie. He had no wish for his species to die in this war, and any saved was one more he might be able to turn away from the Collective. Now that he was free to leave, he had to make plans. The first step would be to disperse the Sectoid bioweapon in a discreet manner.

Since he could chart whichever path he wanted to Vitakar, he saw no reason not to take several stops near Sectoid territory. If the bioweapon was as potent as Vahlen claimed, then it would spread in days and not take full effect till much later, which unfortunately meant that he wouldn’t hear about the results for a while.

Once he was on Vitakar, things were going to get tricky. He would see his family, of course, perhaps even persuade them to help, which was sadly unlikely, but eventually begin work on his own. He’d have a limited amount of time to work before the Zar’Chon called him back, so he had to use it wisely.

Which left one obvious path: the Nulorian. The outcasts of Vitakar and the closest thing to organized crime that existed. That was being generous, compared to ‘organized crime’ on Earth, since the Nulorian would likely be little better than a well-organized gang if he was being honest. But they’d eluded the Zararch for decades and hated the Ethereals, so their motives weren’t unknown.

The issue was going to be getting them to trust him, and convincing them to help in the first place. Someone had to be working with them, otherwise the Zararch would have destroyed them by now. So he needed to find whoever that was and convince them to help. After that…well, he’d go from there. There was virtually no chance of turning any Sectoids or Mutons against the Collective, though he might have to actually learn a little about the Andromedons before dismissing them as well. They might like to keep to themselves, but if there was a chance…he had to take it.

Satisfied he had an outline, he stood and walked off to retrieve the vials of the Sectoid bioweapon he’d stashed earlier. He knew he was now on borrowed time before the Ethereals took notice, and began hunting him down.

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Warburton, Australia

To his credit, Abby had to relent that Lucas actually did seem to be keeping up quite well. It had been a long ride, trek and hit to where they were, but at least with the sun down, it was at least tolerable weather-wise. And after seeing a spider the size of her hand, she’d avoided looking too closely at any one surface for too long, just for her own sanity.

Now the more luscious areas had given way to a sandy arid area, where vegetation-and cover-was scarce and with the small town up ahead, it was time to stop and think through what they were
going to do. Abby supposed it was time for Lucas to reveal his master strategy. If she was being perfectly honest, his idea sounded ridiculous, but given what XCOM had been able to accomplish, who was to say he couldn’t create some wildlife-attracting chemical.

“And there it is,” Lucas said wistfully. “Ground zero. What do you see?”

Abby focused in the distance, thankful her enhanced vision was actually coming in handy here. “Mutons are stationed around the perimeter. Looks like there are Vitakara snipers on roofs and I see several patrols, mostly composed of Muton and Borelians.”

“Do you see an Andromedon?” He asked.

She scanned the area. “No. Is that the leader?”

“I suspect so,” Lucas said with a nod. “They are well-suited to harsh environments like this. Much like the Mutons, I suppose.”

Abby began to nod, then frowned. “How did you know there was an Andromedon here?”

“Harper has his people scout the nearby towns,” he answered with a shrug. “I read up on the reports before coming. Nothing nefarious, I assure you.”

“Right,” Abby said, slightly mollified she’d assumed something was amiss. She appeared to be getting legitimately paranoid, but wasn’t sure that was a bad thing. “Don’t see any Humans though.”

“With a town this small, they probably relocated them,” Lucas noted, kneeling down and looking into the distance. “It’s one of the reasons I choose it. No chance of collateral damage; only aliens.”

Abby realized that she hadn’t even considered what she would do if there had been civilians in the area. She’d been focused only on the mission…she closed her eyes, trying to push away the guilt she felt at the realization.

Nothing would have changed.

A voice told her.

The mission still takes priority, civilians or no.

The voice of practicality talking again. At one point she had almost heard Ruth’s voice telling her that, now it was her own. Maybe there was no turning back now. She slowly relaxed, steeling herself from the conflicting emotions. There was a mission to complete. “I suppose it’s time to tell me what you need to do,” she said, her tone conspicuously flat. “You going to show what’s in that bag now.”

“Not yet,” he said with a slight smile, oblivious to her tone. “The first thing we need to do is get to the center of the town.”

“Why?”

He tapped his pack. “Range, of course. This will need to envelop the entire town, not simply part of it.”

“I got that,” Abby said, eyeing him suspiciously. “But how is this…chemical…so strong? Is it airborne? Aren’t we risking getting caught in the blast?”

He smiled. “Well, I suppose I’ll have to reveal it sooner or later. The truth, agent Gertrude, is that I lied. There is no miracle chemical, it was simply an excuse to get you to drag me out here.”

Abby stared at him in disbelief, debating how justifiable it would be to punch the old man in the
“You’re kidding.”

“Not in this case,” he said, his smile now infuriating. “But it was not a complete lie. I fully intend to take this town, but not in the way you think.”

“Then I suggest you better explain before I break your nose,” Abby hissed furiously. “You know I actually could have been doing something useful right now?”

“Yes, yes, you could have gathered some intel that would have no doubt changed little,” Lucas said dismissively. “Useful, and Harper would probably love it. However, I would prefer to ensure that Australia falls, and regular espionage work is tiresome. I prefer direct action.”

“Direct action, huh,” Abby scowled, pulling out her laser pistol and shoving it at the old man. “Fine. Go out there and shoot all those aliens.” When he didn’t move, she continued her low rant. “Oh, you don’t want to do that? There is a reason espionage is ‘tiresome’; because we prefer not to die!”

“Calm down,” he placated, not perturbed in the least. “Let me explain before you chew me out. Although it is entertaining.”

“Who are you?” She demanded. “Are you even from ADVENT?”

“Yes, I am,” he confirmed. “Although I was EXALT long before. Officially, at least.”

Wonderful. A fucking EXALT lunatic was now working with her, had dragged her out here on a lie and had the gall to stand there smiling as if everything was fine. “Tell me what’s going on or I’m going to knock you unconscious and send you back to Saudia.”

“If you insist,” he said, pulling off his backpack and opening it. “XCOM has yet to learn this, but there are specialized UFOs called Overseers. Actually, I take that back, you likely have seen one. I believe the Ravaged One used it.”

“What’s special about it?” Abby demanded.

“They are the personal transports of Ethereals,” Lucas said, reaching in and pulling out a clear black sphere. “Within each one are spheres such as this one, which are normally used for communication. The exact science I am unaware of, suffice to say that it can also act as a power amplifier for psions.”

Alright, he was making some sense. “I assume that’s what that orb is?”

“Yes,” Lucas confirmed. “Most are already powered by psionic energy in the Overseer UFOs, and emit a purple glow. Empty ones are just that – empty. But a trained psion can create a feedback loop of sorts with the artifact, and accomplish the same thing.”

“Right,” Abby nodded. “Just one problem – neither of us are psionic. I know, I was tested and came back negative. EXALT didn’t have psions. Why even go to all this trouble? Why not tell Harper? Or XCOM?”

“Ah, that is where you are mistaken, agent,” he said, smiling. “One of us is indeed capable of using this artifact.”

Abby furrowed her eyebrows then froze. “Impossible.”

He smiled and the orb began levitating above his palm. “It feels good not to hide it any longer, at
least for a little while.”

Abby was stunned. Questions blazed through her mind. “How are you…? Why didn’t…?”

The orb fell back into his hand and he gently placed it in the pack. “Let’s start walking,” he said, gesturing for her to follow. “It will take a short walk before we are in danger of being spotted. I’ll answer some of your obvious questions along the way.”

She bit her tongue and followed. “Now, I’m not entirely sure how my psionic ability was awakened,” he began. “I had an encounter as a child with a strange object, so I can only presume that was the cause, but I was soon able to do things others couldn’t. I’m sure you’re familiar as to what, so I’ll skip the boring bits of my life, suffice to say I trained myself and kept it a secret.”

They stepped over a rotting branch while he continued. “I found EXALT completely by accident, but decided I could make a difference there. History has always been fascinating, and I saw a chance to influence it in the future with them. So I officially became the Chronicler of EXALT, keeper of their secrets. I manipulated the leaders at the time into believing that they had always had such a position, and I was simply the latest to fill it.”

“They didn’t know what you really were,” Abby stated.

“There was no reason for them to,” Lucas said wistfully. “I was careful not to abuse my abilities too much, such actions draw attention, no matter how careful you are. But I provided nudges, guidance when needed and helped ensure the organization was strong enough to withstand most threats. Of course I was unsuccessful in some cases, but in the end, EXALT has fulfilled its purpose and I am free to do what I wish.”

“And so what are you going to do?” Abby asked. “You still haven’t explained why you can’t just explain this to Harper? And you’re a psion! Why not join XCOM?”

“Because to take Australia, we need an army,” Lucas explained. “And I don’t believe this war will allow XCOM or ADVENT a timely liberation. So the army must be of aliens under my command. The army will start here, and I will grow it. I only need you to help establish my base of operations, and then Harper can send you on whatever operations he wants.”

He paused. “As for XCOM? I do not want to answer to them. I am not unconvinced that the Commander will simply try to execute me because I was part of EXALT. I will do my part to fight the aliens, but I will not be a pawn in the Commander’s game. And it goes without saying that I would prefer you keep this knowledge to yourself.”

Abby frowned. “I’m not sure I can do that.”

“Expected,” he answered. “We’ll discuss that later. In the meantime, we need to prepare.”

They knelt down, just outside the town where she could watch the aliens making the rounds. “Shoot the ones on the roof,” Lucas suggested. “The ones on the ground won’t be difficult. Follow my lead.”

He stood and began walking forward out in the open. Abby winced and quickly followed, laser pistol in hand. The Vitakarian on a nearby roof was turned away, so she took the shot and fired, and the sizzling beam burned right into the skull and he fell dead. She quickly aimed at the next alien sniper and repeated the shot, accomplishing the same thing.

The Muton patrol noticed them walking forward, but Lucas simply raised a hand and they froze. Just like Patricia, his eyes were a glowing purple and the air vibrated about him as he took control
of the aliens. He then waved them along, and the Mutons shambled past, oblivious to them.

Abby nodded in approval and they proceeded forth. Any rooftop soldiers were quickly taken out by her, and Lucas took control of any other aliens they ran into. Eventually they reached a house, a lone one on the end of a sandy cul-de-sac. “We might draw attention,” Lucas warned as they entered. “This is where you’ll come in. This will take all of my concentration, defend me if they come.”

“I have a pistol,” she reminded him as she took a position at the door. “I can’t hold off an army.”

“Then delay them,” he said, as he pulled out the orb and set it on a wooden table. “Be ready, agent, I’m going to start now.”

She nodded, but couldn’t help but watch as he began…whatever he was doing. His body was suddenly surrounded in a shimmering purple and a faint blue spark in the orb appeared. Then the humming started. Imperceptible at first, but it was growing louder and louder until it was literally all she heard. It was silent, but deafening at the same time.

She gritted her teeth as it persisted, and a roar in the distance caught her attention and she glanced out to see a squad of five Mutons charging towards the house, roaring in apparent pain. She aimed her pistol and fired, the red beam hitting one square in the face while the others immediately dove for cover behind rocks, or fell to one knee and began firing at her.

The humming must have affected their shots, since most were wildly inaccurate, but considering she was wearing no armor, it would only take one to kill her. The humming became nearly a shriek, boring into her mind. With a shout, she fired several beams at the Mutons, all of which missed. “Hurry up!” She screamed as a wave of agony washed over her, and the Mutons outside fell to the ground.

“Cease your fight, child,” a voice that was not Lucas’ and still came from his mouth said, clenching a fist sheathed in purple flame. “The aliens are mine.”

Then everything fell silent and Abby slumped to the ground, breathing hard. She looked over to where Lucas was standing, now in front of an orb that rippled a faint turquoise and radiating a clear light despite no visible power source. “I thought you said it was purple,” she muttered, stumbling over.

“I did,” he muttered, also looking at the orb. “Interesting. Perhaps it changes depending on species. But it worked,” a smile spread across his face. “The aliens are under my command now. Your job is done.”

“How is that possible?” She asked, looking outside. “Did you just... take them over? Are you controlling them now?”

“I consider myself fairly talented,” he said with a smile. “But not quite that talented. No, all for now is I simply altered their minds to not consider humans a threat. I’ll have to fine-tune their reactions later, but for now they will be docile to us.”

Abby would have to ask Patricia later to confirm just how possible that was. She didn’t trust Lucas nearly enough to take him at his word. “Then I guess we head back?” She asked, wincing as some remnants of the humming manifested themselves. “And what was with your voice?”

“Yes, we head back and unfortunately inform Harper that my formula was a failure,” he said, amused. “And psionic distortion. I’m sure you’ve heard it before. The intensity was more because
of the artifact, I assume.”

“I suppose,” Abby admitted, not quite convinced. Even Patricia hadn’t sounded like a completely different person. “But if it’s all the same to you, I don’t want to do that again.”

“Don’t worry, Miss Gertrude,” he chuckled. “I have no intention of putting you through that again.”

“Right,” she said, beginning to exit. “Let’s go.”

“Of course,” he said, following her. “Although I do have one request.”

Abby sighed. “And that is?”

“I’d prefer you address me by my title, at least when we are alone,” Lucas said, wincing as she did so. “It’s disconcerting whenever you think of me as Lucas. My title is the Chronicler, and I would prefer it stay that way.”

So Lucas wasn’t his real name. How shocking. Abby shrugged. “If you want, Chronicler. But we have a lot to discuss when we get back.”

“That we do,” he agreed. “And I think everything will work out just fine.”

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Central Command, Mars Forward Observation Station

It was rare to have two Ethereals in attendance at the same time. Three was unheard of.

Yet that was what was happening now. Ravarian had only expected himself, Quisilia and the Battlemaster to be in attendance as they discussed the attack on America. But no, the Battlemaster had apparently called anyone who was even remotely involved in this operation. Not that Ravarian minded, this was exactly what should be happening.

In addition to the three of them, Sicarius was also in attendance, standing in the shadows away from the main holotable, seemingly content to let them work out the details. Why she was here was probably something the Battlemaster was going to reveal. In addition the Battlemaster had also involved J’Loran and Lura’irinena’borelia, which told him that they were going to be heavily involved as well.

The Collective Andromedon Commander didn’t just appear for anyone, nor did the respected Director of the Lurainian. And now all of them were here. The Battlemaster stood opposite himself, flanked by J’Loran and Irinena, while Quisilia stood beside him.

“ADVENT will be expecting an attack,” the Battlemaster began, bringing up a map of the country. “Of all the countries in North America, the United States is the most important. Capture it, and we cripple ADVENT irreparably.”

“The campaign will take months to perform properly,” J’Loran warned in his slightly garbled and synthesized voice, which all Andromedons suffered from in wearing those bulky suits. “America will not fall easily, and there are many potential strongholds.”

“I am aware of that,” the Battlemaster stated coldly. “The Humans are intent on a war, and I intend to provide them with one. If it takes months or years, then so be it. Humans can only withstand so much conflict before breaking.”
“You have a strategy?” Ravarian asked, ready to get to the heart of the matter.

One thing he always appreciated about the Battlemaster was that he was always respectful to his subordinates, even when faced with rhetorical questions such as the one he’d posed. “Yes,” was all he said. “Irinena and Sicarius will first take Hawaii.”

“The island state?” Quisilia asked. “Is it necessary?”

“No, it is not,” the Battlemaster answered without apology. “But it will be a useful staging ground, small as it is. Its fall will serve us more symbolically.”

“But we’ll let them know we’re coming,” Ravarian pointed out. “Could we not attack the West Coast first, and then capture Hawaii? We would accomplish the same thing but with the element of surprise.”

“You are correct,” the Battlemaster said, looking down on him. “But I have no intention of a surprise attack. I want them to know we are coming. We suffered a defeat in Japan, and the Humans are overconfident. When they see the most powerful nation in the world fail to stop us, they will begin to panic and make mistakes.”

“Assuming we are successful,” Irinena said, baring her incisors. Ravarian suspected that the Borelian was not looking forward to capturing Hawaii, which by all accounts, was very hot. “XCOM is the unknown variable.”

“XCOM cannot stop an army alone,” J’Loran stated mechanically. “They have faced amateurs before. Wherever they strike, they will not find ground to stop us. I have studied them, I know what they can do now and my soldiers are prepared.”

“Be that as it may, if Patricia Trask or Aegis show up, we are going to have problems,” Ravarian insisted. “Ignoring that because of bravado is foolish.”

“We are not fools, Zar’Chon,” J’Loran responded. “If we are facing a superior foe, then we will retreat. But the truth is that the majority of XCOM is little more than slightly enhanced soldiers.”

“Let us return to the topic at hand,” Quisilia interrupted. “We capture Hawaii. Then what?”

“There are four major cities that we must take to establish a hold on the West Coast,” the Battlemaster began. “Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland and Seattle. All well-known cities and the capture of them will be an additional blow to morale. Furthermore, the majority are inland, which will allow us to establish ourselves well before marching on the cities themselves.”

“I will coordinate the attacks on Portland and Seattle,” J’Loran said. “Irinena will assist in this.”

“And I will lead the attack on San Francisco,” the Battlemaster continued. “As it is on the coast, we will be most vulnerable there. I will personally target their military bases and then assist should Los Angeles still be standing.”

“I suppose we should attempt to prepare for XCOM,” Ravarian said. “The question is if they will head to where you are, or try and avoid you.”

“Either way, I am prepared,” the Battlemaster assured him. “Patricia is powerless against me.”

“By showing yourself, you risk drawing Aegis out,” Quisilia pointed out. “If he has truly sided with XCOM, he may feel obligated to-“
“Aegis will not emerge,” the armored Ethereal interrupted flatly. “I know him very well, and he will not place himself into the conflict yet. It is too soon. Nor do I expect him to have the courage to kill one of his own. This ‘defection’ is nothing more than an ideological protest against the Imperator. When the Humans are on the verge of defeat, he will come back, having made his point.”

“There is another concern,” Ravarian added. “Mexico is not an issue yet, but should we not do something about Canada? If we continue pressing forward into America, the Canadians can flank us from the north.”

“Canada is not to be disturbed, per the Imperator’s orders,” the Battlemaster stated. “We have little to fear from them regardless. They are isolated, and refuse to join ADVENT. They are not a threat.”

Ravarian frowned. “Why does the Imperator want to ignore Canada?”

“He did not give a reason, just orders,” the Battlemaster answered. “And his orders will be followed.”

“I believe that covers the overview,” Quisilia said. “Now the only question is timing. The longer we wait, the more time ADVENT has to prepare.”

“It will not matter,” the Battlemaster warned. “It will take two weeks to assemble my Division and prepare them for the attack. Let the Humans prepare. Let them become complacent. Their fate is sealed, Quisilia. When I give the command, they will fall before us and will flee in terror.”

And Ravarian believed it. He had only seen the Battlemaster at work once, and that had been enough to convince him that when the Battlemaster became involved, the ground would become soaked with the blood of thousands and the brave would flee for their lives.

Because the Battlemaster was not simply a warrior, he was a hunter. And now, the entire human race was his prey.

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Supplementary Material

The Advent Directive

SECTION 6: ADVENT Intelligence

Subsection 6.1: Introduction

*Purpose:* ADVENT Intelligence serves to protect the members and nations of ADVENT from threats seen and unseen, known and unknown, outside and within. ADVENT Intelligence recognizes that many of the most dangerous threats start within, and only grow the longer they are left unchecked. Documented threats identified within the borders of ADVENT will be swiftly eliminated, regardless of status or position of the organization or person in question.

ADVENT Intelligence practices proactive intelligence, taking the initiative to identify potential issues and problems and then taking steps to deal with them. ADVENT Intelligence also recognizes the threats posed from foreign nations and extraterrestrial forces, and will work to negate, sabotage and remove any who would attempt to weaken or destroy ADVENT.

*Divisions:* ADVENT Intelligence is composed of several divisions, each with the purpose of
fulfilling a certain function within the organization.

- The Division of Field Operations (Foreign): This division focuses on operations that are directed towards foreign, non-ADVENT nations, the nature of which operations can vary drastically, though mostly focus on the removal and negation of government and military targets. The Chancellor of ADVENT must be appraised of all operations stemming from this division.

- The Division of Field Operations (Domestic): This division focuses on operations that are directed within ADVENT, the nature of these operations can also vary drastically, though is typically reserved for internal investigation of multiple State organizations. Because of the sensitive nature of these investigations, informing the Chancellor of ADVENT is left solely up to the discretion of the Director of ADVENT Intelligence.

- The Division of Field Operations (Extraterrestrial): This division focuses exclusively on intelligence operations against alien forces, using whatever means are necessary to negate the threat they pose to our planet. The Chancellor of ADVENT must be appraised of all operations stemming from this division.

- The Division of Analysis and Cryptography: This division focuses on the analysis of collected documents of all types and their usage thereof. It is also responsible for the encryption and decryption of all ADVENT ciphers and algorithms, as well as primarily responsible for breaking the codes of an alien or foreign nature.

- The Division of Cybersecurity: This division will focus exclusively on computer security for all facets of ADVENT, and be responsible for the creation, maintenance and protection of all security software to help ensure that all of ADVENT is securely protected from digital threats.

- The Division of Observation: This division watches private and state media within ADVENT to ensure that that all are in compliance with the directive and will take action if needed to neutralize those who are knowingly misleading or inciting people to violence. State media, private media, social media, all video streaming and posting sites, message boards and online forums, and the darknet are all under surveillance by this division.

- The Division of Computational Manipulation: This division is responsible for the offensive usage of computers against alien or foreign systems, as well as experimentation and development of new systems and algorithms of attack.

- The Division of Interrogation: This division oversees the questioning, debriefing and holding of people and aliens arrested by ADVENT Intelligence, and are responsible for the extraction of information from hostile agents, soldiers and terrorists.

- The Division of Intelligence Command: This division is technically overseeing all previously stated divisions, and is under the control of the Director of ADVENT Intelligence, and the support staff they have chosen. All major decisions regardless of division, must be approved by the Division of Intelligence Command.
It was a victory, and that concerned him.

If there was one thing that he could say for certain about the Ethereals, it was that they weren’t idiots. Yet from watching the various recordings and footage of the battle, he was surprised at the apparent lack of coordination and basic strategy. Were they really so overconfident to believe that if they simply threw enough soldiers at them they would win?

In all honesty, they probably could, but it would be an enormous and unnecessary investment for a war that he still didn’t believe they were fully invested in. True, they had held the advantage here, the defenders always would, but the defense had gone far better than he had anticipated. ADVENT had proven to be able to stand against the aliens on footing that slightly favored ADVENT, and that was greatly reassuring.

That being said, the fact that they had won…he didn’t want to say easily, but they had won without as much damage as he had anticipated, made him suspicious. Could this be a feint to lull them into a false sense of security? Or was it a genuine blunder? But if so, why would the Ethereals risk that to begin with?

At least there was an actual Ethereal on hand to discuss this with. Aegis, Zhang, and Jackson were all in attendance now to discuss the aftermath of the attack now that everything had calmed down. Patricia was getting some well-earned rest, and Vahlen and Shen were hard at work with their projects.

The Commander appreciated that Aegis was apparently…trying…to keep his aura under control, but he could see it visibly affecting Jackson and even Zhang to an extent. He was getting better at blocking it out, but every so often a cool confidence would overtake him, washing away all doubts and concerns.

Not what he wanted right now.

“Is this normally how ground campaigns are conducted?” The Commander asked Aegis as they stood around the holotable.

“No,” Aegis stated. “The Collective has never had to conduct a ‘ground campaign’ as you said. There has only been one major conflict in their history, and that was when the Battlemaster conquered the Mutons. This,” he gestured to the holotable. “Is unprecedented.”

Zhang grunted. “After hearing from Yates, I would have expected more from your strategy.”

“I agree,” Aegis said, curiosity tingling his voice. “This implies that there was someone inexperienced put in charge, or someone arrogant enough to automatically expect a victory.”

“And do you know who that would be?” The Commander asked.

Aegis breathed heavily. “I have some suspicions. It is possible that a Hive Commander or Andromedon was placed in charge, but even that is questionable.”
“I doubt it was an Andromedon,” Zhang muttered. “Those aliens were the only ones who actually knew what they were doing.”

“Agreed,” the Commander nodded. “After this battle, the Andromedons appear to be the most dangerous threat, outside of other Ethereals.”

“Andromedons are a double-edged sword, provided you can utilize them correctly,” Aegis dismissed. “They are powerful against almost every kind of infantry, but they are weak to psionics. The only reason they respect our authority in the Collective is because we have the means to control them anytime they wish.”

“Still, we can’t rely on that,” Jackson said. “But if Patricia could take them over like she did on the beach…” She smiled at the thought.

“The problem is that Patricia is only one woman,” the Commander pointed out. “Her display was impressive, but once the Collective puts a competent leader in charge, they will either spread Andromedons throughout their army evenly, or send something else to distract her.”

“You will not have to wait long for a competent leader,” Aegis warned ominously. “The Battlemaster will be taking command after this, you can be sure of it. The fact that he allowed this at all is surprising, and I can only assume he wanted to observe how ADVENT and XCOM operate. I am actually not dismissing the possibility of an Ethereal being in charge, albeit one without much experience.”

Zhang raised a skeptical eyebrow. “That seems unlikely.”

“Not as much as you might expect,” Aegis corrected. “Most Ethereals still do not believe you pose a credible threat, and likely believe you can be overwhelmed with sheer numbers. Arrogance and pride is an insidious ailment within our species, one which they will struggle to break, if they can at all.”

“Despite who was in charge, we can’t assume that it will always be this easy,” the Commander reflected, scratching his chin. “I expect the next time we will be faced with a much smarter enemy.”

“The question is where they will strike next,” Zhang said, looking down at the holotable. “They might try Japan again, or perhaps Africa.”

“If they were smart, they’d focus their efforts fully on Oceania,” Jackson pointed out. “But they seem to want to take that slowly and methodically. To their credit, the resistance forces there are making it hell for them.”

“Beyond strategic value, we should also consider the symbolic impact,” the Commander said after a few moments of thought. “The aliens will suffer a blow to morale, and they will want to make a statement. There is only one place where that would be possible: America.”

Jackson snorted. “Not if they’re smart. Sure, it would scare the people, but that would be the one thing that would destroy the brewing civil war over there. People aren’t going to speak out against ADVENT once they are saved from the aliens.”

“I agree,” Zhang nodded. “They would be smart to let America weaken itself as it debates over ADVENT. An attack would solidify their position for good.”

“Amusing,” Aegis interjected, and the Commander could almost imagine the Ethereal smirking. “You have illustrated the difference between Quisilia and the Battlemaster. Quisilia would likely
enjoy making America tear itself apart, no army required. The Battlemaster does not subscribe to that thought process. He will be looking to make a statement that solidifies the Collective as a dominant force. I agree with the Commander: America will come under attack next.”

Jackson almost grew somber at that, but perked up quickly. “If that actually happens, we have a good idea where they will attack.”

“The West Coast is the only realistic area,” the Commander agreed. “I’ll tell Saudia that she should reinforce that area. Maybe evacuate the larger cities.”

“I would be very careful in where you send your forces,” Aegis warned. “The Battlemaster will be leading the charge, and your soldiers as they are do not stand a chance against him. It is not an exaggeration to say that whatever city comes under direct attack by him is forfeit.”

“Perhaps we send Patricia once we have confirmation,” Jackson suggested. “She could certainly—”

“No.” Aegis hissed. “That is the worst possible answer. The Battlemaster is immune to mind control, and all you accomplish is losing your most powerful psion. The fact is that you do not have powerful enough psions to stop him.”

“Well, that’s why you’re here,” the Commander said. “Getting our psions powerful enough. And if pressed, you could participate as well.”

“Not yet,” Aegis refused. “It is too soon, and the potential consequences are not enough for me to expose myself yet. I will assist you in preparing your psions, but I will not fight the Battlemaster yet.”


“I am not,” Aegis answered. “But you should be. The Battlemaster will not end this war quickly. He is obsessed with ultimate victory. Territory will be taken methodically, all opposition destroyed along the way and he will leave behind cities locked down by his forces. He is perfectly willing to wage war for years to bring your species under control, but fortunately, that gives you time to fight back.”

“Then we probably shouldn’t delay,” the Commander nodded. “There is a lot we need to do. It’s time to bring roll out our genetic modification program for all our soldiers and psions. If what Vahlen has told me is accurate, they should be close to invincible.”

“A bold claim,” Zhang grunted. “I’d prefer she finished the Manchurian Program.”

The Commander shrugged. “I’m not concerned. Our science teams are large enough to run multiple projects at once. I have no doubt she’s working on it…although she does have a tendency to get personally involved in everything.”

“Just like you, apparently,” Jackson smirked. “No wonder you two are together.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “Very funny. So, anything else.”

“Actually, yes,” Jackson said, picking up her tablet. “I was forwarded this by ADVENT Intelligence. It’s…interesting.”

“Ah, right,” Zhang recalled. “I didn’t realize Elizabeth sent it to you as well.”

“What is it?” The Commander asked.
“Well, uh,” Jackson scowled. “It’s…a Twitter feed.”

“And this is interesting why?” The Commander wondered aloud.

“Well, take a look for yourself,” Jackson said, handing him the tablet. The Commander wasn’t exactly well-versed in much social media, but he knew how to operate it, and found himself quite surprised to see that the avatar of this particular user appeared to be a cartoon rendition of an Ethereal similar to Aegis, giving a thumbs up.

Well, he could already agree with Jackson’s assessment of interesting. That, and the user called itself @TheGreatQ. He looked up. “Is this real?”

“That was exactly what Elizabeth said when she sent this to me,” Zhang said, the faintest smile on his face.

“It got the attention of ADVENT Intelligence when it started apparently live-tweeting the battle,” Jackson continued, visibly trying to maintain some measure of professionalism. “That isn’t completely odd, but what was suspicious was the high quality of the images and video he referenced. That and the content was fairly graphic. Just look through the feed and you’ll see.”

With a growing sense of curiosity, the Commander began scrolling through, and the collection was…quite something. One was a short clip of some alien shooting an ADVENT soldier directly in the head, with the accompanying commentary:

Another soldier falls to the might of the Collective! #headshot #victory #winning

Then there was an image of a heated firefight between ADVENT and the aliens, with the caption:

The fighting has begun! Good luck to our liberating forces! #invasion #encouragement

It became more amusing when whoever this was realized the battle was being lost, as one of the later tweets was an image of the Star Trek facepalm meme with a battle photoshopped image of an Ethereal helm on the head, with the accompanying caption:

MFW our superior army gets beaten by a species that hasn’t even mastered spaceflight. #incompetent #sigh #invasion

The Commander looked up at Aegis. “Is this who I think it is?”

Aegis reached out and took the tablet, while Jackson gave some more information. “So yeah, and that apparently isn’t the only one like that. This account is linked to Facebook and Reddit account of similar names, and seems to be pretty active on them as well.”

“I’m not sure if I want this to be real or not,” the Commander said slowly. “That’s…bizarre.”

“You know him,” Zhang said to Aegis. “Is this something Quisilia would do?”

A pause. “Unfortunately, yes,” Aegis confirmed. “This is definitely something he would do for his own amusement.”

“That…seems like a really bad security issue,” the Commander said slowly. “He does know we can read this right?”

“Probably,” Aegis sighed. “He is likely expecting it.”

Zhang snorted. “The alien wants to get cute? Fine. At least human sites are easier to circumvent. He’s definitely making a mistake.”

“I wouldn’t dwell on it,” Aegis said. “This is likely a distraction from actual threats. I have an idea
on how to take advantage of this, but I will need to think on it some more.”

“We’ll deal with Twitter-using Ethereals later,” the Commander sighed, realizing how far off-topic they’d gone. “But we have more important work to do now. Dismissed.”

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The Praesidium, Barracks

To date, Jamali had never been in a situation even remotely close to the chaos that was in Japan. He’d been in several skirmishes of course, as was to be expected in Iraq, but usually just fighting criminals and terrorists. Front-line combat was significantly different from the brief intense shootouts in abandoned alleys.

After destroying the UFO, he’d gotten Iida some medical attention and rejoined Carmelita as they mopped up what remained of the alien forces, which by then were in full retreat. Jamali wondered exactly how many kills Carmelita had gotten, since it seemed like whenever he looked, she was getting kill after kill, or wounding the ones she couldn’t.

It made him feel somewhat…mediocre in comparison. He was just a regular human, not enhanced like her or psionic like Matthew, who had wrecked a good portion of the alien forces all by himself. Although, he wasn’t sure he’d also enhance himself if given the chance either. It was…well, unnatural, no matter how you felt about it. Humans weren’t supposed to be able to jump entire stories or crush enemies with their minds.

He shook his head and pushed those thoughts out of his mind. Not the right time or place for such talk, especially in light of their victory. Although Sai-Kee had been killed and Inori presumably captured, the soldiers were in high spirits. He had been as well, before reality set back in and he realized that this would be the first of many such battles.

Still though, that would have been cause for celebration, and he might have even joined in had he not done the stupid thing and decided to check in on the state of the Middle East, which the majority of XCOM soldiers seemed to have forgotten about.

“You look oddly gloomy,” Fakhr commented, walking up with a smile. “Doesn’t suit you, especially since not many here can claim to have utterly executed an entire Muton team by themselves.”

Jamali flushed slightly at that. He hadn’t expected that particular feat to garner that much attention in comparison to Carmelita, or Patricia’s utter dominance of the alien forces. But it had spread pretty fast and he’d received compliments from multiple soldiers, congratulating him on his kill count and rallying an attack on a UFO with limited forces.

It was nice to be recognized, but it wasn’t as though it was an act of genius. Most people would have likely come up with something similar. Although they might not have been as good a shot as himself. “I guess you heard about it as well?” He told her.

“Better, I watched it,” she amended. “Suffice to say I was pretty impressed.”

She watched…oh, right. Jamali remembered that all footage from the armor cams was available to XCOM soldiers. Now that he remembered that, he was considering watching Carmelita’s footage. It would be interesting, or maybe Patricia’s. “Thanks,” he told Fakhr. “Though I’m sure you killed your fair share.”

“Oh yes,” she smirked. “Nothing quite like using rockets to blow up Mechtoids. The damn things
just like standing in one place and not moving. Makes them pitifully easy to deal with. But really
though,” she nodded down to the tablet in his hand. “What’s going on?”

Wasn’t she curious. “I’m checking on the situation in the Middle East,” he said evenly. “Nothing
more than that.”

That turned her more serious, and she fortunately didn’t question why he decided to look that up,
even knowing the likely answer. He supposed if there was anyone who would respect his
perspective it was her, which he found extremely ironic in light of where she was from. “What’s
changed?” She asked, taking a seat on the bunk opposite him.

“Israeli and American forces invaded Iraq,” he revealed as nonchalantly as possible. “Guess it’s all
technically ADVENT now, but those are the primary contributors.”

She pursed her lips. “I’m sorry that this is happening.”

He noticed she didn’t apologize, or say that what was happening wasn’t justified. Probably as close
to an apology as he could expect from her. He supposed what she was getting at was that she
sympathized with him, and he supposed that if the roles were reversed, he might not object to
invading Israel if they were behind an attempted assassination of Iraq’s leaders.

But it didn’t make it easier. “Thanks. I hope it ends quickly. They can’t hold out against ADVENT.
More people are just going to die unnecessarily.”

Fakhr nodded grimly, brushing a lone curl out of her face. “I don’t know what really to say. I want
to give some reassurance that things will work out, but…” she sighed. “I can’t promise that. Not all
Israeli officers are particularly lenient, especially after spending decades surrounded by enemies.”

“At least you’re honest,” Jamali said. “You don’t really have any control over it.”

“No,” she muttered. “But I can make some educated guesses. Do you have family?”

“Yes, my parents and three sisters,” he said, glad to somewhat change the subject. “All of them are
living in Baghdad, so they will likely be safe from the worst of the fighting.”

“three sisters?” She asked incredulously. “How did you survive?”

Despite himself, Jamali chuckled. “I managed. The oldest one was living away when I was young,
and the other two were younger than me, and mostly kept to themselves. Could have been worse,
but my sisters never gave me any trouble. What about you?”

“Only child,” she answered. “I could never decide if siblings were something I wanted or not. But
it all worked out alright, I suppose. I enjoyed the solitude even if it was sometimes lonely. Is
military service part of your family?”

“No really,” Jamali said. “One of my uncles was an officer, but nothing beyond that. Soldiers
made my parents nervous, especially during the War on Terror. Needless to say they were
surprised when I decided to join.”

“Well, they’d probably be proud to see you made it to XCOM,” Fakhr said with a small smile.
“Only the very best get here, so I’ve heard.”

Jamali pondered that. “I doubt they know. Even if they did, now they might consider me a traitor.
XCOM supports ADVENT, right?”
Fakhr’s lips twitched. “Yes we do. Officially, anyway. And I don’t see the Commander stepping in to stop it.”

“I doubt he could even if he wanted to,” Jamali shrugged. “XCOM isn’t supposed to meddle in these kind of affairs.”

“Maybe, but I wouldn’t count on ‘rules’ being something to stop the Commander,” Fakhr said. “I have a feeling that if he wanted something done, he’d do it regardless of what was expected. But I think this situation will get better soon.”

“I hope so,” Jamali sighed. “I really do.”

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The Praesidium, Psionic Testing Chambers

The few days of rest was exactly what Patricia needed after the battle. She hadn’t anticipated how much that would take out of her, but given how she presumably single-handedly turned the tide of the battle, it probably wasn’t a surprise how easy it would be to tire herself out. Only thing to do was train to get better.

The Testing Chambers were perfect for this; open spaces she’d helped design with Shen to test out various powers on dummies, targets, and several prisoners Vahlen had loaned to hone telepathic abilities. She and Aegis were still working out the training program, but she believed it was good enough for now, and they needed psions.

Such as the woman in front of her, who was staring at her, apparently torn between confusion and disbelief. “You’re kidding,” Allison Monder said flatly. “I’m psionic?”

“According to Vahlen’s reports, yes,” Patricia said, glancing down at the tablet in her hand to double-check. “Fairly gifted as well, should you elect to undergo the awakening.”

Allison raised an eyebrow. “I’m getting a choice?”

“Yes,” Patricia affirmed. “More psions are needed, but is not something that everyone can, or should, wield. I believe you are capable of utilizing this gift responsibly, as does Haley here,” Haley gave a slight nod in affirmation, and an encouraging smile to the unsure woman. “But you know yourself best. If you turn this down, we will find others.”

“Wait,” Allison interrupted, raising a hand and turning her ice-blue eyes on the smiling psychologist. “Was that the reason you were asking all those prying questions earlier?”

“One of the reasons,” Haley admitted freely. “We can’t have unstable people running loose with highly destructive powers now, can we?”

“Allison bit her lip absently and Patricia could sense she was conflicted. The temptation to
peek into her mind was there, but Patricia knew that would be a dangerous road to go down. This was an important decision, and as such she was impressed Allison was treating it so seriously. However, she expected she would accept. Haley had correctly identified everyone so far, and only forwarded the ones who would likely be open to accepting, and so far she had been completely accurate.

“Do you want to think it over?” Patricia asked after a couple minutes of silence. “I would prefer the decision soon, but not necessarily right now.”

“No…” Allison said slowly. “I’m just…getting used to the idea. I honestly didn’t expect anything like this. I’ll do it, like you said, we need as many psions as possible.”

Patricia smiled. “Excellent. Haley, put her down for a time tomorrow.”

“Happily,” Haley confirmed, jotting it down immediately. “Miss Monder, I’ve forwarded everything you need for the appointment and some recommendations to your private mail.”

“Thank you,” Allison said, inclining her head. “I’ll be here on time.” With that, she saluted and marched off, leaving the two of them alone.

“You cut it close,” Patricia told Haley, turning to her. “I sensed her hesitating. She could have easily turned it down.”

“But she didn’t,” Haley said, almost smugly, but the woman hid it with her constant professional mannerisms. “Allison is conditioned to follow her superiors. She has been stuck in mediocrity her whole life, never excelling. Give her the opportunity for change, combined with a superior officer asking her, and I knew she would agree.”

“Can’t disagree with that.” Patricia agreed, once more impressed by Haley’s methodical assessment. She had been somewhat skeptical when the Commander suggested bringing her on, but after working with, and being examined by her, she knew why the Commander had insisted. She had an analytical mind that rivaled her own, and was a pure professional, as well as easy to talk to.

Privately, Patricia suspected that Haley wasn’t comfortable with psions, and her in particular, but as long as that didn’t interfere, she had no issues with it. “So in total we’ll have six new psions,” Patricia recalled. “Good enough, until you identify more.”

“Well won’t be for some time,” Haley said, slightly adjusting her glasses. “I’ll be closely monitoring this batch to ensure there are no negative mental side effects. Not everyone is as resilient as you. It will take time to get through the rest of the new batch of soldiers, and I’ve got my eye on several other ones.”

“Oh, who?” Patricia asked. “You have concerns?”

She could sense Haley’s cold concern, which fascinated her about the psychologist. Haley was highly focused on problems, not necessarily people, which was a far cry from what she expected, especially since their goal was to help people. And Haley did, but it came from a place of practicality, not concern for their well-being. A well-adjusted soldier was much better than an unstable one.

Although if she was truly a woman who cared about the well-being of everyone, she probably would have refused to work with XCOM out of pure principle, but she had been instrumental in helping identify weaknesses in potential political threats, aliens, and provided advice to help control Vahlen’s test subjects, as well as being heavily involved in the Manchurian Program.
Not an ordinary psychologist, that was for certain.

“Yes,” Haley looked up at Patricia. “You have heard about the situations in America and the Middle East?”

Patricia almost rolled her eyes. “Of course I have. Is that an issue?”

“No yet, but it could be soon,” Haley warned, crossing her arms. “One of the soldiers, Jamali Muhammad, is from Iraq, which is currently under attack from ADVENT. I might talk to him later, help him through any issues he’s having. Ignore him and he might become an issue, especially since XCOM supports ADVENT.”

“Fair enough,” Patricia nodded. “Though he seems fine, from what I can tell.”

Haley frowned. “No offense, Patricia, but you’re not exactly qualified to answer that question. I’d rather be sure, all the same. The bigger issue is the Americans.”

“I highly doubt that a few riots are going to cause issues,” Patricia said flatly. “Or how the Peacekeepers responded. They did their jobs, big deal.”

“Spoken like a true foreigner,” Haley chided. “Most Americans are nationalists, if you haven’t learned that by now, and most of their military is as well. Do remember that ADVENT is a foreign entity that has essentially taken over the United States. Naturally, that makes some people angry, and I highly doubt some of the Americans here are particularly happy knowing they’re now part of a world government without any diplomatic say.”

That was a good point. “And you think this is a big problem?”

“No,” was the not-quite-reassuring answer. “But I’ve been following the situation. In my estimation, it will get worse before it gets better. Once some news anchor gets arrested by Saudia’s Peacekeepers, all hell is going to break loose there. The point here is that the American soldiers with us might become disillusioned or resentful, neither of which are conducive.”

“Fair point,” Patricia nodded, frowning. “However, I don’t see much we can do. Unless you want me to psionically change their minds?”

It was a half-joke, but one Haley didn’t find funny judging from her sudden emotional flare and furrowed forehead. “No. All we can do is monitor them now. The good news is that the Commander is American, and as long as the aliens dominate their minds, they won’t think of other issues. Keep them focused on the real threat and we should be fine.”

“Shame he died,” Haley mused, tucking her tablet under her arm. “He seemed like a nice man. Smart and did his job well. But boring, which in this case would not be an issue.”
“I’ll let you do your job,” Patricia said, walking away. “Now that we have the psions, I need to talk with Aegis about how to properly introduce him.”

“Do that,” Haley nodded. “But please, for the love of God, don’t just bring them to Aegis. Break the news to them away from said Ethereal.”

Patricia chuckled. “Don’t worry, I’ll be sure to do that.”

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The Praesidium, Barracks

Sierra was getting very distracted with the way Nati was idly tapping his finger on the table. It wasn’t anything deliberately distracting, but for whatever reason it kept getting her attention, maybe because she was too caught up thinking about what he was saying. “So basically what you’re saying is that it felt weird?”

Nati hesitated before answering. “I suppose so. Odd is a better word. Nothing was wrong, just… different. Clear.”

“Because of Patricia,” Sierra clarified, nodding. “And her mind tricks.”

“Hey, you should look at my kill count,” Nati said, raising an eyebrow. “I’m not complaining. Whatever she did, she definitely made me a lot better. Everything was so much clearer.”

“Alright,” Sierra said, resting her arms on the table. “So how does that work exactly?”

“You should ask her,” Nati shrugged. “I’m not a psion. But what also helped was that I somehow knew where most of the aliens were, even not seeing them myself. It’s sort of what I imagine a hive mind would be like, although without the drawbacks.”

“And that isn’t a little bit concerning?” Sierra asked incredulously. “That is not the best example you could have chosen to illustrate it. She’s reading your mind and you’re ok with it?”

“I don’t think it works like that,” Nati said, leaning back in his chair. “Why don’t you ask her, or maybe Creed? I don’t know her, but I do know that I definitely don’t have a problem with it. Thanks to her we did win pretty decisively.”

“Right, because of course she is going to give me a straight answer,” Sierra answered sarcastically. “’Noo, Sierra, I definitely don’t occasionally read people’s minds. You really have nothing to worry about.’ Please.”

“Why not ask Creed then?” Nati asked. “He says she doesn’t.”

“Because he is such an unbiased source,” Sierra retorted with a snort. “C’mon, really?”

Nati chuckled. “Fair point. Why so confrontational? I’d think you’d be happy we won?”

Sierra sighed, and rubbed her head. “Yeah, yeah, I know. And I am, and I really do want to actually get out there and fight. But this place is…strange to me. It’s weird. Things that should be bothering people are just overlooked, stuff that is questionable is just accepted. It’s like a place where reality only revolves around the damn aliens.”

Nati almost smirked at her. “You do realize you’re in XCOM, right? A place where our job is literally fighting aliens?”
“Smartass,” Sierra scowled. “Ignore the aliens for a minute and just think. If it was discovered that some humans had the ability to read thoughts and lift things into the air with their minds, what exactly do you think the reaction would be?”

“A lot of confusion and fear, probably,” Nati shrugged.

“Exactly,” Sierra nodded. “But I haven’t seen anything like that here. Everyone is way too convinced that every single psion can be trusted and that the Commander has our best interests in mind.”

“Have you considered that it might be true?” Nati asked slowly, looking at her seriously. “I’m as new as you, but from what I’ve seen the trust here in both Patricia and the Commander is well-placed. I’m not completely sure why you’re so suspicious. Do you know something I don’t?”

“Call it a gut feeling,” she muttered unconvincingly. “Yeah, I know, but in my experience, people with that kind of power don’t use it. They might be doing it for reasons they can justify, but that doesn’t mean it’s not happening. I guess I don’t like the idea of anyone reading my mind, good person or no.”

“Fair enough,” Nati nodded. “But like it or not, this is reality now. Psions are going to only get more common. Don’t forget that they’re still humans, not some alien hybrid.”

“I know,” she sighed. “But I’m not sure I trust the Commander to do the right thing with them.”

“Oh?” He raised an eyebrow. “Why is that?”

“Mainly because of the company he keeps,” Sierra explained, wondering if he would even care or understand. “I don’t suppose you’ve been keeping up with the rest of the world?”

“ADVENT invaded Iraq,” Nati said. “The Russian branch is going deep into Iran, but other than that, not much. Brazil is still flaunting their power, but I’m pretty sure the Chancellor is going to come down on them soon.”

“Not as big a story, but I don’t exactly like how ADVENT just took over America,” Sierra said. “And worse was that when some people protested it for obvious reasons, ADVENT just sent their so-called Peacekeepers and shut them down.”

“They were rioting, right?” Nati asked.

“It wasn’t a riot,” Sierra interrupted. “It was several idiots who decided to pick a fight and ruined it for everyone. Naturally ADVENT took that as reason enough to practically silence any other message that gathering might have sent. Which I guess fits in with what they want.”

“I sympathize, I do,” Nati said, scratching his chin. “Israel is also under ADVENT now too, remember. I think we differ in if that’s a bad thing or not. The world will need to come together eventually, and ultimately I think it’s for the best. No one likes change, but considering the circumstances, I think it was necessary here.”

“I might agree, if this Chancellor wasn’t from the fucking Illuminati,” Sierra clarified. “Seriously, just watch her anytime she speaks. She wants complete control over the world and she’s getting it. Have you looked at the people she’s put in charge of the various agencies?”

“I’m not familiar with the Chancellor’s cabinet, no,” Nati admitted. “But I doubt she’s picking unqualified people.”
“I guess that depends on what you view as unqualified,” Sierra said. “She put a psychopath in charge of the Peacekeepers, so I’m not exactly convinced she’s really concerned about the well-being of citizens.”

“Stein, right?” Nati asked, frowning. “I’ve heard of her before. ‘Psychopath’ never came to mind. A little cold, but nothing like that.”

“She did an interview a few days ago,” Sierra said, shifting in her seat. “I’m not exactly sure why Saudia allowed her to do it, unless it was to scare the hell out of people. Anyone who is fine with killing a child is not someone I want in charge of law enforcement.”

Nati snorted. “Come on, she didn’t really say that.”

“Oh, yes she did,” Sierra said. “She definitely said something along the lines of ‘if they commit murder, they deserve to die.’”

“Oh, that makes sense,” Nati nodded. “That…honestly isn’t an issue for me. Why shouldn’t they be punished?”

“You’re missing the point,” Sierra scowled. “There should be punishment, but I don’t think they should be killed for it. These are kids, remember, not adults.”

Nati pursed his lips. “That is a debate I don’t think we’ll agree on, but we’ve gotten off-topic. Why does all of this make you distrust the Commander? If Saudia ever steps out of line, I’m sure he has plans to keep her on track.”

“That’s the point,” Sierra stated. “He hasn’t done anything. Which implies, at least to me, that he’s perfectly ok with what’s happening. And since what is happening makes me uncomfortable, it makes me not trust him as much as everyone else seems to. Just because he’s good at fighting aliens doesn’t mean he should be influencing the world, because it doesn’t seem to be turning out that well.”

“Well, we wouldn’t have won that battle if not for ADVENT,” Nati pointed out. “You might not like them, but the fact is that they are a necessity, and the world is changing. It’ll take some getting used to, but it’s not going to be stopped and agonizing over all the bad news in the world is, quite honestly, pointless. If things get unreasonable, I’m sure the Commander will step in, but in the meantime, none of that is going to stop the aliens.”

“Right,” Sierra muttered. “Because that is the only thing we should be concerned about.”

“It is,” Nati said, standing up. “I was serious when I said you should talk to Patricia, or hell, even the Commander. This kind of distrust isn’t really healthy, and I do think they’d be willing to talk. If not that, maybe take some time for yourself. Beat up some people in the ring. Don’t stress yourself out over things you can’t control.”

“Duly noted,” Sierra said, half-sarcastically. “Thanks for talking anyway. Sorry to be such a downer.”

“No problem,” he smiled. “Tell you what, why not come with me to get some food. Otherwise I think you’re just going to sit there and get more depressed.”

“Probably,” Sierra admitted, standing up. “Alright, deal. I’m hungry anyway.”

Nati waved to the door. “After you, ma’am.”
“Cute,” Sierra mocked, rolling her eyes, but did take the lead as they left, and she did have to agree that some time focused on something else was probably for the best. For now, anyway.

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The Praesidium, Barracks

It was much easier for Nuan to recount the actual events of the battle rather than enduring it herself. Common sense, but now that the adrenaline had long faded and she could objectively overview the situation, she had performed…adequately. Not exceptionally, to her shame, but good enough that the SSF would be satisfied.

While writing her report, she had debated trying to emphasize the chaotic nature of the combat, and had actually attempted it before realizing that she wasn’t nearly a good enough writer to convey what being in the center of that battle really was like. So instead she focused on what she knew: Cold, hard facts and analysis.

Details of the initial attacks, descriptions of the opposing forces (with video evidence included), tactics noted and used, as well as additional notes, concerns and descriptions as she saw fit. If nothing else, even if participating in the battle had scared her, she couldn’t deny that it gave her a perspective that she would never have known without being there.

No one had asked yet why she was sitting alone at a table with her laptop, typing away, but she didn’t mind. Being Chinese, she wasn’t surprised that a good portion of the soldiers avoided her, and at the moment that only helped her concentration. Although she had gotten a few curious looks, but didn’t feel the need to socialize with the soldiers yet, if ever. It was unlikely that she would be able to find common ground with many here; the differences between herself and the majority were too vast to be overlooked.

She paused typing to take a quick sip from her glass of water, a short break before moving to the section she was unsure how to properly document without causing a panic in the PLA commanders. Psionics was something China had been aggressively trying to research as soon as they learned XCOM had psions, but to the best of her knowledge, they had been unsuccessful.

At least in the SSR, there was a clear suspicion of psionics, with quite a few not wanting anything to do with them. Too much power for one person was always the issue, and after the displays she’d seen, Nuan was convinced that attempting to control a psion would be difficult at best. That being said…one such psion had been the only reason they’d gotten out alright, and another had been a major reason why the battle had been won in the first place.

It was going to be exceptionally difficult to portray them as extremely dangerous, but not necessarily a threat to China. As much as she disliked how the Commander treated China in the past, she didn’t believe he posed a threat, and neither did the psions under him. The problem was that every officer that read the description of one woman mind-controlling an entire army, or another making teams of soldiers invulnerable, or one lifting enemies into the air with a gesture was going to immediately jump to the worst-case scenario of “What if that is turned on us?”

Nuan sighed and pinched her forehead. That was the issue here: Keeping tensions between XCOM and China more or less even. She just needed to report on what was happening from the front, but the more she thought about it, the more the possibility of China overreacting was a possibility. It shouldn’t be, but if they read this and did something rash out of fear…then the Commander, or worse, ADVENT, might be fully justified in responding, which was the last thing she wanted.

She was beginning to realize why the Commander had been fine with her entering XCOM, despite
the bad blood between them and China. It was because he knew that China was essentially boxed in from doing anything to harm XCOM. Anything they did to try and curtail or respond, publically at least, would be a predictable response. He was planning for her to help drive China into a rash decision.

She scowled at that thought. Perhaps she was just tired and her mind was warped into thinking of conspiracies. The problem was that she wasn’t sure it was one. What if she was somehow contributing to the Commander’s grand plan regarding China? Because she definitely knew he had one. She looked at the bright screen with the document filled with black characters.

She seemed to have two options: Be as accurate as possible and describe what she’d seen and knew, while trying to emphasize the fact that XCOM wasn’t a threat yet. Or she could do something unthinkable.

Lie.

A lie of omission, but a lie nonetheless. Instead of giving the full story about the role psionics played, she could downplay it, make it seem like it was a useful tool, not an ability that could change the tide of an entire battle. Could she even do that and not be challenged? The only source that would completely dispute that would be the archived footage from their armor, and she knew China wouldn’t have that.

But…no, no. No possible way that would work. The battle was too public, she’d be either labeled as incompetent or a traitor, when neither were true. She quickly closed her laptop, taking short breaths as she realized what she had almost done. Never in her life had she considered lying or forging reports for her superiors. That was only something traitors considered, or the irredeemably desperate.

But she’d done it, if only for a minute, but not out of selfishness or as a way to damage China, but to potentially save it from doing something terrible. Did that make it…excusable? Or was it the rationale other traitors began considering before they defected? Maybe both. A voice said. It reminded her of a saying she’d heard from several Americans.

*The path to hell is paved with good intentions.*

And the path to treason was paved with lying to superiors. She shook her head, getting her breathing back under control. No. She had to do her job right, and hope that they were rational enough to consider carefully before doing anything rash.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” a voice commented, making her jump.

“Sorry,” Iosif apologized, taking a seat opposite her. “Didn’t realize you were that deep in thought.”

“Accepted,” she said, flushing a little. “I didn’t see you.”

“Accepted,” she said, flushing a little. “I didn’t see you.”

“Hmm, true,” he acknowledged, smiling. “So what’s wrong?”

She blinked. “Nothing.”

He gave a dramatic sigh. “I may not be Patricia,” he told her. “But I can sense emotions. You were scared, briefly, but it was there. And you’ve been sitting at that table for four hours straight. Ignoring why, it doesn’t seem like you’re in the best frame of mind for anything.”

Oh, she wanted to facepalm before opening her mouth like that. It was one thing she needed to
emphasize about psions. You couldn’t distinguish them for regular people normally. Iosif himself only appeared to be a well-built, tall, brown-haired Russian. She would never suspect him of being a psion, or for that matter, any of them.

As for her response now, she wasn’t sure. Denying it would be pointless, but she didn’t want to explain the exact circumstance since he did probably work directly with Patricia, and her with the Commander. “Nothing…major,” she began. “But…have you ever considered doing a wrong thing for good reasons?”

“An interesting philosophical question,” Iosif answered, resting his arms on the table. “But to give you an answer, yes, of course. But I feel it was inevitable in my line of work.”

She searched her mind…what was Iosif before? Russian special forces probably. CT agent? Something else? Either way worked, but that kind of example wasn’t exactly the problem she had now. “Not something simple,” she clarified, struggling how best to articulate it. “Something…important. That your superiors might object to.”

“Now that is different,” Iosif paused, glancing up before answering. “I will admit that I’ve had ideas that my superiors definitely wouldn’t have approved of, although I never considered them good enough to actually risk. I’d probably only consider it if the potential consequences were worse than getting caught.”

All well and good, but the problem now was that there were too many factors to consider. Maybe she was being paranoid. Maybe she had too little faith in her superiors. Maybe she was just tired. How could she alone determine if the risk was appropriate? Not that it mattered, since she was going to purge that traitorous thought from her mind. “Makes sense. So what are you doing?”

“Talking to you,” he answered knowingly. “In all seriousness, I am curious exactly what you are working on there.” He nodded to her closed laptop.

Nuan supposed it wouldn’t hurt. It wasn’t as though it was a secret. “It’s my report to the PLA Strategic Support Force. Detailing the Battle of Japan.”

“Oh, you have to send report?” He asked, raising an eyebrow. “Interesting.”

“China wants to know the actual details of what is happening,” Nuan shrugged. “And that’s why I was sent here, to make sure any information isn’t distorted.”

“Alright, then question,” Iosif said. “What’s to stop you from sending XCOM secrets to the Chinese?”

“Impossible,” Nuan stated flatly. “The Commander isn’t an idiot. He has to approve each document before it gets sent. I’m not reporting any secrets of XCOM that aren’t already public. It’s a win-win for both parties. China stays informed, and XCOM gets a soldier.”

“I’ll admit, that’s surprisingly reasonable,” Iosif nodded, sounding impressed. “I was under the impression that China and XCOM don’t get along.”

“We don’t,” Nuan grunted. “But China knows XCOM is the most knowledgeable about the aliens, and for better or worse, will be instrumental in this war. It doesn’t do any good to have a poor relationship with them. We both want the aliens gone, and some compromises have to be made.”

“So you’re a peace offering?” Iosif questioned.

“In a sense,” Nuan agreed, albeit reluctantly. “Showing that both of us can work together.”
“And that’s it?” Iosif asked, with a slight smile. “Nothing to do with the last Chinese agent that got sent here.”

Nuan stiffened at the mention of Shun. “No.”

Iosif now had a full smile. “Remember, I can tell if someone is lying.”

“My mission has nothing to do with former agent Shun Anwei,” she said, keeping her voice cool and mechanical. “She is just a foreign agent.”

“Strong choice of words,” Iosif mused. “Although I’d think you’d prefer the term traitor.”

“Would that be inaccurate?” She asked coldly. “What would you call abandoning your country for a rival organization?”

“I never said it was inaccurate,” Iosif said, growing more serious as he leaned forward. “By your definition, she is most certainly a traitor to China, and were I in your position, I would likely be just as furious. But I have a question for you: Did you ever wonder why she switched her loyalty to XCOM?”

“No,” Nuan stated flatly. “And I do not care. Her reasons don’t change facts, and treason is something that can’t be forgiven or forgotten.”

Iosif nodded. “Perhaps not, but it can be understood.”

“And I suppose you know why?” Nuan asked.

“I don’t know the details, but I know she had good reasons,” Iosif answered. “I suppose your view on her would be if you value China over humanity. She chose the latter and stuck with XCOM, and I can’t disagree with her.”

“Those two things are not mutually exclusive,” Nuan pointed out. “I can be loyal to China and care about humanity at the same time. Please don’t defend her for the sake of it. You will not convince me otherwise.”

Iosif didn’t seem perturbed; instead simply nodding. “As you wish.”

There was a stretch of time that passes before Nuan sighed, not wanting it to end quite this way. “I wanted to say thank you. I doubt we would have survived without you.”

“Appreciated,” he said. “That is my job, after all. But you did your part; all of us did as best we could. No shame in retreating from unwinnable battles.”

“Still,” she insisted. “It wasn’t nothing.”

“Maybe not,” he chuckled. “Was that your first taste of combat?”

“On that scale,” she admitted, looking down at the polished table. “I’d been in some firefights, but I’m not a pure soldier like most here. I took the ‘support’ part of my job seriously. It was…well, almost overwhelming at first. But you probably felt that.”

“I suspected as much,” Iosif confirmed. “But you held up well. I was impressed. It only gets more natural from here and the calmer you are, the better you perform.”

“I hope so,” Nuan said, opening up her laptop again. “Thanks, Iosif. I should probably finish this soon. The Commander will need some time to review it, after all, and deadlines are taken
seriously.”

“I won’t keep you then,” he promised. “Although once you’re finished, I wouldn’t mind reading your take for myself.”

Nuan hesitated. “I’m not sure I can do that.”

“Ah well, worth a try,” he said, getting up. “See you around.”

He left her alone, and she returned to writing. Now that he had brought it up, she did wonder if she was allowed to show other soldiers her reports. Maybe she could include a short clarification when she sent this, maybe frame it as ‘additional consultants’ or something. Iosif might be useful, and maybe make her descriptions of psionics not as volatile as she probably was.

Something to think about for sure, but for later. Now she had to finish this report and hope she wasn’t making things worse.

Northern Territory, Australia

Abby glanced at the man on the cot while she put away her tools to be sterilized, and threw out her disposable gloves and mask. The good news was that here, the injuries were not extreme in the least and could be treated pretty easily. It felt good, putting her surgical skills to actual use, and she was pleased how easily everything came back to her. It was soothing in a way, much less thinking required than her trying to puzzle out exactly what to do next.

Her mission here had now become a lot more complicated, now with the Chronicler intending to build an army of aliens under his control to fight back. He was a powerful psion, that much was clear, and she figured she might as well hear him out before telling anyone else about him. And she had quite a few questions for the elderly man, who had proven to be a lot more than he seemed.

The wounded man was coming out of his drug-induced sleep, blinking slowly as he focused on her. “Am I dead?” He asked.

“Nope,” she answered, walking over and making some notes on her tablet. He’d come out of it pretty quickly and was speaking clearly. A good sign. “A nasty wound, but nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“Who are you?” He asked dizzily. “I didn’t think we had any medics…”

“You don’t,” Abby clarified. “I’m just doing this to help out. Rest now, ok? You’ll be fighting the aliens soon enough.”

“Right…” his eyes rolled back into his head and it fell back on the pillow. Abby smirked. He needed the rest and would pull through fine. Good news for Harper. She left him in the tent and walked out into the now-dark camp. She rubbed her eyes, realizing that she needed rest of her own.

“Thank you,” Harper said, coming up. “I didn’t expect you to do this much for us.”

“No need,” Abby said, giving a weary smile. “I…needed that. It’s feels good to actually help people again.”

“Lucas’s plan might not have worked, but you’re definitely helping people outside of that,” Harper encouraged. “But you deserve some rest now. I’ll have a more…traditional assignment for you in
the morning."

“I’ll see you then,” Abby promised, and walked off to her own tent, ready to just forget the past couple days for a few hours. But of course that wasn’t to be, as the Chronicler was waiting for her in the tent, sitting on one of the chairs, an expectant smile on his face.

“Agent Gertrude, glad you finally took a break,” he greeted. “I thought Harper might send you out before we had a chance to properly talk.”

“I’d prefer to talk when it isn’t close to midnight,” Abby muttered, sitting onto the makeshift bed with a thump. “There isn’t any better time?”

“Since Harper is planning to send you out early, unfortunately not,” the Chronicler apologized, with a small incline of his head. “And I need to get to work as well. An army isn’t going to grow itself.”

Abby narrowed her eyes. “You want to talk? Fine. Who the hell are you?”

“Originally an advisor to the now-Chancellor,” he said. “My job in EXALT was rather…mundane. As my title implies, I chronicled the history of the world, the true history, without the assumptions and manipulation of historians.”

Abby eyed him skeptically. “Sure. What were you actually doing?”

“How suspicious,” he tsks. “Well, I knew for decades that an alien force was real, and would be coming back someday. But I also knew that for humanity to effectively defend themselves, well, how do I put this? This world had to be…reorganized. It had to be united under one government and order. EXALT was the best chance to see that goal realized, and so I helped them achieve it.”

“You used them.” Abby said.

“Not in the way you were thinking,” the Chronicler corrected. “I helped them. I was just the unassuming voice in the back of their minds, offering suggestions, guidance and direction that they acted on. I never directly took control of them, but I did plant seeds that had the desired effects. Luckily I never had to try hard, as EXALT was filled with highly intelligent people. Saudia in particular is one of the best leaders EXALT has produced.”

“So is the only reason EXALT made peace was because you ‘suggested’ it?” Abby demanded incredulously.

“I would say it is a consequence, yes,” the Chronicler nodded. “I did not expect the aliens to return so soon. I also did not anticipate XCOM or the Commander. Otherwise my plans would have been different, but at one point I did make a point of telling Saudia that her enemies might become allies, and that our true enemy was the aliens. Everything that happened after that was all her.”

“And she doesn’t know what you are,” Abby finished.

“No, and it will remain that way,” he said, his voice turning a bit hard. “As far as I am concerned, my mission with EXALT is accomplished. Saudia will bring order to this world, and I will begin working on my own plans. No one knows about me aside from you. Not ADVENT, not XCOM and not the aliens, and I intend to use that to strike when the time is right.”

“Fine, let’s go with that,” Abby said. “But you don’t need to do it alone. The Commander isn’t an idiot. He would be a much better ally than enemy, and he will consider you an enemy if you don’t let him know what you are.”
“He isn’t an idiot,” the Chronicler said grimly. “But he would never allow a psion to be free that he
doesn’t control. He considers psions potential dangers and doesn’t trust anyone else outside of
XCOM to use their powers responsibly. At best I would be captured, at worst executed. The
Commander doesn’t negotiate about certain things, Abby, and I think you know this.”

He fixed her with a hard stare. “It is why you need to keep this to yourself. I assure you that I will
be a much better asset on my own than whatever the Commander plans for me.”

Abby frowned. “And how do I know you’re not lying to me?”

“Because we are having this conversation now,” the Chronicler sighed. “I do not use my abilities
on innocent people unless necessary. If I wanted to, I could simply force you to comply, but I
would prefer not to do that.”

“So you’re considering it,” Abby stated.

“I did,” he admitted. “Although it’s too late now. If I was to change your mind now, I would likely
have to wipe the past day out of your mind, and I have a feeling that would raise questions, and
with the right people, they would guess what would happen. The risk is too high, and now I must
hope I made the right decision.”

Abby sincerely wished Patricia was here, or someone who could tell if he was actually telling the
truth. On the surface he seemed to be genuine, and Abby didn’t especially think he posed a threat.
Maybe the Commander would see differently, but she didn’t know…”Let’s say I agree to keep this
to myself,” she said, crossing her legs. “What exactly is your plan?”

“As I said, build an army,” he repeated. “Many of the aliens are simple, and easy to manipulate.
The town I now control will house them, and they will naturally go about their business, until one
day I give the order. I will go to other camps, have them transfer over here and enslave them to me.
It is difficult to explain how I can assure this without you being a psion, but rest assured I know
what I am doing.”

Abby thought back to what she knew about psionics. In theory it was possible, and after seeing
what Patricia could do, it wasn’t hard to buy that the Chronicler could accomplish this. The mind
was a tricky thing, and if he could do as he promised…should she really mess with that?

If he is building an army, we need it.

That they did. But was it smart to not tell anyone in XCOM about this? It was an either-or
situation, since she knew the Chronicler would learn either way. He might say he wouldn’t read her
mind, but at the very least he would be able to tell if she was lying or not.

Why not give him a chance? Make him prove he can do as promised before deciding to tell
someone or not.

That idea seemed…fair. If he really was powerful enough to control an army of aliens, then he
should be able to prove it. If he did, then great, he was an asset she would tolerate. If he couldn’t,
then she’d report him to XCOM. Seemed fair, and it was a compromise she didn’t think he’d object
to. “Here’s what I’m thinking,” she said, looking him straight in the eyes. “If you can really build
your own private army, that’s too much of an asset to just throw away. But I want to see if you can
actually do it. Prove it, and I’ll let you keep working. If you can’t, then I’ll report you to XCOM.”

The Chronicler smiled. “I can work with that. How soon will you want results?”

“I don’t know how long I’ll be here,” Abby said, frowning. “But at least a month, probably. You
have three weeks to produce something. And no mind tricks either if you fail. Try that and I’ll have contingencies.”

“I’d expect nothing less,” he confirmed, sounding rather eager. “Very well then, Agent. You’ll see my army very soon. I think you’ll be impressed with what I can do.”

“Good luck,” Abby said, laying down on the bed. “Now I’d like to sleep, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” he said, standing up in a smooth motion. “Rest easy, agent. I’ll see you in three weeks.”

Abby didn’t hear him exit, but she wouldn’t have heard anyway because she was asleep seconds after her head hit the firm pillow.

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The Praesidium, Genetic Modification Labs

The Praesidium was perhaps the most perfect base he could have asked for research purposes. The Commander might despise the Sectoids, but they definitely knew what they were doing, and it had taken Vahlen a short amount of time to set up her multiple stations of research, from weapons, alien artifacts and genetic modification.

The Commander paused outside the room, raised his hand over the sensor and drew on some of his psionic energy. The XCOM logo turned blue and the door unlocked before him soundlessly. The Commander stepped through and heard the door click behind him as he started walking down the short corridor to the entry to the Modification Labs themselves.

As they slid open before him, he was continually impressed with how Vahlen ran an organized project. The room was massive, but quartered off into different sections. Once was dedicated autopsy table with scientists performing detailed analysis to the creature’s physiology, all connected to powerful computers that displayed HD screens and holographic representation.

The others were largely for scientific experimentation, with various pieces of unnamable equipment filling them up, all monitored by teams of scientists. One section was Vahlen’s dedicated zoo, where she stored all the animals she’d imported for genetic analysis. It was a…curious bunch, to say the least.

He didn’t see Vahlen yet, so walked over to where she was keeping her horde of test animals. Birds of prey, vultures, rats, dogs, jellyfish, he wasn’t entirely sure what her plan was for each, but no doubt they had a part to play in her designs. There were cats somewhere around as well, but Vahlen seemed content to let them wander around the labs.

Along the wall behind the cages were vats where Sectoids had once been grown, which were now used for Chryssalid creation. Vahlen was keeping the grown ones in stasis, and since they didn’t have an unlimited amount of space, she was refraining from growing more. The Commander wasn’t sure when the best time to use the Chryssalids would be, but he imagined it would be soon. He supposed Saudia deserved a heads-up before he unleashed them onto the field.

However, now he did notice a small addition to her collection, but it surprisingly appeared to be insects. Specifically a large ant farm, but something was horribly wrong with it. He took a closer look, peering into the glass. To his surprise, all of the ants were dead, and there was…something, growing out of their corpses. A fungus? It was white and definitely resembled one, but he wasn’t a biologist. Was this experimentation for a new weapon?
“A specialized weapon, yes,” Vahlen said, coming up behind him and feeling very pleased with herself. “You caught on quick.”

“Well, you don’t like to waste things without reason,” the Commander said, turning to her with a smile. “The options were limited. But since you *are* here now, perhaps you could explain?”

She returned his smile, and brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “I suppose I can start with that. I do have a lot to show you,” she cleared her throat, and motioned to the ant farm. “Have you ever heard of the cordyceps?”

“No,” the Commander shook his head. “I assume that is the fungus?”

“Correct,” she affirmed with a nod. “A very deadly parasitic fungi that slowly kills the host, as well as taking over its mind.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “A mind-controlling fungi?”

“Bad explanation,” she apologized. “It is more accurate to say as it kills the host, it forces it to act irrationally and abnormally. I actually developed this to assist in the resistance groups holding out in the Oceanic nations. It’s only a matter of time before they start using Chryssalids, and I believe I have developed a way to assist in negating that.”

“You’ve weaponized it?” He asked, already impressed. “That was fast, especially since I remember you only mentioning something like this several weeks ago.”

“I’ve created a strain that can affect chryssalids,” she said, handing him a tablet. “Chryssalids are insects, so it required a minimal amount of work to successfully infect one.” The picture she showed was of a dead Chryssalid, similar white growths protruding from its body, eyes and legs. “The problem, of course, is that there needs to be some way of infecting the Chryssalid itself.”

“I assume you came up with a solution?” He asked. She nodded and beckoned him over to another table, this one with plants on them, and a fungi, as he saw.

“This is a cordyceps plant in its purest form,” Vahlen explained. “Normally the Chryssalids wouldn’t touch it, but I modified it to also excrete pheromones that make it irresistible to them. Once they eat, they become infected. I also sped up the rate of death to nearly a day instead of several. It will emit spores, but those will not affect large areas beyond the plant itself. And in addition to that, it will have an immediate impact.”

“So the resistance groups there can plant these around the islands to trick the Chryssalids,” the Commander nodded. “Smart.”

“I can create dozens in a few days,” Vahlen said, nodding towards the vats. “The cloning equipment the Sectoids have is exceptional, and far more versatile than I first assumed. Although there are several factors that I have not yet determined that should be taken into consideration.”

He nodded, turning back to her. “Such as?”

“This species is a parasite,” she reminded him, frowning. “Which means that it will affect native species as well. I’ve also designed it to spread to grow more after a certain amount of time. My point is that it could potentially disrupt the ecosystems there, perhaps permanently.”

“But it would stop the Chryssalids,” the Commander said, turning back to the fungi.

“It would,” Vahlen confirmed. “And I have naturally made our own Chryssalids immune to the
The Commander considered that for a moment. But it wasn’t a hard decision. If they didn’t get rid of the aliens, there wouldn’t exactly be an Earth left to fix. “Talk to Jackson to begin distribution,” he ordered Vahlen, turning back to her. “If this will keep the resistance groups alive, then I want to use it. If it causes environmental damage…we’ll fix it after the war.”

“I assumed you’d say that,” Vahlen said, a satisfied smile on her face. “I’ve already begun production of several dozen specimens. I wouldn’t concern yourself over the impact quite yet either. Negative change will likely not take effect for years, a decade at least for any real change to be noticed.”

“Well, one topic down,” he said, looking towards the Subject Chambers. “Now, what else have you been working on?”

She grinned and motioned for him to follow as they made their way towards the chambers where Vahlen performed her Human experimentation. “I’ve begun finalizing a new batch of genetic enhancements for our soldiers,” she explained as she unlocked the door psionically. “All that is really needed is your authorization, but I think you’ll be very impressed with what I’ve managed.”

“Do you still have enough subjects?” He asked as the door slid open and they walked through.

“I’ll need a new batch after I order these current ones to be harvested for MELD,” Vahlen mused, glancing down at her tablet. “But I’ve already made arrangements with Jackson.”

“Good,” the Commander nodded, taking stock of the brightly lit cells, all segmented by gray alien alloys and occupied by a Human subject of some kind. There was an aura of terror and pain that washed over him the second he stepped inside, and he could only imagine what it was like for Vahlen. He didn’t fail to note that their terror increased every time she glanced in their direction.

He couldn’t really blame them, though he also couldn’t muster up much sympathy for their current situation. After all, this was simply a consequence of their own actions. “Aegis has been extremely helpful in development,” Vahlen said, as they stopped in front of a cell with the occupant, a Caucasian man, laying on the ground. “He was helpful in applying what I learned from the Ravaged One’s autopsy.”

“What did you learn?” The Commander asked, looking down at the man whose skin was almost translucent, and screaming at every twitch of his muscles. “I know you mentioned the Ravaged One could be the key to one of your projects.”

“Indeed,” Vahlen nodded, also looking down at the man. “You noted how easily his skin was able to heal and wound itself at the same time? I wanted to apply that for our own soldiers. Make them heal wounds almost instantaneously, an idea I first got from the simple jellyfish. And thanks to the now deceased Ethereal, and our new ally, I have done it.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “He doesn’t look that good.”

“He was a failed experiment,” Vahlen explained. “Sort of. His skin does do what I wanted to, but somehow his brain interpreted it as any kind of position other than his initial one is a wound. Thus, he is essentially trapped in place. Painful, but since his body does perform what we needed it to, it is useful for gathering data. This one, however, is the finished product.”

They stepped over to the next cell, where another man was standing. His skin was also slightly translucent, or maybe it was just the light. In any case, it wasn’t nearly as noticeable as the temptation of this plant.”
previous subject. Also in the room was a small portable table, and on it were several different weapons. A knife, a gun, and several vials of various colored liquids. The moment he saw Vahlen, he began backing up, saying something the Commander couldn’t hear or read from his lips.

“I assume you’d like a demonstration?” Vahlen asked, turning to him.

The Commander smirked. “If you could. Though he doesn’t exactly seem cooperative.”

“Not an issue,” Vahlen promised, and turned her gaze to the man while placing a palm on the glass. The Commander watched, fascinated as her iris turned purple as she drew upon her own power to take over the man in the cell. The test subject suddenly became still, his own eyes turning a faint purple as Vahlen took over his mind.

Without any words, the man walked forward, picked up the knife and slashed his wrist without hesitation. Blood sprayed everywhere initially, and started pouring out, although in seconds had already slowed to a faint drip. The Commander watched in amazement as the skin around the wrist healed at a visible rate, until the only sign of injury was the slowly drying blood on his hand.

Vahlen took her hand off the glass and the man stumbled back as she withdrew her mind. “That also runs through the entire body. All internal organs heal the same way, which in effect makes our soldiers immune to chemical weapons.”

“Amazing,” he said, shaking his head in wonder. “A soldier would be almost invincible.”

“Almost, not quite,” Vahlen agreed. “A headshot will still kill them, and severed limbs can’t be regrown. Theoretically blood loss would also be a concern, and certain organs can’t be repaired if severely damaged enough, such as eyes, but for the most part, they would be…difficult to kill.”

The Commander nodded. “I’m curious. Why does the skin have that almost translucent effect?”

“A side effect of incorporating jellyfish genetics,” Vahlen explained quickly. “Their skin is extremely thin, if you’ve noticed, and that is a reason I found they were able to repair so fast. The skin of those with this genetic modification is thinner than regular Human skin, and does occasionally give a translucent effect under the right lighting.”

She then beckoned him to the next cell over. “However, I was curious about the opposite outcome. Instead of making the skin softer and easier to heal, I experimented with making it impenetrable. Aegis’ own skin is essentially impossible to penetrate with even our gauss weapons, so I wanted to apply that to humans.”

The Commander glanced over at her. “Aegis’ skin is that resistant?”

“Yes, a surprise to be sure,” Vahlen said, contemplating the female subject before her. “But a welcome one nonetheless. Apparently only a few Ethereals have it, combat-focused ones like the Battlemaster, him, and the Imperator. But I believe I was successful, and it only took one subject to bring about.”

The Commander looked inside the cell. The woman looked exhausted and terrified, and her skin seemed to shimmer with some kind of faint marking…he focused on it. It was unmistakable, almost imperceptible hexagons lined every piece of skin on her body, almost like near-invisible scales or armor. Clearly an effect of the modification.

Like the last cell, this one had an array of weapons, but of a much higher caliber. A gauss rifle, pistol and alloy cannon were all lined up on the cell wall. Vahlen repeated the same mind-control as she had with the previous test subject, and the woman fell into a blank state, walked over to the
table and picked up the pistol.

The Commander raised an eyebrow as she placed the pistol under her chin, but refrained from commenting. She pulled the trigger with a bang and she went stumbling back onto the ground. She didn’t rise, but the Commander noted she was still breathing. “She survived a point-blank pistol shot,” The Commander muttered. “Amazing.”

“I would still advise not getting shot in the head,” Vahlen suggested, releasing her control. “We have noted that there can be damage done to the brain and hearing, as you can see.” She frowned, looking at the motionless woman. “A loss, but she can be replaced. What is important is that it does provide invulnerability to almost all projectile-based arms, and even plasma weapons have a limited effect on their skin.”

Vahlen pursed her lips. “However, with this particular modification, there are a few downsides, the most obvious being that internal injuries would be difficult to heal in the field since it would be nearly impossible to penetrate their skin. That, and it is difficult to apply new modifications in addition to this one, so it a sense it would ‘lock out’, any new modifications for a specific individual.”

Vahlen smiled again. “Which is why I needed to develop a separate modification to help address some of these issues.” The Commander followed as she led him to yet another cell where a man was sitting on the ground, looking more bored than anything else. “Notice anything?” Vahlen asked.

The Commander looked over the man, but didn’t see any sort of obvious modification, and unlike the other subjects, this man only seemed mildly annoyed with them both staring at him. “No,” the Commander admitted. “Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Exactly,” Vahlen smiled, clasping her hands behind her back proudly. “He is perfectly healthy. He has also been exposed to over thirty fatal diseases and induced cancers. All of which haven’t affected him in the least.”

“You made him immune to disease,” the Commander said, turning to her. “How? Modifying the regeneration modification for internal organs only?”

“Partially,” Vahlen clarified, smiling. “My main inspiration for this particular modification was the vulture. They are practically immune to disease, so I took what made that possible, and applied it to a Human. Before Aegis helped solve the regeneration modification, it was working, but not foolproof. There was always something that would get through and kill the subject. But once I applied the ability for the internal organs to heal themselves, as well as modifying the immune system itself, then I was able to create a disease-immune individual.” Vahlen pause briefly. “A perfect addition to the Iron Skin modification, or any other one for that matter.”

The Commander made a mental note to make her dinner the next time he got a chance, maybe attempt Rouladen again. She deserved something more than another raise for the work she was doing. “I don’t suppose you have anything else?” He asked, thinking her showcase was done.

“One more,” she said with a knowing smile, and motioned him over to one final cell. “This is an attempted offensive modification. You know armor is the greatest protection most of the aliens have, so I attempted to find a way to work around that. The best way I found was a means to strike the weak points of their armor and insert a toxin into their body.”

She waved an arm to the cell. “And I do believe I have done it.”
The subject in the cell seemed mostly normal, aside from a small bulge under his right wrist, that seemed to be holstering something vertical to his arm, inside a small opening that pointed outwards. The arm itself also appeared a big larger than the opposite one, but only slightly. Vahlen once more took control of the man, and a pale tentacle-like stand shot out from the opening until it was held up vertically, a translucent point at the end, dripping with something.

The appendage appeared at least as tall as the man himself, who was close to six feet, and it appeared to be held up under its own power. At what he presumed was Vahlen’s suggestion, the stinger appendage immediately retracted into the arm. “That is…different,” the Commander admitted. “How effective is it?”

“The toxin I created for it is derived from a variety of the most venomous creatures in the world,” Vahlen explained. “Let’s just say Aegis was hesitant to get near it. I’ve also made the stinger able to be fully manipulated by the individual for precise control, and it’s strong enough to resist cuts and will heal from any wounds it suffers. I’m curious how it will work on the battlefield outside of simulations.”

“Carmelita will probably like it,” the Commander said. “It’s certainly the most unique one I’ve seen from you. But exceptional job. I think it’s time to put our genetic modification program into full swing, especially since we have a surplus of MELD, with more on the way.”

“That we do,” Vahlen said with a smile. “The only other update I have is for the Manchurian Project, which has made progress, but unfortunately nothing substantial.” She motioned to the cells. “With the war becoming more intense, I believed this should be my priority before returning to it. But in short, the command system is down and specific instructions can be programmed into the individual.”

She frowned. “There is still an issue of not overwriting the personality of the individual in question, but that will be the next issue I tackle. Still, this should be enough to last for the next few months while improvements are made.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” the Commander nodded. “You’ve certainly done more than enough. Far more than I expected, truth be told. But I’m sure our soldiers will be thanking you for it. If it wasn’t clear, I approve all these modifications for use in the field.”

“Thank you, Commander,” Vahlen said gratefully. “I couldn’t have really done it without you.”

“Hey, all of this was you,” the Commander chided, giving in and finally pulling her into a tight hug. “I just let you do what you do best.”

She instantly relaxed into him. “And I think that’s one thing I like most about you. You trust me to make the right decisions.”

“You’ve certainly proven you can,” he said, leaning down to give her a quick kiss. “If anything, I think you deserve a break.”

“Mhmm, maybe,” Vahlen murmured, her eyes closed. “Maybe I’ll end work a few hours earlier. Although you would do well to do the same.”

He chuckled, stroking her hair. “I’ll see what I can do.”

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The Praesidium, Office of the Commander
Now was the time to have the conversation that he personally was not entirely looking forward to: The future of psionics under XCOM. It was a necessary step, but one he didn’t exactly think would go over that well with the psions themselves. But it was necessary, and they needed to have a serious discussion on it, especially with Patricia and Aegis training a new batch.

Zhang and Aegis himself were going to be important here, and the Commander saw no reason to delay any longer. “I just spoke with Vahlen. The Manchurian Project is still underway, but I suspect it will be at least several months until it is in a position where I am comfortable utilizing it.”

Zhang frowned, then glanced up at the towering Ethereal next to him. “If that is the case, I am not comfortable training new psions that we cannot ensure the loyalty of.”

“Loyalty isn’t a concern yet,” the Commander dismissed. “Frankly, I don’t think it will become one until the war ends.”

“Do not make such assumptions,” Aegis warned. “All species are subject to the traps of arrogance and power. Even your soldiers are no exception here.”

“You’ve observed them,” the Commander noted. “Do you sense anything malevolent or concerning?”

Aegis was silent for a few moments. “No. Not yet. But people change over time, Commander, and power reveals the true nature of people. It is impossible for all of them to withstand corruption of some sort. I will do my best to mitigate it, but it will not last forever. Director Zhang is correct to be concerned.”

“ Appreciated,” Zhang said dryly, looking back at the Commander. “Psions are weapons of mass destruction, Commander. If even one goes rogue, then we have a problem. If one as powerful as Patricia ever does, we’ll have a catastrophe. Can we really afford to take that chance?”

“You don’t have to sell me on the necessity,” the Commander sighed. “I was the one who started the project, remember? It’s just taking longer than I’d like.”

“But I am saying it needs to be our priority,” Zhang insisted, his emotional state ice cold. “While Vahlen’s genius is no doubt something the soldiers will appreciate, you need to push her to finish the Project. Or is she reluctant because she would be subjected to it as well?”

“It’s not for personal reasons,” the Commander said, leaning against the cool wall. “She didn’t see it as the largest priority in comparison to the grand scheme of the war. That’s it. Now that her modification projects are complete, she can focus on this one.”

“This does raise a question I have yet to receive an answer to,” Aegis interrupted, curiosity tinged his tone. “Do you plan on subjecting yourself to the Manchurian Program once it is complete?”

“Yes,” the Commander answered. “There won’t be exceptions, you included.”

“We did not discuss this.” Aegis stated flatly.

“Not initially, no,” the Commander agreed, looking up at the silver helm of the Ethereal. “But of everyone here, you alone are the most dangerous. Sorry, but I’m not going to risk you betraying us, and I’m sure you can understand why.”

“You don’t even know if it can be applied to an Ethereal,” Aegis pointed out. “I would prefer you at least learn that before I allow your scientists to tamper with my brain.”
“Then I suppose we’ll have to capture one,” the Commander said, half-sarcastically. “I personally don’t like it either. I’m not exactly keen on being at the mercy of a code word, but it would be hypocritical to exempt myself or you from this program, wouldn’t it?”

“Not necessarily,” Aegis stated. “By subjecting yourself to a code, anyone who has access to it would be able to control you. That is a risk you should also consider. It is also an inherent flaw with this entire program. With the right information, your entire army of psions could be turned against you.”

“No, because we control the code words,” the Commander reminded him. “If on the off chance someone did learn of a code word and attacked, we could simply shut them down. Vahlen has developed contingencies and backups if anyone is somehow compromised. It isn’t as simple as a ‘single code word controls everything.’”

“And who would have your code word?” Aegis asked. “Vahlen?”

“No,” the Commander answered, shaking his head. “She is not exactly unbiased when it comes to me, nor I with her. Zhang or Jackson would have the code word for me, and I would likely not know it myself to prevent a psion from attempting to read my mind and learning it that way.”

“Honorable,” Aegis commented. “I see no reason to not exempt yourself, as you are one of the most important figures in this war. But if you insist, there is very little I can do on my own. The Battlemaster would likely approve.”

“Good for him,” the Commander shrugged. “But until the program is completed, train the psions as best you can. I have a feeling we’ll need them.”

“But watch Patricia,” Zhang suggested, glancing up at Aegis. “Make sure she isn’t compromised.”

The Commander snorted. “Please.”

“I would prefer we keep an eye on her,” Zhang said, now looking to the Commander. “You read the dossier from Yates. I see no reason not to ensure she is on our side.”

“If Patricia were not on our side, we would definitely know about it,” the Commander sighed, shaking his head in amusement. “People don’t just flip, Zhang. If, and I mean If, she ever decided to abandon XCOM, it’s not going to be without warning or reasons, and as the dossier noted, all she needs to be shown is that the plan is sound and correct.”

“Forgive me for not being so sure,” Zhang muttered sarcastically. “I would prefer a woman who can cripple entire armies with her mind be securely under our control.”

“Don’t worry about that,” the Commander promised. “Patricia doesn’t do things irrationally, and besides, once the Manchurian Program is complete we won’t have to ever worry about that.”

Zhang pursed his lips. “Then I suggest you make Vahlen finish it as soon as possible.”

“I’ll remind her,” the Commander promised. “But there are bigger things than the worse-case scenario here, Zhang. We still have a war to win, after all, and I suspect that the next battle will be upon us soon.”

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The Praesidium, Engineering Bay
The Engineering Bay here was far less quiet than the one at the Citadel. Alien tech in general was much less abrasive than what Humans typically developed. But it was certainly no less potent. The Sectoids had left behind quite a few interesting pieces of tech that the Commander knew Shen was attempting to figure out, but in the meantime, had made do with what had been transported from the Citadel to here.

And now it was time to discuss the larger plans for what was to be created. Aegis had brought a wealth of knowledge, which was likely why Shen had asked the Ethereal to be present when they met. The Commander was going to try and shield Shen’s mind from the worst of Aegis’ aura, but he wasn’t nearly as skilled as Patricia or Vahlen.

Still though, his mind was rather distinct and the Commander weaved his way through the myriad of engineers and equipment until he stepped into the new Cybernetics Lab, which currently only housed Aegis and Shen, both of whom were already discussing schematics that were holographically displayed in front of them.

The MEC suits were also propped up along the walls, bent over and their chests exposed in a shutdown state. It put into perspective how tall they were when Aegis barely reached the shoulder of the Marauder-class MEC suit. The Commander focused on Shen’s mind, and visualized something of a buffer, attempting to block out Aegis’ influence which luckily wasn’t even trying to affect his brain.

Shen stiffened as he did so, then looked behind him to see the Commander walking up. “Glad you came so quickly,” Shen said, recovering quickly. “We have a lot to go over. Aegis and I were discussing where my teams should put their focus.”

“The Gateways will be paramount to the defense of your world,” Aegis said immediately, nodding towards the hologram. “The Collective can strike anywhere, and the response needs to be immediate.”

The Commander looked at the hologram, which appeared to be a structure that resembled a U with the curves slightly inward, but not touching. On the arms were additional features that he assumed were either energy projectors or focusers of some kind. In the middle of the structure was what he assumed was a visual representation of the energy field, which in this case looked like a miniature whirlpool.

“So explain this Gateway,” the Commander said, crossing his arms. “How exactly does it work?”

“The short version is that it acts like a portal,” Shen began. “Theoretically, it can allow instant transportation from one Gateway to another, distance is no object. As to how it works…” Shen trailed off. “It’s complicated enough that I’m still puzzling it out, and Aegis unfortunately has little idea either. From what I can decipher, it appears to act as a miniature controlled wormhole between two points. I’m considering bringing in a physicist specializing in these kind of theories to help sort this out. I can build it as-is, and it would probably work, but I do not like building pieces of equipment I do not understand.”

The Commander could sympathize. That being said… “But you can do it.”

Shen sighed. “I believe so, and Aegis knows how to set up configure the Gateways, so we could begin using them immediately.”

“Yes,” Aegis agreed. “And it might be advisable to send these to ADVENT as well. Gateways can be configured to each other, regardless of distance or time created. All that is needed is the Gateway number and coordinate numbers. The more Gateways established on Earth, the easier it
will be for both ADVENT and XCOM to defend.”

“Except that presents a problem,” Shen pointed out with a sudden frown. “If any Gateway can be linked to each other, what’s to stop the Collective from linking to a vulnerable one controlled by us?”

“An excellent question,” Aegis said, radiating approval. “Nothing. However, I highly doubt they will utilize this tactic for two reasons. The first is that the knowledge of both the Gateway codes and coordinate numbers should only be known to a select few people. Without that, they cannot act. However, it works both ways. I have lists of Gateways established in the Collective. Unless they wish to provoke me, they will not attempt something so…underhanded.”

The Commander appraised the Ethereal. “Interesting choice of words.”

“I would also not expect the Battlemaster to utilize such a tactic either,” Aegis added. “He would consider himself above it.”

“Well, I don’t have the same restriction,” the Commander said. “If you have Gateways, it would be a good idea to use them.”

“I agree,” Aegis said after a moment of silence. “But not now. If you were to attack through a Gateway, you would trigger a much larger response from the Collective than you could hope to handle. It would be a death warrant for not only XCOM, but the entire planet, and it shouldn’t be utilized until much later in the war. Preferably after Earth is secure.”

Aegis did have a point there. Still, it was something to keep in mind for the future. “The Collective will establish their own Gateways here, correct?”

“Assuredly,” Aegis confirmed. “I would be surprised if construction hasn’t begun in Australia, and possibly their foothold in Japan. From there they have a nearly unlimited supply of reinforcements.”

“Which is going to be a problem,” the Commander muttered. “Can the Gateways be transported?”

“Technically, yes,” Aegis said slowly. “However, Gateway Transports are rare due to the amount of power they consume. I do not foresee the Collective using them in the near future. Their cost would be unjustified, especially if the battle is lost. They are also distinct, so the ship could be easily targeted.”

“I assume that Gateways are not just limited to Earth?” Shen interjected, curious. “This could be useful beyond just military application.”

“Yes, it is the primary mode of long-distance travel in the Collective,” Aegis confirmed. “Each established system has its own Gateway, which can then be configured for any system in the Collective. It is highly efficient, and allows near-instantaneous reinforcement. Your own Solar system likely has one now as well.”

“Wonderful,” the Commander sighed. “So they can replenish their forces within days.”

“Precisely,” Aegis confirmed grimly. “But I wouldn’t overly concern yourself yet. The Battlemaster, for better or worse, with be methodical and slow. There will be plenty of time to react and plan.”

“Speaking of plans,” Shen interjected, changing the hologram. “I believe the design for the Firestorm is essentially complete. All that really remains is your authorization to begin
“Granted,” the Commander said without hesitation. “We need ships that can compete in the skies. The Ravens are good, but they won’t be enough.”

“In which case, it might be worthwhile to establish a dedicated Hangar,” he suggested, killing the hologram and turning to him. “If we want to build our own fleet, the Praesidium is simply not large enough.”

Shen raised a good point, and the Commander had also noted that particular issue, though didn’t think it would become one for a while. “We’d need someplace isolated, and preferably not affiliated with ADVENT.”

“I’ll confer with Jackson,” Shen said with a nod. “And concerning a fleet…there is something very interesting Aegis showed me.”

“A prototype Andromedon craft,” Aegis said, switching the hologram to display a new craft that was wholly unlike any before it. It appeared to be much blockier and angular than the regular alien crafts, and from the sides of the craft, at the front and back, were what he assumed were circular engines. “This was supposed to be a Strike-Battleship as they called it. Not the largest ship in their fleet, but one with enough firepower and maneuverability to destroy any modern flagship.”

“We don’t have the space or resources to construct it yet,” Shen admitted, giving the ghost of a smile as he looked at the hologram. “But if we complete it, we would be able to rival the alien fleet on Earth. Hence why I designated it as the Avenger Project.”

A bit melodramatic, but it was good to see Shen so eager to work. Maybe it was Aegis affecting him, but the elderly man looked more energetic than he had for a while. Or maybe it was all the information he was getting from Aegis that was beyond what he could have imagined.

“Is there anything else you want to show me?” The Commander asked.

“I’ve begun development on the Jaeger-class MEC,” Shen said, handing him a detailing schematic. Just like he’d envisioned, a much smaller humanoid and sleek suit with a built-in sniper rifle and melee weapons. From the designs, it appeared to only be as tall as Aegis, but if estimations were correct, strong enough to break the neck of a Muton. Fascinating. “I’ve also ordered construction of more Marauder, Ballista and Goliath-class MECs,” Shen finished. “I know it’s only a matter of time before we lose one.”

“Good thinking,” the Commander approved with a nod. “How is progress on plasma weaponry going?”

“Still slow,” Shen admitted. “Aegis gave us the schematics, but it requires small elerium cores, which he unfortunately doesn’t know how to create. We don’t know enough about elerium to create them, so until we do so, our weapons research is somewhat halted. There are just so many projects to work on.”

That they were. The Manchurian Project and Elerium both seemed pressing, and he wasn’t sure which he should have Vahlen focus on. But Zhang was right, the Manchurian program needed to be completed and their own weapons were dealing with the aliens fine. Until that changed…he’d keep her working on that.

“Thanks for keeping me up to date,” he told Shen. “Good luck on the development. I’ll also talk with Jackson about an external XCOM hangar.”
“Sounds good,” Shen nodded. “I’ll send a report shortly.” With that, the Commander left, more than happy with how things were progressing, though he had to be careful not to become too confident. Very little was more insidious than overconfidence, even that which was well-founded.

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The Praesidium, Barracks

Oliver held the piece of paper in his hands, eyeing it with something resembling suspicion. “This is…different.”

“Indeed,” Anastaysia Shevchenko agreed, her fists propping up her cheeks. The young Ukrainian was almost petite, at least for a soldier. Or maybe he was just getting old. Either way, she’d been pleasant to talk to, and had provided an interesting perspective on the continuing war in the Middle East. That is, until several stacks of paper had been delivered and he’d picked one up.

He was expecting something to do with regulations, maybe arrangements to make things easier for the new batch of soldiers that was supposed to be coming soon. But no, it was something much stranger. “I don’t suppose you know if this is normal around here?”

She sniffed. “I’m as new as you. So no, I don’t. But considering some of the stuff I’ve seen around here, genetic modification seems perfectly possible to me.”

“I actually do believe the Commander writes this stuff,” Oliver commented. “It’s way too straightforward to have come from some PR department. It doesn’t have…hmm, finesse.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard that used to describe him,” Anastaysia said, absentmindedly messing with the paper with a free hand. “I kinda like that.”

“That being said, quite a bit of this stuff seems fake,” Oliver admitted. “Skin that heals in minutes? A stinger appendage and some sort of immunity to disease? That seems way too good to be true.”

“Well, they clearly did something to Carmelita,” Anastaysia shrugged. “Unless you want to tell me that was just her natural ability to jump fifteen feet forward.”

She did have a point. “Conceded. So are you thinking about it?”

“Hell yeah,” she said incredulously. “I mean, who wouldn’t? I don’t think XCOM would put out this opportunity if they couldn’t actually follow through.”

No, they probably wouldn’t. At least not publically. But in his experience, there was always a catch that came with stuff that was too good to be true, and he wanted to figure out what that was before potentially altering his body. A better idea might be to talk to Carmelita and find out exactly how legitimate this process was. Or maybe someone else who’d been here a while.

“What’s that?” Shun asked, striding over.

“An offer from the Commander,” Oliver answered, handing her the pamphlet. “Have you ever gotten tired of getting shot? Now with XCOM™ Genetic Modifications, you too don’t have to worry about bullets piercing your head ever again!”

“Brilliant sales pitch,” Anastaysia chuckled. “Apply to XCOM sales or something.”

“No, but seriously it looks like the Commander is wanting to push genetic modification,” Oliver said as Shun took a seat, looking over the paper intently. “You’ve been here a while. Do you think
“I…think so,” Shun said slowly. “Vahlen’s team has come up with some insane stuff. I wouldn’t be surprised if they figured this out as well. I’m thinking that if the Commander is making this public for all soldiers, it means that he’s expecting the war to escalate.”

“So how is all of this possible?” Anastaysia asked Shun. “Alien tech?”

“I think so,” Shun answered carefully. “I’ve heard the scientists talk about MELD. A kind of miracle tech if it can do half the stuff it’s apparently behind. Maybe not all true, but I do think it is responsible for a lot of the advances we’ve made. But I can say that whatever the Commander has approved, it is safe. He doesn’t risk soldiers for even Vahlen’s experiments.”

“Wait,” Oliver frowned. “How can he know it’s safe unless they’ve done tests on Humans?”

“Don’t know,” Shun admitted. “But Carmelita seems fine. The MECs are all mostly fine, and I know the Commander himself has undergone genetic modification. Whatever process they use, it seems to be working.”

“Right…” Oliver began, before trailing off. That set off all kinds of alarm bells in his head. On one hand, he believed Shun, and believed that the Commander wouldn’t put out something that would risk the lives of his soldiers. To do so would be a net negative, and the Commander didn’t seem like the type to take unnecessary risks.

But he didn’t buy for a second that there was a secret ‘process’ that made these procedures safe. Reality didn’t work like that. They were definitely performing tests on something or someone, but who or what that could be was a question he couldn’t answer, and wasn’t sure he wanted to. And if that was how the Commander was making these safe for everyone, he wasn’t sure he wanted any part of it.

Maybe it was necessary, but Oliver had never been a large believe of ‘ends justifying the means’. That being said, he understood the thought process behind such people even if it was morally questionable at best. It was one reason why NATO had been appealing to him. At least he could believe for the most part that they weren’t performing heinous acts behind the scenes. For better or worse, they’d stuck to their principles even when it would be easier to break them for the greater good.

But he’d seen for a while which way the world was going. The War on Terror had been the biggest indicator of the changing opinions on what was worth doing. For everyone decrying the Commander’s actions, there had been two more endorsing him for the simple fact that he was performing it on terrible people.

Empathy was a very selective feeling, with it arising in people depending on subjectivity, and the truth was that most people could not feel empathy for people who they considered evil. The Commander had known this, and exploited it to an incredible degree. And when the world leaders condemned him, they were content to let him work and only half-heartedly try to put a stop to it.

But they’d never really tried. Because the Commander had done what the darkest parts of them had dreamed of, turning the Caliphate’s dream of a world under Islamic rule into a nightmare. And so the UN, NATO and everyone else was content to sit back and silently endorse his actions while providing little more than lip service.

It raised an interesting quandary: Was an evil action justifiable if it was performed on equally evil people? It was a question he still didn’t have a satisfactory answer to, and still wasn’t sure where
he definitively stood on the issue. But if he had an option to do the right thing, he was going to do it, even if he was just left a regular Human.

But regular Human certainly wasn’t all bad. His head jerked up as he realized he’d missed part of Shun and Anastaysia’s conversation. “Ukraine?” Shun was saying. “I’m not sure we’ve had any soldiers from there.”

“Not as far as I know,” Anastaysia shrugged. “But I would have been involved regardless. If I wasn’t in XCOM, I’d probably be helping the Russians in Turkmenistan.”

“Turkmenistan?” Shun asked, frowning. “I thought it was Iran?”

“We were discussing that before the papers came,” Anastaysia said, nodding to Oliver. “And they are still in Iran, but they’re moving to the north and into Turkmenistan.”

“From everything I’ve seen, Iran is about to fold,” Oliver added. “It’s somewhat difficult to get reliable information, but the word is that the Iranian government is terrified about ADVENT. Don’t know what prompted that response.”

“Oh, I can answer that,” Anastaysia said knowingly. “I have a friend there now. Apparently, ADVENT isn’t exactly…eh, nice to the captured cities. It’s essentially a police state.”

“I’m somehow not surprised,” Oliver sighed. “ADVENT has not exactly put out the image of peace and tolerance. So what did they do? Round up all the men and segregate them?”

“Not just the men,” Anastaysia corrected, shaking her head. “But the women and children too. Entire families were taken into custody to be vetted. ADVENT is very thorough if what he’s told me is accurate. This was pretty early in their attacks. I’m guessing communications are forbidden now or something, since I haven’t heard from him in weeks.”

“Hopefully they’ll just surrender,” Shun sighed. “They have to know they can’t win.”

“It’s a point of pride,” Oliver explained. “Iran has seen the west as a rival at best, and enemy at worst for decades. To lose so decisively to them is humiliating, and they aren’t just going to lose, I can guarantee ADVENT will completely try to erase their culture and government. This war has been referred to by a large number of people as a purge, and I fear they are right.”

“Then maybe they should have thought before provoking Israel,” Shun shrugged. “Sorry, but I don’t have much sympathy for them. It’s bad that things aren’t good for the innocent people caught in the crossfire, but as far as I’m concerned, there are a lot more important things to worry about.”

“Copy that,” Anastaysia nodded firmly. “It’s not like this is a question. The Middle East is going to fall and hopefully all that instability will die along with it. Good riddance, I say.”

Oliver sighed, since it was a lot more complicated than that, but had the feeling that the two women wouldn’t really be open to that particular viewpoint and he had no desire for a debate. Right now, he really needed some time alone to think, what with the new genetic modifications and questions raised.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Miss Anastaysia,” Oliver said, getting up. “But I think I’ll try and track down some more information on this genetic program. It’s certainly a lot to think about.”

“Just Ana, please,” she said with a smile. “The feeling is mutual, and good luck. Let me know if you learn anything important!”
“Will do,” he promised, and walked off with a bunch of unanswered questions haunting him every step of the way.

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The Praesidium, Psionic Testing Chambers

It was excellent timing that the Commander had gone forward with the publicly distributed genetic modification, since it overlapped perfectly with the awakening of new psions which would allow them to be enhanced as well, which would probably help their transition significantly. It was long past time for her to be upgraded as well, and the results were…nice.

Being able to literally jump a couple dozen feet in the air and land unharmed was a feeling that couldn’t exactly be replicated, nor was being able to see absurd distances. Her eyes were essentially like small powerful cameras which she used at will to zoom in and retract as needed. It had taken a bit to get used to, but she’d learned quickly.

The secondary heart that now pumped in her chest had definitely given her a stamina boost, and she somehow felt more energized. Hopefully it would allow her to work harder before she collapsed, or even better, helped her ensure she didn’t overexert herself to begin with. She looked down at her arm, once more looking at it with curiosity.

It looked the same as normal here, but she’d found that under the right lighting, there was definitely a translucent quality to it which she had been told was normal. A side-effect of the Biomuscular regeneration modification, but if that was the price she had to pay to be able to heal almost immediately, there wasn’t a question.

Most of the other psions had chosen their modifications somewhat determined on their aptitude which Patricia and Aegis had been able to fairly easily determine. Not all of them had taken as many options as possible, but all of them at least had some, and at least one of the skin modifications Vahlen had developed.

To her mild surprise, there was an almost even split between the psions deciding between the Iron Skin and Biomuscular regeneration mods. Many of the Defense-aptitude psions had taken the Iron Skin modification, like Iosif, Allison and Said. On the flip side, most of the Attack-aptitude psions had, quite logically, taken the Biomuscular regeneration due to the damage that was otherwise inflicted on their bodies. Nataliya and Chan had both commented to her how much less pain they felt while training. Patricia had wished they had something like this when Annette was still alive. She’d known how much pain the young French woman had felt while using her considerable power.

The Telepaths and Telekinetics seemed pretty split, and beyond that people chose additional modifications as they saw fit. Most had taken the Secondary Heart, and all had the new Disease prevention mod. But there had been a few that had additionally taken the muscle-fiber density and the disconcerting Stinger modification as well. Several were still somewhat leery about genetic modification, but Patricia suspected they’d come around to it once they were able to put it into action.

Apparantly there had been a decent number of applicants for the program, and the modification of them had severely drained the MELD stores which would have to be replenished soon. But Shen was already working on that, and Patricia was sure they’d recover more when the aliens attacked next. But when they did, well, the aliens were going to be in for a big surprise.

But now she needed to focus on helping the psions here get more powerful. The introduction of
Aegis had actually gone pretty smoothly, all things considered. The telepaths had known right away something was off, and the rest had mostly just…accepted it, quite rightly assuming that they knew what they were doing.

Although Allison’s reaction had been rather amusing, something along the lines of “What the fuck?” with several other choice words thrown in there. Apparently, she’d had an unexpected run-in with Aegis at some point and it had apparently scarred her for life, and she’d chalked it up to an extremely strange hallucination.

It was made especially ironic since Allison was a Defense-aptitude psion, and would be training directly under Aegis. She had been thrilled to hear about it. But despite all of that, excellent progress was being made. Aegis, Iosif and Said together had quite a lot of experience, and were quickly training Dael and Allison to use their powers effectively.

The Commander was here today as well, and helping Matthew to teach Karen the more delicate aspects of Telekinetics. Quite honestly, telekinetics was rather self-explanatory, at least from what Patricia understood. Out of all of the designated specializations, it definitely seemed like the easiest to learn. It was more about directing and manipulating power, which honestly didn’t take much practice to get the hang of.

Since Karen was already lifting entire crates filled with metal in the air, she assumed it was going well. The Commander also seemed to be refining his powers, now more focused on more delicate control now that he knew he could lift the heavy stuff. Matthew still appeared to enjoy crushing things with his mind. Patricia wondered if he had some issues there. Oh well, as long as he took it out on the aliens, it was all good with her.

The lone Attack psions, Nataliya and Chan were unfortunately forced to experiment on their own, but Aegis had helped with some basics he knew, and already the psions were wreaking destruction on the helpless training dummies.

And she was assisting with the new Telepath, Jona, who had just grasped the basics of mind-control which she now planned to put it to the test. “Alright,” Patricia said, walking over to the wall where a metal cage was setting. “You can get into my mind when it’s undefended, now it’s time to try it on something else.”

“I did that once,” Jona mildly protested, looking at the cage apprehensively. “What exactly do you want me to –oh.”

Patricia snorted at the small oh at the end as Jona realized what was in the cage. The chittering Chryssalid was not exactly happy, but Patricia wasn’t concerned. It was one of Vahlen’s, so it wouldn’t attack humans. But Patricia sensed that Jona wasn’t exactly recalling that. “Animals are good for practice,” Patricia continued. “I had to learn as I went, but you don’t have to do that. Remember how you did it with me. Focus on the mind.”

“That’s a chryssalid,” Jona said, as if she was blind. “Are you sure…”

“Don’t worry,” Fatima encouraged, walking up and wiping her face with a towel. “The chryssalid won’t attack. They’re Vahlen’s and hers don’t attack humans.”

“Close your eyes if it helps,” Patricia suggested, focusing on Jona’s own mind to calm her slightly. “Sense the mind that you think is the chryssalid. It should be very distinct.”

Jona bit her lip, but complied and Patricia sensed her becoming calmed once she closed her eyes and drew upon her power. The air around her shimmered slightly, and Patricia unlocked the cage
and opened it silently. “Good. You sense it?”

“Yes,” Jona said, her voice distracted. “It’s…frantic. Basic.”

“Focus on it and isolate it with your power,” Patricia continued as the alien stumbled out, looking around frantically as it knew something was happening, but didn’t for sure. “Visualize it however you want, but apply your power to it.”

Patricia nodded in approval as she lifted her left arm, hand extended in the direction of the chryssalid. Good, she was already learning that physical motions were an excellent way to direct concentration. “I think I have it,” Jona said slowly, her form rigid. “I can’t make sense of it.”

“Don’t go too deep yet,” Patricia said. “That’s for later. Give it some commands. Impress your will onto it.”

Jona nodded imperceptibly and a minute or so later, the chryssalid suddenly laid down on the ground and closed it’s eyes. Patricia knelt down and nodded. Yep, it was definitely asleep. Not a difficult command, but it had worked. “It worked,” Jona said, almost sounding surprised as she came out of the psionic trance. “I actually did it.”

“And now you can neutralize a good portion of the alien army,” Patricia congratulated, clapping her on the back. “Mutons, Andromedons and Vitakara aren’t much different. You just need to isolate them and then give your commands. Though I’d suggest something a bit more potent than sleep.”

“So...what could I do?” Jona asked, looking down at the chryssalid in wonder.

“The only limit is your imagination,” Patricia said, tapping her own head. “Slave has a negative connotation for obvious reasons, but that is essentially anything under your control. Do you want to kill it? Incapacitate it? Turn it against its friends? You can do all of that with simple commands. Tell the mind it is burning and it will create the sensation. The mind is powerful, and it can be exploited.”

“Right, I can do that for one though,” Jona nodded. “But how were you able to do the same to a thousand at once?”

“Practice,” Patricia chuckled. “Practice and experience. One mind may be difficult now, but once you master it, five will seem like no big deal. Before you know it, you’ll be taking over entire armies.”

“It also doesn’t have to be used offensively,” Fatima added with a smile. “I personally have found it better to help my fellow soldiers. Patricia knows what I am talking about.”

“That’s a little more difficult,” Patricia warned lightly. “But she’s right. You can affect allies in much the same way, only emphasizing their strengths instead of exploiting weaknesses. It’s like a mind-merge of sorts, sort of like how Aegis affects people, except intentional instead of a side effect. It’s more instinctual to me, but I don’t see why you couldn’t learn it as well.”

“I could show you,” Fatima offered. “I’ve gotten rather good at it myself. Although I had a lot of practice.”

“Sure,” Jona agreed, walking off with her. “I might as well find out what I’m best at.”

Patricia took the opportunity to take a break and sipped from her water bottle, watching the other psions hone their abilities. “We’re making good progress, I think,” the Commander said, walking
up and taking a seat next to her. “You’ve done good work here. All of these people seem like good fits.”

“You can thank Haley for the choices,” Patricia downplayed. “She’s the one who put this roster together.”

“Sure, but you’ve put this entire training regimen together as well,” the Commander said, emanating approval. “Aegis believes that we can eventually get a Human to rival the power of an Ethereal, and I believe we’ll get there.”

“Well, we beat the Ravaged One,” Patricia said as she watched Karen throw a massive crate a Matthew who also caught it telekinetically. “I’d say we’re already there.”

“Although it did take every psion we had, and we still almost lost,” the Commander added ruefully. “But I’m pretty sure you’ll hit that before anyone else.”

“I think so as well,” she agreed, looking towards where Aegis was instructing Allison and Said. “And I’m going to do everything to make that a reality.”

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The Praesidium, XCOM Intelligence Control

“I’m sending agents with Vahlen’s cordyceps plant to Indonesia and the Philippines,” Zhang informed the Commander, highlighting the area on the holomap. “The resistance groups should be able to distribute them quickly.”

“Excellent,” the Commander nodded. “Thanks to Aegis, I think we have a target to look for: The Gateways. I would expect them to be built in Australia, if not elsewhere.”

“Agreed,” Zhang nodded. “I’m going to send that to my contacts. I’ll have my agents locate and sabotage them as quickly as we can. Although we might need dedicated strike teams to carry out missions like this, especially if they are deep within alien territory.”

“A better idea is to phase out agents there with genetically modified ones,” the Commander suggested. “Some already are, I know, but one genetically modified agents might actually be enough to run single-man ops against entire alien strongholds.”

“Something to test,” Zhang nodded. “There are plenty of weaker alien strongholds in Australia to attempt that theory. But I tend to agree. It might be advisable to share some of these modifications with ADVENT.”

The Commander wasn’t entirely sure about that, largely because he didn’t entirely like the idea of ADVENT creating borderline-invincible soldiers that far outnumbered their own. With that being said, ADVENT wasn’t exactly a concern yet, and there were admittedly contingencies he could fall back on. The aliens were the priority and he had to trust that ADVENT would hold up in the meantime. “The Biomuscular Regeneration and Disease Prevention modifications would be appropriate, I think.”

Zhang gave a rare small smile. “I may not be psionic, Commander, but I know your hesitation. While ADVENT could benefit from our advances, I see no reason to let them be released without contingencies of our own. I trust Vahlen is smart enough to insert a fatal flaw into whatever we send, yes? Something that is otherwise impossible to exploit without previous knowledge.”

The Commander smiled. “I certainly believe she is, good thinking.”
“We’d have to keep Kim in the loop,” Zhang added, shutting off the holomap. “His partner, Tygan, might notice something is off and he needs to know about it to redirect him away. I also suspect Saudia would not be pleased if she learned of this. But it’s better than her getting it in her head that she’s invincible.”

“Which is why we have people like Kim keeping an eye on her,” the Commander said. “He’ll inform us if Saudia is developing anything major.”

“I am impressed with her restraint,” Zhang commented. “As was Kim. He expected her to be more interested in turning the MELD nanites into a weapon. Too dangerous, she said.”

“I tend to agree,” the Commander nodded. “But the idea is not without merit. But I intend to utilize that idea as a… sterilization weapon. On Earth it’s too risky, but the aliens have more than one.”

“The Muton homeworld,” Zhang suggested. “If Aegis has described it correctly, it is the heart of their military production. The loss of that would be catastrophic. Or Helion-7 for that matter.”

“Exactly,” the Commander nodded, a grim smile on his face. “Aegis is warning against escalation on Collective controlled territory, and he is right. But when the time is right, we have the numbers of the Gateways and only need to send one or two doomsday bombs through them and watch the fallout.”

“Of course, that would probably send out calls for an all-out assault on Earth.” Zhang pointed out.

“Yes,” the Commander nodded. “Which is why I don’t intend for development on that to fully start until we can fight on somewhat even footing with them. On their turf, not just on Earth.”

“Unless of course we need to enact the Apollo Contingency,” Zhang noted, scratching his chin. “But I don’t think the situation is dire enough yet.”

“Or the Artemis Contingency,” the Commander added. “But for that we need some kind of sample from the Ethereals. I somehow doubt that will be easy to acquire.”

“No,” Zhang agreed, looking at him. “What are you going to do if Aegis refuses to undergo the Manchurian Program?”

The Commander pursed his lips. “That is a good question. I’m not sure if I can do anything, not yet at least. Worst-case scenario, perhaps all of our psions could sedate him, but I feel that would only be a temporary solution. And should that fail, we are essentially screwed.”

“I was afraid of that,” Zhang sighed. “We need to discuss where we should be focusing most of our efforts after Vahlen completes the Manchurian Project. Improving our forces is all well and good, but both of us know that won’t win the war. The Ethereals are the only ones that matter and they cannot be replaced like their regular soldiers. Vahlen needs to begin researching anti-psionic technology to counter them. There is little use for an invincible soldier if they can be turned on us because an Ethereal mind-controls them.”

That was definitely going to be a major undertaking later in the war and Zhang was certainly correct there. “The Ethereals themselves seem to be holding back for now,” the Commander said. “We needed to focus on weathering their army. But once they realize they’ll need more…then yes, we’ll need ways to counter them beyond our own.”

“Beyond that, it’s also only a matter of time before ADVENT tries to make their own psions,” Zhang added. “When they figure out the crude methods involved, it won’t take long for them to refine it.”
“Hence why I added that to the Directive,” the Commander nodded. “By law they have to turn psions over to us as only we can help them adjust to their new abilities.”

Zhang snorted. “Do you really think they’re going to comply?”

The Commander smirked. “Actually, I do. If for no other reason than Saudia is in charge and she doesn’t want to risk me removing her. Aside from that, it’s not like you can hide a psion. We’ve got enough of our own to be able to tell if a Human is one or not. Once that gets out, ADVENT would suffer a serious loss of face, and also per the Directive, the penalty for unauthorized psionic experimentation is rather high.”

Zhang hmmed at that. “And with Stein in charge of the Peacekeepers, she would ensure they would be punished. Saudia may have done a little too well in choosing her. I suppose then that the risk is mitigated. Although later there may be questions raised about why ADVENT must turn them over to us.”

“We’ll deal with that when it arises,” the Commander said. “In the meantime…well, we keep preparing. I’m surprised there hasn’t been a retaliation yet.”

“The delay concerns me,” Zhang admitted, rubbing his forehead. “It means they’re likely preparing for a deadly strike. One we won’t be able to stop.”

“Stopping isn’t our goal for retaliation,” the Commander reminded him. “But to mitigate the threat. Because this time, I think that will be all we can do.”

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*The Praesidium, Practice Range*

Sierra found herself liking the alloy cannon more and more the longer she used it. There was something very satisfying about completely shredding a dummy into pieces from metal shards. Considering her recent improvements, it might not be amiss to add it to her arsenal. After all, it wasn’t as though she only had to carry a rifle and pistol.

She had been rather skeptical of the initial message the Commander had put out regarding the genetic modifications…but after seeing that they were in fact legitimate, she felt it would be highly questionable at best not to take advantage. She had to admit that the idea of apparent invulnerability was tempting, and there were enough people she could personally observe and talk to that made it a pretty easy choice.

And the results were…well, exactly what was advertised. Granted, she hadn’t actually been shot at yet, but she felt physically harder. Her skin had a much tauter feeling, almost metallic, which made some sense. One of the apparent side-effects of the Iron Skin modification were these slightly translucent hexagons that ran over every part of her skin. It made her look a bit strange, especially when the light hit her at the right angle and gave the illusion of a body-length tattoo of small hexagons.

Apparently there was a scientific explanation for it, likely something to do with how that was how the skin was reinforced to stop actual projectiles. She’d done some…experimentation with the modification and it was a little disconcerting to realize how protected she actually was.

“I’m curious,” a voice said, coming up beside her. “How does it feel?”

She turned to see one of the oldest soldiers she’d seen here. It was because of that she remembered his name: Oliver. She was sort of surprised XCOM had recruited someone as old as him, since his
white hair and beard kinda gave away the fact that he wasn’t exactly young. Then again, he probably had a lot of experience fighting.


“Yes,” he nodded, unslinging his rifle from his back. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

She shrugged. “Sure. It’s honestly not that different. I feel stronger; definitely tougher than before.”

“Have you tested it out?” He asked curiously.

“I haven’t gotten shot if that’s what you were wondering,” she admitted with a laugh. “But I’m pretty sure it works. Here, watch this.” She motioned him over to a small table used for weapon cleaning and pulled out one of her knives.

“You don’t have to give a demonstration,” he began uncomfortably, realizing what she was going to do. “Really.”

“Don’t worry,” Sierra assured him, placing her hand on the table. “Trust me, I’m not going to hurt myself. Just showing you how it works.” She took a reverse grip of her knife, raised it and stabbed down on her arm, slightly amused at the sharp intake of breath behind her. But just as she expected, the blade slid off her skin and buried the tip in the table.

“That is…impressive,” Oliver admitted, looking slightly disturbed at her display. “Do you feel it?”

“I can feel something hit me there,” Sierra explained. “But it doesn’t hurt. Now, that might change if I get shot, but I’m actually feeling pretty confident about this. So what about you? Thinking about taking the Commander up on his offer?”

“Not at the moment,” he said, slightly smiling. “But I’m a little too suspicious for my own good, I think. Let’s just say I think there’s a catch to all of this that the Commander isn’t exactly being truthful about.”

The thing was, Sierra had wondered the same thing, but hadn’t been able to figure out what that possibly could be. The scientists had assured her that she wouldn’t be dependent on any drugs and that the modification wouldn’t fade over time. It performed as they said (Seemingly) and had also explained every possible side effect or consequence. Despite not exactly trusting the Commander, she did not expect him to lie to his soldiers, at least with this.

“I haven’t seen or felt anything irregular,” Sierra finally said with a shrug. “Maybe this is the one exception to the rule.”

“Perhaps,” Oliver admitted. “Although I’m also not entirely comfortable with how these genetic enhancements were probably discovered.”

“In a lab,” Sierra guessed. “Maybe they experimented on a Sectoid or two. Why does that matter?”

Oliver sighed. “Do you mind if I’m blunt?”

Sierra smirked and gestured him forward. “I welcome it.”

“You might regret that,” he warned. “But fine. What are the chances that XCOM could suddenly discover this miracle modification that makes soldiers immune to projectiles, and it’s also safe enough that it works 100% of the time when applied to soldiers? Now multiply that times four.
Which either means they’re extremely lucky or are using human test subjects.”

Sierra frowned, as admittedly that hadn’t crossed her mind. “Does that still make it bad?” She asked. “I’m pretty sure there are laws around that.”

Oliver just looked at her. “Under XCOM? Really? I can respect the Commander, but I absolutely know men like him. If something is illegal that hinders them, they will do everything they can to remedy that. Do you really believe he wouldn’t use humans for testing?”

“Fair point,” Sierra nodded. “That being said, the Commander isn’t…unreasonable. Or a sadist, even if I don’t entirely trust him. He probably used volunteers for testing. I do believe he does care about his soldiers.”

“Maybe,” Oliver didn’t sound convinced. “But the thing is, I don’t know, and as such I’m not sure I want to involve myself in it,” he gave a slight smile. “I’m content just staying a normal human for now.”

“I can respect that,” Sierra nodded, now wondering the answer to the question he raised. “Ideological decisions are pretty rare, nowadays.”

“Eh, maybe I’m just old,” he chuckled, shaking his head. “The world is sadly not a place where ideals win. Not anymore, I think. Or at least not the ones I support.”

“You were in NATO, right?” Sierra asked. “What happened to them?”

“As far as I know, they’re being incorporated into the ADVENT military,” he shrugged. “I’m not that surprised it was dissolved. There isn’t a need for a NATO now that the UN fell and ADVENT is in charge. I do like that Saudia put Chairman Christiaens in charge of the military. At least that is one person I can trust in ADVENT.”

“Oh?” Sierra asked. “You don’t trust them?”

“I trust them to fight the aliens,” Oliver amended. “Not necessarily to have the best interests of the people in mind.”

“I agree with that,” Sierra muttered. “Their military is probably why the Commander is turning a blind eye to them. Then again, I’m pretty sure he could force Saudia to do what he wants. The situation is probably even more complicated than I think.”

“Probably,” Oliver agreed. “I suppose all we can really do are our jobs. Whatever plans the Commander has, I’m pretty sure he won’t be telling us.”

“Unfortunately not,” Sierra agreed, tossing her rifle over her shoulder. “But I would be really curious to know what goes on that controlling head of his.”

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The Praesidium, Mission Control

The Commander would normally be slightly irritated if he was woken out of bed in the middle of the night, especially since it was a night where Vahlen had gotten enough done that they could actually spend a night together, but considering the circumstances, he wished he was woken up for literally no reason.

“Status report!” He ordered Jackson, who was in front of the hologlobe, while analysts and
workers rushed around, speaking frantically into headsets. Jackson herself was talking rapidly with someone, but cut them off and snapped into a salute as he approached.

“Hawaii was just hit an hour ago,” she briefly updated. “They were completely cut off and overwhelmed. Networks and feed are dark over there. But we have to assume they’re going to hit the West Coast.”

“Why attack Hawaii?” Was the first thing he wondered aloud. There was no good reason they needed to attack that state unless…

Unless they wanted them to know an attack was coming. And if that was the goal, then they expected to win and more than that, wanted to make a decisive statement in the most powerful nation in the world.

“Unknown,” Jackson admitted. “But they’ve given us a valuable warning. ADVENT is already sending reinforcements to the coastal cities. What are your orders?”

“Assemble several squads of soldiers and I’ll fly with them to the Citadel to coordinate with ADVENT forces,” he ordered. “Prepare our Ravens for launch.”

“Understood,” Jackson nodded. “Good luck, Commander.”

He barely heard her as he left to go prepare. If he was correct about what they could expect, they would need all the luck they could get.

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Supplementary Material

The Advent Directive

SECTION 5: ADVENT Agencies

Subsection 5.1: Overview

Purpose: ADVENT agencies exist to create, regulate and provide services to the citizens of ADVENT over the entirety of the organization itself. Agencies are instrumental in keeping ADVENT operating in a smooth manner that continually improves the lives of all people within it, and constantly looks to improve whenever the opportunity is presented.

Leadership Appointment: The leaders of the various agencies are proposed by the Chancellor of ADVENT, with several agencies also requiring the Chief of the Peacekeepers, the Commander of the ADVENT Military, and/or the Director of ADVENT Intelligence to also approve them before presenting the application to the ADVENT Congress of Nations.

Candidates can only be chosen from a pre-approved pool and must register beforehand before being considered for any agency position. Once a candidate is chosen, he or she is interrogated by the Congress of Nations for a time to be determined by them to determine if they are appropriate for the position. They will then vote on approving the candidate and should it pass, the candidate will assume the position.

If the Congress of Nations rejects the candidate, an explanation must be made with proof and evidence explaining the rejection. Said explanation will be given to the Judicial Courts for review, and if it is approved, then the candidate will be rejected from consideration. If the explanation is rejected by the court, then an additional hearing will be held and vote taken. A candidate can only
be rejected by the Congress of Nations via refuted explanation up to three times, after that the Chancellor can install them directly in the position. If the Congress of Nations fails to provide an explanation within fourteen days, then the Chancellor can install them directly in the position.

Abuse of this system (such as intentionally and spuriously delaying the appointment of a candidate for partisan reasons) will result in legal action. If there is dissent, it is expected to be brought to the attention of the Chancellor and candidate as soon as possible without any intentional delay. Authors of multiple refuted explanations may find themselves barred from further dissents or removed from office altogether.

*Agency Leadership Removal*: Heads of ADVENT agencies may hold the position for a minimum period of ten years, barring events like criminal activity, injury or assassination. Heads of these agencies may not unexpectedly retire without reason or explanation. At the end of their appointment, the Chancellor may approve them for another term, or legally replace them with a different candidate.

A Chancellor cannot replace the head of an agency without an acceptable reason that has been approved by the Judicial Courts. This is in effect regardless of if a new Chancellor is appointed who didn’t make any appointments to these agencies.

*ADVENT Agency List and Brief Overview:*

**ADVENT Department of Energy and Renewable Sources**: Responsible for the research and development for all energy matters related to ADVENT. They are also responsible for regulation and distribution of various resources and technology related to the field.

**ADVENT Bureau of Education**: Responsible for all facets of the ADVENT education system including structure, wages, and regulation over both State and private sector schools at all levels.

**ADVENT Research and Development**: Responsible for the concentrated research and development of multiple areas of ADVENT, including civilian and military advances in computing, science, biology and genetic enhancement.

**ADVENT Engineering and Advanced Technology**: Responsible for the research and creation of advanced technology including artificial intelligence, computing, manufacturing and development. They work in both a civilian and military capacity.

**ADVENT Internal Affairs and Oversight**: Responsible for ensuring that ADVENT is internally following the regulations set forth, and that all agencies are running as efficiently as possible. Internal disputes and legal issues within ADVENT are handled by this agency.

**ADVENT Election Oversight**: Responsible for the vetting, approval and integrity of all elections and candidates within ADVENT, and also has final control over regulations regarding specific elections.

**ADVENT Diplomatic Service**: Responsible for managing diplomatic relationships between foreign nations and alien governments.

**ADVENT Public Relations and Media Integrity**: Responsible for distributing accurate and direct information from the State and disseminating appropriate knowledge in a practical and efficient way. Also ensures that independent media is conforming to standards and not deliberately misleading the public.

**ADVENT Agriculture and Food Oversight**: Responsible for the regulation and inspection of all
food distributors and farms throughout ADVENT, as well as responsible for researching, proposing and improving various agricultural or distribution equipment or technology to increase efficiency.

**ADVENT Department of Infrastructure:** Responsible for the upkeep, creation and removal of all infrastructure within ADVENT, and is responsible for building regulation and maintenance of essential systems.

**ADVENT Adoption and Child Services:** Responsible for managing adoptions within and outside of ADVENT and completing them in a timely, safe, and confidential manner. They are also responsible for dealing with instances of child abuse, trafficking and inspection. They are also responsible for ensuring that children are appropriately registered and vaccinated and possess authority to inform the Peacekeepers if parents do not comply.

**ADVENT Drug and Substance Research:** Responsible for the exclusive research of medical and recreational drugs, including those that are illegal. This agency has the authority to approve a drug for recreational or medical use, and also the authority to recall or make various substances illegal provided proof can be show to the Judicial courts justifying decisions in both cases.

**ADVENT Department of Health and Medical Services:** Responsible for the creation, regulation and enforcement of all ADVENT medical standards and serves to also inspect and oversee them as well. They are also responsible for all patient and medical professional data.

**ADVENT Department of Commerce and Economy:** Responsible for the regulation and oversight of the economy, as well as having authority over foreign and domestic trade, currencies and economical positions.
March of the Battlemaster

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Cultro, En route to San Francisco

The Overseer-class craft sped silently across the skies, no indication within the craft itself that it was flying at all. The Sectoids may have been an inferior, vindictive and selfish species, but their intelligence could occasionally produce excellence. But everything in the craft itself was superficial to him; displays, seats and weapon stands. They had mistakenly believed that comfort was something he placed value on.

Fools. But he had no reason to dwell on it further. The city was approaching and the humans would no doubt be preparing for an army.

They would not expect only one, but a Battlemaster was far more dangerous than any army, as the humans would soon learn. Today was the day where XCOM would learn the price of defying the Imperator, and Aegis would realize the mistake he had made. He bore no ill will towards Aegis because unlike some Ethereals, he stood by his beliefs, although such a drastic step was strange, even for him.

It ultimately mattered little. Not even Aegis could resist him, and it had been a reason why he had made sure to learn all he could from Aegis, because he suspected the day would come when he could no longer rely on his friend.

The holographic humanoid figure suddenly materialized before him, a golden feminine projection who blinked and fizzed as if mere static. The figure had supposedly been based on a Vitakarian female, but it now reminded the Battlemaster more of Human females. The figure was faceless, obscured by a black mist with shining eyes.

He had programmed her for a military personality, so she appeared standing before him in an even stance, hands clasped behind her back. “Battlemaster,” she began, the synthesized voice transmitting directly into his communications implant. “We are approaching the Human city known as San Francisco. J’Loran, Disciple-7 and Lura’irinena’borelia are awaiting your command.”

“Connect me to them,” the Battlemaster commanded, rising and towering over the small projection.

“Connecting,” she said, then her form multiplied and morphed until he was standing before near-perfect, golden recreations of his subordinates, complete with the static fuzz. The CODEX system truly was one of the greatest unexpected creations of the Collective. He would not have imagined Cogitian’s archive system could have such widespread and practical usage.

“Begin your assault,” the Battlemaster commanded. “J’Loran, press your advantage. Bombard the city and draw Patricia to you. They will not be able to resist taking revenge on your species.”

“I am expecting her,” J’Loran boomed. “If the city is evacuated, we will raze it to the ground.”

“Capture any civilians you can,” the Battlemaster ordered. “Remember: Do not kill them unless
they are actively assisting ADVENT or otherwise fighting Collective forces.”

“Acknowledged,” J’Loran stated. “Beginning the assault now.”

The Battlemaster turned to the Borelian as J’Loran severed the connection. “Irinena, begin your own attack. Hold back initially until you see what they have.”

“It will be done, Battlemaster,” Irinena growled, baring her incisors before she placed the black helmet over her head. “May you find victory on the battlefield.”

As she blinked out of existence, he turned to the Sargon dutifully awaiting his orders. “Disciple-7, begin your own assault. Be prepared to counter the psions.”

“I understand, Battlemaster,” the Sargon stated, in guttural tones of his species. “I have analyzed the entirety of the city and estimate between thirty to fifty thousand ADVENT soldiers for defense and have adjusted my forces to account for this fact and the possibility of XCOM being introduced as a variable. Further variables within XCOM have also been taken into consideration.”

The Battlemaster nodded approvingly. He was continually disappointed when the Collective simply used the Sargons on pointless administrative duties and training. Disciple-7 had proven to be as competent as any subordinate, and possessed a near-perfect memory thanks to Ethereal genetic modification.

A shame it was often wasted on trivial tasks that could simply be run by a CODEX system.

“Good,” the Battlemaster said with an approving nod. “When you evacuate the civilians, destroy the city and hold your position. We cannot expect universal victory and will not push forward beyond our limits.”

“I obey, Battlemaster,” Disciple-7 confirmed, bowing his head. “Glory to the Ethereal Collective.”

The figure blinked out of existence and the CODEX appeared once more. “Battlemaster, the city approaches. We are close to the drop position.”

“Noted,” he said, and reached back with his upper right hand to grasp the greatsword strapped to his back. The weight felt familiar and comforting as he held it firmly at his side, letting the point rest on the cold alloy of the spacecraft. The scarred blade that had put millions to death would soon be submerged in blood once more, and he looked forward to testing his strength once more against an alien army.

This time, he hoped they would actually present a challenge.

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The Citadel, Mission Control

It was almost nostalgic, being back here in the now-ADVENT controlled Citadel. They had turned it into a very fortified base that was stocked with what he could only assume were specially trained soldiers. This was apparently where the Lancer base of operations was, which made him wonder if ADVENT was planning on deploying Lancers to defend the West Coast.

The Commander wore his silver armor, helmet tucked under his arm and weapons attached to his back. He doubted that he would personally be participating in any fighting that took place, but it never hurt to be prepared and if nothing else, it gave a morale boost to the personnel here. Soldiers,
Officers and supporting staff all gave quick salutes to him as he walked past, relief clear on their faces and reflected in their emotions.

The doors slid open with a familiar hiss and he stepped through to the open area of Mission Control. It remained largely the same, but it seemed that the once-massive hologlobe was being used as more of a geoscape map, with the blue hologram displaying the majority of the west coast, and, it appeared, positioning of both ADVENT and Collective forces.

People in the room made way before him and he quickly approached the small group that was appraising the situation, and the woman who bore the red and white stripes of command straightened up as he approached, and turned to face him. “Commander,” Laura Christiaens greeted, not smiling but giving him a firm nod of acknowledgement. “It’s good that you’re here.”

“What’s the situation?” He asked, looking down at the geoscape portraying the massive battlefield. “I have three squads with MEC accompaniments ready to assist where needed.”

“Good,” Laura said, also returning her attention to the geoscape. “There have not been any hits I would consider major, but the first alien ships made landfall approximately twelve minutes ago here, here and here.” She pointed at southern California, Oregon and Washington. “All dead ahead of the major cities.”

The Commander appraised the map. “Seattle, Portland and LA. I don’t suppose this was unexpected?”

“It wasn’t,” Laura agreed, a grim ghost of a smile on her aged face. “We knew that the aliens would probably strike the major cities. Strangely enough, San Francisco appears to be clear, but that is likely to change.”

“What about the cities themselves?” The Commander asked. “Have they been evacuated?”

“Impossible to fully evacuate them,” Laura admitted, frustration clear in her tone. “I attempted to get permission to do that a week ago and was advised not to until there was a credible threat. It’s only been started in earnest two days ago, when I got permission from the Chancellor herself. At best the cities are half-evacuated, and I am assuming those that are outside are lost.”

“Unfortunate,” the Commander muttered. “But little we can do. Where are your forces stationed?”

“I knew they would be coming here eventually, and I made sure ADVENT is prepared,” Laura began, zooming the geoscape to focus on Portland. “Each city contains a Battalion of ADVENT soldiers who have been strategically positioned through the area. Portland itself has several choke points we can use. You see the river running through it?”

“Yes,” the Commander nodded.

“We pin the aliens there to start,” she explained. “Explosives have been rigged on the bridges in case they become overwhelmed. I’ve also stationed soldiers up the entire river beyond the Vancouver area, with more behind them to prevent us being surrounded. I imagine that will make it slightly difficult for the aliens, assuming they are fielding their heavier units.”

“They might be,” the Commander warned. “Cyberdisks and Floaters don’t need bridges to cross. However, the entire army is unlikely to be composed of them alone.”

“And indications are that the army heading that way is largely composed of Vitakara,” Laura pointed out.
“Which kinds?” The Commander asked.

“Not enough intel,” she shook her head. “But we can safely assume Borelians and Vitakarians.”

“What about Seattle?” The Commander asked.

“Supremely to our advantage,” Laura confirmed. “The city is on the coast of a lake, which means it is possible that we can repeat our defense that we used in Japan. Unfortunately, all indications are that the aliens learned from their mistake. We just got word that Olympia just went dark, which means they’re coming up the long way. I’ve just sent soldiers to reinforce Tacoma and Kent.”

The Commander could see what she meant. Olympia was southwest of the city itself, and if it followed the road up to Lakewood and then straight up, they could directly attack the city. But the good news was that it was very direct, and they would not be able to do anything but commit to it entirely. “Still easily defendable,” the Commander noted. “But they might attack from the North as well.”

“They are,” Laura confirmed. “But in a much smaller force. They are clearly bringing the main bulk of their army up from the south. What I’m concerned about is the composition. It appears to be mostly Andromedons and Mutons.”

Considering that the Andromedons were the reason the Collective had any ground in Japan whatsoever, that was concerning and raised several questions. “Seems odd to attack Seattle with such a large force,” he said slowly. “I would have guessed a larger or better defended city.”

“As did I,” Laura muttered, pressing her lips together in a thin like. “Which is why I think it is the most vulnerable. I didn’t anticipate an Andromedon-majority force.”

The Commander smiled. “That’s why we’re here. I’ll send my best team and psion to reinforce. The city will be defended.”

“I appreciate that,” Laura said, moving the geoscape towards the south. “California is where our strongest defenses are. San Francisco has an entrenched army large enough to withstand an Andromedon attack, and the aliens will likely have no choice but to either repeat what they did in Japan, or go out of their way to establish an isolated beachhead. The coast is highly useful here.”

“Perhaps that’s why they are leaving it alone,” the Commander mused, scratching his chin as he looked at the blue map. “However...”

“However, that will only work in the short term,” Laura finished, pointing at the state. “If we control San Francisco, we can effectively counter and outflank every alien force that moves further in. Ignoring it is a bad strategy.”

It was, and the Commander was getting a growing suspicion as to why the city was supposedly being left along. The Battlemaster wouldn’t make such an exploitable error, which meant there had to be some plan for the city...and unfortunately, he had a decent guess as to what that was. “What of LA?” He asked, wanting to know about that before voicing his concern.

“Almost the same deal,” Laura said. “But the aliens do have an opening here, which they are taking. Oxnard has been taken, and they are fighting into the city that way. More difficult for us, but they are almost all Mutons, which can be handled easily enough, especially since we have the advantage.”

“It might be a distraction,” the Commander wondered aloud, trying to puzzle out why an all-Moton force would be sent. “Perhaps a feint? They know Mutons don’t work well against us.”
“The attack seems straightforward,” Laura nodded. “Too straightforward. I’m missing something, but there have been no other attacks near the city. Just from the direction of Oxnard.”

“They might be holding some forces back to get you to weaken other positions,” the Commander suggested. “Maybe don’t take soldiers from the perimeter, but perhaps the inner city. They can’t land a force there without you noticing, but they can attempt to surround the city itself before you realize it.”

“Good point,” she nodded. “I’ll see-“

“We’ve got an alien craft heading towards San Francisco!” An analyst called out.

“Only a matter of time,” Laura grunted, moving over to the city. “How many?”

There was a pause; surprise clear in the analyst’s voice. “Just one.”

“One?” Laura narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Is it a scout then?”

“No,” the Commander said slowly, a cold feeling building inside him. “San Francisco wasn’t forgotten by the aliens. It’s being targeted by the Battlemaster himself. And he is about to attack.”

“No one can take an entire city by themselves,” Laura said, looking at him in clear disbelief. “Not even an Ethereal. I doubt your telepath could do it either. And especially not the most protected city on the West Coast.”

“You need to prepare your forces to retreat if needed,” the Commander warned, making her face turn to stone. “I hope you are right, but these Ethereals are not like us, and I somehow don’t think that the Battlemaster is ignorant of the fact that it is supposedly impenetrable.”

“Ethereals are aliens, not gods,” Laura said coolly, turning away from him. “You proved that when you killed the one that attacked you. And you did it with under one hundred men. This Battlemaster faces a battalion of fifty thousand soldiers of ADVENT. No one can survive that alone, not even an Ethereal.”

“Maybe not,” the Commander muttered as he prepared to give his orders to the squads. “But I can guarantee that he is sure going to try.”

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San Francisco, United States of America

“Dropping.”

The hatch underneath him opened up and the Battlemaster began falling towards the sandy beach below. The air whistled in his ears as he sped towards the ground, angling himself like an arrow, cape flapping in the wind. The army before him became more visible as he approached terminal velocity.

Lines of soldiers in black armor, red Officers dotted throughout and snipers, gunners and explosives experts all poised in preparation for an invading force. Unfortunate that they were insufficiently armed to deal with him. The greatsword in his hand was made out of metal that cut through the alloy harvested on Helion-3, and the armor these Humans wore was a diluted variant of that.

He was getting close to the ground…
He thrust his lower hands down to telekinetically stabilize himself, flipping right side up and landed in the shallow water with a moderate splash. Straightening up, he appraised the army before him, hidden behind barricades of black metal, with the city itself behind them. It truthfully did not matter where he was, all that did was the removal of ADVENT from this city.

The battlefield was dead silent as surprise emanated in waves from the Humans before him. The Battlemaster was not surprised as he placed one armored boot forward, the water lapping around his ankles. A telepath he was not, but he could easily imagine the thoughts running through their heads.

Is this it?

Only one?

He allowed himself a smile as he brandished his sword in the air; a formal salute of respect before the engagement of an enemy. The early sunlight turned the blade into a gleaming beacon of light, one that would soon be awash in crimson.

Then the order finally came: “Open fire!”

The beach was lit up with the sound of hundreds of gauss rifles all firing at once. Gouts of sand and water shot up before and around him as they indiscriminately fired in his direction.

Time to begin.

With slow, ponderous steps he marched toward the closest line of soldiers. Projectiles bounced off his armor like water, nowhere near powerful enough to even scratch the forged metal of the Battlemaster. His greatsword was held idly in his lower right hand as he walked forward, impervious to the weapons before him.

A rocket suddenly sped towards him and he casually held up a free hand to catch it telekinetically, then sent it back towards a line of soldiers without breaking stride. He barely heard the screams of pain as he fell upon the first group of victims.

“Fire!” One screamed frantically as all of them backed up. “Kill it now!”

Too late.

With speed that would be perceived as inhuman, the Battlemaster suddenly lashed out with his greatsword, decapitating the first solder, and transitioning into cut that sheared the arm of the woman next to him in two, then grabbed a third soldier telekinetically and pulled him forward to meet the point of the sword in his throat.

Without stopping, the Battlemaster threw the man back and dashed forward, impaling another soldier in the chest before grabbing another one by the head with a free hand and slamming it down into the corner of a crate, killing him instantly. One group down, time to pick up the pace.

A hail of projectiles slammed into his chest, temporarily giving him pause before he located the sources. Four gunners were concentrating their fire, under the direction of several Officers who were directing more regular soldiers to keep firing at him. More were running up, hoping to kill him by numbers alone.

The Battlemaster transitioned his hold on the greatsword to a reverse grip and threw it with
psionically-charged speed to impale one gunner in the chest, while with another hand he extended his telekinetic reach and *pulled*, then leapt towards the group of thirty soldiers as their weapons were ripped out of their hands.

He slammed into one soldier, then crushed one helmet under his boot before grabbing the two closest ones standing beside him and tossing them towards the others while tossing the grenades on their belts. Obliterated by their own weapons, he turned and telekinetically grasped another four soldiers and crushed their throats before they could even so much as gasp.

The greatsword returned to his hand with a telekinetic call and he continued butchering the soldiers who were still unsteady from his pull. He sliced the throat of a woman who’d tripped over another corpse; another fleeing soldier was lifted into the air and pulled backwards to be impaled on his blade; two more soldiers were decapitated with a single swing shortly after realizing there was no escape.

Blood and gore staining his once-sterling armor, he continued marching to the next enclave of humans, who were now trying a different tactic. They’d now organized into large teams of fifteen to twenty soldiers, and seemed to be splitting up to try and outflank him. He chuckled, even as projectiles flew all around him.

He clenched a fist and drew upon the psionic well inside him, engulfing his body in purple flame. The shouts of surprise and terror gave him direction as he picked the first group armed against him and *charged*. Power coursing through him, he sped toward the group of soldiers in a second, hitting one with enough force to break every bone in his body and send him flying back, while every soldier before him on the right fell to the ground, heads rolling away.

The Battlemaster completed the slash, decapitating the soldiers in a clean ring around him, before charging with the same force towards a nearby soldier, grabbing him by the helmet, and slamming it down on a nearby spike. He spun towards the three soldiers from the group that were still alive and dashed towards them with a bloody flourish that rent their bodies in pieces and sent the parts flying back.

The next group was trying to fall back, but there was no escape from him. He threw the greatsword towards one of them who gasped as the blade buried itself in her chest, then screamed as he seemingly materialized in front of her from a charge. He kicked her off his blade into two more soldiers and easily transitioned into a series of quick chops that decapitated, dismembered and otherwise maimed what remained of the entire group.

Remembering the third group, he spun on his heel to see them frantically retreating. He dug a foot into the sand and charged, turning his vision of the world around him into a blur, only focused on his targets. He hit the leader of the retreat with the force of a high-speed crashing Sectoid craft, pulverizing the poor woman and sending her flying in multiple directions, already dead from the fist-sized hole in her chest.

He switched hands, took a reverse grip and sliced backward, executing the immediate line behind him and impaling another soldier which he promptly stabbed into the ground before telekinetically lifting the remaining soldiers and letting them hang as he systematically dismembered them before letting their corpses fall to the ground in piles.

An explosion rocked the beach, then two more hit close beside him, and as he looked to the source, one hit him directly in the chest, the impact forcing him to take a step back. He looked at the line of soldiers armed with grenades and rocket launchers, all grouped up and hoping that sheer amount of explosives would be enough to kill him.
The surface of his armor was now a mixture of soot, gore and blood, with a good few scratches to add to the already present collection. Sand sprayed all over him as explosions rocked the ground near him, but he resumed his steady march through the minefield, sheathed in a purple aura that only burned brighter the longer he fought.

They were already beginning to back up, and now was the time to strike. He balled one hand into a fist and charged once more towards the line of soldiers, feeling the armor give way to flesh that split open, shattered bone, then emerged out the back. The scream of utter torment reached his ears and the Battlemaster pulled his fist out of the soldier’s chest and instantly decapitated the two shaken soldiers beside him, before grabbing another nearby one and charging towards a wall where he smashed her head on it with a sharp crack and a fairly large splatter.

The remaining fifty or so soldiers seemed to realize that running was pointless, and so instead stood their ground. Falling to their knees to line up shots, barking final commands and the persistent sound of gauss fire never let up once as they hoped and prayed for something, anything, to hit. They knew their lives were forfeit, and perhaps want to make a final sacrifice.

Their reasons mattered not, but he would oblige their wishes.

Sword strokes cut soldiers apart in seconds; a telekinetic grab crushed throats and skulls; men and women were decapitated and dismembered in surgical fashion as he wielded the greatsword as tall as some of them like it was made of air. More soldiers kept arriving from the flanks, all standing in the open, realizing cover was useless.

All of them fired gauss rounds, rockets, grenades; whatever they had on hand.

Nothing could touch him, and he continued his slaughter. First it was dozens who fell to his blade, psionics or hands, then the number or corpses around him grew as he sped from group to group, executing them in seconds before repeating the procedure with the inevitable reinforcements.

He lifted another soldier up with a hand and quickly stabbed him through the armpit before tossing his body towards another female soldier. A quick slash behind him bisected the soldier attempting a close flank with a splatter of blood. A quick application of telekinetic pressure crushed the woman’s skull into paste.

Projectiles ricocheted off his armor as he turned to see more soldiers approaching, but this time they had what was referred to as a tank. It rolled up, aimed its massive barrel at him and fired. He took the impact square in the chest and he was actually blown almost ten feet back, rolling onto the ground and reassuming his position.

He grinned, baring his teeth under the helmet. Already he could feel his body healing for the bruise that weapon had caused. A respectable try, but another futile effort. The tank was slow, and he was not. He charged, the world turning into a blur around him and transitioned into a spin that instantly executed the row of soldiers to the right of the tank.

He picked up the lone survivor, sped away, quickly line up his target and charged towards the massive barrel of the tank, the soldier still in hand. With a sickening splintering of metal and crunch of bone the soldier was bluntly impaled on the tank barrel, blood spurting from his wounds as he hung limply on the metal pole. A single swipe up cut through the barrel and it fell to the ground.

Several more chops and slices later, the remaining ADVENT forces on the opposite side of the tank were in pieces. The Battlemaster jumped onto the top of the tank and telekinetically opened the hatch, then pulled the first stunned driver out, snapping his neck and tossing him aside before
repeating the process for every one that was left.

The sound of more boots charging his position caught his attention and he turned to see what was at least fifty soldiers charging around the corner, weapons at the ready, then skidding to a stop when they saw what was before him. Whatever went through their minds, they still fired on him and he decided to just stand there and let them fire.

Let their terror grow as they realized what stood before him, right before he ended their lives.

For he was a Battlemaster and he was invincible.

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Portland, United States of America

“Sierra, Matthew, and Mark, you will reinforce the ADVENT forces on the I-405 Bridge,” Zara ordered rapidly as the skyranger fell into a steep descent. “Me, Karen and Tamara will reinforce the bridge near their Waterfront Park. Nati, Charlie, you will reinforce the Goliath where it’s dropped. All clear!”

“Yes, Overseer!” They shouted in response.

“Then let’s kill some aliens,” Zara stated, intensity dripping from her voice. Sierra could easily imagine the woman smiling under the helmet. She steadied her gauss rifle in her hands, sincerely hoping that the Iron Skin mod would actually work as advertised. Not that she was going to try and get hit, but the possibility was extremely high.

Splitting up the squad seemed risky, but given how much ground needed to be covered, it seemed like there wasn’t much choice. The good news was that the alien were being forced into choke points on the bridges, so that had halted the assault severely.

The skyranger settled on the ground with a thud, the sounds of gunfire and concussive shots already reaching her ears in the distance. The door hissed open and Zara waved them out. “Go! Go! I’ll be in contact.”

“Copy!” Sierra shouted as she charged down, flanked by Matthew and Mark Castle, their medic for this op. They dashed down the street filled with trash, abandoned cars and scorched buildings. Artillery and tanks were set up on the streets and nearby buildings, firing shells and rockets across the river to the other side, hopefully hitting some alien encampments.

The entire area bordering the river had been haphazardly reinforced and heavily improvised, not with the standard ADVENT barricade, but with a mix of crates, trucks and cars that soldiers utilized as they exchanged potshots with the aliens across the river. In front of the bridge itself was a proper ADVENT barricade several layers deep that just barely encroached on the bridge itself.

There were several Officers directing the ADVENT forces who were doing their best to establish a killzone for the entire bridge, and from the dozens of alien corpses lining the road, they appeared to be doing a good job. “Officer!” She called to one of the red-armored men, who had just directed several ADVENT gunners to relieve two soldiers. “Report!”

He snapped to attention the moment he saw her. “Yes, Operative. We’ve been able to hold this bridge for the past hour, but it’s only a matter of time before they begin advancing.” He motioned to the bridge. “These appear to be mostly Vitakara. Borelians and Vitakarian soldiers. We haven’t seen any others.”
Alright, that was decent. “Are the bridges rigged?”

“Yes, but we’re only to detonate if we lose control of them,” the Officer answered, flinching as several plasma bolts flew dangerously close to his head. “We don’t want to isolate ourselves, and detonating the explosives on the bridges might force them to begin a concentrated shelling of the city, which would be catastrophic due to the-“

“Enough!” Matthew interrupted, raising a hand. “What is your objective?”

“Hold this position for now,” he answered. “As long as we control the bridge, we can kill them pretty easily.”

“If that’s the case, we need to press forward,” Sierra said, looking towards the bridge. “You can’t just stay here.”

“We can’t establish barriers,” the Officer protested as more alien fire slammed into a nearby truck, killing the soldiers behind it in a sudden explosion. “Anyone who goes onto the bridge is dead without protection. This works both ways.”

“Mark, go help them!” Sierra pointed towards the group of wounded and dead ADVENT.

“On it!” He answered and charged to help assist.

“He’s a medic,” Sierra explained briefly. “He’ll help with the wounded. And I get that. Do you have the capability to establish barricades?”

“Yes,” the Officer nodded. “There are several engineering teams. But I can’t send them out just to be killed.”

“Leave that to us!” Sierra promised, motioning Matthew to follow and they dashed to the front barricade directly before the bridge itself.

“You must have a plan,” Matthew said as she raised her rifle and began firing across the bridge while also taking stock of the situation before her.

“Something like one,” Sierra admitted, managing to snipe a Borelian who’d attempted to dash to the side. “What’s the range on your telekinetics?”

“Reasonably? Depends on the size,” he answered, looking down the road. “The bigger it is, the easier I can focus on it.”

“Good,” Sierra nodded. “See the cars the aliens are moving?”

“Of course I do.”

“Can you get rid of them?”

She could imagine the tight grin in his voice. “That I can. Cover me, would you?”

Matthew stood up and purple energy began flaring around him as he raised his right hand towards the alien forces. Sierra took a breath and leapt over the barricade and slid to a stray crate in the street that barely offered any protection as she knelt behind it, laying down a firm line of suppressive fire as plasma sprayed all around her.

One bolt clipped her shoulder, another hit her side, but she didn’t feel anything despite her armor being scorched where it was hit. She managed to hit a Vitakarian soldier, who was dragged away.
by another alien, possibly for treatment, and the plasma fire suddenly became a lot more concentrated on her. She gritted her teeth as more plasma bolts clipped her and scorched her once-clean forest green armor.

The integrity of the armor was still intact, barely, but if XCOM was right, the plasma shouldn’t be able to pierce her skin without several consecutive direct hits. Still, it was getting way too close for comfort. The cars that the aliens were hiding behind were suddenly lifted into the air, and the aliens seemed stunned, which she took advantage of, killing several Vitakara within a few seconds with a simple sweep of her rifle.

One car was tossed towards the opposite end of the bridge, killing and crushing a couple dozen Vitakara running to reinforce, and the other was tossed off the bridge into the deep blue water with a splash. Sierra stood and began walking forward, aiming at the now-exposed aliens and executing them methodically before they could react.

There was a lull in the return fire. She looked back at the ADVENT line. “Come on!” She yelled, waving her arm forward to get them moving. “They’re going to start again!”

That propelled the ADVENT soldiers to get moving, and she was soon flanked by men and women in black armor, sending a lethal hail of projectiles down the road as the engineers quickly began building a barricade about an eighth of the way into the bridge. Slow and methodical, that would work fine.

Sierra took the opportunity to contact Zara. “Overseer! We are beginning to take the bridge. Army composition is all Vitakarian and we’re in decent position. Copy?”

“Acknowledged,” came Zara’s cool response. “We’re doing the same. It does appear to be all Vitakara. Interesting, but we’re pushing them back. The Goliath is also holding well.”

“Good,” Sierra nodded. “I’ll update if there are any changes.”

“Reinforcements incoming!” An Officer shouted, and Sierra looked down the road to see a mix of Vitakara soldiers rushing up, with what looked like heavy weapons in their hands.

“Get down!” She yelled, as Matthew raised his hands.

“Stay put!” He shouted. “I’ve got this.”

The aliens fired simultaneously, shooting glowing green grenades and red-streaked projectiles at them, some of which would have certainly hit had the air directly in front and around them not suddenly became distorted, as if looking through water. The first grenade that hit the shimmering field froze in mid-air, and it was immediately clear that the field was acting as a trap for all the rockets and grenades shot their way.

Matthew waved his hand around, and thrust it out, and all of the projectiles were thrown the exact opposite direction. Some slammed into the bridge itself with brief plasma explosions, most hit the road, creating new holes in the asphalt, and some more hit the area around the alien line, killing a dozen instantly and wounding even more.

ADVENT cheered at the destruction of the Vitakara line and continued pressing forward with renewed enthusiasm. Sierra and Matthew still led at the front, killing the stragglers who hadn’t retreated off the bridge and the hail of ADVENT fire preventing any further retaliation.

Halfway across, with the engineers building a new barricade as several dozen soldiers provided covering fire and Matthew removing or killing any new alien offensive, Sierra began to develop a
hope that they just might be able to pull this off.

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Los Angeles, United States of America

Compared to some of the soldiers he was sitting beside, Oliver felt uncomfortably normal even if he wasn’t the only unmodified human here. Catherine, Jesenia and Anna were similarly unmodified, but then again, most of them were just as new, or newer, than he was. They also didn’t have one, but two psions that specialized in offensive attacks. What those were was something he could only speculate, but beyond that some of them were modified in ways that quite frankly, made his skin crawl.

He had gotten the impression that Carmelita wasn’t entirely a stable individual, but possessed an unquenched hatred for the aliens and would do whatever it took to give herself an advantage. That apparently involved the installation of a strange tentacle/stinger into her fucking arm.

It apparently provided yet another tactical tool for her, but it was disconcerting to see the pale stinger extend out of her arm through her modified Aegis armor like some kind of worm or parasite. And of course she wasn’t the only one that had that particular improvement. Their other psion, Nataliya, had also elected to undergo the procedure.

Well, if nothing else they would probably decimate any aliens they came across. “Stand by for deployment, Mariner Team,” Lightning Sky informed as the skyranger lights flashed red. “Coming in for a landing.”

“Acknowledged,” Carmelita said, standing and the rest of them joined her. “Any notes on army composition?” She asked as she once more checked her alloy cannon.

“Appears to be largely Mutons, as suspected,” he answered as the Skyranger dipped. “Looks like they released Berserkers. ADVENT isn’t handling it well.”

“We’ll deal with them,” Carmelita said coolly, in a way that Oliver imagined she was smiling underneath her scarred helmet.

The skyranger set down, and the ramp extended onto the cracked asphalt. The roars of Mutons howling in pain, triumph and rage were everywhere, as was the constant barrage of ADVENT gauss fire. The buildings in the area had taken massive damage and some were even in danger of collapse. The ADVENT line directly in front of them was broken, with three Berserkers decimating the retreating ADVENT soldiers; wrist blades slick with blood.

“Lesedi, get into position; Nataliya, Chan, help me kill the Berserkers,” Carmelita ordered calmly as she took stock of the situation. “Everyone else reestablish that line now!”

“Yes, Overseer!” They shouted as they charged into the street. They were joined by several more ADVENT squads who were rushing to reinforce this position. The Muton soldiers themselves were well established, and Oliver immediately noticed something off about how they were composed.

All of them were in well-established cover, either abandoned vehicles or buildings, but were already different than the Mutons he expected because all of the soldiers had helmets over their faces. They didn’t seem complex, but they were covered up nonetheless. There were also several different kinds that he could see.

There were the soldiers, but there were also some that were holding heavier weapons such as
massive rocket launchers and packs filled with grenades. Behind the Muton lines were the black-armored Centurions, as XCOM had dubbed them, appearing to coordinate the attacks. That was also when Oliver noticed a distinct lack of Muton corpses on the other side.

Carmelita and the two psions wasted no time getting to work killing the Berserkers. Carmelita leapt towards one of the enraged aliens, blasting it in the chest with her alloy cannon, causing it to stumble back, then followed up by charging at the Berserker, alloy cannon raised and unloaded three successive shots directly into the head of the Berserker, killing it almost instantly.

Nataliya performed almost the exact same maneuver, given she was just as modified as Carmelita, but this time lashed out with her stinger, jabbing what he assumed was the point into the spot on its neck, before holstering her alloy cannon, raising her free hand and as she was suddenly engulfed in purple flame, squeezed and psionic rifts of energy materialized around the Berserker and began tearing it apart.

The alien flailed around, before it collapsed to the ground, dead or dying as Nataliya turned her attention to the established Muton army. Chan was less flashy, but far more direct in his own manifestations of psionic attacks. He drew his hand back, energy gathering in it before thrusting forward, sending a purple lance of energy that split the leg of the Berserker in two.

He repeated the same tactic, firing several more lances of energy, each one taking off an arm, another leg, and finally the head. Oliver slid into the ADVENT barricade which was also taken up by the respective reinforcements and began firing his rifle. If he got close enough, he would use his own alloy cannon, but for now the rifle was best.

Now the Centurions were coming up, grunting and roaring in their language as they pointed at the line of Humans. A purple energy shield covered them, and suddenly Oliver found himself under the barrage of its plasma cannon – and he wasn’t the only one.

“Pinned down!” Jesenia sputtered, plasma fire raining down nearby, rendering using her autolaser lethal.

“Same!” Catherine called, despite trying to contribute more to helping the wounded ADVENT soldiers.

“More Centurions are coming up!” One ADVENT soldier called, and Oliver risked a peek to see that they were right. There was an unprecedented six approaching, and it dawned on him that he realized what they were doing.

“They’re targeting us!” He called to Carmelita. “We need to get rid of them!”

“He’s hitting us! He’s hitting us!” She snarled from behind him, and soon she leapt over him to the front and landed directly beside a Centurion and fired point blank into its faceplate, piercing the metal and killing the alien while her stinger shot out of her raised wrist and impaled itself in a gap of the armor of a nearby Muton soldier.

Nataliya clenched a raised hand into a fist and another two Mutons were suddenly engulfed in energy storms that threatened to tear them apart. But the break in fire allowed him to rise and begin shooting. Or would have, had the ground suddenly not started shaking from the sound of explosions.

But not at them. “They’re targeting the building!” Catherine called in disbelief as she pointed towards the Mutons armed with rocket launchers and grenades who had fallen back and were purposefully targeting the building right next to them, firing a steady barrage of explosives. Oliver
frowned, trying to puzzle what-

“More Berserkers!” Jesenia called as six of the red-armored aliens charged into the fray. Two broke off to charge Carmelita, forcing her to leap back while firing almost non-stop and the other four charged them directly. A lance of psionic energy sliced through the head of one, but the others surprisingly simply ignored him and the ADVENT soldiers and it became clear what their goal was.

“The psions!” He called. “They’re targeting the psions!”

Not simply them either, but Carmelita had been specifically targeted as well. She was jumping all around the battlefield, firing her alloy cannon and using her stinger liberally, but while she could appear to handle one Berserker with ease, two was at least enough to keep her occupied, which Oliver was realizing was the whole point.

Whoever was leading these Mutons knew damn well what they were doing. They had expected a fight with XCOM and had a fucking plan to go along with it. But a Muton?

Or more than likely, there was another alien behind this. But a very, very smart one. “We need to get out of here and regroup!” Lesedi hissed into his earpiece, firing her sniper rifle from the roof of a building far behind him. “We’ve got a lot of trouble approaching.”

“Like what?” Oliver demanded as he fired a sustained burst at a soldier, and unfortunately only hit the leg, wounding it but not quite being able to kill it before it was dragged away. “I think we’ve got enough trouble.”

“There are twelve Muton Elites coming,” she hissed. “And some other Muton. Never seen one like it before. I think it’s in charge.”

Elites were not something that they could really handle right now. “Overseer! Orders?”

“We hold here,” she snarled, as she executed the final Berserker after her, splattering her armor in golden blood. “They want to fight us? Let them come.”

The two psions had taken care of their own Berserkers, but their delay had allowed more Mutons to take over and reinforce this street-turned-warzone. ADVENT soldiers were falling every few seconds as Muton fire continued unabated, and the number of ADVENT reinforcements was only getting smaller.

“We need help,” Chan declared in his altered voice as he executed another Centurion, psionic energy flowing off his killing arm. “We need reinforcements.”

“Lesedi! Call more in!” Carmelita commanded as she once more took point, executing Mutons and Centurions at close range, even as the aliens in the back turned a hail of plasma fire onto her, forcing her into temporary cover. The smaller woman’s armor was scorched, cracked and had clearly taken a beating, but she seemed no less determined than before.

“We need help,” Chan declared in his altered voice as he executed another Centurion, psionic energy flowing off his killing arm. “We need reinforcements.”

“ADVENT Command, we need more reinforcements on our position,” Lesedi called. “It appears that the commanding force is behind this attack. Current forces are insufficient to hold.”

A pause as the sounds of battle raged around them. “Copy,” came a male voice. “Redeploying several units to your position. Recalling the Marauder as well.”

“Acknowledged,” Lesedi finished. Oliver remembered that Amahle and her MEC had been deployed to a different part of the city, but he agreed that this was more pressing.
Something in the air caught his eye, but he ignored it, assuming it was an effect of one of the psions. Carmelita shot another Muton in the head while poisoning two more with her stinger which was proving to be a devastating addition to her own lethal arsenal. The roar of more Berserkers sounded in the distance, and he prepared for yet another wave. They only had to hold out a little longer before the reinforcements arrived.

“What the-!” Jesenia yelped as something materialized around her and manifested into a floating mechanical squid-creature. It wrapped its tentacles around her and began spewing a black mist into her face. Anna and Nataliya shouted in surprise as the same kind of creatures materialized around them as well.

He spun around, already reaching for his alloy cannon, and raised it just in time as the Seeker appeared behind him. He fired and it blew apart, splattering him in hot alloy and some alien fluid as the remains fell to the ground. Carmelita had simply grabbed the alien machine as it attempted to strangle her and ripped its tentacles off before finishing it off with an alloy cannon shot.

He was reminded that her enhancements did give her unnatural strength as a lucky side-effect. But before he could begin to help the other XCOM soldiers, the Muton grenadiers fired yet another barrage and with a sudden loud cracking and bending of steel, he realized what they had been trying to do. Sure enough, he looked up to the building and saw it was quickly going to fall down directly on the ADVENT line.

“Fall back!” He screamed as lethal chunks of concrete suddenly began falling around them. He took aim at the Seeker over Anna and fired, blowing it apart and hoisting her back, even as plasma fire flew around him.

The ADVENT soldiers were similarly retreating, and then Oliver realized that Jesenia and Nataliya were still being strangled by the Seekers. “Lesedi! Help them!” He called, trying to pull out his rifle as he realized it might be too late as the building was collapsing around them.

“There’s a Seeker up here!” She yelled back. “I’m trying to kill it now!”

He could spare a look and fired at the Seeker, but it paid him no mind as the gauss rounds missed. The Mutons on the other side were similarly retreating to avoid being crushed under the rubble. Carmelita was closest to the other side and leapt to follow, or at least retreat that way. He wasn’t concerned for her, because Carmelita could easily regroup later.

But despite firing desperately, even as Anna vomited up whatever black fluid the Seeker had forced down her throat, helmet tossed to the side, he watched helplessly as the building collapsed on top of the psion and XCOM soldier, burying them under tons of rubble and smashing the building on the opposite street into a ruined husk.

Down two soldiers already, with Carmelita stuck temporarily on the other side, Oliver was now very concerned that they had walked right into a trap, and worse, it was succeeding.

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Seattle, United States of America

Even flying over the battle, at the edge of her consciousness, Patricia was able to easily distinguish the unique alien minds before her. It was getting easier to tell them apart now, and as a result, easier to target. What struck her as interesting was how uniform so many species were in how they worked and thought. For better or worse, most humans were unique and motivated by their own desires and fears. But the way their minds worked and how they rationalized their thoughts could
be done in a thousand different ways.

Not so with most species, it turned out, with the exception of the Vitakara and Ethereals themselves, though the latter would stand out anywhere. Muton minds were simple and focused; primitive thoughts like *kill, obey, fire*, and other repeated words. Multi-tasking was impossible for the soldiers, and thus why they were so persistent; their minds were very often taken up by only one single thought or action given to them by someone else. So they were easy to find in their utter simplicity and straightforwardness.

Andromedons, on the other hand, were almost mechanical in their thought processes. They didn’t feel emotion like humans, or at the very least, not as strongly. Their minds were filled with contingencies, plans and tactics, all being systematically updated throughout the battle. It was structured, organized, and clean, which made the domination of them that much simpler and easier to target.

Patricia closed her eyes, a hand slowly clenching into a fist as she drew upon the power and let her focus spread to the rest of the soldiers in the skyranger. Names, strengths, weaknesses, weapons, locations and plans were all instinctually known by all of them. A bond that was impossible to replicate any other way. A true united unit, no more, no less.

“Patricia, we’re coming up on the Federal Way,” Big Sky said over the comm. “Be ready. MEC soldier Cho is being dropped to the north to reinforce the defenses there.”

“Acknowledged,” Patricia stated, all of them rising as one and taking positions instinctively. Sung Cho was one of the newest MEC soldiers, and was currently commanding a Ballista-class MEC. XCOM couldn’t be everywhere, but a MEC would be a significant contribution to the defense of northern Seattle.

The skyranger turned sharply around while descending and now Patricia could faintly hear the sounds of gunfire, plasma, and explosions, occasionally punctuated with the sound of a Human or Muton scream, and an uncountable number of voices shouting names, commands and battle cries. The skyranger settled on the ground with a shudder and the ramp opened before them.

The instant the ramp hit the pavement they were all charging out, already firing at the aliens that were entrenched in the small city. They were close to a major intersection, and all sides had taken positions behind vehicles, buildings and other improvised barricades. Mutons were taking on the forefront of the alien lines, and Patricia sensed more in the parking lot behind them, interspersed with Andromedons who were no doubt commanding from the back.

Mordecai glanced up at the four-story office building and leapt up onto the roof, putting his own genetic enhancements to use. “Taking position,” he grunted as he immediately began sniping from the top. Two Mutons suddenly found their heads blown into beige and yellow pieces, likely regretting the lack of any helmets.

Not that it would have done much good.

Kim Yi began laying down a barrage of laser fire from his pulse autolaser at an entire section of Mutons who’d taken up cover behind a building corner. Creed and Rosario began firing towards the opposite side, the two infantry picking off Mutons who stupidly exposed themselves and wounding others.

Iaroslav and Liliyane stayed close to her as she strode out, not reaching for her heavy autorifle quite yet, wanting to assess the situation first. A cheer went up from the surviving ADVENT soldiers as they saw XCOM charging into battle. Patricia closed her eyes and quickly felt in the general
vicinity of the composition of enemies.

Mostly Mutons, thirty or so just in front of her, only a couple of Andromedons. *Your legs are broken,* she pressed into the minds of the Mutons. *They are shattered beyond repair.*

The command received, she turned her attention to the Andromedons and took over their minds directly. After a quick search of their minds, she sent the command: *Set suit to self-destruct in close proximity to allied units.*

Their organized minds filed the information away and they presumably went away to do just that. Patricia opened her eyes and saw through her HUD that her presence had already manifested results. Mutons were lying on the ground, howling in pain as XCOM and ADVENT charged forward. Mutons were summarily executed and shot through the head, while several booming explosions in the distance indicated that the Andromedons had accomplished their tasks.

Their Medic, Joseph, was quickly tending to the wounded ADVENT soldiers while the rest of them advanced to the alien-controlled parking lot. Patricia already saw more Mutons running in from the connecting streets immediately, before they could get past the intersection, and more Andromedons were coming from the building the parking lot was connected to.

Green plasma fire flew all around them, forcing the advance to a standstill. Mordecai was picking off any Muto foolish enough to poke its head out, but now there were Centurions in the mix. The black-armored Mutons directed the horde of aliens to focus on specific targets. The Andromedons were also issuing orders, and pointing to various soldiers are more Mutons reinforced them.

Patricia noted several Battlefield Engineer Andromedons holding back behind the main alien line. “Firing rocket!” Iaroslav yelled as he aimed at the group of Andromedons taking cover behind a semi-truck, and fired. One suit was blown apart, while the other two were severely crippled and the helmets broken, killing the Andromedons inside.

“Suits coming back,” Liliyane grunted in annoyance as she began firing at the reanimated machine. “Fucking can’t stay dead.”

Patricia raised a hand and once more reached out to the other Muton minds. *Turn on your leaders.* The Command was received instantly and suddenly all the Centurions were being shot in the back, or directly in the chest from Muton soldiers with purple light in their eyes. The fire on the Humans vanished almost instantly as the Andromedons and Centurions dealt with the sudden betrayal.

That was when it suddenly stopped. Out of the corner of her eye, Patricia saw one Andromedon near the back of the building tapping buttons calmly on his wrist, and *this* Andromedon was different even from the Battlefield Engineers. The suit seemed larger, had more subsystems attached to it like a dedicated chemical dispenser or flamethrower, as well as heavy weapons attached to the shoulder. An odd alien symbol was etched onto the yellow helmet.

This must have been some Andromedon commander, and the moment he stopped tapping, all of the Mutons suddenly started screaming. Harsh, howling wails filled the air as the Mutons stopped firing at the Centurions and Andromedons and returned fire on an unexpecting XCOM and Human force.

“Ah!” Iaroslav shouted as a plasma bolt hit him right in the leg as he had moved to take a forward position, mistakenly believing it was safe. Joseph quickly rushed over to him in the midst of the firefight and pulled him away to fix his leg, while she tried to figure out what was going on. This shouldn’t be possible!
Fine. She hissed in her mind, narrowing her eyes and extending her reach again. Then burn. The hottest fire she could imagine, she sent towards the Muton force and expected them to collapse in pain.

But they didn’t. They stood and howled, all the while shooting plasma weapons at them. But now the shots were erratic and she knew she was having an effect on them, but it for some reason wasn’t working.

“Patricia?” Creed called as he killed a Muton stumbling forward, suicidally firing as the fire rushed through his mind.

“I know!” She yelled back, deciding to try a different tactic. So, the Andromedons had done something to them. In that case, they could fix the problem. Kill the Mutons. She pressed on the closest Andromedon minds, and she felt them give way…all except for one. The commander, it had to be.

It should have been impossible. She knew the command had been impressed onto all of them, but instead…for that one, it was just being…ignored. She frowned and tried looking inside the mind, ignoring the inaccurate plasma around her. All she saw was a jumbled, scrambled mess that didn’t make any sense, even as she pushed deeper. Images, feelings, sounds, sights, she couldn’t grasp anything. No wonder it wasn’t taking her commands.

Unless that was the point?

In any case, the other Andromedons had gotten the message, and were turning their suits on the Muton army. One executed three in quick precision; another turned an entire section to acid; one more turned a Muton into an acid-burned husk before executing the two beside it. Ok, Patricia noted with a nod as the battle turned heavily in their favor, all enemy fire effectively stopped due to the Mutons being unable to fire properly, We’re fine.

And then that damned Andromedon leader in the back pulled up some kind of haptic display on his wrist and a few seconds later, all the other Andromedons froze briefly, and then turned their attention back towards the Humans.

Impossible! Patricia scowled in disbelief. That can’t be possible!

Regardless of what should have been happening, the fact was that the Andromedons were now firing against them. She focused on their minds and repeated the command. That was when she realized that it had worked and was working. But something had taken over the suits themselves and had locked the pilots out.

She couldn’t mind-control a machine, and that damn Andromedon commander had known that.

“We might have a problem,” she growled, reaching for her autorifle. “They’ve taken direct control of the suits. I can’t do anything to stop them.”

“What are our orders?” Creed shouted as he killed a few more Mutons and began focus-firing an Andromedon with Kim.

With her psionics apparently negated, she would have to win this the old-fashioned way. With guns, bullets, and blood. But not entirely, of course, her allies could certainly benefit from her abilities. “Kim, Creed, focus on the frontal Andromedon force,” she began. “Mordecai, target that leader in the back. Liliyane, Rosario, help suppress the left flank of Andromedons!”

“Yes, Overseer,” they shouted as they received ADVENT reinforcements of their own running in
behind them. The battle continuing in earnest, they quickly entrenched themselves. But command needed to know what was going on.

“Commander,” she said once she had established a line to him. “We have a problem.”

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The Citadel, Mission Control

The Commander had faced quite a few challenges in his career. Very few people had given him pause and none a reason to legitimately fear them. Even the Ethereals were a force he was confident he would be able to overcome. He didn’t put see purpose in giving problems any more time than they deserved. People who opposed him were simply issues to be resolved later, armies were tools that could be sabotaged and systematically decimated. Weaknesses of opponents could simply be exploited. Every challenge he faced never gave him much pause, because he was confident he could develop a solution to it. The difficulty didn’t matter, only the knowledge of if it was possible.

Until now, it seemed.

He had never fully believed Aegis’ tales of Battlemasters that could take entire worlds single-handedly. Perhaps in specific circumstances, but not regularly. The Mutons had been simple primitives, so perhaps that was a simple explanation. But no, it seemed like Aegis had not exaggerated in the slightest.

Never in his life had he ever seen anything like the Battlemaster systematically slaughtering an army composed of fifty thousand soldiers single-handedly. Nothing could slow him down or kill him. Projectiles might as well not exist; missiles barely slowed him down; tank shots were little more than irritants; armor was little better than paper and tactics were a laughable proposition.

The twelve-foot tall Ethereal was fast enough to execute entire squads in seconds and make a mockery out of any advanced technology. He was a demon of the battlefield, speeding across it with inhuman speed and killing anything that stood in his way.

And he legitimately had no idea how he could stop him.

Airstrikes? Too imprecise for one alien, and would probably do nothing even if they did hit.

Overwhelming numbers? If fifty thousand wasn’t enough, then more than that would just be throwing soldiers away. Granted, he hadn’t killed the entire garrison, but with over a fifth of the soldiers dead with no progress, that didn’t paint a positive picture.

Nuking the city? He wasn’t even sure that would work against the Battlemaster. Or at least, figured the Battlemaster would be smart enough to get out of there quickly.

What else was there? Sending in an XCOM team? Dropping a building on top of him? Very unlikely to do anything either. There was no way he was sending in more soldiers now, especially since the other defenses were...not going well. And dropping a building might at best trap him, assuming he was dumb enough to get trapped in a building in the first place, and the airstrikes actually hit.

Laura’s face during the entire conflict had gone from confident, to surprised, to concerned and finally ashen as she’d watched the Battlemaster personally decimate ADVENT’s army. He couldn’t truly blame her; this should have been impossible, but they had to recognize that it was very much reality now. It wasn’t as though she hadn’t tried.
Smaller teams. Blatant numbers. Tanks. Bait. Smaller teams were killed in seconds; larger numbers only added to his kill count; tanks barely slowed him down and he walked into bait because he knew he wasn’t in true danger.

And that wasn’t including how the other defenses had, almost universally, not gone according to plan, especially with this new update from Patricia. “What do you mean ‘It’s not working?’” He demanded as he looked on the holomap where her team was.

“I mean I can’t control them!” Patricia hissed. “Whoever is leading this attack knows how to counter telepaths specifically. They did something to the Mutons, and took direct control of the suits. I slowed them down, but we’re barely holding out at best.”

“Hold your position and update if the situation changes,” the Commander ordered, scowling as he looked to the north. “Laura, reinforce the left flank before Mutons break through.”

“I see it,” she muttered tonelessly. “Ordering the twenty-fifth unit to reinforce.”

As she gave the order, the Commander looked at the other situations. Portland was the only place where he actually saw legitimate progress. The Vitakara-majority army was well-equipped for the standard ADVENT military, but were not prepared for XCOM soldiers of any kind. Sierra and Zara were leading their own charges, weakening the other alien offensives, and the Goliath was stubbornly holding its ground, no matter how much plasma fire was thrown its way.

However, LA was bad. He had underestimated the Muton force by a dangerous amount. Whoever was leading it actually knew how to use the Mutons, and now the Commander could see how dangerous they actually could be. He was legitimately considering retreating if the situation didn’t improve. Carmelita was cut off, one of the psions was dead, and every XCOM soldier was marked for death.

He had been played, he saw that now. The Battlemaster, for that was who he assumed was responsible for the offensive, had predicted his likely actions and he had seemingly performed them to the letter. It was very clear how easily he’d taken the bait.

The Battlemaster had known that, after Japan, Andromedons were considered one of the most, if not the most, dangerous enemy, so what was the best counter to them? One of his best XCOM teams, and his most powerful psion, which happened to be Patricia. And of course the force that awaited them was just so happened to be able to negate Patricia’s telepathy, putting them in a much more dangerous situation.

Not unsalvageable. Patricia was going to have to be more creative, but he did think the battle could still be won, although not without more casualties and time. It was going to be a grueling finish at best.

The Battlemaster had also known that, thanks to Japan and previous battles, the Mutons were considered the weak link, so naturally, it wouldn’t require an overly dangerous XCOM squad, or at least not a completely veteran one. But now they were in danger of losing LA because he’d relied on his assumptions on what could be expected.

Then there was Portland, and the Battlemaster had expected him to send a middle-tier XCOM squad, which was more or less what he’d done, but perhaps where the Battlemaster had erred was that a middle-tier XCOM squad with no obvious counters easily beat a Vitakara force. Which was maybe the only bright spot here.

Then of course, the Battlemaster had saved the most fortified city for himself, and the Commander
could only presume that it was for the sole purpose of sending a message: *You cannot stop me.* 

At this moment, he could believe that.

“You need to retreat from San Francisco,” he told Laura firmly. “All you’re going to do is lose more soldiers.”

“Not yet!” She scowled. “Not even he can last forever! He isn’t invincible! *Something* can kill him!”

“I agree,” the Commander nodded, keeping his voice even. “But do you really want to find out what that is by sending more men to their deaths? What other possible ideas do you have? You can’t kill him with what you have!”

“You want to sacrifice San Francisco because of *one alien*?” She demanded, glaring at him.

“That *one alien* has killed a fifth of your fifty-thousand garrison!” The Commander shot back, allowing some heat into his voice. “And it will be *five* fifths if you let your pride dictate your tactics! Retreating is *not a bad decision.*”

“I…” she shuddered. “One more try. If that fails, I’ll order the retreat.”

“Commander! Multiple attacks are being reported in LA!” An analyst called frantically. “Hesperia, Riverside and San Clemente are all falling under Muton attack! They say there are Elites in the mix!”

“Fuck,” Laura snarled under her breath. “They have us surrounded. And we have only a few reinforcements in the inner city. We sent most of them to reinforce the attacking forces. If they break through…”

“They are *going* to break through,” the Commander stated, seeing the grim reality of the situation. “How did they do that without *any* of us noticing? Armies of that size should have at least warranted UFO transports unless…”

It dawned on him that that actually wasn’t needed. Gateway transports were slow and vulnerable, Aegis had said, but deployed far enough away from the battle, and while he’d been focused on the frontal attack, they’d landed at specific points and prepared their strike force to attack. No UFO fleet required.

They’d been outplayed by fucking Mutons.

“Gateway transports,” he said to Laura. “They can receive an unlimited number of reinforcements unless we destroy the UFOs. Have your pilots survey the area and blow them up. That should distract them and allow us a retreat.”

“Retreat?” She balked. “First San Francisco and now LA? Do you realize-“

“Yes,” the Commander snapped. “And I also realize that if we stay, we will be sacrificing our soldiers for *nothing.*” He took a breath. “I have no authority over ADVENT, Commander, but I will withdraw XCOM before I lose too many of my own people. Retreat and I will have them clear a path out, but I won’t leave them to die.”

“Let’s wait before potentially abandoning a crucial city,” Laura suggested, raising a hand. “If we can hold…they might retreat, especially if we kill their Gateway transports. The battle isn’t lost yet.”
“Fine,” he relented, looking down at the holomap. “For now, but if the situation doesn’t improve, I’m not going to have much of a choice.”

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Los Angeles, United States of America

“They’ll be coming this way!” Oliver called, as he led what remained of the XCOM and ADVENT forces down the street. In short, they were in…pretty bad shape, truth be told. Anna was still having trouble breathing, Lesedi had injured her leg and was limping alongside them and Chan was slowly becoming exhausted.

Oliver raised a fist as they came to a stop in front of another intersection. “Carmelita, you still coming?”

“Affirmative,” came the voice into his helmet. He’d attempted contacting Carmelita immediately after they’d somewhat recovered and thankfully she’d still been alive, albeit now stuck on the other side. She was trying to get an accurate count or something before she came back. “I’m almost to your position.”

“Oliver, this is the Commander,” a new voice interjected. “You’ve likely got a Muton force coming up behind you and from the leftmost intersection. Position accordingly.”

Oliver nodded, even though nobody could see it. “What should we expect?”

“Intel is not exact,” the Commander warned. “But there are Elites, soldiers, and Centurions. Probably Berserkers as well. Amahle is almost to your position, but we might be pulling you out if the situation worsens.”

“Copy,” Oliver grunted, casting an apprehensive glance around the area. Hm. More buildings, no established cover…they’d have to make do.

“Did you get that?” He muttered to Catherine, who was checking Anna’s vitals.

She nodded, while frowning at Anna’s throat. “It sounds bad. Pulling out…if we got hit hard…” he could tell she was stressed a lot more now because her French accent was heavily pronounced compared to earlier in the fight.

“I know,” Oliver sighed, motioning the ADVENT Officers over. “But we’re making a stand here, like it or not. I don’t think they can try dropping another building on us without catching our attention.”

He turned immediately to the other Officers. “Fortify your soldiers in the buildings. Intel suggests we’re going to get hit from behind and from the left. You know the drill I presume. Snipers on roofs, gunners up front and rocketeers in the back.” He paused. “And use your soldiers a little better. Have the gunners focus on suppressing the masses and use everyone else to target the specialized units.”

“Yes sir,” one of the Officers said, and all of them immediately ran back to their squads and began issuing orders. “Lesedi,” he continued, turning to the weary sniper. “Get up top again. See if you can get eyes on anything.”

“On it boss,” she nodded, and began climbing up the wall of the four-story building behind them. Right, he recalled, she had the modification that allowed her to climb walls, that was why her gloves were almost transparent. Some kind of gear modification to accommodate that, he
supposed. But as long as she got up there, he was fine with it.

Oliver smashed the window to the building and took a position in the corner which would let him shoot from both sides. Catherine, Anna and Chan also took up positions inside the building, just waiting for the aliens to come back. “Heads up!” Carmelita suddenly called over the comms and without warning she jumped into the middle of the street, almost making him fire his gun in surprise.

She looked completely and utterly terrible. Her Aegis armor was scorched, scratched, and falling apart. Her right arm had pretty much no armor left and she was missing her left gauntlet. Most of her shin armor looked on the verge of breaking, and her torso also looked bad, but it appeared to only be superficial damage. The giant gash through her helmet visor was by no means superficial though.

“There’s a lot of them coming,” she warned, pulling off her ruined helmet and shaking her short hair free. Interestingly enough she didn’t look tired in the least. Her golden-rimmed eyes held only fury and hate. Despite looking like she’d just gotten the shit beaten out of her, she only looked pissed off.

“Are you alright?” Catherine asked, rushing to her, med-kit in hand. “You look-“

“Fine.” Carmelita snapped, scowling as she reloaded her alloy cannon again. “Iron Skin. Best thing XCOM ever made. Don’t think these things can really hurt me, but they can sure slow me down. They want to kill all of us. This was a trap. They were expecting XCOM here.”

“No offense, but that gem of wisdom is pretty much common sense,” Anna managed, before breaking into a cough.

“Of course they expected us! They’d be idiots not to.”

“Clarification,” Carmelita growled, shooting the woman a scathing look. “Their leader knows how to fight us. And I’m pretty sure it’s a Muton leading them. Lesedi, remember that bigger green one? I’m pretty sure it’s a commander of some kind.”

“I didn’t know Mutons were that smart,” Chan commented. “Strong, yes, but not-“

“Yeah, I didn’t either,” Carmelita interrupted. “Ethereals probably did something to it. But I’m not underestimating it again. They’ve got Elites, Berserkers and Centurions coming our way-“

“Contact!” A voice shouted in the distance, and ADVENT soldiers began firing into the street leading into the intersection.

“Mutons coming from the left,” Lesedi updated. “Not taking cover, and no Berserkers yet. Twelve groups of four, one Centurion per group. Targeting now.”

A gauss sniper shot rang out and Chan turned his attention to down the street, as did Anna, raising her heavy autorifle in the direction of the thunderous boot steps that were reaching his ears. Carmelita leapt to the opposite end of the street and took a position near the corner as the Muton soldiers charged forward, pushing derelict cars as portable cover, Centurions behind them.

Oliver aimed for the wheels of the vehicles and fired, and they popped and deflated within seconds. He turned his rifle to the Muton pushing it and hit it several times, but it still tried, roaring in pain as he kept filling its body with gauss rounds. It finally collapsed, dead, and Carmelita began moving into the fray, a chilling smile on her face.

The Mutons seemed stunned that she was still alive, and more to the point, still killing them. Her stinger snapped out of her wrist like a pale snake, impaling itself in the necks of Muton soldiers
while she executed others at close range with her alloy cannon. Plasma hit her arms and torso, but it seemed to do little more than blacken her skin and armor, only eliciting a grimace as she systematically stopped the Muton advance.

On the left side the rest of XCOM was holding back the Muton offensive who were scrambling into cover, even as Lesedi was picking them off or they were being ripped apart by Anna’s weapon or Chan’s psionics. The North Korean was once more sheathed in waves of purple energy, and was angry. Oliver could feel it rippling off him in waves as he directed his destructive abilities at the hulking aliens, ripping them apart with deceptive ease.

Catherine was braving the midst of combat, mostly on the ADVENT lines who were rushing to take advantage of Carmelita’s attack. Quite a few were bleeding on the ground, and she was attempting to either drag them somewhere safe, or patch the wounds then and there in the heated battlefield. Oliver now realized he was doing very little back in the building. Carmelita was receiving too much heat now, he needed to do something.

He pulled out his alloy cannon and charged across the street, relying on Lesedi, Anna, and Chan to keep the left flank secure. Carmelita was actually backing up now, apparently seeing the new wave of two dozen soldiers rushing up. She took cover behind the car, and he behind the corner of a building.

The roar of a Berserker came from behind the Muton lines and Carmelita pursed her lips. “Hold this line,” she stated with crystalized ice in her tone. “I’ll handle the Berserker.”

“I’ll do my best,” he promised as the red-armored alien charged around the corner, and towards them. Carmelita jumped on the car and thrust her arm forward, the stinger lashing out, presumably stabbing it in the neck before it retracted to her wrist. She followed it up with an alloy cannon blast to the face, shredding the helmet, but not killing it.

“Come and get me!” She roared and leapt backwards, and luckily the enraged alien complied and charged after her. But now Oliver was left with the horde of Mutons who were surging forward. The car positioning actually worked to his advantage as it was easy to kill several Mutons who tried to take cover behind it.

Alloy cannon shards ripped into the armor, downing, if not killing them outright, and the Centurions were noticing him and holding the soldiers back. Now he found himself on the receiving end of the suppressive plasma cannons of two more Centurions. Plasma rained all around him, far too close for comfort.

“I’m pinned down!” He called, reaching for a grenade.

“We’ve got Elites coming up the left flank,” Lesedi warned. “Along with more soldiers and Centurions.”

Fucking wonderful. “Berserker killed,” Carmelita updated, and he saw her charging back into the fight. Her stamina was truly impressive, even if it was the result of genetic modification. “Moving to assist.”

Then he heard the sound of clamping metal on asphalt. “MEC soldier Amahle arriving to assist.” The Marauder-class MEC informed as it charge in from the right, flamethrowers at the ready. “Providing support.” Her wrists were raised and blue and orange flames spat out of them and she sprayed them in such a way as to engulf the entire street. Mutons and Centurions howled in pain as they were cooked inside their own armor.
The ten-foot MEC continued into the firestorm she’d started, shooting cones of flame at Muton squads who were scattering to the wind now that she’d come to assist. Carmelita took advantage of the chaos and leapt into their disorganized lines, poisoning and executing every Muton she could see…until she leaped back to the XCOM-ADVENT line.

“Elites!” She cursed. “And more Berserkers!”

“We’ve got a problem over here!” Chan called, and Oliver glanced to see that the entire XCOM line was being suppressed by the massive plasma cannons the Elites carried. They were split, two Elites per XCOM soldier, in essence pinning them in one place while the soldiers and Centurions advanced unhindered. To step out was to get annihilated on site. Even Lesedi was coming under fire, even as she dropped soldier after soldier.

“Mariner Team, stand by for evacuation,” the Commander informed. “ADVENT is coordinating a retreat of the city. Wait for Lightning Sky to pick you up. Under two minutes.”

Based on how quickly the Mutons were closing in, Oliver wasn’t sure they had that time. “Copy!” Carmelita yelled as two Berserkers charged around the corner and targeted the MEC. Amahle aimed her wrists at one and it was engulfed in flame while the other practically tried tackling her, and was summarily thrown into a wall, but disrupting her attack.

The Elites came right behind it, and began shooting at Amahle, who was not a small target. Carmelita assisted in finishing off the burned Berserker, but as Amahle was dealing with the remaining one, the half-dozen elites were firing every plasma rifle into her and it was taking a massive toll. The chassis sparked and melted under the green plasma, and one of the tanks was pierced by the Berserker and exploded, dismembering the alien, but damaging the MEC immensely.

“Critical system failure,” Amahle updated with mechanical coolness.

“Fall back!” Carmelita yelled as the skyranger roared overhead and set up on the street behind them. “Run!”

ADVENT was also taking the cue to get the hell out of there. Oliver tossed his grenade at the wounded Berserker as he ran and the explosion blew its leg apart, and Carmelita finished it off with an alloy cannon blast to the face. A yell from Chan caught his attention, and he saw the psion thrust his arms forward, sending out a light shockwave that briefly caused the Mutons to stumble, which gave them all the opportunity needed to escape.

Or almost all of them, anyway. As the Elites advanced, their focus on the MEC didn’t stop. They targeted the legs, busting and melting the joints beyond all repair as Amahle simply kept attempting to fight back, drawing the fire of the Mutons as the remaining XCOM soldiers retreated into the skyranger. Once a nameless Elite blasted the helmet of Amahle, the MEC went still and silent, only leaking oil and flammable liquid.

But she’d bought enough time for XCOM to escape, and Oliver watched with dismay as they flew up, the ramp closing in front of him as the aliens continued their conquest unchallenged. If they were retreating, it meant that the battle for Los Angeles was lost.

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San Francisco, United States of America

One throw of his arm and a line of ADVENT soldiers were thrown back by a rippling psionic wave
and slammed into the unyielding stone walls behind them. They crumpled to the ground, not dead, but he would finish them off soon enough.

The Battlemaster leapt towards one Officer that was desperately ordering a retreat and cut him down with a downward slash, immediately transitioning to three quick slices that killed and dismembered the soldiers standing right next to him. One gunner was telekinetically pulled towards him and met with a blade to the heart, and the Battlemaster clenched an opposite fist, briefly lifting three more soldiers and crushing their windpipes, before tossing them down the street.

He had lost count how many had died already, yet they still kept coming before him to die. Everything was attempted, and everything failed. They failed to grasp that they could not kill him. Or maybe that was changing. The soldiers appeared to be mobilizing some kind of retreat. They still kept firing at him, but with far less frequency than before.

He began marching up the street, paying little mind to the gauss bullets shot his way. Up ahead was an ADVENT encampment built into the street. Here, these soldiers were entrenched; rocketeers were in position and gunners began spitting hot rounds towards his position.

But they were not moving to attack. Indeed, soldiers were moving away from the barricade and the ones that stayed were clearly hoping to buy time and slow him down.

It was all he could do not to laugh. Instead he let the tip of the bloodstained blade rest on the ruined concrete and waited for them to unleash whatever defenses they had left. Gauss rounds flew from their cannons and rifles and rockets from their launchers, even as they knew that the three rocketeers they had would be virtually useless.

The Battlemaster simply raised a free hand and the air shimmered before him. Caelior had taught him this trick once, and it appeared to do the trick.

All of the projectiles were suddenly stopped in mid-air, caught by the telekinetic barrier, and the Battlemaster watched with amusement as they continually filled the barrier up with small pieces of metal. But he was tired of waiting, and so kept walking forward, the barrier moving with him. The entrenched soldiers were frantically trying to find a weakness in the barrier, firing at his legs, arms, and even trying to ricochet rounds off the ground.

Rocketeers attempted to reload their launchers even as he stopped ten feet from the barricade itself and decided to end this farce. He did find it admirable that despite facing certain death, they were still attempting to stop him.

With another free hand he extended it towards the entrenched soldiers, at a minimum of twenty, and yanked back. The soldiers behind the barricade were slammed forward into it, the ones to the sides found their rifles yanked out of their hands, and the rocketeers tumbled to the ground. Even the ones near the back were thrown off-balance by the telekinetic grab.

The moment that happened, the Battlemaster dropped the barrier and charged towards the left side of the barricade, at what would likely appear to be the speed of light to the Humans.

He stabbed one soldier through the chest and transitioned to a slash within seconds, killing two more. With a free hand he focused on yet another human and squeezed, turning her head into paste. The final soldier he lifted up with a lower hand and brought down upon the bloody tip of his greatsword as he moved behind the barricade to kill the remaining soldiers.

To his mild disappointment, most of them were retreating in earnest, while only three gunners were
left, firing wildly at the massive target before them. He charged towards one and killed her with a quick slash, charged to the next and repeated the decapitation. He executed the last one the same way, pleased that he’d killed them all before the corpse of the first gunner hit the ground, heads and bodies landing in different places.

He turned to begin hunting the remaining soldiers that were running away, but paused as the sounds of chopping wind and loud engines from the sky caught his attention and he saw six helicopters coming at him from all directions. Sacrifices to slow him down most likely, allowing the survivors to flee while they could.

He did not begrudge them. There was little shame in retreating from a superior foe. Flourishing his blade at the machines in the sky, he prepared to kill them just the same. They spat more bullets at him from embedded guns which turned the area around him into a sparking mess. These were certainly a higher caliber of weapon, as the impact did force him to take a step back, and multiple angles of attack from high-powered gauss cannons might unbalance him altogether.

But they couldn’t keep up with him. He charged forward to two of the helicopters, all of which were lowering to hover just above the four-story buildings for better shots, and threw his greatsword towards the cockpit of one, extending all of his hands to focus his telekinetic power on the one next to it.

He had no intention of bringing it down. He lacked the power to do so, but all he had to do was make it stop. His telekinetically guided blade pierced the glass of the first helicopter, killing the pilot instantly, causing it to veer away and crash into the building next to it in a shower of metal, stone and bodies. The helicopter blades on the other vehicle suddenly froze, and the machine fell to the ground like a stone, unable to fly and it impacted the ground with another explosion that killed all inside.

Fifteen seconds. And now the other helicopters were approaching and firing, and underneath them were at least twenty more soldiers that skidded to a stop as they saw him. Perhaps they had thought this was a retreat, but now found themselves exactly where they didn’t want to be.

“Retreat!” One of them called out as the helicopters began spitting more bullets at him. The Battlemaster ignored the soldiers as he saw they run into a nearby building to the right, he would deal with them after he killed the machines.

He extended a hand to the downed helicopter and his greatsword flew back into his hand as he turned to face the helicopters. They wanted to sacrifice themselves to protect their comrades? Then he would oblige them and saw no reason to waste time, and repeated the greatsword throw at one of the cockpits, impaling the pilot instantly.

It crashed into the helicopter next to it and both fell to the ground, damaging the building itself and killing a few unlucky soldiers on the ground who hadn’t yet entered the building, while he telekinetically grabbed one of the ADVENT corpses around him and tossed it at the blades of the helicopters. It was enough to not only chop the corpse into pieces, but damage the blades themselves, and the helicopter slowly crashed into the ground, ending with a large fireball.

The last one actually began to pull back, but the Battlemaster had no intention of letting it run, and simply stopped the helicopter blades and watched it collapse onto the bloodied pavement which soon became scorched as yet another explosion rocked the street.

He paused, recalling the greatsword to his hand as he turned to the building the soldiers had gone into. Curious. Not retreating exactly, not running, but fortifying. Inside a building. Where they couldn’t possibly kill him. Clearly a trap, perhaps they would lure him inside before trying to
collapse the building on top of him?

His lips parted in a humorless grin under his helmet. Fine. He was curious if they were as predictable as that. They appeared to not know he had been fighting for centuries, and the concept of destroying a building to trap him was not a new one. He approached the door and kicked it in, shattering it as he knelt under the human-sized entrance and stood once more to his full height as the soldiers inside began firing.

Luckily the room itself was high enough so he could act unhindered, so he might as well take advantage. He took a reverse grip on his greatsword and threw it towards an Officer at the end of the room, which appeared to be a furniture store of some kind, and impaled him in the throat while burying the sword deep into the wall.

Their gauss weapons couldn’t hurt him, and so he slowly walked through the room, pulled soldiers into his hands and killing them with whatever he could find. Many had their heads slammed onto pointed furniture which cracked their skulls like eggs; others he killed telekinetically with a gesture and application of force; more were killed on his sword when he finally reached it.

The entire weapon was designed to kill, and that was why the hilt, crossguard and pommel all ended with a sharp spike. He picked up a nearby ADVENT Officer and dragged her to the greatsword buried in the wall still, and slammed the side of her head into the right crossguard, shattering the weaker helmet with a crack.

While blood seeped out of the now-limp body, he repeated the same attack with another ADVENT soldier who’d gotten too close, killing him with the opposite side. At the same time, with a free hand he yanked the greatsword free and charged towards a duo of soldiers and killed them with a single swipe.

Not all the soldiers were dead, but it was apparently enough for ADVENT as the building suddenly shook and an explosion hit one of the corners. Another one hit a few seconds later and the remaining humans were thrown to ground. One was knocked out, presumably, and the other two apparently realized what was happening, but more explosions prevented them from standing straight.

Unsurprising that the Humans were willing to sacrifice their own to try and kill him, but they were likely desperate now. Unshaken and unafraid by the trembling ceiling and rocking floor, he strode over to the soldiers and grabbed them by the first limb he could reach and made his way outside as a missile started the collapse of the building behind him.

Unwilling to risk being trapped, he charged out, and to the left as he saw the building collapsed behind him, crumbling into stone, steel and throwing up a wave of dust. He tossed the two soldiers onto the street, surrounded by their dead and mutilated brethren. He would kill them, but not then.

They seemed stunned they were still alive, coughing and looking around in disbelief, and up at him while they stood. He brandished his blade. “Defend yourselves.” He commanded and it dawned on them that they were still going to die, but facing a Battlemaster instead of crushed under stone. The left one grabbed a rifle and unloaded it on him, while the other reached for her pistol and also began firing.

His armor sparked as the projectiles made new scratches in the metal, but he saw no reason to attack yet. The woman’s pistol clicked and he flashed forward and stabbed diagonally upward through her throat, the blade puncturing out of the top of her helmet, killing her instantly. He pulled it out and swung in a dizzying arc, decapitating the man beside her.
Clean and quick kills, exactly what they deserved.

Curiously enough, the street was silent, and the ADVENT soldiers in the distance were officially in full retreat, shouts in all directions colored with fear and desperation. If they were truly retreating now, he would let them go. But until the city was secure, he had no intention of sparing any soldier he came across.

With a flash and flourish of his greatsword, he marched off to go hunting.

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*Portland, United States of America*

“Down!” Sierra yelled as an ADVENT soldier was suddenly sniped in the head and collapsed onto the pavement. She ducked behind a burned-out car and reloaded her weapon. *Snipers*. Which meant they were either getting too close to established positions, or the aliens were getting a *lot* of reinforcements.

“I’ve got my sniper looking for them,” a Captain informed her as he slid into cover beside the front line of ADVENT and XCOM, even as more Vitakara were fortifying the end of the bridge. “What’s the plan?”

“I’ll try and draw their fire,” Sierra said, risking a peek out. “I can take some hits. Matthew! Give me some cover!”

“With pleasure!” He called, standing up and miming lifting his hands as purple energy flowed around him. The entire line of Vitakara was suddenly lifted into the air, incapacitating and providing some cover against the snipers. Sierra leapt over the car and began dashing towards the end of the bridge, firing at the now-exposed Vitakara.

One Borelian was killed by her rifle, and the rest were executed by the hail of ADVENT fire from the soldiers. Sierra practically slammed into the corner of the bridge and Matthew let the floating corpses and junk in his hold fall to the ground. Sierra wasted no time and began shooting the surprised Vitakara who were now attempting to reposition.

Two Vitakarians were killed by rifle fire, and three Borelians were wounded trying to get away. She grunted as he felt her arm get slammed with something hot and saw her forearm was hot with green plasma, forcing her to pull back into cover as the green faded slowly.

“Sectoids!” Someone called, and Sierra risked looking out to see a dozen or so Sectoids running up, their augmented black arms indicating they were Leaders. Curiously enough, no one could accurately say what these aliens could actually *do*, since all of them had been designated priority targets and killed almost on contact.

Unfortunately, they were probably going to find out now.

The alien forces were well-entrenched at the end of the bridge, taking cover on roofs, buildings and their own constructed alloy barricades as they began firing back against ADVENT in earnest. Most of the Borelian soldiers were concentrating all their fire on Matthew, and the Sectoids were now utilizing their own abilities.

She fired at one that was standing up, with purple energy beginning to surround it, and to her surprise it seemed to hit a barricade, and now she saw a faint distortion, similar to the one Matthew had erected earlier. A personal shield up, it raised the wicked-looking plasma cannon arm and fired at the front line.
Two shots missed, but one hit a reinforcing soldier in the back and flung him to the ground. Mark was close behind, and tried helping the wounded soldier to get back to cover, when the Leader chittered at it and sniper fire suddenly hit the area around Mark, and the XCOM soldier himself. Aegis armor could take a lot, but not even it could survive concentrated and coordinated sniper fire and after the helmet cracked under a flurry of plasma lances, the body went still.

It had happened in seconds, with nothing any of them could have done. Sierra gritted her teeth and renewed her assault on the front-line Sectoid, which had been joined by four more of the Leaders, who were projecting similar barriers in front of them and shooting plasma rounds at the ADVENT line, which was more or less neutralized.

Sierra pulled out a grenade and rolled it under the feet of one Leader who looked down, chittered, and was suddenly ripped apart by the explosion of shrapnel. It seemed the barriers only worked one way. Good to know.

Plasma suddenly rained down upon her position again, and she decided she might as well test the barrier and unloaded her rifle onto the nearest Leader she could. It spun to her with some surprise in its orange eyes, but didn’t waste time firing at her either, though it wasn’t very accurate. Behind it came another leader also emanating psionic energy, and it motioned in her direction.

Nothing seemed to happen at first, then she was wracked by a splitting migraine so bad she collapsed to the ground, rifle chattering to the ground as she grabbed her helmet, wanting the world to fade around her. It was like someone was taking a hammer repeatedly to her brain, and on some level she knew it was a psionic attack, but she just wanted the pain to stop.

The ground around her shook, and she thought someone was calling her name, but the migraine abated for a minute and she fixated on the alien that was causing her pain, and did perhaps the stupidest thing she could have: Charged at it. But she didn’t care, either she was going to go insane, or die if the fucking alien kept affecting her mind.

She barely paid attention to the other Leaders who chittered in surprise as she charged past them, aside from slamming the butt of her rifle into the head of one and firing an entire clip into the face of the Leader debilitating her, blowing the face into a gray and yellow stain. The migraine didn’t vanish instantly, but it did gradually get better and she fell into cover behind a silver barricade, and the Leaders realized they were in trouble.

She fired at one in the back, sending it sprawling forward, dead, and began focusing on another one when a direct plasma shot from a flanking Vitakarian soldier hit her arm, practically shattering the armor. Another bolt hit her skin and she looked down at it, expecting to see the arm gone and waiting for a flash of pain.

But it didn’t come. The green plasma sizzled on her arm, but she barely felt it. The Vitakarian seemed astonished she was still alive, and so she killed him with a burst of gauss fire to the face. Matthew had evidently taken an opening as well and had one arm extended to the group of Leaders attempting to reposition, and clenched his hand into a fist.

Their heads suddenly exploded in bursts of yellow and gray gore, and the headless corpses fell to the ground and Sierra shakily rose to a kneeling position, most of the migraine gone, and half of her armor destroyed. Iron skin. Best thing XCOM ever made.

She peered up at the top of the buildings were the snipers were established, a mixture of Cobrarians and Vitakarians, and fired. She hit one Cobrarian in the…neck? She supposed it was, anyway, and then forced the rest into cover as Matthew also took the initiative, sending a wave of energy towards the aliens that knocked them back or destabilized them.
One Vitakarian sniper was taken out by an opposing sniper, and now ADVENT was taking the frontwards alien barricades, and focusing on the snipers themselves, and now the rightmost Vitakara were focusing on her. Sierra scowled and turned her weapon on them, now wanting to test the limits of what exactly she could do.

She leapt over her cover and charged to the Vitakara line which seemed surprised at her frontal attack, but still attempted to fire. Plasma scorched her armor, but she felt nothing yet. One Vitakarian she executed instantly and grabbed the other one, easily overpowering him and forcing him to act as a body shield.

Or maybe it was a she? Sierra didn’t care as it tried to fight back, but the genetic modification had made her much stronger than the alien, and it did little more than annoy her as she began advancing on the flanking Vitakara barricades. They actually seemed hesitant to shoot her, which was interesting, but worked to her advantage and she fired her pistol at them, knowing firing a rifle properly was impossible.

Once she was close enough, she blew the brain out of her hostage and threw its corpse at the Borelian and fired several times quickly in the head. His friend fired directly into her chest, being absorbed by the armor, and she killed him with a few quick shots. She glanced around her…twelve left, and ADVENT was beginning to reinforce this position as Matthew led the attack on the other side.

Covered in plasma scoring, soot, and alien blood, Sierra reloaded her pistol and dashed towards the farthest alien that could flank her. Plasma flew over, behind and in front of her, but only a couple bolts grazed her. A few frantic shots from her pistol forced the Vitakarian into cover and she leapt on top of him, putting a bullet into his head point-blank, and shooting several shots into the side of the Borelian next to him.

It spun towards her, plasma rifle firing and hit her arm again, and now she felt it burning slightly. Grimacing, she fired a few more pistol shots into the Borelian’s head and ducked into cover as ADVENT advanced, and got the attention of the other Vitakara. She appraised her now-stinging arm which looked almost charred. Well, it seemed that she wasn’t invincible, and should probably not get hit there anymore.

But Sierra felt like she’d made enough of a difference. The Vitakara seemed to be retreating now, and more ADVENT soldiers were coming across the bridge and spreading into what had been Vitakarian territory. “Zara, we’re on the other side and establishing position. Mark is dead, but the aliens seem to be retreating.”

Zara’s voice held an iron tone. “Good work, I’m also on the other side of our bridge. Seems to be a general retreat. We lost Tamara and Nati is dead as well. They hit the area up by the Goliath harder than here, it seems. Charlie is wounded as well, but they held and they’re being pushed back. Everyone else is alright. Portland seems to be remaining under Human control.”

Sierra grinned at that pronouncement. That’s what they get for coming to my homeland. “I’ll assist ADVENT forces in securing the area then.”

“Correct,” Zara affirmed, gunfire in the background. “Good luck and stay alive. No more deaths today.”

Sierra went to retrieve her rifle and reloaded it while looking into the outskirts of the city as ADVENT advanced further in. Time to help with the offensive.

***
The good news: They were keeping the aliens from advancing any further.

The bad news: They weren’t making any progress against said aliens.

The Mutons may be awful shots while working through her attempted debilitation, but they were providing a large enough volume of fire to prevent anything from moving. Not to mention that they were almost instantly replaced by more. For every one they killed, another took its place within minutes.

The Andromedons were slower and more mechanical, if that was possible, but they could actually shoot with some precision, and whoever this Andromedon commander was, he was figuring out that it was actually much more efficient to use the acid all the Andromedons had.

“Back up!” Creed yelled to a squad of ADVENT soldiers as two Andromedons launched green pellets at their position which splashed and hissed where they had been. Patricia and Kim focused on the exposed aliens and fired, and the combined might of the heavy autorifles was able to bring one down.

Mordecai was still trying to get a bead on the leader, who Patricia could see still commanding from the back, personally ordering various Centurions and programming Andromedons suits to specific locations. He was irritatingly competent, and actually knew what he was doing for a change, which was in contrast to many alien leaders they’d had previously.

Of course he was going to have quite a lot of dead Andromedons when this was over, because even if Patricia couldn’t control the suits, the beings inside them were enslaved to her and she had simply ordered them to kill themselves. Most had accomplished this by smashing their heads on whatever control panels they had in the suit, or bodily harm some other way.

Regardless, she imagined it was going to be messy for whoever opened the suits, and it had probably been very painful for the Andromedons within. Not that she particularly cared, but if she’d expected an emotional response from the commanding Andromedon, she wasn’t getting it.

Liliyane and Creed shot up an entire Muton line, but they were almost immediately replaced, and a reinforcement pod of four Andromedon soldiers was now firing their plasma lances on them. Rosario and Kim fired at the Andromedons, and Patricia suddenly realized there was one weakness that they’d possibly overlooked.

“Weapons!” She called. “Shoot the weapons!”

The command spread through the ranks quickly, and Creed and Liliyane risked peeking out and returning fire. A shot from Mordecai hit the rifle an Andromedon was holding and it blew up in a small green explosion, taking off the entire arm. The commanding Andromedon looked up to where Mordecai was stationed and pointed.

Two things happened in quick succession. All of the Andromedons on the field eschewed all other ADVENT targets and focused exclusively on XCOM soldiers, including the one that had just gotten his arm blown off. In fact, it charged the line itself. The second was that all Muton fire was instantly concentrated on Mordecai’s position and one bolt actually hit his head directly.

It didn’t kill him, but it certainly stunned him and Patricia knew that he couldn’t take another shot there. But the plasma was doing far worse than hitting him, but it was weakening the floor he was standing on, and Muton Grenadiers were now firing grenades up towards the top that a dazed
Mordecai couldn’t respond to. “Get down from there!” She yelled up at him as she began shooting at an Andromedon suit targeting Rosario.

“I’m-“ he began and she saw the entire area where he’d gone up in a green explosion. *Fuck!* There was no way he was alive now, and the situation was getting worse. The wounded Andromedon had charged up to Kim’s position and raised its good arm and sprayed a green mist on him that he wasn’t able to avoid.

Friendly fire from the side brought the Andromedon down due to the sheer hail of it, but the acid was already eating through the weaker armor on the helmet and arms. Joseph was frantically trying to neutralize the acid with his med-kit, but the remaining Andromedon suits were still firing at him, and it was difficult for him to work in that condition.

More ADVENT soldiers were coming to reinforce, and Patricia figured they needed to do something now before things got even worse. She tuned to the ADVENT command frequency. “ADVENT Command this is Psion Trask. Requesting airstrike at coordinates that will be transmitted shortly. Acknowledge?”

“Acknowledged,” came a voice. “We’re standing by. We need exact coordinates though or the rockets might-“

“I know how this works!” She snarled, and pointed at the back where the Andromedon leader was. “Officers! Mark far back Andromedon for airstrike! Everyone else suppressive fire on the Andromedons!” Her body flared with psionic energy as she repeated attempting to mentally afflict the Mutons. Fine, if they wouldn’t follow her commands, they would not follow any commands.

But for that to happen, she had to break their minds apart. So she inflicted every possible curse that came to her mind. Blindness, being flayed alive, skewered with hot irons, the possibilities were endless, and she made sure to amplify every feeling a hundredfold and the screams of the Mutons took on a much louder pitch as she began driving them to insanity.

They were surprisingly resistant to pain, but even they had limits. They may have somehow been enslaved to disobey her commands, but their minds were still vulnerable to the effects. There were four Officers standing up and marking the Andromedon in the back, and the rest were firing at the Andromedon suits, some of which were now sparking and falling over in ruins.

An Officer was shot and killed, but Patricia heard the planes now. “Target locked,” the pilot said. “Firing.”

A few seconds later a barrage of missiles struck the building behind the Andromedon leader and the concussion blast blew him forward and he fell to the ground. The tank on his back seemed ruptured, and the missile launcher or equipment on his shoulder seemed damaged, but otherwise he was alive. However, the distraction was all Patricia needed to send one final mental push to the Mutons.

And they broke.

They started turning on each other, the Andromedons and the Humans. Inhuman screams dominated them as they tried to claw, shoot and rip everything around them apart. The Andromedon leader was backing up now, tapping hurriedly on his haptic display, but having very little success it seemed.

Several more Andromedon suits exploded as the combined fire of ADVENT and XCOM overwhelmed them, even as more ADVENT soldiers fell to the plasma lances and acid of the suits.
Then the Andromedon leader shouted something in the echoing and booming voice of their species, and the remaining suits began pulling back, making sure to contaminate the ground before them.

The Mutons seemed to be abandoned, and the Andromedons executed whichever ones tried to attack them, but left the rest to likely serve as a distraction. More Officers were arriving, and the engineers were beginning to making fortifications near the ruined battlefield, even as the Mutons continued killing each other.

“Commander,” Patricia said, taking stock of the still chaotic situation. “What’s the status of the attacks? Alien forces just retreated here.”

“Affirmative, good job,” the Commander answered approvingly, though the tightness in his voice was not reassuring. “The good news is that we are still holding strong. Whoever this leader was, he brought a lot of reinforcements just to attack you.” Patricia looked at the hundreds of alien corpses and suits littering the parking lot.

“I figured,” she said. “But if you say we’re still strong…”

“I mean that the aliens haven’t really retreated,” the Commander confirmed. “They’re pulling back in some places, but they haven’t lost much ground, and we haven’t either. This is more or less a stalemate for now, but the fighting itself is gradually dying down as both sides are regrouping. Forward offensives are too risky right now, especially not with this Andromedon leader.”

“Agreed,” Patricia grimaced. “He was prepared for us.”

“The battle isn’t lost or won yet,” the Commander continued. “You’re being recalled until the situation escalates again. We need to reevaluate our strategies against them so this doesn’t happen again.”

“We’re pulling back?” She asked, frowning.

“XCOM is,” the Commander said. “ADVENT can hold for now, and I don’t want to lose more soldiers unnecessarily.”

“We’ll be here, then,” Patricia said, wondering how the rest of the defenses had gone. The Commander never generally betrayed much emotion in his tone, especially during missions, but she had the feeling that this had not gone as well as they’d hoped.

***

San Francisco, United States of America

The Battlemaster stood on the outskirts of the city and watched as the ADVENT army retreated deeper into the country, away from him. They could run as far as they wished, at some point there would be nowhere left for them to go, but for now they could believe they escaped. His mission was a success and the city would now be claimed for the Collective.

The Cultro swooped down with a low hum and landed onto the ground beside him, and the CODEX figure materialized outside instantly. “The city is cleared of hostiles, Battlemaster. An estimated two-hundred to two-hundred-fifty thousand civilians remain.”

“Noted,” the Battlemaster said, turning around to face the city. “Give the order to bring forces to lock this city down. ADVENT is gone. The rest should be easy.”
“Confirmed,” the figure stated emotionlessly. “Pacification forces are now deployed.”

“Status of other offensives?” He demanded of the CODEX.

“ADVENT and XCOM forces at Los Angeles have been routed, and Sargon Disciple-7 is securing the city,” the CODEX stated. “J’Loran encountered Psion Patricia Trask, as expected, and there is currently a stalemate in the city between ADVENT and Collective forces. XCOM has retreated from the field of battle, though J’Loran is hesitant to press without reinforcements.”

The Battlemaster nodded. Excellent. One city captured, and a stalemate was just as acceptable an outcome. Once Gateways were established, ADVENT would not be able to feasibly hold out forever. “And what of Portland?”

“Collective forces have been pushed back,” the CODEX explained neutrally. “Analysis indicates the Vitakara forces had no suitable counters or strategies to XCOM MECs, psions or enhanced soldiers. Additional note: Multiple XCOM soldiers displayed additional enhanced abilities. Footage is available for review.”

“Archive it for access on the Temple Ship,” the Battlemaster ordered, turning on his heel and entering the Overseer. If there was any battle he predicted would be lost, it would have been the one at Portland. The Vitakara unfortunately were not hard counters to many of the more dangerous elements of XCOM, and in truth, were not exceptional front-line soldiers. This assault had confirmed it, and he would learn and capture the city another day.

Today was a victory for the Collective, and he knew the Imperator would be pleased. The beginning of the end of ADVENT and XCOM had begun with a statement the world could not ignore.

Now it was time to tighten the grip on the territories they controlled while the Humans puzzled over what to do next. He suspected that Quisilia would find it amusing.

*You wanted this, Aegis,* he thought as the Overseer rose and the indications of the allied transports appeared on his display. *Time for you to decide how far you want to take it.*

Whatever game Aegis was playing, the Battlemaster was content to play it to the end. They had been friends for too long to him to consider Aegis a traitor. There was another angle here, and he was going to find it.

But if Aegis was truly a traitor, then he would put him down without hesitation.

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Supplementary Material

The Advent Directive

SECTION 8: ADVENT Military

Subsection 8.2: Structure

**Overview:** Below are the varying ranks and positions within the following divisions. Please note that sections specifically covering a division will only highlight relevant positions exclusive to that division. Genetic and standardized breakdowns are in the previous subsection.

**ADVENT Military Command:** Holds senior staff for all ADVENT branches and is the central body
for decisions that affect the entire ADVENT military and even ADVENT as a whole. The following positions are as follows:

- The Commander of the ADVENT Military
- The General of the Army Division
- The Chief Admiral of the Navy Division
- The Wing Commander of the Air and Space Division
- The Chief Operator of the Special Forces Division (Can be substituted with the Chief of Lancer Operations)
- The Chief Responder of the Special Response Division
- The Chief Overseer of the Oversight Division
- The Chancellor of ADVENT (Advisory position)
- The Chief of Peacekeeper Operations (Advisory Position)

**ADVENT Army Division:** Has responsibility over the majority of ADVENT ground and vehicle forces and the ranks are as follows by seniority:

- General (Oversees the ADVENT Army Division)
- Chief Marshal (Oversees Legions)
- Marshal (Oversees Garrisons)
- Colonel (Oversees Companies)
- Corporal (Oversees Units)
- Officer (Oversees Squads)
- Soldier

**ADVENT Navy Division:** Has responsibility over the majority of ADVENT naval ships and forces, and the ranks are as follows by seniority:

- Chief Admiral (Oversees the ADVENT Navy Division)
- Admiral (Oversees Legions)
- Major (Oversees Garrisons)
- Captain (Oversees Companies)
- Lieutenant (Oversees Units)
- Officer (Oversees Squads)
- Soldier

**ADVENT Air and Space Division:** Has responsibility over the majority of ADVENT air force and the ranks are as follows by seniority. Note: Does not follow standard breakdown of force composition and has no standard equivalent.

- Wing Commander (Oversees the ADVENT Air and Space Division)
- Wing Captain
- Wing Tactician
- Wing Officer
- Wing Pilot

**ADVENT Special Forces Division:** Has responsibility for the special forces of ADVENT and the ranks are as follows by seniority. Note: Does not follow standard breakdown of force composition and has no standard equivalent.

- Chief Operator
- Chief of Lancer Operations
- Primary Director of Special Operations
- Senior Operator
Lancer Officer
Lancer Operative

**ADVENT Special Response Division:** Has responsibility over various unique aspects of ADVENT including experimental units, specialized forces and other aspects that do not conform to standardized ADVENT forces, and are equipped to respond to asymmetrical or unknown threats. Note: Does not follow standard breakdown of force composition and has no standard equivalent.

- Chief Responder
- Unit Overseer: Psionic Response
- Unit Overseer: Extraterrestrial Response Commander
- Unit Overseer: Terrorist Response
- Unit Overseer: Domestic Response
- Unit Overseer: Military Reinforcement
- Unit Overseer: Non-sentient Response
- Officer
- Responder

**ADVENT Oversight Division:** Has responsibility for oversight of the ADVENT military to ensure that all divisions are in accordance with ADVENT standards and policy. Note: Does not follow standard breakdown of force composition and has no standard equivalent.

- Chief Overseer
- Overseer
- Commanding Investigator
- Chief Inspector
- Chief Interrogator
- Investigator
- Inspector
- Interrogator
- Officer
- Operative

Chapter End Notes

Music listened to while writing the Battlemaster scenes was To Glory and Pontiff Sulyvahn from Two Steps From Hell and Dark Souls III respectively, if you were curious about that. So yeah, this chapter was rather fun to write. I've also found out in that time that someone made a tvtropes page for my series, so if that's something you're interested in, check it out. I found it a good read, even if some of the information isn't quite accurate. Link: http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Fanfic/XCOMTheHadesContingency

Hopefully the next chapter shouldn't be too long a wait.

-Xabiar
Tenuous Diplomacy

The Citadel, Situation Room

Saudia fixed the Commander of the ADVENT Military with the most neutral expression she could muster, a feat that was more difficult for her than she liked. Perhaps she should have been here, but Ethan, Laura and the Commander himself had dissuaded her, seeing no reason to potentially risk herself if the aliens attacked the Citadel. They did know the location, after all.

However, after it had mostly gone to hell, Saudia figured a personal assessment was needed, since some of the initial reports were borderline ludicrous. None more so than the story concerning San Francisco.

“One Ethereal,” she stated flatly, looking Laura straight in the eyes. “One Ethereal forced a retreat of an entire garrison.”

To her credit, Laura faced her and gave a firm nod, her lips set in a thin line. “Yes, Chancellor.”

“With a sword.”

“…Yes, Chancellor.”

A short pause.

“It appeared to be a rather sharp sword.”

“Spare me,” Saudia muttered with a dismissive wave, wishing she could ignore it just based on how ludicrous it sounded. “I suppose you didn’t try and bomb it?”

“Chancellor, we tried almost every tactic short of dropping a nuke on the city,” Laura interrupted, exasperation leaking out of her voice. “It didn’t work. Nothing we did could hurt it!”

“Stop berating her for something she couldn’t control,” the Commander interrupted, pushing himself up from the wall and walking over to the holotable. He’d held back at the beginning, apparently content to let them talk, until now it seemed. But unlike Laura, he didn’t seem to have an issue speaking his mind as bluntly as possible. “I told you that the Ethereals were more powerful than you were anticipating.”

“Strong enough to beat an entire garrison?” Saudia demanded, whirling on him.

“If I had purely relied on what I’d heard, yes,” the Commander answered, his own lips pressed in a hard line. That was when she noticed that despite him trying to compose himself, he actually seemed worried. “I personally thought some of it was exaggerated. I knew the Battlemaster in particular was tough, but I didn’t not expect him to match, let alone exceed, what I’d heard. I messed up. Laura messed up. We all underestimated their power. Would you have anticipated that would happen?”

Saudia took a breath before answering. “No.”

“Since everyone here can be at fault, I propose we move on,” the Commander continued, resting his hands on the holotable and looking between each of them. “There is no point to bickering about
“Who made the worse decision.”

“With respect, I agree, Chancellor,” Laura nodded in agreement. “If nothing else…we have a better idea of just what we can expect.”

“We made mistakes,” the Commander sighed, rubbing his forehead. “Now we need to learn from them before the next attack.”

She had to admit that the Commander had the useful talent of focusing on what needed to be done and cutting out the superfluous details. While Saudia had expected better from both of them, they were also right in that in their place, she probably would have done just as well, or much worse.

“Then we continue. San Francisco is lost, that can be definitively stated.”

“Yes,” Laura said with a firm nod, glancing down and activating the holotable. A map of the West Coast appeared, and zoomed in on San Francisco. “Shortly after the retreat, alien transports arrived for what I presume to be an occupation force. No idea about numbers or units, but we can likely assume the civilians lost.”

Her face expressionless, Saudia asked. “How many?”

A twitch of her lips was Laura’s only visible reaction. “At minimum? At least two hundred thousand.”

That was not going to be easily downplayed. The capture of two of the most prominent cities in America was enough of a blow, before people began asking what exactly was happening to the people left in the cities. If word got out that one alien was responsible for the capture of one city, it could spread panic. The good news was that the only people who knew about that were the soldiers, ADVENT analysts in the Citadel, and the media that insisted on following the armies.

Or maybe not so good news. Those media personnel needed to be silenced somehow, albeit carefully. The Commander apparently had the same thought. “It would be best if San Francisco was downplayed. They don’t need to know how it fell.”

“And how exactly are we going to keep it quiet?” Laura sighed. “The soldiers aren’t going to talk about it, at least not outside the military. We can issue orders to refrain from discussing it with civilians, but the non-ADVENT personnel there are going to pose an issue to this plan.”

“I doubt it is a large problem,” the Commander shrugged. “Explain to them that this needs to be kept secret for now to avoid causing a panic. Have them sign a piece of paper swearing them to silence, and if they break it, they go to jail. Simple.”

Laura raised an eyebrow. “Commander, you haven’t dealt much with the media, have you?”

Saudia almost cracked a smile at that, and the Commander gave a sad one of his own. “I’m unfortunately familiar with them, and my general stance on them is to not give them an inch. If their work risks ADVENT stability, then stop it.”

“It’s one thing with XCOM,” Laura said slowly. “You’re not exactly beholden to any nation, nor are your operations large enough to warrant major attention. You must know how seriously journalists take censorship. This is how leaks happen, and then that muddies the waters even further.”

The Commander’s face turned as hard as stone. He straightened and looked directly at Saudia. “I will not tell you what decisions to make, but you have provisions in the Advent Directive to put a stop to illegal and destabilizing media. I suggest you use it.”
All of them had gotten tenser; Laura’s own tone was wary. “That would perhaps instigate more backlash.”

The Commander gave a cold smile. “And why, exactly, should you fear backlash, or are even sure it will last? Are you worried about riots? Civil war? This is what the Peacekeepers are for, Commander Christiaens, and why Saudia appointed Stein.”

“Fair point,” Laura muttered. “That decision is outside my jurisdiction anyway. Chancellor, we can discuss that later. Perhaps we should move on.”

“Portland,” Saudia immediately said, clasping her hands behind her back. “Our lone victory.”

“We can thank XCOM and the city structure for that,” Laura said, inclining her head to the Commander. “The choke points prevented our forces from being overwhelmed and I don’t know what you did to your soldiers…” she shook her head. “But they secured our victory.”

“I’ll pass that along,” the Commander affirmed. “We suffered losses of our own, but your soldiers performed well against the Vitakara. It would be foolish to say we alone saved Portland.”

“But you certainly helped,” Laura said, clearing her throat. “From observing footage of the battle itself, I’m not entirely sure why this battle went much better than the others.”

“Because the aliens didn’t do anything surprising,” the Commander answered immediately. “They sent in their army, and we defended. Much like Japan, we had the advantage here. They didn’t do anything creative, nor had any counter to my psions and MEC.”

“So what you’re saying is that we have a good chance of victory if the aliens don’t do anything unexpected?” Saudia asked, raising an eyebrow. “A bold assertion.”

“A better chance than usual,” the Commander amended, scratching his chin. “The thing is…here the aliens didn’t deploy anything but Vitakara and several of the Sectoid Leaders. No mechanical units of any kind. Would the battle have gone differently if that had changed? I’m not sure, but I believe we would have won Portland regardless because the aliens intentionally baited me specifically.”

The Commander admitting he’d messed up? That was…unexpected. “Explain?” Saudia asked, genuinely curious.

“It’s obvious in retrospect,” the Commander admitted. “Portland was the second-last city to be hit, with San Francisco being the last. He didn’t want or anticipate XCOM soldiers being sent there for whatever reason. Laura, remember the initial reports from Seattle and LA?”

“Andromedons in Seattle, Mutons in LA,” she recalled, a finger tapping on the holotable. “The units we considered the most and least dangerous, respectively.”

“They expected me to deploy my strongest soldiers to Seattle,” the Commander continued. “Which included Patricia. And I sent my less experienced squad to LA because I didn’t anticipate any surprises from the Mutons, who aren’t much for subtlety or strategy.”

“But you were wrong,” Saudia finished, seeing how it had happened. “They were prepared for both. And Portland was left with the middle squad. Standard, if you will.”

“Agreed,” the Commander nodded. “It’s that simple. However, the good news is that they won’t be able to do that again so easily.”
“How was Patricia negated?” Saudia asked. “After Japan, I didn’t think she could be stopped.”

“Vahlen is performing autopsies now on some of the corpses we recovered,” the Commander explained, looking down at the holotable. “Initial impressions are that these Mutons had their brains cybernetically modified. Whatever they did, it prevented full mind control. And the leader was also somehow immune to mind control, but not the Andromedon soldiers for some reason. The only issue was that the leader overrode the suits and let the system take over as if the owner had died. Clever, really.”

“How was Patricia negated?” Saudia asked.

“Vahlen is performing autopsies now on some of the corpses we recovered,” the Commander explained, looking down at the holotable. “Initial impressions are that these Mutons had their brains cybernetically modified. Whatever they did, it prevented full mind control. And the leader was also somehow immune to mind control, but not the Andromedon soldiers for some reason. The only issue was that the leader overrode the suits and let the system take over as if the owner had died. Clever, really.”

“Do we have any information on the leader then?” Saudia asked.

“We have images,” the Commander began hesitantly. “Based on the information I’ve gathered and…sources. It appears to be an Andromedon called J’Loran. Highly placed in the Battlemaster’s circle of trust; expert tactician; excellent soldier and dislikes psionics. Probably why he was chosen to develop a plan specifically to counter Patricia.”

That was…a lot of specific information. However, she wasn’t exactly concerned with where he got his information from as long as it was accurate. “What is to stop them from cybernetically modifying every Muton to make them immune?”

“Cost, probably,” Laura answered, glancing at the Commander. “It’s worth the investment if you want to negate a certain psion. However, it’s not exactly worth it if you don’t kill the psion in question. Besides, Mutons elsewhere are unmodified, and the mind-control immunity has some side effects. Namely, that they become much worse when mentally affected, and can be driven insane.”

“So it’s not perfect.” Saudia noted.

“Not yet,” the Commander said slowly, furrowing his eyebrows. “But after this, I think they’ll devote some time to investigating it. But the issue they’ll have is that this can be easily countered by simply sending additional or differently specialized psions. This will do absolutely nothing to stop a telekinetic or attack psion.”

Saudia felt a measure of relief at that. “That is good. What is the current status of Seattle?”

“Holding,” Laura said. “We’ve not gained, nor lost ground. However, much of that is due to my ordering airstrikes on territory they control. I’m trying to deny them as much ground as possible before they build AA defenses.”

“Realistically, do you think you can hold it?” The Commander asked.

“That depends on how badly we want to keep it.” Laura answered slowly. “Give me steady reinforcements, XCOM support, and reliable supply lines, and I can make sure it’s held, barring an increase in alien activity. But without those…They can keep throwing disposable Mutons at us, and Andromedons like to run before we hurt them too badly. Humans are smarter, but can’t be replaced as easily.”

“You’ll have what you need for now,” Saudia assured her. “We can’t lose Seattle right now. Otherwise they can simply come down to Portland and surround it. Now…LA. What happened?”

“Simply put, we underestimated them,” the Commander said bluntly, the corners of his lips twitching. “The Mutons were organized, directed and employed actual tactics and attempted unconventional attacks. A lot of Mutons died, but the majority were soldiers, and since they managed to kill several of my own, including a MEC, they probably consider that a fair trade.”
“They hit from a lot more angles than we were expecting,” Laura added. “They employed Gateway transports as well, but delayed attacking until they had a sizable force and hit us from the flanks. They slowly drained the reinforcements from the inner city until there were almost none left. We could have stayed and died, or tried fighting our way out. Both of us agreed the latter was preferable.”

“Then it must not have been a Muton leading them,” Saudia guessed, frowning. “That seems far too sophisticated for them, not to mention the precision you allege.”

“Not necessarily,” the Commander said. “There is one Muton type that is capable of such. They call it a Sargon. Very rare, normally used for overseeing territory. Using them in battle though, is almost unheard of. After this display, I’m wondering why.”

“If it is a Sargon.” Laura pointed out.

“One of my soldiers saw a Muton accompanied by Elites, and matched the description I’ve been provided on them,” the Commander shrugged. “I may be wrong, but Muton Elites flanking any Muton is unheard of. What else but a Sargon, or equally valuable Muton, would warrant a personal escort?”

Laura frowned. “Good point.”

Saudia pinched the bridge of her nose, thinking. “The fighting has stabilized…more or less. Treduant is making an address to try and reassure the population, and I’ll be giving one as well. It might be good to have you say something as well, Commander.”

“No,” he refused bluntly. “I need to return to the Praesidium and figure out how we’re going to kill this Battlemaster. That is the priority now for us and I won’t interfere in pacifying the population. That is your job now. Mine is to kill the aliens.”

“Be sure and keep us appraised of the developments,” Laura told him. “A lot more than the lives of just your soldiers is at stake.”

“I know,” the Commander assured her. “And we’ll be ready when the next attack hits. They won’t be able to pull this off so easy next time.”

“Let’s hope so,” Saudia warned as he straightened up. “Because we can’t take more defeats like this.”

“No, we can’t,” the Commander said, looking over to her. “However, the aliens have also presented you with an opportunity here. For whatever reason, they have ignored Canada. Perhaps the Prime Minister might be willing to help us here.”

“That’s a good note,” Laura nodded. “Why they ignored Canada is…interesting.”

That it was, and Saudia wasn’t exactly comfortable with that. “I’ll look into it,” she promised.

“Good luck then,” the Commander said, turning to leave. “We will be watching.”

Saudia didn’t know if the Commander had intended that to be reassuring or unnerving, but if it was the latter, she could safely say that it was successful. The Commander chose his words rather carefully, and she figured that the deliberate usage of what had been the former Council’s catchphrase was not accidental.

She’d puzzle it out later. There was much more important matters to attend to.
Washington DC, United States of America

“We all knew this war would come to our land, and now that it has we will utilize every resource at our disposal to fight back against the alien scourge and avenge our fallen brothers and sisters. America will not bend to alien pressure, and backed by ADVENT and XCOM, we will ultimately succeed!”

“Mute,” Nicole Treduant addressed the television as applause broke out at the end of her respective speech, and the commentators began discussing it once more. Saudia admired how the woman didn’t seem overly perturbed by any of the recent events. Although she’d been president for years, it likely came with the territory.

“Not a bad speech,” Elizabeth complimented from the couch she was seated on, an open laptop by her side and some scattered pieces of paper on the opposite side. Saudia was almost amused how much Elizabeth was uncomfortable just sitting quietly for an extended period of time. She always had to be doing something; walking, fiddling with laptops and rubix cubes or making notes on paper.

Even in the White House.

But no one seemed to mind. Disrupting the Director of ADVENT Intelligence was probably ill-advised, and Elizabeth was able to multitask to an extraordinary degree. Anything of substance that was discussed, she would recall it.

“Appreciated, Director,” Treduant sighed, leaning back into the couch and closing her eyes. “For what good it will do.”

“It will bring some amount of calm to the public,” the harsh voice of Amalda Stein stated, from the opposite couch of Elizabeth. “America is suitably paralyzed from the attack. I do not expect them to pose an organized threat.”

“Depends how the media treats this,” Elizabeth muttered, not looking up from her laptop. “In times like these, people are going to want to be informed. And ADVENT state media is not always their first choice.”

Treduant gave a loud exhale. “That’s what I’m afraid of. Congress is still trying to undermine me, and half the nation hates me. No offense, Saudia, but the media isn’t a fan of ADVENT. They might not try to frighten the population, but they will lay the blame for anything they can on me.”

Stein snorted, an odd sound coming from the armored woman. Stein had apparently taken up the Commander’s habit of showing up in full armor to benign meetings. The black plating of her riot control officer armor contrasted sharply with the lightly-colored room and made the cold German woman even more intimidating than she already was. “I would not expect them to go that far. If they continue making false claims, there are laws to prevent that.”

“While efficiency may be the most prudent response, allow me to interject my own humble opinion,” Firdaus Hassan interrupted smoothly, seated comfortably on the same couch as Elizabeth. “You will not like this, Madam President, but the best solution right now is to ignore anything the media might say about you. Other nations are watching how we react to this. Chancellor, we must decide the image we want to portray to the world: One united in our resolve to defeat the aliens, or one looking suppress harmful dissent?”
Stein fixed him with a raised eyebrow. “In the words of a dumb taco commercial, ‘Why not both?’”

“Because we can’t do both effectively,” Saudia said, her palms pressed together as she thought this situation through. “Taking a hard stance against the media would be impossible to ignore, and might give the populace the impression we are more concerned about our image than the aliens. It might be more beneficial in the long run, but I do not believe that is the optimal path right now.”

“Well said,” Hassan nodded. “Ultimately, the media cannot harm anything but your ego. The aliens pose a much larger threat we should focus on solving.”

“Then what should be our next moves?” Treduant asked, clasping her hands together. “If I want to keep the focus on our response, information will be vital. The people will be calmer if we present an active strategy.”

“ADVENT will be sending in reinforcements,” Saudia began. “Including some of ADVENT Engineering’s prototype MDUs. Mercado doesn’t feel like they are perfected yet, but I’ve instructed him to finish them up. And they will be highly effective against any new alien offensives. Laura has also assured me she can hold Seattle and Portland, provided she is given everything she needs.”

Treduant faced her with a look torn between skepticism and hope. “Be honest with me, Chancellor: How much good will that do if that…thing that took San Francisco shows up?”

Saudia set her lips in a hard line. “At this point? Nothing, Madam President. I cannot reliably say we would stand any better chance. However, XCOM has made the neutralization of this ‘Battlemaster’ their top priority.”

“A fitting name,” Elizabeth chimed in. “And as for what ADVENT Intelligence will be doing, I’ve begun organizing agents to begin attempted infiltration of alien-occupied cities. Given the size, we should be receiving accurate details within days. I’m coordinating with several local militia groups and landowners about how to deal with the aliens.”

“You’re arming them,” Stein stated, frowning. “I’m not sure that is responsible. Especially when a great many of the people you describe could be described as ‘patriots.’”

“Easy, Stein,” Elizabeth chided, giving her a cold smile. “I’m well aware of what I’m doing. These people may despise Treduant at the moment, but if there’s one thing they hate more than ‘tyranny,’” she added the appropriate air quotes to that word. “It’s literal illegal aliens invading their land. They are not hard to use, and arming them with weapons that might actually hurt the aliens is a sound strategic move. Right-wing fanatics some of them may be, but they know their firearms and how to use them.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Stein said, shifting in her seat, a free hand resting lightly on her stun baton. “But if they prove unreliable, the Peacekeepers will arrest them.”

“Not a problem with me,” Elizabeth shrugged, biting her lip as she added some notes to a document. “But they aren’t that hard to use. If nothing else, they’ll slow down the aliens without risking any of our actual soldiers.”

“That’s enough for me to put something together,” Treduant nodded at both women in thanks. “The image of Americans taking the fight to the aliens will be especially effective.”

“I’ll be sure to get some footage,” Elizabeth promised, before looking to Yong. “Now, internationally, we need to make some decisions.”
“What has been the general response to the attack?” Saudia asked Yong.

“Let’s see…” he looked up as if in thought. “Cautionary if anything. The fact that America is breached at all has clearly shaken their confidence, but they all knew it was inevitable, and that the majority of the damage has been limited to a few cities on the West Coast is seen as almost acceptable.”

His voice suddenly became much more serious and he fixed Saudia with an uncharacteristically firm stare. “If you didn’t come to the same conclusion, keep everything about this Battlemaster suppressed. The knowledge that they have one alien who can rout our forces will be a devastating blow to international relations.” He raised a hand. “Yes, I am aware that these Ethereals are not completely representative of their forces, but that won’t really make a difference to them.”

“Don’t worry,” Saudia promised, exchanging a glance with Elizabeth. “Precautions are being taken.”

Satisfied, he continued. “With that out of the way, most of the EU still isn’t willing to join. From interactions with their diplomats, I’m getting the impression that they want to see how long America lasts before making a decision. Hold out for half a year or more, and then we can press them to join with a lot more confidence.”

Stein scowled at that. “Cowards. How fast do you think they’ll change their minds once they come under attack?”

“Quickly, I’d expect,” Hassan nodded with a slight smile. “Especially when ADVENT comes in to save the day. However, we are not at the point that they are needed. Strategically, North and South America have become essential in the way. Africa and China are non-issues at this point, and the latter hasn’t commented whatsoever.”

“Mexico and Canada,” Saudia nodded. “Both of them joining ADVENT would greatly boost our own defense of the United States. They have to know the war will reach them eventually.”

“I believe I can reach an agreement with Mexico,” Hassan agreed. “They recognize that the war is eventually going to spill into their territory if the aliens aren’t stopped. I believe if I emphasize the benefits of an alliance, along with a prominent declaration of our alliance, something along the lines of ‘fighting on the front lines’ or something like that, I believe they will join. In fact…”

He smiled and looked at Stein. “The President himself has heard a great deal about you, Chief Stein, and I do know that he has a rather strong feud with the many drug cartels that still operate in the cities. I do believe some assurances from you would actually help convince them of the benefits of ADVENT.”

Stein gave a smile devoid of emotion. “I would be happy to assure the President that my Peacekeepers would stamp out those criminals like the vermin they are.”

“Excellent!” Hassan nodded, making a note on his tablet. “I’ll arrange a meeting in the next few days, assuming you are free?”

“I’m heading down to Brazil immediately after we finish up here,” Stein told him, her smile never fading. “Apparenty Marshal Luana is having some issues subduing the population. I’m going to straighten that out now, and remind the good Marshal that she is not above the law.”

“Gee, I wonder why she’s having trouble,” Treduant muttered, shooting Stein a dark look. “And I’m rather surprised to hear that. Given that Luana started this out of her hatred from criminals, I’d
think you’d be best friends.”

“Cute, Madam President,” Stein chuckled. “Luana’s initial retaliation was justified, and her stances concerning crime are worthy of praise. But in her quest for vengeance, she has begun wars with countries unaffiliated with the initial revelations. They were started before I took my position and laws were adequately established, so I am allowing them to continue. However, should she expand her crusade, she will be removed. I am going to remind her of that.”

“Anyway,” Hassan interjected, clearing his throat. “Before we get too off-topic, there is the other matter to discuss: Canada.”

“I assume negotiations are going as well as before?” Elizabeth asked wearily, now fiddling with a rubix cube as she looked over at him.

“They are taking the alien’s refusal to attack as a sign they should continue to do nothing,” Hassan said with a grimace. “That was what their ambassador more or less implied.”

“Gutless cowards,” Stein swore. “What do they think the aliens are going to do if they win? Continue ignoring them?”

“That isn’t for me to say,” Hassan said, turning his head to Saudia. “However, Chancellor, I do believe that even if Canada is unwilling to join us, they would be instrumental in moving our military through them to perhaps attack a vulnerable alien position.”

“The question,” Saudia said thoughtfully. “Is if they’ll even agree to that.”

“They’re open to talking at least,” Hassan confirmed. “The Prime Minister has indicated that he will be willing discuss it with you in person.”

Well, that was some good news. “Then set up the meeting if you can,” Saudia ordered with a nod. “Perhaps he will be able to clear up why Canada is so against joining us.”

“Didn’t they make it pretty clear?” Elizabeth snorted. “Something about how we were too ‘authoritarian’?”

“To be fair, they aren’t wrong,” Hassan chuckled. “But they seem to view it as a completely bad thing.”

“I’m sure I’ll get some clearer answers from the Prime Minister,” Saudia interjected, before a discussion began on the pros and cons of that topic. She had learned a while ago that everyone in the room had rather strong opinions on the subject and were willing to discuss them. While interesting, they didn’t have time. “We have our plan. Let’s carry it out.”

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_Tehran, Iran_

To Roman’s complete lack of surprise, the Iranians had not surrendered.

Oh, he was quite certain they would, but not before ADVENT stormed their capital and arrested or killed the leadership. Idiots. They had to know by now that resistance was pointless, and all they were accomplishing was getting their soldiers killed…and for what? A few more hours of freedom? A few more hours of lies they could tell their people? A few more hours clinging to their power and religion?
Roman smiled coldly under his helmet as he stood with the assembled ADVENT military several miles from the Iranian capital. Whatever happened now to the Iranians…they would have brought it completely down on themselves. Offers of surrender had been sent multiple times, and all had either been rejected or ignored.

Ivan had stated privately to all ranking officers under his command that they would not accept surrenders offered from any hostile soldiers or officers. A message needed to be sent loud and clear to the surrounding regions, and if the bombardment of a city wouldn’t elicit their compliance, then there was little point in trying to save them.

“[Anything?]” Roman asked Maksim, who was looking through his sniper rifle.

“[No,]” he answered. “[At least, nothing we’re not expecting.]” A snort. “[These people learned nothing.]”

“I doubt that,]” Galina interrupted, once more recalibrating the gauss cannon that had been issued to her. “[They just have nothing that can stop us.]”

“[On that we agree,]” Roman nodded, looking around at the assembled forces, and raising an eyebrow as a dozen shiny trucks pulled up and several Officers began going over and unlatching the backs. “[Looks like we’ve got some more backup.]”

“[What more do we need, actually?]” Konstantin asked sarcastically. “[An XCOM unit?]”

Roman watched the trucks curiously and sucked in his breath as he saw what stepped out. “[Hey, do you remember that rumor about the Americans building some kind of robotic war machine…?]” He jerked a thumb over to the trucks. “[Because it looks like ADVENT took it over.]”

The robots stood at least ten feet high, maybe more. They were a sandblasted tan, but shiny as if just off a production line. Their entire structure was streamlined and practical from the legs to the torso to the three-fingered hands that held a weapon that was almost as big as him, with a glowing red power source. The robot had no eyes on its head, which appeared to be an angular chunk of metal with a black strip down the middle. To top it off, there appeared to be some kind of missile system attached to the back.

“[Wow,]” Elena whistled. “[Those look really good.]”

Roman did a quick count of the war machines as they stomped over to the front lines and the soldiers quickly made room. Thirty? Forty? It was enough to cause some serious trouble at a minimum with them alone. “[Squads load into your designated transports,]” Ivan’s voice suddenly transmitted. “[Suppressive bombardment will begin commencement now.]”

Roman nodded. “[Load up!]” He ordered his squad and they joined the dozens of others who made their way to the transports as the missile trucks artillery began firing at the city. “Suppressive bombardment” largely meant bombing the city until the ground forces arrived. It would only target the outskirts and clear defensive encampments. They wanted the city largely intact, and at this point had figured out that Iranian weapons simply couldn’t stop them.

“[To all forces,]” Ivan continued as they got situated. Maksim took the open position so he could shoot as they rode up. “[ADVENT has been kind enough to provide us with their newest weapon, mechanized defense units, or MDUs. They are using this as a field test, and simulations seem to indicate they will be a large asset. Do not attempt to hinder them in any way, as ADVENT Engineering made it very clear their programming was not to be tampered with. Good luck, and let’s end the war here.]”
“[So stay away from the machines of death,]” Anton muttered, checking his rifle. “[Got it.]”

“[It’s actually a smart field test,]” Elena chimed in as the transport jolted as it sped towards the city. “[These conditions are terrible for machines like that. If it can work well here, it would probably work well anywhere.]”

Stanislav grunted. “[We’ll see. I don’t want that thing to shoot me because of some bad programming. Don’t trust machines like that, especially ones with rocket launchers.]”

“[We’re coming up,]” Maksim informed after a few minutes. “[Initial bombardment seems to have worked well. The MDUs are pretty fast too. No defender response so far.]”

“[I would have thought they would have had some artillery or defenses,]” Elena said as the transport slowed down. “[Seems odd to have nothing.]”

“[Oh, they did,]” Roman shrugged. “[They did this in the night, so I guess you wouldn’t have heard. They baited all the defenses they had by launching dummy missiles into the city. They just repeated until there was nothing. Their supply is cut off, so they couldn’t restock at all, let alone in time.]”

The transport slammed to a stop. “[Deploy!]” Roman ordered and they charged out into the defensive lines of Iranian soldiers. An entire row of buildings had been reduced to nothing and the Iranians were shouting and screaming at each other in a panic. Roman raised his rifle to fire—and never got a chance to fire as six red beams screamed past him within seconds, each hitting a soldier in the head.

He looked over to see one of the MDUs continue charging forward, continuing to fire beams of light that only lasted milliseconds, but were direct hits each and every time. Nothing was spared from the machines as they shot anything that moved. Roman winced as it shot two civilians who were trying to flee from the machine of death.

Konstantin swallowed. “[Shit.]”

“[Follow me,]” Roman ordered, ignoring the words but echoing the sentiment. Those machines seemed to be even more deadly than even he had anticipated. He was wondering if there would even be anything left for them to kill, so he decided to take the path that the MDU had not gone down. “[Right.]” He ordered and they marched down the street, past the sand-blasted buildings and empty shops.

“[Incoming,]” Maksim stated calmly as they spotted an encampment of a dozen Iranian soldiers who were taking cover behind improvised cover and crates. They shouted in Persian, and opened fire with their conventional rifles.

“[Cover,]” Roman almost sighed as they fell into their own cover behind buildings, inside houses and behind crates of their own. He activated his shields and firmly entrenched himself before he rose and took aim. A few bullets were redirected away and he responded by firing at two behind a crate and both fell back, their bodies riddled with bullets.

He swung to aim at one who was hiding behind the corner of a building and fired at it relentlessly, eventually piercing the corner and subsequently the soldier himself who fell to the ground with a scream. Maksim shot one in the head who was hiding behind a car; Konstantin and Galina had reduced another crate to splinters with their gauss cannons, and the body behind it was a bloody pulp.
With only three left, Roman motioned his gunners to suppress them while he moved up in the open. Truthfully, he was tired of this and wanted this pointless war over with. Stanislav and Elena were close behind him as he charged the remaining soldiers who were too afraid to point their heads out. “[Cease!]” Roman called as the line was reached.

One soldier opened his mouth in terror before Stanislav blew it into chunks; Elena executed another one behind a car, filling the torso with bloody holes while Roman finished off yet one more with a shot to the knee, and then head in quick succession. “[Clear,]” he grunted as he noticed one of the soldiers was still breathing, but leaned up against a building, blood staining the wall and sand around him. He was breathing heavily, a hand over his fatal wounds. His eyes met the faceless mask of Roman, pleading for help, or simply mercy.

Roman only shot him in the head.

He ignored the sigh from Elena as he turned to survey the area. He walked through the corpses, making sure all of them were dead. “[Woah!]” Galina called out as she was hit in the head with a frying pan from a hysterical woman who was screaming incoherently, and had apparently come out of nowhere.

Great. Exactly what he didn’t want to do. But orders were very clear. “[Take her out,]” he growled distastefully as he looked at the minimap in his HUD. “[We need to keep moving.]”

 “[One second,]” Galina answered and swung her gauss cannon sharply up, hitting the woman in the chin with a sharp crack and sending her sprawling to the ground. Blood trickling out of her mouth, Galina lowered her weapon and fired a short burst of gauss rounds, killing her instantly. “[Ready to go, Shieldbearer.]”

 “[Sorry that happened,]” he said as they kept moving. As irritating as civilians were, he disliked killing them.

 “[Not your fault,]” Galina shrugged, taking the position beside him. “[Only an idiot decides attacking heavily armed soldiers is a good idea.]”

 “[Or a hysterical wife whose husband was killed,]” Elena muttered. “[But hey, what do I know?]”

 “[We have our orders,]” Roman reminded her, shooting a glance at Elena. “[Like them or not, we have to follow them.]” He returned his attention to the city streets, screams and the sounds of laser weapon discharge in the distance. “[And in the end, these people brought this upon themselves. Now they must bear the consequences.]”

No one said anything else as they made their way through the streets, killing the soldiers they came across, and the civilians soon fled into their homes at the sight of his team coming down the street. They were now learning their fear of ADVENT was well founded, and the stories of the faceless men in armor were true.

Fear was not necessarily a bad thing, Roman contemplated as he shot a terrified soldier in the back as he struggled to get into a house that had locked their doors.

It certainly made his job easier.

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ADVENT Intelligence Control, United States of America

True to herself, Elizabeth liked to have multiple locations for her headquarters. While in EXALT,
she’d restricted herself to only one for obvious reasons, but now that she was now in charge of multiple intelligence agencies, she was now coopting various ones to stage her operations. They largely coincided with where the operations were taking place themselves, and since America was where quite a few important events were taking place, Elizabeth had taken the former CIA headquarters in Langley as her current base of operations.

And now they stood in a small board room, with an oak table, empty chairs and bare walls. Nondescript, and that was how both of them liked it. “So what do you want to discuss first?” Elizabeth asked, consulting her tablet while pacing absentmindedly.

Saudia smiled, deciding to sit down in one of the chairs. “The Canadian Prime Minister.”

Elizabeth nodded and placed the tablet on the table and slid it over to her. “Jace Murphy, Prime Minister of Canada, New Democratic Party affiliation.” Saudia looked down at the tablet which showed a middle-aged man who looked inscrutable, but even from looking at the image his ice-blue eyes conveyed weariness. He didn’t appear that old either, and his neatly styled black hair had no touches of gray. She glanced down at the information accompanying the picture. Thirty-eight, yes, very young. Idealistic too, if his party affiliation was anything to go by.

“I know who he is,” Saudia said, looking back up at Elizabeth. “I need to know anything of importance. Like how he thinks.”

“How he thinks,” Elizabeth mused, continuing to pace as she thought. “As his party affiliation says, he is one of the New Democratic Party, who gained a lot more influence after the War on Terror, and he pretty much took full advantage of the situation. He was the one who set up the system allowing Canada to take thousands of Muslim refugees from the war. He won the election with very little contest.”

“An idealist and a civilian,” Saudia sighed. “Such a wonderful combination.”

“Essentially,” Elizabeth continued. “Though he has personal reasons for being, ah, anti-war, for lack of a better word. His sister died in the War on Terror. Nothing related to the Commander, thankfully, but pretty much made him work to abolish militarism throughout the government. Most of which was accepted, mind you, Canadians in general are a rather peaceful people.”

“I’m aware of the stereotype,” Saudia nodded. “And that means very little right now. What exactly did he do?”

“Well, military spending was drastically reduced,” Elizabeth began, ticking things off on her fingers. “Canada officially took a non-aggressive position in international politics, he filled his cabinet with people of similar ideologies—which means no former military or police, including the people who work with said branches. Let’s see…what else? Oh, that also includes slashed funding for CSIS, which has led to, I’ve found out, dangerous infiltration of United States, English, North Korean, and Chinese intelligence agents. At this point it’s really not fair to call the CSIS a Canadian intelligence organization.”

She shook her head, chuckling. “I never bothered to really infiltrate Canada, since its usefulness was limited, but now I wish I’d taken an interest. In truth, Canada’s irrelevance is the only reason no one has acted, since it could be turned into a puppet state within a few decades with how shockingly bad their security is.”

She trailed off. “Getting off topic. Ah, did I mention that this also includes law enforcement as well? Yes, law enforcement was also deemed ‘too militarized’ and drastically reformed. Crime isn’t exactly bad, but it’s certainly reduced their effectiveness.”
“He’s got a lot done, I can respect that,” Saudia grudgingly admitted. “So then, I suppose the question is where all this money was put into?”

“About what you’d expect,” Elizabeth shrugged. “Military spending was put into government programs, largely those focused on education, welfare, anti-discrimination initiatives largely focused on Muslims, and police spending was put into rehabilitation centers and programs.”

“Well, they’ve got a head start there,” Saudia admitted. “The rehabilitation centers will be useful once Canada joins ADVENT. Saves us the trouble of building them.”

“Yeah, but we’ll have to do pretty much everything else,” Elizabeth chuckled. “You should have seen Stein’s face when I told her about it. I really bet she’s hoping you’ll enact Section 9.8.”

“She’s going to be disappointed,” Saudia answered, lacing her fingers together. “Annexation is not the correct solution now.”

“Anyway,” Elizabeth continued, pausing to face her. “That’s who you’re dealing with. He more or less holds the exact opposite values we have, or at the very minimum opposes the ones that matter. He doesn’t seem the type to be intimidated, and my information on him suggests that he is suspicious of you personally. He does not trust you, he does not like ADVENT, and he especially dislikes XCOM.”

“Of course he does,” Saudia muttered. “He would know the Commander is in charge of XCOM. That’s only going to make things harder. Do we have anything we can use on him?”

“Not anything useful,” Elizabeth scowled. “The problem is that he’s one of the rare politicians that actually believes the stuff he says. He’s not taken bribes or favors from anyone, his inner circle is completely behind him, and his private life is clean. Single, actually. Currently dating some nice lady in Quebec who’s just as clean as he is.”

“I never thought that would make me disappointed,” Saudia said, shaking her head. “But no matter. I don’t need Canada to join ADVENT right now, and trust or no, this man doesn’t strike me as an idiot. He has to know the aliens are dangerous, and well worth bending his precious ethics to allow some foreign soldiers through his country.”

“Well, I want you to press him on both the aliens and ADVENT,” Elizabeth stated, looking her in the eyes. “I’m having my agents bug the places where your meeting is likely to take place, and the CSIS is too compromised to find them in time. If his views are...problematic, I want audio.”

Saudia curled her lips up. “Rest assured I plan to press him as hard as I can. Now,” she motioned to the tablet, “Oceania.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth nodded quickly, picking up the tablet. “I believe we should be sending more support down there. At the very least we need to keep the resistance groups there well-supplied. They’re actually doing quite well, and deserve our support. The longer we can tie the aliens up there, the more we have to prepare for when they hit next.”

“Granted,” Saudia nodded. She really didn’t see any reason to refuse to supply the ones fighting down there. “How goes Japan?”

“The aliens have set up laser-based AA weapons, denying airstrikes,” Elizabeth updated. “However, we’re keeping them pinned in their city. They’re under constant bombardment day and night, but my agents have reported that it looks like they’re building gateways. At least three, possibly as many as six. But I don’t think they’re planning to attack anytime soon.”
“Or maybe that’s what they want us to think,” Saudia said, rubbing her forehead. “The last thing we would expect or want is another attack in Japan.”

“Maybe,” Elizabeth admitted. “But I’ve got some failsafes in place. They won’t be able to suddenly spew out soldiers through the gateways without us noticing, or fly across the ocean without being detected. Just in case though, I’ve got my agents setting up small tactical nukes in the city itself. Enough to wipe it off the map if they try something.”

Saudia winced. “The Japanese will love that.”


“In agreement there,” Saudia nodded. “Thanks for the update, Director. Now,” she stood, “I believe Hassan wants to discuss the good Prime Minister with me himself before I go off to see him. Perhaps he’ll have a good way to handle him.”

“If you want my advice, Saudia,” Elizabeth said as she left, “Be your charming self. That is, make sure he knows just who really is in charge.”

Saudia gave her an emotionless smile. “I’ll keep that in mind, Director Falka. Thank you.” Then she left Elizabeth to continue her work, while she prepared for the first major diplomatic meeting between ADVENT and a foreign nation.

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Outskirts of Cochabamba, Bolivia

Jaylin wasn’t sure what to expect when she’d arrived in Brazil and was immediately transferred to some city in Bolivia. But she hadn’t expected a military camp.

Because that was essentially what this was. A repurposed military camp from the former Bolivian army most likely, now converted for not only ADVENT Military activity, but specifically for the Peacekeepers. She swallowed. Oh boy, when the public found out that the Peacekeepers had legitimate military bases, they were going to flip out.

She adjusted her gauntlet as she walked through the base towards where the barracks supposedly were. She had to admire how smoothly everything seemed to be running. Everything was organized, black armored transports were lined up neatly. In the distance Peacekeepers were shooting their weapons at targets and there was also a training ring for Riot Control to practice with their batons.

She pulled her own out and looked down at it. Might be a good idea to become a little more familiar with it, since she figured she might need to use it in a couple of days. Or hours, depending on how things went. Everyone had been tight-lipped about what was actually going on beyond that Brazil had invaded Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru last she’d heard, supposedly in retaliation for supporting criminal activity in the country.

Jaylin shrugged and slid her baton back into the holster on her leg. From what she’d read, Marshal Luana was something of a warmongering tyrant obsessed by power. A fanatic of sorts too, given how liberal she’d been in utilizing her military to both keep the population in check and hunt down anyone who broke the law.

She smirked. And all accounts were saying that was probably going to change since the Chief of Peacekeeper Operations herself had also come down to Brazil, likely to put the Marshal in her place. And now the Peacekeepers were left with three countries who were no doubt angry at Brazil.
and likely to cause...issues.

The door slid open as she walked inside the barracks and to her own bed. It was plain, but didn’t look too bad with a footlocker at the end and a cabinet at the head which she presumed was specifically for putting her armor in. She placed her helmet inside and began removing the various pieces of her armor.

“Officer Tanika, correct?” A voice asked.

She glanced up to see a man walk up, also decked out in riot control armor, helmet tucked under his arm. She kept herself seated as he raised a hand, indicating her to remain sitting. Informal then, she could do that. He had what she would call a ‘weathered’ face that also bore some pale scars on his forehead and his shaved head gave the appearance of a hardened veteran. Possibly military then. Based on this place, she wouldn’t be surprised.

“Yes, sir,” she answered with a nod, not sure who he was.

The left corner of his lip curled up in not-quite a smile. ‘I’m Charlie Vasir, Chief of this division of Riot Control,” he took a seat on the opposite cot. “Now that you’re here, you should be appraised of the current situation.”

Jaylin nodded, giving him her full attention. “I’m listening.”

“Good,” he began, lacing his fingers together. “The good news is that Bolivia is completely under ADVENT control militarily. The population, however, is not. Over the next couple of days we are expecting massive riots to break out in the capital. It will be under the guise of ‘protest’, but they will devolve into riots nonetheless.”

She frowned. “Can they not be stopped ahead of time?”

Vasir gave her a cold smile. “Of course we are, but the law is very clear: We can only investigate if they clearly show an intention towards violence. Very few have done that on social media and elsewhere. The majority are likely not intending for things to deteriorate so fast, but many are angry, and will see an opportunity to join in any chaos that follows.”

Jaylin gave one nod. “Prepare for the worst, hope for the best.”

“A good outlook to take,” he chuckled, the sound odd coming from him. “But essentially. If all they truly want is to protest, than we will allow that, as it is permitted by law. However, if it deteriorates they need to be put down quickly.”

“And how many are you expecting?” Jaylin asked slowly.

“A minimum of a hundred thousand,” he answered. “Probably more. I would practice with all your weapons, because if something goes bad, people are going to need to be stopped by the hundreds.” He eyed her coldly. “I trust that won’t be a problem.”

It wasn’t a question. “No sir,” she confirmed. “They break the law, they feel the consequences.”

“Exactly,” he nodded approvingly. “We’re letting it leak that Chief Stein is going to be there as well. Her reputation may make some of them think twice.”

Jaylin started. “Chief Stein is going to be there?”

“She said she would join after she finished up something in Brazil,” he answered. “I imagine she
wants to ‘set the tone’ as it were.”

She almost shivered. From some additional research on the new Chief, she figured that was probably a good idea. That woman made the Commander almost look tolerant in comparison and there was no way Stein would be quite as understanding about the situation these people were in. “Let’s hope it doesn’t get ugly.”

“That’s what we’re hoping for,” he agreed, standing back up. “But not what we’re expecting.” He gave her a slight smile. “Glad to finally welcome you to the Peacekeepers properly, Officer Tanika. I think you’ll fit in well here.”

And he left her there, wondering just what she was now caught up in. She had a bad feeling about the coming days, and what concerned her was that from the sounds of things, Stein already had a plan for putting down any riots, and it wasn’t going to be pretty.

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_Tehran, Iran_

It was less of a battle and more of a massacre, judging from the piles of corpses that littered the city. Most of it largely came from the MDUs which had supposedly surpassed all expectations. Roman was half-convinced that they alone could have taken the city, but in really didn’t matter any longer. Tehran was captured, the Iranian army finally broken, and they could move on to the next country.

The Peacekeepers had arrived after the hostile leadership had been subdued, and he’d personally witnessed them being led, sometimes dragged, away in cuffs. Roman didn’t know what would happen to them, and personally didn’t care. Given how they’d repeatedly refused surrender and as enemies of the state, he was fairly certain they would be executed.

Sitting on his cot, cleaning off his armor, he couldn’t really muster up much pity for them, or anyone else here for that matter. He was just glad this battle was done, yet the war wasn’t nearly over yet. There were still quite a few more countries to deal with, but now that Iran had fallen in such a public fashion, perhaps it would make it easier.

He pursed his lips as he set his gauntlet into his locker. Unfortunately that likely wouldn’t be the case. These people were too prideful to willingly surrender. They would fight to the bitter end, and they would die believing that they would be rewarded in the afterlife; justified in their stupidity. He snorted. Fools, anyone who believed in a god with the state the world was in now was deluded. Unless said god had a sick sense of humor, which given what he knew about some of them, wouldn’t actually be that far-fetched.

“[Not celebrating our victory?]” Elena asked him, walking up. Like him she was dressed in plain black military fatigues and boots. She didn’t seem to have completely cleaned up yet either judging from the pale blonde hair plastered to her forehead, and the smudges of dirt on her pale skin. He imagined he looked similar, truth be told.

“[No,]” Roman told her, setting the armor piece he was cleaning to the side. “[Don’t feel like getting drunk tonight.]”

She snorted. “[Some Russian you are. But yeah, I get it,]” she grabbed a cheap plastic chair and set it opposite him, a foot or so away. “[Doesn’t seem very appropriate, which is why I’m hanging back as well.]”
Roman looked at her for a minute. She looked very tired, both tired and concerned, and given her overall attitude ever since Zanjan had been taken, he was wondering if today was going to be the day they’d have the talk. “[Do you want to punch me?]”

She started, eyes widening in surprise. “[What? No! Why?]”

He let a mirthless chuckle. “[I wouldn’t completely blame you if you said yes. But I’m not blind, Elena, I know you’ve had…issues…with some of the things we’ve done, that I’ve ordered. Figured it was only a matter of time before you wanted to let it out.]” he shrugged. “[So shoot.]”

She bit her lip, thinking carefully. “[I don’t blame you, if you were wondering. We have orders. We follow them. I just would like you to answer a question…]” she paused, then took a breath. “[Do you enjoy it?]”

He raised an eyebrow. “[Enjoy what? Killing? Not especially, I don’t see a reason to take pleasure from killing defenseless people…]” he trailed off, sighing as she no doubt wanted to know how he could so easily carry out orders which killed supposed innocent people. “[The truth is, Elena, I don’t care.]”

She frowned. “[About what?]”

 “[Any of this, really.]” he admitted. “[This entire war is meaningless, pointless for both sides and started by idiots. I hate this place, and I’m tired of killing people fanatical enough to die for an idiotic government. I’m tired of always being on my guard for some suicide bomber or assassin with a death wish. I’m tired of walking through these people wondering which one wants to kill me. So I don’t care anymore.]”

He waved a hand absentmindedly. “[These people don’t matter to me. I don’t see a reason to care if five hundred die or five thousand. It doesn’t matter. At the end of the day nothing will change. ADVENT will take the city and the world will go on. Is the world going to stop if I execute a wounded soldiers or shoot a grieving woman trying to attack me? No, because the world has changed. There isn’t a reason to hold back, there isn’t a reason to give them any consideration they don’t deserve.]”

His voice was growing bitter, but he didn’t stop. “[I want this over, Elena. The aliens are something I care about, but right now we’re stuck here. So I focus on ending this war quickly and permanently. More efficient to kill people instead of capture them, saves time and manpower that could be spent elsewhere. I don’t really enjoy it, Elena, but I don’t care enough to do anything more for anyone here. They could have fled, they didn’t. They could have stayed out of our way, they didn’t. It’s selfish and heartless, yeah, but I can’t bring myself to care enough to change it.]”

He looked up at her. “[That answer your question?]”

He couldn’t read the expression on her face, but she gave a small nod. “[I…think so. I get it, sort of…]” she sighed and looked away. “[But I guess we have different outlooks. I was taught life was to be valued and protected. I joined to protect our citizens from danger, and that’s why this is… troubling to me. Would an enemy be justified if they did this to Russian civilians?]”

“[I suppose it’s a matter of perspective.]” Roman sighed. “[You probably had a happy upbringing, parents that loved you, friends and so on,]” he paused. “[Not me, sadly, my parents were leaders in a rather nasty criminal organization. Harsh, cultured and violent. From the day I was born I was being groomed to be their successor. I killed my first man at fourteen. Don’t regret it, man was a serial rapist who had the misfortune to owe a debt to my family, but I did. Became very acquainted with death over the years.]”
He gave a slight smile at her surprised face. “[It’s not something I tell people often. But the result is I don’t have the same sanctity of life you hold. If there is one thing I learned from my parents, it’s that life is disposable and replaceable. If half the population was to suddenly die, in the end it would mean nothing because more would just take their place. Very few are worth caring about to actually actively protect. I might not like it, but in the grand scheme of things, the lives of those opposed to us, in any position, are worthless.]”

“[I didn’t know,]” she said in a small voice. “[How did you…]”

“[Join up?]” He finished. “[Well, to be honest, because I didn’t see the purpose in running a criminal organization. I didn’t care about wealth, power or anything like that. I needed a purpose beyond simply extorting people for money. Criminals don’t help people. They don’t make things better. So one night, my eighteenth birthday I believe, I killed the leadership, including my parents. They’d never shown any affection towards me, and so I returned the favor. I had been in contact with the police and brought them down upon the organization, killing it for good. Afterwards I joined the Russian military. Protecting my homeland was something I could care about, and it turned out they had use for me. Some years later, here I am.]”

“[Oh,]” she said, leaning forward. “[I…see. Thank you for telling me, Roman. I think I understand you a little better now.]”

“[That’s all I ask,]” he said. “[This won’t cause problems?]”

She cocked her head and stood, an unreadable expression on her face. “[No, it won’t. And I’ve changed my mind, I think I do need some kind of drink now. You know where Galina went?]”

His lips curled into a grin. “[One of the bars close to the city square. Don’t know which one, sorry.]”

“[Thanks anyway,]” she shrugged, offering a small smile to him. “[I’ll see you later then.]”

She walked away and left him alone once again. He grunted and returned to cleaning his gear, sighing when a familiar voice interrupted him once again. “[She took that story rather well. Couldn’t really tell what she was thinking.]”

“[Eavesdropping jerk,]” Roman muttered as Maksim walked up from behind him, a smile on his face. “[Should have expected as much. Besides, I told you that before.]”

“[Yeah, true, but the context was a little different,]” he answered, smirking as he leaned against the bunk. “[If I recall, I was asking how you could kill people so easily. It was a compliment. Not whatever that was.]”

“[Fair enough,]” Roman said as he finished another piece. “[But I agree, she didn’t really react as strongly as I expected.]”

“[Hm, yeah, I wonder why that could be,]” Maksim said, with a tinge of sarcasm. “[Come on. I’ll give you a prize for the top three guesses-]”

“[No,]” Roman interrupted with a sigh. “[I’m very sure it’s not anything like that. Besides, I’m not exactly an enticing person.]”

“[Oh, don’t see yourself short,]” Maksim commented. “[But for now, I agree. Not yet, anyway, but any woman who hears that story and doesn’t run off in terror is someone who’s at least interested enough to find out more. Besides, there’s some women who like taking on broken people like you. They like to ‘fix’ them.]”
Roman sniffed. “[‘Broken’ is not exactly how I would describe myself.]”

 “[I agree, but really, think about it.]]” Maksim continued humorously. “[Former criminal prodigy turns good, kills his family, joins the military and doesn’t care about much because of his messed up childhood. You, my friend, are a cheap romance novel waiting to happen.]”

Roman groaned, wishing he would shut up. “[Perhaps I do need a drink. And you need one as well from saying all that crap.]”

“[Hey, I’m heading there anyway,]” Maksim shrugged. “[And you’ve been cleaning that damn suit for too long. Take a break and have some fun.]”

“[Appreciated, but I’ll pass,]” Roman said, returning to work. “[I think I’ve had enough social interaction for the night.]”

“[Suit yourself,]” Maksim said with a wave. “[I’ll tell Elena you said hi if I see her.]”

Roman narrowed his eyes, but didn’t say anything. Knowing Maksim, he was tempted to follow to stop him from saying something stupid. But no, with any luck Elena would punch him in the face if he made any suggestions. With that amusing thought in his mind, he decided to finish this up and go to bed. Tomorrow would probably be another busy day.

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The Praesidium, Situation Room

Aegis was not exactly gloating, but the impression that the Commander got from him that he practically emanated was I told you so. Luckily he hadn’t made any comments, but this warranted a full meeting of the Internal Council. All of them were standing around the holotable, he was flanked by Patricia and Vahlen; opposite him were Aegis and Shen, and on corresponding sides were Zhang and Jackson, respectively.

“We’re already up to date with how the offensive went,” the Commander began, sweeping his gaze over each of them. “So let’s not waste time and focus on fixing our issues. Vahlen, what did you find?”

She stepped forward, and plugged her tablet into the holotable and the holographic corpse of one of the Mutons appeared. “Your initial impression was correct, Patricia,” she began. “These Mutons were modified significantly. They were cybernetically modified to an invasive degree I did not expect. From what we were able to extract, it seems very possible that the Muton could be forced to obey very specific commands.”

“The technology itself appears to be a prototype,” Shen added, his face wrinkling in disgust. “It could certainly be improved and its sole function appears to be the negation of psionic abilities, but doesn’t make them more effective, if what you described is accurate, Patricia.”

“No, the psionic commands do disrupt their concentration,” Patricia confirmed, narrowing her eyes at the hologram. “With enough concentration, they can be driven insane. But it’s a disruption to my effectiveness either way.”

“Do you have a comment, Aegis?” Zhang asked, folding his arms.

“The implications are…concerning,” Aegis finally said. “The technology appears to be derived from the Andromedon Special Operators.”
“Did they use something similar?” The Commander asked.

“If the conversations I’ve had with them were accurate, they perfected this,” Aegis explained. “There was a reason Special Operators were banned, even by them. Even they have some lines they won’t cross, and cybernetic enslavement akin to your Manchurian Program was something they universally agreed was not to be supported.”

“But it’s apparently fine to apply to Mutons,” Jackson noted. “So a question: Could these Special Operators kill someone like Patricia?”

“Yes,” Aegis answered, with a tilt of his helm. “Without question. They would be completely immune to her attacks and Special Operators were some of the greatest threats during the Andromedon Union Wars.”

The Commander pursed his lips. “Then it’s only a matter of time before they start creating them again.”

“Not with the Battlemaster in charge,” Aegis said. “He won’t stoop to using assassins. However, if another Ethereal division joins, I cannot say the same. But I think even the Andromedons would be hesitant to authorize the creation of more Special Operators, even if allowed by the Imperator.”

“Special Operators or not, that doesn’t solve the biggest problem,” the Commander said, switching the hologram to an image of the Battlemaster. “This is now our priority.”

“And like I said in my report,” Aegis said, with a sigh. “You lack the weaponry to kill him. Your best chances are psions.”

“That is what Vahlen and Shen are for,” the Commander answered evenly. “The Battlemaster isn’t invincible, just difficult to kill.”

“Is the Battlemaster’s skin modifications the same as your own?” Vahlen asked.

“Slightly tougher,” Aegis answered. “But moderately so.”

Vahlen gave a single nod. “I’ll have to begin work to try and crack the Iron Skin mod, and subsequently fix any vulnerabilities in our own soldiers.”

“The problem I see is that almost all of our soldiers will be killed in seconds if they face him,” Jackson noted. “Even the Aegis armor won’t last long against his sword, or his telekinetics will end the battle just as fast. Maybe the Iron Skin soldiers could stand against him, but very few others.”

“Correct,” the Commander agreed. “Only genetically modified soldiers should be allowed to engage the Battlemaster. But it’s still the equivalent to a death sentence unless the goal is to hold him off.”

Shen raised a hand. “Actually, Commander, I might have a solution to this. One which may help us beyond handling the Battlemaster.” He turned to Aegis. “A question: can you create solid weapons out of pure psionic energy?”

The Commander raised an eyebrow at that request, and Aegis seemed similarly confused. “To an extent, Dr. Shen.” He extended a hand and a sword materialized in his hand, wisps of psionic energy floating off from the holographic blade. “If this is your idea, I do not see merit in it. It requires a degree of concentration your psions do not have, and it is not sharp.”

“That’s actually a good thing,” Shen nodded, picking up his own tablet. “And if I recall, you said
the Battlemaster has his own form of honor.”

Aegis nodded. “Yes.”

“So if a soldier was to issue a…challenge, for lack of a better word, he would take it?” Shen continued.

“Likely,” Aegis nodded. “But at best it would delay him, especially since your soldiers are not equipped to deal with a Battlemaster, let alone him.”

“I’m not finished,” Shen continued. “If I also recall, Ethereals disliked using ranged weapons outside of psionics, yet it appears that the majority of the Ethereal Collective uses ranged weapons.”

“Yes, but only because most are incapable of wielding psionics,” Aegis confirmed, a confused note still in his voice. “Non-psions have few ways to negate ranged weapons, especially those who wish to utilize melee combat.”

“That’s all I needed,” Shen said, a satisfied smile on his face. “Now, ever since Aegis told me both about the Battlemaster and their history, I knew that we might need to develop countermeasures and started work on some preliminary projects to specifically deal with the Battlemaster.” He plugged in his tablet and a very preliminary MEC design appeared, with much less detail than the previous ones.

What stood out about it was that it was much slimmer than the previous iterations, there were no additional weapon systems on it, but every part of it was securely armored. In the right hand it held a blade of some kind, and in the other it held a shield half as tall as itself. Specs displayed underneath showed it as just above twelve feet. “I present the Shinobi-class MEC,” Shen said, inclining his head. “A MEC specifically designed to counter the Battlemaster.”

“I’m impressed,” Zhang said. “You had the foresight to come up with this.”

“It will have to be worked on,” Shen amended. “But the concept is one that is solid.”

Jackson frowned. “The concept is good, yes, but in reality? That sword the Battlemaster has cuts through armor like butter. I’m not sure alien alloys will be much better.”

“I know,” Shen nodded. “Which is why the entire suit will have a MELD overlay which can be controlled by the pilot itself to either harden or repair. MELD is exceptionally tough, and if the suit can heal itself…”

“It won’t be able to be killed,” the Commander finished approvingly. “And without extra weight to slow it down, it might be fast enough to keep up with him.”

“Unless he does one of those charges,” Patricia noted. “Not even a MEC can keep track of something that fast.”

“I’m working on that,” Shen promised, looking to the Commander. “With your permission, I can begin devoting resources to this project.”

“Granted,” the Commander nodded. “You’ll have what you need.”

“Until that point, there was another idea I had,” Shen continued, replacing the MEC hologram with a sword. “Patricia, remember that discussion we had a few weeks ago?”
She blinked. “Yes, I do…” She smiled. “That would be perfect.”

The Commander turned to her. “Explain.”

“An idea Shen had,” Patricia explained. “Because the Battlemaster uses both melee combat and psionics, he was curious if our own soldiers could do the same. I told him in theory it was possible, but it would probably be a bad idea because they didn’t have the same protection Battlemasters had.”

The Commander got it. “But now with the Iron Skin modification…”

“Exactly,” Shen finished with a smile as he put the image of a streamlined sword on the holotable. “The swords I’ve conceptualized would work much the same way as the armor, strengthened with MELD nanites and would repair the blade it needed. Combined with a soldier with the Iron Skin, psionics…not many aliens would be able to stop them.”

“Ah, I see now,” Aegis nodded in revelation. “You want to assist in training your psions in swordsmanship in a way that won’t kill them. They would not hurt me with their weapons, nor I with mine. An intelligent plan, Dr. Shen.”

“That it is,” Zhang said with a rare, but cold smile. “Clever. To stop one Battlemaster, we make Battlemasters of our own.”

“I suppose I should get to work,” Patricia stated, a cold fire in her eyes. “The next time the Battlemaster shows up, I want to have a surprise for him.”

“I assume you already have some candidates for training?” Vahlen asked.

“Yes, I do,” Patricia said, shooting Aegis a look. “And today they’ll find out they’ve been selected for the Templar Program.”

“We’ve got work to do,” the Commander finished, clasping his hands behind his back. “Let’s get to it. We don’t know how much time we’ll have until the next attack. Dismissed.”

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Sucre, Bolivia

Jaylin had never seen a crowd even remotely this big. Perhaps it was perspective, being in the city center in front of the capital building, but there were people as far as the eye could see, shouting in incomprehensible roars and waving signs with Spanish writing on them, which was pretty much useless against the mostly foreign Peacekeepers.

She did admit to feeling some slight intimidation at the sheer vitriol that was in the air, and it was almost enough to make her break her wide stance and bring up her riot shield. But she kept her hands clasped behind her back, tense as all hell as the people stood mere feet from her. She was rather glad she didn’t understand Spanish, because she was fairly certain that they were shouting some rather nasty things at her.

“How long is this supposed to last?” Leon asked through their private channels, another American like her. “At some point they have to go home, right?”

“Chief said he expected they would clear out within six hours,” Jaylin answered. “Provided nothing was started. How long has it been?”
A groan. “Thirty minutes.”

Jaylin smirked under her helmet. “Well, at least we can pass the time easier. You been here long?”

“Nah, just transferred from Seattle. Good thing too, I guess.”

Jaylin’s mood deteriorated at that. “I’m sorry. It’s…strange that America is under attack.”

She heard him exhale. “Could have been worse, I guess. Seattle is still being fought for.”

“At least you still have your country,” a new voice interrupted. “Think ADVENT’s pretty much written Australia off for now.”

“True,” Jaylin grimaced. “What’s your name?”

“Samantha Venator, a pleasure.” Huh, not that much of an accent. Jaylin was glad she’d clarified. The voice was surprisingly articulate and cultured. Not what she would have expected. “How long do you think they’ll last?”

“Before all hell breaks loose?” Jaylin asked, looking into the crowd. “Don’t see any obvious troublemakers yet. Maybe they haven’t shown up yet.”

Leon snorted. “For their sake, I hope they don’t cause trouble. Stein will put them all down without a second thought.”

Jaylin looked around the crowd, scanning it yet again. “Any of you seen where she went?”

“No,” Samantha said. “Figured she’s in the capital building. Probably coordinating the various RC groups. If I’ve heard right, she had enough Peacekeepers to completely surround the protestors.”

“What I expect-hold on, we might have trouble,” Jaylin scowled as a particularly angry group of people were heading her way. “Stay calm.” As she said that, she resisted the urge to pull out her ARC rifle with how close these people were, waving their arms dangerously close to her face. She switched her helmet modulator on. “I don’t speak Spanish,” she told them fruitlessly. “Se no habla espanol.”

She thought that was mostly correct. One of the men sneered, and suddenly Jaylin found herself on the receiving end of a pistol. The Peacekeepers reacted instantly and within seconds their ARC rifles were drawn and pointed in the crowd. Jaylin also saw a few other armed civilians also pointing weapons directly at Peacekeepers, and looked entirely unworried by the response.

“We’ve got a situation,” Leon was saying. “Armed and threatening protesters. Respond. I think they’re trying to start a riot.”

“I see. I am on my way.” Jaylin felt cold at the sheer lack of emotion from the voice of Stein.

“Stand down!” Jaylin shouted at them, and wondered how long she could hold them off. There were several people deep within the crowd, also armed and shouting stuff which was getting a rise out of them and it only became more heightened as the minutes ticked by. She switched again to her short range private link. “We need orders now. Fire now!”

“Do not worry, Officer Tanika,” Amalda Stein, Chief of Peacekeeper Operations, said as she walked up beside her. The woman was as chilling in person as her voice suggested. Her face was angular and hard as stone, and her green eyes held contempt for the people in front of her. Her
graying hair was pulled back perfectly, not a strand out of place. The woman was clad in the armor of a Riot Control Officer, which essentially meant the addition of white shoulder cap on her right shoulder, and a gray variant of the Officer helm, which she was not wearing now.

At her side was a State Officer, who Jaylin assumed was a translator of sorts. At the nod of Stein, he adjusted something in his helmet and nodded to her. “Silence!” Stein roared, raising a fist at a ninety-degree angle. Her translator repeated what she had said, louder, but with nowhere the same intensity.

Something must have caught the attention of the man pointing the gun at her, and he called back and eventually everything was much quieter; the roar dimming to a constant murmur. Stein looked at the man with absolute contempt. “Tell him who I am, and ask what he is doing.”

The translator nodded and repeated what she asked. The man answered quickly. “He says he wants ADVENT to leave Bolivia or there will be ‘trouble’ as he puts it. He seems to think the mob can overwhelm us.”

Stein sniffed. “I will not entertain his delusions. Tell him to order the crowd to disperse and his armed thugs to surrender their weapons or we will deal with them.”

Jaylin hoped they actually would, but the man simply shook his head, and directed a string of Spanish toward Stein specifically. “He said no,” the translator said diplomatically.

“I gathered that,” Stein said with a dangerous and humorless smile, her eyes not leaving the man. “Address the crowd. Disperse or be arrested. Their right to peacefully protest has been temporarily revoked in light of armed interference. Let the record reflect this. Continued refusal will result in lethal and non-lethal responses.”

The translator nodded and shouted the orders to the crowd that was now getting riled up again. The agitators in the back were yelling again, and the situation appeared to be worsening. “I don’t think they’re listening,” the translator said. “Orders, Chief?”

Stein turned a knob on her helmet. “All local Peacekeeping forces, you are authorized to remove armed protestors by lethal force if necessary. Subdue all other participants with non-lethal measures. On my signal.”

Stein turned back to the man holding the pistol at Jaylin, and with no ceremony pulled out her pistol and blew his head into red chunks, splattering the people around him with blood. Within seconds the other armed protesters were either subdued or killed, and Stein put on her helmet and withdrew her baton. “On the ground!” She roared. “I will pursue the ones in the back, Christian! Rosaline! With me!”

Now all hell broke loose as Stein stormed into the crowd, flanked by her two officers and the people that didn’t immediately get the hell out of her way she smacked with baton. In lethal mode. The rest of the crowd immediately broke into two groups. Stein’s translator had apparently shouted out the command to get on the ground, and a good portion of them did so, while the rest screamed and pushed against the line of Peacekeepers.

And they fell in droves as the bolts of electricity hit their defenseless bodies. Jaylin put down two people charging at her, and hit three more rushing Samantha. One had gotten close to Leon and he’d responded by smacking the butt of his ARC rifle in his face and following it up with a shock with his baton.

Even still, the now-rioting people knew better than to get in Stein’s way as there were a trail of
bodies of the people who had been foolish enough to stop her. Stein finally caught up with one of
the armed protester who decided to frantically, and stupidly, fire at her. Stein responded by
slamming the baton into leg and pulled, ripping the flesh easily, and with blood now on the spikes,
she slung the lethal baton into his neck and pulled, ripping out part of his neck and he fell to the
ground, dead from the lethal voltage.

“Press forward,” Stein ordered calmly as she continued her hunt into the crowd who now fled or
fell on the ground before her. “Reinforcements are coming to arrest the offending citizens.
Conscious people on the ground are not to be arrested.”

With that the line of Riot Control advanced, still shooting blue bolts of electricity at those foolish
enough to attack, and some were beginning to flee. Behind her, Jaylin noted a large amount of
State Officers who were pulling the unconscious bodies from the crowd behind them and
handcuffing them. Jaylin shook her head at that, returning her focus to subduing this riot.

They were going to need a lot more handcuffs by the time this was done.

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Ottawa, Canada

“Right this way.”

Saudia followed the instructions of the guards and was soon escorted into a well-furnished, but
isolated room in Parliament Hill. Nowhere public thankfully, and it appeared that the Prime
Minister wanted to keep the meeting as low-key as she did. However, by now the Canadian media
would know it was taking place and she wasn’t looking forward to having to deal with them when
she left, as they would likely be impossible to ignore.

Bookshelves lined the walls, and there were several portraits of various people on the ends; an
ornamented rug laid in the middle of the room, a short coffee table on top of it and there were two
opposing couches, one of which held the Prime Minister of Canada himself. There were several
files on the table, arranged in an orderly fashion, and Prime Minister Murphy was sipping some
drink from a mug.

Upon hearing the door open, he rose and walked over to greet her. “Chancellor Vyandar,” he said,
extending a hand. “A pleasure to finally meet you.”

Saudia nodded, taking the hand and giving a firm shake. “The feeling is mutual, Prime Minister,
though I wish the circumstances were better.”

His lips turned up in what appeared to be a sad smile. “I agree, while our administrations have
disagreements, what is happening in America and around the world is a tragedy.” Saudia raised an
eyebrow as that last addition, as she was fairly certain he wasn’t just talking about the aliens.

“I’m glad you agree,” she finally said. “And with that in mind, I hope that we can work something
out to the benefit of both of our administrations, and the human race as a whole.”

“I hope the same,” he nodded, motioning her to take a seat on the couch opposite her. “Now, before
we begin, do you want anything? Tea? Coffee?”

“Unnecessary,” Saudia dismissed with a wave. “I would prefer we get straight to business. Time is
a luxury we can’t afford, and predicting where the aliens will strike next is…difficult.”

“I’d imagine so,” Murphy nodded, facing her seriously. “But it seems you do indeed prefer
bluntness, so I will oblige and make this clear from the start: Canada will not join ADVENT.”

She nodded. It wasn’t unexpected. “Given your administration’s words towards my own, I am not surprised. With that said, I did not come to convince you to join us, but to request your assistance in pushing back the alien threat.”

He laced his fingers together. “Then what is this request?”

“The aliens have ignored your country,” Saudia began. “We’re not sure why, but they seem content to ignore you and press forward in America. This may change, it may not. But what is for certain is that they have left themselves vulnerable to attacks from the north, specifically, Canada.”

He gave a short nod in agreement. “I was told the same. Attacks via the Canadian border would be far more effective than simple head-on attacks.”

Well, there was hope. “Exactly,” she confirmed. “Ultimately, what ADVENT and I request is simple: Permission to construct military bases near or on the border of Canada to facilitate quick surprise flanks on alien forces. With these in place, we will be able to both stall the alien advance, and damage them militarily. An additional bonus is should Canada come under attack, there would be forces on-site to immediately respond.”

He was silent for a few moments. “Why are bases necessary? Could you not just move through the border to your locations?”

Clearly not familiar with military or logistics. Saudia suppressed a sigh. “That is not recommended for several reasons, Prime Minister. We’re not talking about a small force of special forces, we’re talking thousands of soldiers, minimum. Simply marching an army across would be both a drain on resources, and certainly attract the attention of the aliens who may try and sabotage us beforehand. In addition, bases would allow us to gradually establish points so that no matter how deep the aliens penetrate, we will always be able to strike quickly. I do not plan to make this a simple gamble on one force alone. This is a war of both tactics and attrition, and since attrition is something I doubt we can match, our tactics must be smart, and superior.”

He pursed his lips into a thin line. “Let us say I agree. If you end up victorious in this war, what will happen afterwards? Will you leave?”

“Not immediately,” Saudia answered. “I suspect that by that time, Canada will have come under attack and more bases will need to be established to defend it. As Canada is still not a part of ADVENT at that time, bases will be decommissioned eventually, but not until we are sure that the last remnants of the aliens are destroyed.”

“I see,” Murphy leaned forward. “Then I’m afraid we have an issue. How do I know first, that ADVENT would actually leave, and second, that allowing you to do this won’t bring down the aliens upon my country?”

Saudia kept her tone even. “For your first question, because I’m telling you it will happen. The Advent Directive is very clear on respecting the territory of foreign nations, and failure to comply with that would likely lead to me being discharged at best.” She paused. “And I can offer no guarantees on the second. The aliens may take this as a provocation, but the truth, Prime Minister, is that you will not be able to ignore this war forever. Canada will come under attack eventually, and it is better to be prepared than caught unawares.”

“Then why, tell me, have we not been attacked?” He demanded.
“Again, we’re not sure,” Saudia sighed, keeping her exasperation to a minimum. “The most likely reason is because they don’t consider you a threat.”

He suddenly smiled. “And there I think you’ve hit a crucial point, Chancellor. We are not a threat and that is by design. The aliens behind this aren’t brainless creatures. If they don’t see us as a threat, why would they choose to attack us? All it would do is rally more to attack them.”

“Prime Minister,” Saudia said calmly. “With all due respect, this is not a simple territorial dispute. An attack by these aliens on one country is one on all of humanity. Do you really think they will ignore Canada forever?”

“No, I do not,” he answered. “And there are only two ways this war can end: Your victory, or theirs. And I suspect they would be more merciful to a country that has not harmed them than one who was an active participant.”

Saudia blinked. “You would surrender without even putting up a fight? Prime-“

“If that fight would needlessly get my people killed, yes,” he answered, a note of steel in his voice as he looked at her intently. “You may believe you can win this war. I am not so sure, and until I am I do not want to throw my people away just to die.”

“I don’t think there is much of a choice in this matter,” Saudia answered, some frustration creeping into her voice. “Let us entertain the possibility of a surrender to the aliens. Do you know what that would actually mean for your people?” She paused to let that sink in. “Humanity would become a subject species to the Ethereals, your people would be taken away, experimented on, killed. The rights your people enjoy would be curtailed beyond all measure. You would only work in service to the Ethereals. Free will means nothing to them. It is slavery in all but name, Prime Minister. That is what you are choosing by refusing to take a side.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but Saudia cut him off as she realized another point. “And I can safely say that the reason the aliens are ignoring you is not just because you are a threat. Remember Germany? Remember China? Remember Australia? The United Nations? What direct threat did they pose?”

“They supported XCOM,” he shrugged, although sounding uncertain. “They helped the Commander wage war. The UN enabled him and perhaps they viewed that as a military target.”

“Canada supported XCOM if I recall,” Saudia retorted coolly. “So that point can be dismissed. No. The actions of the aliens seem to be unpredictable, and relying on their mercy is as foolish as believing they don’t have plans for Canada.”

Murphy inhaled sharply. “Perhaps. Perhaps not, but truthfully, Chancellor, I am not sure you would be any better.”

Saudia stiffened. “I beg your pardon?”

“You heard correctly,” he stated with a humorless smile. “And don’t act too surprised. I am not blind to what ADVENT is doing in the world. I know you are bombing cities in the Middle East, executing civilians just for getting in their way. I know you kidnap people in the middle of the night on terrorism and criminal charges and convict with no jury or trial. You execute military leaders with no due process. Your “Peacekeepers” fire on crowds of civilians for daring to protest having their country taken from them without any semblance of democratic process.”

He shook his head. “Your administration is little better than that of North Korea, Chancellor,
although since they are a member of ADVENT, perhaps that isn’t surprising. Your administration is set up to trample anyone who dares question them, I’ve read your directive and it is terrifying. No one can enter a position of power without approval from the state, military leaders can order the indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians, and entire businesses can, and have been, taken over by your administration without any say in the matter.”

Saudia listened as he kept going on. “And this is not including the abhorrent people you have placed in positions of influence. Amalda Stein shouldn’t even be in charge of a unit, let alone the entire Law enforcement, and that isn’t counting the war hawk Treduant, dictator Iseul Gwan and a list of people who I’ve never heard of before. And of course, the Commander of XCOM.” The last words he practically spat out.

“You are a question mark, Chancellor,” he continued, eyeing her with open disdain. “I have no idea who you are or were and I am shocked that this isn’t terrifying anyone. I’ve attempted to come up with explanations as to where you come from, and each one is more worrying than the last. At best you are who you say you are, and someone in intelligence work as scrubbed as you should not be in such a position where millions of lives are at stake.”

He paused. “Or you lied and then the question is how you could have possible become the de facto leader of what is now more or less the new United Nations. Either you are a puppet or…something else. Your Intelligence Director, your engineering and science heads, your own husband. These people have no pasts and appeared as though from thin air. I do not want to imagine the implications of that, but I have and I can’t stop thinking about them.”

He sipped from his mug. ‘I’ve met people like you, Chancellor, and all of them were all the same. They have a fundamental lack of empathy. They think people can be forced or molded into whatever they wish. They think they can place everyone into neat little boxes, and rely on fear and subjugation of force the rest in line. People, Chancellor, are not like that. They are unique, they are not set in stone, they can change. A woman like Stein believes that a personality is immutable, a person like you is arrogant enough to believe that you know what people need better than themselves.”

He set his mug down. “On paper you have the semblance of a democracy, Chancellor, but in practice this is an elegant dictatorship. Authoritarianism with a delicacy I can’t help but admire in spite of how much it repels me. Your administration is the exact opposite of what is acceptable. It lacks empathy, it lacks freedom, it lacks humanity. It is potentially just as much of a threat to our species as the aliens themselves.”

His humorless smile vanished. “I was entertaining allowing your soldiers to pass through my country, but after this conversation I have decided against even that. Canada will not assist you in your fight against the aliens. We do not want, nor need your help. The aliens will be dealt with and without your interference.”

Saudia was as still as a stone, and then took a breath. “I think, Prime Minister, that we have a fundamental difference regarding our views on humanity. You have faith in the common person, but I lost that faith long ago. People do not know what is best for them. Some people even believe capitulating to an alien force is preferable to standing up for their ideals. Most people lack the will to make difficult decisions, and then demonize the ones who make the world safe for everyone. Most people, Prime Minister, are easily manipulated and influenced by what they see around them. Media, celebrities, news, and even their own leaders.”

Her tone hardened. “I do not apologize for doing what must be done, Prime Minister. I do not apologize for putting the survival of humanity above the so-called freedoms that have divided us
for generations. I do not apologize for subduing a region that has been awash in death for decades. I do not apologize for distributing justice to people who break the law. You can call ADVENT harsh, heartless or without humanity, as you so eloquently put it. But...” she suddenly smiled. “I do not particularly care. Because it. Is. Working. We have an army capable of withstanding an extraterrestrial force. We have peace between large portions of the world. We have leaders who, while you might despise, are professionals. We know what we are doing, Prime Minister, and I would be very careful openly declaring your intentions towards this war.”

“And why is that?” He demanded.

“Because, Prime Minister,” she answered smoothly. “ADVENT may not take action, but XCOM certainly would. You know what the Commander is capable of, and I believe if he heard what you just said to me, he would recommend your termination from your position. There are people who want me to authorize Section 9.8 of the Directive, Prime Minister.”

He stiffened at that. “I don’t want that, Prime Minister,” she continued coldly. “And I don’t believe that would be an appropriate course of action. But I would strongly reconsider your intentions towards the aliens, or at least keep them private. I will keep your words to myself out of respect for your position, but openly believing that capitulation to the aliens is possibly preferable will make enemies. And you do not want to make an enemy of ADVENT, and especially not XCOM.”

“Is this a threat?” He asked icily.

“No, it is not,” she shook her head. “It is a warning of what might happen. But understand that there are consequences to your actions, Prime Minister, and completely refusing to help will not endear you to those in my administration. I do want to come to some agreement, but perhaps next time it should be you that takes the initiative.” She stood. “I would strongly reconsider your position here, Prime Minister, but ultimately, you must decide. Good day, and remember that there is more at stake than just your country.”

Without waiting for a response she spun on a heel and marched to the door. Perhaps it was rude, but she didn’t see any reason to give any more consideration to someone who was arguably worse than a traitor. Ethan was waiting for her outside and immediately fell into step beside her as she marched past the Canadian guards.

“That bad?” Ethan muttered as they walked.

“An understatement,” Saudia muttered in return, keeping the fury in her voice controlled. “Let’s just say that the good Prime Minister just made a lot of new enemies.”

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Supplementary Material

The Advent Directive

SECTION 9: Relations with Foreign Nations

Subsection 9.1: Introduction

Purpose: ADVENT seeks to have efficient and mutually beneficial relationships with various foreign nations that do not seek to join ADVENT, assimilate those that do, and firmly and decisively deal with foreign nations that pose a danger to ADVENT itself and its citizens. This section will detail the exact requirements for a nation to be permitted into ADVENT, and responses to hostile economic, espionage, and military action from foreign nations.
It will also detail the requirements for an alliance or pact (of any kind) between a foreign nation and ADVENT itself. ADVENT holds itself to a high standard, and expects the same out of those it works with to ensure both parties are mutually prosperous. Not every country will meet these qualifications, either for an alliance or assimilation, but it will demonstrate which ones truly desire such and which ones do not.

ADVENT will also take appropriate action against foreign nations that take hostile actions of either an economic, espionage or military nature, and the response will vary depending on the size, scope and current damages of such actions. Response may include sanctions, engineered collapse, or annexation. ADVENT will not tolerate a threat to its citizens or personnel.

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Vitakar

Vitakar, Intha

Even if his time was unlikely to be quiet, Nartha was quite glad to be back on Vitakar. Earth had its charm, but it didn’t quite compare to his homeworld. Intha in particular was unlike most human cities. While Vitakarians didn’t build their cities into the environment like the Dath’Haram, they did build their cities in a way that incorporated the natural landscape.

Intha had massive rolling hills and the city spread for miles around. An additional stark difference between Human and Vitakara architecture was that cities were expansive. Vitakara built their buildings outward, not upwards. It wasn’t uncommon for ground to be excavated underneath if space was tight. The reason, Nartha believed, was probably due to the storm seasons when winds would reach lethal speeds. He imagined it hadn’t taken long after the first Vitakara skyscrapers collapsed when they decided they needed a better way to construct their buildings.

Besides, it seemed far safer in general. How Humans were fine with continuously working in those skyscrapers was something he didn’t quite grasp. He would never feel comfortable in one and it was worth the extra few minutes to get around without having to worry the building would collapse from a rather strong breeze.

Compared to some of the other Vitakarian cities, Intha was rather small. Only the Hangar had an internal transport system, whereas in a place such as the capital, almost every building in the city had their own internal transport. He supposed it wasn’t too different from Human elevators, but horizontally.

“Landed,” a pleasant female synthesized voice said. “Please exit to the right.”

Nartha unstrapped and stood, slinging his pack over his shoulder. The entirety of his belongings were rather small, and he wore simple civilian attire, a simple gray shirt, pants and boots. He was still wearing the black gloves from his Zararch uniform, no sense in leaving a trail when he could help it. He was glad he had decided for a more subdued approach on arriving. There weren’t many others in the transport with him.

There was a Dath’Haram, and a small family of Vitakarians who hadn’t paid him any attention, which would have doubtlessly happened had he advertised that he was Zararch. Probably had left to visit one of the colonies and were returning home.

Right, he stood in front of the door and waited for it to slide open. He needed to readjust to being among his own species again, and that meant using his position to the best of his ability. His family couldn’t know anything yet, and he couldn’t just say what was actually happening. But the Zararch had establishments everywhere, and there would no doubt be details on suspected Nulorian activity…and dissident activity in the Aui’Vitakar.

The good news so far was that the Sectoid Virus was successfully distributed without any major issues, and with any luck should spread to a good portion of the species within several weeks and months. He’d sincerely wished that he’d thought of contaminating himself before even leaving, because he could have spread the virus to everyone in the Mars Observation Station, including the Zar’Chon himself. Well, not much could be done about that now, but the damage would hopefully be significant.
The door slid open and he walked out into the dark chrome room where checkpoints were constructed before exit transports. Standard procedure was to verify identity, and he walked over to one where a young Vitakarian female was sitting, operating her haptic monitoring board. “Welcome back,” she greeted with a smile, no doubt a standard way to put new arrivals at ease. He suppressed one of his own, because just from her facial movements and the artificial inflection in her tone, he knew she was also a Zararch agent. Unsurprising that they would be monitoring new arrivals.

“Here you go,” he interrupted before she could continue, handing over his ID. “Always a pleasure to encounter one of our own.”

“Ah,” her glowing eyes widened as she saw who he was. “Did you come back from the Mars Station?”

“Earth, actually,” he answered, taking his ID back. “However, I don’t think I’m permitted to reveal more.”

“Of course,” she nodded vigorously, clearing her throat. Definitely a Zararch agent, but a junior one at best. “Is there anything I can do to help you?”

“You can,” Nartha nodded, tapping his wrist-map and ejecting a small chip, which he handed to her. “I need locations on major locations in Intha. It’s been awhile since I’ve been back. If you have access to the Zararch database, I would also like current operational objectives, and of course, clearance to enter the local Zararch base, if that is possible.”

“I can give you clearance,” she said, typing at her station. “However all operations are restricted externally. I’m sorry.”

“Not an issue,” Nartha said with a nod. “I’ll be going there anyway.”

“Here you go,” she said after a moment, handing the chip back, which he inserted into his wrist-map. “Do you require anything else, agent?”

“Not currently,” he assured her. “Thank you for your assistance.” With a final nod, he walked through the checkpoint and consulted his wrist-map. Humans had made good steps in mobile devices and GPS, but they were still too crude. The Vitakara wrist-map slid smoothly over the arm, and had both a normal screen display and haptic projector for better visualization. Highly useful, but right now, he didn’t quite need it yet.

He was positive his family home was still in the same place, and he knew that all of them were going to be waiting to see him.

He sighed. It was going to be tricky to balance what he could and should say to them. The Zararch were doubtless monitoring the house since his father was part of the Aui’Vitakar, but that was just going to be yet another obstacle he had to work around.

Once the obligatory family meeting was over, he could actually begin his work.

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_Blacksite 004 – ID: “Sanctuary” – Overseer: Sana’Ligna_

The Battlemaster looked over his blade, inspecting it for any noticeable flaws or chips in the metal. To date there had yet to be anything that did more than scratch it, but as it had been several decades since it had actually been put into action, ensuring that it indeed was as resilient as before was
necessary.

In truth though, he knew perfectly well that the only metal that could damage his armor or sword came from the Dead World, and the idea that the Humans could find it, let alone survive on the planet was absurd. Aegis only knew the planet by reputation, and didn’t even know about what the Imperator, the Creator, and Sana’Ligna actually did there, let alone what the Battlemasters had done in the days of the Empire.

His chuckled in amusement. The Imperator had been wise to systematically cut Aegis out from the more sensitive projects of the Collective. A shame, in truth, but Aegis has proven the Imperator right and now couldn’t utterly cripple the Collective, even if he knew most of the Gateway network and had taken Sovereign-level technology to the humans.

Unfortunately, he was going to find much of it impossible to construct from materials found on Earth. Only the Gateways were possible, and even Fectorian and Revelean were still attempting to grasp the intricacies of Sovereign technology. The science was beyond him; he was a warrior and was perfectly content with that.

Times like this gave him the opportunity to reflect which was…refreshing…it had been too long since he had seen true combat, and during the battle, he was reminded of how rewarding it was to finally ply the trade which he had spent centuries honing. The Humans had been slaughtered easily, but the Battlemaster didn’t entirely fault them, not at first.

It was natural. Every species underestimated him until the fighting started, then they would either adapt, or die. He had been rather disappointed that the Commander had acted so predictably, and hadn’t sent an XCOM squad to face him. He doubted they would have stood more of a chance than the hapless ADVENT soldiers, but it would have been more interesting for sure.

The battle had indeed been a rout, but it wasn’t worthless and it did give some insight into how he could expect war to be waged against him significantly. It was unlikely the Commander would be so easily manipulated again, but it would also have the effect of him second-guessing himself, making him wonder if there were more traps hidden throughout the information and carnage. Perhaps it would not rattle him, but it would force him to think, and that was time he was not devoting to managing the battle himself.

The Battlemaster set the greatsword to the side and began to polish his helm, removing some of the dried blood from the crest. The various encounters his subordinates had with XCOM was telling, and gave him much to ponder. Patricia had been successfully negated, although J’Loran’s procedure with the Mutons was not foolproof. That being said, it had attracted Revelean’s attention, so it would likely be refined into something...manageable.

Both Disciple-7 and Irinena had said that the XCOM soldiers encountered were...enhanced. Based on the descriptions and reports, it was clearly genetic modification. The impenetrable skin was likely based on Aegis’ own, although the stinger appendages some of them had were more creative than he was expecting. It would be interesting to see if their Iron Skin could hold up to his own weapons.

A very useful piece of information was confirmation that, if pressed, XCOM and ADVENT would retreat, which was both good and bad. Good in that it would ultimately allow cities to be taken more easily, and bad in that it meant he was dealing with tacticians who were willing to pull back if it was clear they were losing, which doubtless implied they would certainly be developing technology to stop him.

It wasn’t a concern with ADVENT. There was very little they could do to develop weapons to use
against him, short of nuclear weapons, and he always had the Cultro observing overhead. The moment nuclear activity was detected, he would leave without hesitation while the Humans destroyed a city for nothing.

XCOM, on the other hand, was worth more consideration. It was only a matter of time until they began producing plasma weapons, and their psions reached a power threshold that might pose a threat. Still, such concerns were only valid if he was absolutely overwhelmed, else he would simply eliminate the threat the moment it appeared.

The haptic shield in front of his room dissipated and Chilis walked in, a neatly folded cape in her hands. As always, the Dath’Haram woman had a look of perpetual disapproval etched on her face, making those green eyes even more intimidating to the other aliens she interacted with. He personally found her demeanor amusing, even if others didn’t.

It was fortunate he’d been there when she’d not been as…respectful to Isomnum as he would have liked, and that Aegis had prevented his aura from affecting her. Had he not intervened, he suspected that Isomnum would have derived a great amount of pleasure tearing her mind to pieces and sending her to the Aui’Vitakar as a grim message in respect. He sniffed involuntarily. He viewed such as overly harsh. Ruling over mewling pawns was tiring and was something a good many of his kind had yet to learn.

Caelior, Macula, Isomnum, all of them seemed to think they were still in the Empire. Where they dealt with only equals and superiors daily and other species were lesser. He had thought so as well initially, but over time realized that was a flawed perspective. Objectively, an Ethereal was a superior being to most others, but taking into account the various personalities within the species… they weren’t radically different.

Andromedons, Vitakara, Humans, all of them had leaders, geniuses, prodigies and as many varied traits as Ethereals themselves. Dismissing them simply based on a lack of the Gift or genetic modification was not only a dangerous mistake, it was a foolish one. There was a reason he, Quisilia and even Sana and Fectorian had trusted alien subordinates, and it was a reason he was certain they would learn it themselves someday.

Not today, but if the war dragged on, they soon would.

If not then, when they subdued the inner-galactic species.

“I had forgotten how much of a mess you cause,” Chilis stated in her rasping baritone voice. “But I will say that it is good to actually do something useful for you.” She carefully placed the cape on the table where his helm rested.

“Thank you,” he said, nodding to her. Even sitting, he was just as tall as her, a fact that he knew made her uncomfortable. Some part of her was always scared of him, and he could understand why.

She cocked her head. “So, was it everything you were hoping?”

“It was what I expected,” he answered, standing and starting to armor up again. “The Humans will be a worthy opponent. They fell easily, but it will not be so simple next time.”

“And XCOM ignored you, I guess,” she noted, leaning against the wall and crossing her arms. “Disappointed?”

“Yes,” he said simply, attaching the cape to his shoulder armor. “But I am quite certain they’ll be
there when I strike next. The Commander knows he cannot ignore me now.”

Chilis shrugged. “If you say so. Sana also told me she wants to speak to you now. Don’t ask me what about.”

The Battlemaster actually had a pretty good idea about what she wanted to discuss. “I will head there now,” he said, putting on his helmet. “Inform the Temple Ship that I have some matters to attend to before I arrive.”

She inclined her head. “Yes, Battlemaster.”

He swept past her and exited his room. Time to see what Sana was doing with the Humans he had recovered.

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Vitakar, Intha

Nartha stood in front of his family home, a small and quaint cube in the housing district. He did have to admit that Humans did have better housing architecture overall, but simple cubes quartered off into sections were admittedly more stable, defendable, and easy to maintain. He placed a hand over the haptic display by the door and waited for a confirmation.

Hopefully they hadn’t taken him off the list of pre-approved visitors.

Luckily, it seemed that they hadn’t as it flashed blue and the door slid open with a chime. He stepped inside the immaculately clean house and looked around, wondering the best way to introduce himself when a familiar droll voice greeted him from the right. “Well, entering without an announcement. How very expected from a spy.”

He smirked and turned to her. “Cairu. I’m so happy to be able to listen to your sarcastic comments again.”

His sister chuckled. “So am I, no one else is quite as tolerant. Come here.” He dropped his bag by the door and embraced her. Once they let go, he actually got a good look at what she was wearing. “Runianarch? You actually joined?”

“Yes, a lot has happened since you’ve been gone,” she said proudly, straightening up and fiddling with the bars designating her rank as a Runianarch officer. “I actually went through with it, although I think that father didn’t exactly approve.”

Nartha nodded. His sister had always been fascinated by the events outside of Vitakar, and had seen the Runianarch as a way to explore beyond the homeworld, and had devoted herself fully to that goal. Looking at her now, he suspected that she’d been in intensive training for the past five years, since she was much taller and visibly stronger than him, traits that the Runianarch trainers were responsible for. Vitakarians in particular were viewed as excellent soldiers because of their adaptability, and his sister has no exception.

“Probably nothing like when I joined the Zararch,” Nartha shrugged, inclining his head. “Going to try for the Lurainian?”

Her smile dimmed. “I…don’t think so. Mostly for the same reason I didn’t consider the Zararch like you. Some of the things I’ve heard are…well, not for me, really. Besides, I feel more comfortable working just with the Aui’Vitakar. Don’t trust the Zar’Chon, no offense.”
Nartha smiled. “None taken. What’s your assignment?”

“Colony defense, so far,” she answered wistfully. “It’s great, especially since they continually rotate colony planets. Get to see a lot of new planets. However…” she trailed off, and fixed him with a stare. “There’s talk of moving more forces to fight the Humans…do you know…well, anything about that?”

“I think I’d rather save the discussion on the Humans for when everyone is here,” he told her. “But I’ve been on Earth. You’d probably love it.”

“Oh?” Her eyes widened. “I’m more interested in the Humans. There isn’t much reliable information out there.”

Well, this was certainly going to be interesting. “Let’s find our parents, wherever they are. There’s a lot of catching up to do.”

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**Blacksite 004 – ID: “Sanctuary” – Overseer: Sana’Ligna**

Warm white light bathed the half-clinic, half-laboratory Sana had control over, with much of it devoted to the former half. Her medics and scientists, all of whom were Vitakarians, were tending to the Humans, who were mostly all children. There had been a disgusting amount of practically abandoned children in the cities, and since they were clearly not missed, he had decided that they would fare better away from Earth.

Sana had been requesting younger humans for some time, and all the children processed from the Australian cities had been sent to Revelean and the Creator for…experiments, he supposed. Distasteful, but the Overmind had predictably overridden his request. He wasn’t opposed to the experimentation of other species…but he failed to see how experimenting on children actually achieved anything. They had yet to become fully developed, and thus it seemed a waste of time and resources except for professional curiosity.

At least none had gone to the Sectoids.

But to be fair, Sana was also going to run experiments on the children, but he could tolerate psychological and social engineering experiments because she very rarely killed or deliberately injured her subjects, especially children. Ironically, these children would likely lead a happier life than being forgotten on Earth.

He was slightly impressed at how curious the children were upon seeing him. He would have thought the sight of an alien four times taller than them would be…disquieting. It was likely the effect Sana emitted, which had been described to him once, since he would never be able to feel it. *Warm, comforting, protective;* unsurprising since she had been a well-respected doctor back in the Empire.

With that said, she was a powerful psion in her own right and had her…other abilities.

He pursed his lips under the helmet and strode forward to where Sana’Ligna was speaking to one of her Vitakarian assistants. Unlike almost every other Ethereal, she lacked a helm of any kind and as one of the few non-military Ethereals, her form was slimmer than most, and she only wore a simple white robe similar to Sicarius, only with much less armor.

“Battlemaster,” she greeted warmly as he walked up, the soothing voice ringing in his ears with an irritating echo. “I must thank you again for bringing the children to me.”
“They were abandoned,” he stated simply. “They would be an unnecessary drain on resources in
the captured cities, and you had mentioned needing more some time ago.”

“How practical,” Sana answered knowingly. “But both of us know they are no more a drain there
than here. It’s touching, truly.”

“My motivations or reasons are irrelevant here,” he said flatly, ignoring the comment. “I brought
them to you. Now I want to know how this will benefit us.”

“Of course,” she said, turning and gesturing him to follow. “This way.” He followed and she led
him to a wall with a panel in front of it. “I am afraid that the results of my experiments will likely
be of little value to you directly, but it will be necessary when we fully integrate the Humans into
our Collective.”

“I suspected as much,” the Battlemaster nodded. Sana’s experiments were often less immediately
usable, and longer term, largely focused on alien psychology and social attributes, although her
contributions to their genetic upkeep and advances in medicine were certainly significant. But that
wasn’t where her true interest lay; it never had.

Her interest was in the examination of other species, and how best to help them. Not improve, but
simply help.

The Battlemaster was continually fascinated why the Imperator had allowed such an…idealist to
survive the War. She was not unique among Ethereals back in the Empire, but here…she was
different, and now a source of irritation to the more cynical and practical Ethereals still alive.
Personally, she always offered a more refreshing perspective that was impossible to find anywhere
else. A naïve perspective, but one he grudgingly wished was reality.

Unfortunately, reality was much harsher than Sana wanted to believe. It always had been, even in
the Empire. The Overmind had informed him that the only reason the Ethereals had ascended to a
level free of infighting and weakness was through a war as bloody as any other species, and they
had genetically enslaved the survivors to follow the conquerors. The history that had been taught
was a lie meant to keep the peace and externally; it was no secret that entire species’ had been
wiped out at even the slightest provocation.

Several by his own hand.

But the truth was, he knew the real reason the Imperator had allowed Sana to survive. The only
possible reason was her connection to the Dead Ethereal himself, and if she truly believed that the
Imperator would not use him when it was warranted…she was lying to herself.

Brushing those thoughts away, he followed the self-proclaimed Healer into a seemingly empty
room with frosted glass for walls and bathed in a much harsher white light. “I’m first running
several experiments on human psychological reactions to various events,” she began, tapping a
haptic panel on the wall, which cleared up the glass on one side to reveal a fake Human house, one
which actually had a family inside right now seemingly going about their day without knowing
they were being watched.

“There are two types of experiments being run,” Sana said, the orange fire of her eyes brightening
as she continued. “Short term is reactions to sudden or traumatic events or news. Benign, mostly,
almost all of these subjects have had their memories completely altered to make the scenarios work. For
ordinary civilians captured I have generally limited the scenarios to non-physical. Receiving news
that a family member died, losing a job, witnessing a suicide, traumatic and potentially life-
threatening events.”
The Battlemaster suddenly wondered if his assumption that the children would be better off with Sana had been…premature. “Why?”

Sana sighed. “I can feel your disapproval. They are not being hurt, I assure you, but it is necessary. Human psychology is something I am still puzzling out. Mental illness is not something most Humans understand, and even fewer seem to want to fix. Thus, I must do the work myself. The techniques many Humans use are antiquated, and always have an unacceptable rate of failure.”

The Battlemaster nodded. It did make sense. “I don’t recall you doing this for the other species.”

“Because most are not as psychologically varied,” Sana explained. “Sectoids and Andromedons have a limited range of emotions, and almost no mental issues whatsoever. Vitakara eradicated their own mental illnesses long before we arrived. I have been forbidden from interfering with the Mutons, as you no doubt know,” her tone turned bitter at that. “Humans…they have not yet. They are as emotionally varied as the Vitakara and far more prone to violence. There are enough dangerous drugs and substances they can abuse and unfortunately, Humans often fight each other which raised a host of additional complications.”

“I see,” the Battlemaster gave a single nod. “You have your work cut out for you.”

“Yes, I do,” she agreed. “However, they will need to be solved if we are to successfully integrate them into the Collective. Which unfortunately includes some more...distasteful experiments that must be run if I am to fully understand Human psychology. The physical scenarios are more dangerous, domestic abuse, rape,” her nostrils flared. “How the Humans repeatedly allow this is sickening, but it must be observed. I will naturally be using the Human criminals you recovered from all the cities for these particular scenarios.”

Unfortunate, but he was slightly impressed that Sana would indeed go that far. Perhaps there were some ends that justified the means for her, even if even this wouldn’t hold a candle to something Revelean would run. Some of his experiments ran weeks, Sana would only have hers running a few hours at best, and keep them alive afterwards.

Revelean normally either killed the survivors or sent them to Isomnum for practice. The Battlemaster grimaced at that thought. Why the sadist felt the need to practice on Humans who literally went insane just being around him was beyond him. Practicing implied challenge and improvement, and he had yet to see how practice on ordinary humans actually did either.

Oh no, he knew exactly why Isomnum practiced. It was a childish attempt to feel powerful and the Battlemaster sorely looked forward to when he was actually challenged. Not enough to kill him, but certainly enough to make him realize that he wasn’t another Overmind or Imperator, let alone a Battlemaster.

“And what are the long-term experiments?” He asked, returning to the topic at hand.

“Twofold,” she answered, wringing her hands together. “The first involves placing Humans that are not related together in various configurations and observing any possible results. Some will have their memories altered to believe they have always been together, others have not. This is where some of the children will be useful, as I was only limited to adults before.”

Sana motioned behind her. “So for example, I would like to see if a Human male and female would raise a child differently if they knew it was theirs or not, or if they would eventually realize something is wrong despite the modified memories. The same thing with pairing a male and female together and making them believe they have been together even if they actually never met, would they care, or would they realize something is wrong? That is the first major series of experiments.”
She raised a hand that had a handheld holoprojector, which displayed a world he didn’t recognize. “Secondly, I want to allow some limited Human integration within the Collective. The Aui’Vitakar was kind enough to forward me plans for the establishment of a mostly Vitakarian colony, and I will be speaking to several of the applicants about their willingness to foster and raise Human children within it.”

The Battlemaster nodded. “I assume this has been cleared with the Imperator?”

“Yes,” she confirmed, shutting off the holoprojector. “He encouraged it, actually. I was… surprised, but pleased nonetheless. This will be extremely useful information in examining how Humans can be safely integrated into the Collective without major issues. If this experiment is successful, the next trial will be integrating families or adults into colonies and beyond that…” she trailed off. “Well, by that point, I would hope that the conflict is ended and we can begin preparations for the future.”

“I will attempt to make it so,” he promised, inclining his head. “But the Humans will not surrender willingly.”

Sana gave a sad sigh. “Why would they? We did attack them first.”

She was, unfortunately, correct. “Yes, we did. But the Imperator has his reasons.”

“I’m sure he does,” Sana sighed. “But sometimes I do wish he would say what those reasons were. Otherwise there seems to be little point to all of this. But there is little I can do about it, so I will attempt to help the Humans as best I can to adjust after you conquer them.”

“And I will end it as soon as I can,” he promised. “And should you need more Humans, be sure to inform me unless you want to give the Creator and Revelean more subjects.”

“I will,” she said, turning to the glass rooms of unwitting test subjects. “I’ll let you go, Battlemaster. Tell Revelean I said hello. Rub it in if you so feel like it.”

The Battlemaster smiled under his helmet as he turned to leave. “I will, Sana. Until next time.”

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Vitakar, Intha

Despite his reservations, the evening with his family was very…relaxing.

His mother was as happy to see him as ever, which wasn’t surprising as she did her best to only focus on Vitakar and not pay attention to anything beyond that like the Zararch and Aui’Vitakar. Nartha found it interesting how she actually ended with a father who was a representative in the Aui’Vitakar, a son in the Zararch, and now a daughter in the Runianarch.

Nevertheless, much of the attention had been on him, and he found he was actually able to not reveal anything…sensitive just by speaking about the Humans and their culture. Privately, he wasn’t sure that the Zar’Chon would even approve of that, but Nartha would prefer they know that the Humans weren’t exactly primitive savages.


“A little,” Nartha agreed. “But it made it easier to blend in.”
“I’d imagine so,” his mother chuckled. “But I trust you were safe for the most part?”

Nartha thought back to all those times under XCOM, with plasma firing over his head and hid a smile while taking a sip of his water. Some things, like water, transcended species. “As safe as can be expected in the Zararch, Mother. It was never boring.” He shook his head. “Well, now I think it’s my turn for questions. What has happened on Vitakar recently?”

His father grunted. “Surprisingly little, at least compared to you. The Sar’Manda are as isolationist as ever, the Cobrarians are whining about their males migrating to other cities, the Borelians want to make our army even larger, the Dath’Haram are pushing for more investment in civil services, as well as curbing the Borelians, and of course, the Oyariah just want everything to stay the same.”

Nartha nodded. Typical. “So everything is going the same as always.”

His father’s eyes narrowed. “…For the most part, yes.”

And *that* was code for *I’ll tell you later*. Cairu and his mother were probably not cleared for high-level information the Aui’Vitakar had access to. Being one of the Zararch’s top agents, he was likely able to discuss events more…openly. Still though, he was curious.

“What is the response to the Humans?” He inquired. “Don’t tell me they don’t have an opinion.”

His father pursed his lips and rested his clasped hands on the marble table. “Let’s say that the Collective is keeping a very tight lid on anything regarding the Humans. We know their location, description and…several other factors. Simply put, we do not know enough about them to form a conclusive opinion. Most of what you just told me I had never heard before.”

Nartha blinked. “The Zararch didn’t share anything? I don’t believe it’s classified.”

“It isn’t,” his father shook his head. “Truthfully, the Human issue has…died down, until recently. The Andromedons have suddenly become a larger focal point.”

Cairu nodded. “I’ve heard some of the soldiers talking. Some of their ships came…close to our colonies. Which they shouldn’t have been allowed to do.”

“I suppose I’ll need to catch up on them,” Nartha said. “I’m not familiar with their species. Even in the Zararch they didn’t interfere much.”

“They generally don’t,” Cairu explained, a tinge of wistfulness in her voice. “I doubt any but the Elders truly know the whole story. They’re very isolationist, but powerful, if the rumors are true. They don’t let aliens go into their territory and don’t really seem to like any species other than their own.”

Hm. Yes, he’d definitely have to look into the Andromedons. Any species that wasn’t completely with the Collective may be something he could exploit. “Curious. What is the response?”

“Nothing, yet,” his father answered, taking a sip from his own water. “Supposedly they were chastised by the Zar’Chon or maybe an Ethereal. But that hasn’t really solved the issue. But recently that’s fallen to the wayside now that the Human planet has been invaded. The Ethereals personally getting involved is…of interest. The Battlemaster himself has called for the support of the Runianarch and Lurainian.”

“Right,” Cairu confirmed with a smile. “They apparently won a major battle a day ago. Everyone was talking about it. The word is that the Battlemaster *himself* participated.”
Oh, that was bad. He winced at the thought of that particular Ethereal facing the Humans. “I almost feel bad for them.”

“Well, the good news is that it will be over quickly if that is the case,” his mother said. “But your father is as cynical as ever when it comes to the Aui’Vitakar. There have been a surge of good things that have happened recently…”

He listened politely as his mother continued describing how the quality of life had improved significantly. Fourteen colonies had been successfully started, education standards were in the ninetieth percentile, science and engineering fields had grown by twenty percent and overall the entire species was doing well.

But the longer they talked, the more it sounded far too good to be true. A particular Human saying applied to this: “If it’s too good to be true, it probably is” and so he listened and asked questions of his own. What it revealed was that the Ethereals were truly insidious in their control.

The Aui’Vitakar were only representative of the Homeworld itself, and didn’t make decisions on intergalactic matters. All colonies were overseen and chosen by the Collective, and he knew from experience that the reason everyone was so…content…was thanks to the Zararch making sure those not in compliance with the Ethereals were removed, and more receptive leaders were installed.

He was well aware that not every Vitakarian conformed to, or was blind to the fact that this was a very elaborate gilded cage, but the Zararch was rarely public about such acts. People would disappear without fuss, and a cheerful explanation was provided if anyone else asked after them. Representatives themselves could vanish and a replacement appointed within the day.

Dissent certainly existed, but it was never given a chance to survive. With the exception of the Nulorian, no one who dared to ask very specific questions lived more than a week.

The good news was that this realization helped solidify the first steps he was going to take. As a Zararch agent himself, even on leave, he could assist in cases, and he would have access to the list of those under surveillance. And he formulated this plan in his mind while they continued chatting about irrelevant matters.

When the talking came to a natural break, his father suddenly stood, eyeing him carefully. “Nartha, if you don’t mind, I’d like to show you something.”

Nartha nodded, and smiled at his mother and sister as he stood up and followed his father into another room which at first glance looked like a cube with a curved ceiling, and then the walls and ceiling faded to reveal the night sky of Vitakar. “The glass can retract as well,” his father stated, closing the door. “But I figure we could use the privacy.”

Nartha turned serious and turned to him. “Good. But I still might not be able to tell you everything.”

“I didn’t expect you to,” he said grimly. “However, I want to know the actual situation on Earth. The Zar’Chon and everyone in the Collective is not giving us the full story. The fact that there is a war being declared is…surprising. If the species is as technologically limited as you said… subduing them shouldn’t be an issue.”

“The Humans are more dangerous than you know,” Nartha answered, knowing that as long as he didn’t reveal specifics, he was fine. He knew what level of clearance the Aui’Vitakar had. “They aren’t using primitive ballistics anymore. They have beam weaponry, and I expect if they are not
stopped, plasma will soon follow.”

“So they’re intelligent,” he nodded. “And strong enough not to be overrun.”

“No, they won’t be overrun,” Nartha confirmed. “What do you know of XCOM?”

His father chuckled. “Only that everyone does not like them.”

“They’re the reason the Humans have any chance at all,” Nartha explained. “They are the best soldiers of humanity. And scientists and engineers if that matters. One XCOM soldier is better than our Lurainian. They were able to kill a Hive Commander.”

His father started at that. “How?! And how did you-“

“I was assigned to observe XCOM,” Nartha interrupted, raising a hand. “I learned a great deal about them. As for how, Humans are capable of psionics.”

His father looked away, sucking in his breath. “That explains a lot. If the Humans have their own psions…the Zar’Chon will have to explain why he kept this from us. This is information we need to know and has been denied to us ever since this started.”

“No.” Nartha stated coldly, emphasizing that point as much as possible. “Do you want the Zar’Chon to remove you? Mother? Cairu? If the Aui’Vitakar start discussing the invasion publicly, people are going to ask questions, and the Zar’Chon does not want people asking questions now. Neither do the Ethereals.” He gave a weary smile. “Can’t dispel the propaganda, father. The Zararch wouldn’t allow it.”

“And yet you’re telling me this now,” he said slowly. “Why? Last time you wouldn’t even confirm things I already knew.”

“One, because the Zar’Chon didn’t say that information is classified above your clearance,” Nartha explained coolly. “He knows I’m related to you, and should have specified if he felt otherwise. Two, because I think the government of our species shouldn’t be in the dark, at least not to this extent. Three, because I’m not the same as I was last time we talked.”

His father appraised him for a few minutes, then gave an imperceptible nod. “I think I understand. You made friends with the Humans, didn’t you.”

It wasn’t a question. “Several,” he answered neutrally. “Though that isn’t exactly relevant here.”

“Then what do you think I should do with this?” He asked.

Nartha pondered that. If things got out of hand, if would be bad if the Zararch decided to purge the entire Aui’Vitakar, but it wouldn’t be out of the question. “You have representatives who want answers as well, yes?” At a nod, he continued. “Tell them what I said. Don’t do anything, and in person, public areas only. The Zararch have likely bugged offices and computers. From there…you have more diplomatic experience here. Perhaps you could speak to the Zar’Chon or better, introduce an order that withholds the Runianarch from participating in Collective activities without informing the Aui’Vitakar.” He paused. “It would have to be very public though. Public enough where if representatives…resigned, there would be questions raised. Too many for the Zararch to silence.”

His father now had a clear look of…not quite concern, but something close to it. “Nartha…you’re being very helpful about this. This is not what I expected from you.”
Nartha gave him a humorless smile as he walked back to the door to rejoin his mother and sister. “Like I said, I’m not the same. Let’s go back before they wonder what you’re actually talking to me about.”

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Vitakar, Intha Zararch Base

“Identification,” a tall Dath’Haram guard stated as he approached the doors of the windowless black square that no doubt extended far underground.

“Of course,” Nartha answered with a nod, handing the ID which was quickly scanned and handed back.

“Apologies, agent,” he grunted. “But we have to check everyone now. Several Nulorian operatives managed to get into one of the bases in Borelia and it was clear that automation wasn’t working here.”

That was certainly interesting. “We were breached by the Nulorian?”

The Dath’Haram bared his teeth. “I should amend it to say that those particular Nulorians never got out. Once inside they were quickly captured. Fools, but the Zar’Chon doesn’t want this happening again.”

“Noted,” Nartha said, walking past him and into the lobby that was more or less black metal with an elevator at the end of the room. No one was inside, but he knew very well that the room was being monitored by analysts and plasma turrets would fall down from the ceiling if any threat was detected.

He entered the elevator and a haptic screen was immediately projected before him. And…Level 3 was the agent deployment room, where agents received assignments and information on specific targets was available. That was where he’d find the information he was seeking. He pressed the illuminated image and the elevator door closed behind him and it began lowering.

A few seconds later, the door slid open and he stepped into the bustling deployment room. Zararch agents of varying races were huddled in groups, armoring up, or discussing things with the various analysts in the room. The initial room itself was rather small, with a holographic projector displaying information about various targets of interest and operation statuses in the middle of the room, while the more specialized rooms were elsewhere.

To the left was the Target Library, which was where he needed to go. It was always filled with Operation Handlers and agents looking for gathered information on specific targets. The room was filled with dozens of the fastest computers in the Collective, and very little else. To his right was a briefing room where agents would receive instructions from Operational Handlers in person, and it served as a debriefing room as well.

There was a break lounge directly across from him, but he didn’t care about that now. The Armory and Training Area were likely other floors altogether. He swiftly moved to the Target Library and upon entering took one of the computers near the end, away from the other Vitakara already taking advantage of the wealth of information.

A quick tap of his fingers and the haptic display appeared, along with a virtual keyboard to begin making inquiries. It could be voice-controlled as well, but he didn’t want to advertise himself any more than necessary. He dismissed the haptic keyboard and a physical one slid out a second later
and he began entering his identification. He’d always preferred hardware for computer interactions.

Since he was a high-ranking agent, almost everything regarding operations on Vitakar was open to him, and quite a few beyond it, all extremely well organized by organization, species, city, and race. He considered looking over the operations concerning the other Collective Species, but also knew that too much unexpected interest would flag Zararch analysts if they looked into his search history.

No, better to keep on track here. He could always come back some other time.

Instead he touched the NULORIAN box, and narrowed down operations by CITY: INTHA. Perfect, there were currently four targets of interest, none of them assigned to other agents due to the low priority. He spent a good amount of time looking over the details regarding them and finally decided what he was going to do there.

All of the targets of interest were suspected of having ties to the Nulorian, none of them were suspected Nulorian Operatives, but suppliers or contacts at best. All intolerable to the Zararch, but in comparison to the wider galaxy, the Nulorian were a nuisance at best. That was going to work to his favor here.

It seemed his best option was to have a short chat with Mul’forial’intha, the only of the targets who had actually interacted with a confirmed Nulorian operative. There was a chance she had indeed not known who she was dealing with, but he had acquired quite a bit of supplies – all cold-weather survival – from her.

She also stood out because she was rather highly placed in the Mullestha, the species-wide organization responsible for supplying the entire planet and colonies. They worked directly for the Aui’Vitakar and were the suppliers of all major Vitakarian organizations including the Runianarch, Zararch and Lurainian.

Forial wasn’t the highest Mullestha in Intha, but highly placed enough to acquire a lot of specialized equipment in a short amount of time, from all across Vitakar, to a client who was a known criminal. She wasn’t stupid, and had clearly tried to make it seem as innocent as possible, but she was dealing with the Zararch, which made her an amateur at best.

However…there was potential. He knew how the Zararch worked and what would actually flag the analysts. If she really was working with the Nulorian, she could be his means to setting up a meeting which, he noted sourly, was going to go over very well with the suspicious organization. He was not unprepared for the possibility that they would refuse contact altogether just because of who he was.

But he had a plan for that as well.

He nodded to himself and immediately claimed that operation for himself. After this he’d go speak to the Operations Handler to let him know. That might raise some questions, but unlikely anything major since he was certain he actually outranked the Operations Handler here. In fact, he might use this as an opportunity to…establish some cover.

If all current targets of interest were closed, it would look like he was wanting to shut down any sort of criminal activity in his home city. Logical and wouldn’t draw suspicion, and at the same time, make the planet ‘safer for all’. And since he was the one who had pushed for it…well, if one of them was found innocent, then all the better.

In any case, he had another objective to investigate. He backed out of the NULORIAN operations
and switched to AUI’VITAKAR operations. He’d never personally participated in any of these, since he had largely worked off-world, but he knew that they were run differently than traditional Zararch ops. For starters, every representative had at least one Zararch spy in his or her entourage that reported on various aspects of the representative.

That was usually as far as it went for most, just another check to make sure the Aui’Vitakar didn’t do anything too radical. But sometimes the Zararch spies flagged representatives for various reasons and those required firmer investigation. Levels of investigation were color-coded based on impact and threat level. Green was normal; blue required additional investigation; yellow required immediate interrogation; red indicated confirmed Nulorian involvement; white indicated immediate replacement and interrogation; black was a demand for immediate execution.

To Nartha’s knowledge, white had only been used four times, and black only once. As it was right now, there were 100 blue-level flags which almost elicited a gasp. One entire third of the Aui’Vitakar under further investigation was unprecedented, which clearly meant his father was far from the only one beginning to ask questions.

He quickly acquired some more information on the demographics. Twenty-two were Vitakarians, which was a surprising amount, but not nearly as much as the thirty-three Borelians, which, in retrospect, wasn’t entirely that surprising since a war would warrant their attention. Four were Dath’Haram, which appeared small, but considering they were focused intrinsically on the Vitakara as a species and didn’t care about much beyond that, it at least showed some were willing to dig deeper.

There were zero for the Sar’Manda or Oyariah, which was entirely unsurprising since the Sar’Manda were more concerned with their underwater empire than the rest of the Vitakara, much less anything beyond the planet, and the Oyariah, of course, were blind supporters of the Ethereals who would never dare question them. Fools.

However, the Cobrarians had a staggering forty-one members flagged for further review. That was just past four-fifths of their elected legislature, which had to indicate that this was something likely felt in the leadership itself, and not a simple majority. At the very least, it required further analysis. He isolated the Cobrarian leaders flagged, and sorted by prominence.

Aui’sareech’hala, the former Cobrarian Hierarchy Leader, and now a simple representative. If she was being flagged, then the Hierarchy itself was no doubt also now flagged for review. If there was any representative that held major influence outside the Aui’Vitakar with the Hierarchy, then it would be her.

That alone was major, and indicated at the very least that the Cobrarians were concerned about something. Nartha wasn’t entirely sure it was the Humans, after reading some of the notes. Apparently there was something of a cultural crisis recently with Cobrarian males leaving the Nests in protest for having virtually no say in the Hierarchy which would be fine…had the ratio of female to males not been nine to one.

Simply put, the Cobrarian Hierarchy couldn’t really afford to alienate the male population too much, otherwise reproduction would be…difficult. But without some kind of controls, there would be nothing to limit the influence a male Cobrarian had within the Nest, and given how essential they were to breeding…it would be a lot.

He sighed, not envying the position the Cobrarian was in. Like he had told Shun, it was bound to happen eventually. But it bad timing for it to start happening now of all times. In either event, he needed to speak to Sareech as soon as possible, but after he attempted to determine a way into the Nulorian.
He quickly committed everything regarding the current investigation on Sareech to memory, and logged out of the computer. Standing, he turned to go and speak with the Operations Handler. Vacation was over, time to get to work.

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*Mars Orbit, Forward Observation Station*

Ravarian was angry.

No, he amended with a sigh, *angry* was not the right word in this situation. He was *irritated*.

And the next logical question, would be *why* the Zar’Chon of the largest intelligence organization in the galaxy be angry? For once, it wasn’t about the situation on Earth, which was actually starting to stabilize, because the Battlemaster was an actual professional who had a job and did it well. Unlike *some* others in the current leadership.

No, he was irritated because the figure before him was the image of…he wasn’t entirely sure. But it certainly wasn’t the image of a competent professional Ethereal wanting to work with him. Quisilia was an Ethereal who could do as he pleased, but Ravarian was truly wishing for the days before being officially transferred here, when Quisilia was a fairly serious overseer who occasionally made a smart comment.

He actually wished Sicarius was back, at least she had let him do his job and didn’t interfere even if she clearly had no interest. Now he was constantly concerned that Quisilia was going to post something that compromised entire operations. He despised the fact that his morning routine consisted of waking up and immediately checking that infernal Human site *Twitter* and hoping that Quisilia hadn’t made some vague hint about future plans, or worse, posted a selfie *with his actual face* in some attempt to…taunt XCOM?

Ravarian was still not sure what Quisilia’s end game was, but he was always relieved if all that happened was Quisilia getting into a meme war, or better yet, being *completely silent*. He now had a Zararch analyst now watching all of the Ethereal’s social media, and all of them were torn between thinking it was fake or a traitor, because of course there was *no way* that it was an actual Ethereal.

Whatever his reasoning, Ravarian could barely fathom how…*stupid* Quisilia was sometimes. He’d raised the point – many times – that ADVENT and XCOM were watching. And the cheerful Ethereal *laughed* and said he hoped they were.

Well, if nothing else, this had assured Ravarian that Quisilia wasn’t going to ever kill him for gross disrespect. Some of the thoughts he had—including now—were not at all complementary to the good Ethereal before him, and Quisilia seemed more amused by that than anything else. But he was beginning to get a handle on his new eccentrics.

And now Quisilia had decided to go ahead and make himself look like even more of a joke. Because standing before him, in his regular robes and armor, Quisilia looked almost normal. Were it not for the white-haired cat cradled in one lower hand, with the other one affectionately stroking the top of its head. The infernal ball of fur was, of course, purring contentedly as Quisilia waited for him to begin.

Needless to say, he was not amused.

Even less so when Quisilia had said that the name of the cat was “Fluffy”. Ravarian gritted his
teeth as the ridiculousness of the picture became more apparent. He was about to have a serious discussion with an Ethereal who could kill everyone here without anyone noticing, that trolled people on the Internet for fun, and was now petting a cat.

“Quisilia, you did quarantine the stations Nartha visited, correct?” He began slowly.

“Yes, of course,” Quisilia confirmed. “I suspect that had we not known about his motives, we would have never suspected him until it is too late. But no matter, the facilities are temporarily closed until we know how best to stop this virus.”

Ravarian sighed. “Well clearly, something didn’t go according to plan. Sectoids across Helion-3 are apparently…ill.”

Quisilia stopped stroking the cat’s back. “Symptoms?”

“Sluggish, listless, and their limited telepathy is distorted,” Ravarian recalled grimly. “The ones most affected have yellow pus building in their eyes. The Sectoids have already isolated the contaminated workers, and are likely now affected as well.”

The Ethereal was silent for a few moments. Ravarian cocked his head. “Quisilia?”

The Elder chuckled. “A brilliant move, Commander.”

“I’m sorry?” Ravarian interrupted. “I highly doubt he was behind this since only Nartha had the agent.”

“No, I believe we are seeing the Commander’s plan at work,” Quisilia said, raising a free hand. “But we…miscalculated. We believed that Nartha only needed to distribute the bioweapon for it to work, but I do believe we didn’t account for him being infected beforehand.”

Ravarian started. “Impossible. He was screened for illnesses and agents. Nothing was detected.”

“Of course nothing was detected,” Quisilia answered. “It only affects Sectoids. And since it clearly is a genetically based bioweapon, our scanners wouldn’t have detected it, not to mention it would be difficult to notice unless you knew about it beforehand.”

“Damn it,” Ravarian cursed, borrowing a human phrase. “I think he mentioned it was specifically designed to be transferrable in every way possible. Air, liquid, food. He’s been a walking bioweapon ever since he arrived…” he sucked in his breath. “And since we were exposed to him…”

“We are as well,” Quisilia finished. “Nartha was not aware of this. I would have learned as much. But the Commander, or perhaps Vahlen, infected him without his knowledge so he wouldn’t be able to reveal it if he was caught. A brilliant contingency plan. One we have fallen for.”

Ravarian felt his grudging respect for the Commander go up a few notches. “And if that is the case, we have a possible catastrophe on our hands. We have to assume the worst and that everyone here is infected, and if one of the Sectoid planets is contaminated, one of the shipyards, then potentially much of the species is as well.”

“I will be informing Revelean of the immediate change of plans,” Quisilia nodded. “We need to figure this disease out before it completely decimates the Sectoid ranks. I will be speaking to the Hive Commanders about suspending all operations and purging contaminated systems.”

Ravarian nodded. “This is going to severely slow down operations, but better that than losing an
entire species.“

“Oh, all we lose of value is time,” Quisilia amended, beginning to stroke the cat’s head again, which nuzzled his hand affectionately. “The drones can be replaced, and only the Hive Commanders are of any real value. It will take time to clone replacements, but perhaps they’ll realize that their idiotic reliance on templates is highly flawed. The scientist Vahlen was clever. She used their genetic similarity against them and they are paying the price. An expensive one, but perhaps necessary. It will not affect operations on Earth. We have enough Andromedons, Mutons and Vitakara to handle one planet of Humans.”

Ravarian sighed and turned his mechanical hand palm up as a holographic report appeared as he recalled it from memory. “The Battlemaster will not be happy.”

“No, he’ll be overjoyed, I think,” Quisilia nodded. “He despises the little grays. It will not affect his plans in the least.”

Ravarian was no fan of the Sectoids either, truth be told they were unnerving in even a way Quisilia wasn’t, in a way the Ravaged One hadn’t been, but seeing Nartha’s own report, the initial signs of the bioweapon and the Commander’s own noted history, he wouldn’t wish a bioweapon dreamed up by him on anyone.

The Commander always had an ulterior motive here, there was always something deeper than mass genocide. The Commander exploited psychological warfare, and wouldn’t hesitate using an entire species as a giant message or warning that would say fight us and this will be you next. They might be able to suppress this, perhaps, but people were going to ask questions.

The soldiers would definitely be talking amongst themselves when Sectoids began disappearing, or worse, saw the infected ones. Morale would drop. The Andromedons would almost certainly demand answers, and the Hive Commanders would demand to know how something like this could ever happen to begin with.

It made his irritation of Quisilia and his cat trite by comparison. Although that cat was probably now a walking bioweapon as well.

“I need to consult with Revelean immediately,” Quisilia said, walking away. “Beyond the Sectoid problem, there are several recent events that need to be addressed.”

Ravarian eyed him as he left, turning partway towards the retreating Ethereal. “You are actually taking the cat?”

“Oh, of course,” Quisilia said, affectionately petting the animal on the head. “Fluffy always brightens up a room. I rather like the little furballs, the Humans were right to domesticate them. You should consider getting one yourself, it might reduce your stress.”

Ravarian snorted. “I don’t think so. I have-“ he stopped speaking as Quisilia vanished right before him, leaving him alone. With a sigh, he turned back to the list of operations he had to go over. He figured he might as well check on what Nartha was doing and make sure the traitor wasn’t causing any more damage than he already had.

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Vitakar, Intha Mullesthia Distribution Center

Nartha ignored the large unloading area that was bustling with shipping airships landing and leaving, much of it automated with Mullesthia managers making sure everything was in order.
Instead, he decided that it would be more prudent to locate Forial as soon as possible and make sure no one could actually listen to their conversation.

The transparent barrier dissipated as he stepped through, and ignored the receptionist, flashing his Zararch ID at her before stepping into the main tram and directing it to the security section. The tram immediately shot to the right and a few minutes later, he stepped out into the clean security center lobby.

Two guards and a captain waited in front of the door which led to the more secure parts of the security center. All of them were Vitakarians, wearing gray vests that would survive perhaps one shot of plasma before penetration, with the Mullestha logo on the right shoulder patch. The two soldiers held Vitakarian plasma rifles, more streamlined and sleek than the ones the Mutons used, which gleamed with a faint silver sheen.

The soldiers wore simple face-obscuring helmets of the same gray color, with the exception of the captain who simply had an ear implant. He frowned upon Nartha’s approach. “I was not expecting company.”

Nartha smiled. “No, you weren’t. I need to access your security systems.” He raised his ID. “Zar’nartha’intha. I need some information.”

All of them stiffened, and the captain’s eyes widened in surprise…and fear. “I see, how can we assist, agent?”

“With luck, you won’t need to,” Nartha said. “Like I said, I need access to your security systems. I need to ask several questions of one of your associates. I doubt it will take long, but the fewer who are aware of this, the better.”

The captain nodded. “I see. Follow me, agent.” He turned and Nartha followed him into a narrow corridor and then to the second door on the right. The captain scanned his own ID and the metal panels parted and he stepped inside, Nartha close behind him.

Inside was a room with dozens of holoprojectors and haptic screens, all displaying footage from the various cameras, drones and other surveillance equipment installed throughout the facility grounds. An older Vitakarian woman walked up, in a similar uniform, a frown on her face. “Captain? Who are-“

“Zararch,” the captain cut off quickly, not needing to say any more.

She swallowed. “How can we help?”

Nartha turned to them, hands clasped behind his back. Good, he had their attention and the fear of the Zararch would come in use here. And perhaps if they were privy to some ‘confidential’ information, it might go even more smoothly. “I trust that both of you can be discreet?” He made sure to have the underlying threat in his voice. It was coming back rather naturally.

At their nods, he continued. “One of your associates, Mul’forial’intha has come under suspicion and I need to question her. I need her current location.”

The security officer nodded and gave the instructions to one of her subordinates while Nartha continued. “We have identified several possible Nulorian contacts, all of which are being…dealt with now. We do know that the Nulorian are watching this distribution center, and may have possibly compromised your security, especially if Forial is implicated.”

“Agent, I am positive our security has not been compromised,” the security chief said quickly. “If
you want-"

“I tend to agree,” Nartha interrupted, raising a hand to cut her off. “However, I will not take chances, and I do not want to tip them off if they have. Set all current surveillance equipment into a loop until I finish questioning her.”

The Vitakarian woman’s eyes widened. “All of-

“All. Of. It.” Nartha repeated slowly and deliberately, narrowing his own eyes to blue slits. “Do I need to repeat myself?”

She visibly swallowed. “We will do it-"

“Good,” he finished, turning around. “And I will return when I have finished to verify you have performed as asked.”

The captain quickly got his attention. “Forial is in her office. Manager Section, room 225.”

Nartha gave a nod. “Thank you, captain. Your assistance has been noted.” With that he walked away until her was back on the tram and directed it towards the appropriate sector. He was confident they would follow his directions, and he knew enough about standard Vitakarian computer systems to know if they were foolish enough to try and ignore his orders.

The fear and respect the populace still had for the Zararch clearly hadn’t dimmed, thankfully. It wasn’t pleasant, but it made his work much less noticeable and that was what he needed right now. He was in fairly nondescript clothing himself, the gray uniform of a Mullestha field unloader in fact. Uniforms were especially handy in places like these, and he didn’t stand out among the Vitakarians here.

Upon reaching his destination, he stepped out into a shining white lobby and, ignoring the receptionist and other Vitakara in the room, proceeded to the appropriate room. No one had yet stopped him, and presumed that he was supposed to be there or had some otherwise valid reason. The offices themselves were fairly small cubicles, all segmented from each other with white walls and harsh white light from the ceilings.

Nartha located room 225 and the door slid open as the sensor detected his approach. The Vitakarian woman looked up in surprise, eyes widening as she watched him enter smoothly, a knowing smile on his face as he carefully made sure to visibly lock the door behind her. “Mul’forial’intha, I presume?”

Forial was sitting behind a desk with a haptic screen displaying what he presumed was distribution information, and probably performing her normal tasks. “Yes…I am…” she answered hesitantly. “May I ask who you are?”

Nartha pulled out an audio disrupter, turned it on and set it on her desk. While he was sure the security footage would be set to a loop, there was a possibility that her room was already bugged, and he preferred not to have to worry about someone eavesdropping their conversation. The audio disruptor emitted an inaudible signal, but one that would turn any recording into high-pitched screeching.

“Zar’nartha’intha,” he answered, taking a seat opposite her. “I would like to ask just a few questions.”

He saw several quick thoughts flash through her eyes. Surprise, fear, panic, and immediately tried to clamp down on her expressions, but it was already too late. However, it wasn’t an admission of
guilt. Probably everyone would feel that way after receiving a visit from a Zararch agent. “What about?” She asked slowly, deliberately trying to keep her voice level.

Nartha smiled. “Normally I would ask several questions in an attempt to trap you, but I have neither the time nor inclination to do so. Thus, Forial, I will be blunt: You are currently under suspicion for connections to the Nulorian, specifically, this.” He withdrew his holoprojector and displayed the images of her speaking with the Nulorian operative, then it flashed to reveal the manifest of the items sold to him.

Forial’s eyes widened even more, and he turned his voice colder. “You have one chance to answer honestly, Forial. First, did you know he was Nulorian? And second, if so, I would like to know your reasons.” He shut off the projector. “Understand that if I even get a hint that you’re lying, I will take you to the Sectoids for psionic interrogation. Tell the truth and, well, let’s say it will turn out much better for you. For starters, you will not be arrested and all charges will be dropped in return for your cooperation.”

She bit her lower lip, trembling slightly. Until finally she relented. “I didn’t know he was Nulorian the first time, I swear. But…I did find out later.”

Nartha nodded. “Good. You’re smart enough to not lie. Why?”

“Because, Zar’narthaintha, I know what you’re doing,” she suddenly snarled, clearly expecting to die now that her treachery was revealed. “The Zararch, Lurainian, even the Aui’Vitakar. All of you are traitors to our species, thralls to your Elder puppetmasters and have the gall to lie to us every day. And anyone who even speaks out disappears.”

“Yes,” she hissed at him. “Not all of us are blind or stupid. When people suddenly go missing, we notice it. When people I know suddenly vanish it suddenly becomes very clear just who is in charge here.” She folded her arms. “I know about Vitakar-12, agent. And if I can help the Nulorian blow up the sick monsters responsible for that…then I’m certainly going to do it!”

Vitakar-12…He was unfamiliar with the name. He would have to look into that later. But the woman was a terrible spy, which fortunately suited his purposes well. He clasped his hands together. “Yes, I agree.”

“That’s what I—“ she froze, and narrowed her eyes to blue slits. “What?”

“An impressive speech, for sure,” he complimented. “And I agree. The Vitakara are too beholden to the Ethereals. The Zararch in particular are little more than direct tools. You’re very lucky I took this assignment, otherwise you would be facing a rather thorough interrogation from the Zararch. If the agent didn’t shoot you out of disgust. But it seems it’s your lucky day.”

She blinked rapidly. “Are you…what…? Why?”

Nartha sighed. “I don’t suppose you’ve heard about Earth? The Humans?”

“Some,” she admitted. “We don’t get much information about that. I’m focused on other duties anyway.”

“I’ve been there,” he said. “The Humans are fighting the Collective. I think they can win, and as I see it, this may be the only opportunity to free the Vitakara from the grip of the Ethereals.”

Forial straightened in her seat. “Victory against the Elders is impossible. Not completely. Even as much as I would like to believe it…the most the Nulorian will be able to do is avenge. Not openly rebel.”
Nartha pulled out a chip. “Perhaps I can make it clearer...the Humans killed an Elder. I have **proof**.”

She audibly gasped as he continued. “Everything on that chip is from a Human paramilitary group called XCOM. They’ve been fighting the Collective since the beginning. They have psions. They have acquired the technology. Like I said, they killed an Elder and I think they can ultimately win.” She took it with a trembling hand. “Unlike what you seem to believe...not everyone in the Zararch is blind to the reality. But most of us don’t see a way to change it. But change is never going to come by doing nothing. My time with the Humans was...inspiring in a way. I’ll probably die, but I believe a difference can be made now, and I’m going to take it.”

She nodded, looking back to him. “I...I guess you choose me for a reason then?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “When I return to the Zararch, I will simply say that you had no knowledge of his Nulorian connections, and I have coopted you as a contact should he appear again. The Zararch will file it away and you can go on with your life. You will have protection status as an asset, and I will take the role of your handler. I would suggest you be discreet, but your...purchases will likely not attract as much attention, especially if I say you are working to expose a Nulorian cell.”

He leaned back in his chair. “For what I need? Get that chip to the Nulorian. Tell them I want to help and will be attempting to forge connections in the Aui’Vitakar. They are not the enemy and are just as frustrated as you regarding the lack of answers. But I want to meet them, preferably sooner than later as the Zar’Chon will likely recall me within days. Tell them I’ve worked directly with XCOM, and have Level 2 Security Clearance.”

She sucked in her breath. “You are that highly placed?”

Nartha shrugged. “I did say I reported to the Zar’Chon. Can you do that?”

She nodded vigorously. “Yes, yes I can. How should I contact you?”

He handed her a piece of paper. “That is the encrypted line I’ve established. I don’t want it on record, but I should be able to be contacted on it. Pass it on to your Nulorian friends as well.”

“I will,” she promised. “I-“

“And I’ll add,” Nartha said. “Practice your acting. I have plausible deniability here. Betray me and I’ll ensure your entire family is sent to wherever Vitakar-12 is.”

Her pale gray skin turned a shade lighter. “Wait...you really don’t know?”

“No, I’ve never heard about it,” he admitted with a shrug, standing. “But after your little speech, I’m going to look into it. Perhaps you can give me an overview?”

She shuddered. “It’s where they send the dissidents,” she whispered. “Where they have the Sectoids experiment on us. I...I think the Nulorian should give you any specifics. Don’t try finding it either...they warned me that people that look into it also disappear.”

Nartha pursed his lips. She was unfortunately right. Looking into it, if it was really as...vile...as she suggested...he would imagine that the Zar’Chon would have no problem killing him to keep something that dark a secret. “Thank you for telling me. Until later, Mul’forial’inth’a.”

He exited the building, both elated that it had gone so well, and almost shaken at what the implications of Vitakar-12 really were. In truth...he wasn’t entirely surprised.
But he had thought the Zar’Chon better than sending dissidents to be test subjects for the Sectoids. That fate he wouldn’t wish upon anyone. The horrors of the Earth Sectoid Hive had been enough to drive that point home very clearly.

It was becoming clearer that he was doing the right thing. Small steps, but he was on the right path and just had to keep it that way without being discovered.

For now, anyway.

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**Blacksite 002 – ID: “Forge” – Overseer: Revelean**

While the Battlemaster waited for Revelean to finish his current project, he was taking advantage of the geneticist’s own CODEX system to get status updates from his own subordinates, all of whom were present at this time.

“It appears ADVENT is determined to hold Seattle,” J’Loran stated. “If I am to break their lines, I will need a much larger force.”

“Alternative,” Disciple-7 interrupted in his grunting monotone. “Simply neutralize the city entirely. The civilian population is evacuated and there is no risk of collateral damage otherwise. I estimate that the destruction of such a well-known city would significantly damage the morale of local forces and United States civilian population.”

“And it might compel Aegis to act,” the Battlemaster pointed out. “I would prefer to avoid that at this time. J’Loran, how many modified Mutons are left?”

J’Loran paused before answering, his bulk oddly still. “There are...a fair amount. However, the iteration is flawed and I have begun modification on a newer generation. Now that Patricia has fought them, she is well aware of their weaknesses. They will not be nearly as effective the second time, and there is a greater chance XCOM will not retaliate with a telepath against me.”

The Battlemaster nodded, it was expected. “The fact remains that both Seattle and Portland need to be taken before we advance much further. The southwest is largely secured, thanks to my own efforts and Disciple-7. The civilian population is also placated and additional Sargons are maintaining order.”

“So it appears...,” Disciple-7 nodded. “I have already drafted plans to target Las Vegas. I expect that the population there will not pose much of a threat and there is little strategic work in keeping it secure for ADVENT. However, it is a major cultural icon that would no doubt have an adverse effect on the population. I estimate the risk of advancing there would be low, including factors such as that we have the southwest as you noted, and major cities are few and far between.”

Irinena growled, her golden form shimmering. “I have read about the city. I would simply burn it to the ground. There is little value in preserving such a hub of depravity.”

“I do not disagree, in fact,” Disciple-7 surprisingly supported. “The city has little worth to us, and serves primarily as a hub for Human entertainment and luxurious excess. Their wealth is of little value to us, and in my estimation, the morale of the United States population would be reduced three times as much by publicly destroying their icons as opposed to simply capturing the city.”

J’Loran hummed to himself. “I am continually impressed by your logical thinking, Sargon. Unfortunate that your brethren are so...restricted.”
"I am not opposed to destroying the city," Irinena noted, baring her teeth. "However, it would be handicapped by the presence of civilians, unless you wish to include them in the destruction."

“I will handle that," the Battlemaster dismissed with a nod. “I believe I can solve multiple issues at the same time. The Humans have apparently decided to suppress my involvement in subduing San Francisco. That will be remedied. I will inform ADVENT of our impending attack on Las Vegas. They may decide to abandon it, or they may defend it. Such is irrelevant. However, they will work to evacuate the civilian population. Once that is completed, I will raze the city to the ground, and broadcast it for all to see."

J’Loran chuckled. “Quisilia will love it.”

“Indeed,” the Battlemaster noted wryly. “However, what he likes is irrelevant. While I destroy Las Vegas, we will assault Portland and Seattle again in renewed numbers. Disciple-7, you will lead the attack on Portland once more, and J’Loran, you will take Seattle.”

Irinena was silent until he turned to her. “And you will perform a different function. I have been utilizing the Vitakara poorly and the Lurainian in particular. Using you as simple soldiers was not wise, and you do not have the correct mindset for large-scale warfare. So I will utilize you differently.” He waved a hand and another image appeared in the middle of them, the continent of Europe. “I want to distract XCOM. Europe is seen as impenetrable. And the reality is that it is without significant losses on our part. But they will not expect a quick strike.”

Irinena nodded faintly. “And my objective, Battlemaster? Destruction? Conquest?”

“Distraction,” the Battlemaster clarified. “You will take a Gateway Transport to France and deploy it in the middle of Paris, you are free to construct your attack however you wish, but the objective is to cause as much chaos and panic as possible. Provoke an XCOM response. Provoke an ADVENT response. Once they are fully occupied…we will launch our attacks in the United States. Retreat when my signal is transmitted.”

He changed the image to that of what appeared to be a floating orb with a glowing red ‘eye’. The metal plating around the eye was clearly able to be segmented, but otherwise it looked unremarkable. “In addition, you will be fielding a new creation from Blacksite 001, simply dubbed, the Gatekeeper. I have been assured that it will be able to defend the Gateway from unwanted assault. The full details will be sent to you.”

He looked around at all of them. “I do not want to destroy Seattle, not yet. Nor Portland. Create your battle plans and report to me within one week. I want to launch this assault no later than two weeks, and I will warn the Humans of the attack on Las Vegas within four standard days. Battlemaster out.”

The golden figures vanished and he swiftly turned and exited the CODEX communication center and into Revelean’s station of horrors. He didn’t know a more accurate way to describe it. The entire Blacksite was segmented into multiple sections. Each level was for running experiments on different species, and more were constructed should he need it. He had just added a Human level in fact. Right now he was on the Vitakara level, and what it contained was somewhat disconcerting, even for him.

The level was segmented not by experimentation type, like the others, but by race. Each segment had stacks of pods holding various Vitakara in stasis until they were used. Revelean had the interesting habit of preserving several specimens after death, and turning them into little more than realistic statues which he placed throughout the facility as decoration.
The Battlemaster snorted as he walked through the facility. To his dubious credit, Revelean was not overly cruel. Not like the Creator, though even her actions might be the mere result of her instability. It was a common sight to see Vitakara cut into various pieces or autopsied on tables, but they were always either dead or chemically sedated.

That being said, Revelean wasn’t opposed to inflicting pain. *Dispassionate.* That was the best word to describe him. It wasn’t uncommon for pain-tolerance tests to occur here, especially if he was testing out various genetic enhancements on them, and there of course were the test pens where he kept the results of his genetic manipulation. He was rather fond of splicing various traits of the races together, all of course to one final goal.

Revelean had determined long ago that the Vitakara races were useless and each one had strengths the other lacked. Thus, his somewhat dubious goal (In the Battlemaster’s eyes), was to eventually return all Vitakara into one singular race once more. He had listened to Revelean go on and on about the usefulness of such a process, because he was convinced that he could eventually evolve the Vitakara into shapeshifters.

*True* shapeshifters, not the Faceless creatures whose usefulness was sadly limited. It wasn’t surprising that Revelean also had quite a few of the lumbering wax-like creatures cut up here as well, since incorporation of their own genetic malleability would be essential to turning the Vitakara into a shapeshifter race.

Personally, the Battlemaster was skeptical that such a scheme could, or even should, be done. It was something he would have expected the Creator to try and do, but the fact that Revelean had begun to do so indicated to him that it was at least theoretically possible.

The genius Ethereal geneticist himself was currently maneuvering some incomprehensible machine over a Dath’Haram male, the arm specifically, probably going to try some new genetic sequence. Unlike most Ethereals, Revelean wore very modest clothing. He wore no robes or armor, but simple white form-fitting coverings over his torso, arms, legs and white gloves on his hands.

His helm was thinner and resembled something like an armored skullcap, fitting the shape of his head closely, and closing around his nose and mouth, while leaving the eyes exposed. His helm also had the capability to deploy magnifiers for each eye, one of which was over his right one as he worked on the Dath’Haram.

“I have finished,” the Battlemaster interrupted bluntly. “You wanted to talk with me?”

“Oh, certainly, Battlemaster,” the smooth reverberating voice answered, each syllable echoing at least a half second after it was uttered. “I trust that your plans are proceeding.”

The Battlemaster made a dismissive wave. “Yes. What do you want?”

“Patience,” Revelean chastised as he straightened, even at his full height of nine feet, the Battlemaster still towered over him. “I actually have some updates from the Creator herself. Or Blacksite 001, if you prefer.”

The Battlemaster cocked his head. “Interesting. Why would she inform us of her work now?”

Revelean chuckled. “Well, to be fair, I am fairly certain she was calling to brag. She now has yet another pet to add to her collection. You’re not going to believe what she did this time.”

The armored Ethereal sighed. By ‘pet’ he supposed it was yet another result of the Creator attempting to integrate Ethereal genetics into the various species. A fool idea that only someone as
unstable as her could conceive of as being clever. The first two ‘results’, that of combining Andromedon and Ethereal genetics, and Vitakarian and Ethereal genetics, had of course resulted in abominations just as insane, if not more so, than the Creator herself.

The first one had killed every assistant associated with its creation, and was a psychopathic bipolar wreck obsessed with pain, torture, combat, and a twisted sense of honor. Supposedly the Creator had to give her dozens of victims a month just to keep her sedated and from losing her mind completely. A useless creation that was far more costly than was worth it. The Creator didn’t care, of course, the mere fact that she had been able to construct such a being was reward enough for her.

The second one was much, much worse. Largely because it killed people by just talking with them and driving them insane. Why the Creator had taught the thing telepathy was beyond him, but the result was a twisted thing that was disturbingly intelligent and had unfortunately learned Quisilia’s sarcasm and believed itself a superior being, sometimes even to other Ethereals. Naturally he and Quisilia were friends. Typical. As was Isomnum of all Ethereals, though given his methods, the Battlemaster was not surprised.

Now of course she had done it again. Wonderful. “What happened?”

Revelean raised a finger on one hand. “She incorporated Ethereal and Muton genetics of all things.”

A low growl emanated from the Battlemaster’s throat. “She appears to believe that because her Blacksite is orbiting the Dead World, that she can do whatever she wants. I will be speaking to the Imperator about purging her creations if this continues.”

“For once, I agree with the idea of purging these scientifically momentous achievements,” Revelean nodded. “In truth, I was skeptical, and honestly see little reason to do it. But she has done it and that avenue of research is open to us, should we follow it. However, she should have terminated those abominations long ago. This new one in particular is a gibbering maniacal wreck overwhelmed by his psionics and trying to kill everything that gets close to him. The primitive mind of a Muton cannot simply comprehend the power of the Gift.”

He shook his head. “However, I did congratulate her. She has done excellent work recently, especially with the Gatekeeper, so I feel it appropriate to let her explore her irrational ideas. If the Imperator tires of her experiments, he will interfere, simple as that. But as interesting as this is, I did want to inform you of my latest orders from the Imperator.”

The Battlemaster narrowed his eyes. The Imperator almost never interfered or gave orders with Revelean, so this was…intriguing. “What are they?”

Revelean had an odd note in his voice. “The Imperator wants me to resume work on the Avatar Project.”

The Battlemaster was unable to hide his surprise. “It was deemed a failure centuries ago. We expanded too many resources to begin with. You determined it wasn’t possible.”

“The Imperator seems to disagree,” Revelean shrugged. “He thinks that Humans might be the key. Upon some initial investigation, I am wondering the same thing. Humanity is capable of psionics-“

“As were the Sectoids,” the Battlemaster reminded him. “Need I remind you of the Hive Commanders that immolated themselves or went insane? The Overmind was…displeased he had to personally alter the memories of the remaining Hive Commanders.”
“The point is that it deserves to be investigated,” Revelean interrupted. “Which is why I’d prefer you not kill any psions you find. Capture them and bring them to me.”


“No, but it is a matter of time,” Revelean admitted. “Humans at the psionic level and mastery that are useful here will take months or years to properly achieve. And the Imperator…well, I believe he wanted answers on even just if it was possible rather soon. I am, of course, awakening Humans, but I would prefer that to be a contingency, nothing more.”

The Battlemaster was silent, before sighing. “I will see what I can do.”

“I don’t expect it should pose too much of an issue,” Revelean stated with confidence. “After all, I have yet to see an instance of Humanity that would even give you pause.”

“Oh, we’re starting up the Avatar Project again?” A new voice interrupted, and the Battlemaster turning with some resignation to see Quisilia walking up to them. “This will be interesting.”

The Battlemaster stared. “Quisilia…why are you holding a cat?”

Indeed, the former Imperial Shadow was holding some white feline in his lower arms, absentmindedly petting it. The entire picture looked…wrong…to him. And disrupted the somber nature of the discussion. Which was not helped by Quisilia’s companion at his side. “And why is there a…tiger…with you.” The Battlemaster was convinced that animal at his side was such a creature. It was one of the animals from Earth that fascinated him.

The tiger actually seemed docile, and now that Quisilia had stopped, laid down around his feet and started purring, a low rumble that would have terrified any sane person. In truth, the animal was rather small compared to his own height; not even coming up to his knee, but he was still wondering what Quisilia was doing with such a creature.

Quisilia raised a free hand. “I’ll get to that, but Revelean, there is a slight issue with the Sectoids.”

“Really,” Revelean asked dryly. “What now?”

Quisilia cocked his head. “The short version is that I made an error. You recall the Sectoid bioweapon Nartha revealed that XCOM made?”

Revelean nodded. “And you said you had it under control and I could assume control of the Quarantine zones.”

“About that,” Quisilia said slowly. “It turned out that the bioweapon is indeed transferable cross-species, and Nartha was, unknowingly, infected with it. And in turn, infecting everyone around him, and ultimately leading to what I fear to be a majority of the Sectoid population being infected as well. If we do not act, I am afraid our Sectoid numbers will be decimated in the coming months.”

Revelean was silent for a few moments. “You will inform the Imperator of your error, since he was rather insistent that the Avatar Project be completed soon. This new situation takes precedence, but you will bear any punishment for this failure, Quisilia. And I will attempt to clean up your mess. I thought you insisted that you could control this traitor?”

“This had very little to do with Nartha,” Quisilia answered, shaking his head. “At least, knowingly. Even if I had killed him the moment I learned he was a traitor, the damage could still be done. He was a walking bioweapon the moment he landed on Mars and unknowingly contaminated hundreds
of workers. This situation would have still arisen. I will, of course, inform the Imperator.”

Privately, the Battlemaster could not have cared less about the Sectoids dying of a genetic bioweapon. He had half a mind to find some way to save the Human scientist who had conceived it for himself, since anyone smart enough to realize that the Sectoids were a blight upon the galaxy was one he wanted working for himself.

“Now, as for the tiger,” Quisilia said, turning to him. “I got him for you as a pet.”

The Battlemaster narrowed his eyes. “A pet?”

“Yes, a pet,” Quisilia repeated happily. “Fluffy here has made me realize how nice it is to have them. It’s very relaxing. The furballs are rather cute, and the Humans are smart to have realized that pets are an excellent quality of life improvement. Besides, cats pretty much take care of themselves, and more to the point, everyone else struggles to wrap their minds around me having one,” he finished with a laugh.

The Battlemaster was not convinced. “Self-sufficient or not, I don’t have time to devote to this animal. And why a tiger?”

“Please,” Quisilia dismissed. “A regular house cat is the size of one of your hands. You need something big enough that you won’t kill accidentally. Besides, I figure he would be useful in combat. Tigers are predators after all, and Humans fear them.”

The Battlemaster looked down at the feline stretching out on the ground and sighed. “I see why you get along with the Creator. Your ideas are as unhinged as hers.” Practically speaking, he could probably find a use for this tiger. Maybe not as a pet, but the only ones who could keep up with him in combat were chryssalids or other Ethereals, and since he would never use the former, perhaps it would be interesting to have a combat companion his speed.

Although…he eyed the tiger. It was going to have to be improved significantly. Otherwise it would be shot dead in seconds. Perhaps a project for Fectorian? A short distraction to cybernetically improve an Earth creature? Yes, he could see a way to present this to Fectorian.

“Not one for me?” Revelean asked mockingly.

“Absolutely not,” Quisilia stated, almost sounding offended. “If I gave one to you, it would end up on some cutting board and dissected. I only give cats to people who appreciate them, thank you very much.”

Revelean chuckled, a definitely strange conclusion to a meeting which would have ramifications across the entire Collective.

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Vitakar, Aui’Vitakar Assembly Chambers

The center of Vitakarian government was just as impressive as ever. The Chambers themselves were massive, sleek and with soft white angles that protruded far above any other building in the capital. It was one of the only buildings to break convention and construct upwards instead of horizontal. However, Nartha would not be entering the physical chambers today and instead headed to the Cæranian Hierarchy Embassy, where all their representatives were stationed when not in session.

Everything had to be kept to regulation, which meant that there was no sand or vegetation in the
Embassy, which was no doubt something they would have wanted. Although there were special mats that were the equivalent of chairs for the Cobrarians, who coiled their lower bodies on them. The air was also arid and hotter than usual, which was to be expected. Even the mild climate of the Capital was almost cold for them, though many had adapted to it.

It was fairly busy, as many schools took groups of young Vitakara to the capital, although the goal was to learn more about the different races than specific government, so in addition to them, there were aides, soldiers, guards and other representatives going about their business. He slipped through the crowds unnoticed, acutely aware of how many Zararch agents were stationed throughout just this area, all watchers for the representatives. Some were aides, some were friends, and others were guards. All were spies keeping tabs on assuredly more than just their charges.

Sareech herself was fairly close, and her own personal aide, another young Cobrarian, Aui’histrath’lasa, was her unknown Zararch spy, a rare Cobrian Zararch agent. He had let her know beforehand that he was coming “on business” and she had agreed that he would not be disturbed. He outranked her by a significant margin, so it wasn’t difficult to get past her.

She actually inclined her head as he walked up, and the doors parted as he stepped into the office of the Cobrarian representative. It was fairly larger for an office, with clean white walls, chairs to accommodate all races and lit by a Cobrarian Heat Lamp, which had the adverse effect of making the entire room hot.

Sareech herself was behind a tan desk, her lower body coiled up on one of the mats, and her upper half was dressed in the typical Cobrian Representative uniform: A brown cloth vest-like garment that bore no markings aside from the emblem of the Hierarchy on the shoulder pad. The hood of the garment was down, exposing the reptilian face of the representative.

Nartha did admit that the Cobrarians were a race that did occasionally make him nervous being around. They were strikingly different from every other race, with perhaps the exception of the Sar’Manda. How they were even the same species was amazing, but such was the power of Vitakara genetics.

Sareech was fairly old, from what he could tell. Her scales were a pale yellow, scratched in places and her diamond-shaped head was actually turning white in some places. Nevertheless, she was one of the most influential figures in the Hierarchy, even if she was a mere representative now. She tilted her head as he walked in and took a seat. “[Hello, Vitakarian,]” she began in their language, unable to properly form words of the Basic language all other races used. Fortunate that he could understand it. “[May I help you?]”

“I hope so,” Nartha nodded. “I don’t suppose you know who I am?” At this he activated his Audio Disruptor.

She flicked out her forked tongue.”[…no, but you taste different than the others. You have been off world. Earth.]”

He widened his eyes. “Impressive. How did you know?”

She hissed, which was Cobrian for a chuckle. He hoped. “[Because I’ve spoken with those who have returned. Soldiers. Lurainian. Runianarch. Zararch. All who came from Earth tasted as you did, with the faint scent of the Humans on them. Which are you?]”

He inclined his head. “[Zararch, honored representative. Zar’nartha’inha.]”

She visibly tensed, coiling up tighter like a spring. “[Zararch…I see. And why would you wish to
speak to me, agent?"

Nartha laced his fingers together, and rested his hands on the table. “Let us say for now it is simple curiosity. I have disrupted any devices eavesdropping on us, so we can speak freely, although the cameras are still working. But returning to the topic at hand, I don’t suppose you are aware you have been marked as a potential issue by the Zararch? Or that forty of your fellow representatives have been flagged as such?”

She flicked out her tongue again. “[I suspected I was, it is no surprise. I am aware how you…operate. However…I did not realize it extended to so many of my sisters. Why?]”

“That, is what I want to determine,” Nartha continued. “Specifically, have you pressed for additional information on Earth? Introduced motions affecting Vitakara military policy? Supported controversial positions?”

Sareech shut off the haptic displays and eyed him curiously. “[The Hierarchy does not approve of how much is…unknown…regarding this new species. Naturally they have asked us, as representatives, to learn what we can. However it seems….few…are interested in the truth. The Runianarch and Lurainian say it’s too sensitive, and the Collective is not forthcoming either. I’m certain you can understand that, and with the…issues…currently in the Hierarchy, we have enough to deal with without wondering what is happening without our knowledge.]”

Nartha nodded. “I suspected as much. And that is why you are under watch, as well as an entire third of the Aui’Vitakar. The Collective does not wish anything involving the war to become public knowledge.”

 “[It does not need to be public!]” She hissed. “[But we have a right to know what our people are fighting and dying for! People come to us for answers and we can offer nothing. We have no choice, and if the Zararch doesn’t understand that-]”

“Calm, Representative,” Nartha placated, raising a hand. “I believe I can give you some information…provided you don’t use it recklessly.” His tone turned cold to drive home his point. “Understand that everything I will tell you will mark you for death by the Zararch should it be used carelessly. Do you still want me to explain?”

Hesitance, then a nod. “Good,” Nartha continued. “The war against the Humans is not going as well as you are hearing, if you have heard anything at all. They have reverse-engineered Collective technology and are using it to defend themselves. It has gotten to the point where the Elders themselves are taking part in the conquest. Most notably the Battlemaster and previously Ethereals Sicarius and the Ravaged One.”

She tilted her head. “[I do not recognize the names, save the Battlemaster.]”

“They are isolated figures,” Nartha clarified. “But what you need to know is that the Humans, specifically and organization called XCOM, killed the Ravaged One. I have proof, and I was there.”

She visibly recoiled. “[How could they kill an Elder?]” She hissed in amazement. “[It should be impossible…]”

Nartha gave a slight smile. “You can see why they want this information…suppressed. After the Ravaged One died, that was when the war began in earnest. Despite what you might have heard…the Humans have the ability to fight back, and possibly win. Their people are also capable of wielding psionics.”]”
“[This changes everything,]” Sareech hissed furiously. “[They truly thought they could keep this
down? They truly thought they could keep this
from us? We have tolerated the insolence of the Collective too long. We must demand answers!”

Good, she was on the right track. “I would avoid that,” he cautioned. “Trust me, I feel the same
way. Which is why I’m telling you this. But you can’t act immediately, not unless you want to
draw the Zararch out, and they will kill you. I wouldn’t even take this to the Hierarchy, not yet. It
would look too suspicious if you were to suddenly leave after we spoke. I wouldn’t mention this to
anyone yet either. But wait at least a few days, preferably, a week, then return to the Hierarchy.
Decide what to do then.”

He subtly left a chip on the table. “There is proof. And if you want to get answers of a different
sort…have you ever heard of Vitakar-12?”

She cocked her head. “[Sectoid naming convention? Are you referring to Viennith? It’s a dead
planet, desolate and abandoned. Why?]”

Nartha pursed his lips. “I’ve received some potential information that is…disturbing, if true.
However, you say it hasn’t been touched. Are there mineral deposits? Anything of use?”

 “[The entire moon could be mined for resources.]” she said slowly. “[It’s been on the lower end of
the agenda for decades. Never gets any traction when there are better projects.]”

“Perhaps you should bump it up,” Nartha suggested. “I hope I’m wrong about it, but I would prefer
we know everything in our home system. Please don’t ask questions. Not yet.”

She nodded. “[You have been…helpful…But I suspect this is a means to an end for you. This
information isn’t handed to me for a reason.]”

He stood. “Let us say I need a friend in the Aui’Vitakar who I can marginally trust. However…
before you make any public decisions, or even ones in the Aui’Vitakar relating to this…contact me
first. I would prefer you not attract the Zararch and be executed. They will not hesitate to remove
one even as influential as you. Now you know why.”

He paused. “Take the proof to the Hierarchy when the time comes. Think carefully about the
future of our species. Information on how to contact me is on the chip. Good day, Sareech.” He
turned around and exited.

That had gone…well…he supposed. The shock and outrage he’d seen was genuine, but he was
more concerned she would accidentally compromise him and do something rash. That was always
a risk, but he had to trust she wasn’t an idiot. But if he could get the Hierarchy on his side, things
just might start shaping up in his favor.

Assuming of course, he could still continue to trick the Zar’Chon into thinking he was still on the
side of the Collective.

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Supplementary Material

The Advent Directive

SECTION 10: Guidelines for Extraterrestrial Civilizations

Subsection 10.1: Introduction
**Overview and Purpose:** As humanity is decisively no longer alone in the universe, we must prepare for contact, conflict and diplomacy with other alien civilizations beyond our own and ensure that we establish humanity and ADVENT as the unrelenting and proud voice of our species. We will ensure that humanity never bows or succumbs to alien influences and no alien civilization will hold power over our species without destroying our own in the process.

Alien civilizations must be made to understand that humanity can never operate or negotiate from a position where the alien benefits overwhelmingly from the arrangement or at the expense of Humanity, nor can they be allowed to believe that conflict would result in anything other than their own annihilation. To attack one Human is to attack our species, and ADVENT must take an unrelenting hand in dealing with alien civilizations and put the preservation of human life above all else.

At the same time, ADVENT realizes that not all aliens seek war or destruction with our own, and should be a strong and diplomatic leader to species who choose to ally or work with ADVENT. The extent of friendly relations will be determined on a case by case basis, but alien civilizations can rest assured that ADVENT will never attack unless provoked, be it openly or otherwise.

Humanity seeks not war, but will accept nothing less than total victory for those that oppose us.

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Trials and Templars

The Praesidium, Situation Room

The Commander frowned at the report on his tablet, and looked up at Patricia, Aegis, and Zhang who had all arrived to discuss the latest development. “Does this seem genuine, Aegis?” All of them looked to the robed Ethereal as he studied the simple message which had been recently sent to ADVENT:

Las Vegas is next.

There was no signature or anything indicating identity, or even that it was alien in origin. But given the ominous nature of the message and the straightforward words, the Commander was suspecting it was the Battlemaster. “I would not be surprised if it were so,” Aegis finally said. “Though he is normally not so…open.”

Patricia crossed her arms. “It has to be a trap.”

“I agree,” Zhang nodded. “He’s trying to use Las Vegas as bait for some reason. He might not even attack there.”

“No, he would,” Aegis countered. “However, he is clearly expecting a specific reaction to this. The question is what it could be.”

“Assuming this is genuine in the first place,” Zhang pointed out grimly. “Is Las Vegas a city we should care about? What value does it have strategically?”

“Symbolism,” the Commander answered, looking down at the holomap of the state of Nevada. “Las Vegas is a cultural icon and seeing it captured would be a blow to morale and weaken the trust people have in ADVENT protecting them. Strategically, it’s not useful. It’s what it represents that’s the issue.”

“The question is if we should take the risk if it is fake,” Patricia noted, leaning forward and resting her hands on the table. “Even if it isn’t, the cities close to the fighting should evacuate. Yeah, it might ruin some vacations, but anyone actually going to Las Vegas for fun right now is an idiot.”

The Commander opened his mouth to speak and Aegis suddenly raised a hand. “Commander…would it be unreasonable to assume that the destruction of the city would have a larger impact than its capture?”

“Depends on how well it is publicized,” the Commander said with a shrug. “However, if they want to destroy it, I doubt there is anything we can do to stop them from broadcasting. ADVENT could lie, but it might backfire. Why?”

“A thought,” Aegis mused. “I wonder if that is what the Battlemaster plans. To destroy the city. He would not do so if there were civilians still living in the city, but if they were gone…”

“Ah,” Zhang suddenly smiled. “I see. ADVENT of course wants to reduce civilian casualties. Leak the attack ahead of time and they will evacuate, leaving nothing but soldiers. Clever.”

The Commander had to agree. “Interesting. That means he does not see any strategic value in
preserving it. Perhaps we can use that.”

“The question is how,” Patricia mused. “The easiest way to negate his plans would be to advise Saudia not to evacuate. It might prevent the Battlemaster from destroying the city right away—“

“No, it won’t,” the Commander interrupted. “All that will do is delay him. If he really just wants to destroy the city, he’ll just remove the civilians and do it anyway. We have little to gain by not evacuating.”

“We can’t forget that this may simply be a distraction,” Zhang reminded them. “I highly doubt the Battlemaster will just attack one city, if he even bothers to personally appear.”

“I agree,” Aegis nodded. “If I had to hypothesize, he is preparing another offensive in the United States. Likely to capture Portland and Seattle before continuing onward.”

The Commander frowned as he looked down at the holotable. With Canada unreliable, and the Battlemaster wanting to establish clear lines of territory as he advanced, reprisal was going to be... problematic, and he clearly wanted those cities. The Templar Program was proceeding...well...but he was very skeptical that they would do little more than slow the Battlemaster down. Whichever city he attacked was likely forfeit, but doing nothing was out of the question.

“If it is him, the Battlemaster is giving us a warning,” Patricia said slowly. “We need to take that. Negate as much damage as possible.”

“The good news is that all the civilians that were still in Portland and Seattle are gone,” Zhang noted. “I hate to suggest this... but I think we should begin thinking not of winning, but asset denial tactics and prepare in more fortified cities and use the natural barriers in the Midwest instead to trying to keep our hold on the West Coast cities.”

The Commander sighed. “Unfortunately, I don’t necessarily disagree. At the very least contingencies should be made if we do lose the cities. If the Battlemaster is indeed intent on destroying Las Vegas, we should make it as costly for him as possible.”

Patricia rubbed her forehead. “Saudia is not going to like this. The large decisions like this have to be approved by her.”

“She isn’t an idiot,” the Commander said. “And I think that we’ll all agree that if we do lose the cities, we make sure there isn’t much left for the aliens to use, or make it extremely costly.”

“So is that our recommendation?” Patricia asked. “Evacuate Las Vegas and prepare to sacrifice the cities?”

“It should be,” Aegis agreed. “Perhaps you can hold the cities where the Battlemaster is not attacking, but in the event you cannot, it is better to force the Battlemaster to delay than decide a few structures are worth preserving and allow him to capture them whole. And I will strive to continue preparing the Templars until the Battlemaster strikes.”

“I’m curious when you’ll actually decide to participate,” Zhang muttered, shooting a glare at the Ethereal. “Talk is all well and good, but actions speak louder than words, as we Humans say. If you really are on our side, you should show it.”

“I will help when the time is right,” Aegis answered calmly. “I do not wish to escalate the situation more than necessary. Yes, I could help you and perhaps save the West Coast. But you understand that by publicly taking a side, you will draw more Ethereals here, and it might be more than we can handle. I am not refraining from interference simply because of cowardice and not ‘taking a side’
as you put it. But because my public involvement could irrevocably doom your world.”

The Commander pinched the bridge of his nose. “I can understand that to a degree, but if the situation worsens…”

“I am not ignorant, Commander,” Aegis said. “If the situation becomes dire enough, I will intervene. You have my word.”

A word the Commander didn’t entirely trust, but then again, Aegis had been exceedingly helpful the past couple months, and perhaps he could be trusted to a degree. But it was still mildly frustrating dealing with his refusal to openly fight. “I suppose that’s it. I’ll have Jackson send our recommendation to Saudia. Dismissed.”

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**Australia, Sydney Outskirts**

Abby put away her binoculars and observed the now-captured city from afar. The problem, from even the outside, was that it seemed impossible to get in without discovery. Whoever was in charge of defense was very smart. There were what looked like Zararch snipers, and every street entrance was guarded by Mutons and she had observed groups of Mutons led by Centurions or a Vitakara wandering the city streets.

No civilians whatsoever, at least wandering out in the open. What was curious was that there appeared be no supply lines of any kind. She’d carefully watched over the past couple days and nothing. Which immediately indicated to her that they had, or were building, Gateways within the city.

Which was not good.

She knew hard proof was needed, but again the problem was actually getting inside, and then once she learned what she needed. Exploring without a direction or general area was also a bad idea, as she would only waste time and increase the possibility of her capture. So no good options.

A glint in the sky caught her eye and she looked up to see a gray UFO transport come out of the sky, and maneuver towards the interior of the city, close to the center, and slowly land. She raised an eyebrow and brought up her binoculars. Hm. Well, that hadn’t been expected. The good news was that from her vantage point she could get an idea of what they were doing, since the area had been converted into a makeshift landing zone recently.

Her eyes widened even more as they began unloading a strange structure, almost an upright attached to a pedestal with glowing purple lenses throughout it…ah, now that made sense. They were receiving Gateways from offworld, not actually building them here. That made sense, but as she kept watching, she didn’t see more than two being unloaded.

In the grand scheme of things, that wasn’t a lot. It would be a problem, but unlikely to be game-changing especially if they were located and destroyed. She quickly noted that in her log, along with the time and location, as well as the areas it appeared the Gateways were being transported to. Harper would definitely prefer harder intel, but she simply didn’t have the equipment or information needed to successfully penetrate the city.

Well, she’d gotten what he wanted. Her goals were to learn if the aliens did have Gateways established and if possible, their locations. She knew the answer to one, and could narrow down the second. It would have to be good enough, and she’d need to talk with Zhang about additional
tactics or supplies she could use.

She waited until the sun went down and then began making her way back to the main camp with the little ATV Rover she’d been provided. It would at least suffice until she reached the helicopter, one of the few that was in operation. That reminded her…

She was fairly certain at this point the deal she had made with the Chronicler was up. She didn’t remember if it had been two or three weeks, but even if it was the latter, she knew it was past that. Once she reported to Harper, maybe it was time to pay the psion a visit and see if he was as useful as he’d promised.

Abby wasn’t sure she actually wanted him to have fulfilled his promise. If he had…it was going to make things a lot more complicated.

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*The Praesidium, Templar Training Arena*

The thing Patricia especially liked about the Praesidium was how large it actually was. She had initially thought that the ones selected for the Templar program could train with the regular psions, but she’d dismissed that when the Commander had notified her of a large empty room that could be used as a training arena for them.

And so the Templar Training Area was born. It was largely empty and a massive rectangular room with one corner filled with various obstacles when either Aegis or Leng wanted to challenge the trainees. All of them were deep in practice now. There had been four she and Aegis had deemed appropriate as “trial” participants.

Iosif first, which was not a surprise as a defensive psion fit the program exceptionally well. Karen Dais had also been chosen, and Patricia did believe that a telekinetic psion could work almost as well as a defensive one. Chan Jin-Taek was more of a test case, since he was an attack psion and potentially vulnerable in a way none of the other ones were. He wouldn’t go up against the Battlemaster, but Aegis did believe an attack psion could easily decimate ordinary enemies.

The last one she’d added almost as an afterthought: Carmelita. While the combination of psionics and melee combat was *technically* what Patricia wanted, Carmelita was uniquely qualified to fill the role. She had experience with melee combat to a degree, was an expert at close quarters and ultimately, if she could wield a melee weapon…Patricia couldn’t see a reason to deny her that. She was really only accepted because she had the Iron Skin and Muscle Fiber Density modifications and could take damage that Templars would draw. But Patricia knew that Carmelita would be the exception here – not the rule.

Right now the Korean woman was dueling Leng who was still managing to fight her to a draw. Patricia shook her head in amazement as he continuously managed not to get brutally beaten by the genetically superior soldier. All the Templars were training in full armor, as Aegis and Leng both agreed that they should get used to wielding weapons in their gear.

Chan was currently cutting through a self-created scenario of haptic dummy projections, his greatsword flaring with purple mist as he swung the blade as if it weighed nothing. Karen was practicing telekinetically calling her weapon to her hand instinctively and throwing it again at a different target.

Iosif was currently attempting to duel Aegis and actually seemed to be doing decently. All in all, things were proceeding well. A month and they might have some exceptional duelists. As soon as
the Commander had authorized the program, Patricia had Jackson find an actual expert in historical melee weaponry and tactics, and she had found one: Aki Leng.

A middle-aged Japanese immigrant to America, he had been surprised at the offer, but definitely willing. She confirmed that he seemed trustworthy enough, and that he wouldn’t do anything to hinder their operations. He had been, well, somewhat disturbed seeing the Battlemaster in action, and the fact that one of the same aliens was working for XCOM didn’t exactly reassure him.

However, he did agree that their plan was solid, and had immediately gone along and shattered Shen’s vision for the Templars. Shen, and Patricia too for that matter, had envisioned the Templars as sword-wielding psions that killed enemies with ease and could slow the Battlemaster down, if not stop him altogether. Romantic for sure, and not practical at all according to Leng.

The first thing he had thrown out the window was the set goal of using swords as the base weapon. He had, rightfully, pointed out that stabbing the Battlemaster was going to accomplish absolutely nothing because of his armor, and would ultimately be little more than show. “He’s not going to get tired, he’s not going to have his armor breached, and he’s not going to care about your swords except laugh.” Leng had said. “You really want to slow him down? Damage him.”

So he had instead proposed that psions dueling the Battlemaster wield armor damaging weapons like war hammers, maces and flails. “Swords are useful,” he’d said. “But they are not a one-size-fits all weapon. It’s just another tool. You don’t use screwdriver to weld steel, so why should you use a sword against impenetrable armor?”

Aegis had been rather impressed he’d pointed that out. Apparently the Battlemasters in the Empire had not bound themselves by a single weapon either. Aegis recalled that while most did indeed use greatswords, there were a good number that duel-wielded, used axes, morning stars and energy-based alien weapons. So the next thing Leng had done was help each new Templar pick out a weapon that suited them the best.

Iosif had chosen a mace as his primary weapon, two of them in fact. A shorter one for regular enemies and a longer one for dealing with the Battlemaster specifically. Weight wasn’t much of a factor, as all of them were genetically enhanced and could swing heavy weapons easily. Patricia was very careful not to be around Iosif when he was swinging his mace around, since he could probably kill her with one lucky hit, or break most of her bones at the least.

Chan had developed a love of massive two-handed weapons that he could envelop in psionic energy. He was alternating between a massive double-headed war hammer which she was also trying to stay away from, and the Zweihander, which looked like a greatsword except somehow larger and with two parrying hooks on the blade, slightly above the hilt. From what she gathered, the Zweihander was for regular aliens and the war hammer was for the Battlemaster.

Karen had opted for complete annihilation tactics. Her primary weapons were two short swords which she planned to use against regular alien forces, throwing and recalling them in such a way that she was never unarmed, and a long-handled mace if she had to face the Battlemaster. In addition to all that, she had strapped half a dozen combat knives to her armor, and planned to telekinetically throw them when she deemed it appropriate.

As Carmelita was the lone non-psion in the group, her style was slightly different. Namely that her alloy cannon was one of her primary weapons, and her melee weapon would alternate between the standard longsword, and a flail. Why she had chosen such a dangerous weapon for her second option had been brought up by Leng, and Carmelita had shrugged and said something to the effect of “It’s unique.” Which Patricia knew from her emotions, that it was her way of saying she wanted to use it, and that was that.
Shen was designing special MELD and alien alloy enhanced variants of the weapons they would be using, but in practice they would always be using basic non-modified weapons. For one, it meant they could unload on Aegis to their heart’s content as he couldn’t be hurt by them, and the Aegis armor was strong enough that Leng could spar with swords and even flails and not get hurt.

She smiled as she felt Creed come up behind her and whistle. “Well, they seem to be coming along quite nicely. Not joining in?”

He meant it as a joke and she chuckled along with it. “Unfortunately not, I can’t use my own powers in melee combat. Wrong skill set.”

He smirked at her. “Nah, you’re just not thinking creatively enough,” he tapped his head. “It’s actually pretty simple: Invade their minds, say “freeze” and while they stand there you go up and slice their throats.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Or I could just shoot them. Never really liked making things more complicated for myself.”

“Fair enough,” he relented, coming up and putting his arms around her, pulling her into his chest while they watched the Templars train. “You trust the new guy?”

“Leng?” She asked. “For the most part. He’s done well here so far and he surprisingly gets along with Aegis well. I don’t think he’ll be a problem. Trust me, I’m keeping an eye on him.”

“Well, if anyone would know, it’s you,” Creed said. “I never thought medieval combat would actually return. Seeing XCOM soldiers wielding swords is strange, let alone a giant alien doing the same.”

“Neither did I,” Patricia admitted, listening to his steady heartbeat as the sounds of steel hitting steel rang in the foreground. “But then again, there’s a lot of things I didn’t expect recently.”

There was silence for a few minutes. “Do you think we can stop him?” Creed finally asked.

Patricia hesitated before answered, until she just slumped into him and sighed. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “Aegis is doing his best but…even with his help, even if we had everything…I don’t know if we can. And if we do…I’m worried what that would bring down on us. You…you don’t know, but the Battlemaster is far from the most dangerous Ethereal out there. I’m worried that even if we kill him, we’ll just draw down someone worse.”

“Then we’ll kill them too,” Creed reassured her, kissing her gently on the side of her head. “I trust you and I trust the Commander to figure out a solution to any problem that comes up. Think about it Patricia – We should have lost this war a long time ago, but we didn’t. All the aliens have accomplished is making our species stronger, and the longer they fight us, the better we’ll become. I don’t think the Ethereals have ever run into a species quite like ours, Patricia, they don’t know how to deal with an enemy that takes their strengths and turns it against them.”

He did believe the words he was saying, but he didn’t know what she knew about the Ethereals, the Collective, the Synthesized, Revelean, the Imperator himself. He was blissfully ignorant of the evidence that point to the fact that not only did the Ethereals know how adaptable Humanity was, they were counting on it.

For what purpose…Aegis said the Imperator wanted soldiers.

She wasn’t so sure anymore. She believed he was after something specific. There was a goal he wanted to accomplish that all of them were missing.
But she didn’t say anything to Creed, and just enjoyed being in his presence as they watched the Templars train for the inevitable duel with an Ethereal who’d spent centuries honing his craft.

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*Japan, Nakashibetsu*

“Everything is so quiet.” Beatriz said softly as she peered through her sniper rifle, looking across the vast expanse of fields. “Do you think they’ve given up?”

“Doubt it,” Johan said with a shrug, still keeping his rifle at the ready. “But they’re probably done for the day.”

Duri agreed. The aliens attempted to press an attack of sorts every day, usually by sending a few dozen Andromedon and Vitakara soldiers. He was fairly sure it was a continuous probing attack to make sure ADVENT wasn’t planning a sudden attack on their one lone town. But it was always hectic, even if ADVENT had every advantage.

They had definitely not been idle, and Duri knew that fairly soon ADVENT was going to launch a retaliation attack on the town. Within Nakashibetsu itself, there were dozens of THAAD defense systems and artillery launchers, which was the primary reason they had suffered very few losses when the aliens attacked. There was simply no good cover for them to take, and what cover there had been was now wrecked. The once-tidy fields were now ravaged by artillery fire and turned into misshapen terrain of dirt, grass and plants.

More artillery and squads were being covertly deployed to encircle the town itself, and for the moment hadn’t been detected. Or they had been, but the aliens believed they were safe. Duri wouldn’t have been surprised if that was the case. ADVENT Intelligence agents had reportedly been working there, and the intel he’d heard was...concerning.

The agents reported that the aliens had enacted a red energy shield over the entire town, much like what he’d seen from the Andromedons from the first attack. On top of that they were utilizing a kind of laser-point defense system which was shooting down all the airstrikes that had been attempted there. Supposedly there were also several dozen Sectopods (What the massive alien machines were called, apparently), and a *lot* of Andromedon soldiers.

Duri had also heard talk of something called a Gateway, but he didn’t know what that was.

“Well, I think it’s past time we kicked these aliens off this island,” Cara muttered, her gauss autorifle still trained on the fields. “We should be in America.”

Duri pursed his lips under his helmet, not really sure what he should say to that. He could understand Cara wanting to defend her homeland, but he knew that keeping the aliens in check here was just as important. “They’ll be pushed back,” he reassured her. “But the aliens here are just as important.”

“No disrespect intended, but no,” Cara stated flatly. “If the aliens take America it’s probably over. Even if Japan is lost, it’s not a death blow. Not yet, anyway.”

“I’d be grateful, if anything,” Kang shrugged. “A lot of the people were killed in the attacks. The stuff I’ve heard about San Francisco is rather disturbing.”

“How about how that one alien killed a fifth of a garrison?” Cara snorted. “Yeah, I’ll wait for an official proclamation before I believe that. There probably was some super-alien, but not one *that* powerful. Sure, San Francisco was lost, but they should have at least owned up to it.”
“I’m not sure,” Beatriz commented softly. “In the official statement, there was no mention about how San Francisco was lost, and no mention of a super alien either. Not like LA. Maybe it isn’t like the rumors, but I think there was something there that has the leadership worried.”

“In any event, it doesn’t change our goal here,” Duri said, ready to refocus them before they became too focused on rumors. “We know ADVENT is preparing to decapitate the aliens here. Then we’ll see if they decide to redeploy us or not.”

“Speak for yourself, but I rather like it here,” Johan said easily. “Barring the slightly marred countryside, this is a rather beautiful place. We get to kill aliens and our chances of dying are low. In my experience, looking for fights normally leads to people dying in various horrible ways.”

“Here, here,” Beatriz agreed with a nod.

“Yeah, sure,” Cara sighed. “But you try being objective when it’s your country under attack.”

“We understand,” Duri told her, resting a gauntletted hand on her shoulder. “But all of us – no matter which country is attacked – need to remember that it’s bigger than just one nation. Even if we lose one battle, the war is far from lost. America will be reclaimed. I’m sure of it.”

“I hope so,” Cara relented, letting the barrel of her weapon rest on the ground. “But I want to be there when it happens.”

Duri smiled. “No promises, but if we finish off the aliens here…I’ll see about being deployed to America.”

“We get a vote in this?” Johan asked humorously.

“You say no?” Duri asked, raising an eyebrow even if Johan couldn’t see it under the helmet.

“What, me?” He asked sarcastically. “Nah, been awhile since I’ve been there, and as long as we’re killing aliens, I’m fine with it.”

“No suicide missions though,” Beatriz added.

All of them chuckled at that, and Duri did note that Cara seemed a little less tense as they continued their watch. Thing would hopefully be wrapped up in Japan soon, but Duri also had a feeling the aliens wouldn’t simply continue their probing attacks for long.

They would try another invasion soon, and this time he feared the aliens intended to ensure they couldn’t lose.

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The Praesidium, Templar Training Arena

Nuan was now wondering on occasion if she’d died and was now living in some alternate reality because the scene in front of her didn’t make sense on a logical level. It was utterly fascinating, but not something a rational person would ever expect to see.

Specifically, Iosif and an Ethereal dueling. With a mace and whatever purple weapon Aegis was using.

The Commander had a certain gift for understatement, and of course he had decided to casually reveal XCOM was working with a living Ethereal in the most off-handed and normal way possible.
The first thing had involved him calling up groups to his office, where initially he outlined what XCOM was going to be doing to counter the Battlemaster (Which she was very thankful for). And Patricia had revealed the Templar program and what that entailed.

Everything seemed normal. Until someone asked how they could possibly train for something like the Battlemaster. And of course the Commander had said that they’d be training with the Ethereal that was working with them, who by the way, was called Aegis. In hindsight, Nuan believed that the Commander was secretly enjoying springing this bombshell on them.

Needless to say, none of them were permitted to share this with anyone outside XCOM. The Intelligence Director had made the not-so-subtle threat of what would happen if anyone did. So now she was stuck with game-changing information and couldn’t do anything with it. Perhaps…perhaps it was for the best. If the Chinese Government knew that XCOM was working directly with an Ethereal…well, she honestly wasn’t sure what they could do. But with that information, they could definitely use it against XCOM by implying that they were under the influence of this alien.

Her jaw locked up at that thought. That was exactly what she didn’t want to have happen. She didn’t believe they were under the influence of this Ethereal, otherwise why would XCOM still be fighting at all? But she did agree that at least ADVENT and the governments of the world needed to know about this. Not the public, obviously, but at least the people in charge.

So she’d decided it might be informative to actually go down and see this Aegis and Templar Program. The Templars she could at least report on, though the premise was not likely to make sense to them until they knew about the Battlemaster, which apparently was also being kept quiet. Another mistake in her opinion. It was going to get out eventually, and even if the news was terrifying, it was better than learning XCOM and ADVENT had deliberately kept quiet on it.

She’d said as much to the Commander, who had shook his head and said something about “Not creating more unnecessary panic. Morale is more important than truth at this point.” She could agree with that sentiment to a degree, it was almost Chinese in reasoning, but to flat out refuse to tell other militaries? Questionable.

However, what she had learned for an hour or so of observation was how much she enjoyed watching dueling. She was still somewhat confused as to why Iosif had chosen a mace of all things, but it was definitely enjoyable to watch him duel an opponent that towered over him.

The Ethereal himself was just as fascinating. From the way those dark blue robes were positioned over his body, she would have thought it would hinder his movement. But the Ethereal was surprisingly graceful, especially for his size. The sword-like weapon in one of his hands looked like it was made out of nothing but psionic energy, but it didn’t seem to be hurting Iosif when he got hit.

It was the voice that truly caught her attention. It was rich and deep, and seemed to make the air itself vibrate around him, and had some kind of echo after each syllable spoken. If she hadn’t liked the sound of it so much, it would definitely be something she would find disturbing. Then there was the aura the Commander had warned them about. She knew it was affecting her, even if she was rather far away, but she could tell she was close enough because she didn’t feel any concern or fear.

Normally, anything alien made her nervous, so an Ethereal should dredge up some kind of suspicious emotions, but those never came until after she left. That and she would have also been concerned about people swinging dangerous weapons around with intent to hurt or kill. Iosif was
clearly not holding back, even if Aegis was. But she strangely wasn’t concerned for his own safety.

Right now the alien and Human weren’t dueling, per-se, but had been going through repetitions, apparently to help Iosif improve his ability to integrate his abilities into combat. Aegis swung his sword from multiple angles, ordering “Deflect! Deflect! Block!” And at the word “Block” Iosif would raise a hand or forearm and a psionic shield would manifest itself in front of Aegis’ phantom blade before dissipating a second later.

Aegis was deceptively fast, and he attacked from every angle she could imagine, all while yelling out commands at the same time. Sometimes he’d order two blocks in a row and then nothing but deflects for a solid two minutes. By the time the twenty-minute marker had passed, Nuan was sure that Iosif was tired from the relentless assaults and commands. And then Aegis finally attacked with a swing he was unable to block and it sent him flying nearly a dozen feet to the side.

If Nuan could feel concern right now, she would have winced. But he didn’t seem hurt, and Aegis’ weapon dissipated and he withdrew the arm into his robes. “Well done,” he said. “Rest for now before you exhaust yourself.” Then turned and walked over to where some of the other Templars were training.

Iosif groaned and picked himself up, and once he had, pulled off his helmet and trudged over to her. The only indication of his surprise at seeing her was a raised eyebrow. “Hello Nuan, like what you see?”

She nodded. “Yes, it’s rather interesting. I definitely would not have expected anything like this before coming here.”

For some reason, Iosif seemed to find her answer funny. “But really,” he continued, reaching for a water bottle. “Why did you come down here?”

“I wanted to see this Templar Program in action,” she answered. “And the Ethereal. Speaking of which…did you know about him? The whole time?”

“Aegis?” Iosif glanced back. “Yeah, for quite a while. Figured the Commander would tell all of you eventually. Trust me, I was surprised to learn it. But really, Aegis isn’t all that bad. A bit overly dramatic and everything, with that getup, but I like him. He’s been helping all the psions and I’m guessing the Commander and his council.”

That seemed…reasonable. At least to a degree. A hostile Ethereal probably wouldn’t attempt to train Human psions. “Why is he here?” She asked.

“Supposedly because he isn’t happy with how the Ethereals are handling us,” Iosif shrugged. “So his response is apparently to defect and join their greatest enemy. Got to give him credit there. Doubt that’s the whole story, but I don’t think he’s a spy or anything like that. Otherwise we’d all be dead or captured.”

Nuan nodded. “Did that hurt? When you got hit?”

“It wasn’t fun,” Iosif emphasized, leaning his mace against the wall. “But it didn’t quite hurt. I don’t really feel that anymore thanks to my modification. But Aegis has been pressing me that no matter how bad it is here, the Battlemaster is going to be much, much harder.”

Nuan motioned toward the mace. “Why that instead of a sword?”

“Well, because I wanted it and because it’s more practical,” he explained, picking it up. “A sword is probably not going to pierce or slice his armor, but a mace might be able to put a dent into it and
make it difficult for him. A good blow to his head might also disorient him. Leng was rather insistent that all of us train in some kind of blunt weapon for heavily armored enemies.” He grabbed the haft and extended it to her. “Go ahead and hold it.”

She reached out with a hand and grasped the cool haft. “I’d grab it with two hands,” Iosif advised with a grin. “It’s heavier than you think.” She took his advice and grasped it firmly with both hands, eying the flanged head of the mace, which to her eye looked almost as big as her own head. He let go and the head almost dropped to the floor immediately.

She hissed and shifted her grip and managed to lift it in what was probably a mockery of an attack stance. The damn thing was heavy. She looked up at him incredulously. “How do you swing this thing around with one hand?”

“The beauty of genetic modification,” he smiled, taking the mace back at her insistence and casually twirling it in his hand. “Enhanced strength is a useful side effect. This isn’t really a ‘standard’ mace either. It’s a bigger adaption of the German Mace, with a longer haft and bigger head. Specifically for fighting the Battlemaster. I’ve got a much smaller one for regular enemies.”

“I’d hate to get hit with that thing,” Nuan shuddered at the thought of someone being smashed with that flanged weapon. “It might be worse than a sword.”

“Depends on where you get hit,” Iosif chuckled, letting it fall to his side. “The mace will break bones and cause a lot of blunt trauma. Although with the exception of head injuries, the wounds can be treated easier should there be medics on hand. People generally don’t die from broken bones, but they do die from amputated limbs and blood loss.” He set the mace back against the wall. “However, one good blow to the head is usually enough to kill most people.”

Nuan nodded, now wanting to ask a question that had been on her mind. “Why did you never block Aegis with your weapon? It was always a psionic shield.”

“His advice,” Iosif explained. “According to him, blocking the Battlemaster with your weapon is a quick way to die unless you’re as large as him. It’s better to deflect instead of outright block, saves energy and will stop you from being driven into the ground from the force of the blade alone. Aegis hits hard, and he’s quite pointedly told me that the Battlemaster hits much harder.”

That made sense, but didn’t seem like overly good news. “Does he have any weaknesses?” She asked.

Iosif pursed his lips. “In combat? Truthfully, very few, if any at all. According to Aegis, he’s had literal centuries of training and has seen probably anything we can throw at him. Even if we manage to break his armor or pierce it, his skin is strong enough to likely stop our weapons. Not to mention that he’s a telekinetic and does use his powers in combat.”

Iosif paused thoughtfully. “Aegis thinks that we might be able to use his height against him. The bastard is twelve feet tall, that’s twice as tall as me, and several heads taller than Aegis himself. Getting in close might hinder him more, and make it difficult for him defend himself at such close range. His only true weakness is psionic attacks, but no one but Chan can really do anything about that, and Aegis said that the Battlemaster is well aware of his flaws and he doesn’t usually let actual threats live very long.”

“You’re not exactly making me feel better.” Nuan stated slowly, slowly becoming a little concerned. Well, more than usual. Apparently Aegis was far enough away that he wasn’t affecting her anymore.
“What, you prefer I lie?” He asked sarcastically, with a smile. “Yep, there’s a good chance I’ll die, but we really don’t have a choice, do we?”

Nuan shook her head. “No, I guess not.”

“Hey, don’t count any of us out yet,” he said, resting a hand on her shoulder. “I think Shen and Vahlen are making some tools to help us. And don’t forget we’re getting help from an Ethereal that specializes in protection and defense. Trust me, I don’t plan to die.”

“I don’t think any of us want to,” Nuan said quietly. “But it seems…almost impossible, honestly.”

“Then give yourself every advantage you can,” Iosif suggested. “Do what I did. Don’t want to die? Make yourself as unkillable as possible. Get yourself genetically modified. Trust me, you won’t regret it. Train in melee combat, hand to hand, any weapon you can to survive in any situation. Sticking to one weapon only won’t help you forever.”

She bit her lip. The genetic modification was admittedly something she’d been considering, but wasn’t sure if it was an appropriate step to take, especially without permission from her superiors. However, maybe if it was to increase her survivability, they might not need to—no, she was doing it again.

Just because you can do something doesn’t mean you should. Going being their back like that would be just a traitorous as lying, especially since it meant subjecting herself to foreign procedures. The problem was that those thoughts were becoming more and more common, and she was finding it harder and harder to just ignore them or dismiss them as the treason that they were.

“Nuan? You alright?”

“I-“ she quickly glanced up at a now-concerned Iosif. “Yes.”

He appraised her for a few seconds. “Remember what I said about psions knowing if someone is lying? I somehow doubt it, Nuan. You’ve been doing that a lot recently.”

“I’m fine,” she repeated, hoping that would somehow make it better. “I’ll…I’ll think about what you suggested. You’re right, we all have to minimize our chances of losing. But…” she sucked in her breath, then slumped her shoulders. “Sorry. I have to go now. I’ll talk to you later.”

He didn’t seem entirely surprised, but definitely concerned. Still, he said nothing as she made a quick and highly suspicious exit. But she knew that if she’d stayed he’d probably start asking questions and she did not feel like discussing them with someone until she sorted herself out.

But the longer it continued, the more she was wondering if she even could.

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Warburton, Australia

From the onset, Abby could tell there was something different about the little town the Chronicler was staying in. Every single alien on the outskirts still had the illusion of guards, but they were almost as motionless as statues. It was eerie, truth be told, and Abby wasn’t sure she wanted to just walk into it, even if the Chronicler had assured her that she would be safe.

But she didn’t exactly have much of a choice. She supposed it would be pretty simple. She expose herself far enough away where she could retreat if they actually were hostile. Still, she wasn’t overly keen on the idea.
Be calm, Agent Gertrude, my soldiers will not harm you.

She almost yelped at the Chronicler’s voice suddenly appearing in her head. *Don’t do that again,* she thought furiously, in case he was listening, but at least it was clear he was here. In fact, there was a small group of aliens coming directly towards her position. A Vitakarian soldier flanked by standard Muton soldiers.

She stayed in place, figuring they had been sent by him. Sure enough they stopped about five feet from her position. The Vitakarian inclined his head towards her. “Agent Gertrude of XCOM, follow us. The Chronicler wishes to speak to you.”

She frowned at the voice, the words were delivered in a dull monotone devoid of any semblance of expression. His eyes were impossible to read, since they were a solid blue, but the Mutons were more conventional and she could swear they looked glazed over, what she might expect a sleepwalker to have or something.

Was he controlling them even now?

“Take me to him,” she nodded, and joined the group as they escorted her into the town. It was even more unnerving as she walked around the empty buildings and houses. The entire town was dead silent, even with the dozens of aliens milling around or standing guard. Many of them turned to look at her, staring as she walked with unblinking eyes.

The atmosphere of this town was almost smothering. Something seemed badly off about all of this. Mind control was one thing, she’d seen it from Patricia, but this didn’t seem to be anything like that. Not really. She didn’t know what it was, but it was something strange and disturbing. The Chronicler had some explaining to do.

The problem was that even if he did have some kind of rational explanation…she wasn’t sure she could even verify that. She wasn’t a psion, and he wasn’t an idiot. She had no doubt he would exploit that somehow, yet it did seem like he actually had done as promised.

Which made this very complicated.

The Chronicler himself was sitting on a bench in the middle of a city square, reading something on his tablet. Two Andromedons stood behind him, the behemoths silent and foreboding. He set the tablet down as she approached, and greeted her with a wide smile. “Agent Gertrude! So, what do you think?”

She hesitated slightly before answering. “What did you do to them? This doesn’t look like just mind control?”

“Oh, but it is,” he answered, clasping his hands behind his back. “What you’ve no doubt seen is Patricia temporarily take control of various aliens. She has no need to tact or subtlety, all she wants is for them to kill each other. Useful, but hardly viable beyond the short term.” He gestured to the aliens around him. “True mind control, Miss Gertrude, is more subtle. It’s more than simply forcing a message into their little minds. You have to change their way of thinking, you have to establish firm mental commands over time. You have to spend time and constantly exert your will over them.”

He inclined his head towards her. “And for most people, it takes days. But with the Ethereal Orb and my decades of experience, I know how to do it rather quickly. It’s pleasant not having to constantly babysit aliens telepathically. Now I give commands and they carry them out. Useful, wouldn’t you say?”
“That depends on how they’re used,” Abby answered, crossing her arms. “I’m impressed. You actually did what you said. And what is your next move? Continue gathering soldiers? Eventually someone is going to notice.”

“Oh, they will,” the Chronicler smiled. “But as for what I do next, that, I think, depends a great deal on you.”

Abby raised an eyebrow. “I assume this refers to me telling the Commander about you or not.”

“Correct,” he nodded. “And I have changed my mind on that to a degree. I would prefer to keep working with you, agent. However that is best accomplished by having access to XCOM resources and information, both of which you can provide me access to. Look around and tell me what you see?”

Abby looked around at the aliens in the town, of all types. “Spies.” She said with a nod. “You can use them to penetrate the defenses.”

“Clever girl,” he confirmed. “They would have to be used sparingly at first, but I have no doubt more will come eventually. I have a plan for growing my own forces, but what is important to you is what I can do with them. Intel gathering, Gateway locations, troop numbers, sabotage, assassination, poison; the list, Agent Gertrude, is limitless.”

“But you want me to help,” Abby said slowly. “What do you want from me?”

“Reveal me to the Commander as a…contact,” the Chronicler explained slowly. “Someone who’s in the cities and can cause damage. My psionics will remain a secret of course, but this way I can more effectively coordinate my efforts to help XCOM, and the Resistance here, of course. I would hate to accidentally ruin your plans.”

Abby thought for a moment. “The Commander is not going to trust you at first. And if you do cause as much damage as you claim, then he’s going to ask questions.”

“I expect he will,” he nodded. “However, that is unimportant right now. I’m not asking much here, agent, and you stand to gain a lot more if you work with me. Quite frankly, with the Battlemaster in play, you need all the help you can get.”

Abby appraised him carefully. “And how do you know about that?”

He smiled and tapped the side of his head. “The Battlemaster is well-known in the Collective army. They spread the news of his conquest quite readily. I simply observe. So what do you say, agent? Help me liberate Australia? Or potentially doom it?”

“Cute phrasing,” Abby snorted as she thought. She still didn’t trust him, not completely. Anyone who could do…this, was dangerous, and she was entirely relying on him not taking control of her here. Yet the fact that he hadn’t yet told her that he probably wasn’t going mind control her. The question is whether she could do it all without him learning of it.

But the bigger question was if she should.

He’s right. We need all the help we can get.

Objectively, there wasn’t a question of working with him. It would make their operations much easier and could actually cause a great deal of damage to the aliens. Subjectively, she wasn’t entirely sure what would happen afterwards if they won. This had the makings of a deal with the devil, and she knew there would be some cost down the line.
If we lose, it won’t matter in the end.

Another good point. Would it actually be better if they lost because she was too skeptical of a psion? Was she being unreasonable here? Patricia was trustworthy, why did she have to be the only one? The other XCOM psions were likely the same, and aside from manipulating EXALT, the Chronicler didn’t seem completely evil. If he was, he’d have likely tried to take over the world long ago.

If he was, he wouldn’t even be bothering with giving her this choice in the first place. No, she was being paranoid here and needed to do her job. The Commander would understand, and if he ever learned, she could defend it.

Abby looked at the Chronicler and gave a single nod. “I’ll take your deal. You help us liberate Australia and I’ll keep your secret. For now. Move against XCOM or ADVENT and I’ll be sure to tell him.”

“Acceptable,” the Chronicler smiled. “I’m glad we could come to this agreement. And here.” He tossed the tablet at her which she caught. “Locations of the Gateways for Sydney and a few other cities. Give it to the Commander as a token of my authenticity. Also mention I know about the Battlemaster if he questions if they are accurate. Only those inside the cities or in ADVENT or XCOM know.”

“I will,” Abby promised, lowering the tablet. “I’ll be in contact soon.”

He gave a short melodramatic bow. “I look forward to it, Agent Gertrude. I look forward to working with XCOM.”

He probably did. Abby just hoped that she was making the right decision here, but it was done. Now she had to return and sort all of this out with Zhang in the Commander.

She was sure both of them were going to be thrilled.

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The Praesidium, Engineering Bay

Shen had announced he had made a breakthrough in the Templar weapons, so the Commander had immediately come down to see what it was. No mention of the Shinobi-class MEC, but he didn’t expect that to be completed for some time. But if Shen was already finished with the weapons, then perhaps he would get the MEC done in short order as well.

Shen was standing over by a table with several different weapons laid on it, while engineers worked around him. Lily was also by him, surprisingly enough, and visibly brightened as he walked over. “Commander!”

He gave her a smile. “Hello, Lily. Long time no see.”

“I’m glad you came so quickly,” Shen nodded, seeming much more at ease with his daughter around him. “I think Lily here wants your opinion.”

“Oh,” he raised an eyebrow. “Did she make all of these?”

Shen laughed. “Well, not exactly. However, she did draw up the designs for the weapons before you. Dimensions, styles, and she asked the soldiers of any specific additions they wanted. She’s become quite the weaponsmith recently.”
“I’ve always been,” Lily protested. “Well, medieval weapons at least.”

“Lily always had an interest in that sort of thing,” Shen explained. “Honestly I didn’t think much of it, but she sadly has more experience with melee weapon design than most people here. So I figured I’d put her work under your eye.” He paused. “Although the designs weren’t the tricky part, it was making them durable.”

“Well, now I’m curious,” the Commander said, looking towards the table of weapons. “Show me what you’ve done.”

“Get the test dummies,” Shen asked his daughter, who ran off while he turned and picked up a mace from the table. “I’ll first show off the weapons easiest to do. Maces, from what I’ve learned, only need to damage armor and only cause blunt trauma. Nothing fancy here.” He handed the flanged mace to the Commander. “Here.”

The Commander tested it, moved it around and took a few mock swings. He was completely unfamiliar with maces, but the head seemed heavy. The entire weapon appeared to be a dark steel, and nothing else. “Seems good,” he said, looking at Shen. “Alloys I presume?”

“With a MELD overlay,” Shen corrected. “The nanites were programmed to harden over it. It can be damaged, but only by our pulse weapons and plasma. We haven’t been able to break it significantly any other way. It should certainly hold up against the Battlemaster’s sword.”

“Guess we’ll find out soon,” the Commander muttered, as he saw Lily rolling over a humanoid dummy with alloy armor of some kind over it. “That for practice?” He asked.

“Yes!” Lily said with a grin. “Try it! It’s fun!”

“The armor is several centimeters thick, minimum,” Shen added as the Commander walked over to the dummy. “It should give you an idea of the damage output.”

The Commander raised the mace, which was heavier than he was used to, and brought it down on the dummy’s head with all his might. And with perhaps a little too much vigor as the ‘helmet’ completely caved in and the head was smashed into little white chunks. The Commander lifted the mace, noting that the metal was now almost stuck on the weapon. He shook it off and the remains fell to the ground.

“Perhaps I should have been gentler,” he mused, turning back to them. “Even if it won’t dent the Battlemaster’s armor, it will probably wreck anything else on the battlefield. Well done.” He looked down at Lily. “I like the design too. What did you base it off of?”

“A German Mace,” she answered proudly. “Although not as spiky as some variants. I made that one more of as a proof-of-concept, Iosif’s will be bigger.”

“Yes,” Shen chuckled. “None of the weapons are designed to the Templar specifications, those will only come after your approval. Each weapon type will be approved before being tailored. Iosif for example seemed to like it…only bigger.”

“Can’t blame him,” the Commander said. “So, what next?”

“The war hammer is essentially the same concept,” Shen said, gesturing to the double-headed hammer almost as tall as him. “Forged of alien alloys and with a hardened MELD overlay. You can test it as well, though I can guarantee you’ll receive the same result.”

“I’ll trust you on that,” the Commander dismissed with a wave. “Now, you said that was the easy
“Lily?” Shen called, and the young girl reached for what looked like a standard longsword and handed it to him. To his surprise, the blade was almost…shimmering. Blue reflections appears and vanished on the silver blade as if it was reflecting water. “I wouldn’t touch it if I were you,” Shen warned, acutely noting his interest. “The largest problem with blades weapons is that, against any sort of defenses, they will suffer damage. They chip, split, and sometimes break. None of which are optimal.”

“Agreed,” the Commander nodded absentmindedly, turning the sword around in his hand. It certainly felt sturdy enough. “How did you fix it?”

“By using computers,” Shen answered with a proud smile of his own. “Embedded in each sword is a small, simple OS that has different states. And the thing is, this sword has a MELD overlay, but unlike the war hammer and mace, the MELD nanites can be in multiple states. Right now, the current mode is repair.”

“In essence it repairs any damage to the original structure,” he continued, pointing at the blade. “The original design is programmed into their memory, so they can ‘rebuild’ it, so to speak. Although it isn’t permanent and does take nanites to accomplish. In theory you could use all the nanites and the sword would be just…well, a sword.”

“Reapplying the MELD is a simple process,” Shen reassured, adjusting his glasses. “But you should be aware there are some drawbacks here.”

The Commander lowered the weapon. “So, this has multiple states? How many more?”

“Turn the pommel,” Shen suggested. The Commander looked down at the square pommel, and noted that there was a design on each side. The one now was currently a wrench. Repair, he assumed. He turned the pommel and it locked with a click once it was even and the blade suddenly turned the same dark gray steel as the blunt weapons. The pommel logo was a shield.

“That hardens the blade to an almost indestructible degree,” Shen explained as the Commander turned the blade, marveling at how it didn’t seem any heavier. “It was the first variant we developed, since we don’t want the blades breaking under the Battlemaster’s weapon. To date there is nothing, outside of pulse and plasma weaponry, that can damage the blade. Even edge-on-edge attacks don’t weaken or chip the sword.”

“And it’s just as effective as the other weapons?” The Commander asked, turning to the dummy which still had the chest plate. He drew the weapon back and stabbed into the armor. It definitely didn’t go through without resistance, but it impaled through the dummy easily enough. If it worked this well from direct penetration attacks, then it was a success to him.

“Well done,” he complimented. “Let’s see what’s next.”

He turned the pommel and this one had a lightning bolt implant. The blade suddenly reverted to its silver color, except now little bolts of electricity lined the blade, zapping in and out of existence within milliseconds. “The ARC setting,” Lily explained with a grin. “The nanites generate little jolts of electricity with each other, multiply that by a million and you have a weapon that can short out any mechanical enemy or system.”

“In theory,” Shen amended gently. “It’s worked well on our systems so far, and it would probably be best used on Andromedons, Drones, Cyberdisks and the like. One of the weaker physical blades, but I’m positive that it would stun enemies just from a single strike. Don’t discount that.”
“Better to have more options than none,” the Commander agreed, turning the pommel for a final time. This one had a flame on it. The blade suddenly turned a blazing orange. It wasn’t quite red-hot, perhaps orange-hot, but he felt no heat coming from the blade.

“The nanites generate friction together, which makes anything they touch melt,” Shen said. “The science is…complicated, but the short version is that this will melt anything it comes in contact with. It’s proven rather effective against armor, actually. Though I don’t think it would stand up to a direct hit from the Battlemaster.”

The Commander switched the blade back to the repair setting and handed it back to Lily. “You outdid yourselves here, both of you. All I wanted was swords and you managed to turn that into a damn Swiss army knife.”

“We appreciate that, Commander,” Shen smiled. “The greatsword operates virtually the same way, just on a larger scale. We can also apply this technology to other blades, should it be required. Even katanas and scythes, should someone ever want it.”

The Commander snorted. “I doubt we’ll need scythes. But well done. Have you shown the Templars yet?”

“Not in action,” Lily answered. “But they know how it works.”

“I’d show them,” the Commander suggested. “It would definitely give them something to look forward to. And is the Shinobi proceeding well?”

“Still designing,” Shen shrugged. “But I’m close to completing it.”

“Good,” the Commander said. “I’d get to work on the swords for the Templars. The Battlemaster could strike any day, and I want people ready to respond.”

“With pleasure, Commander,” Lily beamed, apparently thrilled he was happy. Her joy was infectious, and he almost wished he could be that optimistic. But for right now, he would just enjoy the feeling, even if it was just an echo of the real thing.

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The Praesidium, Barracks

The gathering storm had finally broken.

Jamali had been expecting it ever since the Commander had revealed that they were actually sharing a base with a damn Ethereal, and had subsequently started taking people for some new psionic program. Then there was a lot of speculation that the aliens were going to launch another offensive in America, and specifically target Las Vegas.

The aliens had finally attacked, but much later than they had anticipated and in a completely different location.

Jamali flipped his helmet in his hands and placed it on his head. France of all places. And since France wasn’t part of ADVENT, and no one had expected such a…brazen attack there, the response was almost nothing. But XCOM was on the way, as was the rest of the French Army. ADVENT would probably respond as well, but it would take hours before they arrived.

Jamali grimaced as he grabbed his pulse rifle. The French were absolutely going to get slaughtered. The tech advantage the aliens had was too large and the French would be lucky to kill a few dozen.
Unless they just used explosives.

The good news was that there had been no reports of the Battlemaster, and they would definitely know by now if he was there. Although there was warning of some new alien construct. A floating mechanical ball if the reports were to be believed. Wonderful. Despite that, the Commander wasn’t taking chances and was sending one of his Templars along with them.

Chan he was called, an offensive psion with a massive greatsword held in his hands as he took some practice swipes. Sorry, no Chan had been very specific and called it a Zweihander, as if it made a difference. It was a massive sword that looked dangerous, and clearly forged out of alien alloys and MELD.

Chan had seemed very eager to test it out. Jamali was also reassured that Patricia was going along as well. If anyone could rally the people still alive there, it was her.

“Jamali! Hurry up!” Patricia called, and he decided it was time to stop ruminating, and prepare for the battle ahead.

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Supplementary Material

The Advent Directive

SECTION 1: Organization and Structure

Subsection 1.4: ADVENT Member Nations

Overview: Countries which comprise ADVENT are known as member nations, and are afforded representation, funding, law enforcement, and additional support to ensure that each member nation is held to the highest possible standard possible; ensuring that ADVENT is strong enough to withstand any adversary or trial.

Member nations are afforded one representative in the Congress of Nations, and said representative is decided via appointment of the Head of States of a nation. However, the Head of State may take the place of a representative in certain circumstances. All representatives at all levels are expected to be of the highest caliber of candidates, and shall not engage in criminal or treasonous activity, which if ignored, will result in prosecution by the ADVENT Peacekeepers.

Member nations will be given a standing garrison, proportional to the size and population of the nations. The same will be done of the Peacekeeping forces, and the Head of State can directly petition the Executive Branch for additional support if needed. Note that while the soldiers are stationed within the nation, they do not ultimately answer to the Head of State or their cabinet, although they will be part of the leadership. All ADVENT forces ultimately answer to the Commander of the ADVENT Military and the Peacekeepers ultimately answer to the Chief of Peacekeeper Operations.

Taxes and funding directly from the State will be negotiated at the federal level, as there are multiple different variables that must be taken into account, making standardization less effective. But it will vary depending again on the size and population of the country, but ADVENT is committed to making sure every nation succeeds and will never intentionally force poor or malicious decisions on a nation. Should that happen, those responsible will be investigated and prosecuted by the Peacekeepers.

Heads of State are allowed to pick their own cabinet, although candidates must be reviewed by
ADVENT Internal Affairs and Oversight to ensure the appointees are truly best suited for the job. This does not apply to levels lower than that of the Head of State, though those must choose from a pool of pre-approved candidates. The Head of State is also permitted to retain their previous title before joining ADVENT, or simply be referred to as the Head of State of a certain nation.

Finally, ADVENT member nations are expected to completely comply to all laws and decisions made by the Congress of Nations, Executive Branch and the Chancellor, and the Judicial Courts. Failure to abide by the laws established will lead to the removal of current leadership, and emergency elections for replacements. Treason and criminal activity will not be tolerated under ADVENT, especially not in the highest levels of government.
Skyranger, En route to Paris, France

Jamali swore he could feel how angry Patricia was.

Given her abilities, he wouldn’t be surprised at all if that was the case. But it was a foreign feeling to him. He was no stranger to anger and injustice, but he would describe his output as more…hot. Intense, but would fade after a few minutes and cooler heads prevailed. He was never a persuasive speaker, and always tried to stay out of situations that he knew would risk a confrontation.

Patricia, on the other hand, was as cold as ice. He felt the cold analytical anger affect him, simmering below the surface. Every thought was logical and emotionless, his thoughts were not fury at their actions, but how to methodically disembowel them violently and brutally. He thought he glimpsed thoughts from her own mind, visions of aliens being driven to insanity while she strode through the throng.

But the rest he had a sickening feeling were of his own design. Patricia apparently had the effect of drawing out the darkest parts of people, and he wasn’t entirely happy that there was a part of himself that was this…brutal. He knew he had the capability…but he’d never wanted to act on it. Not until now.

“We’re expecting the French army to be heavily outclassed,” Patricia finally said, her arms resting on her knees in a deceptively nonchalant manner. “The French have given us the locations of where the fighting is the heaviest. We will be deploying near the Grand Palais, and the Goliath will be dropped near the Pantheon. The UFO supposedly landed at the Eiffel Tower, so that is where we will fight towards.”

Jamali noticed the hands of the soldiers in the skyranger were clenched as Patricia’s voice became harder. “We suspect they are using Gateway Transports. Only one, it seems. We fight towards them and destroy it. We take no prisoners with the exception of the leader. Kill the rest.”

“It will be a pleasure,” Catherine nodded, clenching her rifle. Jamali wasn’t surprised she sounded even harsher than Patricia. The native Frenchwoman had a much more personal reason for being here than the rest of them, which was a stark contrast to her normally friendly persona.

“What aliens are here?” Iida asked, as calm as always

“They seem to be all Vitakarians,” Patricia answered. “Likely Runianarch or Lurainian. Early reports suggest there might be something else in the Transport, but it’s likely Outsiders.”

“Psion Trask, we are approaching the LZ,” Big Sky interjected. “It’s looking bad.”

“Copy that,” Patricia answered calmly, standing. The rest of them quickly stood with her as she walked to the end of the skyranger, the new Templar Chan at her side. The Zweihander was held in a reverse grip, the point on the ground since Chan had no sheath and space was limited. To his eye, Chan seemed rather eager to see combat.
He stood next to Fakhr, and both shared mutual nods as they mentally prepared themselves for battle. As the skyranger dipped, Jamali found himself remarkably calm and the sounds around him slowly faded into the background. They were there, but his concentration was…elsewhere.

Patricia at work, he supposed.

The skyranger ramp opened and all of them charged into the fray. It was, without a doubt, a near rout of the French forces. Human bodies in French uniforms littered the grounds and streets, burned, dismembered, and malformed by alien weapons. A few alien bodies were scattered in the streets, but the majority of the small battlefield was stained with red blood.

They had landed behind the main alien force that was advancing, and there were more coming up from the side, as the French seemed to be making a last stand in the middle of a giant intersection, hiding behind concrete barricades and what limited cover there was. Jamali instinctively fell to one knee and aimed at a Vitakarian soldier and fired. The red laser instantly slammed into its face and it fell dead.

Patricia’s body was enveloped in a shimmering, and faintly purple field of energy, and she extended her hands towards both groups of aliens, along with the snarled message. “Kill them all.”

The effects were almost instantaneous. The main group attacking the French suddenly began fighting amongst themselves, and the reinforcements suddenly fell to the ground, screaming in apparent pain. Jamali immediately moved towards the crippled reinforcements and fired short pulse laser blasts at the writhing bodies. Fakhr and Liliyane assisted him in executing the hapless aliens and after a few minutes all the bodies stopped wriggling.

Jamali turned to see how the much larger alien group was being handled, and then saw the results of giving Chan a sword. If Patricia was lightly covered by psionic energy, Chan was engulfed in purple flames. These extended to his Zweihander which was wreathed in purple energy and seemed to only be making the damage worse.

Chan cut his way through the infighting Vitakarians with an emphasis on brutality. The swipes were wide enough to cut through multiple aliens at once, and he seemed to like leaving the ones not killed instantly to bleed to death on the ground. While decapitating a Borelian with one hand, he raised the opposite one and purple energy shot out from it and ravaged a couple of Vitakarians in the faces.

The rest of the XCOM soldiers assisted in executing the wounded Vitakarians not cut up by Chan and his sword. The French had stopped firing, seemingly not wanting to risk wounding the Templar that was cutting through the alien horde, which was still being affected by Patricia, and not even able to focus on the blade-wielding soldier as he cut them to pieces.

All of them advanced through the remnants of the alien force, who were incapable of retreating. Scattered and crazed by fighting each other, it was almost too easy for Jamali to pick off strays and the rest of them performed just as well. Catherine and Blake rushed to the French line, presumably to help treat injuries, while Patricia strode up to a Vitakarian soldier who was screaming on the ground, and roughly grabbed it by the head, and stood there for a few seconds.

Once she was done, she threw the soldier down and pulled out her gauss pistol and shot her in the head. A few more minutes of slaughtering the aliens, and the battlefield was almost silent. The psionic energy around both Patricia and Chan had faded, and Jamali noted that the dark gray of Chan’s sword was smudged and black.

“I have the location where the UFO is,” Patricia stated, as she marched over to the French line.
“We fight towards it on our own. It doesn’t appear that the aliens have forces that can combat me; at least they didn’t tell the soldiers about it.”

Catherine rushed up with what appeared to be a ranking French officer who looked both parts relieved they had arrived, and terrified after seeing what eight XCOM soldiers had done. “I assume he is the ranking offer?” Patricia asked, looking to Catherine.

“Yes,” she answered. “He-“

“It doesn’t matter,” Patricia interrupted, raising a hand. “Tell him I know where the UFO is and we’re going to destroy it. Tell him to have his superiors contact ADVENT if by some miracle they haven’t. We move out once you deliver that.”

Catherine quickly translated it to the officer while Patricia turned to them. “We need to wrap this up quickly. I have a feeling this isn’t a true attack. The information I extracted from the soldier’s mind indicated they were to cause as much damage to the military as possible and leave. This is a diversion to something.”

Jamali could easily imagine the scowl under Chan’s helmet. “You get that, Commander?”

“I did,” he confirmed grimly. “However we don’t have anything else to go on yet. Everything is normal.”

“I’ll keep you appraised,” Patricia stated as Catherine jogged up to them, signaling her readiness with a nod. “We move out now. I’ll let you know before we engage, but I don’t expect these aliens will pose a challenge to me.”

And with that, they marched off, Patricia leading the charge with the Templar at her side, the blade already soaked in golden blood.

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The Cultro

“XCOM has entered the battle,” the CODEX system informed the Battlemaster as he flew over the desert sands, a small fleet of alien transports behind him. “Lura’irinena’borelia has reported that Patricia Trask is leading the attack, and a Goliath-class MEC is also fighting against her forces. In addition, there appears to be a few types of XCOM soldier. A psion wielding a greatsword, presumably in conjunction with his abilities. More information has yet to be obtained. At this point they are quickly marching toward the Gateway Transport.”

Well, that was unexpected.

Aegis was likely behind such an idea. He was rather impressed, honestly. These new XCOM soldiers had to be a direct response to him. Pale imitations of what a Battlemaster was, for sure, but it was an attempt that he was pleased they had undertaken. Perhaps it was foolish to dismiss them immediately, but he had faced down legions of Synthesized hordes, the best militaries of far more advanced species, and even once a Director Flagship.

At best they would make his conquest here more interesting. Hopefully.

“Time to Las Vegas?” He asked the CODEX.

Her golden figure flashed briefly. “Ten minutes. Additionally, we have officially attracted the attention of ADVENT forces. Defenses are likely being raised.”
“Good,” he nodded. “Order Irinena to retreat and deploy the Gatekeeper. The Creator has assured me that it can... disrupt... telepaths. I am curious to see if that is the case. Also order her to destroy the Eiffel Tower.”

“At once, Battlemaster.” She flashed again and disappeared. A few seconds later the forms of Disciple-7 and J’Loran appeared.

“Begin your assault,” he commanded. “I am close to Las Vegas and XCOM will respond soon. Take the cities and wipe out all the soldiers. We have no need of prisoners today.”

Disciple-7, in his full armor and helmet, gave a brief nod. “At once, Battlemaster. Portland will fall today.”

“As will Seattle,” J’Loran added. “Burn Las Vegas to the ground. J’Loran out.”

The two forms vanished and the CODEX figure appeared once more in front of him. “Initial scans of the city do not reveal any trace of nuclear weaponry or activity. However, there are large amounts of high-explosive materials laced throughout the city and perimeter. In addition, there appear to be a minimum of fifty thousand soldiers heavily entrenched in the city. I have also detected multiple mechanical manned and unmanned platforms. Aircraft is limited, but air support is likely.”

Good, the Humans had actually prepared for a fight, and he was curious to see what, if anything, they had learned from their first engagement with him. Many of his soldiers would likely die today, but he certainly would not. Overall, it was on the surface looking to be invigorating if nothing else.

Two armies facing each other in battle. It had been too long since he had participated in such, and hopefully XCOM didn’t disappoint him when they finally appeared.

A low growl reached his ears and he glanced down at the tiger Quisilia had gifted him with, now very much improved. Farath, he’d decided to call him, since Quisilia insisted he needed to name it. The Battlemaster had grudgingly accepted that maybe the animal wouldn’t be as useless as he feared, now that Fectorian had turned it into a cybernetic terror, and it was admittedly nice to have a somewhat loyal companion that didn’t need much.

Of course the creature had tried to attack him several times, to no effect of course, but it had eventually been broken in and was a rather efficient killer, and Fекторian had made sure that the creature was conditioned to never attack again, and had included specific code phrases he could use if he absolutely needed to take direct control. Although Fectorian wasn’t sure that would be necessary, since he did note that this creature was fairly intelligent.

Intimidating was the word the Battlemaster would have personally chosen, given the modifications. He wasn’t sure of the exact procedures Fectorian had used, but he was aware that specific implants had been inserted into various sections of the tiger’s body, which allowed heavy armor to be attached and removed at will. The armor itself covered the entire body and legs, while leaving the pads of the feet and tail untouched.

It was a sleek black, and the armor was configured in such a way that allowed a full range of motion, and the Battlemaster knew Fectorian had also cybernetically enhanced the bones and joints to allow it to carry the additional weight, and replaced elements like the teeth and claws with alloy alternatives which would allow penetration of ADVENT soldier armor.

Needless to say, the Battlemaster had been pleased with the result, and for the most part, Farath acted the same aside from not attacking him randomly. Which he appreciated. But today would be
the first real test, both for the animal and Fectorian’s work, since the engineer had himself declared it an experiment.

The Battlemaster rested an armored hand on Farath’s head, as they waited to reach their location. The CODEX appeared once more. “We are outside the city perimeter. Landing now and sending orders to remaining transports. Authorization?”

“Granted.” The Battlemaster declared with a nod.

The CODEX vanished and the Cultro dipped and within half a minute, had come to a stop and the Battlemaster felt it rest on the ground. The metal panel over the exit slid up and the multicolored barrier dissipated and the Battlemaster felt a rush of hot air enter the Overseer. Gripping his sword, he marched out into the desert with the shining city in the distance, his feline warrior at his side.

In the distance, he spotted the ADVENT encampments. In sight of them, he raised his sword in a salute, thousands of alien soldiers behind him disembarking. The Cultro rose and flew up into the air. The Battlemaster lowered his sword and spoke into his link with the CODEX. “Begin the transmission.”

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The Praesidium, Mission Control

So he’d been right in suspecting that the Paris attack wasn’t what it seemed.

The Battlemaster wasn’t an idiot. He knew there was no way to hold a city like Paris without an actual army, and while the French were horribly outmatched, ADVENT was marching to the city and XCOM was already there and annihilating their forces. It seemed to be going exceptionally, which made him immediately suspicious.

Which was why he and Jackson had decided to prepare two additional squads and had sent them off to the Citadel if the Battlemaster decided to attack in America again. The worst that would happen is that nothing happened and this was just a poor tactical decision by the Battlemaster. But if the Battlemaster did attack, XCOM could be the difference between victory or defeat.

Jackson echoed his thoughts. “I’m glad we sent the skyrangers.”

The Commander only nodded as the hologlobe lit up with reports of the cities coming under attack. Seattle and Portland again, and Las Vegas as the Battlemaster had warned. The good news was that every city was prepared for an attack and wouldn’t fall easily, especially with XCOM support. However, they had only two skyranger teams, and there were three cities.

So choices had to be made. Seattle would get support, since the city was heavily contested, and the video on the screen now playing confirmed that Las Vegas would be receiving the second squad. The video had suddenly begun streaming on every social media and video streaming service minutes ago, and it was providing a bird’s eye view of the ADVENT defenders, and the aliens marching on their position.

Lead by the Battlemaster.

The Templars were going to get a trial by fire today. There were standing orders to retreat if too many died, but the Commander wondered if even the Templars would last that long, given how quickly the Battlemaster could kill his enemies. But it shouldn’t be a slaughter like San Francisco.

Hopefully.
ADVENT was already mobilizing the Air Force to bomb the alien armies to dust, with plans and contingencies that had been developed being put into motion. Even if it was futile, there were plans to deal with the Battlemaster, even if the usefulness of them was questionable. But it wasn’t as though there was a choice.

Commander Christiaens was also in constant communication with Zhang in the Situation Room, which he would be heading to in a few minutes, and no doubt the Chancellor was being appraised of the situation. He pursed his lips. Win or lose, this was going to likely have a net loss for ADVENT in terms of support and morale. Full-scale attacks on major cities in such a short time would be difficult for civilians to endure without some kind of damage.

No question about it now. If Seattle fell, Canada would have to give up their morally superior attitude and play ball with ADVENT. The United States could not be lost, and there needed to be significant steps taken to prevent that. Hopefully the Prime Minister would understand that, though given how Saudia described him, that didn’t seem likely.

Damn civilians.

If he thought Saudia was being unfair in their meeting, he was really not going to like her when she was angry. Unlikely most people in power, Saudia was not hesitant to make extremely controversial decisions. And if he made himself her enemy, his days in power were numbered.

That was a worst-case scenario though. Portland could probably be held, even without XCOM support. Seattle might be able to be as well, depending on the enemy composition and force size. Las Vegas was unlikely at best, now that the Battlemaster was in play with an entire army. But if the majority of the army could be killed, that was as close to a victory as they could get.

Jackson nodded at a voice coming in through her headset. “Dodger and Marlin Teams are approaching the cities. We should move to the Situation Room.”

“Agreed,” the Commander nodded as he turned to leave Mission Control. “Have Zhang prepare the armor cams and holotable. And keep that video running in the background. If the Battlemaster wants to give us more information, we’ll take it.”

Jackson conveyed his instructions, a hand on her headset earpiece, as they made their way to the Situation Room.

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Las Vegas, United States of America

The Battlemaster was immediately besieged by thousands of gauss bullets and tank rounds flying at him. All of them bounced off his armor or missed him entirely. The majority of the forces behind him were Andromedons, and behind those were Muto Grenadiers and Runianarch Demolitionists.

He had come to destroy the city, and that was what he was going to do.

ADVENT was formed up in defensive lines of a dozen soldiers behind a chest-high black barricade, and those were scattered along the perimeter of the city. Tanks were behind those, and they were firing fairly rapidly, not always at him, but assuredly at the army at his back. No point in wasting time.

The Battlemaster leapt up into the air, picked a front-line group of soldiers, and charged, psionic energy flowing off of him and an armored hand tightened into a fist. It landed in the chest of an
ADVENT soldier, caving in her armor and he decapitated two more with a single swipe. He immediately transitioned into several quick slices that dismembered several more ADVENT soldiers.

“Blow it!” Someone screamed.

The Battlemaster knew instantly that he needed to get out of the immediate vicinity and quickly dashed backwards as the barricade itself exploded with several bright explosions, killing one of the remaining soldiers, and throwing the survivors to the ground, shrapnel riddling their armor. With a flourish of his blade, the Battlemaster turned his attention to the next group, who was now focusing on him.

Well, they were learning at least.

The Officers were shouting orders and frantically reorganizing soldiers in the back rows, but he decided to deal with that later. He dashed towards the second group, performed several quick slices and dashed away, leaving several dismembered corpses in his wake. A few seconds later he charged forward again, grabbed the heads of two soldiers with free hands and smashed their skulls into the barricade with enough force to preemptively set off the explosives which he immediately dashed away from, though feeling the rush of heat and wind in his wake.

He was suddenly throw back several feet from a tank blast, and he quickly spun to face the threat from the back. ADVENT Rocketeers were also firing grenade launchers towards him, and instead of dashing out of the way, he raised a hand and telekinetically caught the explosives in the air, and sent them back at their source with a flick of his hand.

He ignored the screams and explosions as he surveyed the new battlefield. His army was close enough now that they were beginning to exchange plasma fire with the ADVENT gauss weapons. Lances of green were striking dozens of soldiers every second, and even when the Andromedon line was damaged, they were simply phased out and replaced by a healthy soldiers while the Battlefield Engineers fixed the others.

The Runianarch and Muto soldiers were far behind the line, and were firing their own explosives up in the air, lighting up multiple ADVENT positions and blowing up valuable vehicles and barricades. “Light them up!” One officer screamed right before his life ended with a stab to the face.

The ground was suddenly rocked as the desert behind him exploded. Nearly half of the front-line Andromedon force was on the ground, helmets broken and armor sparking. Most of the Andromedons hit were clearly dead, and there were at minimum several hundred Mutons and Vitakara who had also perished.

Restraint. Impressive.

ADVENT was smart enough to know that explosives would probably not hurt him, so they hadn’t wasted them on him, and instead waited for the army to step over them and then detonate. He’d best be careful if he didn’t want to lose too many more soldiers. He was already underestimating their forces, best not to do it anymore.

Disruption in the back lines was needed, and so he charged towards the tank line which immediately began trying to maneuver away from him, to no avail. With one palm turned over, he telekinetically lifted one tank into the air, and threw it towards an ADVENT barricade which exploded in a shower of fire and metal.
He dashed toward another ADVENT line, grabbed one of the Rocketeers and threw her at another tank and she hit with enough force to explode, destroying the main barrel and rendering it inoperable. He then methodically made his way through the line of tanks, cutting off the barrels or damaging the tanks in other ways, stabbing in vital areas or reducing mobility.

He’d been sure to study the schematics after San Francisco.

Farath was also proving rather effective against the ADVENT soldiers, with bullets washing off his battle armor like water, and he seemed to be enjoying ripping the throats out of various ADVENT soldiers, while the others either tried to frantically retreat or fire at the armored feline. The cat was also smart enough to at least try to dodge explosives, although the armor was certainly dented and scorched, indicating that he had taken a few explosive hits.

“**Battlemaster, ADVENT aircraft approaching. Fighter and bomber class,**” The CODEX informed him through their link.

Would they risk airstrikes so close to friendly forces? Probably not a good idea to find out. “Request a squadron of Sectoid Fighters,” he ordered as he stabbed a Gunner through the chest. “All forces, charge the ADVENT line!”

A roar overhead caught his attention and he saw a squad of ADVENT fighters shoot overhead, missiles releasing and speeding towards his approaching army. Most of them took out multiple Andromedons, though thankfully mostly the damaged ones that were shambling forward, driven on only by their AI systems.

Still, they were already swooping around for another round. The Battlemaster gripped his blade tightly in his hands as he cut through another line of ADVENT soldiers, his blade now crimson and splattered with stained sand. He’d made a mistake disregarding the air force they had, seeing as how they hadn’t used it well initially. A mistake he would not repeat after this.

ADVENT also appeared to be retreating into the city, and he noted it was towards the apparently famous Las Vegas Strip, the heart of the city. It was clearly a strategic retreat, since it couldn’t yet be said they had lost enough to warrant a full one. Another aircraft roared overhead, this one the distinctive shape of a bomber.

The Battlemaster watched as a hatch opened on the belly of it, and dozens of small bombs fell out, and a bright line of explosions followed, one that killed hundreds more instantly and wounded even more from the shrapnel. More fatally damaged Andromedons rose from the sands, like metallic zombies as they resumed attacking retreating ADVENT forces further into the city.

“**Air support has arrived,**” the CODEX informed him as a dozen Sectoid crafts suddenly sped overhead and began engaging the ADVENT forces, but the Battlemaster saw more of the Human fighters flying in. It was going to result in a victory, but it would likely be a more costly one than he was anticipating.

He dashed towards various stragglers, executing them with single strokes of his sword, and the army behind him was now at his side, far smaller than before. From a simple visual standpoint, he had lost at least a third of his forces, even if the casualties ADVENT had suffered were equal or greater. But now they had the advantage, and destruction was the goal.

“Begin razing the city,” the Battlemaster ordered the demolitionists and grenadiers as he slowly advanced forward, crimson cape flapping in the wind. “ADVENT will be dealt with.”

The ground began shaking as pristine, expensive buildings and hotels began being bombarded with
plasma explosives, and Contamination Operatives poisoned the areas around the buildings, which would render them uninhabitable for decades.

And the army behind him marched forward, unrelenting in their quest for victory, led by the invincible Ethereal who was now only waiting for the inevitable challenge by XCOM.

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Paris, France

“They’re falling back,” Jamali noted as he saw the Vitakara retreating through the streets, those that were either ignored or out of the range of Patricia’s mind control. “Why?”

“I would guess they don’t have a special counter to psions,” Iida said as she shot a Vitakarian in the leg, and then finished him off with a bolt to the head. “But I don’t like it either.”

“We’re getting close,” Patricia interrupted, as the Eiffel Tower loomed close by in the distance. “Six Dath’Haram are about to ambush you, Chan. Should I intervene?”

The Templar was finishing off a Borelian, stabbing it through the heart, psionic energy rolling off the blade. “Only if they fight you,” he stated as he pulled the blade from the body and turned to face the new threats as they leapt down from the buildings. These were the green-skinned Vitakara, Dath’Haram, covered in dark green clothing interspersed with silver armor coverings on the chest, arms and legs.

In their hands they held blades of their own, straight ones with no hilt. Almost medieval like were it not for the ornate handles and that the blades had been clearly covered in some kind of red fluid. Right now Jamali couldn’t tell if it was some kind of poison or blood, but it was apparent that these aliens knew how to use them.

Two of them scored hits on the back of Chan, though those bounced off the armor, and he retaliated by blasting one of them in the face with psionic energy from the raised hand, and began fighting off the other three with his blade. The Dath’Haram quickly realized that they faced the problem of their blades being too weak to stand up for long.

Perhaps if Chan’s blade wasn’t awash in purple flame, they could have prolonged the duel, but as it stood, each clash was visibly weakening the temperament of the metal. There were gouges and scorch marks on the metal after each blade met with Chan’s Zweihander. From what he could tell, they appeared to be mostly assassin weapons, not supposed to be used for any real dueling. They seemed too thin and short to be of any real use.

Two of them made the mistake of trying to attack Patricia who simply gestured at them, and they fell to the ground, writhing and screaming in the high-pitched alien wails. Jamali and Fakhr executed both of them with quick shots to the head. The remaining Dath’Haram were certainly trying to kill Chan, but it was simply not going to happen.

With a wide swing, Chan cut through both the blade the alien was using, and subsequently, his head. The momentum of the swing carried over to the next alien who got out of the way, but not fast enough before Chan raised his right hand and the Dath’Haram was suddenly engulfed by purple energy. The last alien he finished off with a quick stab to the heart after shattering the blade of the Dath’Haram with a strike of his sword.

All the aliens dead, they proceeded towards the location of the UFO, and finally came out into the area of the Eiffel Tower, the Gateway Transport landed right in front of it. And guarding it were at
least several hundred Vitakara of various types. All of whom were shouting and pointing at the new arrivals.

“Cover!” Patricia shouted as their area was swarmed with plasma weapons fire within seconds. Jamali slid into a small concrete column, and most of the other soldiers followed suit. He heard Catherine scream as several plasma bolts hit her in the armor, and the small gap in her shoulder. Not fatal, but she was clearly in pain as she pulled herself to a short concrete block.

“I’m fine!” She wheezed as she calmly pulled out her med-kit and began spraying the sizzling wounds. Jamali did actually believe her. If there was anyone who could say that after being shot, it would be a medic.

Patricia was once more distorted from drawing upon psionic energy of her own. “Give me a second,” she advised as she stood. “There are more here than I thought. I want to try something.”

Plasma bolts flying all around her, she extended a hand towards the mass of barricaded and entrenched aliens, and as the bolts became ever more accurate, she closed a fist and Jamali could almost swear he heard a deafening snap echo across the entire area. He glanced over to see Liliyane shake her head, and Fakhr and Blade exchange looks of confusion. Iida inhaled sharply and the purple energy enshrining Chan flickered and he stiffened like a statue.

Everything went silent for one brief, small, second.

Then madness broke out.

Jamali watched in fascinated horror as the once united aliens suddenly turned into shrieking crazed maniacs. Some of them still continued to attack XCOM, but the shots were wild and didn’t even seem close to intentional. No, they were focused on attacking each other. But this clearly wasn’t the same as Patricia directing them to turn on themselves. She appeared to have quite literally driven them insane.

Liliyane turned to glance at Patricia who now slowly lowered her arm, and quickly looked away. “Shit.”

“They’ll be occupied and should pose little threat,” Patricia stated calmly as she motioned them to move towards the UFO. “Catherine, how are your wounds.”

“Fine,” she grunted, walking noticeably stiffer, even if her rifle was at the ready. “Won’t be as fast as normal, but I’ll live.”

“Acceptable,” Patricia nodded, as she gestured as Vitakara in their way collapsed onto the ground, and the soldiers only spending brief seconds shooting them in the heads. Jamali almost considered it a mercy at this point. “I’d prefer we take the Gateway intact, but if need be, we destroy it. Expect Outsiders.”

“I’m curious how they’ll stand up to this,” Chan commented as he stabbed downwards on a neutralized Borelian. “Psionic-“ He stiffened, and fell to one knee. Patricia’s also calm walk turned to a shuffle and she rested a hand on her helmet.

“Patricia?” Iida demanded, moving forward to grab an arm to steady her, while Jamali grabbed the opposite one. “What’s wrong?”

“Look!” Fakhr shouted, raising her rifle. Out of the UFO came four massive Outsiders, and in the center was a… floating ball?
That’s what it seemed to be, anyway. A perfect white sphere with a glowing orange ‘eye’ in the middle. The ground under it was slightly distorted from the propulsion systems likely installed, but it didn’t appear to be anything more than that. It moved effortlessly through the air, oddly graceful as it swooped to a stop and appeared to notice them.

“What the hell?” Chan gasped, grunting and grasping the Zweihander with two hands. “What’s wrong with that thing? Patricia, can you feel it?”

Patricia had stabilized, and was, for the first time, reaching for her heavy autorifle. “I can feel it,” she said, her voice still slightly distorted. “It’s interfering with my psionics. I think it’s overwhelming me by psionically projecting its state over the entire area.”

Jamali froze. “That thing is psionic?”

“I think so,” Patricia said slowly as the odd alien squad began moving towards them. “And it’s screaming.”

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Las Vegas, United States of America

Even with three Templars in the squad, Nuan did not have a good feeling about this mission. As far as she could tell, the squad had been designed specifically to counter the Battlemaster, and besides the three Templars, Iosif, Karen and Carmelita, there were the two snipers, Cassandra and Esinam, and two infantry for dealing with the other aliens, Antoni and Aya.

And herself, who would have the distinct pleasure of testing out some of the new grenade types, and the effectiveness of them against the Battlemaster. There was some kind of irony that despite her efforts at trying to stay alive, she was getting thrown into against perhaps the most dangerous being in the galaxy.

Armed with grenades.

Which she would normally consider fairly reliable, had she forgotten that the Battlemaster was a telekinetic and could turn them away with a gesture. She supposed that was what the Templars were here for: to distract him from the other XCOM squad members.

“What is the status on the advance?” Karen asked, one of her short swords resting idly in her hand, a cold dark steel. They were unlike any that Nuan had seen before, shorter than most swords, and they lacked a guard of any kind. Probably made it easier for Karen to telekinetically throw them.

“ADVENT is fighting back, but they’ve pushed their way a quarter down the Strip and are expanding outward,” Iosif answered grimly, the head of his mace resting on the ground. “They are also destroying everything in their way. The Battlemaster is at the front as expected.”

“So what do you want us to do?” Cassandra asked, her sniper rifle resting against her knees, nodding towards Esinam beside her. “Target the Battlemaster as well or assist ADVENT?”

“Assist ADVENT at the beginning,” Iosif ordered. “We need to halt their advance, and the three of us can deal with the Battlemaster. Nuan, Antoni, and Aya, the three of you stay back and hold the line against the aliens, Nuan, if you see an opportunity, use your grenades.”

Nuan swallowed and nodded. “Yes, Overseer.”

“I am best able to face the Battlemaster one-on-one,” Iosif continued, raising a palm and a small
purple shield manifested before them as he made his point. “I can take hits even if I’ll try to avoid
them. Karen, you’ll try and keep him in place with your weapons and telekinesis and Carmelita…”
he glanced over at the final Templar as if not sure what to do. “Hit his flanks when he is distracted.
I’ve seen you kill pretty much anything at close range, so see if you can add an Ethereal to your
list.”

Nuan had been uneasy around the woman for a while now, ever since their first heated exchange.
She had looked downright nice compared to the armored terror before Nuan now. Her armor was
night black, with the small visor in her helmet a pale white. Several high-explosive grenades were
strapped to her waist, and on her back was her alloy cannon and in her hands was an actual flail of
all weapons, which Nuan didn’t entirely understand.

Combined with her Iron Skin and Stinger modification, she was walking death for anything close
to her.

But still, a flail?

“Heads up,” Burning Sky informed them as the skyranger suddenly dipped. “We’re coming in hot.
Can’t stay long on the ground, explosions are everywhere. There’s a massive dogfight above as
well. Guess ADVENT remembered they have planes.”

The lights flashed to a solid red and Iosif stood, and they all prepared to disembark. Nuan was
beside Karen, who pulled out her second sword and held it in a reverse grip. The skyranger
shuddered, and the sounds of screaming, gauss weapons and plasma suddenly became audible. One
hand gripping his mace, Iosif raised the free one and a shimmering purple barrier appeared in front
of them.

“Advance!” He ordered as the ramp opened up and they charged out into the streets.

“Moving to higher ground!” Esinam called, speaking for the first time as he and Cassandra ran
towards opposite buildings to establish their positions.

“Copy!” Iosif acknowledged as ADVENT realized that XCOM was here. There were some audible
cheers, quickly drowned out by the constant barrage of explosions in the distance. Nuan almost
stumbled from the shockwaves in the ground every few seconds as she took in the scene before
her.

She had never been to Vegas, and only knew it by reputation. It was never a place she ever wanted
to visit, but she had to admit it was a beautiful city, if drowning in excess at times. And it said
something that even in the midst of a battle, it still retained some of its magnificence. But only
where the aliens hadn’t touched it yet.

What ADVENT controlled was simply marred, broken windows and scorched walls disturbed the
hotels and casinos around them. There was even a small amusement park, she noticed. But in the
distance, the aliens were leaving nothing behind.

Every building that wasn’t blown apart and collapsed was on fire, and that fire was spreading. She
winced as a hotel in the distance collapsed, shaking the ground in a deafening crash. The massive
black pyramid structure she’d seen pictures of was completely ruined, a smoking and deformed
structure of black metal and glass.

And the aliens themselves were still advancing, and she got her first glimpse of the Battlemaster.
He towered over even the Andromedons behind him, and somehow seemed even taller in person.
His charging ability was just as terrifying, as he seemed to move between doomed groups to
soldiers within seconds. She gripped her weapon tighter as she saw him kill an Officer and three other soldiers within five seconds with a few swipes of the massive bloody sword he held in his hands.

“Let’s get started,” she heard Carmelita mutter as she reached for her alloy cannon. “Engage, Overseer?”

“Let me get his attention first,” Iosif ordered, stopping in the middle of the street, the psionic barrier protecting the ADVENT line on the Strip and the soldiers beside him. The Battlemaster had definitely noticed now, and was just standing there, waiting. “Get into cover,” he ordered the non-Templars while Karen and Carmelita flanked him. “Don’t engage unless you have an opportunity.”

Nuan nodded and dashed behind an ADVENT barricade, and Antoni and Aya did the same, roughly spread out across the ADVENT line. Iosif let the shield drop when they were in position and twirled his mace in a flourish, until the head was pointed at the opposite army. “Battlemaster!”

The massive Ethereal glanced behind him and raised a free fist and the Andromedons stopped advancing, though still continued firing. Nuan thought she saw one of them give a slight nod, and almost immediately a few Battlefield Engineers began rushing forward, carrying those shield generators she knew had been used in Japan.

The gap between the alien and ADVENT line was still large, the entire width of the Strip and at least twenty meters between the armies. The Battlemaster clearly wanted some room to properly duel the Templars. The armored Ethereal took a forward stance, his own weapon raised in a salute. “Come, XCOM, show me what Aegis has taught you.”

Iosif gestured, and the Templars beside him immediately sprang into action. Karen nodded towards Nuan who pulled out a smoke grenade and tossed it to her, who telekinetically caught it and then blasted the grenade towards the Battlemaster, who just stood calmly by as the smoke engulfed him as Carmelita leapt towards him, firing her alloy cannon already.

Iosif’s entire body was covered in a personal psionic shield as he sprinted forward, gesturing towards Carmelita as the Battlemaster made his first move, and sliced at her. His blade was stopped cold by the small purple square that appeared in front of it, and he responded by extending a lower hand and Carmelita was suddenly blasted against a concrete wall form a telekinetic throw.

He immediately turned his attention towards Iosif who was preparing a first rapid strike, likely on one of the legs since the Battlemaster towered over him. The Battlemaster responded by performing a deceptively fast slash against him and Iosif barely managed to turn the blade upwards, deflecting it towards the sky.

Karen had gone around the other side of the Battlemaster, and now her swords were somehow covered in electricity, sparking with blue discharges and she telekinetically tossed one towards the Battlemaster which naturally deflected away, but it did seem to have briefly startled him as he spun to her position, of which she had already moved away from.

In the meantime, ADVENT and the aliens were still exchanging fire, less so than before for fear of hitting the ones in the middle. The Andromedons were establishing a red shield that provided ample cover, while allowing them to shoot back. Nuan saw that ADVENT was immediately rotating out the regular infantry, and replacing them with Grenadiers and Rocketeers.

She nodded in approval, she couldn’t be too distracted by the fight taking place in front of her.

Iosif was keeping the Battlemaster busy, always attempting to strike wherever he could, and always
blocked or dodged by the Battlemaster who still seemed content to not use his charge abilities, or any more telekinesis beyond the blast against Carmelita.

That worried her.

Carmelita herself was doing exactly what she was ordered, flanking the Battlemaster when he was focused on Iosif and Karen. She now had her flail in hand and was continually attempting quick strikes with it when she tried quick leap-by-attacks. She scored several hits, but only on the heavily armored back, and as far as Nuan could tell, she was doing no damage whatsoever.

Karen was still trying her tactic of throwing her electrified blades, but it was clear the Battlemaster was getting close to ignoring her. While not even looking at her, he raised a free hand while attempting a downward strike at Iosif and telekinetically caught the sword in mid-air, then sent it back slow enough to clearly mock her.

Carmelita tried another leaping flank attack and this time with lightning speed the Battlemaster thrust out with free hands at Iosif and Karen, the former of whom managed to resist the blast, but was briefly stunned, and sending the latter several feet back until she telekinetically stabilized herself. Immediately after that he spun and caught Carmelita in the air, and charged, reappearing a short distance away with Carmelita slammed into a nearby building, cracking it where she’d impacted.

The Battlemaster must have charged again, as he appeared once more in the center of the street, two of the three Templars briefly incapacitated and a low rumble reached her ears through the exchanged fire between the armies.

Laughter. The Ethereal was laughing.

Dread threatened to take over as the Battlemaster almost mockingly walked towards Iosif who prepared once more to defend as Carmelita shakily rose and Karen was clearly trying to figure out how to be effective.

This, Nuan concluded, was not going well.

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Seattle, United States of America

“Deploy!” Creed ordered and all of them charged out into a battlefield that was far larger than any Oliver had ever seen before. Entire buildings had been leveled in the constant siege between alien and ADVENT forces, and the other side had the oppressive barrier of Andromedon energy shields protecting them.

There were small windows where the Andromedons and other aliens were fighting through, but there was a clear advantage towards the aliens, even if ADVENT had established an equally long black metal barricade, and was also using the buildings still standing as bases and establishments. It was a black metal wall manned by men and women constantly.

The no-man’s land in the center was nothing but charred and destroyed rubble and concrete. Rotting corpses of alien and human bodies were laid in the center, no side willing to attempt to recover their dead in the face of gauss and plasma fire. But now the aliens were launching a full attack again and ADVENT was just as willing to defend.

“I’m getting into position!” Lesedi called and she immediately jumped onto the nearby wall of a building and began climbing up. Oliver would have found it strange at any other time, but he didn’t
care as plasma fire was uncomfortably close by. The ADVENT soldiers and Officers made room for all of them as they charged up to the barricade, and Oliver got a good look at the actual situation.

The Andromedon line behind the shield was interspersed with Muton soldiers, and he could unfortunately see there were a lot of them. Although it was worse since hovering above the shield were deployed Cyberdisks, raining blazing projectiles down upon them. Above the sky there were full dogfights in motion as ADVENT jets shot at UFO fighters, although the UFOs seemed to currently have the upper hand.

“Strategy?” Oliver called to Creed, who was beginning to fire at one of the Andromedons with his pulse rifle.

“Take down the shield,” Creed stated, as their Rocketeer, Nio, took aim at the one of the shield projectors. “Gloria, prepare to barrage the line.”

“Copy,” Gloria Page, one of the new MEC pilots answered. “Establishing position.”

Oliver glanced back at the massive machine as she planted the feet of her Ballista-Class MEC in the ground, and raised her arms, and the rocket launchers on her shoulders began to prime in preparation for the order. Creed nodded toward Matthew. “Take it out.”

“With pleasure,” Matthew stated, a smile clear in his voice. “Allison, some protection?”

“On it,” Allison nodded, and extended her hand, psionic energy manifesting around it. Matthew was then encased in a shimmering psionic shield and stepped out onto the battlefield. He immediately attracted attention, and was immediately shot at by Cyberdisk rounds and plasma bolts, the latter of which were simply absorbed by the shield, and the former he telekinetically stopped in the air.

He extended a hand towards one of the Cyberdisks, as if grabbing it. The metal around the machine groaned and sparked, and Oliver watched in fascination as it was slowly crumpled into a ball of fluid and metal. He threw his arm to the ground, and the wreck was thrown into the bottom of the shield generators, and the entire area around the generator flickered momentarily.

“Lesedi! Jose! Nio! Fire!” Creed commanded. Nio and Jose fired his rocket at the weakened area and Lesedi began taking shots at the Battlefield Engineers that were coming to assist, driving them back momentarily as the rocket destroyed another shield generator, and then an entire section was suddenly offline.

Matthew extended his hands to another Cyberdisk and repeated the procedure, and another section of the shield was collapsed. “Barrage their position!” Creed ordered as the now-exposed aliens began scrambling back. The ground was wracked with tremors and booms filled the air as Gloria unloaded her arsenal on the exposed aliens.

Oliver felt some measure of satisfaction as he watched the missiles rain down upon the Mutons and Andromedons, most of them destroyed beyond repair or recovery. Then the aliens appeared to switch tactics entirely. All of the nearby Cyberdisks retracted into disks and flew behind enemy lines.

“How many?” Matthew demanded, as he lifted massive concrete chunks and tossed them at the
enemy line.

“At least twenty Elites,” Lesedi answered, another Muton falling from one of her shots. “Shit. Ten Berserkers at least. We might have made a mistake bringing that shield down. They definitely know we’re here.”

“We can handle that,” Allison said, still focusing on protecting Matthew. “But the Berserkers need to be stopped. I can’t maintain this while moving.”

“Ready barrage and rockets again,” Creed instructed, as he looked around at the ADVENT soldiers. “We’ve got Berserkers incoming! Prepare to fire on incoming on my command! Officers, ready your soldiers.”

“Will do, sir!” One of the Officers stated, tapping a button on her wrist. “Going to inform the Corporal Williams about the situation.”

“Do that,” Creed said, as he forced an Andromedon back from concentrate fire. “Also say that we’d appreciate an air strike here at some point.”

“I wouldn’t expect that anytime soon,” Shun growled as she tossed a grenade towards a pair of Mutons. “They seem pretty well occupied.”

As she said that, a UFO shot overhead, pursued by two ADVENT fighters. Another one in the distance was shot down by a UFO and crashed into an abandoned building. Oliver had to agree that the ADVENT Air Force likely had more pressing concerns, and with two psions, they could probably control the situation.

Then again, the last time they’d also had two psions and he remembered how that had gone.

A roar in the distance indicated the Berserkers were charging. “I’m going to freeze them when they get into position,” Matthew yelled, crossing his arms to help focus his power. “Don’t waste the shot!”

“Incoming,” Lesedi stated calmly. “Probably ten seconds.”

Creed raised a hand. “Be ready!”

Oliver immediately focused in on the massive Mutons the moment their silver helmets entered his sights. “Sighted!” The pack of Berserkers roared at the sight of the taunting psion in the wasteland, and began charging.

“And…stop!” Matthew yelled, extending his hands and the foremost Berserkers suddenly froze, faint psionic energy binding them. The ones behind them slammed into the trapped brutes, and Creed lowered his arm.

“Fire!”

At least a few dozen rockets, and another barrage from Gloria was rained down upon the trapped horde. That was not counting the hundreds of gauss rounds and laser pulse streams added to the slaughter. The entire small area was annihilated with multiple orange and fiery explosions, and when the smoke and shrapnel cleared, all the Mutons were clearly dead.

Shun whooped and Matthew lowered his arms, seemingly exhausted from the display. The ADVENT soldiers also cheered, although it was cut short by Lesedi. “Elites incoming, Matthew, you should probably get back and rest some. You can’t keep that up forever.”
“Fine, a short break,” he relented and began to slowly retreat when he was suddenly yanked backwards, a seeker materializing around him.

“Fucking machine!” He growled, squeezing a fist and the head of the Seeker crumpled, and fell off of him.

“Ah!” Shun and Allison shouted simultaneously as Seekers materialized behind them, and then around multiple Officers.

“Duck!” Creed yelled at him, and he threw himself to the ground and Creed shot right above him, and another Seeker wreck fell to the ground. The rest of them were trying to quickly shoot the ones holding Shun and Allison. The one behind Allison suddenly crumpled from a telekinetic grab as Matthew came stumbling back.

Nio shot the one above Shun and it collapsed to the ground after about a few seconds of sustained fire. She fell to her knees and tore off her helmet and immediately began vomiting up whatever that black poison was that the Seekers used. Allison fortunately seemed to not have been affected, likely protected by her psionics.

“There’s two of the things on me!” Lesedi yelled frantically from the roof of the building, obviously choking. “I can’t-“

She gurgled and cut off. “We need to help her!” Oliver demanded, looking up frantically where she was, even knowing that there was no way they could get up there in time.

“We need to help the living!” Matthew yelled back, as there were still multiple Officers being strangled by the Seekers, all up and down the line. The good news was that they were so isolated from the main force that they were killed before too many Officers choked to death, but the bad was that during that time, the aliens had taken full advantage of the confusion and moved forward.

As the last Seeker was destroyed, Oliver turned to see a line of towering Muton Elites in the distance, their plasma cannons firing massive bolts of plasma in their direction, and quickly advancing, more Mutons behind them, and in the distance were the roars of more Berserkers.

Swallowing, Oliver reloaded and prepared to face down the oncoming Muton horde.

Everything had gone wrong very fast.

And he knew it was likely going to get worse.

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Las Vegas, United States of America

The Battlemaster was sufficiently pleased with XCOM’s attempts at fighting him. By themselves they were woefully inadequate, but together they were managing to force him to pay attention, even if they had yet to land a significant blow. They were an adequate challenge, which was admittedly more than he had expected given that this had to have been a recent development.

These particular XCOM soldiers would likely be rather devastating on his own army, but not even remotely close to the skill of a Battlemaster. He was pleasantly surprised with their weapon choices as well, it showed they had at least put some thought into how to realistically take him down, even if in practice it didn’t work nearly as well.
The one with the mace, Iosif, who he recalled from the intelligence gathered, was clearly the smartest one. He knew his limits and only played to his strengths and successfully demanded attention, and was skilled enough to deflect his strikes instead of meeting them head-on. The rare times the Battlemaster scored a direct hit, it had been blocked or negated with psionic shields.

He was decent, but not a particularly good duelist and didn’t have the appropriate speed to respond to his faster ripostes.

The telekinetic soldier was utterly useless, and outside of the gimmick of her electrified swords, posed no threat to him that he had seen. The trick had initially been welcome, but she hadn’t figured out the current needed to be sustained if it was to have any effect. Simply throwing her weapons at him would do next to nothing as they couldn’t pierce his armor.

So it amused him to continually return her weapons, knowing that she would only get more frustrated. She also had refrained from directly using her telekinesis directly on him, perhaps out of fear of provoking him to do the same. Commendable, since he would feel obligated to respond in kind, even if it was as weak as the rest of her fighting style.

The other one had been a mild surprise, and highly amusing. Carmelita was nothing more than a rage-driven berserker with a shotgun and ridiculous melee weapon. It could clearly hit fairly hard, but she was so predictable it was almost tiring. She was one of those fighters that only relied on strength and invincibility over strategy, and thus fell into traps and make mistakes rational fighters didn’t make.

She was tough though, he could respect that.

He felt one of them behind him and kicked out and hit air. He transitioned into a spin-slash downwards and barely missed Carmelita, who had dodged out the way, firing her ineffective alloy cannon as she retreated. The telekinetic woman had apparently decided she was tired trying ineffective strategies and had both her weapons in her hand, now glowing a bright orange.

Well, this should be interesting.

He swung towards Iosif who was too slow to get out of the way, but a psionic shield before his raised forearm stopped the blade in its tracks, although it was clearly draining. The telekinetic jumped forward, trying to slash at his leg. Because he was curious what would happen, he let her, though positioned his hand above her as her blades connected.

To his surprise, they sizzled on the armor on his thigh, and he actually noted they had left visible marks.

A problem then.

He reached down, grabbed the woman by her helmet and threw her into a nearby wall and immediately turned to deflect a blow from Iosif. With a free hand, he telekinetically grabbed the swords from the woman’s hand and threw them far behind the alien line. With any luck he would find them later and learn how exactly they were strong enough to even scratch his armor.

He felt Carmelita behind him and stuck out his arm, nailing her in the chest and sending her falling to the ground. He was rather tired of her now, so he spun around and angled his blade to stab into her body, and aimed right for her throat, it suddenly was halted a foot from Carmelita, and a yell of anger caught his attention and he turned to see the telekinetic with her hands extended to him, or rather, his sword.
Carmelita scrambled away and he turned to face the now-furious psion, the energy rippling off her. “You’re fast,” he said, inclining his head. “But I intended to kill her. Someone else must die in her place.”

He charged toward the ADVENT line, appeared in front of one of the XCOM soldiers, one he had no name for. All of them shouted and stumbled back, and he telekinetically grabbed one of the XCOM soldiers and forced him onto the blade, which stuck through his neck. The blade went through the gap smoothly, and with the body still on it, he slammed the point onto the ground, pinning the XCOM soldier to the ground.

The Battlemaster smoothly drew the blade from his neck and charged back towards the melee only to be stopped in his tracks by the telekinetic psion. He felt the energy covering his entire body, the bonds preventing it from moving. Or at least, trying to. It was no stasis field which was both easier to maintain and actually froze a target in place.

But it was enough for Iosif finally score a hit directly on his knee. The metal was slightly dented as a result, but it would take at least a dozen volleys before it did any possible damage. He contemplated letting her exhaust herself on this false imprisonment, but seeing as though Carmelita was also taking advantage and striking on the opposite knee, he figured it was best not to take chances.

He focused on the point where the telekinetic was, and squeezed. The effect was immediate and she fell to the ground, gasping as he cut off her air supply and circulation throughout her body. The instant he was free, he released her and slashed towards Iosif, scoring an actual hit and sending him flying backwards, a large gash in his armor.

He transitioned to a slash against Carmelita, but she had wisely gotten out of his way, and had returned to firing her alloy cannon at him. He heard a clicking sound and looked down to see a small canister at his feet which didn’t explode but released a white gas into the air. Curious-Ah, he knew what it was.

He charged out of the way just in time as a laser from the XCOM line shot towards the gas and hit it. The instant the laser hit, the cloud turned into an inferno and burned out a second later. He glanced towards the XCOM line where one of the soldiers was probably preparing another one. Clever. Although it likely wouldn’t have hurt him even if he’d been in the center of the inferno.

His legs were suddenly rooted to the ground and he saw the telekinetic woman yet again trying to pin him, several more grenades floating above another hand. She thrust it forward and he raised a hand to ‘catch’ them-

And they exploded, but not in shrapnel or fire. But black sticky fluid coated his arm and managed to reach his helmet. The black goo coated his eyepieces, unfortunately rendering him effectively blind.

That was new. He knew what it was. XCOM had dubbed them ‘symbiote grenades’. Used for incapacitation and a rather ingenious application of the green sap the Sectoids used in constructing the Civilian Pacifiers. Charging was risky since he couldn’t see, but he could still feel the Humans around him, and he charged approximately halfway towards where the ADVENT line was and briefly assessed the damage.

His one hand was completely covered in the black substance and he couldn’t move it at all. It was rubbery, and not completely unpleasant. But certainly immobilizing. He still had three other arms, but the front of his helmet was covered by the substance. He felt the soldiers converging on him again, and he quickly tested peeling the substance away, but to no avail. Perhaps if he had time.
But right now, he did not.

He smiled. Fighting blind was something he had not done in decades. All Battlemasters trained at one time or another, but it was seen as unnecessary and impractical. It was more for sport than a serious tactic.

But this was sport, was it not?

But the telekinetic woman had earned her death. He had considered capturing her for Revelean, but she had turned this into an interesting fight. She deserved a warrior’s death, not whatever the geneticist had planned. After all, there was still another psion he could capture.

He closed his eyes, reverting to his habits and focusing on his senses. He tuned the sounds of the still-raging battle around him out, and only focused on the three presences. One focused and determined – Iosif, likely. One victory and triumph – likely the telekinetic. One rage and hate – Carmelita.

In his mind he visualized the battlefield, with the XCOM soldiers as ghostly purple apparitions, and put their presences to the apparitions, and the sounds around them. Swishes of air and grunts of exertion. All allowing milliseconds of time to react.

But he was a Battlemaster. There was no question of if he could do it.

And so he charged forward toward the apparition of Iosif who moved back and the Battlemaster felt his blade meet nothing, which was a psionic shield. He felt Carmelita behind him, and spun to catch her, his fingers outstretched to catch where he presumed her position was, and was rewarded with grabbing her by the arm, and he threw her towards Iosif who probably caught her, he couldn’t exactly say.

He then charged toward the telekinetic, fully intending to kill her, but in a more respectable way. He slashed towards where her legs would probably be, he felt her rise slightly – jumping – and quickly transitioned to an overhead chop with blinding speed. A scream that echoed with psionic distortion sounded, and he realized that his blade was actually stuck in her body.

He heard her yell in pain, and the Battlemaster used the noise to pinpoint her exact location as he pried the blade from her body. The so-called Iron Skin modification. Strong, but not strong enough to resist his weapon. Focusing on her sounds of pain, he gripped his sword with two hands and swung towards where her head would be.

He felt resistance, but it was a clean cut.

The sounds stopped.

Her presence vanished.

He turned to the other two psions, their presences now tinged with panic and fear. They had indeed fought as well as could be expected. Perhaps he would kill them all anyway. It wasn’t as though he was never going to get another chance.

With the firefight still raging around him, the Battlemaster raised his sword in a final salute to them. The dance was coming to a close, and he was curious to see if there were any other tricks they had.

Then again…
He glanced toward where the other humans were, feeling their fear and terror at the sight of a blinded alien still handily beating their best soldiers.

Perhaps he should make a short diversion. Kill the rest of the XCOM soldiers first. Then the psions.

He gripped his weapon, smiled, and charged the line of Humans.

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Paris, France

“Down!” Jamali yelled as the eye of the alien machine glowed brightly and a massive beam shot out of it, luckily missing all of them and slamming into a building behind them, leaving the wall cracked. The Outsiders were taking cover, as a good portion of the squad had Pulse weapons, the bane of the crystalline aliens.

Chan raised his hand, and shot purple energy towards the machine which whirred and floated behind the Outsiders, who began firing on the Templar. “Fakhr, can you blow them up?” Patricia demanded, as she began firing at one of the Outsiders shooting behind a concrete column.

“Give me a moment!” She yelled back as she pulled the rocket launcher from her shoulder and began loading the rocket inside. Jamali noticed the floating ball was moving back their way, the eye glowing again.

“It’s firing again!” Liliyane called while she ducked and the orange lance shot where her position had been. She responded by shooting her Pulse rifle at the floating ball, and scored a hit on the hull. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem to be having much of an effect, only seeming to scorch the armor.

Patricia managed to shatter one of the Outsiders into orange shards as he attempted rushing to a closer position. Iida and Catherine were pinning another one down, and Jamali, Blade and Chan were focusing on the other two. They were getting shots of their own off, and many of them were frighteningly close.

“Rocket ready!” Fakhr announced. “Target?”

“Shoot the machine!” Patricia called, seeming to improvise, as it just was floating there, and the eye was glowing a brighter orange as it probably was preparing to fire again. “Chan! Close range! Everyone else cover!”

“Copy!” They all shouted and Chan grasped his Zweihander and began charging one of the Outsiders while Jamali and the rest of them laid down dozens of gauss shots and laser bursts on the remaining Outsiders. Fakhr shot the rocket towards the ball and it just managed to float out of the way, but not before the rocket hit close by, and the shrapnel and fire actually seemed to penetrate it.

“Ah!” Patricia groaned, pausing her fire as she shook her head, perhaps in response to the pain of the floating ball? Was it actually alive then?

Chan was upon one of the Outsiders and slashed down at the alien. It raised a crystalline arm to block it, and did so, though the blade cut deep as it burned with purple energy. With the blade stuck midway down the arm, Chan took one of his hands off the grip to place a hand flaming with more purple fire onto the Outsider, and within seconds of his hand touching the alien, it was slowly engulfed in psionic energy and disintegrated as all Outsiders did in death.
Iida and Blade took the opportunity to charge forward to both flank the remaining Outsiders, and the floating alien. Fakhr was loading another rocket into her launcher, and Liliyane suddenly cried out as a plasma bolt from one of the Outsiders hit her directly in the shoulder, forcing her back down into cover.

At the same time, the floating alien suddenly began changing. Jamali watched in fascinated horror as the panels around the upper half of the eye suddenly retracted revealing a sickening...thing housed within. Literal tentacles wreathed in psionic energy emerged from the shell, four of them, all attached to a rolling and shifting mass that emitted the same purple aura.

The ball of flesh in the cell was utterly and completely unnatural, even by Jamali’s ever-changing standards. It wasn’t static, but was rolling and inverting, twisting into vaguely spherical shapes. He couldn’t tell if the flesh was naturally pink, or if it was simply an illusion from the psionic energy distorting it.

“What the fuck?!” Blake spat as he began focusing on the tentacle alien.

“What the fuck?!” Patricia shouted, focusing her weapon on the monstrosity. “Scatter!”

The thing began manipulating it’s tentacles around the air, and a purple sphere began converging in the center. It thrust it forward, sending the ball in their direction. Jamali leapt out of the way, and managed to get out of the small blast radius where it hit. But he saw the effects. The bodies caught in the blast suddenly turned black and disintegrated within seconds, and even Liliyane and Catherine who were on the edge of the radius had entire chunks of their armor just disintegrated off, and their entire suit was black and scorched.

“Damn that hurts!” Catherine cursed, as she frantically pulled out her med-kit. “Lily! Get over here!”

“Preparing rocket!” Fakhr yelled, aiming at the tentacle alien. “Firing!”

Her rocket sped towards the creature, but it simply shifted to the side and the rocket crashed nearby, managing to hit one of the Outsiders, but nothing close to where the rocket was intended. Jamali risked standing, taking a few precious seconds to aim at the mass of flesh, and fired.

The burning red lance was true and hit the rolling flesh dead center, and it swiftly turned to him. After three seconds of sustained fire, he ceased and looked at the damage he had caused. Only he saw that the effect had been almost nothing. The charred flesh and even the hole he had burned were already healing and within a few seconds, it was almost as though there had never been a wound at all.

It suddenly floated forward with surprising speed, and stopped right in front of Iida who began stumbling back in surprise, firing her weapon at the tentacled monstrosity in front of her. The thing lashed out with one of its tentacles, wrapping it around her leg, and another wrapped it around her arm and hoisted her up into the air.

“Shoot it now!” Jamali called frantically, but the alien was healing too fast for their shots to be of any use. Iida screamed as she was thrown into the rolling mass of flesh by the tentacles. Jamali could only watch in horror as the flesh enveloped her body, slowly consuming her and presumably dissolving her body within.

The tentacles suddenly withdrew into the shell, and the coverings slid over the flesh-brain, completely protecting it from harm. “Readying rocket,” Fakhr called. “Last one.”
The lone bit of good news he could see was that Chan had killed the last Outsider and was moving towards the alien...thing. The eye of the alien began heating up, but Chan struck it from behind, scoring what seemed to be a deep hit. It spun around, and seeing it was facing an enemy at close range, retracted it’s armor and the tentacles emerged again.

But Chan fortunately seemed to know what he was doing. When one tentacle lashed around his leg, he sliced down and the alien recoiled as he sliced the tentacle clean off. He severed another one with an uppercut. Yet even that didn’t seem to only be a temporary solution, as the alien was simply sticking the tentacle stump back into the mass of flesh, and it was emerging with a completely new tentacle.

Chan couldn’t keep it up forever, but he seemed to be wanting it to end. With that enemy the only one remaining, the surviving XCOM soldiers were circling around it, trying to shoot the mass of flesh encased within the shell, hoping that massive damage to it might manage to kill it. But at this point Jamali suspected that the only thing that would kill it is if the entire flesh-brain was destroyed at once.

Chan suddenly adjusted something on his sword, and the blade suddenly turned a white-hot orange, glowing bright as psionic flames wreathed around it. Grasping it with both hands, he plunged it directly into the eye of the alien horror, pushing it deeper and deeper, slowly as the creature seemed to go into some kind of shock, vibrating and flinging its tentacles in the air.

Patricia also shuddered and fell to one knee, clearly affected by whatever psionic thing that was being sent out by the alien. Chan shouted as well, but continued to push the sword further in until it was up to the hilt. “Firing!” Fakhr shouted, and the rocket sped towards the alien mass and hit the back of the shell.

The explosion of purple and orange threw Chan backwards and the shell suddenly fell to the ground. Jamali quickly assessed the damage as soon as the fumes cleared. All that remained in the shell was some purple goop and bits of flesh, though who’s it was he couldn’t tell. The entire front of Chan’s armor had been torn to shreds, and his helmet had open gashes, yet he stood. Shaky, but alive.

“What the actual fuck was that?” He sputtered, exhaustion tinged his voice, as he slumped.

“You sit the hell down,” Catherine demanded as she pulled out her med-kit. “We’ll deal with that later. You’re exhausted and you’re not killing yourself today.”

“Fine, doc,” he sighed, collapsing to the ground. “Lost my sword the first battle. Was hoping it would last a little longer.”

“I’d say it was a fair sacrifice,” Patricia commented, walking up. “That thing pretty much negated my telepathy. I don’t know how that...thing...did it, but I really hope there aren’t that many more of those things.” She motioned toward the UFO. “We’ve still got a mission here. Come on, let’s go secure the Gateway. But I think the hard part is done. I don’t sense anything more inside.”

Jamali sincerely hoped that was true.

He never wanted to experience anything like that again.

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Seattle, United States of America

“I’m hit!” Jose yelled as a large bolt of plasma hit him square in the chest, the brunt of it luckily
absorbed, but leaving a small black crater in its wake, a danger that was becoming more and more prominent as the Elites continued pouring through the hole in the barrier and taking positions behind the rubble.

Oliver had heard the stories about how just six Elites and an Ethereal had nearly destroyed New York and fighting them now, he could easily see why. The hulking red-armored aliens with their ornate triangular masks would just. Not. Die.

He saw them shrug off *missile* attacks from Jose and Nio, if they even did cause any damage. But their skin beneath the armor seemed incredibly tough, and he was pretty sure they had been genetically modified to be able to heal wounds extremely quickly. The massive plasma cannons they wielded were powerful enough to kill any soldier in a few shots, and to make matters worse, they were beginning to be interspersed with ordinary Muton soldiers.

The smaller Mutons fortunately died much easier, although they were on the whole remarkably tough. But the problem was that they were in danger of losing the line, and as more Elites poured through, they were beginning to advance forward, and not even the two psions would be enough to turn the tide.

The air battle above had turned into essentially a victory for the aliens, as the UFOs now far outnumbered the ADVENT aircraft still in operation. Andromedon soldiers were also beginning to come through the gap, and were tactically disabling certain parts of the shield to allow their forces to advance. Normally that would be a bloodbath, but with the Elites leading the charge, it was giving them a fighting chance.

“Firing barrage,” Gloria informed, and raised the arms of her MEC and fired a trio of missiles directly at one of the Elites, all of which impacted on the upper chest and helmet. Large gaps of the armor fell off and Oliver and Shun fired at the openings, and the combined power managed to bring the behemoth to the ground with a thud.

One down, thirty to go?

It wasn’t the first Elite that had died, but they were few and far between. A roar from the back of the alien line sounded, and Oliver felt his heart drop even further. The Berserkers were back, and this time there wasn’t a coordinated missile strike to stop them. “Berserkers incoming!” Creed echoed, as he killed several more Muton soldiers.

Oliver quickly scanned the battlefield, trying to see how much they could realistically hold. The alien forces were roughly two-thirds through the rubble graveyard, and even though ADVENT was continuously rushing their forces to the defense, it was becoming overwhelming even for them. Soldiers died, were pulled away, and replaced, but now they were falling behind, and dozens of corpses now littered the area around him, along with the smell of ozone and burnt flesh.

If things didn’t improve soon, they would have to pull back.

Allison was selectively using her psionic shields, creating smaller and personal ones around wounded soldiers, those actually firing and also directly in front to alien weapons to temporarily negate the threat. The woman was distorted through her purple veil, but he could tell she was beginning to tire from the constant usage of her powers with no break.

Matthew was similarly weakened, and used his abilities with no wasted breath or finesse. Squeezed fists resulted in Muton heads imploding, and Elite armor crumpling. He alone had been responsible for the deaths of three Elites so far, and the rest of his energy was spent reshaping the battlefield, removing the cover the aliens hid behind, and throwing the concrete at more aliens, or against their
The Berserkers leapt forward as Oliver executed yet another Muton soldier, and immediately charged forward, wrist blades at the ready. They fortunately weren’t as armored as the Elites, or as large, but that was a small comfort since they still towered over all of the soldiers. “Target the Berserkers!” Creed yelled, and the hail of laser and gauss fire turned to the charging aliens.

Two immediately succumbed to the combined fire, and Matthew yelled as psionic energy convulsed around him, and two of the Berserkers were lifted into the air, and their armor visibly crushed as he threw them into the aliens at the back. Several Berserkers slammed directly into, or tripped over small psionic barriers manifested by Allison.

One was blown apart by rockets, but several managed to leap over the line, and immediately began wreaking havoc on the ill-prepared soldiers. Two ADVENT soldiers were thrown back by one punch from a Berserker, and Nio yelled as another one grabbed him and began beating him into the ground. Oliver frantically fired at the head of the beast, and managed to pierce it after a few volleys and lucky shots.

The Berserker collapsed to the ground, Nio still in its hand, limbs at contorted and unnatural angles and lying still. He was clearly dead. Another Berserker roared as its arms were literally ripped off by Matthew’s telekinesis, and the psion seemed to be growing surprisingly more powerful as things got worse. Creed, Shun, and the combined fire of ADVENT managed to take down the remaining Berserker, but during that entire time, the situation had worsened.

The Elites were almost upon them, and the Cyberdisks had nearly surrounded them as they had been focused on the Berserkers. They had been saved for just that moment, it seemed, when the majority of their tools were spent. Creed noticed too, and knew what had to be done. “Retreat! Allison, shield!”

“On it!” She responded, and raised her hands, the largest psionic shield he had seen from her yet appeared above them, blocking the Cyberdisk fire. The Officers were also yelling to their soldiers to fall back, and into their wrists as they communicated orders from their superiors. Matthew roared, and clenched a fist and six Cyberdisks promptly collapsed into wrecks, the entirety of the force that had been flanking them from above.

And he promptly collapsed.

“Grab him!” Creed ordered Oliver, and Allison readjusted her shield to face the Elites and Muton soldiers. “Lightning Sky, we need an evac now!”

“Oh approach,” was the response. “Stand by.”

Oliver hauled Matthew over his shoulder, grunting at the weight. It seemed that Matthew had not been getting stronger, but had simply expended everything he had left. Luckily, it seemed that might save them since they now didn’t have to worry about getting shot from above. The Mutons were now past the line, and one of the Officers waved back some of the still-retreating soldiers. “Stand clear!”

Oliver realized he was holding a detonator, and once his thumb hit the trigger, the first two buildings near the ADVENT line shuddered and suddenly collapsed from planted explosives inside. The rubble fell onto the Mutons, burying them if not killing them outright. “That’ll buy us some time,” the Officer said grimly. “But I don’t think we can hold the city.”

“Not in this condition,” Creed nodded, as the skyranger swooped down. “We’ve lost too many
people now.”

Having now participated in two losing battles, Oliver was not exactly feeling elated as he saw the skyranger land. The aliens seemed unstoppable when they put thought into it, and as shown, overwhelming numbers would kill the defenses even if the aliens weren’t as smart.

He could only hope the other battles were going somewhat better.

Although with the Battlemaster in one of them, he had a sinking feeling that wasn’t the case.

***

_Las Vegas, United States of America_

Nuan would have been awestruck that the reports and even footage of the Battlemaster in combat was somehow _understating_ what it was actually like to physically be around him.

If she hadn’t been completely terrified.

She had felt a faint glimmer of hope after Karen had blinded him with the symbiote grenades, but that had been quickly dispelled when he had proceeded to continue fighting _blind_. His subsequent execution of Karen had been excruciating to watch, and Nuan really felt the screaming urge to throw down her weapon and run.

But she didn’t.

She couldn’t leave everyone else to die to this thing.

Even as it butchered everyone around her.

Despite how it seemed on the surface to not be effecting him, Nuan somehow noted that the Battlemaster _was_ hindered by his blindness. His strikes were broader, not as precise. He amputated limbs off of soldiers when she could tell he had been going for kills. Right now he was hacking the soldiers around him into pieces, all grace and precision gone in favor of death.

Iosif and Carmelita were coming back to assist, but the Battlemaster had already killed half of the ADVENT forces around her. Aya was stumbling back, firing her pulse rifle as she tried to get out of the range of his swings, but she was suddenly picked up telekinetically, and a swing by the Battlemaster decapitated her without a sound.

Carmelita tried once more firing several rounds from her alloy cannon, which Nuan knew _had_ to be running low on ammo, but to the _exact same fucking effect_. Nuan felt an unreasonable anger at Carmelita’s so-called ‘tactics’. It _clearly wasn’t working_. Yet the idiot woman kept doing it over and over again expecting different results.

_Idiot!_

Iosif was trying to attract the Battlemaster’s attention again, actually using his brain, by attacking the flank of the towering alien. A low rumble emanated from the alien as he gestured and both Carmelita and Iosif were sent flying back, although Iosif managed to anchor himself to the ground after being pushed a few meters back.

The Battlemaster was now looking towards her side of the street, she swallowed and he suddenly performed his fake teleportation trick and appeared _right beside her_. She bit her tongue to keep from screaming as he slashed the soldiers around him, men and woman crying out in pain around
She stumbled back and tossed one of her flame primer grenades at his armored feet, refraining from firing until she was well out of range. And then the Battlemaster looked at her, the helmet encased in the black substance only adding to his terrifying visage. A second later the sword was coming towards her and she leapt to the side and felt the blade whistle horrifyingly past her face and she fell onto her back, thinking how lucky she was that she hadn’t been hit.

Until the pain hit her and she realized that he had hit her. Her arms felt as though they were on fire, and she tried to push herself up to get away, when the extent of her injuries became apparent.

She had no arms.

Panic enveloped her as her vision swam as the pain strangely dulled at the realization that two of his limbs didn’t exist anymore. She could feel the blood running out of the stumps, her life literally draining away as the sounds of the world faded to a mix of screams, gauss blasts and explosions.

She didn’t want to die like this, but she was too weak to fight anymore, too weak to even do more than look around. The sky was irritatingly bright blue and cheerful, almost as if there was no war going on.

Nuan wished with what she presumed was her final moments that the rest of them would leave now. Iosif, Cassandra, that other sniper, even that idiot Carmelita. They couldn’t win. Not against that thing.

Her vision flickered, and she noted with some dull interest that she felt herself behind lifted up by the shoulders and dragged…somewhere. Voices above her talked, but she couldn’t understand them. Were they even friends? Something was sprayed onto the stumps of her arms, blessedly hot and cold at the same time.

What an idiotic last thought to have.

And Nuan finally fell unconscious.

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Supplementary Material

The Advent Directive

SECTION 8: ADVENT Military

Subsection 8.3: Soldier Qualifications

Overview: The ADVENT Military expects the best from its soldiers and that extends from the newly enlisted to the ranking officers themselves. There are standards that ADVENT will adhere to, thus ensuring that those enlisting are of the highest caliber to face the multiple challenges ADVENT will face from a military and diplomatic perspective.

The ADVENT Military must be more than a sword of the Executive Branch, only used as a blunt tool to destroy or negate opposition, but as a scalpel with the knowledge that a military response is not the only one, and exercise restraint when utilizing the ADVENT Military. However, when the time to deploy comes, each ADVENT soldier must follow their orders completely, and execute their enemies without mercy.
There can be no compromise against the enemies of ADVENT, except complete and utter surrender of the enemy. Those serving must be prepared to perform these acts and understand what joining ADVENT truly entails.

There are two points of entry: Enlisted and Officer, both with the potential for promotion.

The ADVENT Military does not discriminate based on age or gender. All positions are open to male and female soldiers, provided that they meet the minimum requirements.

**Educational Requirements:**

Enlisted: High School Degree – Lower education levels not accepted.

Officer: 4-Year College Degree Minimum – Lower education levels not accepted

**Physical Requirements:**

For both Officer and Enlisted: Must pass a physical fitness test which consists of the following:

- Pull-Ups: Minimum Requirement: 10
- Crunches: Minimum Requirement: 75
- 3-Mile Run: Minimum Requirement: 28:00 Minutes

Must not be missing one or more limbs, or have approved prosthetic replacements

Must not be suffering from any terminal or debilitating disease or illness.

**Personal Requirements:**

Minimum Age: 18 (17 with parental permission)

Must have a clean criminal record (Only exceptions can be made for misdemeanors)

Must not be affiliated with any known political or religious extremist groups (List is publically available)

Must be a legal citizen of ADVENT. Illegal applicants will be arrested and prosecuted.

**Psychological Requirements:**

Must not have a documented record of deception, bullying, or disruptive behavior.

Must not be under any medication that severely alters mental conditions.

Must not be suffering from one or more mental illnesses or social impairments.

Must participate in a Standard Psychological Examination (SPM) to establish psychological state:

- Those with pacifistic tendencies, or inclinations towards non-violent behavior in the face of danger will be dismissed. Alternate employment within various ADVENT agencies may be recommended instead.
- Those with sociopathic, psychopathic, or similar inclinations towards the taking of life to the extent that they pose a threat to combat and military security will be dismissed. Profiles fitting this description will be forwarded to ADVENT Intelligence or XCOM for possible
recruitment.

- Those who do not fall into either extreme will pass, though some may require monitoring for a period of 1 to 5 years.

Chapter End Notes

So, it's that time of year again where the college semester is starting. Like usual I'll post my standard disclaimer that college comes first and will take priority over writing. That being said, historically, there hasn't been a major change in updates, but if there is, that is the reason. What is going to stop writing briefly is the XCOM 2 expansion dropping next week. That'll be where my free time is spent until I beat it. I'm hoping to get another chapter in the pipeline before then, so you should hopefully not experience a drastic delay. No promises though, it's going to be an (obviously) big one.

And another thank you to everyone reading and/or giving feedback. This would not be nearly as good without you.

- Xabiar
The Praesidium, Situation Room

There was very little good news in the wake of the battles.

Patricia had returned to the Praesidium with her squad mostly intact, in addition to a UFO Transport and Gateway. That, and they managed to kill one of the little surprises the Battlemaster had left, which had apparently almost killed the entire squad. Even with the ease of which Patricia had disposed of the majority of the alien forces, the victory felt hollow since it had, in retrospect, not been anything more than a diversion.

Seattle was essentially lost, even though they had extracted a heavy toll from the alien forces, but destroyed most of the city in the process. The casualty list was massive, including several veteran XCOM soldiers, and it would have been far higher if he hadn’t insisted Saudia have the military prepare contingency plans in case of being overrun.

And that was the problem. No matter how skilled they were, no matter how intricate and detailed their plans were, none of that mattered when they could eventually just be overrun with sheer numbers. It was a stark reality he had…not ignored, not entirely, but certainly pushed to the back of his mind; reduced its importance; pretty much whatever to ignore the fact that no matter what, they would probably die from nothing more than being outnumbered.

Psionics did somewhat even the playing field, but not when there were clearly ways to counter it, and the enemy had psions of their own.

Aegis had given him the numbers before, and it put into perspective the…futility…of this war, even if everything somehow went right. Every single individual species’ army outnumbered the combined military might of every single human military, even with the increased numbers from recruitment. The Muton species alone was half the size of the Human race, and Aegis hadn’t clarified if that was for the entire species, or only combat-ready soldiers.

Humans were too easy to kill.

It was just that simple.

It wasn’t that the other species were innately superior to Humans. The battles had shown that. With the exception of the Ethereals, each species had shown that they could, in general, be overcome by Human weapons and tactics. Some easier than others, but it wasn’t hopeless. The issue was that there were just more of them than Humanity could ever hope to match in a reasonable amount of time.

Portland had, amazingly, been held, but it was another hollow victory because while ADVENT had managed to hold off the Muton army, they hadn’t been able to exact nearly enough enemy casualties to make a noticeable impact, and once whatever alien commander had realized that the best he could do was overrun with superior numbers, he had instead sabotaged the city outside the zones of control ADVENT held.
Electricity, water; all of that had been severed or sabotaged and immediately afterwards the alien army had retreated, content to force them to leave of their own volition, while keeping heavy watch on any efforts of ADVENT to repair it. Supply lines were being attacked, and planes shot down. The position was untenable, that much was clear, and it would only be a matter of time before ADVENT had to abandon it.

Vegas was little more than shiny rubble now, as the Battlemaster had made good on his promise to destroy the city. ADVENT had helped to an extent, strategically collapsing buildings onto hordes of aliens, similar to Seattle. The majority of the defenders were dead, and only around twenty thousand had managed to retreat safely.

They had admittedly killed at least three times their number of aliens, which would have been an acceptable loss had numbers actually meant anything to them. It didn’t matter how many Mutons, Vitakara, or Andromedons died, they were all ultimately replaceable and for every one that was killed, all it did was delay the inevitable a little longer.

Then there was the Battlemaster himself, and he was one of the only ones whose death would actually have an impact. The problem was that the very idea of managing to kill the Battlemaster seemed laughable. True, the Templars had only had mere weeks of training, yet the Battlemaster had disabled them with ease, going so far as to fight them while blinded.

Debriefing Iosif and Carmelita had been unpleasant from what they’d described to him. It had looked that way from the footage of the battle, but both Iosif and Carmelita were convinced that if the Battlemaster had really wanted to, he could have killed them within minutes. The only reason he seemed to keep them alive for so long was because he appeared to want practice.

**Practice.**

The Commander stared at the footage playing in front of him on the holotable. The same footage of the Battlemaster played over and over, from every perspective he could find. What was he hoping to find here? Weaknesses, tactics, anything that gave a sliver of hope that he could be beaten. And he could be, the Commander was certain of that. Everything had a weakness, some kind of vulnerability.

So he believed, but the more he learned, the more he was wondering if the Battlemaster was the rare exception to the rule. Aegis had given details on the Battlemaster a while ago and had noted much the same thing.

His armor was nigh-impenetrable, and Aegis suspected that only the same type of metal might be able to be strong enough to penetrate it, or defend against his sword. The only glimmer of optimism he could glean from this was that Shen’s swords, set to the high-friction setting, seemed to actually do more than just glance off the armor, but actually cut it in a minuscule way.

The Battlemaster had seemed to think the same thing, judging by how quickly he took Karen’s swords out of the picture.

So one possible weakness. Two if he counted offensive psionic powers. Chan might actually be able to cause of damage. Annette as well, had she still been alive. But that highlighted another problem: The Battlemaster didn’t tolerate threats. The instant it seemed like his life was in danger he stopped playing and removed the threat.

Karen’s swords had caused damage. Literally seconds later he had them telekinetically thrown far away. If a soldier posed something more than being irritating, he would just kill them outright. The Commander didn’t know if Karen had been a victim of this, or she was just unlucky and the first
one the Battlemaster had chosen to kill. But he was certain that if a psion like Chan was in play, the Battlemaster wouldn’t waste time toying with him, he would simply kill him within seconds.

The Commander had to admire his intelligence, even if he despised him at the same time.

So what was the solution? More Templars? New weapons? Try to overwhelm him with psions? Get Aegis to actually do something? Or was it time to take more drastic measures?

Problem: Humans were too easy to kill.

Problem: Aliens outnumbered Humans by an unfathomable amount.

Problem: The Battlemaster was almost impossible to stop, let alone kill.

Problem: There were other Ethereals actually worse than the Battlemaster.

Problem: Humans were still divided.

Problem: Every single one of those problems is too major to ignore.

And the issue was that none of them could be solved quickly or easily without taking drastic action. Traditional ethics was not something he held himself to, but he had standards and didn’t begrudge people for following them. He knew there would be some who viewed what Vahlen and her team were doing to the Human body as strange and unnatural, and wouldn’t want that anywhere near themselves.

He’d planned to let genetic modification be a choice each soldier made, like the MEC pilots. Now he was wondering if he could afford to do even that. Every soldier lost now was too major to ignore. Could he honestly say that approach was truly worth preserving? Did he even have a choice now that there was a very real possibility that they would lose if these steps weren’t taken?

There was a problem with his priorities. Even now he was still too idealistic. He was looking forward to the future too much, working with a failed fantasy where personal choice was an actual and legitimate option. Manchurian Project be damned, the last thing he needed now was Vahlen wasting time trying to keep Humans under control out of some apocalyptic fear that they could take over the world. That was a problem for after the war, that was a concern that should only be realized when the fighting was done and they had to pick up the pieces.

What was he actually concerned about? Defection? Betrayal?

He laughed to himself.

If there was one thing he was certain of, it was that every member of XCOM would rather die before letting the aliens win. No, betrayal had never been a reason, but his attempt to keep the most powerful people in the world from abusing their abilities on other humans. He was tackling a problem that had yet to manifest just because…why?

Was it to prove that, somewhere, he was not as bad as he knew he was? That he still respected human choice, and wanted for at least one of his achievements to be objectively seen with approval? This, from someone who cared nothing for superfluous praise and validation?

He scowled, hands gripping the holotable tightly as the footage played over and over in front of him.

He wasn’t a good person, so why should he pretend otherwise? Logic and pragmatism were far
superior, and that was why he had gotten this far; that was _why_ he was still alive. He saw lines and he crossed them if there was no other choice, so this should be no different. There were still so many problems in the world that he had refrained from interfering in out of the sake of being _apolitical_.

Apolitical.

Sure, that was what he wanted XCOM to be in the future. Work with ADVENT, not work for or control them. Don’t interfere in their matters. He’d given Saudia all the tools needed to create, if not a perfect society, one that was free of most of the failures of the past. And to her credit, Saudia was rising to the challenge, because she too understood what was really at stake.

He wasn’t blind to the fact that normally, after such a defeat, there should be people in the streets. There should be _some_ kind of outcry.

There wasn’t. Probably due to her wisely keeping it quiet.

Apolitical.

Was that even a word in this time? _Every_ decision had ramifications across the world now. For every country that did not join ADVENT, ADVENT was that much weaker. For every pointless Human war that persisted was one taking precious resources away from the alien invasion. All he needed to do was send Patricia over to China or that idiot in Canada and force them to join for the preservation of the Human race.

One XCOM squad could decapitate any minor threat the countries in the Middle East might pose. The time for surrender had long passed, as far as he could tell. The governments deserved nothing after seeing they stood no chance, and yet, persisting anyway. XCOM had collapsed governments before, but only as it related to the alien threat.

But that was a petty argument, since _everything_ now affected the war against the aliens.

He closed his eyes and took a breath.

He was stressed, tired and likely not thinking clearly.

But major decisions needed to be made.

“You can’t sleep?” He glanced up, partially surprised that Vahlen had managed to get this close without him noticing her. She looked like she had been sleeping, as she was out of her laboratory attire and was wearing more casual clothing for sleeping. He noted absently that her hair was also down and she hadn’t bothered putting on shoes before coming.

Probably waiting for him, he supposed, feeling somewhat guilty to keep her waiting without letting her know- “No,” she suddenly interrupted, raising a hand and walking around. “Don’t you even begin feeling that way. I should have guessed you’d be somewhere here.”

He shrugged, looking back down to the holotable. “For what good it does.”

“And is it working?” She asked, gently taking his chin between her fingers and turning it towards her. “How many times have you watched that? Ten? Twenty?”

He closed his eyes, sighing. “I have no idea.”

She reached over to grab his hands and he let her turn his body towards her. “And what exactly
Have you managed to find from that that we didn’t find at the meeting?”

He rested his forehead against hers. “That we’re all dead unless we make some big changes.”

“You know you shouldn’t do this all on your own,” she chastised, looking at him with concern both in her eyes and emanating out of her. “Ignoring pointless romantic comparisons, you’re going to make mistakes in judgement if you sneak up here in the middle of the night and dwell on how bad the situation seems.”

He let go of her left hand and used it to rub his eyes. “I’d kept all of you up far past what was needed. People need sleep, I can’t right now. No point in wasting time I say. I’m not—”

“You’re not well, mentally or otherwise,” Vahlen interrupted, more harshness in her voice than he was expecting. “I can feel how much stress and exhaustion you are under from the other end of the Praesidium. You’re probably making it impossible for any reasonably powerful telepath to sleep tonight. You need someone to share it with,” her voice softened. “So here I am.”

He simply pulled her into a hug.

They stood there for a while, both of them relaxing against each other, reminding themselves that they weren’t completely alone in the struggles facing both of them.

“Thank you,” he told her, knowing she could feel how much those words conveyed.

“Anytime you need it,” she answered softly against his chest. “That’s what we do for each other.”

“That it is,” he answered, just as softly. “Although I still don’t think I’m going to be able to sleep anytime soon. Unless you make me.”

“No, I’ve got a better idea,” she said, gently disengaging from him. “I saw what was in your head while walking up here. Difficult to ignore and you needed someone who sees how you think to really help.” She walked around to the opposite side of the holotable, brushed a few unruly strands of hair behind her ear and looked him directly in the eyes.

“We’re both not going to get to sleep, I think,” she continued, shutting off the footage of the Battlemaster. “So we’re going to start going through those thoughts and plans in your head. We’re going to think them through logically and clearly, which you were definitely not. And we’ll do that until Zhang, Jackson, or Patricia decide to check up on us.”

He had to smile at that. “I think that is an excellent idea. Since I was, ah, not ‘thinking clearly’, perhaps you should decide what we go over first.”

“Fine,” she said with a look of intense concentration on her face, already typing on a tablet she had picked up. “Your first identified problem: Humans are too easy to kill”

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Switzerland, ADVENT Command

Saudia sat alone at her desk, no one nearby to disturb her as she dwelled alone on the ramifications of the past few days. She was thankful that the Commander had the foresight to include certain provisions in the Directive, and that she and Elizabeth had worked for this contingency well in advance.

Unfortunately, it was a so-called victory that she didn’t want to have. In fact, it only made things
more difficult for her.

Morale was dropping fast in the wake of the losses, and she couldn’t entirely blame everyone.

They were losing. Badly.

There was no way around that fact, and the worst part was that no easy answers presented themselves to her. Or plausible ones of any kind. No, if things stayed as they were, the aliens would win within one year, probably sooner.

She personally wasn’t as affected as everyone else, and was keeping her mind on the big picture. The war wasn’t lost. Not by a long shot. So, there were some facts she was keeping at the forefront of her mind:

One: The aliens only controlled a relatively limited section of the world. They had the major cities in Australia, a town in Japan, and some major cities on the American West Coast. All in all, not that many. Granted the losses were no good for morale, but they still held the advantage when it came to land mass.

Two: ADVENT could beat the aliens. They’d done it before, both with and without XCOM help. They just needed to be smarter and wiser than the aliens for it to happen, which was a somewhat difficult task since the Battlemaster was proving to be too competent for his own good. It was irritating, since she couldn’t help but respect him in a way.

The main problem that she had highlighted was that in the end, it would come down to a numbers game. Humanity could probably kill several billion aliens and they would still have some to throw at them. No, they couldn’t win this conventionally. They were playing within rules imposed in their minds.

Rules that were simply one species against another, winner take all.

Wasn’t fair and didn’t work. So a new strategy needed to be developed. The rules needed to be changed or they simply needed to cheat.

The question was how they should cheat. What would be the best answer to what the aliens were doing here?

That was something she knew she couldn’t figure out on her own. Luckily she had an excellent and competent team of advisors oversee the various departments and agencies. No, she didn’t believe the war was lost yet. The Battlemaster was a problem, but only because he was smart. She’d surprisingly noted that the Battlemaster seemed to have gotten into the Commander’s head, which she knew had to have been his intention.

The Commander was a man who rarely, if ever, lost. But when he did, it fucked with his head severely. He would second guess himself, become predictable, and try things as safely as possible. The trick with the so-called Templars had been novel, but Saudia had known the best they were going to do was slow the Battlemaster down.

Slowing him down was a pointless goal. He had to be killed. That was what they should be working towards. No surviving, or slowing him down, but purely killing him. But the Commander was almost preparing for defeat, he was acting almost hopeless and scared of the Battlemaster. That was, admittedly, completely justified, but it didn’t solve the problem.

Saudia drummed her fingers against the table, her chin resting on a propped up fist. To her it seemed simple: Kill the Battlemaster and they could win the war. Most of the aliens were inferior
to Humans, especially Vitakarians and Mutons. Take away their leaders and they were worse. They weren’t winning on skill, but numbers.

The Andromedons were a problem, but they were fewer and they would have many more weaknesses than the Battlemaster. And the Sectoids…come to think of it, she didn’t recall seeing them at all in the past few months. Though they were another inferior species, with laughably weak psions compared to Humans. With the exception of the Hive Commanders.

Of course, there was the likelihood of another Ethereal showing up if the Battlemaster was killed. But she had her doubts that he would somehow be worse than the Battlemaster, with the exception of this Imperator leading them. Still, even the weaker Ethereals were dangerous, and they had to deal with the problem at hand.

The Battlemaster was one Ethereal. One with a limited area of effect. Capturing cities was all well and good, but his reach was limited and he couldn’t be everywhere at once. The fact that he was, right now, seemingly invincible didn’t matter so much in that perspective. So that meant he needed to be kept off the front lines whenever possible.

ADVENT needed some kind of victory for PR if nothing else. There needed to be strikes against alien holds, or the razing of their armies. The Mutons might have been unfeeling brutes, but she suspected that even Andromedon and Vitakara morale could be damaged.

There had been enough toying around. The aliens were on Earth, and Earth belonged to the Humans.

It was time to remind them of that. Luckily she had several operations she could enact, ones that had been in the process for weeks, but now might need to be bumped up a few days. She needed to talk with the Commander as well. XCOM would probably be needed for some of these, and it was extremely possible that aliens would launch even more attacks soon.

The little bit of good news to come out of this entire debacle had been that the EU was finally coming around. France had begun making efforts to join after Paris was almost taken, and when they realized how unprepared they were for an actual alien army. And Hassan had told her that it would likely have a ripple effect.

Europe had now seen first-hand the strength of the aliens. She found it darkly amusing to have the knowledge that if the idiotic politicians in charge didn’t start using their brains, there were definitely some in the militaries that would be concerned enough to take matters into their own hands. But she felt it wouldn’t come to that. They would join ADVENT in the end and that was the end of story.

Canada was another issue that seemed almost petty in the scope of the threat. Prime Minister Jace might be idiotic enough to openly refuse to help, but she truthfully no longer cared about what he wanted. Necessity demanded that Canada cooperate, and she would ensure they would, one way or another.

But it would require some deftness not to make a martyr out of him, for the moronic pacifists that refused to accept that anything other than ADVENT would result in death. Then again, against her Peacekeepers and army she supposed it really didn’t make much difference what they wanted.

All they had were weak, hollow words and threats. They threatened nothing but her ego.

She had armies.
And it was perhaps time to consider bringing this world to order much more forcefully than she’d wanted. The survival of the human race now depended on it.

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The Praesidium, Medical Bay

Nuan groggily opened her eyes, then rapidly closed them to hide the white light shining from the ceiling. What happened? Was the first thought to come to her head as she slowly adjusted to consciousness.

The battle…the Battlemaster…they were losing…Karen died…Carmelita was an ineffective idiot…

My arms!

Her eyes snapped open as adrenaline flowed through her at the realization. The first thing she did was look down as best she could to where her arms were.

Or should be.

Because right now they were just stumps, the ends covered with some kind of soft device, probably medical. The left one had lost about half of the forearm and the right had been amputated right up to the elbow. They didn’t hurt thankfully, but there was just…nothing.

Nuan swallowed as she unconsciously tried to move her fingers and arms, while also realizing that they weren’t there anymore. It was so alien as to be difficult to grasp. It was difficult to believe this was actually happening and not part of some nightmare.

The only good news to her was that she appeared to have been rescued by XCOM. She doubted the aliens would have tried taking care of her, and the room she was in was distinctly alien based on the shimmering gray metal and subconscious throbbing in the back of her mind. So that meant at least some XCOM soldiers had survived.

She hoped Iosif had made it.

The multicolored shield that constituted her ‘door’ suddenly dissipated and a bald man in a medical uniform walked in, a tablet in his hand. She’d seem him before, he’d been one of the soldiers who apparently was also a Praesidium Medic. “Calm down, Nuan,” he said slowly and deliberately as she jerked her head in his direction. “It’s going to be alright.”

“My arms are gone and that alien destroyed us like we were nothing!” She hissed. “How could it be alright?”

His forehead furrowed and lips parted slightly. “I’m sorry,” he said. “But I don’t speak Chinese.”

Oh, right. She consciously made sure she was speaking English to answer him now, although the initial burst of fury had dissipated, leaving only exhaustion. “It doesn’t look alright to me, doctor…”

“Harkin,” he answered. “Blake Harkin. I’m sure you’ve seen me around. I double as the chief battlefield surgeon when I’m not on missions. And it’s not as bad as it looks, trust me.”

Nuan attempted to relax, trying to ignore the feeling of nothing where her hands should be. “The others…?”
“Iosif, Carmelita, Esinam, and Cassandra managed to get out,” Harkin reassured her, consulting his tablet. “The Templars are the main reason you’re still alive. They pulled you out after you were wounded and called for an extraction nearby. They got everyone alive out before the Battlemaster remembered to kill them.”

Ok…that was some good news. “And the battle?”

Harkin grimaced. “No good news there. After XCOM evacuated the main ADVENT force received orders to retreat and enact contingency plans. They made the aliens pay dearly, but as it stands, the city of Las Vegas no longer exists.”

Nuan didn’t care at all about the city, it could eventually be rebuilt if the Americans really wanted it. But it seemed like such a waste of life now. What did they have that could possibly stop the Battlemaster? All fighting him seemed to accomplish was getting people killed, and had it not been for a liberal dose of luck, she would have been one of them.

“What about the other battles?” She suddenly recalled, also vaguely noting that he’d been on the Paris operation.

He scratched his chin as he hesitated answering, and she absentmindedly noted that the light shining down on him briefly highlighted the almost imperceptible hexagons on his skin. Gene-modded. Huh, she hadn’t known that. “We succeeded in pushing the aliens out of Paris,” he began slowly. “Although there were some complications. We did manage to recover one of their transports and a Gateway. Lost Iida, but we were lucky all things considered. Seattle though…the aliens control what’s left of it. XCOM was overwhelmed and was forced to retreat, and ADVENT didn’t have the numbers to hold.”

She supposed it was good Paris was safe. They’d probably join ADVENT now because of it. “Wasn’t there another city?” She remembered. “Botelan?”

“Portland,” he corrected automatically. “News is…mixed. ADVENT did manage to hold it, but we don’t know how long they can stay. The aliens, instead of striking the city proper, hit the utilities leading to it. Water, power, electricity, supplies. ADVENT doesn’t know how long they can hold the city without it becoming unfeasible. And the aliens didn’t take many casualties, although thankfully ADVENT didn’t either.”

“And everything is ‘alright’.” She repeated dully. “You Americans are optimistic.”

“Well, you’re clearly feeling better,” he sighed, rubbing his forehead. “I was more referring to your injuries than the current state of the war. I assume the Commander will be making some changes to our strategies in the coming days. Hopefully that Ethereal actually decides to help instead of sitting around doing nothing.”

Nuan glanced down at the stumps of her arms. “So what will you do?”

Harkin set down his tablet and fixed her with a stare that didn’t exactly instill confidence. “We can do a lot with MELD,” he began. “But we can’t regrow limbs. Haven’t really tried, truth be told, but that isn’t an option for you sadly. Which means you’ll be fitted with prosthetics if you want that. They’re functionally identical to the real thing and will actually be much stronger, if you want to look at the positives.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Considering my options, I’d rather have that than nothing. But…how similar is it to my- what my arms felt like? Is feeling there?”
Harkin’s lips twitched. “I know it’s not as sensitive as natural flesh, but like I said, it’s functional. There are forms of pain receptors, although they will be received differently by your brain. From speaking with some of the recipients, you won’t have the same…delicacy, I believe is the right word. You’ll likely not be able to play the piano very well, but you’ll be able to write as good as ever.”

But she’d have hands…which was better than nothing. Still, she felt a wave of sadness wash over her as she realized that there would be some sensations she would never feel again. Although she knew she-

“[Damn!]” She abruptly swore to herself. She’d somehow forgotten that she couldn’t-no-shouldn’t make any decisions without authorization by her superiors. Why had that not been the first thing she’d thought of when waking up? She didn’t even know if they wanted her in XCOM anymore, let alone if she should be taking their tech.

If you hadn’t been so loyal and gotten enhanced like Iosif suggested, you might have arms no-

No. She quickly crushed that line of thought. She knew her place and followed her orders. Unless she got permission, she shouldn’t make decisions like this without permission. And she certainly shouldn’t blame them for her condition now.

“It’s not that bad,” Harkin said, misinterpreting her outburst. “The Commander has one, and he’s described it as ‘different’ but it only takes some getting used to—"

“No! Not that,” she interrupted, sounding irritatingly emotions. “I need to contact my superiors.”

“Oh...” he said, nodding slowly. “Nuan, don’t worry about that. They’re appraised of your condition. They commended your bravery in fact. They also have authorized any prosthetics you need.”

“Show me;” she demanded. “I need official documents.”

Harkin smiled. “Lucky that Zhang demanded all of what they said in writing. Something about Chinese loyalty conditioning.”

She flushed as Harkin handed her his tablet. “Zhang can go straight to hell.” The insinuation that she was a conditioned puppet was almost as insulting to her as a criminal being so highly placed here. As if Zhang actually knew anything about loyalty outside of money. She bet he was only here to avoid spending the rest of his life in jail.

Nuan glanced over the documents, and did confirm they were genuine. She felt a warm glow as she read the words commending her. Praise was rare, and she immediately relaxed when she realized that they actually did care about her. Good, good, she would have to write up a detailed report as soon as possible. They needed to know the extent of the threat about the Battlemaster.

“Thank you,” she told Harkin, handing the tablet back. “When will I receive my prosthetics?”

“You’re scheduled for tomorrow,” he answered with a smile as he tucked the tablet under his arm. “You’ll need an additional few days for recovery while you’re prosthetics are calibrated. Then you’ll need at least a week to get used to them, to retrain your brain to remember all the actions you knew; eating, holding a gun, lifting. You likely won’t be able to develop finer motor control right away. I’d say you’ll be out of any combat operations for at least two weeks, possibly three.”

That was a remarkably quick recovery time, she knew, but at the same time it seemed like an eternity. But it was probably needed. “Then I guess the sooner the better.” She paused, hesitating
for some reason before speaking further. “Is Iosif fine?”

“Tired, but he’s recovering,” Harkin answered. “I don’t know what he’s been doing, honestly. I’m guessing the Commander’s debriefing him, and I know he’s spent a lot of time with Aegis. He did come by when you were out, and said he’d come visit sometime when you were awake. Might not be until after your surgery, although I’ll update him you’re up.”

She winced knowing that he’d come to see her when she was so…disfigured. Maybe he didn’t care as much, but she’d have preferred he had not seen her like that, it would be better if she was whole, if not exactly the same. “Tell him I’d like to see him after I get my prosthetics.”

“Got it,” he said with a firm nod. “Any other questions?”

Nuan shook her head as best she could on the pillow. “Not right now.”

“Then I’ll leave you to rest,” Harkin said. “Your sacrifice has and will not be forgotten. The Commander wants you to know that, and that goes for all of us as well.”

She wasn’t sure how she felt about that. All she’d done was fight like everyone else, and she’d gotten hurt for it. That she’d done her job didn’t make her feel more special than anyone else. Praise for something like that was strange…but she didn’t dislike it. It made her feel valued if nothing else, not just another soldier here.

“Thank you,” was all she said, closing her eyes.

At least she wouldn’t have to wake up too many times with the phantom pain where her arms had been.

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*Lancer Operational Command, United States of America*

Saudia quite liked how the former USSOCOM Headquarters had been converted into now what was the headquarters of the Lancer division. From her understanding, it had formerly been known as the MacDill Air Force base and United States Special Forces just happened to have had a section to themselves.

That was gone now, and reorganized into a purely worldwide training and operations center. The Lancers were drawn from the best special forces units in the world, or at least those who hadn’t been recruited to XCOM. SEAL’s, Rangers, KSK, Special Forces Brigades; all working together and learning from each other.

Lancer Operational Command had also since been completely locked down to any civilian presence. Only the highest ranked in the ADVENT Military were able to enter; even representatives and politicians didn’t know the inner workings. Saudia had been sure to invest enough resources into making the Lancers the most effective and deadly special forces organization in the world, even aspiring to surpass XCOM, though that was unlikely.

Luckily the former Commander of the USSOCOM seemed to have a very good idea of how to effectively accomplish that goal. Helion Weekes was perhaps the most dangerous man she had promoted into a position of power. He didn’t command soldiers, he was one through and through. He was even taller than she was, and visibly stronger as well, though not in his prime any more.

From his history she knew Weekes had been a Navy SEAL and been one of the best operatives. Once he couldn’t perform up to standards he transitioned to a command position, and a few years
later he’d been in charge of the entirety of the United States Special Forces. Thus he’d seemed the perfect candidate to head a global equivalent. It helped that he was intelligent in addition to being a tactical mastermind.

Since being promoted, Weekes had been working with the Science and Engineering Agencies to ensure his soldiers were receiving the best equipment, in addition to closely following all ongoing developments. He’d also developed cross-national training regimes to eventually standardize the Lancer Corps into a superior fighting force, removing training and tactics that were inferior and only elevating the best.

In addition to that, he’d ordered construction of multiple science labs with genetic modification as a priority. Given that he hadn’t brought that up before, she was assuming that was going to be a topic of discussion in addition to the overall situation. That Dr. Tygan was also here indicated such, and of course Commander Christiaens was also present.

All of them stood around a holotable in the well-lit room, with the walls holding whiteboards and maps all marked with various markers and notes. This was clearly Weekes’s center of command. He stood opposite her, while Laura and Tygan were on opposite sides as they waited for him to start.

“The situation is bad,” he began, the deep baritone was often surprising to most for the first time in its intensity, which was unmitigated with age. “We know it, so I won’t repeat it again. The fact is that we need a solid plan. Sitting back and waiting for them to attack us is only going to cause us to lose ground and wastes soldiers.”

“I agree,” Laura said with a sigh. “Japan was unexpected and gave us a false impression of what we were facing. The fact is that our soldiers are inferior to a significant portion of the alien forces. And, to put it bluntly, they are too easy to kill.”

“The question then, is how we can solve that,” Saudia finished, clasping her hands behind her back. “We have a limited number of soldiers when compared to the aliens, and we can’t replenish them quickly. So we have to work on preserving the ones we have.”

“That’s only solving part of the problem,” Weekes shook his head in disagreement. “We’re acting too passive. We’re letting them come to us and not striking them where it hurts.”

“And where would you propose we strike?” Laura asked, raising an eyebrow. “If you haven’t noticed, we’re somewhat confined to one planet. It’s impossible for us to strike anywhere that would hurt them.”

“I will only buy that excuse when Earth is completely ours,” Weekes shot back, crossing his arms. “The aliens do control parts of Earth, right? That’s why we’re here after all. And how exactly can we not reach those?”

Saudia’s lips curled up at that point. He wasn’t entirely wrong. “I would say it is because the aliens are heavily fortified in the cities they control, Chief Weekes. But your point is correct. We cannot be passive forever. Should we rely on defenses to hold our ground, the Battlemaster will methodically destroy us.”

“Our method of handling the Battlemaster is also flawed,” Weekes added. “I think we can say for certain that throwing armies at him and expecting that to work is a bad idea. We need to start manipulating him; drawing him away from targets of interest, keeping him on edge. We need a deterrent.”
“If I may pose a query,” Tygan spoke for the first time, slightly inclining his head as he spoke. “Have we noticed him exhibit any caution to any of the current arsenal of the ADVENT Military?”

“He seemed eager to get out of a collapsing building in San Francisco,” Laura shrugged. “But that doesn’t mean much. Even he would probably suffocate trapped under tons of rubble.”

“I watched the combat footage in Las Vegas,” Weekes said thoughtfully. “Twice he seemed surprised, or at least reacted differently. When that XCOM soldier threw that grenade with flammable gas, he rushed out of the way. I also noted that he reacted very violently when that XCOM Templar attacked him with her swords. I did not see any visible damage, but it seemed to spook him rather quickly.”

“The symbiote weapon also seemed to slow him down temporarily,” Laura recalled with a nod towards her colleague. “Perhaps applied to a larger scale?”

“Mhmm, that is a feasible approach,” Tygan nodded. “I can speak to Dr. Munju on some potential applications. XCOM has also graciously forwarded a large number of research documents on their MELD and genetic engineering programs, presumably to assist us in enhancing their own forces.”

That more than anything made Saudia concerned. If XCOM was worried enough to share their own gathered information beyond essentials, it meant they didn’t think they had the time, or resources, to wait for ADVENT to advance to a point where it would pose a major threat. “Generous of them.”

“The Commander isn’t an idiot,” Weekes stated. “I know he’s probably hating the fact that he had to send them. But he knows XCOM isn’t enough to win. They’re skilled, but it will be us who win this war. Which brings me to how we should use this gift XCOM has given us.” He nodded to Tygan.

“Yes,” Tygan cleared his throat. “Several of the genetic enhancements XCOM has applied to their soldiers have been included here, in particular, the Iron Skin and Biomuscular Regeneration are of interest, as well as some that modify vision and disease resistance. I have determined that we can apply these enhancements to our own soldiers, should we choose to.”

“The other half of the problem,” Weekes continued, a fierce grin on his face. “We die too easily. We’re a physically weak species and that needs to change. Despite how it turned out, XCOM did have the right idea with their Templars. They keep the Battlemaster occupied. More than that, the aliens don’t have much of an answer for them as their work in Paris proved.”

“I assume you have a suggestion?” Laura said.

“First and most obvious, I want the entire Lancer Corps to undergo extensive genetic modification,” Weekes began, raising a finger. “Second, both the Battlemaster and the Templars highlight a weakness in the alien army – Namely, that they have few counters for melee combat outside of the Berserkers and those Oyariah. We should exploit that.”

“How?” Laura asked. “Giving all of our soldiers swords as well?”


“Exactly,” Weekes finished with a smile. “Not the entire Corps, of course, perhaps a quarter. But we’ve seen both how well modified soldiers perform in combat from XCOM, and that the aliens will be devastated in close quarters. I’ve looked over the schematics for their weapons they sent over. We have an opportunity here. Chancellor, with respect, I don’t think we have a choice.”
“Yes, but I would caution being overzealous with our supply of MELD,” Tygan interrupted slowly. “Modifying the entire Corps would be a significant investment, and without facilities to make more, we could risk ‘putting our eggs in one basket’ so to speak.”

“But we know how to manufacture MELD,” Laura pointed out. “So why aren’t we doing it?”

“It is largely due to the amount of, and limited supply of specific locations and components,” Tygan explained. “It also takes a respectable amount of time to manufacture in any large quantities—”

“Not good enough,” Saudia interrupted, raising a hand. “We need more. France has joined us. The EU will likely follow. I will be discussing plans in regards to building factories devoted exclusively to the manufacturing of MELD.” She looked at Weekes. “And you have my permission to proceed. Do what you think will suit us best. You have more experience than I in this. But do not waste our resources, do you understand?”

“Of course,” he answered, inclining his head. “And I never would ask unless it would have a tangible benefit.”

“Good,” Saudia nodded. “And as for your point about being idle…that needs to change. I have requested that XCOM join us for a joint operation. I expect they will respond soon and we can prepare an organized operation of retaliation.”

“Excellent,” Weekes said. “It is past time we begin to collaborate with them. They aren’t our rivals and whatever disagreements and tension between you and the Commander should stop. After all, we have larger problems to deal with.”

Saudia couldn’t entirely disagree, but then again, Weekes didn’t know the full context of what he was referring to.

The Commander would work with her, but he would never trust her.

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*The Praesidium, Situation Room*

“We need to make changes.”

The Commander saw little reason to not be completely blunt. Everyone here was under no illusions. Aegis didn’t need to be here unless he was actually on their side, and the Commander was thinking it best that until that happened, they needed to start planning to win without him. If Aegis really wanted to know what they were planning, he’d have to actually make himself useful in combat against the aliens. Tech wasn’t going to cut it anymore.

“I think that’s obvious, Commander,” Jackson said with a nod. “I’m assuming you have some in mind?”

“I wouldn’t have called this meeting if I didn’t,” the Commander said, nodding towards Vahlen at his side. “Vahlen has been helping me, but I need everyone’s input on this before going forward.”

Patricia crossed her arms. “I don’t suppose you have an idea for the Battlemaster?”

“I have some ideas,” the Commander answered. “The first thing I am doing is authorizing the Artemis Contingency against the Battlemaster. I know the risks, but he warrants them.”
Shen pursed his lips. “I’ll have some of my team begin working on weaponizing the MELD…but I do feel the need to warn you that this could ultimately backfire.”

“I know,” the Commander answered grimly. “But in terms of options, we don’t have many. Weaponized MELD might be enough to actually kill him. The only other options are nukes, collapsing buildings and swords out of whatever metal his equipment is made out of.”

“The MELD swords did seem to damage the armor,” Zhang noted. “That’s useful—“

“Except he threw them away the instant he noticed that,” Patricia interrupted with a scowl. “He’s not a fucking idiot. That’s the problem. Even this MELD weapon is going to really have one chance to work and then he’ll know we have it. And what do you think he’s going to do when he sees a missile heading for him? Stand there and let it hit him.”

“No,” the Commander said, smiling for the first time. “But I do think there is a way we can play him a bit. Aegis told me that his UFO is equipped to detect nuclear activity. The moment he detects it, he bails out which does infer that a nuclear blast will kill him.”

Shen’s eyebrows furrowed. “That seems to be a large assumption. How exactly do you know he’ll flee if he detects nuclear activity?”

“Based on what Aegis has told me and my own observations,” the Commander answered. “The fact that the Battlemaster even has his personal ship equipped specifically to detect it means that at the very least it’s a concern of his. Aegis has also stated on multiple occasions that the Battlemaster doesn’t like taking risks, and an unknown or unexpected variable suddenly entering the equation would raise the risk significantly, and perhaps entice him to pull back and reassess.”

“He definitely doesn’t even tolerate things he knows can hurt him,” Patricia noted, nodding. “Like I said before. The instant he realized the swords could hurt him, he removed them. Thing is, one or multiple nuclear weapons heading towards him might be something he can’t personally handle. He doesn’t seem the type to risk his life unless the odds are something he can handle.”

“Then again,” Jackson shrugged. “It could be that he has common sense. I wouldn’t blame him at all if he got word of a nuclear missile incoming. I doubt even he could survive one, no matter what kind of bullshit magic armor he has.”

“Sarcasm,” Zhang said dryly.

“Sarcasm aside, it gives me an idea,” the Commander continued. “We don’t need to kill the Battlemaster to negate him. Just scare him away. Jackson…how feasible is it to fake nuclear signatures?”

Jackson’s eyes widened and she actually smiled. “I’d have to check that, but I don’t think it should be too hard. Vahlen might know more, actually.”

“Why even fake a signature?” Zhang asked. “Why not use live weapons and just not use them? Or even place them in cities as a deterrent. Sure, the Battlemaster could risk us not blowing up our soldiers, but he knows who you are…and that you’d nuke a city just to kill him. Would he risk that?”

“That depends,” Patricia mused. “He might call our bluff…the question is if we are prepared to blow up cities to kill him?”

“Of course we are,” the Commander sighed. “If that’s the only way to kill him. But I want to keep him guessing. If he always has the fear of nuclear weapons in the back of his mind, it might make
him not directly participate until he comes up with a solution.”

“What I’m concerned about is that he has to have prepared for something like this,” Shen noted slowly. “Or do you think this might be his weakness?”

“The unknown? Possibly,” the Commander shrugged. “However, if the Artemis Contingency fails, I’d much prefer him directing from the back than the front.”

“It sounds good,” Jackson nodded approvingly. “So what’s next?”

“We need more psions,” the Commander said. “The simple fact is that we’re far outnumbered and outgunned. So we can’t throw away people and treat everyone as disposable. The Templars performed as well as could be expected, and they’ll only get better. I’m going to expand that program and have Vahlen awaken as many psions as possible.”

Zhang narrowed his eyes. “The Manchurian Program-“

“Fuck the Manchurian Program,” the Commander sighed wearily. “It’s diverting our resources. I’m not worried about the potential of some psion going rogue. Not anymore. We need advantages, we need psions, we need everything we can get and wasting them on a safeguard that might not even be necessary is borderline moronic.”

He paused. “I’m not ordering research be stopped, but we need to prioritize. And another truth is that mandating that ADVENT shouldn’t have psions is self-defeating. I don’t completely trust Saudia, but I trust her willingness not to betray us now. ADVENT can recruit more, probably weaker psions than our own, and even a weak psion could make the difference.”

“That’s…surprisingly reasonable of you,” Shen commented, adjusting his glasses. “I didn’t think you’d risk giving ADVENT such a powerful tool.”

The Commander gave a humorless smirk at Shen. “I’m not going to be idiotic about it. When the Manchurian Program is complete, I will require that every ADVENT Psion undergo it, and we have access to their code words. Until then, I think a small bomb in their heads will ensure they don’t do anything stupid.”

“Not without flaws, but it should suffice for now,” Zhang said with a single nod. “As much as I dislike Saudia, we do need more psions, and ADVENT is the best means of accomplishing the acquisition of mass quantities.”

“We can have some of our own train them if needed,” Patricia nodded. “Or maybe let ADVENT develop their own methods. Aegis will help me with the psions we have here, and Iosif and the other Templars can help others in the Program. When are you going to tell her?”

“We’re going to tell her,” the Commander said. “It’s time we both meet and make plans together regarding the future of the war. A joint meeting of XCOM and ADVENT Command. Patricia, Zhang and Jackson, you’ll come with me to meet them.”

Vahlen stepped forward. “Before the Commander gives some details regarding what will be discussed, I also think we need to push the genetic modification for our soldiers. We can’t have them dying from stray plasma bolts anymore. It might be necessary to make it mandatory.”

“After this, I think you’re going to get a lot of additional volunteers,” Jackson noted. “But we have to watch our MELD stores. We have a lot, but even modifying half our force will drain them significantly.”
“Which is why we’re going to change that,” the Commander said, looking towards Shen. “I want you to take Aegis’ plans for the MELD manufacturing plant, and make twelve of them. Jackson will secure off-base locations if you need it, but I don’t want to have to worry about MELD stores again.”

“Ah, I’ll begin work immediately,” Shen promised, blinking rapidly. “Although we’ll need some raw materials—“

“You’ll have them,” the Commander dismissed with a wave. “On a similar point, what are you doing with the Gateway and recovered alien tech from the Transport?”

“We’ve stripped the alloys from the craft, and are analyzing the intact alien computers,” Shen explained. “Aegis said he was surprised that there was no CODEX system installed, which means this was one of the earliest iterations of the craft.”

“Or the Battlemaster removed it in case we won,” Patricia noted. “Everything sent on that mission he had to be able to lose.”

“In any event,” Shen continued slowly. “The intact Gateway is one of the only solid positives to come out of that battle. Schematics and theories are useful, but having an actual Gateway to observe will speed along our research significantly. The alien computers will also, I believe, allow us enough to finally reverse-engineer them completely.”

“And finalize the Firestorm Project?” Vahlen asked.

“I should think so,” Shen nodded. “Our largest hurdle was replicating the alien systems we’ve recovered from other UFOs. In theory we could simply use intact alien computers for Firestorms, but that ultimately means we’d always be limited by how many computers we had. It will also help us with every system in the Praesidium that runs on alien tech.”

“Well done,” the Commander agreed. “Now, the last major point. I’m going to suggest that ADVENT end this pointless war in the Middle East once and for all, and we’re going to help.”

Jackson frowned. “Isn’t that in clear, ah, violation of us being apolitical?”

“Depends on how you look at it,” the Commander shrugged, not bothering to hide his irritation with the whole situation. “On one hand, of course it is. But on the other, this is a drain on resources that ADVENT could be using to put towards the aliens. The Middle East is just sitting there not being useful, and it all comes down to the war having a detrimental impact on the actual war, and thus threatening humanity.”

The Commander rested his hands on the holotable, and fixed each of them with one unblinking glare. “We can end this war. So why shouldn’t we?”

No one disagreed.

Patricia finally spoke. “How then?”

The Commander straightened and his lips curled into a smile. “We cut off the heads.”

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Japan, Nakashibetsu

“[How is it daddy?]” Mari asked through the screen, her face taking up around half of it while
Sandara stayed in the background, smiling to herself. “[What are you doing?]”

Ah, he’d missed them more than he realized. “[I’m keeping everyone safe from the aliens,]” he answered. “[I’m doing it with some really good people.]”

“[Did you shoot one?]” She asked.

“[Mari!]” Sandara chastised in the background.

Duri chuckled. “[Maybe, the fighting gets a little chaotic sometimes. But nothing for you to worry about. The aliens don’t stand a chance against us.]”

He sincerely wished he didn’t have to lie, but Mari didn’t need to know the horrors of war quite yet.

“[Well, duh.]” Mari said, rolling her eyes in exaggeration. “[They’re scared of you.]”

His chuckled was almost sad. “[I wish that were so.]”

“[Alright, the two of you off to bed,]” Sandara said, gently setting Nabi on the ground off her lap, and his younger daughter gave a final wave joined by Mari.

“[Good night daddy, talk to you soon.]”

Sandara hustled them off to bed and he waited until she eventually got back and let the facade drop. Damn, she looked like she was going to cry. “[Tell me the truth,]” she said quietly. “[How is it there, really?]”

He was silent for a few minutes. “[Here? Not that bad, in all honesty. We’re heavily fortified and the aliens can’t make a move without getting slaughtered. But…well, I assume you’ve been watching the news?]”

A nod.

He grimaced. “[I guess it depends if they hit here next or not. If they do…it’s not safe for any of us. I don’t know if we’ll live or not. I’m not going to get myself killed by being stupid, but the aliens just seem to be better than us.]”

“[Can’t you do something?]” She almost pleaded. “[You’re on the front lines! Can’t you be transferred somewhere safer?]”

He rubbed his forehead. “[I could, maybe. But this is where I’m best. My entire team has stayed alive so far, which is a small miracle in itself. All I would accomplish by asking to leave is condemning someone else to potentially die in my place. I don’t want that.]”

“[I know, I know.]” Sandara sighed, wiping her eyes. “[But it’s awful living here alone. The girls make it bearable, but I’m terrified that one day I’m going to have a soldier show up at my door and tell me you died ‘heroically’ or some equally meaningless story.]”

“[I’m sorry I can’t be there with you,]” Duri said quietly. “[With all my heart I want nothing more than to be with you right now. But we both knew this would happen one day. I’d say we were luckier than most. If it were any other place I’d have no problem with you living on-base, but Japan right now is no place for you or the girls. I won’t put you in danger willingly.]”

“[And I wouldn’t put the girls in danger like that,]” Sandara gave a weak smile. “[You should see
Mari. She’s so proud of you, she’d been telling everyone at school about how amazing you and all the other soldiers are. She’s made friends with a lot of girls going through the same thing. You would be proud of her."

He felt some tears pricking his eyes as his wife spoke. "[We raised her well.]"

"[And I need to be happy for her.]" Sandara said. "[She shouldn’t grow up afraid. None of them should. I’m glad you didn’t tell her what it’s really like. Not yet. She isn’t old enough yet.]"

Duri nodded. "[Hopefully the war will be over by the time she’s old enough. I pray so anyway.]"

"[So do I.]" she nodded. "[Please be safe. I love you.]"

"[And I love you too,]" he answered back. "[I’m always thinking of you.]"

They stared at each other for a few seconds, and then the screen went black. Duri just sat there in the chair for a few minutes numbly staring at the screen. He just wanted to see and hug them again, but the time to do that looked to be nowhere in sight. He hadn’t realized just how much he’d missed them until now, which he’d unconsciously buried in his work and friends.

"You alright?" Cara’s voice asked from just outside the makeshift video-conference room.

"Yeah," he said, rubbing his eyes and standing. "It’s just…well, I miss them."

She nodded, her blue eyes seeming brighter in the dim light. "No shit you do. Didn’t realize you even had a family until recently."

"Not something I really feel the need to bring up," he shrugged. "But what about you? Have a husband? Boyfriend? Family?"

She snorted. "No. Dates usually end poorly for me; guys can be idiots sometimes. For the best I think. Military doesn’t really fit that lifestyle." She eyed him sideways. "No offense."

"None taken," he said. "Times like this I realize why it’s discouraged."

"And as for family?" She shrugged. "No biological parents, at least none that I know of. I grew up in an orphanage for a time, me and my brother got adopted by another family. They’re in Florida thankfully. My brother is probably enlisting, like the patriotic fool he is."

Duri chuckled. "And you’re just here out of the goodness of your heart."

"Sorry, but I prefer my siblings alive," Cara answered back, only sounding partially sarcastic. "He just thinks he’s the next great thing, but he’s not a soldier. I’m only here because I wanted to kill people."

Duri started. "Sorry?"

"I met a lot of bad people growing up," Cara said emotionlessly. "But I couldn’t do anything about it. I’d hate to think what might have happened if I hadn’t been adopted. But I never forgot and I made plans. It seemed simple at the time. Bad people didn’t deserve to live and the military killed bad people. Seemed like an easy join."

She shrugged again, a bit more wearily. "I don’t know if I had a death wish or not. I always requested the most dangerous places, the hottest zones so to speak. Anything for a chance for me to actually remove some evil from the world."
Duri was wondering where this was going. “And did you?”

“And did you? Nope,” she answered nonchalantly. “But I killed a bunch of scared kids in the War on Terror. Brainwashed scared men who believed in some release from their miserable lives. Saw a lot of action in that war, killed a lot more people. Some of them bad, but it wasn’t all like I’d thought. It was the exact opposite of satisfying, revolting almost. You don’t shoot a teen in the head and come out alright.”

Her lips twitched. “Killing people fucks with your head, no matter who you are. There’s a reason veterans wake up screaming in the night. There’s stuff in their head that they did. I can handle it. But I don’t want it. My brother isn’t like me. He’d never be the same again in a war. And no, them being aliens doesn’t make a difference. They bleed, they scream, they die. They clearly think, they have some kind of emotions. I’m not a patriot Duri, I’m only here so someone else doesn’t have to be.”

She waved absentmindedly. “Guess you didn’t need to hear all that, but hey, you asked. Keep it to yourself alright, I don’t talk about it with everyone.” And with that she turned and walked off, leaving him alone.

He’d had no idea she’d had such a traumatic past. She’d certainly never shown it before.

Maybe that was the point. She put up a front for people, just like his wife did for their daughters.

“Don’t worry,” he told the air. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

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_Tehran, Iran_

Roman stood together with the rest of the Shieldbearer Officers and ranking staff. The Colonel General apparently had something he wanted to update all the command staff on. He personally hoped that it was news about how the war was progressing in other parts of the Middle East. Iran had taken up several months, and there was still a decent amount of territory left.

All of them were in full combat armor, with the helmets off of course. If there was one thing Roman saw that was common with all of them, it was that they looked utterly exhausted. Not necessarily about the war, but that they were wasting their time. Sure, the Middle East probably had some value, but compared to what was happening in America, all of them were itching to actually fight something that was worth their time.

And the Middle East certainly was _not_.

But they did their jobs, like good soldiers.

Ivan Frolov stood in front of them, table before him which held nothing but a map, and a projector displayed it on the wall behind him as well. He was with two people Roman had never seen before, one of which was a fairly short and bald woman wearing the uniform of an ADVENT Officer, helmet removed of course. Interestingly enough her armor was a dull gray, not the traditional red he’d seen from the other officers. Her fair skin and softer features indicated that she wasn’t local or likely Russian either. American probably.

The other person was a man wearing no armor, but a black uniform of sorts that held no badges or means of identification, but if Roman had to guess, he was ADVENT Intelligence. Possibly Kidon since his skin was a darker brown, and he had heard him speaking with a noticeable Israeli accent.
Roman didn’t like him just based off his body language and false voice. Intelligence agents always made him uncomfortable, and the fact he felt the same way around this guy definitely made him think he was right in thinking this man was a spook.

“For the benefit of our guests, we will begin,” Ivan said, speaking English presumably for the two beside him to understand. It was a good thing most of them knew English, though Roman could hear some in the back mumbling to each other, translating to their friends who didn’t know. He presumed Ivan knew about it, which was why he paused after he began.

“This is Marshal Amy Kilian,” he continued, nodding to the woman. “And Operator Moshe Emanuel, from the American and Israeli Divisions respectively. They’ve been spearheading the American and Israeli operations below Israel.”

“And we personally thank you for your contributions to taking Iran,” Moshe said, inclining his head in respect. “Israel Command personally thanks you for your sacrifice here, and we will never forget your help.”

Well, it was the least they could do. Oddly enough Roman felt he was being sincere, and really, why wouldn’t he? Not every day you had major world powers working to help you take revenge. Because that was ultimately what this was about. The Middle Eastern nations had done something stupid and killed people in their government. Israel retaliated, with extreme prejudice.

Not that Roman didn’t like it, but thanking them seemed more like an obligation than anything.

“ADVENT wants this war ended,” Ivan continued. “I’ve received that loud and clear from the top. Based on recent events, I think we can all agree with that. Last I heard they are still planning details about what exactly the strategy will be, but Chief Weekes, Commander Christiaens, and the Chancellor herself are involved in this personally.”

That was actually significant news. The Commander and Lancer Chief in particular meant that ADVENT actually was not fucking around anymore. Which meant that this would be a massive operation when it actually happened. And if it was bad enough that they were getting involved, then it probably wasn’t going to be particularly gentle either.

Good.

“As of right now we’re unaware of the details of the plan,” Marshal Kilian continued, clasping her hands behind her back. “But we suspect it will involve taking out the leadership of the remaining nations opposed to us. But before we can proceed, everyone needs to be updated as to the status of the war itself.” She nodded to Moshe.

“Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and nearly half of Saudi Arabia are now under ADVENT control,” he said, pointing to the respective countries on the map. “Israeli strike forces have severely destabilized Yemen and Oman, and the American Division is preparing teams at this moment to take their capitals. With that we’ll have the capital of Saudi Arabia completely surrounded.”

“How is the Royal Family reacting?” One of the Shieldbearers asked.

“As expected,” Amy shrugged nonchalantly. “They’ve imposed martial law on the remaining cities they own and are pulling in every favor they can. They still have many foreign connections, especially in Russia and America and they’ve been leveraging them for money, resources and influence. Riyadh is a fortress that even we will be hard pressed to take.”

Moshe smiled lazily. “However, ADVENT Intelligence has identified the contacts the Royal
Family has been leveraging, and all of them are being prosecuted or sitting in jail cells now. They don’t have anyone left, and no allies they can call on. They will not surrender.”

Roman wasn’t entirely unhappy with that. As satisfying as it would be to see the Saudi King humiliate himself by surrendering, it would be far more satisfying for him to be dragged out into the street. Better yet, shot in the head. Maybe the rest of the family too. As far as he knew, there was no one worthy of any consideration in the Royal Family.

If there was, they’d have done something by now. Or knowing how those animals thought, they would have been killed for daring to suggest something as heretical as ‘surrender’.

“This leaves Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan,” Ivan said, pointing towards the respective countries. “We have already started offensives in Turkmenistan, and we’ve received word that India is willing to help take Pakistan when the time comes.”

No surprise there. Roman knew that India and Pakistan hated each other, though didn’t know why. Which raised an interesting question. “Is India part of ADVENT?” He asked.

“Not currently,” Amy clarified. “However, I am under the impression that negotiations are taking place between the two parties. Their proximity to China is a matter of some concern, I believe. And it is entirely possible that they want to take control of Pakistan and I would not be surprised if ADVENT allows them to have it if they help, and respectively join.”

The soldiers in the room nodded. If it got India into ADVENT, Pakistan was a small price to pay. That would boost the war effort drastically. They had one of the largest populations in the world, along with the industrial power and resources to match.

Ivan’s face suddenly turned harder. “Pakistan in particular will need to be handled delicately, as they are a minor nuclear power in the region. The only ones aside from Israel to have that capability in the Middle East.”

Roman frowned and everyone around him began murmuring to themselves. “I thought their program was dismantled in the War on Terror?” One soldier asked.

“Halted, not dismantled,” Moshe corrected. “Or so we’ve been able to find out. Official records are…difficult to come by. Pakistan had been conducting nuclear research long before the Commander showed up, and with what the Indian Intelligence Bureau has been sharing with us, China likely helped them become a nuclear power, presumably to keep India in check.”

Well, this was definitely a problem. It was one thing to invade Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the like because the threat they posed was minimal. Their armies were outdated and tactics ineffective. Roman actually figured that the Pakistani army would be largely the same way. But if they had nukes, and their country was in danger of falling, Roman doubted that ADVENT could properly stand against even a small nuclear arsenal, much less the fallout afterwards.

“What are we specifically dealing with here?” He asked. “Do we have numbers? Equipment?”

Moshe and Amy exchanged a look. “The Intelligence Bureau estimates Pakistan has between fifteen and thirty-five nuclear weapons,” Moshe began. “We’re also not entirely positive of the distribution between missiles and bombs, but we suspect they have more missiles than bombs. And they might have one nuclear submarine. Perhaps two. The warheads themselves are likely being stored at a minimum of five separate silos and hidden locations. Nuclear launch procedures are not currently known, and ADVENT Intelligence and the Intelligence Bureau are working to ascertain said procedures.”
“Then what’s the plan of action?” Another Shieldbearer asked, her features scrunched in worry. “We go marching in, they shoot nukes. It’s not like they’ll have anything to lose. Sure, they all die, but they go out in a blaze of glory so to speak.”

“Like I said, it is being handled delicately,” Ivan placated. “I have been assured that ADVENT will not move forward until there is a plan in place to deal with the nuclear problem. But I am aware that the Lancers will take part, as well as top agents from XCOM Intelligence. And if negotiations continue well, the best of the Indian Para Special Forces.”

That ADVENT seemed to have a plan regarding this, or at minimum a healthy understanding of what they were dealing with was reassuring. A shame XCOM wasn’t getting involved, since they could probably make all of this simple by sending in one of those psions. What little he’d heard about them was…unsettling…to say the least, but in this case, mind control might actually be justifiable here.

Assuming all the stories coming out of America and Japan were true, of course.

“What about Kazakhstan?” Another Shieldbearer asked after a few seconds of silence.

“In talks, oddly enough,” Ivan said, his tone audibly lighter. “They’ve never been a major problem historically, and naturally want to keep their independence. Negotiations are going well, last I heard. Considering their strong relations with Uzbekistan, I believe ADVENT wants them to leverage them into surrendering to ADVENT control. I find it unlikely we’ll have to fight them, and they’ll also likely join ADVENT.”

Roman nodded. Since Kazakhstan shared a border with Russia, he knew a little about it. Though not that much, honestly, which was likely a point in their favor since the countries he tended to know a lot about were ones he was enemies of.

“What are they doing to prepare for us?” Someone asked. “Will they surrender?”

“Unlikely at this point,” Moshe shook his head. “They’re preparing as best they can. We can be thankful none of them ever developed nuclear weapons, else this would potentially be a problem. As it stands, they really have nothing that will stop us except time. They’ve apparently tried to solicit help from China, but have been stonewalled completely.”

Made sense. There was no way China was going to back a clearly losing side, much less deliberately antagonize ADVENT and XCOM. China wasn’t run by complete idiots, for better or worse, just very arrogant and prideful people.

Eh, China was something for people smarter than him to figure out.

“Now, for us, we will likely move into Afghanistan next,” Ivan continued, his hard gaze sweeping the room. “Once Israel and America clean up Saudi Arabia, they will assist us in taking the remaining nations. Depending on how negotiations go, we could have support from India and Kazakhstan as well. In short, this war is coming to a close and I suspect it will happen sooner than later.”

Roman smiled. Things were finally coming together. Hopefully he wouldn’t have to wait too long before the fighting started. He could feel the energy in the room from the other soldiers, their spirit renewed after learning how close the war could be to actually ending. They were ready to finish it.

All they needed was the word.

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“The operation was largely a success,” Elizabeth finished, handing Saudia a piece of paper with a list of names. “These are the instigators and anarchists we arrested, all currently being held and awaiting prosecution. My agents’ evidence is indisputable, and I’m already ordering interrogations on some of the more influential ones for details on their groups.”

“Good,” Saudia nodded, glancing over at Stein who was standing straight and still at the other side of the table. “Both of you did good work. People are scared, but there aren’t riots in the streets.”

“I think we need to take the initiative now,” Stein stated bluntly. “Some of these people were connected to known anarchist groups, and there are others who have equally dangerous influence. That’s sufficient evidence in the Advent Directive to mandate the disbanding of their groups.”

“Assuming you’re referring to Antifa, it isn’t that simple,” Elizabeth mused, starting to pace. “They have a loose command structure, if you could even call it one. The problem is that it’s an ideology, and ideologies are hard to kill. You know about Anonymous?”

Stein raised an eyebrow. “That hacker group that had a big mouth?”

Saudia snorted at the description, and Elizabeth chuckled. “Yes, that’s the one. Effectiveness aside, they made Anonymous into something of a cultural phenomenon because they openly stated that it was an idea. It was something anyone could be. Antifa is similar, if more violent. Taking out their leaders won’t accomplish much because they know their strength is in decentralization.”

“This is still a simple problem,” Stein shrugged. “You just find the participants and arrest them. Kill the entire movement, not just the leaders. Instill terror in anyone even thinking of joining them. People are squeamish about using that word, but terror is more effective than leniency.”

“In certain cases,” Saudia interrupted. “Or it could have the opposite effect. We could do as you say and make this as public as possible. I think that is a bad idea simply due to the climate at the moment. The last things people need right now is to feel more terrified. Terrified people can sometimes feel they have nothing to lose.”

She glanced at Elizabeth. “That being said, I agree with Stein that these people need to be dealt with. But I want it done quietly.”

“I have a possible solution,” Elizabeth said suddenly, actually pausing her pacing. “One of the greatest strengths these people have is coordination and belonging. If they could be isolated, they could be negated since I highly doubt most of these people have actually met in person. The solution might actually be simple – we let them speak, but silence them.”

Stein frowned. “Come again?”

“I believe the internet term is shadowbanning,” Elizabeth explained. “In essence, it allows a person to post on a certain site, but no one else can see what they post. Essentially placing someone in a glass box that they can see out of, but not actually interact with. They would still have the illusion of freedom, but no one else could see it. Social media in particular is susceptible to this.”

Saudia scratched her chin. “What of the opposite effect? I presume it would be possible to amplify a voice or idea?”

“It certainly is,” Elizabeth nodded, smiling. “However, the Directive does have some restrictions on the extent to which we can interfere. Invisible promotion of certain ideologies is only acceptable to placate a populace on the verge of panic strong enough to destabilize ADVENT.”
“I’m not sure this would qualify then,” Stein noted dryly. “We’re not quite at that point yet.”

“That depends,” Saudia recalled. “I believe such an action has to be approved by either the Congress of Nations, or the Executive, Military, Peacekeeper and Intelligence branches jointly reaching the same conclusion. At least four of the five are needed, and that would give us that power for three months.”

“Requirements for evidence are strict though,” Elizabeth warned. “But I do think we have enough to make a case.”

“Then I want you to put something together with Treduant or Savvin,” Saudia said. “If this gets put through the Congress first, then the media won’t just be able to say this is some sort of power grab.”

Stein snorted. “The media can go to hell. What exactly can they do anyway? Strongly disapprove?”

“People watch the news in fact,” Elizabeth said dryly, eyeing Stein. “It’s still a massive demographic, and one we don’t entirely control. Speaking of which, Chancellor, the media is not exactly happy with you.”

She sniffed. “What a surprise.”

“They’re being clever about it,” Elizabeth said grimacing. “But the insinuation is clearly that ADVENT is failing and you are unfit to lead. They’re not going overboard with defamatory stories, not quite yet, but they are clearly cherry-picking coverage that paints you in a bad light.”

Stein frowned. “Aren’t there provisions in the Directive that require full context? Otherwise they’re breaking the law.”

“Not in opinion segments,” Elizabeth corrected. “Which is where a larger amount of the insinuations are coming from. The problem is that people don’t know how to separate fact from opinion, and they’ll trust these so-called ‘news anchors’ blindly without checking for themselves.”

“People are stupid,” Stein shrugged. “What else is new? But even still they can’t flat-out lie.”

“Hence why I said insinuations,” Elizabeth clarified again. “Bad news is that they’re targeting Treduant next it seems. Canadian media hates us for obvious reasons. Russia is fine, but it’s state-owned for the most part. Europe is right now running a lot of anti-ADVENT pieces. France joining is worrying for them, and they aren’t under the same restrictions media in ADVENT is.”

“Which I assume amounts to calling us a totalitarian nightmare,” Saudia guessed dryly. “Amusing. But I am not worried about them. Fear mongering only works until the aliens come. France was a warning to the people, and until the EU puts up their own plan, people are going to want to join the ones who are actually doing something about the alien problem.”

“Well, I’m ready to move whenever you give the word,” Stein said. “You said there are plans to end the war in the Middle East?”

“Yes there are,” Saudia nodded, her lips curling into a smile. “Both of you will be coming to the meeting with XCOM. It sounds like they want this war ended as badly as we do.”

Stein actually frowned. “Chancellor, that is more concerning than anything else. I thought XCOM was adamant about not getting involved.”

“So I thought,” Saudia shrugged. “But I suppose they came around.”
Stein narrowed her eyes. “From my few meetings with the Commander, I highly doubt that is the case. The only reason I can think of that they would suddenly be willing to help is if they were scared and know something we don’t.”

Saudia’s smile slowly faded. That had admittedly not crossed her mind. “A fair point.”

Stein shrugged. “Just warning you that I doubt XCOM is making this decision out of the goodness of their hearts or they saw the light or some other crap. The Commander is practical first and foremost. The only reason I can see him doing this is if he genuinely believed he didn’t have a choice.” She paused. “Just be aware of that when talking to them.”

Saudia nodded, wondering how much she should press the Commander for in private. If he really was this worried, it did not sound good for any of them.

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Switzerland, ADVENT Command

This was going to be interesting.

Saudia brushed back her hair and checked her uniform to make sure everything was in place. She didn’t have the time or inclination to go to Canada, but she was certainly going to be as professional as possible when speaking to the Prime Minister via video conference. Low tech, especially with holographic displays being implemented in most ADVENT command centers, but she could make do.

She suspected that Prime Minister Murphy was not going to be entirely happy to see her, and the feeling was mutual. Nonetheless, they now needed Canada as a practical necessity. The situation had become more serious, and they needed to reassess their decisions. Her options were more limited, and she hoped he could see that.

The screen suddenly flashed and displayed Murphy’s face, and the Prime Minister was wearing his standard political attire, which amounted to a well-pressed suit. She couldn’t really see anything below that, and it didn’t matter. “Prime Minister,” she greeted cordially. “I trust you are well?”

“I am, Chancellor, and I thank you for your concern.” She wondered if he was being mildly sarcastic, though couldn’t tell it in his voice. “I am sorry about recent events. What the American population is dealing with right now is terrible.”

She actually believed he was being sincere here, but only because he had specifically noted the population, not the leadership or even ADVENT. Fit with his psyche profile. “Your concern in appreciated,” she answered, inclining her head. “We are doing our best to assuage the concerns of the public and reassess our strategies.”

“No doubt,” he nodded, and went silent.

There was nothing spoken between them for just over a minute. Saudia finally sighed. “I won’t sugarcoat this, Prime Minister, we both know why we’re speaking. I did not agree with your decision before, but I could work around it. I think we can agree that the situation has changed, has it not?”

“The situation in America has changed,” he answered evenly. “Canada is unaffected, last I checked.”

She carefully kept her face expressionless, though glared daggers into his irritatingly calm face.
“Indeed you are correct,” she said coolly. “The American situation has indeed become more serious. To be blunt, we are losing ground and need a way to halt the alien advance. In the interest of complete and full disclosure, we need Canada now. There is very little choice here.”

“There is always choice,” he answered. “Tell me, Chancellor, do the aliens control territory from border to border? Is there a straight line of aliens that just ends on the Canadian border? If not, then I do not see why allowing you to pass through our borders is necessary.”

He was arguing damn semantics. She would think he was an idiot if she didn’t know that wasn’t the case. The problem was that he was a damn civilian pacifist. “It’s not quite so simple,” she explained. “Of course the aliens don’t have something as simple as a line to prevent us from flanking them. But they do have sensors, they likely have satellites and scouts scanning the immediate area on their front line.”

She paused, thinking how best to illustrate this. “What Canada allows us to do is move large divisions that don’t only strike the aliens from an unexpected angle, but from where they are weak. Imagine, Prime Minister, if the ADVENT army struck Seattle again and began marching south. Suddenly the aliens are at risk of cities between ADVENT and the coast being cut off. They halt their advance, they pull back, and we begin boxing them in. That simply cannot be accomplished by moving within our borders.”

“And I suspect we would then be involved in your war,” Murphy said slowly. “I will also be blunt, Chancellor, I don’t entirely believe you can win. I’ve followed your conflicts. You’ve lost, XCOM has lost. The aliens are more advanced than us. What exactly are you accomplishing by throwing lives away? Let me pose a question to you: If you lose, will the aliens treat you better or worse than if you just surrendered?”

Saudia realized her fists were clenched in white-hot fury at this coward’s blindness. “I will not be responsible for enslaving the Human race to these aliens,” she almost snarled. “If you really believe these aliens will show mercy, you have not been paying attention. You saw the recorded footage from the Sectoid Hive. You saw what they were doing to us. You saw them take Australia. If you want to condemn your people to that fate, then I cannot do anything to dissuade you of that. But I would rather die than live under the thrall of an alien master.”

“You are too emotional,” he said, lips set in a thin line. “It’s going to be worse when you finally lose, and despite that, if you were anyone else, representing anyone else, I would help you. But I will not put my people under the thumb of a different master. I will not subject them to ADVENT willingly. Do I make myself clear, Chancellor?”

“You will not allow us to move within your borders?” She demanded icily.

“No,” he answered flatly. “My answer has not changed, and it will not. I can make it no clearer than that.”

Saudia took a deep breath. “Understand very carefully what you are saying, Prime Minister. By doing this you will stand in opposition to ADVENT protecting humanity. You might be annexed. Do I make myself clear?”

He surprisingly smiled. “No, Chancellor, you will not do anything outside speak empty threats. You are powerless to do anything. You have armies, you have influence, but you only keep it because you put so much effort into convincing people that you are benevolent and the ‘right side’. If you go so far as to annex a country that did nothing more than say ‘no’ to you, then you will be showing the world exactly what you are.”
“And this is what you are, Chancellor. You are a tyrant. You are prideful. You are emotional. You hide all of this from the people, but there can be no hiding such an act, there can be no justifying it in the eyes of the people. Do you really think the world will just accept you? Knowing that you’ll destroy anyone who dares speak against you?”

A pause. “No, Chancellor, they will not. So I do not fear your empty threats Chancellor Vyandar, your words are as hollow as your promises for a better life or hope against the aliens. You can certainly try, but know that you will not only make me a martyr, but the great nation of Canada as well. If that is required to have the world strip you of power…then I accept that. Good day, Chancellor, I wish you good fortune in your war.”

And the screen flashed to an idle setting.

Saudia stood there, both stunned at his audacity and his ignorance.

Yet she couldn’t help but almost admire him in a way. No, respect. He might be the embodiment of ignorance and idiocy when it came to the aliens, but he actually had a spine which is more than she could say for most people.

Unfortunately, he had sealed his fate with that little speech.

By refusing to help, Canada now stood in direct opposition of ADVENT operations that protected the entire Human race, and was eligible for annexation. Prime Minister Jace Murphy was no longer fit to hold office over Canada and the entire legislature was also no longer reliable.

She pulled out her phone and dialed Treduant’s number. “Yes, Chancellor?” She answered after Saudia had waited a minute to connect.

“Have your representative call for a special session in Congress,” she said coldly. “Canada has met the requirements for annexation. I want legislation introduced now.”

Silence on the other end. “I’ll need justifiable evidence.”

“You’ll have it,” Saudia promised. “I will begin gathering the needed authorizations on my end. Bring Iseul, Savvin, and Nowinski on this as well.”

“I’ll start now,” Treduant answered, sadness in her voice. “I wish it hadn’t come to this.”

“As do I,” Saudia said grimly. “But they made their choice. Now they must face the consequences.”

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Command Chamber, Mars Forward Observation Station

The haptic shield dissipated as the Battlemaster strode into the room that only held one other occupant. Caelior stood in the center of the room, which was displaying a holographic projection of the first battle of Japan captured by one of the Overseer UFOs. Caelior was looking at the recreation of Patricia, her hand extended towards the aliens she was controlling.

“I have been analyzing their tactics here,” Caelior said as he turned his attention to the Battlemaster. “I understand my mistakes. Now the humans will not be able to stop me when I launch our retaliation.”

The Battlemaster gave a single nod. “And you will be accompanying them?”
Caelior raised one hand, palm up. The Battlemaster felt the room begin vibrating, and the metal and glass visibly shook, even his armor became slightly uncomfortable. “I will do more than accompany them,” he stated, venom lacing his voice. “The Humans are inferior and will not be able to stop me. I will crush their cities and splatter their armies. When Japan lies in ruins, I will move to the next country until Humanity submits or dies.”

He had spirit, if nothing else. But there were rules to follow. “Only destroy the cities if needed. We will need some form of shelter to establish our hold. It will delay us to build bases in ruins.”

“The voice of reason as ever, Battlemaster,” Quisilia said cheerfully, walking in with a purring cat in his lower arms. “But I wish you would impose some rule on melodrama.” He glanced over at Caelior, who was staring at Quisilia with unmasked irritation. “Honestly, do you understand how ridiculous you sound?” His voice became a poor imitation of Caelior’s. “’I will crush their skulls beneath my hands and bathe in the blood of my enemies. I will tear them apart limb from limb!’ Please, we’re not savages.”

“Leave,” Caelior hissed. “Or I will turn that little feline into white and red paste.”

Quisilia straightened and reassuringly petted the cat which purred up at him. “I doubt it, Little Storm. If you do, I’ll cut off one of your hands. Maybe two.” He set the cat on the ground, and it trotted out of the room, which amusingly told the Battlemaster that he was mildly concerned Caelior would follow through on his threat. “But I am going to be helpful here. You’re underestimating the Humans. Badly. What exactly are you going to do? Do the exact same thing, except you’ll be down there?”

“I have elevated some aliens to serve as overseers,” Caelior answered. “But my presence alone will-“ He hissed in surprise as Quisilia’s hand flashed and a dagger was suddenly buried in Caelior’s arm.

The blade was suddenly torn out and flew back into Quisilia’s hand, blue blood covering it and beginning to leak down his arm, even as the flesh itself began visibly healing. “This isn’t a game,” Quisilia stated, all humor gone from his voice. “Did you forget Aegis is down there? Do you really think he doesn’t know how to beat you? Kill you? Do you think he somehow hasn’t shared that little bit of information with XCOM?”

Quisilia hissed as he was suddenly telekinetically lifted into the air, Caelior’s lower hand clenched into a fist. “You give these Humans too much credit,” he growled. “Their weapons will not touch me, let alone kill me.”

“Little fool,” Quisilia sighed and Caelior suddenly groaned. Quisilia then dropped to the ground, staring at the Ethereal that had now fallen to one knee. The Battlemaster let him be; Caelior needed some lessons beaten into him, and he’d been coddled for too long. “I don’t suppose you realize that XCOM has lasers, yes? How exactly will you stop those? How exactly are you going to stop someone shooting you in the back? I wounded you from the front and you couldn’t stop me.”

Quisilia knelt down in front of an audibly panting Caelior, and pulled out a smartphone of all things. “Think very carefully before you dismiss what we have to say, Little Storm,” he said, pointing the smartphone at the Ethereal visibly in pain. “And if you ever try that little trick again, I will post this to twitter and make you the laughingstock of the Humans. Stop believing you’re somehow superior. I shouldn’t have to remind you that the Ravaged One died, and Aegis defected.”

Quisilia stood, even as Caelior groaned. “Do you wonder how the Battlemaster is winning so easily? It’s because he takes this seriously. He doesn’t consider every victory an absolute. He respects his enemies, and he certainly doesn’t make childish rants promising bloody vengeance.”
Quisilia put the phone away. “Think about that, Little Storm. The days of your incompetence are over, and if you still fail to learn, I will consider your death a benefit.” With that, Quisilia turned and strode out of the room, leaving a mentally tormented Caelior and silent Battlemaster alone. He considered himself above such displays of terror, but he did find some satisfaction in Quisilia reminding Caelior that he wasn’t invincible.

So while he waited for Caelior to recover, he decided to see what exactly Caelior had planned, and if needed, improve it. He glanced over to see Caelior had still not recovered, and figured that he’d be that way for a while.

Quisilia didn’t give lessons people forgot quickly.

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Switzerland, ADVENT Command

As far as the Commander knew, this was the first time so many high-ranking and influential members of ADVENT and XCOM had come together to put together a plan of action. He recognized some of them from the brief meeting before Japan was attacked, even if he didn’t know them well outside their positions.

There was Helion Weekes, the Chief of the Lancer Corps. The Commander almost wished he could work for XCOM, since his record was one of the most impressive he’d seen. Saudia had chosen well in picking him for the role. Commander Christiaens and Elizabeth Falka were also here, in addition to Amalda Stein.

That was the leadership of the Lancers, ADVENT Military, ADVENT Intelligence and the Peacekeepers all in one room. And he’d brought along Patricia, Zhang, and Jackson. All of them stood around the holotable, ready to finally begin. “I am assuming everyone is aware of each other, by reputation if nothing else,” Saudia began, looking around the table. “With that in mind, we should begin. Commander, welcome.”

The Commander nodded beside her. “I’m glad we were able to set this up so quickly.”

Laura gave a humorless smile. “Don’t think we can afford not to, Commander. I’m assuming you’ve come to the same conclusion.”

“That I have,” he agreed, glancing at Saudia. “Chancellor, would you like to begin, or should I?”

“You first,” she relented, letting him take the center.

The Commander stepped forward and waited a few seconds before speaking. “The war in the Middle East has gone on long enough. All it is now is a drain on resources until every hostile nation is captured. In light of recent events, I do not think we can afford to drag it out any longer.”

“Agreed,” Weekes nodded. “We’re wasting time and soldiers.”

“Then how would you propose to speed it up?” Laura asked. “There are some things that cannot simply be bypassed.”

The Commander looked to his right. “Zhang?”

His Intelligence Director cleared his throat. “One thing that has become apparent as this war continues is that morale is fading drastically. These nation’s armies don’t want to fight, yet their governments are not going to surrender. ADVENT is solving the problem the wrong way. Yes,
“The solution is simple,” the Commander continued, clasping his hands behind his back. “We execute the governments of these hostile countries. Remove them from the equation. They will not surrender, and they have forfeited that right long ago. They must be eliminated. Not captured, not negotiated with, killed.”

“There will be immediate chaos,” Stein warned after a few seconds, her brow furrowing. “Provided that everything goes according to plan. And what happens if the armies still don’t surrender?”

“Then I suppose you have to kill them,” the Commander sighed. “But I highly doubt that would happen. Men can only fight so long and lose so much before they just stop. If their government is dead, their land captured, what more are they fighting for? How will they rationalize continuing the fight?”

“True,” Elizabeth said, rapping her fingers on the table, glancing up absentmindedly. “We could potentially exploit that. This isn’t even counting the citizens under martial law. With some well-placed propaganda, we can turn them into ultimately welcoming us.”

“I agree with the goal,” Weekes said, inclining his head in a sign of respect. “But it will take some of our best. The Lancers can do it, but it will cost lives, even if we wait for them to be genetically modified.”

“There is no need to worry,” Patricia interrupted, raising a hand and a smile on her face. “You don’t need an army everywhere. Point me towards any government and I will handle the rest. Give us information and we can send an XCOM team to wipe them out. We are willing to commit to this, and you don’t need armies of hundreds, or even dozens. Just one psion is enough for any Human army.”

“That’s…reassuring,” Saudia said after a few seconds. The Commander noted that all of the ADVENT personnel had become much stiffer and deliberately trying not to be affected by remembering that Patricia could read their minds. “I think that we are of one mind on this. We end this war quickly and effectively.”

“I will need to bring over several thousand Peacekeepers at least,” Stein told Saudia. “It’s going to be a nightmare to keep the population under control, especially in the rural cities.”

“Noted,” Saudia nodded, then looked over to Laura. “Commander Christiaens?”

“Necessary, I suppose,” she sighed. “In which case we need to decide on what we’re doing with India and Kazakhstan, right now India wants Pakistan minimum in addition to protection from China, they might ask for Afghanistan as well. Kazakhstan wants to keep Uzbekistan out of the fighting and for us to take them as a member state.”

“I’ll have Hassan handle it,” Saudia said. “He’ll know how much we can push them. But it’s superfluous anyway. Them joining ADVENT is worth quite a lot. With France now with us, it’s only a matter of time before the EU follows suit. And speaking of which…”

She stopped, and looked over at him, her lips in a thin pressed line. “Legislation has been introduced to annex Canada. I will be authorizing it and am in the process of acquiring the needed authorizations.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “He still wouldn’t listen to reason?”

Saudia’s lips twitched in amusement. “I’m afraid not. He…dislikes me. He had some choice words
at the end. Enough to convince me that he’s no longer someone who can have any sort of influence in this world. Preparations are being made to deal with the fallout.”

Good riddance. While he would have preferred Saudia refrain from annexing a rather peaceful country, the Prime Minister had brought it down upon himself quite frankly. She’d given him multiple chances and he’d spat on each one, which was intolerable in this day and age. Still, the Commander was somewhat impressed he’d actually had the gall to stand up to who was likely the most powerful woman in the world.

A shame. But Canada would be a massive boost to the war effort, India as well.

China would be furious.

He smiled at the thought.

“There is also something else I would like to make you aware of,” the Commander said after a few seconds. “I have drafted an amendment to the Advent Directive regarding the usage of psionics.”

All of them visibly reacted. Weekes and Laura stiffened in surprise, Stein raised an eyebrow and Saudia blinked rapidly. Elizabeth scratched her head in confusion. “Really?” Saudia finally said. “I didn’t expect it-“

“Neither did I,” he interrupted. “And this isn’t without conditions. As of this point we are working on something we are calling the Manchurian Project. In essence it is a form of mental conditioning that would allow the shutdown of a rogue or dangerous psion. This is something that will be applied to all psions, XCOM and ADVENT, when it is complete. And we will hold the code words for your psions but you will not have the same for ours. This is non-negotiable.”

“Guess you need some kind of power over us,” Elizabeth muttered. “But it’s a lot better than nothing, I’ll admit.”

“A question,” Stein said slowly. “How restrictive is this mental conditioning?”

“The goal is for normal functionality,” the Commander explained. “You should not be even able to tell if someone is under it, unless they act in a way they are specifically not programmed to do, or someone uses their code word.”

“Thank you,” she mused. “I approve. Psions cannot be running around without checks. The risk is too high and I’m glad you can see that.”

“You said it was being worked on,” Weekes recalled. “I suppose you will want some other form of insurance in the meantime?”

“Correct,” the Commander nodded. “Having explosive micro-chips inserted into their heads and providing us with the codes will be an acceptable alternative for now. Although the potential psions must be informed of this beforehand.” The Commander gestured to the side. “In addition, we will provide you will all our current research on Psionics and if requested, training from some of our own.”

He paused, and lowered his voice. “I don’t make this decision lightly. But I don’t believe you will abuse it, and frankly, I don’t think we have much of a choice. Our ability for psionics is one of our few advantages over the aliens. The more who can be awakened, the better. How you go about doing this is up to you.”

“It is appreciated,” Saudia finally said. “Unless there are objections, we will accept with the
conditions.”

He nodded towards Jackson. “Send it over, Central.” He turned back to the holotable. “In the meantime, I think we need to retaliate. We need a victory or to at least blunt the alien attacks. In short, we need to hit where they’re vulnerable.”

“That I agree with,” Weekes stated. “They’ve held that town in Japan for too long. It’s time we destroyed it. The same with America. We need to reestablish supply lines with Portland before we’re forced to pull out. I suppose you could assist us in this?”

“With pleasure,” Patricia nodded. “And we’ve drafted some potential tactics we can used against the Battlemaster. They might not work all the time, but we might be able to catch him off guard.”

Zhang’s eyebrows scrunched together. “You said ‘destroy’ the town in Japan. How? I believe it is surrounded by an energy shield and point-laser defense systems. The only way to take it is to march an army there, and a lot of people will die.”

Weekes pressed several buttons and a prototype unit suddenly came up. This was one of the most heavily armored soldiers that he’d seen. The colors were orange and black, and it held some kind of flamethrower in his hands, with an armored tank strapped to his back. “Dr. Mercado has been attempting to develop a suitable counter to close-range alien units. This is the result of the “Purifier” Project. Quite possibly the most dangerous unit in the entire military. While I’m sure Dr. Mercado would like to refine the final iteration a bit longer, I think the circumstances warrant an acceleration of his timeline. I have seen the unit in action and it will suffice.”

“Really?” The Commander said, trying not to sound too skeptical. “It might be useful in certain situations.”

“I’m afraid you don’t understand,” Weekes said with a smile. “Have you ever heard of chlorine trifluoride?”

“A pool chemical?” Jackson guessed lightly.

Weekes chuckled. “Not quite. But it’s possibly the most dangerous and flammable chemical in the world. It was so dangerous even the Nazis stopped working on it because of how bad the effects were. This chemical can burn through nearly anything, concrete, dirt, metal, aliens. Water only makes it worse. In short, a squad of these soldiers is enough to put some fear into the aliens.”

“Write that down,” he told Jackson, mildly surprised Vahlen had never informed him of the existence of such a chemical. “I stand corrected then. With the correct protection…yes, I think we can work with this very well.”

“And I will also have my agents in Australia perform some liberations of their own,” Zhang interjected. “One of my agents has a contact that is providing essential information. Enough for Harper’s resistance forces to launch an attack. If we coordinate several strikes at once…”

“The aliens will be briefly stunned,” Laura finished. “They’ll be surprised if nothing else.”

“Then I think it’s decided,” the Commander said, looking around. “With that in mind, I see no point in waiting any further. We have drafted some plans of attack, and this should be done in coordination with ADVENT. Should we begin?”

“I think that’s a rhetorical question, Commander,” Laura said with some amusement. “I think we’re all in favor of some retribution. Let’s begin.”
Supplementary Material

The Advent Directive

SECTION 7: ADVENT Peacekeeper Division

Subsection 7.2: Structure

**Overview:** Below are the varying ranks and positions within the following departments. Please note that sections specifically covering a division will only highlight relevant positions exclusive to that division. Generic and standardized breakdowns are in the previous subsection.

**ADVENT Peacekeeper Command:** Holds senior staff for all ADVENT Peacekeeper departments and is the central body for decisions that affect the entire Peacekeeper Division and even ADVENT as a whole. The following positions are as follows:

- Chief of Peacekeeper Operations
- Riot Control Commander
- Chief State Officer
- SSR Orchestrator

**ADVENT Peacekeeper Riot Control and Pacification:** Has responsibility over riot suppression and pacification against hostile civilian populations or violent civil unrest and the ranks are as follows by seniority:

- Regional Commander
- Riot Control Officer
- Riot Control Pacifier

**ADVENT Peacekeeper State Officers:** Has responsibility over enforcing the laws of ADVENT on a day to day basis and performing arrests, investigations, and protection in service of ADVENT citizens. The ranks are as follows by seniority:

- National Chief
- Regional Chief
- Department Chief
- State Officer

**ADVENT Peacekeeper State Special Response (SSR):** Is responsible for performing special operations in service of protecting ADVENT. Terrorism, organized crime and arrests of high-profile criminals are handled by the SSR. Ranks are as follows by seniority:

- SSR Watcher
- SSR Assassin
- SSR Saboteur
- SSR Executor
- SSR Operative

Chapter End Notes
So, War of the Chosen in certainly fun. If I had to guess, I'm probably a little more than halfway through my campaign (Avenger maxed out, beginning plasma weapons/warden armor, killed one Chosen, just did the Blacksite, etc). Although I have a tendency to delay major story missions until I'm sufficiently powered, so I may be further along. Given me plenty of story ideas, some you no doubt noticed here. Although as a general rule, my adaptions are probably going to be a lot more dangerous. One of my Purifiers would kill any XCOM squad if they were idiotic enough to actually let it fire at them.

Anyway, in some brief behind-the-scenes news, I've reorganized how my beta reading is done. I'd previously had it where one person did the main story, the other XCOM Files (Johnclaw Dragonhelm and BloodsplitBOOM respectively), but since both were making corrections, I figured everyone working on the same page was best. I also added another beta reader (Thuzan117) for a total of three. So I think the net result should end up being chapters that are much better than otherwise, this one alone had several spots revised thanks to their feedback.

Next chapter might be a while, all depends on how soon I finish the campaign. Then I've got XCOM Files to do as well, ha. Thanks as always for the feedback and reading. And go get the expansion if you can, it's definitely worth it.
The group consisted of many of the people who had been at the initial private meeting between ADVENT and XCOM, but now they were joined by the various Marshals, Admirals, and Commanders that made up the ADVENT military. The Commander and Commander Christiaens were at the forefront of the semi-large briefing room, facing a small crowd that stood at attention with a holographic projector displaying a blue, glowing map of the Middle East before them.

To his right and Laura’s left stood Patricia and Weekes respectively. The plan had been conceptualized by all of them, and the Commander was confident it would hold up, especially since they had so many tools at their disposal.

But the Middle East was only one part of the offensive, and ironically probably the least dangerous.

The strikes against the aliens held far more danger.

“Welcome and thank you all for arriving on time,” Laura began, stepping forward. “The operation that will be undertaken in the next twenty-four hours will likely be one of the most important, and dangerous, in human history. Myself and Chief Weekes have been closely working with XCOM during this time, as this is one point where we cannot afford mistakes.”

The Commander nodded, and also stepped forward. “The operation we have designated as ‘Deus Vult’ will have two primary objectives, and multiple angles of attack within each objective. The first objective, is the complete subjugation and capture of the Arab nations that stand against ADVENT, and by extension, our survival.”

He began pointing at the holomap. “The targets will be Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Oman, and Pakistan.” He paused, and noted impressively that there wasn’t any background chatter as he revealed their goal. Given how high-ranking many of these men and women were, they had likely expected something similar.

“Yemen and Oman will likely be final cleanup operations,” Laura continued, nodding to one of the women in the room. “Thanks to the Israeli ADVENT Legion, we control the centers of power and just have to deal with the final military remnants. The other good news is that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have been convinced to stand down and assimilate as part of ADVENT.”

“That still leaves us with a few nations to capture,” the Commander warned. “Pakistan, as a nuclear power, is the largest threat to ADVENT. India has been working with us in preparation for our attack. It will have to be handled delicately, and since we know that Pakistan is heavily monitoring the situation thanks to the Intelligence Bureau and ADVENT Intelligence, there is a chance that they will recognize this as a final offensive and feel they are out of options.”

He clasped his hands behind his back. “As a result, Pakistan and their nuclear arsenal must be neutralized as soon as possible. To do that, both the Prime Minister and entire Pakistani Defense Council will need to be taken out in short order, as either one has the capability to order the launch of nuclear missiles.” He paused. “In theory, disrupting the chain of command should be enough to prevent nuclear launches due to supposedly strict protocols. In practice, if either the Prime Minister
or Defense Council feel they are at risk of falling, protocols will mean nothing.” He nodded towards a man raising a hand. “Yes?”

“How will this be accomplished without either of them acting then?” The officer asked. “Multiple strike teams? That would still give them time to react.”

“Yes, it will,” the Commander agreed. “Fortunately, we don’t have to rely on luck.” He waved Patricia forward, who was clad in her dark red Aegis armor, wearing her helmet for good measure.

“Patricia Trask, Head of the XCOM Psionic Division,” she introduced herself. “This is where I come in.” She pointed to the map. “I will be deployed first to Islamabad, where the Prime Minister is currently residing. The Pakistani military does not have any defense against psionics, so they will pose little threat to me. I will capture the Prime Minister, extract the locations and names related to the nuclear arsenal from his mind, and secure their nuclear football, from there we can determine the locations of all nuclear stockpiles.”

She pointed to a different part of the map. “With the locations established, multiple Lancer and Shieldbearer teams will prepare to take out the stockpiles, and I will deploy to Rawalpindi, where the Pakistani military command is. I will then extract as much information as is needed from the command staff, then terminate the entire base.”

“Once Patricia provides us with the relevant codes, we will then use the protocols to order their nuclear submarine, or submarines, to surface,” Laura continued. “And with the ones in command with the authorization to launch the missiles dead, the strikes against the nuclear stockpiles will begin and the Russian ADVENT Legion will march on the prominent cities in Pakistan and Afghanistan.”

“The neutralization of the Pakistani nuclear threat will be the signal to begin the rest of the operation,” the Commander said, motioning to Saudi Arabia. “I will lead the attack on Riyadh, along with one of the Israeli ADVENT Garrisons, while the rest of the Legion secures other points of interest in Saudi Arabia.”

“In the meantime, the majority of the American Legion deployed here will take Turkmenistan,” Laura said. “We will also receive some assistance from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in accomplishing this.”

“It should be made clear what our objectives are,” Weekes stated, speaking for the first time. “Let there be no ambiguity: The time for surrender has long past. This is about the complete decimation of the ones opposed to ADVENT. Our goal is to completely annihilate the opposing militaries by any means necessary. We no longer negotiate with enemies of the State. We are not capturing any soldiers, we are killing them. The only surrender that will accepted is soldiers who throw down their arms. Any others you are ordered to execute on sight, this goes for anyone foolish enough to attack you.”

“We will not risk any portion of the leadership of the Middle East surviving,” the Commander nodded. “The governments and leadership are not to be captured, nor is any surrender to be accepted. Those who are tasked with executing the governments will do nothing less. There will be no trial or capture. They are guilty according to the Advent Directive and mercy has long since been removed from consideration.”

Laura gave a slight frown, and glanced briefly at the Commander. “While harsh, that is correct. The only exceptions will be children, who are to be brought into custody. All other officials who are connected to the Pakistani, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan governments, and the Saudi Royal family are to be executed on sight. This doubly applies for the entire military leadership. Is that
understood?"

“Yes, Commander!” All of them shouted instantly.

The corners of the Commander’s lips twitched. It was somewhat amusing how the circle came to a close here. He’d been the one to first weaken these corrupt and problematic nations, and now he was going to finish the job. “Good. That is the first objective of this operation. The second is arguably more important, and far more dangerous: An initial retaliation against the aliens.”

The holomap flashed and it was replaced with an image of the state of Oregon. “There will be three major components to this operation,” he continued. “This first is the reestablishing of supply lines for Portland. The Sargon commanding the alien forces there has surrounded the city and cut off access. The American ADVENT Legion will lead the attack with XCOM support. With Portland secure, we have at least a better chance of repelling the alien advance.”

The holomap flashed to Australia. “XCOM and ADVENT Intelligence are coordinating in Australia to act on information where the aliens have lessened security around Mackay, a city on the coast. Both my agent on the ground and the current leader of the Resistance believe it’s primed for an unexpected strike to get the civilian population free. Transports to evacuate them have been sent to Resistance areas of control, and they are preparing to actually move on the city and evacuate the civilians in an efficient manner.”

“The final strike will be against the lone alien stronghold of Nakashibetsu,” Laura finished. “With XCOM support, we believe that the aliens won’t be able to maintain control of the city and it will give us undisputed, if temporary, control over the entirety of Japan. To accomplish this we will be deploying the new Purifier teams, and our intent is to reduce their fortifications and army to nothing.”

“You’ve been appraised of their volatility,” Weekes reminded them. “But I need to repeat, keep all your soldiers well away from the fire once it starts. The only ones who should be near the units are the XCOM psions protecting them.”

“MDU’s will also be deployed in all appropriate locations,” Laura updated. “Chief of Engineering Feng has cleared them for deployment, and they will provide a much-needed versatility to our forces across the globe.”

“Are there questions?” The Commander asked, looking around.

“What happens if we encounter the Battlemaster?” One officer asked, his brow furrowed in concern. “Portland is near his territory, so to speak.”

The Commander figured it was a fair question. “We have a contingency in that event. However, in the event that any team encounters the Battlemaster or any other Ethereal, you are to pull back and XCOM will assume control of the operation.”

He looked around once more. “Any more questions?”

No one said anything. “In that case, each of you will break into the respective teams for the various assaults. Kilian, Emanuel, Betos, come with me to go over the assault on Saudi Arabia in more detail.”

“The rest of you stay in place while I give each team specific instructions,” Laura continued as the three commanding officers broke off to follow the Commander. “Good luck to everyone, but now it rests on you.”
To the best of her knowledge, this was the first time Abby could remember Harper’s Resistance team actually all meeting in the same place. She’d seen each of them around occasionally, but not in the same place. Now all of them were here, as well as Hari May, the other XCOM Intelligence agent, the Chronicler (still called Lucas by everyone else) and two ADVENT Intelligence agents, Joseph Falka and Illena Desora.

She’d never met any of them before, but she wasn’t exactly thrilled that yet another former EXALT agent was now here.

All of them were standing around the wooden table, a map of Australia laid out on it, where the target of interest was marked in red sharpie and a pin stuck in the center for good measure. “Mackay is our target,” Harper began. “Thanks to a source of Abby’s, we have been able to confirm that the aliens have left themselves vulnerable in the city. Abby?”

*You’d better be right.* She thought towards the Chronicler, given that he was her ‘source’. As helpful as he was being right now, she still didn’t entirely trust him, nor was she comfortable with keeping him a secret from Zhang.

*Don’t worry, agent, I know I am.*

She shivered.

He still did that, and she hated it every time.

“I’ve been able to confirm myself, and Agent May can back me up,” Abby began. “For whatever reason, the aliens have been moving around the majority of their force, with at least some being sent to the larger cities like Sydney and others to the south.”

“It’s not inconceivable that they are also moving some to help secure the other Oceania states,” May added, tapping the map. “They’ve been having trouble with the guerilla forces there as well. We’ve been doing more reconnaissance work, and thus our impact has been minimal, so naturally, the aliens want to move resources to where they’re needed.”

“In the end, the reasons don’t matter,” Abby continued, refocusing on the map. “There are at least one hundred aliens, which are mostly standard Mutons, and a small portion of Runianarch soldiers, likely Vitakarian. Cobrarian if we’re unlucky, but we didn’t see any when we were there.”

“The more accurate estimates are between one-twenty-five and one-fifty,” May added, glancing around the table. “With the majority being Mutons, I think that we have more than enough to defeat them.”

“With the weapons agents Falka and Desora brought us, I agree,” Ahri Colonan, one of Harper’s best guerilla commandos, nodded. “We have more than ten times that number.”

“But our soldiers are not expendable,” Harper pointed out. “From what I’ve seen, the aliens can replenish their numbers easily. We can’t. We still have to be smart about this, but now that we’re getting actual ADVENT support, I agree that it’s definitely feasible now.”

“Always a pleasure,” Joseph noted, inclining his head with a smile. “While drawing attention to the Resistance here is dangerous, the time has come to hit them where it hurts. But remember the goal, which is *not* to take the city.”
“Right,” Harper nodded. “Evacuate the civilians. Your people will be at the designated point.”

“Absolutely,” Joseph assured him. “This is part of one of the largest military operations ever undertaken. It will be done. We just have to kill the aliens first.”

“That can be easily arranged,” Harper said with a smile. “The soldiers are eager to attack, and after we take one city, we’ll take the next until only the major ones are left.”

“Don’t go in arrogant,” Abby cautioned, frowning. “We know they have at least four Andromedons, and possibly higher-ranking aliens that we haven’t seen. Not to mention there may be Zararch agents seeded with the civilians. I wouldn’t put it past them to do that.”

“We’ll have to take that chance,” May shrugged. “We don’t have time to take a blood test of every civilian, and I doubt they’ll attack when surrounded by armed humans.”

“The aliens, like us, prefer to use resources wisely,” the Chronicler spoke for the first time, sounding vaguely amused. “If I had to guess, they have far more important usage of such Zararch agents than to place them in random towns.”

Abby narrowed her eyes.

Assuming he was insinuating what she thought, that was one concern averted.

“What happens if they begin taking hostages?” Ahri asked. “They will call for help, and we can’t afford delays.”

There was silence for a few moments. Abby and May exchanged a look, before she looked back to Harper. “That’s why we have snipers. We can’t exactly stop, because those people will be dead anyway. Hostages shouldn’t affect the plan whatsoever.”

Ahri looked at her, his face inscrutable, but she was fairly certain he disapproved. “You might be willing to do that, agent, but I don’t think the rest of the soldiers will be as willing.”

“That, sir, is why we are here,” Joseph interrupted smoothly. “We understand that some people have issues making decisions like that. Should a situation arise, one of us will take care of it. We’re trained for situations like these, and we will do everything we can to keep the civilians safe…” he shook his head. “That being said, we will not compromise the liberation of one hundred civilians for the sake of ten.”

Abby still despised what this was being reduced to, but he was right. She hated that he was right. “This conflict is one of resources and pawns. Like it or not, that’s what it is. The more civilians we rescue, the weaker the alien hold here is. The more that live, the higher morale is. The more held in cities, the lower the morale. The people we’re trying to free are people, yes, but they are also a crucial resource in this war. And like any resource, sometimes they must be used to achieve a greater result.”

Well said, the Chronicler’s voice in her mind said, very approvingly she noted.

Joseph raised an eyebrow in surprise. “A very practical outlook, Agent Gertrude. And one all of us in this room should understand.”

Harper’s lips were set in a grim line as he stared at her unblinkingly. “I won’t ever reduce the people I swore to protect as mere resources…but I don’t disagree to an extent. Hostages can’t stop this operation. Do what you must if the need arises…but I won’t order my soldiers to do it.”
“You won’t have to,” Joseph promised, tapping the sniper rifle attached to his back. “Like I said, that is our job.”

“Then I’ll tell my soldiers to prepare to move out,” Harper sighed. “Good work, all of you. And good luck in liberating the city. If we win today, this will send a message to the aliens they won’t forget anytime soon.”

Assuming everything went according to plan.

The Chronicler seemed oddly relaxed though, and she wondered exactly what part he planned to play in the conflict. He hadn’t said anything to her, but she knew he had a plan.

He always seemed to have some kind of angle, and since he’d given her this information, she was expecting he was getting something out of it.

_I believe I am getting another city, Agent Gertrude; assisting you in taking it is the least I can do._

_Get out of my head_, she growled in her mind, knowing he probably wouldn’t.

Well, at least that confirmed he was going to help.

Even with ADVENT support, the best in the Resistance, and XCOM and ADVENT agents working together, she believed they’d need all the help they could get.

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_The Praesidium, Barracks_

Sierra had never seen everyone quite as active as now. This was being called the biggest operation ever undertaken by XCOM, and knowing the full extent of what was going to happen, she could believe it.

She hated that she felt conflicted of all things.

On one hand, she was going to help hit the aliens in America and free Portland from the supply lock the aliens had imposed on them. She was rather feeling up for killing a few dozen aliens. That was a cause she could fight for and feel like she was doing the right thing.

The only issue she had right now was that XCOM was getting involved in the Middle East war, and from the sounds of things, going to end it.

That bothered her.

Not that the war shouldn’t end…but she firmly believed that XCOM should not be interfering in it. It set the wrong precedent. This was ADVENT’s problem, and they should be the ones that fix it. Sure, the Commander probably had some justification, and it was admittedly probably a good one, but now that XCOM was getting involved, what was to stop XCOM now intervening whenever they perceived a country as making the ‘wrong’ decision?

The Commander was being irresponsible here, even though he’d never admit it. He had to know what sort of message this was going to send, and that he’d clearly decided to do it anyway indicated that he either didn’t care, or didn’t understand.

And she knew the Commander wasn’t an idiot.

Not that many people seemed to care one way or the other. The only ones who seemed even
vaguely affected were the ones who had originally come from the Middle East like Jamali and Fakhr, who were wisely staying quiet. At least the Commander was smart enough to send them to fight the aliens and not against their home region.

“You seem less excited than I thought you’d be,” Jona Mattis commented as she walked up. “I agree, for what it’s worth.”

Sierra wasn’t even bothered by the fact that Jona had apparently read her mind, or at least guessed correctly. At this point having telepaths around was just normal. “Not that I’m complaining about shooting aliens, but really, do we need to curb stomp the Middle East as well? It’d be one thing if it was close, but from what I’ve heard ADVENT is just laughing off bullets. This is just overkill, pardon the language.”

“Hmm, I understand,” Jona nodded, as they began walking with the other soldiers to the Hangar. “Although I think that the longer the Middle East is at war, the more people die. The sooner it’s ended the better, I think.”

“Oh, please, this isn’t about the people,” Sierra scowled at the woman’s naivety. “I’ve seen enough of the Commander to know that he doesn’t think like that at all. This is purely about power and resources. More power ADVENT has, the less people exist to question him. The more resources ADVENT has, the better the invasion can be stopped. If you think that he cares about people, you clearly didn’t see him put a damn Illuminati leader in charge of the world.” She paused. “No offense.”

Jona fortunately seemed to find that funny. “True, true, but while I can’t speak for the Commander, that is what I think. So regardless of his reasons, I think it’s the right move.”

“Yeah, sure, I just don’t have the greatest opinion of ADVENT right now, so forgive me for not thinking they have the best interests of the people in mind,” Sierra muttered, as they rounded a corner. She briefly checked her pulse rifle out of habit. “And before you ask why, I’m American. Tell you what, if you really want I’ll rant to you about it later.”

“I don’t think you’ll have many disagreements with me,” Jona said, flipping her helmet in her hands and placing it on her head. “I don’t exactly think ADVENT is quite as flawless as it thinks it is.”

“You can say that again,” Sierra snorted, mimicking her and placing her own helmet on.

“Seriously, the way some of those people speak they think they’re the second coming of Christ, coming to lift the stupid people into a new enlightened age. Pretentious twats. Stein in particular is the worst.”

She could imagine Jona’s eyebrow raising when she spoke. “You really want to punch her in, ah, ‘her smug little face’?”

“Very much so,” Sierra chuckled as they reached the Hangar. “But for today, I’ll settle for punching some aliens. Or better yet, shooting them from a distance.”

“I’ll stick to the back,” Jona added. “Telepathy doesn’t require getting in close.”

“Lucky you,” Sierra said. “But leave some for me.”

“No promises.”

In somewhat clearer spirits, Sierra and the rest of the XCOM soldiers began boarding the skyrangers, ready to exact retribution on the aliens who now believed their army couldn’t be
stopped. Something all of them were looking forward to clearly proving wrong.

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Japan, Nakashibetsu

“They’re gearing up for a big assault,” Duri noted as a squad of four of the new flame units, or “Purifiers” as they were being referred to, walk by. “It’s only a matter of time now.”

The Purifiers didn’t even look like they were operated by Humans. The armor was much, much bulkier than even the Shieldbearer armor he’d seen, and it looked like every single component had been made out of pure alien alloys. There was a very clear difference in quality. ADVENT armor was good, but he knew it was a mixture of alloys and regular Earth metals, which sometimes gave the armor a plasticy look of all things, even if that clearly wasn’t the case.

Pure alien alloys had none of that. It reflected light like hardened metal. Purifiers looked more armored, and the armor alone was enough to make it stand at least six inches higher than he was in full armor. It even looked like each gauntlet was fully armored, which had to have been extremely resource intensive, even if it was clearly well-designed.

The helmet looked to have been inspired by the Shieldbearer, but even that was taken to a hardened extreme with each of the angles and shapes being even sharper than before. The armor was colored a dull orange with portions of the helmet and armor being painted black. The only symbol or identifying mark was a bright white word on both shoulders, the upper right chest and twice on the tanks attached to the back.

CIF3

The tanks themselves were octagonal tubes, two extremely close together and made out of the same metal as the rest of the suit. They extended the entire length of the back, and even up to nearly half the head itself. Duri assumed it contained the flammable liquid for the flamethrowers they held in their hands.

The flamethrowers themselves were sleek, symmetrical, and nearly as long as a sniper rifle. The barrel progressively got narrower towards the end, and he noticed there was a smaller tube hovering just below the main barrel. A way to add an additional accelerant? A starter flame? He didn’t know enough about flamethrowers to figure it out.

But he noticed that they moved so. Very. Slow. It was somewhat ridiculous, and reminded him of robots, except that he’d seen robots now and they could move at a reasonable speed. These Purifiers just lumbered along, never speeding up. If he didn’t know better, he’d say they were moving deliberately slowly because they could explode at any moment.

If only. No, if something really was that dangerous it was unlikely to actually be used. A shame, it could actually be useful against the aliens then. From what he could tell...he couldn’t see a point to the Purifiers. He supposed it would be nice if they sent Chryssalids or Berserkers, but in general they just seemed too situational to justify the obvious cost that was being spent on them.

And of course ADVENT was low-key hyping them up, with warnings like “Do not ever approach Purifiers in combat” and “Do not attempt to enter areas being attacked by Purifiers”. Someone in ADVENT really feared fire. Not that Duri minded. He would be very sure to steer far away from them if they started working. While the armor would protect him, he figured it was best not to risk it.
“They remind me of machines,” Johan noted, scratching his beard. “Kinda neat, if a little creepy.”

“What a waste of resources,” Cara snorted derisively. “Yes, ADVENT decided we needed a flame unit of all fucking things. How the hell are these guys going to get close enough to cause any damage? Do they have sniper rifle flamethrowers?”

They all chuckled. “Berserkers, maybe?” Kang asked with a shrug. “Or other close range units? I’m just guessing, I feel the usefulness is limited as well.”

“Hold on?” Beatriz narrowed her eyes and pushed herself up from the wall as she watched the Purifier team walk away. “What was that on their armor?”

“Sif-Three?” Duri answered. “Probably a unit number of some kind.”

“Was it Sif-Three or CIF3? Beatriz demanded suddenly.

“It was spelled CIF3,” Duri shrugged. “Does it really matter?”

Beatriz whistled. “What the actual hell, ADVENT? What are you thinking?”

Duri cocked his head, and the rest of them turned to her. “That mean something?” Cara asked.

“I only heard about it a while ago,” Beatriz said slowly. “But if it’s the same thing, no wonder those guys walk around like they’re afraid of exploding. They just might.”

Kang turned directly to her. “Explain?”

Beatriz took a breath. “The short answer is, if I remember correctly, CIF3 stands for Chlorine Trifluoride, and it is possibly the most dangerous chemical on the planet. That stuff can burn through concrete, and then the dirt under the concrete, and still keep burning. There are only like, three, ways to safely contain it, if that.”

“Oh,” Cara said in a small voice. “Well, hopefully they have a water team—“

“No,” Beatriz interrupted. “Water causes it to explode. You can’t put out a CIF3 fire. You can only wait for it to die naturally. The fucking Nazis thought it was too dangerous to use and when the Nazis think that…maybe, just maybe, it might not be a good idea to try it.”

“I stand corrected,” Kang said appreciatively. “Well, maybe these Purifiers will actually be useful then.”

“If they really are using CIF3, then I don’t think ADVENT wants to take the city,” Beatriz said slowly. “I think they want to destroy it. I don’t think even aliens would be able to survive it. If even some of it gets on you, you’re dead and suicide by water might actually be a mercy.”

“I guess we should pay attention to the warning that we should keep our distance from them,” Duri said. “I wish ADVENT would have actually given us this explanation.”

“Keep people from panicking, probably,” Beatriz guessed. “I mean, if just one of those Purifiers exploded, we’re pretty much screwed. It’s going to make them priority targets, but if they actually get close enough to the aliens, they will be the ones who are screwed. I don’t know even if whatever magic armor the Battlemaster has could survive that.”

“The question is getting them close,” Duri said. “Even without knowing what they can do, I don’t think the aliens are going to like a bunch of heavily armed flame units coming across the no-
“If I had to guess, I’d say they have a plan,” Johan said slowly. “It explains why the units are so armored, and why they walk that way. There is no way ADVENT overlooked that particular flaw in the plan. Maybe Shieldbearer tech?”

“Wouldn’t be surprised,” Duri answered, idly flipping his helmet in his hands. “If I were in charge, I’d do whatever was needed to make them as safe as possible.”

Beatriz chuckled. “There is no such thing as a ‘safe’ way to handle CIF3. There are only ways that have less risk.”

Well, the good news was that it seemed like the Purifiers might actually be useful.

But he was going to keep himself and his team as far away from them as possible. Death by fire was not how he wanted to go.

***

Islamabad, Pakistan

On edge, but not worried.

That was the general impression Patricia got from walking down the streets of Islamabad. There was very little urgency and fear. The people seemed to believe that only when they could easily see the enemy approaching, then that was cause to fear. Until then, they saw no reason to not go about their normal day.

She was dressed as inconspicuously as possible, in appropriate civilian clothing which consisted of tan pants, what felt like incredibly flimsy shoes, and a regular desert sweater over a light shirt. At the suggestion of Laura, she was also wearing an open-faced hijab and shawl, for no other purpose but to blend in. It was also entirely possible that the Pakistani government had acquired pictures of her and were telling people to watch for her.

Very unlikely, but possible.

Stifling as it was, it seemed to be working and she persisted towards the House of the Parliament of Pakistan. Not only was the Prime Minister working out of there most days recently, but it was the majority of the legislature in Pakistan. Should they be eliminated, the government would collapse completely, allowing ADVENT to only have to mop up.

She saw it up ahead now, a very blocky and white building to say the least. Not exactly creative architecture, but she believed she could tell where they were going. It was as if someone had taken the United States Capitol, and turned it into squares. There was one slightly taller square in the middle, and on each side were smaller squares with obvious levels.

What was very good was the high military presence. Excellent.

Pakistani soldiers marched in formation around the building, guards were stationed at every checkpoint, and there were even more in front of every entrance. People were being ID’d and escorted out if they failed to have the correct authorization. Paranoid, but they were smart in fearing an attack. There were probably enough soldiers here to defend it for at least thirty minutes against ADVENT.

Which was far too long if they had nuclear weapons.
But speculation was pointless, as reality was going to set in for these people very shortly. By the
time she was finished, everyone in that building would be dead or under her control.

Preferably the former. The mission was very clear.

*Extract the information from the Prime Minister, capture him until operation is complete, and
execute the entirety of Parliament.*

Easy enough.

Four guards had noticed her walking up, and moved to intercept her, visibly preparing to use their
rifles. “اعرض عملك!” One of them demanded harshly.

They stepped back in surprise when they saw her eyes flash a brief purple and tinted energy
manifested around her body, but she took control of their weak minds before they could so much as
speak. All that was needed a brief command: *Stop.*

Impressing that upon them, she took the opportunity to look into their minds, seeing what potential
issues the rest might pose. Images, voices, memories and random thoughts all rushed over her in
seconds, but she was experienced enough at this that she picked out and focused on the information
she needed and stopped the rest with a mental gesture.

*Layout,* she commanded, and she was bombarded with images of them walking the building, the
twists, turns and rooms all coming at her at a speed that would overwhelm a novice telepath, but
she was able to construct a useful recreation in her mind, aside from a few black spots where these
people had no access.

She would have to impress her will a little harder on the soldiers, as many of them didn’t have a
firm grasp of English, even if they understood a few words. Not a problem. Forcing the meaning of
her commands on them would take slightly more time, but she could work with it.

Let’s see…the Prime Minister.

A few mental commands for information about where Prime Minister Rafiq Sangrasi was and…
yes…while there wasn’t an *exact* location, he was definitely here, as the security around him was
always noted by one of these guards. Good enough, and she could work with that.

She opened her eyes and looked at the men staring at her dully, their minds completely in her grip.
“You will pay attention,” she said, the psionic undercurrent present in her voice, further driving her
words and will into their minds. The spoken word was often more effective for getting her
commands across, and she felt them immediately focus everything they had left on her. “In
approximately four hours, you will execute every Parliament member in this building with no
exceptions, as well as any who would protect them. You will also answer only to me, and ignore
my activities unless called upon. Do you understand?”

All nodded. She returned the gesture and released them directly from her control. “Go about your
duties.”

They wandered off, silent and mechanical as she proceeded deeper into the courtyard in front of
the building and walked to a small patch of grass close to the building, knelt on the ground, placed
her hands on her knees, closed her eyes and began her domination of the inhabitants of the building.

There were hundreds of people inside, with two very distinct mindsets from each other. One was
heavily organized, conditioned and protective – soldiers and military personnel, she assumed. That
was fine. The rest were largely more unique, some more busy or slow than others, but they lacked
the strict uniformity found in soldiers.

So first she focused on them, on all the civilians that were here, all the ones who were doing their jobs.

*Everything is normal. Nothing to be concerned about. Go about your business.*

She impressed these words on them until they dominated the thoughts of every civilian in the building, which was easier since many more of them understood English, and thus, the command registered. They might not know why they were thinking these thoughts, or why they were so certain ‘everything was fine’, but they would believe it nonetheless.

Now, for the soldiers.

*Come.*

She repeated that command to all those with the minds of soldiers, who suddenly felt compelled to abandon their posts and go to where she was, the exact location she planted in their minds, even as she tightened her grip on them. They did not understand what was happening to them, and she felt their brief terror before she smothered it and forced compliance.

It might have been an hour later, or perhaps only five minutes, but she eventually felt dozens of minds in close proximity to her own and opened her eyes, her purple-tinted vision showing a small army of soldiers in front of her. All of them stood as still as statues, their eyes sightless as they stood under her thrall.

The landscape was eerily quiet as they all stood waiting. “Now listen…” Patricia began, her voice distorted and low as psionic energy coursed through her, and she gave them the same instructions as she had given the first group of guards. The instant she was done, the spell of silence was broken and they all shuffled away, no conversation taking place.

“You. Stay,” She commanded one of the ranking officers who froze and turned to her. “Escort me to the Prime Minister.”

“Yes, sir,” he said dully. “Follow me.”

She followed the soldier as they finally entered the building, and ignored the civilians and legislators still scurrying around, oblivious to the entirety of their guard temporarily disappearing just as she’d hoped. The soldier escorted her into an elevator and pressed the top floor, and they waited patiently as it took them up.

They stepped out, and he escorted her through the ornate hallway with the red rugs until they arrived in front of double doors, trimmed in white and gold. No doubt where the Prime Minister was stationed. The guards she had affected here were back at their posts, and opened the door at her command.

“Dismissed,” she told them with a wave. “Return to your duties.”

They saluted and she walked into the office of Prime Minister Rafiq Sangrasi. It was well-furnished, with bookcases and expensive chairs and couches lining the room, and sitting at a desk, several aides around him was Rafiq himself. He had fairly light skin, no beard, and a graying head of black hair. Dressed in a simple traditional suit and tie, he didn’t look especially threatening or even intimidating.

He frowned as he noted her approach, and stiffened in outrage as she took the opportunity to
liberate her hair of the hijab, seeing no more need of it. “And just who are you?” He demanded, correctly assuming she only spoke English, and he was fortunately good enough that his accent was easily understandable.

“Patricia Trask,” she answered. “XCOM Psion.”

Fear spiked in him, and his mouth parted in terror. “Impossible! How could you-“

“You man has your version of the nuclear football, yes?” She interrupted, glancing at the man standing in the corner, holding onto a silver briefcase handcuffed to his hand. “You. Come here.”

She easily took control of his mind directly and he walked over mechanically. “ADVENT has grown tired of this war,” Patricia continued, sitting down in a chair opposite him, not feeling it was time to sift through the Prime Minister’s memories quite yet. “Thus, both XCOM and ADVENT agree it is prudent to end it. The problem is that you are, unfortunately, a nuclear power, and we can’t risk you killing millions of people in some form of revenge.”

At a mental commend, the man placed the nuclear football on the table in front of Rafiq. “This is what I need from you, Prime Minister,” Patricia continued, letting the psionic energy alter her voice, and was rewarded by Rafiq squirming in his seat and pushing away. “Your nuclear codes, your procedures, and who knows about them. You will start by unlocking the nuclear football.” At that the man began unlocking it, and opened it to reveal a simple GUI which prompted a code from the Prime Minister.

Rafiq swallowed. “And if I refuse?”

“Then I will take control of your mind, like I’ve done with your soldiers here,” she answered coldly, crossing her legs as if relaxed. “Your cooperation is not needed, but I feel an obligation to give you a choice.”

“And then what?” He suddenly snarled. “You expect me to just surrender to your western empire that has sought our destruction for decades? You would see me humiliate myself? And for what? For my life?”

“No,” Patricia answered. “To preserve the sanctity of your mind. It is something so personal and intimate that it being violated without consent scars people for the rest of their lives, no matter how short they are. You fear that happening to you now, and it can be prevented. I haven’t entered your mind yet, but I would certainly have no issues doing it.” Patricia paused. “That is the only reason. Your government will die today, Prime Minister, as will you, the people in this building, and your military command. If it’s any consolation, the war in Pakistan will be over quickly-“

He spat in her face.

Patricia was still for a moment, then sighed. She could almost admire his defiance, and she did have to admit that there weren’t many upsides to her offer. Fair enough. “I suppose that is a no then,” she said, wiping her face with the back of her hand. “As you wish.”

She extended the opposite hand to him and directly broke into his mind. She felt no need to be gentle as she probed through his memories, ones not even relevant, but she wanted to experiment somewhat here. It wasn’t as if she was pressed for time now, and she wanted to see if she could keep him aware of what she was doing throughout the whole thing.

She parsed through his memories of childhood, early life, intimate moments, the deals he’d made, the secrets he knew, in mere minutes, keeping him independent enough so he knew just what she
was seeing. It probably appeared to him like his life was literally flashing before his eyes, because it was, in a way.

She’d toyed with him enough. His mind was hers, and resistance was futile. “Enter the code,” she said, and he did so. It beeped in acceptance and the GUI switched to show a small map of Pakistan. The language was in Arabic, but she could see several spots she assumed were stockpiles or missiles. There was a colored radius in the Arabian Sea, which she assumed was the general area of the nuclear submarine.

“Thank you,” she said, pulling out her own tablet and entering the codes and information she’d extracted from his mind. She nodded and the aide closed the football and stepped back. “You have been helpful. Walk with me, Prime Minister, we have a plane to catch.”

Cognizant of how he was being controlled, but helpless to stop himself, the Prime Minister rose and followed her out, the nuclear football in her hand. She could feel both his terror and fury, obvious questions blazing in his head.

“You people will be treated fine, provided they follow the law,” she said in the elevator, in response to a question in his mind. “We do not kill people without reason, only those that stand in the way of defending Earth. You should have surrendered long ago, and now you and everyone here will pay the price.”

The elevator opened and they stepped out. “And I wouldn’t be reliant on your military launching a retaliatory strike,” she warned him with a smile as they walked through the ornate halls. “They will not know you are even gone, not until it is too late. That is where I am heading next, and ADVENT and XCOM teams will be moving to the nuclear sites as soon as your military command has fallen. Your country will be given to India afterwards, if you were interested.”

A sense of loathing enveloped him, a hate so strong she had to chuckle. “I don’t blame you for being angry,” she said, with a glance back at him. “I would be too. But the thing is, I know when I am beaten, and your arrogance and stupidity is not something I can sympathize with. If you must hate anyone, hate yourself.”

They stepped outside right on time, the skyranger was waiting with the ramp open and she escorted the Prime Minister onto it, and then mentally commanded himself to strap in. Once they had lifted off, she allowed him to talk. “Do you have anything you want to say? No one can hear you now.”

“Enjoy your life on this Earth,” he spat. “But an evil like you will not last forever. You will be punished one day for your crimes. You will be judged, in this life or the next.”

Patricia raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps, but I somehow doubt it. Your god didn’t intervene during the War on Terror, nor when your holy sites were destroyed, and not at all during this war. Your god is dead, Prime Minister. Or more likely, he never existed in the first place. There will be no afterlife for you, there will be no peace when you are executed. All you will have to look forward to is the void. You will die knowing you failed, and I want you to think of nothing else until that point.”

She added the psionic command to the end of her sentence. “Remember, Prime Minister, that you failed.”

That would be enough to start his mental deterioration, and she had more important things to worry about than the delusions of a dead man. The Pakistani military still needed to be neutralized, and she needed to prepare for that. Hmm…

The ordeal had drained her of quite a bit of energy, and while she was confident she could
complete the mission, no sense in taking chances. She did recall the one trick she’d used when they’d attacked the Mercado Estate, and when she’d drained one of the soldiers of his energy. She glanced at the Prime Minister.

Perhaps he _would_ serve an additional purpose before his death.

It wasn’t as though he’d be contributing to anything else.

***

*Portland, Oregon*

“Deploy!” Creed shouted and the entire XCOM squad charged out into an already heated firefight on the south side of Portland outside the alien-controlled perimeter. Sierra knew there were three major objectives in securing Portland. The aliens had the city nearly surrounded, and had deployed some kind of artillery to cut off any sort of support from the side that was free. The north, south, and west of the city was secured by the aliens, and the Muton-majority forces had somehow constructed fortifications around the city.

Sierra looked around as the ADVENT soldiers charged forward with them. Matthew, Zara and, surprisingly, herself, were leading the charge forward at the foreboding alien structure that seemed to be too well-built for it to have only been constructed mere weeks ago. It was simple, with a single command tower two stories high in the center, and around it were black alloy fortifications and barricades. No walls, but multiple levels of cover until the center.

And they were filled to the brim with Mutons.

Plasma fire flew past them, hitting a good many soldiers who fell screaming as the plasma ate through their armor. “Establish a position!” Creed roared as they all took what cover they could in the woods, on a hill that was just above the Muton stronghold. The Officers around them repeated the orders, pulling back their soldiers while the Engineers rushed through.

“MDUs moving to assist!” One of the Officers shouted at Creed. “Set to reinforce you!”

“Acknowledged!” Creed called. “XCOM! Prepare to move forward! Jona, you ready?”

“Yes, sir!” The telepath answered with a firm nod.

“Sierra, Zara, with me up front!” Creed ordered and they immediately moved to comply as the green camo MDUs came stomping up. “Jim, stay back and take out the bigger targets. I bet we’re going to have Elites and Berserkers showing up soon.”

The lean sniper nodded. “My pleasure.”

“Jamali, Fakhr, Jona, stay behind us,” Creed instructed, hefting his pulse rifle. “We can take the fire. Matthew, you’re also up front.”

“Looking forward to it,” Matthew answered, sounding almost happy. “I’m ready to crush some xenos.”

“Overseer!” One of the Corporals, as designated by their dark green armor, yelled, running up, a few plasma bolts coming uncomfortably close to her head. “I’m coordinating the Grenadier attacks if you need it. I’m also working to establish sniper cover.”

“Have your gunners move up to suppress the worst of it,” Sierra found herself suggesting, as a
cursory glance at the stronghold revealed the Mutons would overwhelm them with plasma otherwise. “The infantry aren’t going to do much good otherwise.”

The Corporal took it in stride. “A good suggestion, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Have your Grenadiers fire on my command,” Matthew suggested. “I can direct their initial volley much more accurately than they can.”

“Understood,” the Corporal nodded. “Good luck down there.”

“Same to you,” Creed said. “Move out!”

And they charged forward down the hill into the hail of plasma below. Jona fell to one knee and extended a hand towards the stronghold, her body sheathed in a light psionic aura. “Fall!”

Sierra watched in fascination as a knot of Mutons just inexplicably fell over, although they moved to rise quickly, but it caused a lull in the constant plasma fire, and that was when the MDUs were sent forth. The bipedal robots wasted no time in opening fire. Lasers struck with pinpoint accuracy against the helmeted Mutons, with repeated volleys killing them instantly.

The remaining plasma fire was suddenly split between the new threat and XCOM bearing down on them. Sierra also fell to one knee and began sniping with her own pulse rifle, sustaining the beam at the head of one Muton. Creed did the same. Zara was pushing forward, using her own plasma rifle to wreak more havoc on their position.

A roar suddenly rang out, and Sierra’s lips hardened into a line. Berserkers.

“Launch!” Matthew commanded, raising a hand, psionic energy surrounding his body. Sierra heard the ADVENT Corporal shouting in the background, and she glanced up to see an entire section of the air above her shimmering, a telekinetic net created by Matthew to catch any projectiles.

“Rocket prepped and ready,” Fakhr updated, the launcher on her shoulder. “Whenever you’re ready, Matthew.”

Six Berserkers suddenly came charging forward and Matthew threw his hand forward. “Now!” The four dozen or so grenades caught by Matthew, and Fakhr’s rocket were suddenly thrown with blinding speed and slammed into the armored Berserker horde with an explosion that lit up the battlefield.

Zara whooped and waved her hand forward, as she was close to the line. “Come on!”

The MDUs were right behind her, and causing almost as much damage as them. The Muton Grenadiers were rushing forward now, along with the soldier reinforcements, and this time they were specifically targeting the merciless machines. Two MDUs went down in a bright explosion, even as the majority of the XCOM team reached the first barricade.

“Silly Mutons,” Matthew chuckled, raising his hands toward the Grenadier line, and slowly squeezing. “Holding grenade launchers is not smart around me.” The entire line suddenly exploded in a bright flash of green as the plasma not only killed them, but vaporized the entire line instantly.

Sierra and Jamali leapt over the first barricade, and charged to the second one as more reinforcements came pouring out, this time with Elites supporting them. While not nearly as impressive as Patricia, Jona was doing her part in smaller ways, muttering words to herself in a trance. *Pain, fire, panic,* and *terror* were all regularly part of her vocabulary, and Sierra noted that there were Mutons that occasionally started roaring in pain, clutching their heads, or just falling
over. Those were quickly picked off by one of the soldiers or the MDUs.

Two more Berserkers suddenly leapt out from behind the Elites, and charged some of the MDUs. One slammed into the machine, clearly damaging its laser weapon, which the machine then tossed aside and started using its metal fists to pummel the Berserker in the face. The alien was clearly surprised, but in a match between a Berserker and machine, the Berserker would eventually win…

…Were it not for the intervention of psionics. Matthew noticed the situation and raised his hands in the direction of the Berserker, and lifted it into the air. The MDU was merciless as it struck with pinpoint accuracy at the designated weak point, which was the helmet, tore off the helmet, then dug its metal hands into the face as quickly and brutally as possible, turning it into unrecognizable pulp and gore, until it ripped what Sierra could only presume was part of its brain out.

And just like a machine, it immediately moved to the next target and began pummeling a surprised Muton soldier into the dirt. Sierra had to remember to send whoever had made them a congratulatory note. It was a beautiful combination of brutality and efficiency.

The Elites were backing up, and beginning to try and reform some semblance of a line with the remaining Muton soldiers. One suddenly turned and began attacking its brethren, and Fakhr took advantage of the distraction by loading another rocket and firing it into the crowd. The Elites staggered under the blast, but were torn between the mind-controlled alien, the MDUs who were circling in, and XCOM.

A cheer behind her caught her attention, and suddenly there were ADVENT soldiers by their side, firing at the remaining Mutons from positions of cover. Sierra grinned; she supposed that they’d done a good enough job to make it safe for ADVENT to actually come and reinforce their position. They were already doing good work.

Half a dozen Mutons were cut down from combined MDU and ADVENT fire, while Matthew was in the process of systematically crushing every limb, bone, and armor plates of a Muton Elite, his body language seeming to take great pleasure in making the alien suffer. A few other Mutons suddenly began freaking out, shooting the air, and stumbling around as if blind. Sierra and Jamali quickly put them down with sustained lasers.

The Muton force that was coming up from the west stronghold a few dozen feet away suddenly stopped, and the Elite suddenly began making motions for the force to retreat, and they quickly backed up, exposed and suddenly under a hail of gauss, laser and plasma from XCOM and ADVENT. An Elite corpse was thrown towards the small army, presumably by Matthew who stepped forward, psionic energy almost turning his form purple.

“You will not run!” He snarled, extending a hand, closing it into a grip and pulling. “Not today!”

The weapons of the front line of Mutons, including the Elites, were ripped from their hands and tossed onto the grass and dirt. Matthew’s other hand was flat to the ground, the air around it distorted and Sierra realized that there was clear distortion pulling down around the legs of the Muton force, meaning he’d effectively anchored them in place.

And so they killed each and every one of them. Not even Muton Elites could withstand the fury of hundreds of gauss rounds and lasers, especially with no means to fight back. Sierra killed Muton after Muton, melting their helmets and heads in short succession. The Elites and Berserkers died more slowly, suffering from dozens of small wounds that bled them dry, while the MDUs systematically targeted and hit the identified weak points.

Sierra now realized why EXALT had given Matthew the designation of a “Fury”. He was giving
Patricia a run for her money. Quite honestly, the only thing that was giving her more satisfaction than slaughtering Mutons was watching that weaponless MDU walk around, and beat the odd Muton into a tan and yellow pulp.

Sierra grinned, and realized that the day was only getting started for them.

Vengeance felt good.

***

Rawalpindi, Pakistan

The teams were ready to move, all that was needed was the neutralization of Pakistani Military command. No longer in civilian attire, Patricia wore her Aegis armor as she marched toward the Joint Staff Headquarters, which was fortunately near the General Headquarters of the Pakistani Army. Subtlety was not a concern as she simply forced the few that got in her way to sleep with a mental command.

Even if most of them started running the opposite way when they saw her.

Her energy and vigor restored, she was ready to close this chapter of history, and wanted it done as quickly as possible. The military checkpoints were coming up, and she simply reached out towards the nearby minds and gave simple commands: *Kill each other.*

She paid no mind to the sound of gunshots ahead of her, and strode through the checkpoint as the guards focused on killing each other. A team of soldiers came running up to see what the commotion was, their own weapons drawn and she froze them in place with a single command. One of them was an officer, so she quickly extracted as much information from his mind as possible, before giving them all the same command as the guards.

And she got an idea.

Why waste time commanding individual groups of soldiers when she could affect *everyone*?

She cocked her head in thought. In theory it was possible, and certainly Ethereals were capable of such feats. Aegis had said Humans were likely capable of replicating at least some of an Ethereal’s power, so why not this? Compared to destroying a planet, it was trivial.

But she would need an additional burst of energy to make it happen. Luckily, there were many sources around. She grasped one of the soldiers by the neck and focused on him, while simultaneously raising a hand in the general direction of the base to direct her power. She closed her eyes, and let the psionic power envelop her.

Then she slowly and deliberately expanded her influence, which she imagined as an arc effect, spreading out and catching minds in its wake like a trap. She knew she wouldn’t be able to give complicated commands, but she didn’t need to. Not yet. Like a parasite or virus, she wormed her way into dozens, then hundreds of minds over the course of at least a half hour.

Every time she felt her concentration wavering, she simply drew some of the focus of the man she had by the throat. She repeated this at least six times, as her control and range grew and the sheer number of images, thoughts, and voices of these people had contorted into a blur and voiceless *noise* in her head that threatened to drive her deaf and blind.

She figured there was no more she could do now. Perhaps the Command staff had been caught in it, perhaps not. Either way this would solve the problem one way or another. The time had come.
She could expand no more, and gave her command.

*Kill.*

She opened her eyes and let her mind contract into her own. She looked down at the man she had by the throat and noted that he had died, with some blood running out of his nose. Hm, so she actually could kill someone like that. Interesting. Not like it mattered as the man would have died today anyway.

At least it had been a useful death.

Machine gun fire sounded further into the base. Yelling and an explosion followed.

She smiled.

The walk through the Pakistani base was a fascinating demonstration of how just one command could reduce a man to little more than a raving beast. It turned out that *kill* wasn’t really specific enough. Some used guns, others used their hands, shovels, boxes, it didn’t matter as long as they had a target. Some of the bodies were so mutilated they would never be identified.

Others had clearly died excruciating deaths, and yet even then they had persisted in trying to kill something. All their faces were contorted in fury, rage and pain. Some of them even tried to attack her in their bloodlust, yet she simply redirected them with a simple mental wave. By the time she reached the Headquarters proper, she realized that her influence hadn’t quite reached here. It had gotten close, but the soldiers here clearly retained their minds, and she could sense their distress at having to gun down their own men.

She put them out of their misery quickly. *Kill yourselves* she sent, and they placed pistols to their heads and pulled the trigger, ending their lives quickly and painlessly. She secured the mind of someone within the base and forced them to open the door for her, then gave them the same command as the guards.

Though before that, she extracted the location of where the Military Command was situated. An underground bunker, that could only be accessed via elevator, and no one here had the codes to get into it. That might be a problem, had she not been able to access minds.

She didn’t need to be in the room to extract the information she seeked.

So she strode down to the elevator, locked of course, and after she had turned every resident in this building against each other, she knelt down and focused on the minds below her. Now she planned to be a little more delicate, since she had some detailed information to extract here. She pulled out her tablet, and accessed the first mind, which happened to be the Chief of Naval Staff.

He was quite a trove of useful information. After a dedicated half hour of stripping his mind of information, she had the means to contact not one, but *two* nuclear subs, and the protocols for them to surface, as well as specific details about the missiles they were carrying. Their general location wasn’t a surprise, but that was irrelevant, and of course the codes required were extracted as well.

The next few minds were not quite as useful, simple military leaders. She now had confirmations on the nuclear stockpiles and missile sites, all of which matched the ones from the nuclear football. Additional codes and protocols were also extracted, including all-clear and stand-down ones, which she figured could be used.

The next mind wasn’t exactly *important* per-se, but interesting nonetheless. He must have been a scientist or engineer, as he knew the complete technical capabilities of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal,
including bomb sizes, impact radius, bomb yield, time needed to hit, and the maximum range. Yes, very useful, and would help them plan even more exact operations.

She also confirmed that they hadn’t sent any orders, for the simple reason that there clearly hadn’t been any ADVENT activity and this was being seen as an attempted military defection. They clearly wouldn’t risk their country being annihilated because of a military revolt. In the end, it had the same effect and they had ensured their destruction.

She sent all the information to ADVENT and the Commander. Her job was done, and all that was left was cutting off the head. But how to end them? She realized that she could use this time to experiment, maybe attempt to drive all of them to insanity or worse, since she hadn’t quite mastered that aspect yet.

In the end, she decided the simplest way was the best. Much as these people were the enemy, there was no reason to make them suffer unnecessarily. She could save that for the aliens.

*Kill yourselves.*

With the final command sent, she stood and walked back onto the general area of the base and surveyed her handiwork. Hundreds of bodies were sprawled across the airfields and barracks, with the remnants fighting to tear each other apart. Blood ran and stained the concrete, and the corpses were already beginning to fester in the sun.

Above her the skyranger flew overhead, and she made her way to where it was landing, a trail of death and insanity behind her, but it was worth it. Pakistan would no longer pose a threat to ADVENT or XCOM.

With her final command, she had secured the future of the Middle East and ended the final threat they posed.

***

*Nakashibetsu, Japan*

Duri certainly felt somewhat apprehensive as the ADVENT Army marched forward to retake the one alien stronghold in Japan. There had been a few skirmishes, which had been driven back almost instantly as the Andromedons encountered stomped away when they saw the size of the army approaching.

And it was a massive army. Duri had heard that there were at least five thousand soldiers being committed to this mission, which was *not* counting the MDUs that led the front of the line, nor the XCOM psions that also stood before them. Duri realized that as much as he’d heard about the fabled XCOM psions, he hadn’t actually seen one before.

They looked pretty normal, all things considered. Their armor was clearly more advanced and sleeker than ADVENT armor, but they didn’t look any different than regular XCOM soldiers. That was, until the fighting started. A large reason they hadn’t suffered any casualties yet was because they were in constant communication with the commanding officers, and apparently were able to sense where aliens were.

That, and when the aliens *did* appear, they raised their hands and purple shields appeared in front of where the alien weapons were, absorbing the plasma and allowing the aliens to get shredded by the MDUs. Even Andromedons weren’t safe from the laser weapons the bipedal robots wielded, because whoever had programmed them was *smart*, and they targeted specific weak points of the
armor, joints, tubes, and with literal laser-point accuracy, they caused the Andromedons to flee or die by a thousand cuts.

Duri glanced at the one psion leading the other two. Iosif he believed he was called, who was carrying a mace of all things. All of them were almost ripped out of some fantasy story; at times it seemed so bizarre just what was now possible. Plasma, aliens and tech made sense, and he could easily accept that.

Weird purple magic? That was something else entirely.

Still, he was more than happy to accept their help, because they would need it. The army formations were open, but at least the Corporals and Marshals had taken some care into how they were being put together. There were three main groups of soldiers, each group roughly one to two thousand strong. The majority were Officers and their squads, of which he was one of the ones leading in the front.

In the back, and in between each group were transports holding more soldiers, and carrying trailers of artillery pieces to deploy if needed. There were a few tanks leading the convoys, but the majority of vehicles here were mainly for transport and not direct combat, which Duri could understand since the number of vehicles suited for open combat was small, and the MDUs were much more useful in terrain like this, and especially in urban environments.

Around the midpoint between the Officer squads were Purifier teams, Duri believed there were about a hundred Purifiers total, spread throughout the groups. Interspersed within the Officer squads were teams of ADVENT Engineers who were carrying squares of metal that he understood was a new development from ADVENT R&D, actual portable cover.

The specs seemed fairly strong, but Duri wasn’t sure how reliable it would be under sustained fire, and curiously enough, all of the Engineers were armed with Symbiote grenades of all things. Correction: They had some kind of device that could spray that symbiote substance, which looked similar to the med-kits that the medics and XCOM used occasionally. Probably used to patch up weak points. Either way, they were dispersed in such a way where several layers of ADVENT lines could be established within minutes, which was essential in the open field they would be initially be fighting in.

In front of all the groups were the line of MDUs, colored a stark white presumably to get the attention of the aliens, which shouldn’t be a problem as the machines towered over the regular soldiers. And of course, leading the entire army were the XCOM psions.

“Who are the other two?” He asked his team, even as the red of the energy shield surrounding the captured alien city came into view. “The one with the mace is Iosif, I remember that.”

“Dael and Said,” Beatriz answered, the barrel of her sniper rifle resting on her shoulder while she carried it by the stock. “Don’t ask for their last names, I don’t think they ever said. Spooky if you ask me. Who the hell charges into a team of Andromedons?”

“And then bashes their little green heads in?” Cara finished with a chuckled. “Don’t know, but I like these guys. Anyone that crazy is someone I want on my side.”

Johan clicked his teeth. “Still though, why the hell would you use a mace?”

The psion Iosif suddenly raised a fist and the entire Army halted. Before them, Duri saw the alien stronghold in its full glory. All the bordering buildings had been fortified with alien alloys, and
reflected a dull gray. Alien snipers were stationed on the roofs, and before the buildings were three layers of alien barricades, all constructed with Andromedon body sizes in mind.

There were hundreds of Andromedons already behind the barricades, their plasma rifles primed and ready, pointed at the ADVENT army encroaching on them. And in front of them was the massive red energy shield that seemed to cover the entire city. There were poles of various heights he saw buried in the ground, presumably the power sources. Some of the sections of the shield were clear, which was probably to give the Andromedons a window to fire out of.

“Engineers!” Iosif, called out, hooking his mace in a slot on his belt. “Establish defenses at the designated coordinates. You will be protected!” At that, the bodies of the psions were suddenly surrounded in purple energy, and Duri watched in amazement as a purple energy shield materialized before them, small at first, but it grew to fill the entire front of the army.

“Wow,” Cara said.

Duri felt that was an appropriate choice of words, and the Engineers began rushing forward and establishing cover, and the aliens took that as their cue to fire. Green plasma flew towards them, but every single shot was negated by the psionic barrier, and the Engineers worked quickly, protected by the impenetrable barrier.

They set up the black squares, placing them vertically to the ground, and spikes shot into the ground, anchoring it in place initially, then metal panels extended out and interlocked with each other, until a full barrier was firmly established.

“Take positions!” One of the other psions ordered, the one with the Egyptian flag on his collar so that was…Said? Probably. It was more Egyptian than Dael.

“Move up!” Duri ordered and his team charged forward and quickly established themselves, holding their rifles at the ready and waiting for the order to fire.

“Target orders?” Beatriz asked, training her sniper rifle at the aliens. “I can get shots at the Andromedons or I can try to take out one of those generators.”

“Rocket also primed,” Kang stated, his rocket launcher aimed at the barricade. “Ready when you are.”

“Target the Andromedons,” Duri instructed Beatriz. “But don’t fire. I want to see what they’re going to do.”

The ‘plan’ as he’d heard it, was that XCOM was going to protect the Purifiers who were going to get relatively close and burn the aliens. In practice, Duri thought there would be some other plan. Maybe that was the public one, since the aliens likely had spies of their own. There had to be more than that.

“Shield will dissipate!” Iosif called. “Return fire at will!”

The purple barrier vanished almost instantly, and the battle officially began. “Open fire!” Duri ordered, as did every other Officer on the front. Plasma was returned with gauss shots, and the red energy shield flickered as it was bombarded with thousands of projectiles. Duri tried firing at the gaps in the shielding, but soon found that he was too far away for his rifle to be that useful.

But he was going to do his damn hardest to contribute.

Behind him the Engineers were already establishing secondary lines, and the Purifier units were
moving up. The MDUs were holding position, but were firing back as accurate as ever. They were managing to hit the energy generators, but the Battlefield Engineers behind them were replacing and repairing them just as fast.

“Purifiers! Forward!” Iosif shouted, his hands awash in purple energy. The Purifiers lumbered forward, as slow and methodical as ever, and Duri was instantly worried a stray plasma bolt was going to hit one and blow them all up.

But his worrying was needless, as the Purifiers were suddenly enveloped in what he could only describe as a personal psionic shield. It was partially translucent with a purple tint, but Duri could clearly make out the armored figure within it. How the psions were managing to project a shield on every one of the Purifiers was something Duri didn’t feel like questioning at the moment, but the Purifiers soon took the lead.

The psions themselves trailed behind them, their hands extended towards the Purifiers, and similar shields covered their own bodies. Iosif in particular marched forward, a fist encased in energy raised high in the air, while the other held his mace. Once the psions started marching, the MDUs began their own methodical march forward.

The aliens were now noticing the problem, and even if they didn’t know exactly what the Purifiers were, they knew they were probably dangerous. Duri gritted his teeth several times as a plasma bolt sometimes hit a Purifier directly, but the psionic barrier stopped it, and the Purifier kept marching forward unrelenting.

Duri also noticed that some of the Purifier units weren’t exactly the same. Instead of the armor being black and orange, the color was white and orange, and the label painted on their shoulder was oddly enough, the formula for water.

\[ \text{H}_2\text{O} \]

He assumed it stood for something else. However…

The Purifiers stopped at what was probably one hundred or one-fifty feet away, best as he could tell. The white-striped Purifiers stepped forward, raised their weapons and shot out blasts of… water?

Beatriz whistled. “Friend, you are crazy.”

She \textit{had} said that CIF3 reacted violently with water, didn’t she?

The water Purifiers continued spraying down the area in front of the shield, soaking the ground and the fronts of the generators. Then just as quickly, they stopped, and stepped behind the line of main Purifiers who now raised their flamethrowers, starting flames lit and extended far from the barrel.

The command was heard by everyone from Iosif.

\textit{“Light them up!”}

What followed Duri would never forget for the rest of his life. He’d always thought flamethrowers were little short-range weapons that were dangerous, but only if you acted like an idiot about them. Not so here. The idea that flamethrowers were ‘short-range’ was, as he saw now, a complete myth.

Cones of white-hot flame shot across the battlefield and into the shield, and the instant they made contact with the soaked ground, the entire front of the shield exploded in a series of white smoky blasts that initially forced him to look away. When he looked back, the shield was visibly
dissipating, and the Purifiers were moving forward, chemical flames blasting into the alien lines.

The water Purifiers behind them were aiming their water cannons into the air, and firing again, aiming to rain down water directly on the alien position, but Duri already knew it was complete overkill. Interestingly enough, the Andromedon suits were still intact, although on fire, but it was clear that whatever their helmets were made out of was not fireproof.

Duri was fortunate, or unfortunate, enough to see a Purifier fire directly into a pod of Andromedons who were trying to get the fuck away. The initial blast turned their armor black and set the metal on fire, and literally everything else that wasn’t an alien alloy melted or disintegrated into nothing. The green and red helmets of the Andromedons melted like butter and the moment the chemical flames touched the alien within, the suits exploded, leaving only scraps behind.

The ground was burning now, and the fire was spreading into the city as the Purifiers continued shooting white flames into the doomed aliens, and the loud pop of explosions was still heard as water rained down, soaking even more of the city, ticking and innocent time bombs as the fire reached further.

The few non-Andromedons might as well have been wearing nothing when the flames hit. Duri saw a Vitakarian evaporate, boil, or explode, he wasn’t sure which. And there were a group of… other aliens, sectoids maybe, that seemed to disappear the moment the flames covered them. Then there were the aliens that were on fire, and trying frantically to put it out, trying to pat it down, which only resulted in more of them catching on fire, or accidentally committing suicide by trying to douse themselves or others in water.

Cara summed up what most of them were feeling. “Holy shit.”

All of them could only agree, as the Purifiers began to move on to encircle the city, and creating a ring of fire the aliens would not be able to escape from. And ADVENT listened to the screams of their enemy, and watched the fire as it consumed everything in its path.

***

Nuclear Storage Base 2, Pakistan

Roman felt that if he were on the opposite side of the small military base before them, he would be sufficiently terrified. ADVENT had the base completely surrounded, with MDUs encircling the base at all intervals, guarding THAAD and Point-Laser defense systems being rolled into place if the soldiers tried to launch a nuclear missile.

The main bulk of the ADVENT army was at the ‘front’ of the base, where Roman could see at least a few hundred Pakistani soldiers preparing to fight, hunkering behind barricades of boxes and sandbags.

All of them were as good as dead.

XCOM had also deemed to send one of their own to assist, and she was probably the scariest woman he’d ever seen. Ignoring the actual sword she carried, and the massive alloy shotgun, her body language and tone screamed danger to him. She walked as purposefully and emotionlessly as the MDUs around them.

Carmelita, that was her name. Unique to him, which was probably why he remembered it. And she had been pacing back and forth for the past fifteen minutes, the sword held idly in her hand as she was waiting for the order to attack. She reminded him of a tiger, or another animal stalking its prey.
Every single person in there was marked for death, and Roman had the feeling that in a battle with this woman against everyone in the base…his money would be on the woman.

From what Roman could tell of the base itself, it was fairly small and ill-equipped for any kind of sustained attack. There was a main command building, and airfields for planes to take off, and that had actually been the initial response, which was to send up aircraft…which had immediately gotten blown out of the sky by the AA defenses established.

The Pakistani soldiers were looking to put up a good fight, if a fruitless one.

Roman had to admire their bravery in the face of death, but he wasn’t sure if it was bravery or just plain stupidity. Either way, it was time to get started and end this war once and for all.

Maksim looked down the scope of his sniper rifle. “[And so it will end. What a pointless death.]”

Galina shrugged. “[I’m just glad it will be over soon.]”

“[Agreed,]” Anton nodded. “[Past time we join the real war.]”

“Attack at will,” the orders came suddenly, and Roman’s team fell into formation and began slowly marching towards the base. There were six Shieldbearer teams, with even more behind them, and Carmelita led the pack, twirling the sword in her hand with the blade suddenly turned orange, as if red-hot.

“[Shield up,]” Roman stated, as he activated his gear. “[Open fire!]”

Everyone in ADVENT began firing at the opposing soldiers, sending a hail of gauss fire that tore through their flimsy defenses, killing the front line almost immediately, and the few shots in retaliation simply bounced off the armor or his shielding. Carmelita yelled and jumped at least twenty feet toward the back of the Pakistani line and Roman realized he was right to consider her dangerous.

Carmelita killed quickly and brutally. With several swipes she dismembered and decapitated the immediate soldiers around her, grabbed another hapless one and slammed the point of her sword through his skull from under the chin, and then she extended her left hand and…something came out of it.

It was some sort of nightmarish tentacle, which looked more suited for a jellyfish. It was pale and the stinger at the end glistening with some kind of liquid. It impaled itself in the eye of one soldier, and then wrapped itself around the throat of another, and choked him to death while Carmelita swung her free hand holding the sword in a wide arc, slicing open the chests of a few more soldiers.

Roman wasn’t sure if she was a typical representative of XCOM, but if so…no wonder ADVENT liked playing nice with them.

The remaining Pakistani soldiers were running deeper into the base, at this point running from the now-blood covered XCOM soldier who was now sheathing her sword in a slot on her back, and pulling out her shotgun and firing into the backs of retreating soldiers.

Konstantin snorted. “[Did we really need to come?]”

“[I’m wondering that myself,]” Roman commented as he shot two soldiers who were trying to hide behind some wooden crates. “[I guess we know why ADVENT is legally bound to fund XCOM. Can any of us do that?]”
That, which was now referring to Carmelita turning into some kind of leapfrog with a shotgun. He could swear he heard her chuckling as she leapt in front of fleeing soldiers, before unloading shotgun blasts in their chests, or beheading them with her sword. She seemed to be interchanging between them frequently.

“She’s practicing,” Elena noted calmly as she gunned down several soldiers trying to set up a mounted minigun. “This isn’t serious combat for her.”

“No shit,” Galina said sarcastically. “I’d like to see what she does if she is trying.”

“Hey, we need to secure those missiles!” Anton yelled, and pointed to a rack of missiles against a wall. Roman didn’t know if they were nuclear, but they needed to do so anyway.

“Secure them,” he ordered, and they began moving towards that location. The semblance of defense that the Pakistani army had promised had long since dissipated, and now it was simply a matter of hunting down any who didn’t surrender. And by the looks of it, no one had yet.

Maybe not a surprise. You didn’t get sent to guard a secret nuclear site without being sufficiently loyal. Most of these men probably didn’t know their government was abolished, and even if they did, he doubted they would have given up anyway. But in the end, it didn’t matter as he simply shot every enemy soldier he saw, and most of them were powerless to stop them.

The MDUs had entered the premises now, and Roman could now call it a massacre, although that wasn’t fair to ascribe that to this battle now. Because this wasn’t a battle, it was a slaughter and they were the butchers. Roman found himself feeling somewhat disappointed at how... easy it was.

But if it was the last time he had to fight in this damn desert, then it was worth it.

“Missiles secure,” he stated. “Status of the enemy forces?”

“Routed,” came the response. “Another team secured their nuclear arsenal here. I’m getting updates that the same is happening at the other locations. We all did it. The Pakistani threat is neutralized.”

Roman grinned. “That’s good news, sir.”

And now he could relax. At least for a few days until he was sent to fight aliens. But he felt every one of his team deserved some rest. The War for Pakistan was over, and the Middle East would soon fall.

Yes, they’d definitely earned a break.

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Exterior of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Reduced in power as Saudi Arabia had been over the years, they had still managed to construct some impressive buildings. There were few buildings she would consider to be skyscrapers, but they towered over the lesser structures which she supposed were houses, businesses and the few remaining mosques in the world.

But even the tall buildings couldn’t completely hide that the days of Saudi influence had ended. The skyscrapers were dull, sand-blasted and blocky. Remnants of much more intricate designs were spread throughout the city, half-finished or abandoned, either from a lack of money or resources. Riyadh had at one point been considered luxurious, but those days were long past.
Perhaps they would come again, but it would not be from the Saudis. By tomorrow, they would be gone for good.

Marshal Helsa Betos, of one of the Israeli Garrisons, stood before the city, reflecting once more before what would likely be the final battle that took place here.

She was conflicted.

She was not a stranger to practicality or callousness; she would never have chosen a career in the military were it otherwise. Yet there was a point where she had to question just where such a line was. ADVENT Command was right, this war needed to be ended. She doubted any of them disputed that point. Yet the way it was to be ended was…extreme, even within the confines of the Directive.

It was something she had learned very quickly after Israel had joined ADVENT and their military had been restructured to conform to ADVENT standards. ADVENT did not have empathy. Betos genuinely didn’t believe any of those in charge could really fathom why these countries didn’t surrender to them. They couldn’t understand their continued defiance, when it flew in the face of logic and reason.

They didn’t seem to have any recognition that they might not be completely right. Betos agreed that the alien threat was the larger issue, but…again, ADVENT once more took the most extreme measure possible in subduing what they saw as a threat, which given how every Middle Eastern nation that had actually fought them was utterly decimated…she couldn’t see how ADVENT could see them as anything more than an annoyance.

They most certainly were not a threat.

It also didn’t help that many countrymen she knew were treating this war as a means of revenge, vengeance and retribution against the region that had once stood united in its hate for them, a hate that had never really faded. Israel demanded blood, and they were finally carrying out the mission many of them had dreamed of. Palestine had been the first step, and now they were finishing the job.

That, Betos believed, was not why a war should be fought. Nowinski had called it a neutralization of the enemies of Israel, but now it had turned into a campaign of revenge.

One that she was now a part of.

It was eerie how much people could change once rules were removed or lessened. Men and women she’d served with for years had given orders that would have been seen as war crimes before ADVENT, yet were perfectly permissible under the current administration. Words like mercy, surrender and respect had been thrown away in the quest towards total and complete victory. It wasn’t enough for ADVENT to win, they had to crush the enemy to absolutely nothing and salt the earth which they had died on.

Effective perhaps, but it came at a price.

Nothing solidified that she was living in a world where the rules were changed more than her time working with the Commander of XCOM. He was an enigma to her, a mix of contradictions and personalities that didn’t seem to match. On the surface she was immediately attracted to his calm demeanor and clear respect for his subordinates. He didn’t seem to see himself as innately superior to them, and had asked them for input quite often.
Betos could see why he had been put in charge of XCOM, and it helped that he was clearly smart as well.

Yet in direct contrast to his friendly demeanor to his subordinates...he was the embodiment of ADVENT’s military directive. If she didn’t know better, she’d swear he’d written the damn thing himself. It was chilling hearing him calmly describing the plan to execute an entire family, and draw up orders for the execution of all hostile military soldiers.

No one was worth any extra consideration in his eyes. Man or woman, the Commander marked them for death. His one line appeared to be children, but he clearly didn’t think about the effect it would have on the children, seeing their parents getting shot in front of them. It was worse since he had been explicitly clear that no surrender was to be accepted.

His rationale was just as practical as the rest of him. “Facing death reveals the true nature of people. Most will beg for their life in order to save it, regardless of why they are in that situation to begin with. These people have been given the opportunity and refused. Their chances are spent, and their tears will not change their feat.”

What was unnerving to her was that he had a way of presenting his plan as making sense. He operated on pure logic, and because of that, she couldn’t easily refute what he was saying. Morality was not a word in his used vocabulary, and one he seemed to hold some disdain for. The Commander didn’t really care about liberating the people here, or improving the Middle East, he only cared about the negation of a threat.

She recognized that was certainly a major part of strategy...but there had to be some kind of balance. She’d at least tried to treat the captured soldiers and civilians well, and she had the capability to empathize with what they were going through. She had some more perspective on that than most, and tried to apply that in this war.

The Advent Directive itself thankfully allowed for such small mercies, but it was abundantly clear now that the ones who really mattered only cared about the victory, and not the means or what even came after.

That bothered her. Did she really have a place in it then if this is what she could be repeatedly ordered to carry out? How long was it going to be before ADVENT started sending military forces to simply shut down people who peacefully opposed them?

She snorted.

Stein’s appointment suddenly made a lot more sense, now that she thought about it. That psychopath was a perfect fit for what ADVENT wanted, which was a state free of all dissent. At any cost.

“I don’t think the architecture is that interesting,” the familiar voice of her second-in-command stated as he walked up behind her. “I doubt some of it will be standing tomorrow.”

“What better time to memorize it, Mox?” She asked the towering soldier now at her side. “I doubt anyone else will care.”

He crossed his arms, his tone full of disapproval. “You actually sound surprised at that.”

She shrugged. “Maybe I’m too much of an idealist.”

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“It died when ADVENT took over. We’re now all tools of the
state. I told you what these leaders were like, and you didn’t believe me. It’s changed, hasn’t it?”

She took off her helmet, and let the air wash over her bald scalp. “Maybe you were right,” she admitted. “These people aren’t like us.”

“Which is why you need to resist them,” Mox said grimly, moving around to face her. “At some point you have to make a stand. Do you really believe it’s necessary to kill off the entire Royal Family? Do you really think that all of them are equally influential?”

“Of course not!” She snapped, gritting her teeth. “But what exactly am I supposed to do? Defy a direct order from the Commander of XCOM? Do you even know what kind of man you’re talking about here? He doesn’t see innocence or guilt, only potential threats. And he eliminates threats, Mox. Until you’ve met him, don’t say that speaking against him is a viable option.”

Mox was silent for a few moments. “You’re a good woman. I’ve known that for years. But I’m worried you won’t be one if you keep…doing this. And I’m worried about myself as well. Both of us joined to protect people, and right now it doesn’t feel like we’re doing that.”

“No,” she agreed softly. “It doesn’t. But what other choice do we have? Leave?”

Both of them were silent, until Betos’ wrist chirped an incoming message. She quickly put on her helmet. “Marshal Betos. Status?”

“We’ve got a defector,” came the answer. “Says he’s part of the Royal Family. Appears to be legitimate, he brought his family and personal guard with him. We’ve taken them into custody, and he’s being escorted to the Commander now. He wants you there with him.”

That was unexpected. About time one of the Saudi’s got smart. “I’m on my way,” she said, then clicked off, looking up at Mox. “It appears one of the Royal Family defected. The Commander is going to speak to him now.”

“Really?” He visibly perked up. “Well, get going!”

She took his advice and dashed off at a quick jog, moving through the ADVENT camp where soldiers quickly got out of her way as she marched through the winding paths. The Command Structure was a quickly-constructed building made out of lightweight tiles and walls that snapped together to form a secure shelter stronger than a tent.

There wasn’t much room inside it, but enough for a small holotable and room enough for at least three or four other people. Betos opened the door to see the Commander standing on the far end of the holotable, dressed in his full Aegis armor. The silver gleamed in the light, and his gauss sniper rifle and pulse rifle were hooked to slots on his back. The helmet was resting on the holotable, and the Commander appeared more inquisitive than anything else. No surprise he was in armor, Betos knew he was going to participate in the battle.

The other man did appear to be a wealthy Saudi man. He was dressed in white and gold robes, and the traditional headdress with cloth that fell to his shoulders was affixed with the black band. She knew that particular piece had a name, she just didn’t remember it off the top of her head. His skin was a ruddy tan, and he had a full black beard which was neatly groomed.

“Betos, good, you’re here,” the Commander nodded in her direction. “Now, you may begin.”

“Yes,” the man said, bowing to her as she went and took a place by the Commander. “My name is Maqil bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, of the Royal Family of Saudi Arabia, brother to King Dhul Fiqar Abdulaziz Al Saud.”
The Commander gave a single nod. “Yes, I recognize you now. Surprising, that you’re standing here before me. I would not have expected someone so highly placed to defect at this stage.”

“You must understand, Commander…” He paused, waiting for the Commander to reveal his name.

“’Commander,’ will suffice,” was the answer.

“You must understand, Commander,” Maqil continued. “We are a proud people, we do not see the humiliation of surrender as something to aspire to. Call it arrogance if you wish, but the Royal Family sees this as an unjust war, and the aggressors as people who seek to destroy our culture and way of life.”

The Commander’s face hardened. “If it was an unjust war, we would not be in this situation. You coordinated with other Middle Eastern nations to attack Israel, and now you are paying the price. And I am most certainly here to destroy your culture and way of life. This is not my first time here, Maqil bin Abdulaziz, I have seen your so-called ‘culture’ and ‘way of life’ and it is an oppressive and restrictive monarchy. It has no place in the modern world, and it will be abolished and reconstructed. Change will only come to this region with force, and neither ADVENT nor I are hesitant to bring it about.”

Maqil seemed to not be expecting the rolling anger in the Commander’s voice. “Believe me or not, but my family had nothing to do with the egregious attack on Israel.” He shook his head. “However, I believe that is beside the point now. What is done is done, and I assume within the next few hours you will attack.”

“Yes,” the Commander stated.

“What are you planning to do?” Maqil asked. “What is to be the fate of my family and the citizens just living their lives? I do not ask for mercy for my brother, I suspect you have determined his fate, but I do ask that you treat the citizens and the innocent ones in my family fairly.”

“The extended Saudi family has little to worry about,” the Commander dismissed. “It would be impractical and pointless to hunt down those with very little real power. But the core of the family, they will be executed. No exceptions. The family will die, and it will never rise to power again, and I will not risk letting them live and attempt to influence their subjects from afar. The time for mercy for your family is long past. The civilians will be treated fairly, provided they follow ADVENT’s laws. If they are foolish enough to antagonize the soldiers, they will not be spared.”

Maqil visibly became deflated. “I suppose there is nothing I can do to convince you to simply take them alive?”

“No.” The Commander answered flatly. “They should have surrendered when they had the chance. That chance is gone. Why are you here, Maqil? You had to know your demands were unlikely.”

“First, to secure the lives of my wife and children,” he began. “And second…because I want to help ensure the city is taken as quickly and bloodlessly as possible.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “Is that right? How could you possibly help? Our military is far superior to your own.”

“Yes, it is,” Maqil quickly agreed, bobbing his head. “However, taking the city will only be the first step. The people will not respond well initially to a foreign power in charge, no matter your intentions. It will cause…problems, and I have seen how ADVENT responds to dissent, such as in Iran, and I have no wish for that to happen to the population.”
He spread his hands. “However, this can be avoided with my help. I am known to the people. They will react better if one of their own is seen with ADVENT, especially if it is me. Your problems can be easily avoided if you simply install me as a…temporary King, or at least until the population is sufficiently placated.”

Betos almost winced. She genuinely wasn’t sure if this was an opportunistic power grab or a legitimate strategy the man wanted to employ. On the surface, she would agree. The leaders of countries and even regions should reflect their citizens. It would be wrong for the Head of State for Saudi Arabia to be anything other than a Saudi, or at least someone of Arabic ethnicity.

The question was if the Commander would see it that way. As it was, he simply had one eyebrow raised.

“Quite convenient for you,” he commented. “You survive the purge of your family, and in return gain the power of King. As it happens, I do think it would make most sense for a Saudi to eventually preside as the Governor of Riyadh. But I’m not sure it should be you.”

The Commander raised a gauntleted finger at him. “Saudi Arabia will no longer be a sovereign power in the world. It will become a territory under ADVENT control, or might be given to Israel depending on what is negotiated. And concerning your own appointment, ADVENT does not work like that. After the peace is established, ADVENT will hold elections, with approved candidates, and the winner of said elections will preside as Governor of whatever is left of Saudi Arabia.”

The Commander paused. “If you wish to have this position, you must earn it. I don’t know if you are a good leader or not. I don’t know your qualifications. With that said, you have made the right decision siding with us, and I will remember that. The decision of allowing you to run for a government position is not up to me, but if you are sincere about wanting to, then I will personally approve you for Governor application. If you actually have the skills, than I see no problem allowing you to help. Is this acceptable for you?”

Maqil sighed. “I believe it will have to be. Nonetheless, my help is at your disposal, should you need it.”

“Good,” the Commander stated. “In the meantime, we will find a place for you here. The attack will take place in a few hours, and we will not have need of you until the military and political threat your family poses is removed. Be ready to be called upon.”

“Yes, Commander,” he said, bowing. “I will do what I can to assist.”

“Then dismissed,” the Commander stated, and then when Maqil left, he turned to her. “Betos, are the soldiers ready?”

She nodded. “Ready and waiting, Commander.”

“Then give the order,” he stated, reaching for his helmet. “We attack now.”

Betos blinked. “Now? But you told him that—“

“I find it suspicious that he happened to leave the city with no one stopping him,” the Commander said, his voice artificially harder from the helmet. “He seems genuine, at least in his desire to be a more, ah, ‘benevolent ruler’, and to acquire more power for himself. But I would not be surprised if there is one of his entourage that is compromised by the Saudi Family. Not that it matters, but I would prefer to catch them off guard then even give them a few hours to prepare. There is no need to delay, regardless. I think you want this over with as much as I.”
Betos could only nod. “I certainly do, Commander.”

“Then launch the attack,” he stated, walking past her. “Their threat ends today.”

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*Riyadh, Saudi Arabia*

The perimeter of Riyadh lit up with muzzle flashes as the Saudi soldiers realized that ADVENT was actually attacking. Their bullets were answered with gauss rounds from ADVENT soldiers and lasers from the MDUs that led the front. The Commander fired his own pulse laser, cutting through several Saudi soldiers with ease, and in a few minutes that MDUs had neutralized most of the initial defense line.

Riyadh was a large city, and there was a lot of ground to cover between the Royal Palace and the city perimeter, but the Commander wasn’t exactly pressed for time at the moment. He’d have the MDUs surround the city, and all the major exits were covered in the unlikely event that the Royal Family tried to leave.

The Saudis had declared martial law a while ago, so that was hopefully going to keep the majority of the civilians out of the line of fire, and he sincerely doubted that the military would be stupid enough to use the citizens as human shields or hostages. Perhaps if this was a lesser city, but not the capital of Saudi Arabia itself.

The Commander leapt onto one of the roofs, pulled out his sniper rifle and sighted in on a group of soldiers rushing forward to defend the city. Four gauss shots later all of them were lying on the sandy concrete, dead from headshots, looks of complete surprise on their faces.

Good to see he hadn’t fallen out of practice.

He swept his scope around his immediate area, looking for more soldiers to take out, and helped ADVENT soldiers by taking out their opposition from afar. He really didn’t need to, as the ADVENT military was cutting through the Saudis like a wet piece of paper. Even their heavy equipment like mounted machine guns barely had enough power to even wound ADVENT soldiers.

It was apparent where the Saudis had been hit hardest after he’d executed the King and immediate family the last time he’d been here. No one wanted to deal with them, as the stigma was still too great. The Commander expected that hadn’t been a problem for countries like China, Russia and even the United States to make secret deals, as they still had oil.

Yet all of those countries were operating from clear positions of strength. Saudi Arabia didn’t have a choice if they wanted to make deals. They tended to be old weapons and arms, outdated and flawed weaponry that had been replaced with something better. It showed. Their weapons, armor, and even heavier pieces were irrelevant twenty-year old pieces of junk that the ones who had actually sold them were probably laughing at just how bad the Saudis had been ripped off.

In the end, he wasn’t disappointed the Saudis weren’t providing a challenge to him. He was just finally glad they were being dealt with decisively.

It all came full circle it seemed. Wasn’t that long ago that he was waging another war here. He’d technically won, but he had known he’d not solved the problem completely. The problem would never be solved as long as these countries still existed in these current forms.

He liked to think of this as finishing the job.
Fate had a sense of humor and irony, last time he’d been acting alone without government support. Now he was leading the armies against them.

ADVENT forces had now made major inroads in the city, and the Saudis were in full retreat. He’d been sure to bring the entire Garrison so they could effectively cut off all areas of retreat, and clear the streets systematically and quickly. So he kept going forward, leaping to different roofs as he assisted the various squads of soldiers and took out all opposition in their path.

The Commander quickly fell into a familiar pattern as they methodically advanced through the city. He leapt across the roofs of buildings, fell into position, and took out as many enemies as he could see until the ADVENT forces had pushed far enough that there were no more targets for him, and he leapt forward to the next building to repeat the same thing over again.

He didn’t know how long it took, but eventually, the Royal Palace was in sight, a compound that stood above all the rest of the plain city because it was clearly the most luxurious. The walls were a gleaming tan stone, and had silver trim. The ornate building in the middle had a domed top, many windows and surrounding it was expertly trimmed landscaping and decorative pieces like benches, arches and fountains.

The Commander only shook his head and sighed. Even now the Saudi Royal Family couldn’t let go of their wealth and power, even if it resulted in the rest of the country suffering by comparison. His lips set in a firm line, he systematically eliminated the guards around the palace, even as the ADVENT soldiers surrounded the gates.

Time for him to move in.

He jumped down and made his way over to the entrance where the soldiers had already blasted the gate apart, and were ready and waiting to advance forward. “Remember,” he instructed them. “With the exception of the children, kill all inside. Are there any traps being picked up?”

One of the Engineers shook his head. “No, Commander. Seems to be all clear.”

“No signs of any of them fleeing,” Betos updated, also walking up, her second in command, Pratel Mox, he remembered, close behind. “My soldiers have surrounded the palace and are sweeping the rest of the streets for stragglers.”

The Commander nodded. “Move in. I will deal with the King.”

With the soldiers at his back, the Commander marched forward, his pulse rifle at the ready as they reached the massive white doors leading into the palace. A sustained laser melted the locks, and they stepped inside the palace.

He knew foreigners were rarely allowed in, but the place had changed surprisingly little since the last time he’d been here. The obvious thing that stood out was that the palace was shiny. The stairways, floors and furniture all gleamed as if recently polished. There were some men and women standing in the small ballroom, who froze as they marched inside, and could barely react before they were cut down with gauss rounds.

The Commander knew where the King would be.

The same place where he’d killed the last one.

“There are two basement floors below this, and three above,” he told Betos. “I will go deal with the King now. Divide your soldiers accordingly.”
“Yes, Commander.”

With that he jumped up to the highest floor, which was easily accessible with the open architecture of the palace. He pulled himself over the railing and began walking down the luxurious hallways that were decorated with portraits, rugs, and golden lamps which lit his way.

One man suddenly rounded the corner and yelled in panic before trying to turn around, though not before the Commander telekinetically grasped him with a raised hand, psionic power converging around the prosthetic. He kept walking forward, even as the man struggled against the unrelenting grip. The Commander squeezed his hand and the man’s neck snapped with an audible crack, and the Commander let his body fall, slumping against the wall.

The Saudis didn’t have a ‘throne room’, even they weren’t that obnoxious, but they did have an equivalent of course. It was a grand ballroom, with a single massive table in the middle, under the golden domed top. It was honestly one of the most impressive rooms the Commander had ever seen; a shame it had to be here.

The massive double doors in front of him were closed, but the Commander forced them over with a simple telekinetic gesture and he stepped inside the ballroom. Complete silence met him as he stared across to the table where a man in similar attire to Maqil was seated, and by his side a woman who he presumed was the wife, in a rather pretty white dress, her raven hair expertly styled and falling just below her shoulders.

King Dhul Fiqar Abdulaziz Al Saud simply watched him as he walked forward, his footsteps echoing loudly in the silent room until he was at the opposite end of the polished table. “So, the fabled Commander of XCOM approaches,” King Dhul said, his voice low and rich. “No doubt here to gloat over your victory.”

“I don’t gloat, your majesty,” the Commander said, pulling out his pistol and setting it on the table. “Your soldiers didn’t put up enough of a fight for me to feel particularly good about gloating.”

“Then why are you here then?” He asked, lacing his fingers together. “To ask for my surrender? To take me into custody and parade me before the world? A last final humiliation.”

“No,” the Commander shook his head. “I am here to kill you, and your entire family.”

The King stiffened. “Even ADVENT would not be so monstrous as to do such a thing. You are many things, but you would not stoop to the level of murderers.”

“Executioners,” the Commander corrected. “Murder would imply the death is unjust. If I recall, you were given plenty of time to surrender. Offers were made, and all refused. You had your chance to live, and you refused. You are a threat to ADVENT, and will remain one as long as you live. We have enough problems to deal with without you.”

With that he raised the pistol and shot the woman beside him in the head, killing her instantly. The King bolted up, his fists clenched and face white with fury. “You will not get away with this! You may kill all of us, but your day of reckoning will come. The world will see you for what you are and rise against you.”

The Commander laughed. “That is very similar to what your predecessor said, right before I killed him.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “Impossible. The Commander killed him, and the Commander was executed. His time came, just as yours will.”
“Did it?” The Commander asked, pulling off his helmet with a short hiss. “I’m afraid you are mistaken, your majesty. I didn’t die after I surrendered to the UN.”

He paled even further. “You are dead! You cannot have survived! I watched you die!”

“Yes, I’m sure you did,” the Commander nodded with a smile. “But I’m not exactly a fan of dying, and the whole story of how I’m still alive is long and complicated, suffice to say that there were more people who recognized my worth than who wanted me dead.”

He slumped back into his chair. “Then all I can hope is that the world learns of—”

“No one cares,” the Commander interrupted bluntly. “No one will mourn your death, or the war against this region which has been nothing but problems for decades. Order will be brought here, and before you die, do know that you failed. You will be placed into an unmarked grave, and your name will fade into history.”

The Commander raised his gauss pistol and said the same words he’d said to the previous King. “Pray to your God, and pray he exists, for you will meet him now.”

He fired and blew the head of King Dhul Fiqar Abdulaziz Al Saud apart.

And thus, the battle of Saudi Arabia ended.

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Mackay, Australia

“Targets in sight,” Joseph said from the foliage where he and Abby were situated, the rest of the Resistance soldiers were waiting in similar areas, and where the Chronicler was, Abby had no idea. So she was here waiting for the order to attack, gauss rifle in hand. Joseph had his sniper rifle at the ready, and was looking through the scope on one knee.

“Which ones?” She asked with some sarcasm, as there were a minimum of twenty aliens in the small town before them. Most were Muton soldiers, guarding the perimeter, with some Vitakara snipers on the roofs of the houses and buildings. No Andromedons, Elites or Berserkers, so that was good. But there had to be some deeper in the town.

“Snipers are the larger threat,” he answered, gesturing slightly with his rifle. “Mutons are stupid, large and brutish. Snipers cause more damage. Shoot the far left one, and go down the line until all of them are corpses.” His tone grew more mocking. “Idiots. They didn’t even bother to try and rig up a good sniper nest, no. They just stand up in the open.”

“Good enough,” Abby shrugged. “Whatever makes it easier for you.”

“Mhmm,” he nodded. “So, what’s your story agent? Call it intuition, but I get the feeling yours is interesting. More so than mine, anyway.”

“I doubt that,” Abby answered, shooting him a frown. “Not all of us were a part of a worldwide global conspiracy, Falka.”

“Ah, yes, I’d forgotten that isn’t exactly normal,” he chuckled. “I’ve sort of stopped thinking about it as anything special. It was just reality for years. So fine, I’m a little interesting. You didn’t answer my question though.”

“Fine,” she relented. “Short version is that I was an XCOM soldier, a medic specifically. Our
Intelligence Director thought I would be a good agent and made me an offer. I accepted, toured the world, shut down a few EXALT cells, ended with my team getting killed by a UN assassin of all things.” She glanced over at him. “I would say sorry for ruining your Russia cell, but I’m not.”

“Interesting,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “I’d never have guessed you were a medic, kinda goes against the stuff you said in the briefing.”

Abby looked back towards the town. “I changed.”

“So I see,” Joseph nodded, lowering his sniper rifle and looking at her. “Color me impressed. Not a lot of people can handle what we have to do in this job, much less people who used to save lives.”

“Depends on your perspective,” Abby said. “How many lives will we save right now?”

“A fair point,” he nodded. “One I happen to agree with. Even if you worked against us, I can respect what you did. Can’t say I wouldn’t have shot you in the head, were we still enemies, but you would have fit in well with us.”

“‘Us’ as in your family? Or EXALT?”

“One and the same,” he clarified. “Or at least it was. We’re all part of ADVENT now. But you have everything needed for a good Falka agent. You’re smart, resourceful, practical, attractive, and adaptable. What more could be useful in an agent?”

Abby flushed unexpectedly. “Cute. That doesn’t work on me, Falka.”

Joseph glanced over at her. “What, because I called you attractive? I wasn’t flirting with you, if that’s what you thought. I read the report on the Russia cell being compromised, and given some of the tactics used, I’d think you know more than most how fallible we are to our own mortal needs.” He finished with a smile.

Abby wished her mind hadn’t immediately jumped to that assumption. “Right, sorry.”

“Trust me,” Joseph chuckled. “I would be a lot more charming if I wanted to flirt with you.”

“And I would probably punch you.”

He was still amused. “Fair enough.”

“My turn,” Abby said. “What’s it like growing up in the Illuminati fan club?”

“And just where do you think that concept came from?” He asked knowingly. “EXALT didn’t always have its name. But your question is a good one, and I rarely get the privilege of talking to people who didn’t already know it. My family was a little different than most, and even in the family, my training was very different.”

“How so?”

He pinched his forehead. “Let’s see…alright, you have to understand what the goal of the Falka family was. Many times, members of the family are just…ordinary people. They have jobs, families, friends. But they really are spies. They spend their lives as sleeper agents of a sort, and they are effectively the reason why EXALT had such a reach around the world.”

It made Abby’s brain hurt just trying to grasp the scale of such an operation. The concept wasn’t so alien, but the fact that someone had actually done it was…disconcerting. It was enough to make
someone paranoid, as there really were spies all around. “Of course, they aren’t all Falka agents,” he clarified. “But most were. Then there were the dedicated “Intelligence” organs of the family, and that is what I was a part of. Specifically, I was identified as a good candidate for long-term undercover operations.”

“What made you stand out?” She asked.

“The first thing Falka children are taught, regardless of where they’re born, is how to lie,” he explained. “For obvious reasons, we can’t have children being a weak link. Kids tend to accidentally say stuff they shouldn’t. We teach them to lie instead. As it happened, I was very good at lying. Well, for a ten-year-old I guess.”

Abby was very glad she had never heard details of this family before. Every other family at least seemed somewhat…understandable, from what she knew of them. But this was just bizarre and creepy. Kids shouldn’t be able to do that kind of stuff, especially not being taught to do it. “So I pretty much spent my life training how to blend in and kill,” Joseph continued. “I might have had a good, successful career as an agent. Sadly, or perhaps not, the aliens threw a wrench into that plan. This is technically my first assignment.”

“Oh?” Abby raised an eyebrow, her lips twitching. “Not exactly what you were training for, is it?”

“Not really,” he admitted. “But I’m not going to complain about killing some aliens.”

“So,” Abby said, now openly amused. “Does this mean I technically have more experience than you? At least as an intelligence agent.”

“Perhaps if we want to get technical,” he admitted, apparently taking an interest in his sniper rifle again.

Abby kept her amusement to herself, and looked back over the town. If you’re finished with chatting up your partner, I do believe we’ve got a town to liberate.

And just like that, her good mood dissipated. I thought I told you to get the hell out of my head. Then try to a little more to keep your emotions in check. Every psion in this area can probably sense you. Who knew your secret was to comment on your looks?

Abby internally rolled her eyes. Do this again and I’ll report you to Zhang. Anyway, you ready?

Yes, yes. I believe the command will be given in the next few seconds.

Sure enough, a voice came on her earpiece. “Begin the attack.”

Joseph fired, and one of the snipers fell. All the aliens froze, and that gave him time to shoot several more in their heads, before they finally got wise and abandoned the roofs to get some real cover. With a yell the Resistance soldiers emerged from their ambush points, firing their gauss rifles at the unprepared alien horde.

Abby herself hefted her rifle and charged forward, feeling like she’d had a good night’s sleep and was fully energized and ready for battle. Two more Mutons fell to the ground from headshots, and all the aliens seemed to be reacting much slower than usual. They shuffled towards the buildings for cover, haphazardly as if drunk, and their return fire was wildly inaccurate, as opposed to the Resistance soldiers, who were seeming to hit everything with pinpoint accuracy.

Herself and the Resistance soldiers charged into the town, several beginning to knock on doors and
get the civilians themselves out, while the vanguard kept charging forward deeper into the city. Abby wasn’t sure why she was feeling like this, but everything for her seemed focused and clear. Her mind was fully directed on the task at hand, and it was as if all her senses and reflexes were enhanced.

She could swear she heard the hiss of a plasma rifle charging and managed to pull the soldier in front of her back just as a lance of green plasma shot past. They turned to see one of three Andromedons lower his rifle, and order the other Mutons around him to open fire, as well as the other Andromedons behind him.

“Cover!” One of the soldiers shouted, and all of them slid into cover behind boxes, crates, pillars and houses. Abby swung out, aimed her rifle at one of the Mutons and sighted in in what felt like milliseconds before pulling the trigger and seeing the gauss rounds tear the unprotected flesh apart with a golden spurt of blood.

The Andromedons realized that something was wrong with how accurate these Humans were, and they themselves seemed to be affected as well, moving slower and reacting too late as gauss rounds hit their torsos and helmets. One had its helmet cracked, and the other two were leaking fluids. One of the Andromedons raised a fist towards them, and several green projectiles shot out.

“Acid!” Abby warned. “Get down!”

Most heeded her warning, but there were a few that screamed as the green chemical hit them and began eating through their padding and skin. Abby hissed as a new surge of energy swept through her and she swung out with her rifle again, and somehow knew each major weak point of the Andromedon before her, and somehow managed to shoot a gauss round at each one within seconds.

She hadn’t been alone in the sudden increase in marksmanship, every other remaining soldier was affected as well, and the results were instantaneous. One of the masks of the Andromedons burst open, and the alien inside let out a shriek of agony before going silent. One Andromedon fell to the ground, joints on the armor ripped apart from sustained fire. The tank that was on the back of the last Andromedon exploded, and blew the top part of the helmet open, also killing the alien inside instantly.

The Resistance soldiers quickly pulled out grenades and threw them towards the damaged Andromedons, each one a perfect throw that landed in the cockpits of the suits themselves, frying the control systems before the AI could take over. Half a dozen soldiers sustained fire on the downed Andromedon, even as it crawled towards them, its legs destroyed.

But eventually the helmet broke, a grenade was tossed, and it crawled no longer.

There was silence, even as adrenaline pumped through her body.

What the hell was that?

She’d never felt like that, not at all during her time as a soldier, or anytime else for that matter. It had to have been the Chronicler. But even then she wasn’t sure. She’d heard some of the soldiers describe what it was like to be under the influence of Patricia, but this seemed far more intense and effective than what she’d been told.

She clicked her earpiece. “What’s the status of the teams? Casualties?”

The man on the other end actually sounded stunned. “Status is…ah, good, we did it. Teams are
getting the civilians out now. We barely took any casualties. The aliens were seriously not expecting us. I’m wondering if these were a defective batch.”

She breathed a sigh of relief, and looked around as if she expected the Chronicler to appear out of nowhere. She hadn’t been sure what to expect but…he’d turned a small guerilla army of Humans with gauss weapons into a force capable to taking an alien-controlled town with almost no casualties.

Abby almost wondered if he could match Patricia in simple power.

*Depends on the circumstances, Agent Gertrude, Patricia is powerful in her own right, but she does not understand subtlety like I do.*

Abby wasn’t even particularly mad at him entering her mind again. *I don’t suppose you could do that again?*

She could swear she heard him laughing in her mind. *Of course, Agent Gertrude. We both want the aliens off this world, after all.*

Abby found herself nodding along. If for no other reason than she didn’t want to antagonize him. Anyone this powerful had to be treated carefully. Doubly so if they could read your mind. She just hoped he wasn’t paying attention all the time.

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*Kabul, Afghanistan*

When Oliver had joined up with XCOM, he had been expecting to fight aliens.

Clearly, that was no longer the case. And it made him uncomfortable.

He knew full well that the Middle East was, to be diplomatic, a mess. It needed to be reformed; it needed to be changed. But it seemed like the people in charge had a fundamental misunderstanding of how the best way to go about doing that would be. Oliver didn’t consider himself a diplomat, but he was certain that pretty much any plan that he came up with was better than…*this.*

Far as he understood, this had originally been retribution from Israel in response to several Middle Eastern nations being linked to the assassination of many in their government. Assuming that the Israelis weren’t lying, it was far past the point of retribution regardless. This was now ADVENT deciding to get rid of the problem once and for all.

Except that wouldn’t solve the fucking problem.

The thing no one in ADVENT seemed to understand, or the Commander for that matter, was that the people weren’t at fault here. The only ones at fault were the government, and yes, they should face some kind of punishment. But in reality, ADVENT was making no distinction between the two. Everyone was a potential enemy and Oliver knew that was only going to fester if ADVENT didn’t change their act right now.

Yes, the citizens were going to be furious at them, what a fucking shock. Who could have guessed they’d be angry and afraid of the people *literally* invading their country.
Then there was the matter of this little mission, and for that matter, the extreme response against the militaries and leading government. The thing was, Oliver didn’t necessarily disagree with it. To be completely honest, he had very little sympathy for the governments at this point. Yes, the war might be unfair; yes, it would be temporarily humiliating. But it did show him just how little they actually cared about their citizens.

Good leaders knew when they were defeated, and would surrender to protect their people. ADVENT, for all its faults, would honor deals. But since they hadn’t surrendered, they were going to come down hard, and it was the people who were going to suffer. Ironic that the leaders who had brought this on themselves would be granted a relatively quick death, while the ones that lived would have to suffer under increased scrutiny for months.

Still, he wouldn’t have personally killed the leaders. It wasn’t as though they would pose a threat. But he could understand why ADVENT was done with them.

He looked around the skyranger at the XCOM team preparing to deploy. Most of them were newer recruits like him, with only a few who he knew were veterans. The Templar Chan was acting as the squad overseer, his Zweihander resting on his lap. The only other psions were Allison, who specialized in defense, although how much that would be needed was unknown, and Fatima, a telepath and one of the so-called “Furies”.

Such charming names XCOM had for these people.

It spoke to ADVENT and XCOM’s confidence that this mission only required a single XCOM squad and Lancer Team. Oliver hadn’t heard of them before, but now knew they were essentially ADVENT’s Special Forces. And, according to Antia, one of the Americans in the squad, the Lancers were all as genetically modified as much as some XCOM soldiers.

They weren’t given a choice it seemed.

“Heads up,” Burning Sky informed them. “Coming in for a landing. Looks like the Lancers have made their entrance.”

Saar Aaron whistled, her voice almost excited. “Not wasting time, are they?”

“Everyone up!” Chan ordered, standing up and moving to the skyranger exit, even as the aircraft dipped. “Our orders are clear: Assist the Lancers in taking the capital, and execute the ruling government. No prisoners. Clear?”

“Yes, Overseer!” Was the affirmative.

Chan raised his Zweihander as the ramp descended. “Then deploy!”

All of them charged out into the sandy outskirts of the city. Burning Sky had been right, the Lancers had cleaned up nicely and Oliver got his first good look at them.

He recognized the armor design; it was from an Israeli prototype that had appeared a while ago. The armor itself had clearly been inspired by generation-2 XCOM armor, or whatever the design had been called before the Aegis iteration, but the helmet had a domed top, and was oddly reflective, with no visible place where the eyes or nose should go.

The other thing about the armor was that it was completely pitch black. No identifying marks or badges were on the armor, and the interesting thing was that many of these soldiers weren’t carrying guns. Some were carrying melee weapons; longswords, maces, and some of those Peacekeeper stun batons, set to lethal mode.
Someone had clearly been inspired by the Templars.

Even their weapons were pitch-black. It was strange seeing swords and other medieval weapons with shining black blades, and laser weapons that didn’t give any indication what they were. Several carried gauss rifles, but Oliver could see more were using pulse laser weapons.

And they were currently in the process of slaughtering the Afghan soldiers guarding the city outside. They were laughing off bullets, and cutting and shooting through them like they were toys. One Lancer cut through three soldiers with her sword within a few seconds, finishing each one off with a stab to the heart.

Two more Lancers were carving a group of six soldiers to pieces with their laser rifles, dismembering and decapitating at will. It was morbidly fascinating and efficient to watch. Fatima extended a hand as she walked, twisted her palm until it was facing the sky and closed it into a fist. The remaining soldiers suddenly clutched their ears as if they heard some loud noise.

All of them were quickly finished off by the Lancers.

Oliver did a quick count: There were twelve Lancers, and there were at least sixty Afghan soldiers lying dead on the sand. One of the Lancers, holding a laser rifle, walked up. “Welcome to the party, XCOM.”

“A pleasure,” Chan answered, resting the blade of his sword against his shoulder. “Although you could have saved some for us. Not fair if you have all the fun.”

“Trust me,” the man jabbed a thumb in the direction of the city. “There’s plenty more where they came from. I’ve got a few more teams pushing at them from other entrances. We actually caught a group of officials trying to sneak out earlier. A few less to deal with now.”

“No attempts of surrender?” Fatima asked curiously.

“None so far,” he confirmed. “Not really surprising. Not sure how many of these guys speak English. Anyway, ready to get going?”

“When you are,” Chan nodded.

“Overseer, if I may make a suggestion?” Fatima interrupted, raising a hand. At his nod, she continued. “If it makes it easier, I will remain out here and concentrate. I will be more effective utilizing my abilities here than in the field.”

The Lancer cocked his helmet at her. “Who are you?”

“Fatima,” she answered. “XCOM Psion, telepath.”

“Ah,” he nodded. “Up to you, Overseer, but I’m inclined to agree with her. A telepath is a damn powerful asset to have here.”

“Then do it,” Chan instructed. “Everyone else, let’s move in!”

And with that, the team of XCOM and Lancer forces entered the city. Oliver could definitely tell already that this was not exactly a prosperous nation. The houses were old, chipped and falling apart, and he glimpsed some moving shapes inside through broken windows. Good, the civilians needed to stay out of this.

They rounded a corner and suddenly found themselves facing a small Afghan army of at least
thirty soldiers, all in cover and even manning some mounted guns. At a shout all of them opened fire, and the rattling of machine-gun fire drowned out everything else.

The Lancers responded by charging forward, Chan leading the charge, now flaring with psionic energy; purple flames encircling his Zweihander. The rest of the soldiers fell to one knee or ducked into cover and returned fire. A purple shield was thrown up between them and the Afghan soldiers, clearly from Allison whose raised hand was wreathed in energy, which dissipated when she dissolved the shield once they were in position.

By the time Oliver had even lined up a shot, the Lancers and Chan had pretty much destroyed the opposing soldiers. They were woefully unprepared for attacks at close range and suffered getting their limbs chopped off or skulls bashed in from the Lancers and Templar. One screamed in agony as one Lancer stabbed him with a lethal stun baton, and two didn’t have any time to react as Chan decapitated them with a single swipe of his Zweihander.

“This is completely ridiculous,” Min-Su Song, another newer soldier muttered. “At least they could try and put up a fight.”

Oliver didn’t know if that was something they should be hoping for, but it was laughable how utterly invincible they were here. China was going to be more freaked out than they probably already were once word got to them of what had happened.

With the soldiers dead, the Lancers and XCOM advanced deeper into the city, and Fatima made her presence known via each soldier they came across. They were curled up on the ground, clutching their ears, muttering to themselves or screaming as the case went. All of them were executed with single shots to the head.

Oliver found it surreal walking through streets of soldiers just lying on the ground, driven down by such pain and misery that wouldn’t end. He shivered. What those psions could do now scared him. They were people, but they weren’t like other Humans. No one who could do something like this was normal.

It was a good thing she was on their side.

“Like shooting fish in a barrel,” Saar muttered to herself. “Good job Fatima.”

Up ahead was the Presidential Palace, the home to the current President and staff. The National Assembly was where the legislature was, and Oliver knew the other Lancer teams were converging on that specific location. Although at this time, he would expect any legislators to be in their homes or trying to flee.

He wished them good luck.

The guards were similarly debilitated, and were executed quickly. Oliver wondered if everyone inside was similarly affected, and the moment they entered the Palace itself, he got his answer. There were people strewn all around, men and women of all classes and positions lying on the ground, crying, gasping and yelling in their language, likely begging for some release from the torment.

Chills ran up his spine as he listened to the voices, not needing to comprehend the words to understand what they wanted. At a gesture from Chan, XCOM opened fire on those on the ground, bringing them some final solace.

Then they proceeded upward, and did the same to any they came across. The Lancers refrained
from overly painful deaths with their melee weapons, but did pull out pistols and execute all those they came across. All of them were silent as they carried out the grim task of execution. Even Saar and Min-Su, who’d complained about it being too easy, were quiet as they shot what essentially amounted to defenseless people.

Each room they swept, each floor cleared. Oliver didn’t even know if they’d actually killed the President yet. He wasn’t sure he would stand out from the other bodies, and in the end, it didn’t matter much.

Everyone in the building was going to die, and Oliver didn’t quite care anymore if one got out alive. If ADVENT wanted to make a statement, they had made it today. None of them would forget this day for the rest of their lives.

And briefly, very briefly, as they shot helpless men and women alike, Oliver wondered not if he was doing the right thing, but if he was on the right side.

This was nothing compared to the aliens, surely. But there had to be a better way to unite humanity than this.

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Bolivia Peacekeeper Outpost

“Celebration?”

Jaylin looked up at Leon bringing her a glass filled with some kind of drink. “For what?” She asked. “And more importantly, what is that?”

He took a sip from his own glass. “This, Jaylin, is the local alcoholic beverage. I don’t remember the name, but it is exquisite. We’re off-duty now, so why not?”

She smirked and took the glass. “And what’s the occasion?”

“Well, essentially, the ‘war’, if would could call it that, is essentially over,” Leon explained satisfactorily. “So pretty much, we did our job, and we’ll probably be moved somewhere else. Not much use for Riot Control in a docile population.”

“Huh,” Jaylin said, taking a tentative sip from that glass. It was…interesting for sure. She didn’t usually drink unfamiliar beverages, but this wasn’t bad. Very tangy. “The people here were certainly subdued easily.”

“That’s if you buy the main story,” Leon amended knowingly. “I’m guessing it’s more of a propaganda thing than anything else. People here are still angry, but they aren’t going to do anything stupid, hopefully. They’ll calm down once some kind of normalcy has been restored. Now that Brazil has control of these countries, it should help normalize things.”

“Hopefully,” Jaylin nodded, taking another sip. “I’m just wondering where we’ll get sent next.”

“The goddamn Middle East,” Samantha interrupted, marching over without introduction, a different drink in her own hand. “You guys blind or something?”

Jaylin didn’t take offense. Samantha had a very…abrasive personality, and didn’t always mean the insults she said. Or at least meant them in sort of an endearing way. Leon seemed to find it funny. “Well, considering we’ve been on guard the past six hours, no,” he answered with a grin. “So do enlighten us, since you clearly want to.”
“Stop treating this as a joke,” she almost snarled. “ADVENT just wiped out the governments of Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Pakistan at once. And they took back that city in Japan using some kind of soldiers from Hell, and reestablished lines with Portland.”

Leon almost spat his drink out. “The fuck?!?”

Jaylin was equally stunned. “How? How did they do that at the same time?”

“I don’t fucking know!” Samantha answered, exasperated. “But XCOM was involved. My guess is that they told ADVENT that the war was wasting time and to end it. Word is that they were heavily involved.”

“Back up,” Leon said, raising a hand. “What was that about ‘soldiers from hell’?”

Samantha took a long drink, and set it down at the table with a thud. “Well! Apparently these new hell soldiers have flamethrowers that shoot fire hot enough to melt Andromedons. ADVENT calls them ‘Purifiers’, like this is some kind of witch hunt.”

Jaylin wondered just how tipsy Samantha was right now. “Sure, Samantha,” she placated. “Perhaps it melted the buildings they were in as well.” It sounded just as plausible. As nice as something like that would be, she was pretty sure Samantha had misread something, which in her state, didn’t really mean much.

“Oh, I think it actually did,” she clarified, her eyes widening. “Some of the footage released is amazing.”

“Perhaps we should go back to the fact that ADVENT just ended the war with the Middle East,” Jaylin redirected. “That’s going to seriously improve the war effort.”

“And our jobs are going to be so much fun,” Leon said sarcastically. “I have a feeling terrorism is going to make a comeback. Somehow I don’t think the people are going to be happy to see us.”

“Well, too bad,” Samantha quipped. “About time someone brought some actual order to that place. Maybe with the governments dead, some progress can actually be made.”

“Man, people are going to be shocked,” Leon said in an exaggerated voice. “Women driving in Saudi Arabia? Can you imagine such a thing?”

They all shared a laugh at that.

“Well, I’m going to get out of this armor,” Leon said. “Makes us look all intimidating, but it’s a bit heavy after a few hours.”

“Yeah, I’ll come with you,” Jaylin nodded, grabbing her helmet. “But I’m getting some sleep after this.”

“What the hell, I’ll come along,” Samantha said, trotting along beside them, noticeably smaller since she was out of her armor. “I’ve got nothing better to do.”

Jaylin shook her head, and smiled, while opening the door and they stepped out into the base courtyard. There were still plenty of Peacekeepers on and training, even this late in the evening. She nodded to some of the guards, and glanced down to adjust the stun baton on her belt. “So a question,” Samantha began. “Since you’re-“

A shot rang out and Samantha jerked back and fell to the ground, a red hole directly in her
forehead, her mouth still open mid-speech. “Sniper!” Jaylin yelled, throwing her helmet on and glancing frantically around, before looking back at Samantha, who she could see was clearly dead. It was a perfect headshot; she’d probably died instantly.

More shots rang out, and she looked around for the source. Another yell of pain and she saw two Peacekeeper guards fall to the ground. Jaylin raised her arm and established her riot shield. It could take ballistic fire and even some gauss shots. From that mild safety, she actually glimpsed a figure moving around the base, ducking behind crates and armories.

She couldn’t make out the gender, but they were definitely wearing some kind of hooded cloak, and it was ruddy and brown, tints of green were also present, perhaps for camouflage. “On your six!” Leon yelled, and she spun around and saw another one of the figures, raising their rifle at them. Under the hood she saw it was wearing some kind of mask, one with yellow lights for eyes, and it looked like it was some kind of gas mask.

It fired and her riot shield cracked, but absorbed the shot. It immediately dashed away once the shot missed, and both she and Leon fired at the escaping figure, even as more Peacekeepers were running out to defend the base which was now under attack.

“Where the hell are they?!” Leon yelled as they stood back to back, as more shots seemed to come out of nowhere, hitting Peacekeepers from odd angles and velocities. The good news was that they weren’t outright killing them anymore, but they were causing damage and they kept vanishing and reappearing like ghosts.

But the tide was now turning as more and more showed up. Finally the shooting seemed to stop, yet they didn’t have any bodies to show for it, just the corpses of their friends and comrades.

“Is that it?” Leon asked cautiously. “What the-“

Several different explosions cut off whatever he was going to say, as almost every single vehicle they had suddenly exploded in a barrage of rubber and shrapnel. The fuel depot also went up in a massive orange explosion. Jaylin had fallen to one knee to steady herself, riot shield still up and looking around for any sign of a renewed attack as the smoke began to clear.

The base courtyard was now riddled with flaming metal and rubber, the smell of smoke and burning fuel filled the air, and now that things were quieting down, the yells and screams of injured Peacekeepers became audible. Other Peacekeepers were now running to help provide medical assistance and put out fires.

“Terrorists.” Jaylin spat.

“Fuck,” Leon muttered, as he knelt down and closed Samantha’s eyes. “I have a feeling we’ll still be here for a while. This can’t be tolerated.”

“Agreed,” Jaylin stated, retracting her riot shield. “We won’t let this stand. Come on, let’s go help them.” And they rushed forward to help put out the fires, all under the watchful eyes of the shadows in the distance.

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Forward Observation Station, Mars Orbit

Caelior, was, to put it mildly, displeased.

The Battlemaster was as well, but it wasn’t entirely unexpected. He was rather impressed XCOM
and ADVENT had managed to put a comprehensive plan together in so little time. He supposed this escalation was his fault, as XCOM likely felt they had little choice if they wanted to survive. Still, not only had ADVENT managed to win their little war in the Middle East, but also push the Collective completely off Japan, reestablish connections to Portland, and there had even been a town in Australia liberated.

All problems. Portland wasn’t unexpected, and neither was Japan, to an extent. But Australia being compromised this badly was a problem Caelior had neglected, and the Battlemaster knew it would only get worse the longer it was allowed to fester.

“What should I do?” Caelior finally asked.

The Battlemaster was, admittedly, surprised. He was expecting a rant from Caelior, a tirade promising fire and vengeance. Not a request for advice.

Perhaps he had been listening after all.

“What would you do, first?” He asked, curious what the young Ethereal was thinking.

“I want to burn Japan to the ground,” Caelior hissed, the air around him vibrating as his anger manifested. “I want to tear ADVENT apart piece by piece for this defeat. I want to flatten Sydney as punishment for their continued defiance. This is what I want to do, Battlemaster, but I do not think it is the right thing to do. I am too angry to make a rational decision.”

The Battlemaster nodded approvingly. “You are learning, good. You are right. This should not be tolerated, yet you must understand this comes with war. The enemy will retaliate, and sometimes you will lose. It does not matter how primitive or inferior you think they are, they can surprise you, especially the Humans.”

He paused. “You have been lax in Australian security. The resistance must be eliminated, and you have failed to adapt. I have not intervened yet, but I feel that if you do not make adjustments, I will have to. This is not something you can solve with armies, but with the Zararch, the Special Operators and other Vitakara units. Andromedons and Mutons are ill-suited to the task of fighting a guerilla force. My suggestion is to work with the Zar’Chon. He is an expert on these matters, and will be able to assist in solving your problems there. As for Japan…”

The Battlemaster appraised the Ethereal before him. “The Humans believe I am the worst they can face. That perception should change. You are more powerful than me, and the time to hide is over. The Humans believe they have won now. Tear down their victory in front of them. Attack Japan personally, exact your revenge on the Humans. Remind ADVENT and XCOM that they are inferior to us, regardless of what the traitor Aegis provides them.”

“Then that is what I will do,” Caelior nodded, his voice filled with venom. “But I will not go in without a plan. I learned from my last failure. Their… additions should be taken into account. But their armies will not be able to stop me, not this time.”

A haptic map of Japan appeared, and Caelior began appraising it, already calling up unit figures to simulate strategies. “Japan will fall once more, and the Humans will know my power.”

Dramatic, but he had spirit. The Battlemaster watched with approval as the young Ethereal began working on the plan to assault Japan, with him providing advice when asked. He almost felt sorry for the Humans, but then again, he had to figure out how to deal with Portland being secured.

These new flame units were of a potential concern, even to him. He would have to solve that before
entering the field again. ADVENT was stepping up their game, and now he must respond in kind.

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Switzerland, ADVENT Command

It was done.

Saudia leaned back before her computer and let out a breath. Everything had gone perfectly, or as perfect as could be expected. The Middle East was secured, Japan was secured, the Australian town had been liberated, and Portland was reinforced. She could not have imagined a more perfect outcome to this operation.

There would be challenges ahead. The Middle East, even if it was under ADVENT control, was going to have to be significantly reformed for any hope of progress to be made. It would likely take years at a minimum, but there was now actual hope that it was possible.

The more important thing was that a good chunk of the ADVENT Military was now ready to be deployed against the aliens. The Peacekeepers could secure the Middle East, and any terrorist threats that popped up in response, and she had no doubt they would.

The Purifiers had performed beyond expectations, even if they had rendered the city uninhabitable for a few days. Still, it was a small price to pay for driving the aliens off Japan completely.

Now she had to think about retaliation. The aliens wouldn’t take these defeats lightly, and getting kicked off Japan in such a humiliating fashion would likely incite some kind of revenge. ADVENT had to be ready, and she suspected the Battlemaster would be making an appearance shortly. Nonetheless this was a major boon to the propaganda effort and general morale.

This showed the aliens could be beaten, and that perception was powerful now.

Once the PRIEST Program was up and running, ADVENT wouldn’t have to rely on XCOM for this kind of crucial support.

Privately, she had realized just how lucky they were that the XCOM psions were actually on their side. Reading the reports of how Patricia had effectively taken out the government and an entire military compound single-handedly, and how Fatima had paralyzed the entire opposing army, or how the three psions in Japan had shrugged off plasma fire with their shield like nothing…yes, they were very lucky the psions were working with them.

The Commander had said he was refocusing his efforts away from his Manchurian Program, and after seeing this display…she was wondering if that was a really wise idea. XCOM only recruited from the best, and the best were decent, if xenophobic, people. They were largely reliable. ADVENT wouldn’t have that luxury. Out of all the people in the world, even now, there would be some who used psionics for their own gain.

Which would be a problem.

She’d have to speak to him about that, since she agreed that something needed to be done to keep them in check.

But right now, she needed to make sure another problem was at least being taken care of before she could relax and enjoy her victory. The Middle East had been captured, and for the first time in a long time, it was...stable. For now at least. However, that was the easy part. Now they had to not only modernize the nations, but also undo decades of division, hate, and destructive religious
influences.

Not exactly a problem suitable in the midst of an alien invasion. If there wasn’t an alien invasion it would be a challenge. With an alien invasion it was going to be a nightmare to do correctly. Yet this was going to be the largest reformation in Human history, so there could be few mistakes, if any. Despite knowing quite a bit about the region, she knew she wasn’t suited to solving its problems, and while she was sure Stein or Zara would have preferred they just lock down the area with Peacekeepers until the war was decided one way or another, that was not solving the problem.

The Middle East had resources, and more importantly, people. They had engineers, scientists and managers. They had the potential to be productive citizens of ADVENT, although she supposed that right now they would not exactly be keen on such an offer. That would have to be changed, and the better ways she could see to dispel that notion would be to give them a problem to solve, and integrate them fully into ADVENT.

Luckily, there was someone that Saudia felt confident entrusting with such an enormous task, and she should be arriving right now. Her office door chimed, and Saudia pressed a button and it slid open and in walked a woman with pale skin and long blonde hair, dressed in an ADVENT uniform, carrying with her a tablet.

Karen Marshall, former Administrator of USAID, and now Head of the ADVENT Modernization and Development Agency. Saudia had found no better person for such a position, and as an extra bonus, Karen had been heavily involved in Middle Eastern aid and development before being promoted to Administrator of USAID.

If anyone knew how to fix the problems there, it would be her.

“Chancellor,” she greeted, with an extended hand as Saudia approached her. “Good to hear it’s all over.”

“For now, anyway,” Saudia answered, as she accepted the outstretched hand. “But thank you for coming so quickly.”

Karen gave a small smile. “Chancellor, I’ve spent a good portion of my life hoping for the day to have this opportunity, I’m not going to miss it even if it’s at an obscene hour of the morning.”

“You do believe it can be done even during the invasion?” Saudia asked. “I understand it isn’t an ideal time.”

“Not ideal, but not impossible,” Karen negated with a wave, opening up her tablet. “As it happens, it’s for the best. Peacekeepers will suffice for any law enforcement needed. The last thing these people need to see are more soldiers.” She paused. “Admittedly, the Peacekeepers don’t look much different, but it’s all in how it’s presented.”

She gestured her over. “So, Chancellor, the first thing to establish is boundaries. Obviously these nations can’t govern themselves now, and I doubt you want the borders staying the same. So for the moment, here are the current territories drawn up.” Saudia looked down as Karen continued.

“Israel is taking the countries of Syria, Lebanon and Jordan,” Karen said, pointing at the respective portions of the map. “They will be working with me in reorganizing the countries, although they will all be under the territory of Israel now. This was apparently decided once they joined ADVENT, and they don’t want to give up their new territories.”

Saudia nodded. “It seemed fair. Israel has been a consistent ally since the beginning, and this
seemed like a fair trade for their assistance.”

“I don’t begrudge them,” Karen said. “And the only other change in territory is Pakistan returning to Indian control. There will be…difficulties…in the transition, but I’m also going to be working with India to make the transition workable. However, India seems to have a good grasp on what needs to be done.”

She moved towards the heart of the Middle East. “Now, the remaining countries should be divided up a bit differently. At this point, I’ve divided them into two sections; the Eastern Arab States which consists of Iran, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan. Then the Western Arab States will consist of Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.”

Saudia nodded. “The division makes sense from a geographical perspective. I assume the countries will currently take the form of States?”

“That I have not decided yet,” Karen admitted. “At this current point, it is going to be better to work on a city-by-city basis, and once we have actual functioning governments, we can discuss if original borders should be restored or altered. I’m unsure how familiar you are with the region, Chancellor, but not all Arabic countries are the same, even within the same one, there can be multiple cultures and lifestyles. Some may be suited for a territory of their own, or joining with a nation of a similar culture.”

Saudia frowned. “Are you certain you are not overcomplicating this?”

“If anything, I’m oversimplifying it,” Karen sighed. “Chancellor, if I may, I don’t believe you understand just how large a project this will be. What do you estimate the timeframe of completion will be?”

“In an alien war?” Saudia paused. “A minimum of five years.”

Karen let out a laugh. “Chancellor, try twenty.”

Saudia’s frown turned deeper. “That seems excessively long.”

Karen rubbed her head. “You said you wanted to do this right? Well, this is what it will take. If you haven’t figured it out before, the Middle East is a mess, which I will add, was not helped by this war. Your decision to completely wipe out the ruling governments, tactical as it was, has alone set us back several years.”

She tapped her tablet. “That being said, it may be for the best. We’re starting from scratch here, and you have to understand, Chancellor, that they can’t simply be turned into productive ADVENT states overnight. Some of these countries don’t have democracies, or they are so corrupt they might as well not have governments at all. And no, it’s not as simple as establishing a democracy and going with it. These people don’t trust those in power, or have been conditioned to not know any other way, and the fact that ADVENT is seen as a predominantly Western power doesn’t help here.”

She took a breath. “You have to change their mindsets, Chancellor. You can’t just give them the tools for success without showing them how to use them. It’s like giving a gun to someone who doesn’t know how to use it and telling him to defend himself with it. Sure, he might figure it out and save himself, but he just as easily might hurt himself and make it more difficult in the long run.”

Saudia was not expecting to essentially be rebuked here, though took it in stride. “In that case…
what is your plan?”

“For the current plan, ADVENT will control all matters at a national level,” Karen said. “None of the countries are capable of doing such, and in the final phases, they will transition to a fully-fledged nation state. But for now, the most important thing is education. The rural areas especially have uneducated populations, and even the cities have had their perceptions warped by the former governments in power, as well as Islam. That has to be undone, and that is accomplished by proper schools for the children, and classes for adults.”

Karen sighed. “This is without mentioning that all the negative perceptions they have of ADVENT need to be undone. A lot of damage was done due to your overzealous Peacekeepers and…military strategy, no offense intended, but you need to understand those decisions have consequences here. This can only be undone by ADVENT helping them rebuild, and more importantly, modernize. Buildings need to be brought up to code, there needs to be reliable utilities, electricity, and food supplies. This applies more to the rural areas than capitals and cities, with perhaps the exception of countries like Afghanistan or Iraq.”

Saudia didn’t exactly agree that the so-called ‘overzealous’ Peacekeepers were entirely a bad thing, but Karen was not a military strategist, and far more empathetic than she was, so she refrained from saying anything. “And what of the government?”

“They need to be led by their own,” Karen said immediately, nodding to herself in emphasis as she looked down at her tablet. “I’m rather impressed the Commander didn’t execute the defecting Saudi Royal. That is more of a boon to us than you know. He will be instrumental in changing Saudi Arabia for the better. At this point, they will be far more willing to listen to someone who looks like them, and better yet, someone they recognize, than one of us. We simply need to identify leaders who will work with us to make this possible.”

“Good,” Saudia said. “Anything else?”

“While you would no doubt like to see their culture completely eradicated, I would advise against that,” Karen cautioned. “Much of that perception is due to the Islamic influence that’s permeated the countries. I do agree that it should be removed, but there are other aspects we should not ignore. We just need to emphasize the positive aspects and negate the negative ones. It will give them both a sense of independence from other ADVENT nations, and give them pride in their country. We should not force them to change important aspects of who they are for no reason other than that you feel your way is superior.”

Saudia pursed her lips. “Fair enough. If their so-called ‘culture’ is not a detriment to ADVENT, then I see no reason to change it. But you will work with Stein to make sure that is the case. As much as you know the region, Stein knows security and will be more unbiased than you when it comes to that. You see people, she will see vulnerabilities. She might not always be right, but I will not compromise the security of ADVENT because we wanted to appease some nations.”

Karen gave a nod. “Understood, Chancellor. But I’m well aware of the policy, you can trust I’ll keep it in mind. Is there anything else?”

“No,” Saudia shook her head. “I believe you covered everything important, and I will ensure you will have what you need to see this accomplished.”

“Thank you, Chancellor,” Karen answered, inclining her head. “I’m looking forward to starting.”

“As am I,” Saudia agreed. “Good luck.”
“Thanks,” Karen chuckled. “I’m going to need all the help I can get.”

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Nakashibetsu, Japan

Duri awoke to the sound of klaxons blaring.

He wiped his eyes and stared dumbfounded at the door, hoping against hope that it didn’t mean that they were under *attack*. It had been mere *days* since they drove the aliens off Japan.

They couldn’t be back *already*?

Right?

He quickly woke everyone up, although the klaxon had already done that for him, and they all got armored up, in various stages of disbelief. Duri had expected the aliens to attack sometime again, but this was supposed to drive them off for a while. It wasn’t actually supposed to be a quick retaliation. They were *not* prepared for this.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Cara said as she put on her helmet. “Anyone else?”

“Understatement of the week,” Kang said grimly. “I guess we might have pissed off the aliens a little too much this time.”

“We should have guessed fire was their weakness,” Johan said lightly. “I really hope we still have some of those Purifiers around.”

“Purifiers aren’t what’s needed,” Duri shook his head. “We need those psions.”

“Yes,” Beatriz said, checking her sniper rifle. “XCOM better be here, otherwise I think that this time, the aliens aren’t going to be beaten so easily.”

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Supplementary Material

The Advent Directive

SECTION 8: ADVENT Military

Subsection 8.4: Directive

**Overview:** The ADVENT Military performs two major functions: To defend ADVENT and its citizens from military threats of all types, and to terminate those in opposition to ADVENT by any means necessary. The ADVENT Military must follow these two functions without fail to achieve a safe and secure society.

**Military Strategy and Limitations:** The ADVENT Military is not constrained in the methods they use to defeat enemies of the State. There are no limitations on utilizing experimental or dangerous technology and weaponry in combat, provided they have been proven to be effective and are a minimum risk for soldiers to use.

The ADVENT Military is authorized to strike areas with known civilian populations as long as one of the following conditions are met (Note that this doesn’t apply to Special Forces, Intelligence, or operations where no civilian casualties are expected):
1. The civilian population has been notified that their region is a military target
2. The civilian population is actively harboring or aiding the military target in question
3. The mission is time sensitive with a time window of twelve hours or less

ADVENT Military Officers have the freedom to construct their strategy as they feel is appropriate. Whenever possible, civilian casualties should be reduced, but if necessary, there are guidelines in place to provide additional options.

**Enemy Personnel:** There is no requirement to accept the surrender of enemy combatants during combat. Surrender must only be upheld if negotiated with respective enemy Officials beforehand. ADVENT is under no obligation to provide additional services or rights to enemy personnel and reserves the right to treat them as needed. Note that specific directions can be given by ADVENT Officers.

**Enemy Governments:** Governments must be offered a surrender twice: Once at the start of the recognized conflict, and once when the capital or center of government is marked as a military target. Other surrender opportunities are not required, and are subject to be given at the discretion of the commanding officer.

If necessary, the execution of the entire governmental structure, or any specific elements or people is permitted. However, the government in question must have refused surrender at all opportunities. Note that if this is pursued, an additional offer of surrender must be given before the execution of such an operation.

**Hostage Situations or Usage of Human Shields:** ADVENT does not negotiate with enemies of the state during combat, and under no circumstances is the presence of hostages and/or hostile forces using human shields to change mission objectives or parameters unless circumstances are extraneous. Attempts should be made to minimize civilian casualties, but it is not at the expense of the mission objectives.
Skyranger, En route to Osaka, Japan

It felt like they had just fought aliens here.

Granted, Sierra hadn’t actually fought in the battle itself, but the First Battle of Japan had been the first true battle against the aliens, which in retrospect…huh, now that she thought about it, it had been a while since that battle. Pretty much everything had gone downhill from there, and it was only a matter of time before they came back.

She supposed that that little surprise attack had made them a little angry.

Still, assuming the aliens had learned from their mistakes last time, XCOM and ADVENT had also improved significantly. They were really only screwed if the Battlemaster himself showed up… which was extremely possible now that she thought about it. At the very least she was expecting him to put competent aliens in charge.

She sincerely hated how irritatingly competent these aliens were sometimes.

Would it kill them to have one alien who wasn’t a tactical genius? Although every said that the first attack on Japan was extremely amateur…

She was mentally rambling, knowing that the aliens were not going to play so nice this time.

Which said a lot since she had never used that word to describe them. But XCOM had psions, a MEC, and the best soldiers in the world, even if she barely knew the names to some of them.

Carmelita was in charge, which Sierra was somewhat reassured by, even if she suspected the woman wasn’t entirely stable. She had a tendency to take extremely suicidal actions, but survived all of them. Crazy she may be, but she knew what she was doing, even if she went somewhat berserk once the shooting started.

Aarni, Antia, David, and Kiera were all newer soldiers, and she wasn’t entirely sure they’d actually seen combat against the aliens, but she did know they had experience. Good enough. Much as people went on about how different the battlefield was…it really wasn’t. Instead of bullets, there was plasma; instead of enemy humans, there were enemy aliens. You got shot too many times, you died. People around you died. The enemies died. That stuff didn’t somehow change.

Then again, she was something of a veteran at this, and couldn’t really get hurt like she used to, so her perspective was probably flawed to an extent. The two psions, Fatima and Said, were the real heavy-hitters here. Sierra wasn’t sure how wise it was to send people who were married into the same combat zone, but it wasn’t as though they couldn’t take care of themselves.

Both were freakishly powerful from what she’d seen. Fatima was a mini-Patricia and Said was at least as strong as Iosif when it came to defense psionics. They were definitely going to make any aliens who were idiotic enough to attack think twice. Assuming they could even think that independently.

“Ten minutes out,” came the voice of Burning Sky. “Initial reports are coming in. Osaka seems to be coming under attack from primarily Mutons. But there’s a lot of them.”
“Copy that,” Carmelita grunted, her longsword resting between her legs, the metal tip touching the floor. “No way that’s their only surprise.”

Sierra agreed. “Probing for what we have?”

“Likely,” Carmelita nodded. “Or they intend for it to be a distraction.”

David crossed his arms. “A distraction from what? The entire country is locked down. I looked over the defensive specs for some of the cities, Tokyo is a fucking fortress. They’re not going to be able to launch surprise attacks anywhere.”

“Yes,” Fatima agreed. “David is right. This is likely a simple way to test ADVENT, and perhaps us. The aliens view Mutons as expendable, once they determine the apparent weaknesses of the defenses, they would launch a more dangerous wave specifically constructed to destroy it.”

“Assuming the aliens are smart enough to do that,” Aarni pointed out. “The last time they attacked, they didn’t have much in the way of tactics other than ‘throw as many soldiers at them as possible.’”

“We’re likely fighting the Battlemaster here,” Sierra reminded him, rolling her eyes. “He’s not an idiot. In general it’s better to assume that you’re dealing with geniuses instead of idiots. Makes things easier if they actually are being commanded by idiots.”

“Speaking of which,” Kiera glanced over to Carmelita. “What’s the plan if the Battlemaster shows up?”

“I distract him while we wait for Purifier and MDU support,” Carmelita answered. “XCOM and ADVENT think the Purifiers might actually pose a threat to him. MDU’s might be able to keep up with his speed. But Aegis doesn’t think the Battlemaster will be on the field today. He thinks that the sudden appearance of the Purifiers will cause him to back off until he develops a way to kill them ‘safely.’ Who knows how long that will take?” Her right hand gripped the longsword. “Still, never hurts to be prepared.”

Sierra nodded. It seemed like a fair assessment. The Battlemaster, for all his power, did seem to take things very conservatively. It was almost paranoid in a way, but it was done in a methodical manner she once more found irritatingly smart. She supposed that when an entire Empire of those things had died, you learned not to rely on invincibility.

“Approaching the LZ,” Burning Sky updated. “Stand by for deployment.”

The skyranger’s lights flashed to red and Carmelita stood, with the rest of them following suit as the skyranger began to dip, the sounds of combat already reaching their ears. Carmelita stood up front, Said beside her, his hand partially raised and rippling with psionic energy. Sierra stood right behind Carmelita, David beside her.

With a shudder, the skyranger settled on the ground, and the ramp slowly lowered to the ground, human and alien screams mingling in the distance, along with the familiar hissing of plasma and rhythmic pounding thuds of gauss weapons. A purple shield suddenly appeared before them, and Carmelita pointed her sword towards the fighting; reminiscent of the knights of old charging into war.

“Deploy!” She shouted, and they charged out into the raging firefight.
“Prepare the lines!” Came the calls from behind him as ADVENT soldiers rushed all around him, filling up the erected barricades and reinforced buildings that still hadn’t fully recovered from the Purifier attack earlier. Duri could still make out the smell; he couldn’t place what it reminded him of, but the entire city smelled of it, and it was distracting.

“Beatriz, you in position?” He glanced back to the small two-story shop where she was situated on top of the roof, sniper rifle propped against the stone railing, ready for action.

“Ready as can be,” she answered, giving a thumbs up to him. “Not much going on up here right now. Nothing in the distance either.”

“Of course there isn’t anything yet,” Cara muttered to herself, hefting her autorifle. “Sensors start picking up stuff hours away. I don’t even know if that’ll be enough.”

“Do we even have anything major left here?” Kang asked, checking his rifle.

Duri nodded. “A lot of the MDU’s and Purifiers were immediately transferred to Tokyo, but we still have…” he paused. “Twenty-five MDU’s and forty Purifiers. That isn’t counting that Destroyer out in the water, and the rest of the regular soldiers. Like us.”

“They better keep the Purifiers way the fuck back,” Beatriz commented over the comms. “Those things are not front-line units.”

“Really, where should they be then?” Cara pointed out. “They aren’t exactly artillery.”

There was a brief pause on the other end. “Fair point. Let me amend that to saying that the Purifiers should be kept back until the battle is a little less..er, chaotic. Like when they could actually be sent out, burn a few aliens, and then pull back without as high a chance of getting shot right next to you.”

“Well, in that case,” Cara nodded to herself. “I agree. I think the Corporal knows what he’s doing with them though. No point wasting them.”

“Are we getting psion support?” Johan asked, changing the subject. His tone indicated a frown under his helmet as he spoke. “I have a feeling we’ll need it.”

Cara snorted. “Please, name me a situation where we wouldn’t need the purple demigods?”

Duri smiled under his helmet, and Kang stifled a chuckle. Still, a psion would be nice. Preferably an entire XCOM or Lancer squad. MDU’s were nice, but there weren’t enough to make him feel comfortable.

They had reinforced the city as best they could, considering the circumstances. The coast was mostly open beach, no cover whatsoever, and ADVENT had established lines much like the first time, at the edge of the city overlooking the beach. But this time they were being a bit cleverer. Mines had been placed throughout the entire beach, the ones furthest back, and the ones at the end under direct manual control in case the Andromedons tried any sort of shield tricks again. That, and there was the possibility of damaging the UFOs themselves.

Then there were some new turrets; recent ADVENT tech they’d been working on much like the MDU’s. They essentially were a black pillar of metal with a large laser weapon on the top, with a few panels around that to protect the inner workings. From the explanations he’d been given, they operated much like the MDU’s in that they were just as accurate and completely autonomous.
There were a dozen of those spread along the perimeter, and he knew there were a half-dozen more further in. ADVENT had also been sure to reinforce the interior of the city, in case the perimeter fell, so the army could have a secure place to fall back to. It was very elegantly planned, and Duri was grateful that at least someone was learning from the last time this place had fallen.

On top of all that, there was an entire Raven Squad and another plane which Cara had, quite excitedly, identified as a Warthog. According to Cara, it was the best thing they could have outside MDU’s, and it appeared to be an anti-tank plane of all things, which he’d thought would be very difficult to pull off, but it seemed the Americans had every kind of combination available.

He’d been somewhat surprised to learn that these Warthogs actually hadn’t been upgraded to Gaussian tech, which he would have thought would have been a priority. He’d casually brought it up with Cara who’d laughed and showed him a picture first of the gun, and then the size of bullet fired. After that she’d shown him some videos of the plane demolishing actual buildings with a single volley.

He conceded that maybe they didn’t need a gauss upgrade quite yet

So, that was air, sea, and ground support covered. A well-fortified city, or as well fortified as could be expected. Purifiers which could turn the entire beach (or city) to glass if needed. MDU’s and their sister turrets which didn’t fuck around with anything. All in all…they were as prepared as they could possibly be for this attack.

But if they’d learned from their mistakes, would the aliens follow suit?

“What do you think they’ll send this time?” Kang asked, as the minutes passed. “More Andromedons?”

“Please yes,” Cara said. “Let them come, set up their little shield, then send the Purifiers to burn them to death. Or Mutons. I’d be alright with Mutons.”

“They always send Mutons,” Johan muttered absentmindedly. “Well, almost always.”

“Realistically?” Duri paused. “A combination of air and heavy infantry units if they’re smart. Definitely the Floaters for harassment, basic Mutons for shock tactics, throw some Andromedons and Elites into the mix and you’d have a solid force we can beat. If they send any psions, Sectopods, or god forbid, the Battlemaster, things aren’t so good.”

“It’s not the units,” Cara shook her head. “It’s how they’re used. Hopefully they’ll have the same idiot running the battle that did the last one here. I like it when they use the ‘throw everyone at them’ strategy. Makes it much easier.”

“All soldiers, we have sighting of UFOs,” came the voice of the Colonel.

Duri quickly looked behind him. “Beatriz?”

“One second,” a pause. “Lots of glints in the distance. Definitely transports. Ugh, there are UFO fighters with them. Air support might be tied up if that’s the case.”

Duri looked back out into the horizon, and he also saw the shimmering glints in the distance. “How many?”

“Twenty, minimum,” was the answer. “And…uh, there’s three more lines behind them.”

“Sixty?” Johan asked incredulously. “For this?”
“Hold that thought,” Beatriz said, her voice wavering. “Ok, the first twenty are still going forward. All the rest are holding back.”

That made some measure of sense, there was only a limited amount of room on the beach, and too many soldiers would make it crowded. That was a small comfort, since there were twice that number of reinforcements following them. It was even worse if any of those transports had Gateways in them.

“Look at that.” Kang said in awe, and Duri squinted his eyes and focused onto the UFOs now clearly in view. Still small, but getting closer. But he immediately saw what Kang was talking about. “That doesn’t look like a transport.”

“No,” Beatriz agreed. “It definitely doesn’t.”

From what Duri could make out, it looked like the equivalent of a sideways teardrop, although with clear edges and lines on its sides. What immediately stood out was that the entire ship appeared to be transparent, or at least made out of a light-blue tinted substance. It reminded him of the Andromedon helmets and…the teardrop ship suddenly dipped and plunged into the ocean.

He blinked. “What was that?”

“Oh, that's not good,” Beatriz breathed. “I don’t know what that thing was, but there were Andromedons on that ship. Saw it plain as day. Going underwater isn’t an accident.”

“We have subs, right?” Johan asked.

“Don’t know,” Duri said, looking towards the Destroyer which was now starting to fire up at the transports. “But that Destroyer needs to get out of there now if we don’t.”

“Ready weapons!” Came the call from the front-line Officer, as the transports came ever closer.

Duri gripped his weapon, and steadied his aim towards the ocean, saying a quick prayer that all of them survived this battle.

But this time, he wasn’t sure they’d be so lucky.

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Osaka, Japan

From a few minutes of hectic, dangerous, and chilling observation, Sierra knew that even if the aliens literally sent nothing but Mutons, this battle was not going to be won easily. The heaviest fighting was taking place in the Osaka bay, with ADVENT holding the perimeter of most of the areas around the circular bay, but the aliens had landed on the far ends, as well as some of the docks and platforms in the water.

The transports had actually landed on them, and the Mutons were mostly hunkering inside the transports, and occasionally sending teams to brave the hailstorm of gauss bullets shot in their direction. But what was actually bad news was that the island that was further back in the bay had clearly been taken over by aliens, and Sierra could clearly see at least a thousand marching forward into the city proper.

“Fatima! Take care of that island for us!” Carmelita demanded coldly, slowly appraising the situation herself as ADVENT soldiers ran past them to reinforce the front line.
“Overseer!”

They turned to see a green-tinted ADVENT Colonel dash up, flanked on either side by standard soldiers. “Colonel Chu, sir! Glad you could get here, we got hit harder—“

“So I see,” Carmelita interrupted, raising a hand. “Situation report.”

“Yes, sir,” he nodded, audibly wincing as a building closer to the front lines crumbled. “Short version is that the aliens have control of Awaji, that island over there. Right now the transports on the docks are keeping a good portion of our soldiers occupied. Air support is currently limited, so we can’t rely on that. We can’t make a concerted effort to press forward, since the Mutons are actually being smart this time.”

He pointed to the docked UFOs. “They haven’t done much more than stick their heads out this whole time. Only Mutons, but they’re being led by someone smart. A massive Muton force is going to hit Akashi, since the island connects.”

“Can’t you blow the bridge? Aarni asked, tilting his head.

“Bad move,” Sierra dismissed. “Should only be done as a last resort. That funnels the Mutons and makes it easier to kill them off.”

“Exactly,” Colonel Chu confirmed. “I’m not blowing the bridge until we’re sure they can’t hold. But there are going to be a lot of soldiers that die if they aren’t reinforced.”


“Copy, Overseer. Gray Sky out.”

Carmelita looked back to the Colonel. “A Ballista-Class MEC is being sent to that position. Fatima, you’re going too.” At that Fatima dashed off towards one of the Humvees that was carrying soldiers to and from the battle, hailing it down. “She’s a telepath,” Carmelita explained. “If that’s where the largest threat is, she should be able to handle them.”

“Great!” Colonel Chu said, clearly relieved. “I’ll inform the Captains of the updated situation. What about the rest of you?”

“We’ll deal with the transports,” Carmelita answered, looking back to the shores of the fighting. “Two at a time. Sierra, David, Antia, you’re with me. Aarni, find a sniping position and take out any priority targets you see.” She pointed to the Colonel. “I want Aarni tapped into your lines. He’ll take out any specific targets you want, within reason.”

She looked to Said. “Take the rest and hit another transport. Everyone got it!”

“Yes, Overseer!” They shouted. Carmelita looked to the Colonel.

“Anything else we should be aware of?”

“There are transports hovering beyond the bay,” he answered, pointing in the distance. “I assume they’re reinforcements. If we keep holding them off, they’ll likely send them.”

“Understood,” Carmelita stated, gripping her sword tighter. “Move out!”

With that they split into their respective teams and charged forward. Sierra knew Antia and David
would need to be a little more careful, since they didn’t have any genetic modification, while she had the Iron Skin, and Carmelita was extensively modified. Still, the aliens were about to be in for a world of hurt in the very near future.

Green plasma streaked overhead once they reached the front lines; ADVENT soldiers were hunkering behind their black alloy barricades, while Gunners provided steady streams of suppressive fire, which barely seemed to do more than irritate the armored aliens. Sierra also saw that some of the Muton bodies, which she assumed were from failed charges, had been stacked on top of each other into something of a makeshift cover, bound together by what looked suspiciously like the stuff in symbiote grenades.

Huh. Clever.

Seemed to be working too, since even those makeshift Muton barricades were filled with soldiers, and were withstanding direct plasma blasts. “I’m going to distract them,” Carmelita muttered as they stepped onto the metal docks, cover few and far between. “Keep both of them alive. I’ll hold them until you get here.”

Sierra opened her mouth to answer, but before she could, Carmelita jumped towards the open mouth of the transport, sword glistening in the morning light.

“What the fuck,” Antia said in disbelief.

Sierra heard surprised Muton grunts and the familiar sound of an alloy cannon. “Go forward! Now!” With the hail of plasma fire briefly stopped, the three of them charged through the winding docks, all of them hyperaware of just how exposed they were. But they finally got close enough to the transport and Antia and David slid into cover, while Sierra charged a bit further.

Carmelita had done a lot more than distract the Mutons.

She alone had already taken half of the transport bay, and Sierra saw eviscerated, stabbed, and headless bodies of Mutons who’d tried to stop her. Carmelita was right now behind some alloy cover that had been erected in the interior of the UFO, firing away with her alloy cannon every few seconds, which had the effect of keeping the Mutons pinned in place.

Sierra made it to the first barrier in the transport, lined up her shot, and fired. The cyclic red laser bored into the head of a Muton, leaving a small hole behind and the massive alien collapsed to the ground. She repeated the same with the one next to it before it realized what was happening.

Two more shots took down another Muton, and Sierra glanced over to see David and Antia were both here now, and taking positions behind the second layer of interior defenses. Sierra leapt over her own and decided to try something a bit risky. “Carmelita!” She yelled. “Flank them!”

“My pleasure!” She yelled back, and charged toward the right flank while Sierra took the left, and their positions were quickly taken up by their backup. The Mutons were not expecting another apparent suicidal charge forward and stepped back in surprise, before Sierra shot two of them in their unprotected faces, then pulled a small grenade and tossed it towards another one, ripping it apart.

Carmelita was far more brutal. She quickly executed two Mutons with alloy cannon shots to the face, turning their heads into mush, while a few seconds later she hooked the weapon to her waist, thrust out her left arm and that eerie stinger modification shot out like a cobra and directly into the eye of another Muton, burying itself deep while she pulled out her sword again and leapt towards two more Mutons, stabbing one directly in the face, and quickly repeating the same tactic with the
“Outsiders!” David called, and his and Antia’s fire immediately focused on them. Both had Pulse weapons, and they were quick enough to catch one Outsider by surprise, and the sudden influx of energy froze it, increasing the orange light inside the crystalline alien until it shattered.

The other two Outsiders were smarter and faster; ducking into cover immediately and firing on Sierra and Carmelita for all the good it would do them. One plasma bolt clipped her shoulder; scowling, she responded by raising her rifle and firing, forcing it to hide from the deadly laser.

Carmelita didn’t waste time with that, and simply jumped to the second level where the Outsiders were hunkering, landing beside one and unloading three full blasts of the alloy cannon into its face. Sierra quickly ran up the ramp to corner the second one, and the instant she had a sighting, she fired and shot directly into its leg, pinning it temporarily as Carmelita reloaded her weapon and stormed over, before repeating the same method of execution.

The area went relatively quiet, although the sounds of battle were still heard outside. “Said, report!” Carmelita demanded. “We’ve taken this UFO.”

“Just a few Outsiders to deal with here,” was the immediate response. “No injuries or anything. This’ll be taken care of soon.”

“One down, seven to go?” David asked hopefully.

“Think it’s probably more than seven,” Carmelita grunted, motioning them to follow her back outside. “But essentially. Still, if this is all they’ve got this will be laughably easy.”

She paused. “Colonel, any updates?”

“Whatever your telepath is doing, it’s amazing,” was his answer. “Don’t know what she’s done to the Mutons, but they’re pretty much killing themselves. That MEC is also picking up his fair share of kills and your sniper is softening up the transports for a counterattack. Air support is still tied up, but it’s much better.”

“We’re moving to the next UFO,” Carmelita informed him, briefly checking her alloy cannon. “We’ll do this as many times as needed.”

“Understood, I’m reorganizing our defenses to further assist.”

“Time to take the next one,” Carmelita said, and they charged back out into the fray. Sierra was just waiting for the hammer to come down. Carmelita was right. If this was it, it would be laughable. But the aliens never made things this easy, even if the same idiot was in charge of this attack.

Since the Mutons still didn’t have helmets, she suspected he was.

Arrogant aliens.

***

Nakashibetsu, Japan

“Fire!” One of the Corporals yelled and all the Rocketeers, Kang included, fired at the approaching transports. Rockets sped towards the ships in streaks of white and orange light, impacting with brilliant explosions that sadly only seemed to be doing superficial damage at best. With gauss
bullets bouncing off of them, the transports settled down, and a few moments later, the transports opened up and out came a horde of Mutons.

They were likely in straight lines before charging out, but those quickly deteriorated as the savage aliens roared and charged forward. These ones were wearing helmets, not stupidly exposed like the others. The helmets were the same green as their armor, but they thankfully didn’t seem to grant them more intelligence.

The first wave suddenly exploded as they triggered the mines, and the rest staggered to a stop in confusion, and some immediately fell to one knee and began firing at the ADVENT line, while others continued forward slowly, firing their plasma rifles; not even seeming to take into account the minefield they found themselves in.

Duri, Cara, and Johan all began firing their weapons at the encroaching horde, whose numbers at minimum matched their own, even if they had no concern for their own safety, and after a few minutes of battle, he realized that when the Mutons didn’t have such a blatant weakness…they were rather terrifying.

Cara unloaded an entire clip into one approaching Muton, but even as it bled ichor from its mangled chest, it still kept going, and was only killed when it stepped onto another mine. Johan and Duri managed to kill one by blowing away parts of its helmet, which was still fairly easy to target, since the alien made no attempt whatsoever to find cover.

“Shit, they have Grenadiers to the back,” Beatriz said urgently to him. “I’ll try to take some out. But they’re coming now.”

That was not good. “Grenadiers!” He called to the other soldiers. “Watch for explosives!”

“MDU’s moving forward,” Corporal Williams’s voice suddenly interjected. “Hold the line. We have plans for grenades.”

“You’d better,” Cara sneered as she managed to down another Muton that was getting uncomfortably close. “Because they’re coming up now!”

Duri saw the aforementioned Muton Grenadiers coming forward now. In all respects they appeared to be identical to the Soldiers, except that they had a couple dozen plasma grenades strapped to their belts and across their back, as well as holding what looked to be some kind of grenade launcher. He’d heard of these, even if he hadn’t fought them yet.

“Snipers, target the exposed grenades,” Williams ordered. “All Gunners, lay down immediate suppressive fire!”

There was a chorus of unacknowledged affirmations, and all the Gunners began spraying the battlefield with thousands of gauss rounds in wide arcs. The front line of Mutons was instantly halted, and some raised their arms as the hail of rounds slammed into them, some puncturing vital organs and body parts.

Behind the main Muton line, several Grenadiers suddenly exploded in green flashes, presumably from the snipers hitting the grenades strapped to them. “One down,” Beatriz said smugly. “Only several hundred more.”

“They’re getting ready to fire!” Another Officer called out.

The ADVENT Snipers fired again, as the regular soldiers, Rocketeers, and Officers picked up the suppressive tactic while the Gunners reloaded their weapons. A few more Grenadiers exploded
from sniper fire, but the majority loaded their grenades, raised, then fired them at the ADVENT line. The green-tinted projectiles were in the dozens, and Duri didn’t see how all of them could be stopped.

The short answer was that he was right.

But it wasn’t nearly as devastating as it would have been otherwise.

The MDU’s raised their weapons up, and streaks of lasers shot into the sky, and it was suddenly filled with green bubbles of plasma that dissipated seconds later as the MDU’s and Turrets shot the grenades out of the sky when they entered their range. But it still didn’t get all of them. ADVENT soldiers jumped out of the way, or tried to flee the range of the grenades, but some just weren’t fast enough.

The plasma blew them apart, or incinerated them entirely depending on how close they were to it. Entire fortifications were suddenly nothing, and even a few MDU’s succumbed to the plasma grenades. More green explosions from the back as the Snipers continued taking them out, a few more volleys, and they would have this under control.

The Muton advance had been mostly stopped, as the Mutons refused to find any sort of cover, but they were now adapting to that in a rather morbid way. Knowing they didn’t have to worry about grazing shots or even getting directly hit unless it was in the face, they were taking the corpses of their dead and piling them on top of each other, creating a temporary, but effective means of cover.

“We’ve got air support,” Corporal Williams updated. “Stand by for airstrike on concentrated Muton position. Officers, mark highest concentration of Muton forces.”

“Understood!” Duri responded, and activated the green tracking laser on his rifle and aimed it where the Mutons were establishing a massive semi-circle of dead aliens, and beginning to return fire from it. “Locked!” He shouted as the green laser turned red. He saw the lines from other Officers who were also marking the area.

“Stand by for airstrike in five seconds,” a deep voice suddenly said. “Targets marked.”

Duri suddenly heard a sound that seemed to come from a buzzsaw or really fast machine gun. Then out of nowhere thunderous streaks of white light rained down from the sky and cut the Muton concentration to pieces. Cara whooped as the plane that had fired the airstrike flew off into the distance for another round. “Fuck yes!”

He supposed that had been the Warthog she’d been so excited about.

Now he knew why.

The Muton forces were in complete disarray as the ones not ripped apart by the airstrike struggled to decide what to do next. “Purifier forces, perform area denial,” Corporal Williams ordered and two Purifiers suddenly began walking forward, taking advantage of the lull in the Muton plasma fire to perform area denial.

Duri could only hope things were going as well further up and down the beachhead, because this was a beautiful sight.

The Purifiers unleashed the white-hot cones of ClF3 towards the Muton fortifications, then swept them across as much of the beach as they were able to. The Mutons unfortunate enough to get caught in the blast panicked instantly, running around in circles, rolling on the ground to put out the fire, or worse, running into the water where they promptly exploded.
The fortification of Muton bodies was incinerated within minutes as Purifier fire swept over it, destroying the only defense on the beach. The sand underneath the fire was turned to glass that shattered and damaged the Mutons even more when they fell on it or set off more of the few mines that had remained untouched.

Duri’s lips curled into a grin. Perhaps it wasn’t hopeless after all.

Maybe they could win once more.

***

Tokyo, Japan

To Jamali’s surprise, there actually wasn’t any fighting going on in Tokyo.

Yet.

All of them exited the skyranger rather calmly, all things considered. They technically weren’t in Tokyo proper, but in one of the areas before it entered Tokyo Bay; Kawasaki he believed. But from what Jamali had seen already, the city would be able to withstand even the worst alien assault. There were, at a minimum, twenty-thousand ADVENT soldiers here alone, of all types.

That wasn’t counting the automated systems like MDU’s and turrets, which had been built throughout the entire area. Beyond the bay was also one of the massive US Carriers, a behemoth of the sea that was primed and ready for any conflict. Jamali also suspected that there were submarines also accompanying it.

Yet the aliens hadn’t attacked yet.

Interesting.

“Looks like we’ve got company,” Allison muttered as a group of ADVENT soldiers walked up. Definitely an ADVENT Marshal by her coloring and shoulder cape that was over her right shoulder. She was flanked by six Colonels and Corporals, likely the main Commanders of this entire defense. The squad Overseer, Dael Young, a recent promotion, stepped forward. “Marshal Kilani, Overseer Young, XCOM.”

The Marshal put a fist over her heart in an approximate ADVENT salute. “Glad you’re here. Satellite footage and readings all indicate that we’re going to get hit hard, and we’re going to need all the help we can get.”

“That’s why we’re here,” he nodded. “We have a Goliath getting dropped off in the city proper, and we’ll assist on fighting the front lines, wherever the fighting is the heaviest.” He motioned to Allison. “Both Psion Monder and I are defense specialists; Psion Mattis is a telepath. We’ll give extra protection and assistance when you need it.”

A nod from her. “Good. In the meantime the city is as prepared as I could make it. MDU’s, soldiers, Snipers, Gunners, Purifiers; all of them are situated and ready for whatever is coming. We’ve got the USS Washington out beyond the bay, which will provide us with air and sea support, should we need it.”

“How much air support will you have?” Jona Mattis asked.

“Worst case scenario?” Marshal Kilani asked. “A small fleet. That isn’t including the American Warthogs that were brought in for anti-infantry and anti-tank support. Our Ravens are weaker than
UFOs, but we can still shoot enough of them down to make a difference.”

“Don’t worry about them too much,” Jona tapped her head. “I picked up some tricks from Patricia. As long as they aren’t automated now, I should be able to take them over.”

“That’s good, but we’ll also need you on the ground,” Dael reminded her, before turning back to the Marshal. “In the meantime, where do you want us?”

“You’ll have two deployment helicopters for your own use,” she answered quickly. “In addition to your skyranger. You’re probably going to be moving around a lot, and I want you where we need you as quickly as possible. I’ve ordered them here—hold, new info.”


Well, that didn’t sound good. “Understood,” she finished grimly. “Good luck.” She looked back at them. “Change of plans. The large alien fleet we were worried about is going in completely different directions. Probably reinforcing other points of attack.”

“What?” Yasu and Sora, both XCOM soldiers of Japanese origin said at the same time. “Then we’re safe?” Sora finished, her voice hopeful.

“Not exactly,” Kilani corrected slowly, raising a hand. “There’s one UFO coming towards us. Small, seems to be the same class as the one used by the Battlemaster.”

Oh.

Jamali swallowed and exchanged looks with the rest of the XCOM soldiers. They were absolutely not the right ones to face the Battlemaster. “I see,” Dael said slowly. “If it is the Battlemaster coming, get your soldiers out, and gather as many Purifiers as you can. Those may be the only things that could actually hurt him.”

“Agreed,” she said, motioning to one of the Colonels to give the orders. “Estimation is that it’s ten minutes out. I’m ordering two squads of Ravens to try and take it down, since it appears to be alone.”

“Is that a good idea?” Gyeong asked, stepping forward. “Isn’t the Battlemaster a telekinetic?”

“He’s dangerous, but not a telekinetic,” Allison interrupted, shaking her head. “At least not a true one. He can use it, but it’s not his skill. And even if he managed to take down one, that leaves seven more. Not sure how well it’ll work either, but it’s the best plan outside of relying on Purifiers.”

“Look!” One of the Corporals shouted, looking through his sniper rifle. “UFO coming.”

“Right on time,” Marshal Kilani nodded and the squads of Ravens immediately streaked overhead towards the faint glint in the distance. “Fire at will, Wing Officer.”

Jamali watched as the glint slowly got larger until it was clearly what he believed XCOM had dubbed an Overseer-class UFO. The metal was a duller grey, but it still seemed a duplicate of the UFO scouts and fighters. The first of the Ravens fired at the UFO, as did the guns on the Carrier from the ground.

Except the missiles suddenly froze in mid-air and then plummeted towards the sea. In retrospect, that might not have been too unexpected. Missiles were small, and even the Battlemaster could
catch a half-dozen.

But what did shock not just him, but all of them, was all of the Ravens suddenly freezing in the air, jets still pushing forward, and then their metal frames suddenly collapsing in on themselves like cheap foil. Jamali blinked. “Officer!” Kilani demanded. “Come in!”

Something must have finally ruptured, because one of the Ravens exploded, and the rest of the planes were slowly turned into crumpled balls of steel. At that point Jamali realized that the UFO had stopped and was hovering. He also noticed that despite the Carrier firing, it seemed there was zero damage being done to the craft.

He swallowed. “I don’t like this,” Maria Pena said softly. “Could the Battlemaster do that?”

The crumpled Ravens were suddenly released from the invisible hold on them, and fell into the water with a splash and something dropped out of the bottom of the UFO, and began speeding towards them.

“Oh, fuck,” the Sniper Corporal breathed in terror. “It’s an Ethereal.”

Jamali quickly zoomed in on his own rifle and his eyes widened as he confirmed what had been said. But it wasn’t an Ethereal that they knew, this was a completely new one. The helmet was almost identical to the one Aegis wore, if having a couple more curves, but the rest of the Ethereal was completely new.

He, because he assumed it was a he, wore a mix of the Ethereal robes and battle armor. It was as if the material was interwoven with the armor, which covered the chest and legs. While a material skirt of sorts fell behind the Ethereal’s legs, it still allowed the Ethereal to move forward freely, and the arms were covered by sleeves of a purple material, with the hands encased in black gloves.

The Ethereal was on what seemed to be a kind of hoverboard, which was just large enough for him, and no more. The boots seemed welded into it, and the Ethereal flew with a familiarity that indicated that this was not the first time it had been used. His arms were held loosely at his side, and the Ethereal approached as if it had all the time in the world until it was just over the entrance to the Tokyo Bay, in perfect view of XCOM.

The Ethereal was still very far away, but Jamali wasn’t sure that really mattered.

“Humans!” Jamali and the rest of the soldiers on the rooftop involuntarily shivered as the amplified and echoing voice that permeated the air long seconds after the last syllable was uttered. “You have fought beyond what we could have predicted. You have scored victories, and killed hundreds of our soldiers. Your continued defiance is a testament to your will, although your intelligence has much to be desired.”

Marshal Kilani didn’t really seem to like his monologue. “Fire!” She yelled, and the area was suddenly alight with the flashes of gauss rifles and the sound of automatic fire. The Ethereal didn’t seem perturbed, and simply lowered a hand out towards them, palm down and the gauss rounds suddenly froze inches before they actually hit him.

“You time of insubordination is at an end,” the Ethereal continued. “Today the world will see the futility of resisting us and our power. You will die at the hand of Caelior, Destroyer of the Immortals, and Wielder of the Maelstrom. Prepare or flee before the might of the Storm.”

With that he thrust down another hand, and a visible wave appeared in the air and slammed down on several hundred ADVENT soldiers, all of whom were immediately crushed to the ground. He
extended another hand to a nearby building filled with soldiers and ADVENT emplacements and Jamali watched in awe and terror as it shook and suddenly collapsed from waves of energy that crushed it from all sides.

“Jona! Get into its head!” Dael yelled as all of the soldiers started firing. “Commander-“

“You can’t fight Caelior where you are,” came the urgent response. “Caelior will kill all of you at this range. Get back now and reconfigure a plan!”

“Copy!” Dael confirmed, as Caelior swooped down to another ADVENT position and raised one hand, clenching it into a fist. The soldiers below him began screaming as their armor compressed and he crushed them into masses of flesh, armor, and bone. He threw another hand as six MDU’s were tossed into the water like toys, right before he turned his eye to the carrier in the background.

Allison saw it too. “Impossible,” she breathed. “He can’t do that…”

Impossible or not, Caelior was going to try, and with one hand extended to the USS Washington, he turned his palm up as psionic energy encased his body. He raised the arm.

And the Carrier began to rise.

Water poured off it by the hundreds of gallons, everything not bolted down also slid into the black water as the ship rose by inches, until it was five, then ten, then twenty feet above the ocean, and still rising. Throughout it all, Caelior hadn’t been neglecting the enemies on the ground. He shot waves of energy which caused miniature earthquakes in the immediate area, destabilizing everyone, including the XCOM soldiers.

Most were flattened into the ground; unlucky ones were crushed with an unrelenting psionic grip; Purifier tanks exploded and set fire to nearby areas; MDU’s were crushed and ripped apart, and Jamali heard the Marshal yell for a retreat in the background. Then Caelior turned himself around, one hand raised high in the air, with the massive United States Carrier held suspended several hundred feet in the air.

It was all too clear what he was going to do: Throw it into the center of Tokyo.

“Get on the chopper!” Dael yelled, and all of them quickly boarded them, and were speeding to the city, trying desperately to formulate a plan that had even a hope of stopping the nightmare gradually getting closer.

But Jamali was no longer sure that was possible. Not with the time they had.

Their only hope was maybe Patricia.

And even then…they might be calling her to her death.

***

Nagoya, Japan

No words were needed as XCOM stormed out of their skyranger into the heated battle of Nagoya, where the aliens were not just attacking from the shore, but also from the east of where they’d landed, in farmlands and fields where they assumed ADVENT wouldn’t be expecting them.

Shortsighted fools the aliens were.
Connected as she was with all of her squad, she had no need to give orders and watched them charge off to their respective battles. Cassandra and Jim headed to appropriate sniping positions; Matthew led Bora and Leonid towards the docks where the alien were attacking, and Fakhr led Anna and their MEC Gloria to assist by the farmlands.

Patricia herself closed her eyes and knelt on the ground. It was easier this way, much less distraction than just standing up and relying on unneeded gestures to impress her will on the enemies of XCOM. She felt she was beyond that now. Not quite at the level of an Ethereal like Aegis…but she was getting closer every day.

She felt the frantic, chaotic, and fearful minds of the Humans around her. Flashes entered and exited her mind like water. Memories, stray thoughts, strong emotions…they were all present and amplified in the heat of battle. Love, hate, hope, and despair were all in equal measure, largely swinging between the extremes.

She listened with interest as she observed the Humans minds around her, fascinated at the thoughts that ran through their heads before winking out of existence. Some thought about their spouses and kids, others regretful at not achieving their goals, others had the faces of their mortal enemy seared into their minds right before they died.

Oddly enough, it wasn’t usually the faceless alien that killed them, but some mundane Human that had wronged them at some point. Harsh bosses, cheating friends, whoever had the strongest emotional connection tended to be the last person one thought of before death.

How curious.

Nevertheless, she had a battle to win, and a job to do.

*Be at ease,* she began, *focusing on the Human minds first, focus and stand firm in the knowledge that you will be victorious. Let go of the fear, clear your minds. Focus on the aliens.*

*Focus on them, and kill them.*

*Wipe them out.*

That she repeated until it was in the minds of the soldiers; it was their mantra, their singular goal for this day. Hopefully one they would never forget. And she felt the emotions around her change. The fear slowly faded and was replaced by cold resilience; resilience that only grew stronger as the minutes passed. Every death seemed to harden the resolve of those fighting; every injury only emboldened those alive to fight harder.

They fought by not letting the emotions humanity was so prone to rule them.

And perhaps that was why the Ethereals were so interested in them.

A human not ruled by emotion was a dangerous one indeed.

She smiled.

Now, the aliens.

They were all exclusively Mutons to her surprise. Odd that they would pick the most flawed species to fight today. A trap, or simple overconfidence? No matter, it only made her job easier and there were no tricks in the minds of these Mutons. Simple creatures, beings driven by instinct and whatever was drilled into them in the War Camps.
Such aliens were broken beyond repair. Whatever potential their species had held was now lost forever, crushed by the ambitions of the Ethereals and their quest for vengeance.

It was almost sad. Mutons didn’t have emotions like Humans, those had been purged long ago by the Ethereals. It had been purged by years of torturous training and beatings at the hands of Sargons, Sectoids, and Vitakara. The capacity for a Muton to feel anything beyond pain was no more.

And yet, there was a way.

She could make them feel again.

Their minds would not be able to process what they were feeling, nor would they be able to handle it without simply freezing up and standing still. And so she projected her feelings into their minds; opening them to what had been purged long ago. Hate for her enemies, sadness for the friends she’d lost, hope for the future, and love for her friends and Creed.

It all rushed over their simple minds, and as she suspected, they simply froze. They stopped, as if frozen in mid-thought, and in a way, they were. It would take their brains hours to fully process what they were feeling, and by that time, all of them would be dead.

Her smile grew as their minds suddenly vanished, winking out like stars in a galaxy, until there were only a few more left in the void. And the Humans pressed forward, ever confident and resilient in the face of overwhelming odds. Odds which were slowly shifting back to their favor.

Still, she wondered why they had only sent Mutons. With that, she went into the primitive mind of one looking for clues, and managed to reconstruct a fragmented thought.

*Enemy appraisement. Test current defenses.*

She frowned and mentally commanded the Muton to kill himself. Interesting. So they were probing ADVENT defenses? Seeing what they had before sending in-ah.

Well, they were getting better. Mutons were expendable. Better to tailor the second wave to the weaknesses of your enemy. It was probably the same for all the attacks then. Very clever, and an excellent usage of the superior numbers the aliens had, if a little useless. She frowned as there was something buzzing in the distance…what was…oh, right.

She returned to reality; the sounds and smells all coming back in a rush. “They’re testing the defenses,” she quickly said into her helmet. “The Mutons are just a front. The real attacks will be the second wave-“

“*Patricia! We need to get you to the skyranger now,*” the Commander interrupted. “*Big Sky is coming back for you now.*”

She frowned. She was never called away. “What’s happened?”

“*Caelior,*” the Commander confirmed with a word. “*And if we don’t get you there soon, he’s going to destroy Tokyo.*”

***

Tokyo, Japan

Jamali knew they were in a losing battle, though seeing the Ethereal float through Tokyo Bay, a
massive US carrier held hundreds of feet in the air, it didn’t seem entirely real. He prayed this was some kind of horrible dream, but he knew that if it was, he would have woken up by now.

He tried lining up his pulse rifle, and fired another burning lance at the distant Ethereal, missed of course, and quickly moved because that was the *one* thing that seemed to provoke Caelior. “Jump!” He yelled and Maria and Sora both complied as they moved to the next roof, and just in time as well.

He glanced back to see the building he had been standing on, a small two-story one, shimmer as it was surrounded by a slightly purple aura, before cracking and collapsing in on itself. Jamali’s heart pounded as the rubble settled, but the sounds and screams were still as prevalent as ever. There was *nothing* that seemed to be able to stop the rampaging Ethereal.

Gauss rounds slowed to a crawl the moment they got near him, rockets were turned back at ADVENT laughable ease, buildings were collapsed into rubble with a clenched fist from the Ethereal, and his range seemed only as limited as far as he could see.

And he could see *far*.

“Jona!” Jamali yelled. “Can you stop him?”

Their telepath had one hand extended futilely to the flying Ethereal, purple energy shimmering around her. “I can’t!” She yelled in frustration. “He’s too strong! I can’t do it without help!”

Jamali glanced up as the Ethereal was getting frightfully close to the city. “Come on, Patricia!” He muttered. She was literally their only chance here, since Jona wasn’t strong enough, and their weapons weren’t doing more than posing a minor annoyance to the Ethereal.

“Jamali! Allison! Get on!” Dael yelled from a helicopter that landed behind them. “Maria! You get on too. We’ve only got one shot at this before he gets close enough!”

Jamali didn’t hesitate and jumped onto the helicopter along with the others, as they took off and began circling the area. “What’s the-“ Jamali began, before Allison gasped and the building that they had just been on was suddenly surrounded by Caelior’s telekinetic hold, and shattered. With a grip strong enough to break stone, Jona, Sora, Gyeong, and Yasu weren’t nearly equipped to resist it, and their figures compressed into misshapen forms of humans, limbs bent in odd ways as their Aegis armor worked against them, making any injury far more painful.

He just blinked in surprise. Had it just been random bad luck? Or had Caelior been able to target them from Jona’s telepathic probe? But they were dead now; killed within seconds at the hands of the Ethereal.

Any slower and he might have been on the building when it imploded.

Allison’s voice was ragged. “Plan?”

“We trap him in stasis,” Dael answered grimly, summoning his power. “Both of us. That isn’t his specialty and we need to do it now.”

“But-“

“It won’t stop him, I know,” Dael answered. “Maria, Jamali, you shoot that glider-thing he’s riding. He’ll be invincible, but he’ll crash to the ground all the same. We drop a bomb down into the water and he might die.”
As far as plans went, it wasn’t the worst he’d heard, and see two skyscrapers collapse, knocking over even more buildings…they needed to act now. He exchanged a glance with Maria, who nodded and raised her pulse rifle. They could do this.

They got closer and closer. Jamali needed to learn the name of this pilot. He deserved a medal if they all survived this. “Now!” Dael yelled, and he and Allison extended their arms and Caelior was suddenly surrounded in a purple bubble that covered his body like a shell. Luckily his helmet was facing away, which meant he hadn’t seen their approach.

“Fire!” Jamali yelled, and red lances of fire spat out of their rifles and into the hoverboard Caelior was using, with them specifically targeting where the engines were. The silver board sparked, and the blue engines or anti-grav fields, Jamali didn’t know which, flickered out and failed.

And the board fell into the ocean.

But Caelior was still hovering in the air.

“Little foolish humans,” Caelior almost sounded amused, and the helicopter blades stopped. Jamali gasped as pressure covered his entire body, as if he was in a presser that was killing him by centimeters. “A clever tactic, and one that might have worked, had I not prepared for such a maneuver.”

The purple shell around Caelior had vanished, and the now-floating Ethereal spun around, one lower hand extended to the ground, another towards the helicopter now in his grasp, along with all the occupants. “You die here today, XCOM,” Caelior spat, as Jamali felt his bones begin cracking. Maria and Dael screamed in pain. “And you will die knowing you failed.”

Caelior closed his fist, and the helicopter crumbled like a cheap toy, and the people within it were just as doomed. Jamali didn’t have to think about how he died. Perhaps his skull caved in on itself; perhaps his spine broke; perhaps the pressure forced his body to explode. But all that he felt was a brief flash of intense pain, and before he even had time to form a final though, let alone scream, everything ended.

And the crumpled helicopter crashed into the water, then sank to the bottom, never to be recovered.

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Osaka, Japan

The battle had suddenly and unexpectedly shifted. Everything had been going along relatively well, and both XCOM teams had taken several more of the landed UFOs, but now there were…issues. Sierra first noticed that something was different when they suddenly came under attack by Floaters. Not just the cheap and poorly made floaters, these were…different.

They were the result of someone taking the concept, and putting as much armor as possible over them. Whatever visible flesh was on the alien, it was gone and replaced by metal. These Heavies carried full plasma rifles as well, not the carbines the smaller ones used, and they were being used to great effect.

“Down!” Sierra yelled, and yanked David to the ground, before directing her weapon back up and firing at the Heavy that was trying to flank them. One of several dozen which were assailing the ADVENT lines, of which they were a part of now. Six went down from combined ADVENT and XCOM fire, but several dozen were shot in quick succession as a response.

What was worse was that the Floaters completely negated Carmelita’s advantage, since they could
stay above her, and largely out of the more accurate range of her alloy cannon. But even the aliens
couldn’t keep that up forever, and with every Heavy they lost, that was one less. The unarmored
Floaters weren’t that bad. One swipe with her sustained beam cut them right in half.

She glanced up over the water as damaged Heavies flew inside the transports hovering over it.
They seemed to be acting as a hangar of sorts, and Sierra suspected that there were probably
Battlefield Engineers inside.

“Said! Fatima! Status?” Carmelita demanded as she managed to blow a Floater apart that had come
a bit too close.

“Hold,” Said grunted, and Sierra looked over to where he, Kiera and Antia were defending the
docks. “The Floaters are whittling down the ADVENT forces. I can’t protect them all.”

“Another problem!” Sierra interrupted, as she saw two dozen shining disks coming across the water
in the distance, accompanied by the familiar black drones. “Cyberdisks!”

“It’s not good over here,” Fatima breathed heavily, and Sierra saw from a quick glance over at the
bridge that there was a lot of ground being lost. The Ballista-class MEC was smoking, and the
missile racks were almost depleted. Kenta needed to restock or get out of there, especially as she
saw three Sectopods stomp out of the woods before the bridge.

“My telepathy isn’t working on them anymore,” Fatima explained. “They’re using those mind-
slaved Mutons, and the Andromedons have their suits overridden. Everything else is mechanical,
and-gah!”

“Shit!” Carmelita cursed as a massive floating white ball suddenly joined the Sectopods.
“Gatekeeper!”

Alright, maybe there wasn’t an idiot in charge after all. All of this was way too specific to be a
coincidence. “It was a trap,” she muttered to herself as her laser sheared through one Floater that
tried an audacious flank. “They wanted us to kill the useless Mutons.”

“Thank them later,” came the voice of Aarni. “Carmelita, I need some priority targets. I can keep
shooting whatever comes into my sights, but there are too many to choose from effectively.”

“Can you hit the cyberdisks?” Carmelita demanded, as the disks transformed into their firing
mode.

“Yes,” came the answer. “Understood.”

“New plan,” Carmelita continued, all of them continuing to fire as the Cyberdisks shot golden-
trailing rounds onto ADVENT positions. “Said, you and me will go reinforce the bridge. Sierra,
make sure everyone else holds here.”

“Got it!” Sierra confirmed as Carmelita began dashing away towards the fight on the bridge. A
Cyberdisk suddenly flared and its insides caught fire, then fell into the water with a splash. Sierra
took a few seconds to aim, then surgically fired at one of the small gaps in the cyberdisk, cutting
through it easily and it fell into the water after a few seconds of sustained fire later.

That immediately attracted the attention of the aliens in the area, and she slid completely behind
cover as plasma and golden rounds hit everywhere around her. A couple ADVENT soldiers jerked
back as their bodies were pierced by the rounds and they fell still as she quickly reloaded a fresh
cell into her rifle, and turned around to line up another shot.
To her dismay there were even more Heavy Floaters in the air, almost reminding her of a swarm of insects. They were shrugging off ADVENT gauss fire like water, or at the very least it wasn’t affecting them. And they had figured out how to use their superior speed and protection most effectively. The Heavy Floaters were dive-bombing ADVENT soldiers, slamming into them, grabbing the unlucky ones and dragging them up into the air, where they either dropped them into water, or slammed them into walls or the ground with bone-shattering force.

“We can’t keep all of them off!” David yelled as two Heavies flanked him and the soldiers around him. They fired, killing one soldier and wounding the other. Sierra swung her rifle around to shoot them, and quickly fired, hitting one directly in its metal head, doing enough damage to kill it instantly. The other one fired at an exposed David, and scored several direct hits in the leg.

David fell to the ground in a heap, though managed to raise his own rifle high enough to hit the Floater directly in the center chest, causing it to flare out of control and crash into a nearby building. Sierra rushed over to him, glancing down at the wounded leg which had dissolved most of the thigh armor, and the plasma residue was eating into the leg.

“Out of the way,” Antia interrupted, pulling out her med-kit. “Let me fix him up.”

“Thanks,” Sierra said as she returned to the quickly worsening situation. The Cyberdisks and Floaters were ripping the ADVENT forces apart, and the bridge battle wasn’t going well at all. The Gatekeeper was engaged with the front ADVENT soldiers, its shell open and tentacles extended, and consuming them in horrific fashion.

Said was clearly trying to establish some kind of defense, but against a horde of Sectopods, Mutons, and Andromedons, he couldn’t hold out forever. The Sectopod fire was relentless, and Sierra blinked as one massive blast slammed directly into Kenta’s MEC, and it blew apart with a fiery explosion. She swallowed. That was the MEC gone, and with it, one of the main reasons ADVENT had been able to hold the bridge.

“Two on the right!” Kiera shouted frantically, and Sierra barely had time to dodge out of the way before one of them tossed a small plasma grenade at Kiera’s feet, exploding and blowing the lower half of her apart before she could even move. The Floaters were quickly taken apart, but the damage was done, and they were another soldier down.

“Carmelita!” Sierra yelled furiously as she stepped back, trying to draw some fire on her. “We’re getting overrun here!”

“Well, it’s not any nicer over here!” was the hissed response, with the familiar sound of alloy cannon shots in the background. “Kenta is down, Fatima is hurt, and Said can’t defend the bridge on his own. Now I’ve got a Gatekeeper to deal with.”

Sierra ground her teeth together as she shot a few more Floaters down. “We need to retreat. All we’re going to do is die if we stay!”

“I agree,” Carmelita answered grimly. “They knew exactly how to counter us. We were played here. I’ve informed Colonel Chu of the recommended course of action.”

“Is he going to do it?” Sierra demanded.

“All ADVENT Forces are ordered to immediately retreat to the designated regrouping area,” Chu suddenly interrupted on the comms. “Blowing the bridge in five minutes.”

“Time to get off here,” Carmelita said. “Sierra, get David and Antia to the designated extraction
“Understood,” Sierra answered, waving to Antia who was standing over David, trying to protect him as best she could. “Come on! We’re getting out of here!”

She dashed over, providing brief bursts of covering fire as Antia hauled David to his one good leg, who also grunted in pain. “I’m just going to slow you down,” he grunted, in obvious pain still. “Just go!”

“Give him to me,” Sierra ordered, and she clumsily switched places with Antia, who took up the role of bodyguard and area suppressor. “We’re not leaving you behind.” She told David, and with a grunt slung him over her shoulder. Were she not genetically enhanced, she probably would have collapsed. As it was, he was extremely heavy and she was not going to be able to protect herself.

“Aarni, cover our retreat!” She ordered as they began moving up the street as fast as possible, plasma and Cyberdisk rounds raining around the street and buildings.

“Copy that,” Sierra didn’t see what he was actually doing, her gaze was directly in front of her, moving forward as fast as possible; one foot in front of the other, even as she tried some means of making tracking difficult by moving in a zig-zag pattern, although she was probably too slow for it to make any real difference.

“We’re almost there,” Antia encouraged, sounding almost out of breath herself as they kept going. Sierra was purely following her HUD at this point, although the sounds of the battle had faded the more they got away from it. She was trying not to think of how close she’d probably come to dying. That wouldn’t serve any purpose.

But she’d come close today. Very, very close.

She took a breath. The battle here was probably lost.

Hopefully the others were going better. Assuming that the rest of the attacks had been more or less straightforward.

But she had a feeling that wasn’t the case. Whoever had planned this knew what they were doing.

Probably wasn’t that idiot from the first time then. Sierra sincerely wished that aliens would actually make some mistakes every once in a while. Because when they were smart, they were terrifying and almost unstoppable.

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Nakashibetsu, Japan

The aliens were both doing what Duri expected, and not at the same time. He found it interesting that the reinforcements still hadn’t begun moving forward, and they seemed content to watch ADVENT utterly annihilate the remaining Muton forces, sending each and every last one to the grave. Some more Warthog barrages had targeted the transports some of the Mutons fled to, and that had resulted in several massive explosions as the Warthogs must have ruptured the elerium engines, destroying the craft completely.

That had prompted the aliens to send in several squads of alien fighters, and now there was a raging dogfight in the air, which essentially meant that they would not be getting any air support for a while. The destroyer had been constantly moving ever since that strange Andromedon craft plunged into the water, and as such wasn’t providing much assistance. At the speed it was going,
Duri would have guessed it was running for its life if he didn’t know better.

However, the lull on the ground was likely going to stop soon as the Corporal informed them of the latest development.

“We’ve got another UFO on approach-,” Corporal Williams suddenly informed the soldiers, with his voice halting unexpectedly at the end. “Purifier forces immediately move back. Confirmation of an Overseer-class UFO on approach. Possibility of Battlemaster engagement raised.”

Duri exchanged glances with his squad, expressions all hidden under the helmets, but any elation he’d felt had quickly faded at that. The Battlemaster. “Fuck.” Cara summed up for them eloquently, as she frantically reloaded her weapon. “And here I thought things were going well.”

“Rocketeers, ready weapons for launch,” Williams stated, as in the distance a small gray UFO appeared. Kang raised his weapon, as did all the Rocketeers in the area. Duri did not have high expectations that this would work, but there was always the chance. “Fire!” Williams ordered, and several dozen rockets sped towards the UFO.

Small red lasers shot out of small turrets which popped up the instant the missiles were launched, and quickly reduced the missile volley to dust and metal. “That went well,” Kang muttered as he switched back to his rifle.

“Looks like it’s landing,” Duri noted with some surprise, as he aimed his weapon at the entrance. “Weapons up!”

“Prepare for concentrated volley,” Williams ordered. “Fire the moment whatever’s inside steps out.”

“Copy,” Duri affirmed, and they waited.

And waited.

At five minutes, Cara was clearly starting to get restless. “He’s taking his sweet time,” she muttered. “Whoever this is doesn’t seem to care.”

“Or he’s being smart,” Johan pointed out. “Although that raises the question of why he’d come alone?”

The UFO was a fair distance down the beach, literally hovering a few inches above the water itself before the sand proper. It had landed in between two of the empty transports, and was grossly out of the range of the majority of their weapons. ADVENT was cautiously moving forward, and the MDU’s were marching forward slowly, accompanied by some Purifiers who stopped about a quarter of the way to the transport, which was still fairly far away, but at a range the Purifiers could reach.

“Purifiers, ignite the target,” Williams ordered, and the Purifiers kept walking forward, as if they hadn’t heard the command. “Hold your positions,” Williams repeated. “I repeat, hold your positions.”

The Purifiers spun around in perfect coordination and unleashed their flamethrowers on the completely exposed MDU’s. None of the machines stood a chance as they exploded and melted from the torrents of flame from the traitorous Purifiers. The chemical fire flared dangerously close to the ADVENT line, but for better or worse, the worst of it had been taken by the MDU’s and the Purifiers didn’t seem to want to continue firing, as they walked back towards the UFO, as slow and mechanical as metal zombies.
“Humans!” A deep bass voice rang out, as the alien inside the UFO finally stepped out, the area in front of him charred and broken glass, and the compromised Purifiers moved to form a pyramid of protection around him, although not close enough that if they exploded, they would harm him. Duri also noted that even if the alien was in range of a Purifier explosion, the chances of even a sniper hitting the tanks was extremely low.

Purifiers had been built specifically to withstand enemy fire like this.

The alien himself was not an Ethereal. Nor was it any other species Duri thought he had seen before.

The alien was massive, it stood nearly as tall as an MDU, with bulging muscles encased in segmented and seemingly ceremonial red armor. The fingers of its red gauntlets had tipped points, and the symbol in the center of his chest armor was clearly reminiscent of an Ethereal figure. If said Ethereal was a stick figure.

“What the hell is that?” Johan muttered.

It reminded Duri of a Muton, if that Muton was a little smaller, not quite as strong, and could talk. The face was that of a brute, ugly, with compressed features and a blockish head, not to mention scarred horrifically. The skin was a deep shade of purple, although the bald scalp was a mix of violet and purple from all of the scar tissue. The eyes were a deep purple, and seemed to burn with an unnatural purple fire.

Under his right arm he held a similarly ornate helmet, one reminiscent of the ones Mutons wore sometimes, which completely covered the face and only had slits for eyes. But this one had ornaments that were angular and jagged at the ears, and the back had some kind of hair or wig coming out of it.

Duri surmised that Johan had spoken for all of them.

Because he had no idea what this thing was.

Except that it was psionic.

“Humans!” The alien repeated, raising a pointed hand not holding the helmet at them. “You have stood in defiance of the Elders for far too long. You have insulted their generous nature, and your continued resistance is beyond merely insulting, it is heretical!”

The alien raised his hand to the sky. “The Elders wished to bestow great gifts upon your species, as they did to me! But like petulant children, you have squandered their goodwill, not even comprehending what you will lose in pursuit of your hollow victories! You are blind, arrogant, and weak!”

Duri wasn’t sure if he should be worried at how genuinely offended the alien sounded, or confused because he was literally monologuing in front of them. And the alien began to pace. “Snipers, set your sights on this thing,” Williams commanded, cold fury evident in his voice. “Let him keep wasting his breath.”

“…For even the generous Elders will not tolerate your rebellion any longer!” The alien continued ranting. “Their grace has been exhausted, for they have sent me! I am the Creator’s Greatest Champion™! Be honored, Humans! You stand in the presence of Senorium, Fist of the Creator and Warlock of the Elders!”

“Who the fuck is the Creator?” Cara muttered in disbelief.
“God?” Kang asked in equal confusion. “I mean, this guy seems to think the Ethereals are gods anyway. Who would have thought aliens have their religious fanatics as well.”

“Psionic religious fanatics who don’t shut up,” Duri added. “Look, he’s still going.”

“Fire,” Williams commanded, and all the Snipers in range shot their rifles in quick succession, discharges reaching his ears within milliseconds of each other. The alien actually reacted quickly, raising a hand and a small shield appeared in front of him, but Duri quite clearly saw one of the bullets hit the unprotected part of his throat, ripping it apart.

Purple blood spilled out, and the alien reached for it, looking more angry than in pain. “You wish a battle?” The Warlock gasped, straightening up as the wound closed before Duri’s eyes. He blinked. Impossible. He doubted even an enhanced XCOM soldier could survive a direct shot to the throat.

“You cannot kill me!” The Warlock roared, abandoning all pretense of civility as purple psionic flames encased him. “No mortal can hope to stand against me! You will die now!” All of ADVENT suddenly began firing at the Warlock as he surrounded himself in a psionic shield, while putting on his helmet.

He screamed some battle cry in a harsh, guttural language, and he raised a hand encased in psionic energy to the sky, as if lifting something, before pointing the other one at the ADVENT army. Then things immediately turned terrifying. Hundreds of purple figures appeared on the beach, materializing out of nowhere.

The moment they appeared they began running towards the ADVENT line which quickly turned to focusing on them. Duri didn’t know what these things could possibly be. They were humanoid figures, some clearly defined while others were little more than psionic mist in the shape of a humanoid. They held strange kinds of melee weapons in their hands, or maybe they were parts of their hands.

The soldiers were clearly afraid of what these things were, and firing frantically into the ghostly force charging towards them. Duri just fired and prayed that these things even could be killed. Luckily, at least some of them seemed to be vulnerable. The ones made out of little more than psionic mist dissipated after a couple shots, while the more defined and solid ones took a few volleys to completely be destroyed.

But Duri also noticed that they couldn’t be wounded or slowed down. Not in the conventional way. It was all or nothing. They were either destroyed or they were not. The only thing that indicated damage was that cracks appeared through the defined ghosts, and the immaterial ones became less visible.

The Warlock was laughing as he strode forward, a laugh torn between joy and pain. Psionic energy formed in his hands and he thrust them at a nearby ADVENT fortification. A maelstrom of destructive psionic energy materialized and tore the soldiers within it apart, as well as anything else caught in the storm.

The psionic ghosts that hadn’t been destroyed were now on the ADVENT line, and to Duri’s terror, they actually were more than just illusions. The ones of psionic wisps sliced and cut against the armor, and it had the same effect as if dangerous psionic energy was used on it. This resulted in the blades of psionic mist cutting and stabbing through armor easily.

The solid apparitions were thankfully much less dangerous. Their weapons were more blunt than sharp, and although they were harder to kill, they were not nearly as deadly as their glass cannon counterparts. Duri shot one of the immaterial ghosts, and it vanished, but there were two more solid
ones that were attempting to kill Cara.

One she blew apart with a volley, but the other sent her back with enough force to send her to the ground. Kang stepped up and killed that one, as well as another coming around the side. “They’re on me!” Johan shouted as three of the immaterial ghosts charged him; one he shot into nothing, and Duri managed to shoot the other, but none of them were fast enough to stop the last one from slicing down at him, then stabbing him in the neck with the psionic blade, which sizzled the skin it stabbed though, before it vanished as Duri killed it.

“We need to fall back!” Duri yelled as the seemingly endless wave of ghosts kept coming. The MDU’s were practically useless as their sensors likely didn’t recognize the immaterial forms, and thus couldn’t fire at them. Whoever was in charge of the MDU’s had ordered them back, but the machines were taking damage all the same, yet were unable to act on it.

The other ADVENT soldiers were still holding the lines, but the Warlock was continuously advancing, creating little psionic storms in secure fortifications, turning them into death traps. “All forces immediately retreat!” Corporal Williams ordered. “Retreat to interior defenses-“

He was suddenly cut off, and Duri didn’t waste time worrying about what that meant. “Come on!” He yelled to Cara and Kang, and they began backing up, firing at the apparitions continuously. Duri felt a pang of regret for having to leave Johan’s body behind but, there was no choice whatsoever. “Beatriz! Come in!”

“Y-yes?” She answered, her voice ragged and terrified. She sounded like she was going to hyperventilate. Fuck. He couldn’t have her break down now.

“Listen to me,” Duri commanded, putting some extra steel into his voice. “Keep calm. Stay where you are and do not move until we are at your position. How many of those ghosts are left?”

A pause. “I…I think a quarter of what they were. Maybe, I…”

Alright, that could be worked with. “Good,” he interrupted her. “Keep shooting them. Target the more immaterial ones. Those are more dangerous. Do you got that?”

“I…yes sir.”

“Good,” Duri nodded as he shot a few more psionic ghosts. “Stay calm. We’re on our way.”

And as they retreated deeper into the city, the insane laughing of the Warlock followed them as he pursued the soldiers, psionic energy rippling in his hands as he continued ripping them apart with his immense power. And behind him, the UFO Transports began moving.

This was somehow going to get worse.

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Tokyo, Japan

“All of Twin Team has gone silent,” Big Sky informed Patricia as she stood alone in the skyranger. “They’re presumed dead, killed by Caelior."

“Understood,” Patricia said softly, even as she first felt the Ethereal himself. She didn’t know how close they were, but she could sense his power was immense. Vindication and triumph were emanating off him in equal measure, and he clearly took great joy in exercising his powers. “Open the ramp,” he ordered, wanting to see the battleground before deciding what to do.
“Patricia, this is the Commander,” he suddenly interrupted. “You’re not going to be able to stop him now. ADVENT is in full retreat from the city and we can’t afford to lose you as well.”

“I know!” She scowled. “But I’m going to see for myself before deciding.”

“I’ll try to stay out of his range,” Big Sky promised. “But even still…”

“Do it,” Patricia repeated, as she reached out to probe Caelior’s mental defenses. All background noise faded to silence as she tapped into the psionic power within her, and reached out to the alien below her.

She met the equivalent of a brick wall. It was a shell that completely blocked any access to his mind beyond the basic sensing of emotions. Not good. A quick survey didn’t reveal any significant weaknesses, and even if she were to press, he might be able to pinpoint exactly where she was, and that would only get her killed.

She needed support. Multiple telepaths minimum, people who could augment her strength or overwhelm Caelior’s mind. The technique had worked with the Ravaged One, it would probably work here, if she actually had anyone to help her.

The ramp opened up and she got a look at the destruction Caelior had already wreaked upon the city. It had started in the canal before Tokyo Bay, and it had only continued. Buildings and businesses had been turned to shattered rubble, leaving hundreds of gaps amidst the city, and the collapses had also destroyed other buildings beside them.

There were thousands of dead ADVENT soldiers, MDU’s, and aircraft littering the water and land. Every single one was mutilated in some way, from irregularly shaped limbs to complete pulverization of the bodies. Many would never be identified. Dozens of small fires were raging, dotting it in orange, likely from exploded Purifiers, and the fires would cause more damage before burning themselves out.

And she saw the floating US carrier, suspended high in the air, just as the Ethereal below it threw the raised hand forward, and the behemoth of steel was thrown forward, flying through the air almost in slow-motion as it careened towards the center of the city. It was almost elegantly thrown, up until it crashed into the first buildings.

The sound was deafening as skyscrapers were shattered and toppled as the carrier cut through the bases of the buildings like butter; each destroyed building raising clouds of smoke as it fell. The carrier cut through a good portion of the city before coming to a stop; complete destruction in its wake.

The Ethereal himself was suspended in the air, likely under his own power, observing his handiwork, before he continued drifting forward, telekinetic powers employed as he destroyed what ADVENT forces were left, and turning the buildings still standing into rubble.

“Head back,” Patricia said quietly. “We can’t do anything more here.”

“Yes, Psion Trask,” Big Sky answered just as somberly. “Leaving the area now.”

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Nakashibetsu, Japan

“We’re getting surrounded,” Beatriz updated worriedly as Duri, Cara, and Kang continued retreating through the streets. More ADVENT soldiers were taking up positions behind the
barricades in the streets, and the turrets were primed and ready, as were the MDU’s left. It looked like the Purifiers were being moved to certain choke points.

Beatriz’s update was not exactly welcome. “How?” Cara demanded as she leapt over a barricade and positioned herself in a firing stance.

“They’ve landed UFO transports on the beach and east and west sides,” she explained. “Largely Mutons and Andromedons from each of them. I think there are a few Vitakara teams as well.”

“Set up here,” Duri instructed his team, as they joined several other squads at the barricade. “Beatriz, what’s coming up to us?” He glanced up at the roof she was positioned up on, along with a couple other snipers.

“Uh…” she audibly swallowed. “Andromedons.”

“Wonderful,” Cara grunted. “As long as that Warlock doesn’t show up with them, we should be fine.”

“Majority of ADVENT forces are in fortified positions,” Williams stated over the radio. “Purifier forces perform immediate area denial and retreat to safe position.”

The Purifier on their street immediately stepped forward, raised his flamethrower, and shot a torrent of white-orange flame which set the entire street alight, as well as the buildings on the ends. Duri didn’t feel comfortable being this close to the chemical, but it would force the Andromedons to find some other path.

Though it didn’t deter them for long.

“Andromedon!” One of the soldiers yelled, and immediately plasma lances came down on their position as the Andromedons began firing, not from the street, but from the buildings around it. Their angles of attack weren’t exceptional, but they had a line of sight to the ADVENT line. They were also constrained by how many could fire at a time.

And it trapped them. “Kang! Collapse it!” Duri ordered, and Kang immediately pulled out his rocket launcher again, and loaded in his final rocket.

“Marking now, syncing…” Duri continued, switching to his green laser sight, which pointed at one of the buildings containing an Andromedon force. The green beam turned red. “Locked!” He yelled.

Kang fired the rocket, which hit one of the Andromedons directly in its green-yellow helmet and blew apart the entire wall, and within a few seconds later, caused the building to collapse into the street. The rubble caught fire the moment it touched the burning street, and began spreading onto the nearby buildings.

“Nice shot!” Cara called, doing her best to lay down a suppressive barrage on another building holding Andromedon soldiers. “I think-” She was interrupted by a surprised gurgle as a soldier next to her fell over, a small hole in his forehead.

“Sniper!” Duri called, and all of them reflexively fell into cover. “Beatriz!”

“I can’t get a clear look!” She yelled back. “Might be two or more. Vitakara probably.”

Another lightning plasma bolt hit an Officer without warning, and the Andromedons were moving further up the buildings. “Got a shot,” Beatriz updated. “Firing.”
A few seconds. “One down.”

Duri let out a small sigh. Alright, this was still bad, but Beatriz and the Snipers could hopefully deal with the Vitakara. The larger problem were the Andromedons moving ever-closer. “Acid!” Kang shouted in warning as a half-dozen Andromedons stepped outside their protective buildings, raised their fists and shot out small green pellets at the ADVENT line and turrets.

Duri immediately fell behind protective cover, as small puddles of sizzling green acid landed around him. Soldiers yelled as they were hit and it began eating into them, and some landed on MDU’s and turret barrels, warping the metal and preventing it from working properly.

Some of the MDU’s, deprived of weapons, charged the Andromedons who’d shot the acid. Unlike the Mutons which Duri knew would try and fight back, hand-to-hand, the Andromedons simply raised their wrists and sprayed the MDU’s with acid which ate through the metal and destroyed the integrity of the limbs well before they were destroyed by the acid destroying vital systems.

The good news was that the Andromedons had exposed themselves to the surviving MDU’s and turrets, and those surgically destroyed their suits. An MDU blew apart the tubes on one of the Andromedons; the acid tanks on their backs were destroyed by some turrets, and with ADVENT now somewhat recovered, their combined fire was enough to completely kill the Andromedons, including before they could utilize their AI that activated after death.

Duri quickly looked around. They only had maybe fifteen soldiers left, and there weren’t any reinforcements coming that he could see. Whereas he couldn’t tell just how many Andromedons were left; there could be dozens or only a few. Given the rate of fire still being used on them, he figured they had plenty of soldiers left.

He quickly glanced upwards, and there were UFO fighters still streaking over, engaged in dogfights with some of the Ravens. No chance of any kind of air support then, as that was still tied up, they were too far for the Destroyer to help, provided it was even in any position to do anything. “Corporal,” he said on the channel. “We’re getting overwhelmed with Andromedons here. Requesting reinforcements.”

“I don’t have any to spare,” was the tight answer. “Every front is under attack.”

“Then we need to retreat out of the city,” Duri insisted, as he fired a few times at an exposed Andromedon. “We cannot hold this position without support!”

A pause on the end. “Orders will be coming shortly. Hold the line until then. Williams out.”

Duri actually hoped that shortly wasn’t code for death sentence, but the Corporal knew that they couldn’t win this now, especially if things were as bad as had been suggested. If there really were no reinforcements, then this attack was much bigger than he’d thought. “Stand by for orders!” He yelled, speaking to the remaining forces, since many of the Officers had died. “Hold the line!”

A plasma lance slammed into another soldier who collapsed to the ground. And now the Andromedons judged it was the time to strike, and they came pouring out, determined to simply tank the remaining damage ADVENT could put out. Duri had a choice now: Try and hold the line or retreat.

It wasn’t a hard one. “Fall back!” He ordered, waving a hand backwards. The soldiers immediately retreated dashing back a few steps, falling into whatever cover was around, and firing a few shots, while the Gunners performed a sustained fallback, firing as they went. “Ah!” Kang gasped as a plasma lance hit his leg, forcing him to the ground.
Cara stopped and began moving towards him, before he waved her off. “Go now!” She didn’t have much of a choice as the Andromedons quickly reached where he was, one lowered a gauntlet and sprayed his quivering body with acid, eliciting some loud and chilling screams before he died.

“Beatriz!” Duri called. “Get down here now!”

“I’m here,” she responded, dashing out of the building she’d been in, and firing with her drawn pistol. “We need to-“

“Yes! I know!” Duri yelled back, trying to prevent her from breaking down completely. Even through her armor he could tell her body was shaking horribly, turning her shots into wild misses. Her entire balance was off, and he wondered if she would be able to fully run without stumbling over herself.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her behind a crate. “Beatriz! Listen!” He yelled at her over the shooting. “Look at me! You understand?” A quick nod. “Take a breath and stay by me! We’re going to get out of this, do you understand?!”

Another nod. “Alright, let’s go!” He ordered, and they stood and continued to fall back, now with some distance put between themselves and the Andromedons. With no more Sniper support, the Vitakara snipers had returned to shooting the soldiers, killing several more with their plasma bolts.

“ADVENT forces are immediately ordered to begin retreating out of the city,” Williams finally updated. “Purifier forces are standing by for final area denial.”

Damn it, he was leaving another soldier behind. Two down. He couldn’t lose any more today. His HUD had the coordinates and pathing, so he directed the surviving soldiers that way. “Behind me and reload!” He ordered Cara, whose clip was running out. “Now-“

Another plasma bolt slammed past him and directly into Beatriz chest. She collapsed with a gasp, but the first thing Duri noticed when he knelt to check her was that she was still breathing. Barely. But she was breathing. The sniper had directly hit the hardest part of the armor, and it had absorbed the worst of it.

Not all of it, and he knew she would die if she didn’t get medical attention soon. Plasma wounds were like acid, but slower. By the time it fizzled out it might burn through her chest. He tossed aside his rifle and picked her up in both his arms. Throwing her over his shoulder would probably only make the wound worse, not to mention be extremely painful for her.

All he could do was pray they were out of the range of the snipers.

“Cara! Cover me!” He yelled as he dashed past her.

“On it!” She confirmed, still spraying gauss rounds down the street. Duri didn’t know how long they had been moving, running, and shooting, but the end was in sight. There were transports and Purifiers at a small city square, waiting for them.

There were only six of them left, as the MDU’s had long since been destroyed, and one of the six was injured. Upon seeing them running up, one of the Officers gestured and an ADVENT Medic came running up to him. “Direct plasma shot to chest,” he urgently told the Medic. “Armor seems to have taken the worst, but-“

“I’ve got it,” he assured Duri, waving for a few soldiers to come with a stretcher. “She’ll live. Don’t worry.”
Duri turned around and saw the two Purifiers begin their final area denial. They didn’t stop at just the streets this time. Every nearby building that didn’t immediately pose a threat to them was doused in the terrifying chemical. As the entire street burned, Duri felt that was a good metaphor for how this entire attack had gone.

Up in flames.

Everything they’d accomplished here was ultimately for nothing.

And he didn’t know what they would be able to do to make sure it didn’t happen again.

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Supplementary Material

The Advent Directive

Section 8: ADVENT Military

Subsection 8.6: ADVENT Army (Abridged)

Overview: The ADVENT Army is the primary ground force of the ADVENT military, and is responsible for all ground combat waged. The structure and funding of the ADVENT Army is to be larger than other military divisions because of the increased areas of control and because the majority of armed forces are ground-based.

Structure:

- **General**: The general of the ADVENT Army oversees the major operations and deployments of the Army, and coordinates heavily with the other ADVENT Military.
- **Chief Marshal**: The Chief Marshal is the designated officer over ADVENT Army Legions, which are largely provided to member nations, although there are some held in reserve to deploy in cases of emergency. Coordinates often with the General of the ADVENT Army.
- **Marshal**: Marshals oversee Garrisons of ADVENT Legions, and are largely used to protect major cities within member or enemy nations. As they command Garrisons, they are more mobile than standard Legions, as are thus able to more accurately distribute their forces. Marshals report directly to the Chief Marshal.
- **Colonel**: Colonels oversee Companies of ADVENT Garrisons, and are largely used for specific and precise geological positioning, and are able to be one of the most mobile forces of the army. They are best suited in conjunction with other Companies or higher, or defending smaller towns. Colonels report directly to Marshals.
- **Corporal**: Corporals have direct authority over the management or positioning of Squads of soldiers which are composed of Units, many of which can be unique and specialize in multiple areas. Corporals are essential in reducing the workload of command, and are likely to be most involved in battlefield command. Corporals report directly to Colonels.
- **Officer**: Officers oversee four-man squads of ADVENT soldiers and are the primary battlefield commanders in the heat of combat. These are essential for maintaining battlefield discipline. Officers report directly to Corporals.
- **Specialty Units**: These are units that do not fall directly under a specific hierarchy of command, but generally answer at minimum to Corporals:
  - **Purifier**: Flame units that specialize in area denial and annihilation tactics.
  - **Medic**: Primary medical professionals specializing in battlefield medicine. Are armed with gauss rifles and pistols.
Engineer: Battlefield engineers that specialize in adapting equipment found on the
battlefield into usable equipment, as well as maintaining robotic and vehicular units in
and out of combat.
Soldier: ADVENT soldiers have several different specializations:
Gunner: Are heavy-fire units which should be utilized for suppression and area
denial. Their primary weapon is a gauss autorifle.
Infantry: The standard soldier of the ADVENT Army, who uses gauss rifles and
pistols.
Sniper: Long-range specialists that are utilized for single-target removal and surgical
sabotage. Armed with a sniper rifle and pistol.
Rocketeer: Heavy weapon and explosive specialists armed with a gauss rifle and
rocket launcher.


Annexation: Canada

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

It was quiet.
Too quiet.

Patricia didn’t recognize where she was. She appeared to be in some circular hallway, with the windows outside showing red sand. Dust blew in gusts, and that was enough for her to become lucid enough to realize that she was dreaming. Immediately, she extended her psionic senses and…

She froze.

The Imperator.

It was unmistakable. There was no other Ethereal that had the same sheer aura of power, even within this mental construct. Caelior, and even Aegis were shadows compared to him, and he knew she was aware, and that she was afraid. She knew that he would likely be able to take over her mind, and there might not be much she could do.

But he seemed content to just let her come to him. She could sense where he was easily enough, and even though she didn’t know the layout of this place, it probably wouldn’t take her long. So she started walking, realizing she was in her armor, minus the helmet and autorifle. She pursed her lips, concentrated, and willed the familiar weapon into her hands.

For whatever good it would do.

She kept walking through the empty station, wondering where she actually was. The detail was too rich to merely be a construct. There were always signs of a purely mental creation, which meant that the Imperator was…well, even more powerful than she anticipated, or that this was drawn from a memory of this place.

She kept looking out the windows, and was fairly sure she wasn’t on Earth. Mars? Mercury? Her astrology really wasn’t the best, but she was pretty sure there weren’t any buildings on those planets, and at least some of them were completely uninhabitable. Then again, Mars was where they were pretty certain the main alien command was, so it would make sense that they had built some stations on the planet itself.

Patricia reached a door, with a green holographic circular lock in the center, which dissipated as she approached, and slid into the walls silently, and she continued. As she kept going, the walls becoming more exposed and revealed their internal workings, she became aware of a low hum in the back of her head. It reminded her of the UFOs, but this wasn’t nearly as pervasive. It was more like a machine running; not something that was jammed into your skull.

A few more winding hallways, and she suddenly found herself in what seemed to be some kind of…control center? There were computer stations that had no noticeable similarities to Human tech…or…she frowned. It even seemed different to Ethereal tech. There weren’t any kind of screens or interfaces, but they were definitely meant to be interacted with.
In the center was what they were all connected to. In the center was some kind of rectangular
device, green lit lines running along it, shielded by a similarly colored stasis field. It was utterly
unlike anything she’d seen, and still seemed to be…online. Assuming that it actually worked like
that, and wasn’t just a shiny monument.

“A repository,” the rumbling voice of the Imperator stated out of nowhere, stepping beside her.
“We were not the first to find your species.”

Patricia looked over, and saw that he’d assumed the form of…Patricia frowned. The name didn’t
come to the front of her mind right away, but she had seen him before. Ah, right. He was that old
guy that always accompanied Saudia. Why the Imperator was assuming his form of all things was
interesting, but at least it wasn’t her father again.

“Where are we?” She asked finally.

“Mars,” he answered. “Specifically, the ruins on the planet. The Collective Observation station is
in orbit, but there have been a few teams sent down here. A fascinating place it is, despite what
happened.”

Patricia sighed. “And I’m sure you’ll enlighten me?”

The Imperator stepped forward, a smile on his face as he looked at the strange artifact before them.
“Honestly, I can only speculate. All that is certain is that at one point, they were here, and then
seemingly vanished. The technology is even different from our own, and this is not the first time
we have encountered it.”

Patricia raised an eyebrow. “How perceptive. I could have guessed that.”

“You are missing the point, psion,” the Imperator chided. “Does that not remind you of
something? Or has Aegis been remiss in teaching you our history? The very reason we still
exist?”

Ah, she got it now. “You really think this alien species was killed by the Synthesized?”

“Or something equally as dangerous,” the Imperator nodded approvingly. “There are only two
forces that could simply wipe out a powerful galactic civilization, and time does not seem to be
something that hinders them. Perhaps it is the Synthesized, perhaps not. The point is that it is
unlikely that they have suffered the same fate. One day they will return.”

Patricia wondered at that. “But you don’t know.”

The Imperator smiled, an expression that looked alien on his Human avatar. “No. Not for sure. But
there is little point assuming without proof.”

Patricia crossed her arms. “Is there a point to this? Are you going to do something to me, or just
give me a history lesson?”

“Do you really think I care about your species fighting back?” The Imperator asked. “It does not
matter what happens. You only have one planet. Do you really think that I have not dealt with
upstart species before? You pose no threat to me, psion, and you still seem to believe you have a
chance against us. Every advancement you think will be the key to your victory will ultimately
mean nothing. The use of dangerous chemicals, nuclear weapons; tricks of technology, those will
only prolong the war, and not end it in your favor.”

He took a few steps towards her. “You think of us as arrogant, but I find it amusing to think that of
all species, yours will single-handedly topple a galactic collective composed of billions of soldiers
and spacecraft. Perspective is needed, psion. At the moment your greatest enemy is us, but who will it be next should you miraculously manage to win?”

Patricia shrugged. “Aegis has mentioned other alien species in the inner galaxy. Depending on how hostile they are-”

“Incorrect,” The Imperator stated flatly. “They are all puppets, controlled by those who are far more powerful and manipulative than they could ever hope to be. I am surprised your own species was ignored before we found you, though since we were directed here, I do wonder just what their plan was…” he trailed off contemplatively. “Win or lose, psion Trask, you will need to recognize who the true threats are, and they are not mere alien species, but beings much older and dangerous. Ones powerful enough to bring our Empire to the ground, or wage proxy wars using entire species over countless cycles. In the grand scheme of things, we are, to provide a Human analogy, a sand castle against a raging flood. But I believe that can be changed.”


“One of them, for certain,” the Imperator nodded. “But they may be gone. There are ones who are tangible and real to beware of. There is a reason we have avoided the puppet species so far.”

Patricia furrowed her eyebrows. “That isn’t an answer.”

“I will tell you,” the Imperator smiled again. “One day. But all I desire now is for you to think. Understand what you are really fighting for, and fighting against. Aegis does not accept certain realities, but I do not believe you will ignore the evidence once you make the connection. Fight well, Patricia. We will speak again.”

He inclined his head, and Patricia woke up.

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The Praesidium, Patricia’s Quarters

She woke up with a short gasp.

A quick glance at the clock told her that she had been sleeping at least five hours, but she was strangely alert with no drowsiness whatsoever. Creed was right beside her, still breathing softly and one arm wrapped over her. She took a breath and took the opportunity to snuggle into him, even though she knew she wasn’t going to be getting any more sleep tonight.

One perk of being the Overseer of Psionic Operations was that she got her own room. Not too large, but it was enough for a two-person bed, a couple nightstands, and an armor rack and small armory. And it was all to herself, and anyone she wanted to share it with of course.

Mostly the man she was sleeping beside.

An argument could be made that her life had gone horribly wrong (as had every other Human’s on the planet), but this was one area of her life that certainly hadn’t. She’d quite honestly thought that any sort of relationship she’d develop would be after her military service, outside of the couple flings with those guys she’d found enjoyable, although that had quickly grown problematic as well. A lesson she’d learned was that relationships based solely on sex never really worked out. So eventually she just decided to focus on what she was good at.

It was a shame they really didn’t get any kind of vacation or shore leave, she figured her parents would like him. He really was the kind of guy her father would want her to marry, and while she
was not expecting that to be brought up for a long time, it was a possibility she could see happening. One day. But she wasn’t convinced it needed to happen for a while yet. It really wouldn’t do much aside from making it official, and there were quite a few more pressing matters at the moment.

Like her conversation with the Imperator.

She grew grim at that, and pushed herself tighter against Creed, as if that would do anything. It didn’t, but it was a comforting feeling. The Commander and Aegis were going to wonder what he was talking about, and that he still didn’t seem interested in…really doing anything. He’d shown up, talked with her, and left.

It was maddening. In a strange way, he reminded her of Quisilia, doing things that made no sense. Why would he tell her this, then just leave? A warning? His own strange way of expressing respect? Just part of his game? Maybe Aegis could answer it, but she wasn’t so sure. That, and there was definitely something on Mars…assuming the entire dream wasn’t an illusion.

That, however, was probably something Aegis could confirm. If they really had encountered that strange technology before, he’d likely be aware of it. If that was the case, then she did have to wonder at the power of something that could wipe out not just one, but multiple galactic civilizations.

That was when she also realized that she’d forgotten to ask the Imperator another rather important question. He’d said there were two capable of such a fear. If the Synthesized were one…

Then what the hell was the other?

And apparently, this was the larger threat, at least to the Imperator. Had Aegis forgotten to mention the other galactic threat or did he not know either? The Imperator seemed very keen on keeping secrets from those he didn’t trust, which then begged the question of why he was telling her this. Not to mention the strange warning about ‘knowing who the real threats are’.

Could that be, in a twisted form of a contingency, his way of warning them that even if they won, they would be forced to fight the same enemy in the future?

She frowned in the darkness. There were too many missing pieces. Too much was unknown. There was a lot more going on beyond Earth that they had no comprehension of; that Aegis might not know. The Imperator had said he didn’t care, and she believed him; she’d sensed no dishonesty when he’d spoken, although given his power, he was probably one of the few who would be able to lie to her and succeed.

But if he was being truthful, then that was troubling. If an entire species fighting against his Collective, developing psionics, and overall fighting better than they should have, not to mention one of the more powerful Ethereals defecting to their cause…if that wasn’t something he cared about, then what was?

Maybe she was making it too complicated. It was entirely possible that the Imperator just didn’t respect the threat they posed. He was too focused on the bigger picture; he was used to the scale of galaxies and planet clusters, not cities and continents. Such concerns were likely beneath him, and so he assigned his underlings to handle the rest.

Was their scope too narrow? Were they focusing too much on Earth right now and assigning importance to it that wasn’t deserved? At some point, assuming they were still alive…they would need to expand off Earth. There was the Vitakara, the Sectoids, the Andromedon Federation, and
the Mutons, all of whom held hundreds of planets, and outnumbered them by a ludicrous amount.

In some way, she had to admit the Imperator was right. Was it really not arrogant to believe that they, who hadn’t even mastered spacecraft yet, could manage to bring down a Collective whose sheer size dwarfed their miniscule one planet? True, they had psions, an Ethereal, soldiers, and Nartha who was doing whatever he could to disrupt things in the Collective, but even still…the odds were not in their favor.

They had a few trump cards left. Japan wasn’t the end, no one really believed that. But it was going to force them to make decisions on where to use them. Eventually, they wouldn’t have any left, and at this stage of the war, could they really afford to use them up too quickly?

She didn’t know. That wasn’t her call.

But the aliens were going to adapt, and at some point, they would decide to finish it, and unless a miracle happened, they wouldn’t be able to solve it.

With those cheery thoughts swirling through her mind, she stared blankly into the darkness, waiting and hoping she might fall back asleep, even if she wasn’t sure she’d really rest.

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The Praesidium, Situation Room

Considering that they were juggling several crises at once, the Commander was not especially amused to hear that Patricia had been telepathically contacted by the Imperator.

Again.

He wasn’t sure if he should feel insulted or concerned that this marked the second time the Imperator had contacted her. Considering he was the Commander of XCOM, he would have expected himself or someone high in ADVENT like Saudia might be a target of the Imperator’s power. That he’d spoken to Patricia twice meant he’d specifically developed an interest in her.

Well, maybe Ethereals just had their favorites. Aegis had done much the same to him, but he figured it was more due to his position than anything else. Still, that begged the question of why the Imperator was contacting Patricia. From what it sounded like, he’d basically just talked to her (again) and made some vague points (again), and then left, even wishing that she fight well.

And in the process brought up a lot of…interesting…information. What the hell was it with Ethereals and just dropping crucial details like it was nothing? First Aegis, then Quisilia, and now the Imperator. It was like they were trying to make it easy for them sometimes.

That being said, this was not the right time for this kind of information. The Japan situation needed to be dealt with, and the Commander knew that the Canadian annexation was going to be executed soon. This was in addition to some reworks in XCOM strategy and helping prepare the Korean defense.

The good news was that this was hopefully going to prompt Aegis to actually act. Caelior was a clear escalation, and they needed to respond in kind. In the meantime, he was instead going to get grilled on some things he'd forgotten to mention. “This alien technology Patricia described,” Vahlen said, eyeing Aegis suspiciously. “What do you know about it?”

If Aegis felt anything regarding the borderline interrogation, he didn’t show it in his tone, body language, or emotions. “Very little,” he answered, apparently honestly. “Our interest is not in
archeology or ancient technology. The ruins and scraps we have recovered have not been examined in-depth, since Revelean and Fectorian determined that they were no more superior than our own. They mostly serve as a reminder to us; a symbol of the threat the Synthesized pose, and that it is more than our species that is at stake.”

Patricia rubbed her forehead, sighing. “And you never bothered to try and learn more about it?”

Aegis turned his helmet towards her. “What would the point be, Psion Trask, outside of academia? Time is precious, and while a curious development, the ultimate purpose it serves is likely limited.”

The Commander was grateful to see that none of them were particularly satisfied with that explanation. “Likely limited?” Shen noted, disapproval clear in his voice. “Then you don’t know for sure.”

A pause. “No, I do not know for sure,” Aegis admitted. “But I can only assume that if it had some value, either the Imperator or Sovereign Ones would have had us investigate.”

“Well, that gives us a goal then,” the Commander said. “If the Collective isn’t interested in this other technology, maybe we can find something from it. I guess then you wouldn’t know why there was one on Mars to begin with?”

Aegis shook his head.

“The Imperator mentioned the device was a repository,” Patricia recalled. “So he has some knowledge. Why he told me that, I don’t know.”

“Question of the hour,” the Commander muttered, leaning on the holotable. “I’m curious as to what his ultimate point was. Was it to say to us that ‘there are more important threats than me’?”

“Possibly,” Aegis said slowly. “Regardless of who wins this conflict, the Synthesized will likely return one day, and they will have to be fought. That will be us, or the Collective. The Imperator, for all his faults, is keenly aware of the threat, though not to the extent I had hoped he would be.”

“That’s a problem to deal with when we win,” the Commander shook his head. “The Synthesized, or any other galactic threat, do not have any bearing on the situation now. As of this point, the Collective poses the largest threat, and they need to be removed. Then we can talk about the Synthesized.”

“And these inner galactic species,” Jackson spoke up for the first time. “That the Imperator called them ‘puppets’ is not a good sign.” They all looked to Aegis.

“I am only aware they exist,” Aegis said, shaking his helmet again. “The Imperator made a very clear point that we were not to go anywhere near them until we were prepared. Based on his words, I wonder what exactly he learned, as he no doubt sent at least Sicarius and Quisilia to the inner galaxy. I know of no species outside us who could turn an entire species into ‘puppets’.”

There was a short uncomfortable pause.

The Commander furrowed his eyebrows. “Is it possible that there are other surviving Ethereals?”

“No,” Aegis stated flatly. “If that were the case, it would have not been hidden, even if the Imperator decided they were hostile. I can say for certain that these aliens are not Ethereals.”

“Or there is just as good a chance the Imperator is lying,” Zhang pointed out neutrally. “Whatever
he said, he is not simply talking to you because he is bored. This was done purely to get into your head, Patricia, and by extension, all of ours.” He stepped forward. “It does not matter what is beyond the Collective. It does not matter if these alien ruins are explored or not. The Synthesized are not a threat right now.” He nodded towards Aegis. “They are the only ones we should concern ourselves with. The Ethereals are our enemy. Once they are dead, then we can focus on whatever else this galaxy holds.”

The Commander nodded his approval. “Well said. Interesting as this is, it is not relevant. We have actual problems to deal with; namely what we’re going to do about Japan, not to mention Canada.”

There were nods all around the room, although Patricia didn’t look quite so satisfied. The Commander knew that the conversation was going to stick with her for some time, and he couldn’t really blame her. But they needed to move on, and information from a questionable source wasn’t worth dwelling on.

Still, he felt like Aegis knew more than he was letting on. That, however, was a conversation for another time. Preferably when there weren’t several other issues that demanded their attention.

“Concerning the new information that the Andromedons have a dedicated aquatic team, I think that we need to develop some kind of response…”

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*Lancer Operational Command, United States of America*

In Saudia’s view, the situation could be worse.

Conversely, the situation could always be worse.

She realized she was staring at the small holotable for no specific reason, distracted by the recent events. Japan was, predictably, not going over well. The media knew for sure they were pulling out of Japan, and predictably, they were using that to indirectly imply that ADVENT was slowly falling apart, as well as questioning her leadership.

There was no mistake about it, they’d lost. Badly. While the decision to pull out completely perhaps sent the wrong message, it was the smartest move. Everyone of any import agreed, and it was by far the easiest decision she’d had to make throughout this. But they’d been outmaneuvered, outplayed, and outsmarted here. Like ADVENT, the aliens had learned from their mistakes.

She pursed her lips. The Ethereal, Caelior, he was by far the biggest problem. Saudia had been skeptical that the Battlemaster could be topped in terms of threat level, but that was before the alien had thrown a US carrier into Tokyo. Still no one knew if the nuclear reactors on the carrier had gone into meltdown or not, and she doubted that the aliens were going to care much one way or the other.

Laura’s autopsy of why they lost was a step in the right direction, and if nothing else, the woman was good at adapting quickly. But it would take time to actually implement, and implement well. Right now they had no idea where the aliens would strike next. America, Russia, and Korea were all valid targets, even China, though that was optimistic.

What complicated matters further was trying to reassure people that the situation was handled, when that was questionable at best. None of them had really gotten any sleep the past few days, and there was the upcoming annexation to deal with.

In short, the situation was not good, but manageable.
She could work with that.

“What are the reports from Japan?” Weekes asked Laura as they finally gathered around the holotable. “If we want to begin harassment operations, we shouldn’t delay.”

“Same as before,” Laura answered, shaking her head. “They seem to be establishing bases, and spreading pretty rapidly. We’re not sure if they’re getting ready to attack again soon or not. We’re preparing for the worst.”

“Regardless of what they’re planning, we need to be proactive,” Elizabeth interjected as she paced. “But Japan is a dead end, I think. They will be expecting strikes there. Perhaps now we should being focusing on Australia, wound them where they don’t expect it.”

“Or we do both,” Saudia said tiredly. “I’m certain XCOM would be willing to help. But I believe Japan would be a greater priority. Whatever happens next, it’s almost certain they’ll be launching an attack from there. We need to know what they’re doing and how.”

Laura leaned back into a wall, her shoulders slumping. “We need to do something soon. I’m about ready to shoot every TV screen that I see if I hear one more idiot commentator wondering ‘what this means for the future of ADVENT’. Maybe I should do an interview, maybe it would calm them down.”

Stein sniffed, her tone flat. “No. The Commander of the ADVENT Military has more important things to do than waste time with those packs of vultures. If you must send someone to placate them, I’m willing to speak to them.”

“No offense, but I don’t think scaring the hell out of them is a valid response,” Weekes interrupted. “Besides, you’re with the Peacekeepers, not military, sorry. I’m sure we could find some means of placation.”

“The Prime Minister?” Elizabeth suggested. “Perhaps the Emperor or one of the Royal Family? They would appear more trustworthy than us to them.”

Saudia nodded in approval. “The Prime Minister understands the situation fairly well. I believe he would be best, and it would especially be reassuring to the Japanese refugees to hear it from their leader.”

“We have another problem we’re going to have to deal with soon,” Weekes interjected. “South Korea needs to be evacuated immediately. At best we hold the aliens at the coast, but I don’t think one major military installation will be enough to hold them back.”

Laura nodded. “Seoul is where the real fight will be. Weekes is right. They need to be evacuated elsewhere.”

All of them knew the obvious answer to that. “North Korea,” Elizabeth finally said. “Everything comes back full circle. Gwan is going to be thrilled. Not to mention the South Koreans moving north.”

Laura tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Be that as it may…this could actually be a positive development. If there is anything that will bring the two nations together, them both helping each other will at least help relations. The symbolism of North Korean and South Korean soldiers fighting beside each other is a powerful image.”

“One we should exploit,” Elizabeth nodded.
Laura shot her a distasteful look. “Not everything has to be propaganda, Director.”

“No,” Elizabeth agreed. “But I’ll never turn down the opportunity when it arises.”

“I’ll begin organizing that immediately,” Saudia nodded, mentally adding another task to the massive list in her head. “The sooner that’s started, the better. Has China made any official response?”

“Not publically,” Laura denied. “But we received some official documents from them that revealed they were planning to move their soldiers to reinforce the most vulnerable cities. I suppose that is their way of saying they’re preparing for an attack as well. Nothing more than that though.”

“A shame,” Saudia said, looking down at the holomap. “At some point they have to come to the table. They can’t fight this war on their own and they know it.”

“I suspect once China is attacked, their tune will change,” Weekes shrugged. “Honestly, they are not something we should be concerned about right now. They stay out of our way, we stay out of theirs. We need to get the PRIEST Program up and running stat.”

“Don’t worry,” Laura soothed, her tone artificially controlled. “Initial recruitment is already underway. Everything related to this has been accelerated.”

“Speaking of which,” Elizabeth interjected. “XCOM just forwarded something…interesting. Several interesting things in fact.” She began tapping her tablet, biting her lower lip in concentration. “They sent schematics for some kind of psionic training device, a kind of focus tool of sorts, at least from the description. And an…interesting…amount of information on Caelior.”

“When you say interesting…?” Stein prompted.

“I mean interesting,” Elizabeth said, puzzled. “His general personality, his noted strengths, weaknesses. Stuff that I don’t think they should have. For that matter, there has been a lot of stuff they recently sent that was oddly advanced.”

Saudia cast a sidelong glance at Elizabeth. “That isn’t surprising, at least not to me. Remember there was at least one alien defector, and they have an entire team of Vitakara they took prisoner. I’m not surprised they’re exploiting them. Where else would they get that information from, an Ethereal?”

“I’m not daft,” Elizabeth muttered. “But that doesn’t match what we’ve seen, and know about the Ethereals. They are very secretive, even in their own Collective, they don’t reveal themselves unless they think it’s necessary. How does a random team of scientists and a traitor spy know personal details like this?”

“Does it matter?” Weekes asked.

“Depends,” Elizabeth said slowly. “It could mean they know more than they’re telling us. Even now.”

Laura sighed. “Based on what I know of XCOM, that’s always going to always be the case. They only recently decided it would be a good idea for us to have psions. They’re always going to have secrets, and frankly, we really don’t have a lot of resources to determine how much they really know.”

“I agree,” Saudia said, adding a dismissive wave. “There is also one final matter to discuss: Canada.”
“Oh dear,” Laura sighed once more. “I can’t be the only one to see that the timing of this is problematic to say the least. It won’t exactly help the situation.”

“Assuming you care about PR,” Stein commented bluntly, her eyes flashing. “Canada has proven to be unreasonable. We don’t have time to put up with their childish antics and they are denying us support purely on a political vendetta. That will not be tolerated.”

“While I wouldn’t have put it quite like that, I agree,” Weekes nodded. “Regardless of optics, Canada will be a massive boon to handling North America. With it under our control we can mount a concentrated push against the West Coast. We also get the resources their country has, and send a very clear message.”

“Authorization to Annex Canada just passed the Congress,” Saudia nodded. “All that we need to do is execute the plan. The media will have a field day, of course, but it’s all in presentation.” She straightened up. “I suspect that the population will be more accepting of our decision when they see what the Canadian government is actually defending.”

A smile graced Elizabeth’s face. “Their parody of an intelligence agency will be greatly beneficial. Despite what the good Prime Minister has the world believe, there are those in Canada who are rather…irritated…that the Prime Minister is acting like a tree-hugging moron. People I’ve reached out to.”

She tapped a few buttons on the holotable. “Benjamin Varys, a computer forensics expert currently employed with the Ottawa Police service. He’s a rather vocal opponent of Murphy, and since the good Prime Minister has made several questionable cuts to the police as a whole, there likely will not be much resistance to our occupation.”

Elizabeth set her tablet down. “Where Benjamin comes in is taking down the city grids. Much as most governments try to hide it, there is very little security on power grids and power plants in general. Thankfully no one usually exploits these, but for us it means that we can reliably take down the majority of the country provided we can access the plant computers. Benjamin has provided us a program to give us complete control, and has assured us that it will work. He supposedly tested it out on the Capitol Building grid.”

Saudia nodded. “Excellent. I’ll be sure to commend him once we take the country. Is there anyone else?”

Elizabeth pressed several more buttons. “Indeed, and this one is potentially the most important.” A new figure popped up, an older man with graying hair and a slightly ragged beard. “Logan Campbell, Commander of the Canadian Army. A useful figure, as you can imagine, and he’s apparently been butting heads with the legislature regarding the entire invasion. It wasn’t hard to convince him to work with us.”

Stein nodded approvingly. “Even in Canada, patriots do exist.”

“This is significant,” Weekes said, inclining his head to Elizabeth respectfully. “If he orders the Army to stand down, that removes the majority of what little threat they pose to us.”

Saudia glanced at Elizabeth. “While this is certainly good news, I assume they want something in return?”

“Yes, but it’s perfectly reasonable as far as I’m concerned,” Elizabeth confirmed. “Benjamin wants to work in the Peacekeepers, preferably in high-activity zones.”
“No issue,” Stein said immediately. “I would be more than happy to accommodate someone like him.”

“There is a bit of a complication,” Elizabeth admitted. “He’s a paraplegic. Front-line work might not be suitable for him—“

“Please,” Stein interrupted. “That isn’t a concern for me. Prosthetics have advanced to the point where his condition could be negated. I dare say it would be a positive image beyond the fact that I get a competent Peacekeeper, since all of you care about optics. Tell him he’ll get what he wants.”

“Noted,” Elizabeth nodded. “As for Logan, he wants to command the Canadian Legion when the military is reorganized. Laura?”

“Reasonable,” she agreed with a nod. “It would certainly be better to have one of their own in command; tell him his request will be granted.”

“Then it’s settled,” Saudia stated, looking at all of them. “Make the final preparations. I want Canada under our control within the week. Remember that we have the aliens to deal with as well, there is no time to delay.”

They all saluted her, and she adjourned the meeting, feeling rather pleased about the progress they’d made.

A shame Canada had to be annexed, but it was probably for the best.

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**ADVENT Command, Switzerland**

The Commander set the tablet down and looked up at Saudia, giving a short nod. “A good plan, from what I can see. While there will be people who have issues with annexation, I suspect more people are going to be furious that the Canadians were even attempting to remain neutral in this situation.”

“The larger problem is going to be gauging the Canadian population response,” Saudia said, scratching her forehead. “Elizabeth seems to think they’re docile enough, but they might not take kindly to our occupation. They might decide to speak out in ways we can’t exactly legally stop.”

The Commander snorted. He wondered if she was being sarcastic or if her years in EXALT had made her blind to certain perceptions. “ADVENT is taking over the country. I would be more surprised if there isn’t an outcry. That being said, I don’t think the people are content to just sit by as the aliens kill us. Murphy thrives on public approval and his image. Destroy those, and the population will be too distracted to do anything.”

“The alien threat is damning,” Saudia nodded thoughtfully. “But for his idiotic ideals, he is annoyingly consistent. Much as I don’t like it, his response isn’t out of character.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “Then there is a simple tactic: Fabrication. If you believe that the soon-to-be deposed Prime Minister will retain some measure of influence, destroy whatever goodwill he had. It is allowed in the Advent Directive in these circumstances.”

“I’m not sure that will even be necessary,” Saudia countered. “While effective, I doubt that such a tactic is the best option. Everyone has something they want to hide, and I’m sure there is something we could exploit, should we even need it. Fabrication could backfire, and this is a case where I’m not sure the risk would be worth it.” Saudia shrugged. “I’ll have Elizabeth look into that...
regardless. Returning to the primary subject, I want you to be there when I announce the operation. The world needs to see us united on this, and the support of XCOM publically would be useful.”

“On that we are agreed,” the Commander confirmed. “I’ll be there. Although I doubt you need our support for the operation itself.”

“No,” Saudia dismissed with a wave. “The Canadian military does not pose a threat, and Commander Logan will salvage the majority of the Army. I expect resistance to be minimal at best, and in the end, I don’t know how many soldier and police will be willing to die for a leader who has repeatedly dismissed them over his career.”

The Commander was rather curious to see how accurate that really was. Patriotism was a thing, but it was typically constrained to America and wasn’t nearly as popular in the rest of the world, outside of dictatorships. Canada had never really embraced military patriotism or displayed extreme national pride. He imagined fighting for a leader who wished you didn’t exist was, in fact, one of the truest forms of patriotism.

But patriotism was doing what was best for the country, not for the leader.

If a leader didn’t respect the purpose the military and law enforcement served, then they didn’t deserve their loyalty.

Ironically, in a perfect world Murphy would be the ideal leader. The issue was that this wasn’t an ideal world, and to pretend otherwise was delusional. War would never cease, nor would crime. It was simply a matter of mitigation and defense. To willingly ignore the realities of the world was irresponsible and naïve.

The Prime Minister was undoubtedly a good man. Just not a very smart one.

“The international response will be interesting,” the Commander said, setting the tablet down. “I wonder if it will increase membership.”

“The southern half of South America and Africa are really the only areas where we don’t have influence,” Saudia said, bringing up the holomap. “I suspect that the response will be limited, especially from China.”

“China has gone out of their way to avoid provoking you,” the Commander noted, appraising the map. “It might not be a bad idea to try and open some kind of negotiations with them now. They aren’t idiots, and with the aliens right outside them, they may listen to reason.”

“Unlikely,” Saudia disagreed flatly. “Not yet at least. While they aren’t being deliberately provocative, they have unofficially made their stance clear. I have no problem with that, provided it stays that way.” She pointed at Europe. “I expect that the EU will fully collapse within a few months after this. France leaving will start a domino effect, and once the UK joins ADVENT, that spells the end for the EU.”

“You don’t think they’ll condemn this?” The Commander asked, curious.

“No,” she answered, a grim smile on her face. “I suspect they’ll be too scared to officially say anything, for fear of being annexed by us. Baseless for the moment, but the sentiment will be useful if it brings the rest of Europe into the fold. The only critics of this move will be the media and certain parties on the internet.”

The Commander looked at the serious figure of the Chancellor, staring over the holomap with an expression he could only describe as controlled on her face. He frowned. “Fear isn’t why we want
this to work. It has its uses, but it won’t build anything sustaining. While I would never base decisions on public perception, I think that it might not be a bad idea to focus on some of the more positive aspects of ADVENT. Neuter the media’s bite with the truth, all they have to talk about is how bad things are, and the so-called ‘imperialism’ and ‘brutality’ of ADVENT.”

Saudia cracked a smile and made a show of rolling her eyes. “The issue is that they are under no obligation to do it. Their only strict guideline, that you put in, was that they had to be factual. Technically, none of them have broken the law yet, and are subtly rebranding their stations to be ‘opinion’ based, which allows them to get away with direct criticism and lies.”

“Figures they’d find a way to abuse it,” the Commander sighed. “I also believe I put in some additional requirements to lessen that. Although those would be extreme steps.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to kill them off yet,” Saudia agreed slowly. “However, the issue is making them irrelevant. Too many people still listen to them, and while our own state-run platform is doing…decent…it’s boring. It is not easy to get people to care about the daily decisions and facts because the truth is boring. There is a reason the media has become sensationalized.”

The Commander thought for a moment. “Perhaps you’re handling them the wrong way. It’s about reaching the right audience, and the audience that we will need is the younger generations, and we do know that their preferred method of consuming entertainment is through the Internet; social media specifically.”

Saudia looked up, her eyes sightless as she thought. “Internet personalities are influential in their own right. It is an untapped market.”

“Just an idea,” the Commander said. “Propaganda has been lax, and that should change. We need to keep boosting recruitment, as well as focusing on the aliens and the heroic ADVENT and XCOM soldiers fighting for the planet. Dealing with the aliens is simpler than making the population want to support you. No matter how good you are, the majority are prone to manipulation by any party. They must be controlled by ADVENT, not foreign or media influences.”

“I think we can both agree on that,” Saudia said, rolling her shoulders. She was silent for a few moments. “It’s interesting. I thought that it would be…simpler…than this. I always wanted to unite the world, but there are factors that I hadn’t even thought to consider. Had our original plan succeeded, I suspect we would have lost control within years. We were too arrogant and would not have trusted anyone but ourselves with any sort of real power.” She chuckled. “Quite the opposite of reality. Oddly enough, I suspect you were the best thing that could happen to us.”

“We have similar goals,” the Commander answered. “And out of everyone, you were best suited to try and undertake this task. But you’re right. You would have been deposed eventually. Fortunate I suppose, that you understood the need to unite.”

“Mhmm, yes,” Saudia said softly. “I’ve wondered, what happens should we win? You are quite adamant that my place is here now, but I believe you never specified what would happen to me after, or anyone in EXALT for that matter.”

The Commander simply looked at her for a few moments. She did appear genuinely curious, and seemed resigned to whatever answer he gave. “That ultimately depends on if you do what is needed,” he answered. “Defend humanity to the best of your ability, and you have nothing to worry about. Fail, and I suspect you won’t live much longer.”

She gave a single nod. “Fair. I suppose it wouldn’t make much sense to dispose of someone useful,
simply based on their past.”

Now the Commander gave a nod. “If we were judged solely on past crimes, I would likely be dead. As far as I’m concerned, everything is reset. Our pasts are not important, only what we do now. Defeating the aliens is all that matters. We can sort out the aftermath when that is accomplished.”

“Focusing on the present is best,” Saudia agreed. “I’m glad you understand that.”

While he’d meant what he said, they both knew that even if their pasts were ignored, they would never be, nor should be, forgotten.

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Riyadh ADVENT Command, Saudi Arabia

It had been…she didn’t even know how long it had been since she’d had a solid drink. Too long. At the same time, it still wasn’t enough to really help her.

If there was one thing Betos utterly hated, it was higher-ups considering their work done, giving a victory speech, and turning over a hostile country to them. The Commander had fucked right off after the battle, leaving the city in her immediate control. Thanks Commander, really glad you had such confidence in me.

She wasn’t sure if she should be flattered or not. The first days had been, predictably, chaotic, as the surrendered soldiers were processed, and she tried organizing some kind of system to let the citizens know what was going on. That had predictably gone over very well, and while the majority did seem to largely accept their new reality, there was a section that turned violent.

In the grand scheme of things, there hadn’t been much damage done. So far the death toll was up to fifteen, and quite a lot of property damage, not counting the fact that there were an unknown amount of civilians also caught in the suicide blasts, or simply were in the line of fire.

Then the Peacekeepers had arrived, which had initially been welcome, until she actually saw how they operated. These weren’t standard Peacekeepers either. SSR Officers, in heavy sleek black armor made up a considerable amount of the Peacekeeping force. For all intents and purposes, they were in charge of securing the city. She was just the Marshal of the Garrison, and terrorism was not her job.

Betos had always moved on quickly whenever they’d taken a town or city, waiting for the Peacekeepers to show up, and then moving onto the next destination. She’d never actually seen how they operated.

Now that she had, she wondered who had actually written up the guidelines for Peacekeepers.

ADVENT had more than a zero-tolerance policy for terrorism; anyone remotely associated with identified terrorists was a potential target. The SSR were not subtle, and Betos woke up to reports that the SSR had conducted multiple raids, and been in several shootouts throughout the night. She’d seen them fight once, and these guys were clearly special forces, and utterly unafraid of the threat these terrorists posed.

They didn’t negotiate, and they didn’t take prisoners. A small group of rebels had taken a few families hostage and the SSR had stormed the building anyway and killed them, though weren’t fast enough to save some of the hostages.

The regular Peacekeepers were not much better. They were the most visible face of ADVENT, but
they acted more like soldiers than law enforcement. Betos suspected many of these people were foreign to the region, and deeply suspicious of anyone who even so much as held a conversation. It wasn’t uncommon for Peacekeepers to go up to pairs or groups of citizens and ask for identification. Those who didn’t have it were immediately directed to the ADVENT Registry that had been enacted soon after the Peacekeepers had arrived.

Betos took another drink, sitting alone in her thoughts. It had been one thing to hear about the stories of Peacekeepers, the rumors all of them had dismissed as exaggerated. But that largely appeared to not be the case, and honestly, some part of her didn’t believe it was wholly unjustified. It ultimately worked. There was almost no kind of sedition anymore and the SSR had left, and sent a few more units of Peacekeepers.

Things were slowly returning to normal, and there were apparently ‘great plans’ for restructuring the entire region.

The entire situation had made her deeply uncomfortable. The Peacekeepers had been doing their job, but it still stung when she walked the streets, and any of the citizens drew back in terror. It shouldn’t be like that. ADVENT should inspire hope and respect.

Not fear.

But the damage was done, and she doubted that they would ever fully trust any of them, even if ADVENT ultimately helped them. She didn’t blame them, in their situation she’d be scared too. Hell, she was scared just how far they were willing to go. She swirled her drink around her glass. I’m sorry, she thought as an apology. I would have done things differently.

Would it have worked? Maybe, maybe not. Not much point thinking about it now. Sure, the terrorists were gone, but it came at a price she felt was too high.

“A bit early for that, isn’t it?” Mox asked, coming in and sitting down opposite her. They were alone in what passed for her quarters, which was just a bed and a table, of which she was now sitting at. He was one of the only ones who could stop by without an invitation; which people always got the wrong idea from.

“I’ve now got a city that’s terrified of us, and a bunch of Peacekeepers who don’t listen to me,” she answered bluntly. “I’m having a fucking drink.”

Mox’s lips twitched at that. “I hear you. This whole situation isn’t good.”

“Understatement,” Betos muttered, taking a long gulp. “ADVENT doesn’t understand that sometimes you don’t send in the damn SSR when there is a small amount of terrorist activity. They only made it worse.”

“Seems to be the standard ADVENT procedure,” Mox agreed bitterly. “First, do as much damage as possible and crush your enemies into dirt, then make them terrified of you, then actually try to help them. It’s an inverse of whatever that oath is that doctors take.”

“Yeah,” Betos muttered, resting her forehead in one of her hands. “And there is exactly nothing I can do about it except advise. It’s not like the Peacekeepers are doing anything illegal. The fact that this is legal is a problem to me.”

“You could always resign,” Mox suggested. “Helsa, what are we actually fighting for right now? Who are we actually working for?”

“Supposedly fighting against the aliens,” Betos shrugged. “That’s what we’re supposed to be
doing. Right now it seems mostly like whoever ADVENT doesn’t like at the moment. How long until China does something ADVENT doesn’t like. As for who?” She took another drink. “Really only for my soldiers. You. Even the people that hate us. Someone has to try to help them, might as well be me. It’s clear that ADVENT doesn’t care about people, only statistics.”

She waved the hand holding her glass aimlessly. “You don’t see the reports I get sent. I’m already getting orders to protect engineering teams who are setting up or renovating new oil refineries. ADVENT Intelligence is setting up propaganda campaigns targeting specific citizens based on psyche profiles for recruitment. ADVENT has plans for here, they don’t care about the people here, but they are going to put them to work. Weapon construction, city fortification, each person is another resource to use. It shouldn’t be like this.”

Mox cocked his head. “So quit. The only reason I’m still here is because you need every bit of support you can. Far as I can tell, no one else even remotely cares about the fact that we’re working for a dictator.”

Betos rubbed her eyes. “I’m not sure I’d go that far-”

“Really?” Mox raised an eyebrow, his tone bitter. “A dictator suppresses anything they don’t like, they rule by fear, they impose their will on the people who can’t fight back. They exploit and use whatever they can. And when they are smart, they are terrifying. This Chancellor, and everyone working with her, are systematically destroying anything resembling discourse. It is their way or off to the dungeon for you. These people weren’t even elected, and now they’re essentially in charge of the world.”

His jaw was clenched as he continued. “The Middle East started this, but it gave ADVENT an excuse to come here. They had a reason, even if we disagree with the methods. How long until they invade some country under the guise of simply refusing to help them as much as they’d like? You might have mentioned China in jest, but I think that’s not too far off.”

“I don’t know,” Betos admitted. “They keep saying they aren’t tyrants, authoritarians or whatever. They do something like that and that is exposed as a lie. People can’t ignore that.”

“And what are we doing here?” Mox asked. “ADVENT doesn’t deserve you trying to help the people. And you can’t change anything on your own. Listen, you aren’t the only one. I’ve been talking to the other officers and soldiers. They aren’t happy with how ADVENT is doing things, they’re furious at seeing what the Peacekeepers are doing.”

“And what do you want me to do?” She finally exploded, slamming her glass on the table furiously. “Desert? Quit? Do you want everything to get worse? I’ll probably be executed, and probably you as well, since ADVENT Intelligence doesn’t fuck around with loyalty. You aren’t exactly subtle. Resigning would just be cowardly, and I’d be shuffled somewhere quietly.”

“That depends on two things,” Mox said softly. “Where you go…and how many go with you.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “If you think anyone else would desert, I think-“

“Why?” Mox crossed his arms. “You know what I’ve found out? That every one of them thinks they’re alone in how they feel. All of them feel they’re trapped, thinking there’s something wrong with how this is being done. But no one ever talks about it, because they don’t want to get reported. They don’t want to seem disloyal. They are loyal to you, Helsa, not ADVENT.” The last word he spat out. “If you leave, I believe they would follow. Your soldiers are good people. Good people don’t belong in ADVENT.”
She drunkenly chuckled. “Let’s say I actually did something that stupid. On the off chance ADVENT didn’t execute us on sight, then where thefuck would we go?”

Mox clasped his hands together. “Africa.”

Betos coughed. “Sorry?”

“ADVENT has ignored Africa for whatever reason,” Mox continued. “But I know some people there. They haven’t ignored ADVENT, but they’re really worried that they might come. But they’re not united, even if some talks are taking place. If you come with even a portion of your soldiers, that might be the catalyst needed to unite them. It’s only a matter of time before ADVENT remembers them.”

“Or,” Betos pointed out. “I’d just bring ADVENT down on them. I don’t want to put them in a position where they either have to turn us over or face ADVENT invading. Unlike the US, ADVENT won’t settle for doing nothing.”

Mox shrugged. “There are ways around that. They have to know where you’d be, for starters. Can’t be justified in attacking, if they don’t know for sure. I guarantee that the leaders of these nations would lie to keep you safe. And honestly, there isn’t much choice.”

Betos leaned back in her chair, head swimming. “I’m way too drunk for my own good, since I’m actually considering this.”

Mox stood. “Keep thinking on it. Whatever you decide, I’ll stand with you. But remember that you’re not alone.” He left her alone then, letting her contemplate what they’d said.

Whatever happened, there would be no second chances.

She’d have to think about it, preferably when she was actually sober.

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Australia, Northern Territory Resistance Camp

It would have been more of a celebration, if the news hadn’t come that Japan had officially fallen, but even still, Abby was fairly happy with their progress so far here. They’d freed two more small towns, and the Chronicler had more soldiers for whatever his plan was. Harper was happy, and had allowed an unofficial celebration of their progress.

Abby was personally concerned about Japan, but she wasn’t overly surprised it had fallen. This time the aliens would have probably applied overwhelming force, and defeat was inevitable. From the short conversation she’d had with Zhang, ADVENT was going to preserve the majority of their forces, and move the main battleground to Korea.

The biggest issue, he’d said, was another Ethereal. One called Caelior, some kind of telekinetic specialist. Based on his description, an Ethereal that powerful was a problem.

Obviously.

Still, Zhang had been pleased at how much they’d accomplished, and he had insinuated that both XCOM and ADVENT may be conducting dedicated strikes in Australia. That had also made Harper very happy. Once the major cities were liberated, that would open up a lot more options without worrying about too much collateral damage.
“No drink?” Joseph asked, walking up to her. “Not much for parties, are you?”

She gave him a sidelong look. “That’s a rather large presumption. Or is this your attempt at a pick-up line?”

“Oh,” he playfully winced. “Nah, just noticed you aren’t doing much. You just stand there and watch everything. Most people would try mingling a little bit. Or at least trying not to seem so conspicuous.”

“Well, you figured that out,” Abby shrugged. “Besides, I have quite a bit on my mind. Japan, and what’s next here.”

“Ahh, right,” he nodded, turning a little more serious. “Did anyone you know die?”

Abby shook her head. “No. But then again, I don’t really know a lot of the soldiers anymore. I saw a bunch of names, but none of them really registered.”

“Mhmm, I suppose that’s for the best,” Joseph agreed, leaning against the wall by her. “I don’t really know a lot of people in general. Well, I do, but not people I know well. Friends are something of a luxury.”

“They certainly seem that way now,” Abby agreed grimly. “I’m not sure how many people still remember me in XCOM. Everyone I knew in XCOM Intelligence died. Don’t really have anyone now.”

“Shame,” Joseph commented. “At least I’ve got a family, and I have people I trust. You really don’t have anyone?”

“My parents are still alive,” Abby shrugged. “I haven’t contacted them in years. We never got along, and I had no desire to talk to them again. I assume they’re fine. Had a couple friends in med school, but they moved on.”

“Do you want some unsolicited advice?” Joseph asked.

Abby sighed. “Go ahead.”

“I don’t know whatever problems you have with your parents,” Joseph continued, sounding interestingly genuine as he talked. “But I would at least let them know you’re alive. People can change over time, and in times like this, well…” he trailed off. “Past differences seem more trivial. Just something to think about.”

She thought about it for a few seconds. “Are you speaking from personal experience?”

“Partially, yes,” Joseph answered. “Though not in a negative way. Whatever you think of EXALT, family was an unbreakable pillar. Parents only wanted what was best for their children. I wouldn’t be where I am without them, and they are the only ones even today I can unconditionally trust. That’s special to me. It’s sad when others don’t have that for whatever reason.”

Abby felt somewhat envious at that. “Maybe I’ll do that,” she relented. “Whenever this assignment is done.”

“Well, at the rate we’re going, it might not be too much longer,” he said, looking at the groups of soldiers. “So, I’m curious. What’s your impression of our mutual elderly friend?”

Abby was careful not to betray anything. “Sorry?”
He motioned to the Chronicler who was chatting with Harper as they shared a drink. ‘Him. You two have talked, so I assume you know some things. Maybe he even told you his name. We just called him the Chronicler.”

“No luck with me,” Abby admitted. “He introduced himself the same way. What do you know about him?”

“Only what everyone knew,” Joseph answered wistfully. “An expert historian, been around as long as anyone can remember. It’s like he doesn’t age, and is extremely smart. His goal is apparently to chronicle the ‘true history of the world’ or something like that. More of a personal project, but you’d probably find it fascinating. My guess is that he’s still doing it. Far as I know he’s friends with Saudia, and he has a higher clearance than almost anyone, even in ADVENT Intelligence.”

Given what she knew about him, that didn’t surprise her. “I’m not sure I’d want to know just how much history differs from what I know.”

“I can understand that,” Joseph chuckled. “I mean, I don’t think people would be happy knowing that everything they understood was a lie. So, I’m curious just how much you know. Pick an event, and I’ll tell you what we did.”

Abby frowned. “Isn’t that against…some kind of secrecy agreement you have? You really want me to guess? And why would I even believe you?”

“XCOM and EXALT are working together,” he dismissed easily. “Besides, this is ancient history. I doubt you could do anything with it, and if anyone would believe you. As for trusting me? Well, that’s up to you.”


His eyes lit up. “I like that. Most people wouldn’t go back that far. Let’s see…” he tapped his chin. ”Well, we were very different back then. Honestly, EXALT, or the Illuminati as we were known then, we were more the secretive hired assassins who had very wealthy backers. Monarchies had mixed results with infiltration, but we saw potential in a democracy. In short, we identified some people who we thought would be useful, and convinced them to rebel.”

He smiled as he recounted the tale. “We didn’t invest heavily until it was clear that a certain George Washington gave the American forces a good chance of victory. Washington was not one of us, of course, but certain allies of his were. Benjamin Franklin was one, and he provided Washington with our soldiers. Don’t bother trying to look them up. Even most of the American soldiers didn’t know they existed, but the assassination, poisoning, and general sabotage of the British forces ultimately guaranteed victory. Despite what history says, the Revolution was never in danger of failure. When we backed it, their success was guaranteed.”

Considering what she knew about EXALT, that wasn’t as shocking as it might have been. Assuming Joseph was telling the truth, they really had been around centuries. “Why do I think this was part of a larger plan?”

“Because it was,” Joseph emphasized. “This was part of an operation to lessen the power of the monarchy. It was difficult and risky to properly manipulate, and the concept we felt was outdated. You will notice that America steadily increased in power, largely thanks to us, and we took action elsewhere. The French Revolution comes to mind, and we were rather satisfied with the result. The last remnants of the monarchy were systematically abolished over time, thanks in part to us.”
“Huh,” was all she said. She was now curious about what the Chronicler had written about. Perhaps she could ask him about it sometime. “So, how far back does EXALT actually go?”

“All the way back to the Crusades at the very least,” Joseph answered. “Although records are… scarce. I don’t think it’s remotely comparable. At some point they decided to create a Chronicler position, and that’s what their job is. I think the seventeenth century was the first time an actual line of documents were created, detailing various events and operations.”

So that would put the Chronicler at… four hundred years?

How could he possibly be alive? Did psionics extend life that much?

“The more you know,” Abby said quietly. “Thanks.”

“Anytime,” he said with a flashed smile. “Now, if you excuse me, I’m going to mingle some more. Let me know if you want more of the history of the world being shared. I’ve never gotten the chance to tell anyone before. I like it.”

Abby gave him a wan smile. “I’ll be sure and let you know.”

He gave a mock salute with two straight fingers, and strode off, leaving her with a lot of questions running through her mind. If nothing else, he was interesting to talk to. More straightforward than the Chronicler at any rate.

Abby wondered just what his actual plan was. Because he was clearly hiding something.

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The Praesidium, Office of the Commander

The three women before him were in their regular XCOM fatigues, although Gloria really only had some loose garments to hide the extent of her cybernetics as a result of the MEC conversion. Liliyane had fully recovered, and he could sense that she was somewhat apprehensive about what she was being called up for, and was definitely a little fidgety.

Jasmine on the other hand emulated her MEC comrade, in her stoic stance, simply waiting for him to begin. “At ease,” he told them, setting down the tablet he had been holding. He’d been reviewing their profiles, and from what he could tell, there likely wouldn’t be many issues. Gloria was not an issue, since he doubted she would care as much as the result of her conversion, but Jasmine and Liliyane might have stronger feelings.

They did deserve to know beforehand that Canada was being annexed, and more importantly, why. While he doubted they would do something drastic, blindsiding them without so much as a warning was something he could not justify. It wasn’t as though they were going to warn the government.

“What did you want from us, Commander?” Jasmine asked, her unusually grey eyes focused intently on him.

“Seconded,” Liliyane added.

The Commander hesitated. “How much are you aware of the current relationship between Canada and ADVENT?”

Liliyane glanced over at Gloria and Jasmine, clearly wanting them to answer first. “I have not been
“I have not received any information from the Canadian government or military, nor am I familiar with current diplomatic and previous efforts.”

“The Prime Minister doesn’t seem to like ADVENT much,” Jasmine said, giving a more Human answer, although she was similarly confused. “Last I saw, relations were strained. Not hostile, but strained.”

Liliyane absentmindedly ran her hand through her cropped brown hair. “Eh, I don’t know much either. But I know you’re aware that I got authorization to be recalled, should I have taken it from the Canadian Army. That was weird, and I clearly turned it down, but that told me that they were offering me an out…though I didn’t know why.”

The Commander focused on her. “You never attempted to figure out why?”

“Why?” Liliyane shrugged. “Canada will come around eventually, and we need to fight the aliens. Even if the Prime Minister isn’t doing anything, I don’t want it to seem like there aren’t any Canadians that care about this.”

The Commander nodded. It matched up with what he’d suspected. He knew Liliyane was an immigrant from the Philippines, and in his experience, immigrants were sometimes the strongest patriots he knew. Not a surprise she wanted to represent Canada in the best light possible. He was not looking forward to explaining the actual situation.

“The short version is that the relationship between Canada and ADVENT is much worse than is known publicly,” the Commander revealed, his gaze sweeping over all of them. “For all intents and purposes, Canada has denied ADVENT any sort of aid or support whatsoever. They cite disagreements with how ADVENT is run, and mistakenly believe it to be an authoritarian and oppressive government.”

Jasmine furrowed her eyebrows. “While ADVENT is not exactly the same level of freedom as even the previous United States, and Canada, calling it that seems…inaccurate.”

“Prime Minister Jace Murphy is noted as a pacifist, anti-military, anti-police, and far left political affiliation,” Gloria suddenly said in the same tone. “Due to ADVENT restricting violent protest and pro-alien propaganda, as well as an advanced and expanded military, with clear authority within the ADVENT government; factors lead me to believe his opposition stems from idealism and personal morals, and not facts.” A pause. “Prior to my conversion, I know I did not like him.”

“Hey, Murphy’s not a bad guy,” Liliyane protested. “Although he didn’t have many friends in the military, and admittedly made some decisions that made us angry. He’s an idealist, nothing wrong with that.”

“Right or wrong, it doesn’t matter,” the Commander shook his head. “In light of the recent losses in Japan, and continued alien aggression, that Canada is refusing to cooperate under any circumstance is a major issue to ADVENT.” He paused. “Within twenty-four hours, Chancellor Vyandar will be announcing that ADVENT will annex Canada, and it will become a member state of ADVENT, and the current administration will be taken into custody.”

Gloria had no physical or emotional response whatsoever. Jasmine stiffened suddenly, and the color drained from Liliyane’s face. “What?” She asked in a small voice. “What?”

“Was the Prime Minister even aware this could happen?” Jasmine practically demanded, taking a step forward. “How strong of an attempt at diplomacy was there?”
“The Prime Minister was well aware of the possibility,” the Commander answered calmly, noting that while two of the three were shocked, that was it. For now. “And Saudia attempted several times to renegotiate an agreement, and was flatly rejected each time. There is proof, which she will be releasing when she announces the operation.”

“Fuck,” Liliyane breathed. “Is…is there no other way?”

“No,” The Commander answered.

Jasmine rubbed her forehead. “I wanted Canada to join the fight. But not like this.”

“No one wanted it like this,” the Commander said gently. “But there isn’t a choice. If Canada will not work with ADVENT, then there is little option. No action is not possible. Saudia has assured me that the casualties will be kept to a minimum, and they will be accepting any surrendering Canadian forces.”

There were a few moments of silence. “XCOM is supporting this, I guess?” Liliyane said, taking a few breaths.

The Commander nodded. “We are. XCOM will not participate, but in light of the circumstances, ADVENT is justified in annexation. This is the sole fault of the government, and Saudia realizes that. Should it go according to plan, Canada will be a full member state within several months, with full voting and legislative rights.”

“Small comfort, I guess,” Jasmine sighed. “Damn it! They don’t stand a chance if they fight!”

“If it goes well, that won’t happen,” the Commander said. “Commander Logan Campbell will be assisting ADVENT in securing the country. I think you know him, Mrs. Stark.”

Liliyane’s lips were a thin line. “Yes, I do. Not surprised, really. He’s hated Murphy for years. I know there are a lot in the military that feel the same way. I suppose he’ll order the Army to stand down, and I’d also guess there will be a lot of others that follow suit. Murphy is not someone you want to potentially die for.”

“I hope that they see it that way,” the Commander agreed. “But I thought you should be aware before the operation commences.”

Jasmine took a breath. “I…thank you, Commander. I wouldn’t exactly call it good news, but I’m glad you told us.”

“As am I,” Liliyane said, rubbing her eyes. “Just…gah, why would he be this stupid? He didn’t strike me as an idiot!”

“I don’t think he is,” the Commander said. “Not really. But he doesn’t accept the reality of the situation, and his own biases are affecting his judgement. There is little that can be done to change that.”

“And now Canada will pay the price for his pride,” Liliyane said sadly. “Hopefully ADVENT isn’t too…harsh.”

“Unlikely,” the Commander reassured her. “This isn’t the Middle East, and the population is not violent, and the military and law enforcement will not want to die for nothing. Like I said, should things go well, it will be resolved within a few months.”

“Then we should hope that the timetable is accurate,” Gloria said. “I estimate that when the
Collective learns of the annexation, they will classify Canada as a threat and act accordingly.”

The Commander nodded. “Likely. But that will take time, and in that time, we can prepare. So will there be any issues?”

Liliyane shook her head, and Jasmine followed suit. “This can be laid at the feet of the Prime Minister,” Jasmine said flatly. “Even if I had issues with it, you are not ADVENT. We’re XCOM. We fight aliens and for humanity now, not just one nation. That you didn’t hide this is something I won’t forget, and neither will Lily I think.”

“Seconded,” Liliyane said emphatically. “You’ll have no issues from us. Our loyalty is still firmly with humanity and XCOM.”

“There are no changes to my parameters,” Gloria added. “Priority threat is still the Collective. No additional information has changed that.”

The Commander felt rather proud. Any who could put the greater good above their past loyalties were those he was proud to have with him. “I appreciate that,” he told them. “You are dismissed.”

All the soldiers saluted, and then exited his office, leaving him alone; waiting until the time came to begin the operation.

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**Fort McCoy, Wisconsin**

Roman had never been to the United States before, and he really didn’t think he’d seen enough to give an opinion one way or another, since the moment the Middle East had been wrapped up, he, and quite a few other teams, had been redeployed to the United States, and had spent the entire time running through a lot of training exercises.

He was slightly miffed that they hadn’t gotten a decent break. If he was coming to America, he wanted to experience it a little bit.

That being said, it was before Japan, and that had spooked all of them. If they needed to skip out on some vacation time, then so be it. Still, the training exercises were definitely preparing them for something, but what that something was they hadn’t bothered to tell them yet.

Until now.

Roman wasn’t sure if he’d heard correctly.

“Could you repeat that?” He asked his immediate superior officer, Corporal Hawkins, a comically short American woman whose face seemed perpetually irritated.

“You heard correctly,” she repeated. “Assemble your squad and report to the Hangar in one hour. We got orders that Canada is being annexed, and this strike is going to be quick and painless. Don’t want to give the aliens more time than necessary.”

So ADVENT could annex countries. Interesting. “Have they declared war on us?” He asked.

“Short of actually announcing it,” Hawkins answered, crossing her arms. “They have refused to work with ADVENT whatsoever, which is a problem when it comes to our operations in America. Guess the Chancellor got tired of putting up with them, and is going to solve the problem herself.”
That seemed extremely odd. What exactly did Canada have to lose with working with ADVENT? Did they not want to protect the planet? Unless…

He frowned. “Have they been compromised by alien infiltrators?” He knew such a thing was possible.

“If they have, no one’s told me,” Hawkins shrugged. “Wouldn’t surprise me though, and it would explain this kind of response. ADVENT wouldn’t do it unless it was serious. I also wouldn’t be surprised if they kept it quiet. That would unsettle a lot of people.”

Roman nodded. The reasons weren’t too important to him. The fact that any country was sitting out this war was borderline treasonous in and of itself. And if they were even refusing to work with the only entity that was doing something...well, he wasn’t too sympathetic to their reasons. Anyone who ignored the alien threat was either blind, stupid, or compromised.

“What will be our objectives?” He asked.

“Commander Logan Campbell of the Canadian Army is with us,” Hawkins said, picking up several pieces of paper from a nearby table. “Once he announces he is with us, and orders the Army to stand down, I think resistance will be minimal, if any at all. The team you’ll be with will be charged with securing Edmonton and the legislative body there. With any luck, the program provided by Benjamin, another Canadian helping us, will take down the power grid to the city and cut it off until the city is secured. You should not have much trouble.”

“Sounds good,” Roman agreed. The majority of the military not being an issue was a huge boon, and would make everything go much quicker. “Any restrictions I should know about?”

“No civilian casualties whenever possible,” Hawkins ordered. “Canada isn’t the Middle East. These people aren’t potential insurgents, and if any Canadian military or police do fight back, the chances of them employing terrorist methods or hostage situations is low. So watch your fire. The last thing we need is to give the media more ammo to use against ADVENT.”

Roman rubbed his forehead, his lips stretching into a grim smile. “I’ll do my best. There will be fallout from this.”

“Oh, I’m sure of it,” Hawkins agreed. “But that isn’t my problem or yours. The Chancellor has ordered this, and she can deal with the consequences. We do our jobs. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Dismissed, and good luck,” she said, inclining her head to him.

He saluted and left, wondering how his team was going to take this. ADVENT was a never-ending adventure it seemed. Of everything he had expected, annexing Canada of all countries had never crossed his mind as a possibility.

Oh well. With any luck this would be over quickly.

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ADVENT Command Courtyard, Switzerland

Saudia stood in the same place as she had during her first official address, and oddly enough, with many of the same people behind her. Although there definitely seemed to be a lot more…ornamentation around the general area. The ADVENT Command Center had been getting a lot of
security upgrades and general aesthetic improvements, which largely consisted of liberal
dispersions of the ADVENT logo everywhere.

She didn’t really care either way, but it did seem to impress many of the reporters and media here,
who were taking pictures, video, and everything else they did. They packed the courtyard in front
of her, while ADVENT Peacekeepers stood at their posts, ever vigilant for the slightest sign of
trouble. She really wasn’t expecting anything, since these people had been screened well
beforehand.

But they were definitely curious at what she had to say. Rumors she heard said that they were
expecting her to speak about Japan and the current situation with the military.

Well, they were going to be in for a surprise.

They were quiet as she took the podium, at least one kind of representative of every ADVENT
member nation behind her; a show of unity that would be crucial as she made her speech. The
Commander, Treduant, Gwan, Habicht, all were behind and waiting along with the media. Behind
them was a massive projection screen which was playing a short spinning ADVENT logo, with red
and black tints. A placeholder for what she would be revealing later.

She grasped the sides of the podium with her hands, and began. “Citizens of ADVENT, and those
across the world, it is again a privilege to speak before so many today. Over the past months,
ADVENT has worked tirelessly to unite the world under one cause, repair the wounds that have
festered for generations, and defend our species against the ever encroaching threat of the aliens.”

Saudia was sure to work in some pauses into her speech, to allow for the translators to repeat what
she was saying. Everyone needed to hear this. “As with any war, there are victories, and there are
losses. It is a matter of mitigation and control. I want to assure the people that ADVENT is quickly
adapting to the situations as they arise, and heeding the lessons used in our defeat. To expect total
victory is unrealistic at this stage, yet despite our enemy being far more advanced, we have held
them to a single continent, Japan, and the West Coast of the United States.”

Might not be inspiring, but it was the heavily distilled truth. But it was all in presentation. “Yet
despite the few setbacks, ADVENT had not slowed in continuing to improve the lives of not just
our citizens, but those in the rest of the world. Our cities are growing more industrious and
prosperous, our people are united in our cause, and we have brought peace and security to the war-
torn regions of the Middle East, and quelled the misguided attacks and corruption plaguing South
America. Thanks to the efforts of our Peacekeepers, citizens within ADVENT are without a doubt,
the safest in the world.”

Oh, there were some people who were going to pick that line apart. There was no applause, but she
raised a hand up, more for attention than anything else. “But this is all leading to one singular
point; the one purpose for which ADVENT was conceptualized for. All our advancements and
achievements are for nothing, so long as the aliens exist. There can be no rest as long as they
threaten our lives and freedom. All within ADVENT leads to this; the defense of our species.”

Her voice rose. “This is larger than us; this is more than a government fighting its enemies. This
concerns the very fate of our species. ADVENT does not simply fight for those within its borders,
but for all Humans, regardless of where they live. This is no time for petty divides of ideology and
sovereignty. Our very future is at stake, our freedom, and our loved ones. Those are the stakes in
this war, the ones our soldiers fight for every day.”

That did get some scattered applause, and now came the turn. Her voice hardened. “And yet, there
are those that refuse to acknowledge this fact. They refuse to acknowledge the truth that this is not
a conflict that one can simply stand on the sidelines and watch. How can one be neutral when the defeat of ADVENT will spell the enslavement and decimation of the entire Human race? That, I am afraid, is not the reality some live in.

“There are those who believe that if they avoid the conflict, that if they stay out of it, that they will be spared. They would rather throw themselves on the mercy of the alien conquerors meekly, than stand and fight for our inherent right to live as a sovereign and independent species; free from any kind of alien control. Our fight is for freedom; their peace is slavery.”

Her gaze swept over the crowd, who were now somewhat unsettled by the venom in her voice. “That must end. These people are traitors of the worst kind, the cowards who hide and try to play both sides, hoping and praying that they will be spared by whoever emerges victorious. This is not something that can be ignored, nor will it.”

Her voice ripped through the crowd, who were furiously scribbling their notes and hanging on her words. “Canada has taken this path. Their leadership has capitulated to the lie of neutrality. Prime Minister Murphy believes the aliens can be reasoned with. They think that by refusing to assist us, they gain favor with the aliens, should we ultimately fall.”

“ADVENT does not seek to impose our methods on independent nations,” Saudia stated to them all. “We will work with these sovereign states, even if their ideologies are vastly different to our own. Canada has repeatedly refused to do even this; they would rather they retain their pride and superiority than assist us in repelling the alien threat in the United States. Because of their refusal to help, thousands of our soldiers have perished when there was no need. Their resistance was a matter of disagreement before; now it is a matter of priority.”

There was now muttering breaking out in the crowd, who were staring wide-eyed at her, some in clear disbelief. “Neither ADVENT, nor I, will put the sovereignty of one nation above the entire Human race,” Saudia continued, her voice letting the controlled fury free. “Diplomacy has failed, reason has failed, all methods to convince the Canadian government of the reality of the alien threat have failed. There are no other choices.”

She extended a hand, gesturing to the screen behind her. “But you may believe that is their right. Perhaps, but I would question the ones who would rather see our species enslaved than work with the ones fighting it. Judge for yourself if you wish to see us under their thrall or not.” The screen switched to the footage which she had prepared.

From what she knew, XCOM had kept this footage secret for obvious reasons, and it was one of the most chilling things Saudia had ever seen. Yet there was no more potent way to drive home what the aliens truly intended than to watch the footage XCOM had taken from the Sectoid Hive. The speakers blared the unsettling crying of half-grown Human children, thrown into grinding vats to be reduced to organic waste. The Hive had been a nightmare come to life, with the callously discarded bodies of Human babies experimented on only being one part of the show.

The footage jumped to different perspectives, with the XCOM soldiers talking in the background, but no one was paying attention to that. They were watching the cells of genetically mutated Humans; the machines where they were dissected while still alive; additional experimental footage the Sectoids had been so kind as to record, of them casually disassembling children and adults, all while they were still screaming.

Saudia’s gaze never wavered from the crowd, all of whom were either stunned, horrified, or most of them were looking away. One or two threw up in the background. “Shut it off!” Someone yelled, a sound between horror and sobbing. Saudia didn’t shut it off, but resumed speaking.
“This is what the Canadian government is willing to subject us to. They have seen what you are seeing now. They are under no illusions, but their response is still the same. They believe that we are more of a danger than these creatures doing these experiments to our species. It is said that evil only exists when good men do nothing. I have found nothing more evil than this. ADVENT is fighting to prevent this from being our future; they would welcome it, and accept this evil into our lives; meekly, without any fight, like cowards.”

Now came the final blow. “In light of the circumstances, evidence, and approval of the Congress of Nations, I have authorized the annexation of Canada, into a member state of ADVENT.”

The pretense of civility the reporters had was shattered, and they began yelling questions at her, or just talking in stunned disbelief. They had clearly not expected this. “ADVENT will be working to ensure this is done as efficiently and quickly as possible,” Saudia continued calmly. “Even as I speak to you now, our soldiers are arriving within Canadian territory. We have the support of the Commander of the Canadian Military, Logan Campbell. We have made formal demands for the remaining military forces to stand down, and for the current administration to surrender to our custody.”

Saudia allowed a pause. “For any Canadian citizens watching this, you are not our enemy. All that is required is your full cooperation with any ADVENT officials. We will be with you throughout this unfortunate incident. It is not what we wanted, but little choice has been left. We will not stand by and do nothing for that only serves to embolden the aliens. ADVENT will provide what your leaders could not; safety, security, and the willingness to fight for a future free of the alien threat.”

She took a step back. “There will be updates on the current situation hourly, and I look forward to us refocusing on the alien threat. There will be no questions taken today. May this incident be resolved peacefully,” she finished, giving the ADVENT salute with a fist over her heart, and every single Peacekeeper and soldier followed suit, and she imagined that the Commander was doing it as well.

But it was delivered, and her job was done.

Now it was time to see what happened next.

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*Edmonton, Canada*

Roman was unsurprised to see that there weren’t many opposing soldiers outside the city as ADVENT marched on it; the latter soldiers still deploying from the helicopters, and even more were coming from armored carriers within hours. The numbers seemed pretty small, twenty-five hundred ADVENT personnel, but all of them were soldiers or officers, and the chances that the Canadian military would put up a fight were close to zero.

It was also apparent that some of the citizens had no idea what was going on, as there was a small stream of traffic leaving the city, although the cars almost immediately turned around when they realized they were driving towards an army, rifles raised in their direction.

“The Canadian Army is standing down,” Hawkins updated as they began entering the city perimeter, their target being the Alberta Legislature Building. The entirety of the Alberta government was to be taken into custody, and there were other teams going to the various residences with arrest warrants. “Power is down in the city, they should be paralyzed.”

“Acknowledged,” Roman stated, motioning that they continue as they were approached by some
clear Alberta police officers. Their own weapons were drawn, and looked laughably pitiful compared to the firepower ADVENT had. “We’ve got law enforcement coming up. Not hostile yet.”

“We’ll see how long that lasts,” Galina muttered, raising her rifle in conjunction with the other soldiers as Roman raised a fist, ordering them to stop. The soldiers behind them froze, and steadied their weapons at the growing number of law enforcement. The chief officer, or at least that was who Roman assumed he was, stepped forward.

“You aren’t supposed to be here,” he said, a hand resting on his pistol. “We weren’t expecting ADVENT, and I’m pretty sure we would have known if you were permitted to enter the city. Especially with an army.”

“I am ADVENT Shieldbearer Roman Kostov,” Roman greeted. “By order of Chancellor Saudia Vyandar, Canada is to be annexed and a general call for surrender has been sent out to the current administration and military. We have received confirmation that the Canadian Army is standing down, and our mission is to take the Alberta legislature into custody.”

The man didn’t seem surprised, which told Roman that he knew very well what was going on. “And what would you expect us to do? Just let you take control of our city?”

“That is up to you,” Roman said slowly. “If necessary, we will take the city by force. You will die, and unless your department has gauss weaponry or explosive equipment, I doubt you will kill even one of us. I have orders to avoid unnecessary conflict, but I will not hesitate to put you or your officers down if required. Before you throw away your life, think very carefully about what you will accomplish.”

There were a few tense moments of silence. “I suppose you have taken down the city grid,” the chief said. “If we…stand down…will it be restored?”

Roman cut off external speakers. “Corporal, are you listening?”

“Yes, Shieldbearer,” Hawkins confirmed. “Assuming they aren’t lying, we can do that. But before that, we will need their assistance in arresting the legislature.”

“Understood,” Roman nodded, and turned his external speakers back on. “If you stand down, we will restore power; but only after the Alberta legislature has been taken into custody.”

The man’s face grew grim. “I suppose that might have to do.” He stepped back. “We will stand down. But only if you refrain from harming the civilians and treat the legislature…well.”

Roman gave a firm nod. “We have no intention of harming the civilians, assuming they stay out of our way. The legislature will not be harmed either, provided they submit quickly. Are they in the Legislature Building?”

“Yes, most are,” he confirmed. “There was an emergency session called after the…announcement. The building went into lockdown when the power was cut. They are still in there, and I have officers guarding the building.”

That was going to make things easier. Roman waved the soldiers forward, and they kept marching. “ADVENT appreciates your cooperation,” he told the chief. “It will not be forgotten, and power will be restored as soon as possible. Ensure that the citizens are out of our way, and all your officers stand down.”

“Will do,” he agreed, stepping back and allowing Roman to proceed, and with several hundred
soldiers at his back, they marched through the streets, following the small mini-map in the upper right corner of their HUDs. The civilians out on the streets fled and stumbled out of the way as they approached, some gasping and staring in shock at the soldiers invading their city.

Shock, more than anything else, stood out on their faces. Roman didn’t know if it was because of ADVENT invading, or aftereffects of the horrific images the Chancellor had shown. Roman almost wished he hadn’t decided to pay close attention to what had been shown. He’d seen a lot of utterly revolting things, but nothing even remotely at that level of cruelty.

Yet he was sure of one thing. Anyone who could stand by knowing that was what the aliens wanted to do to their species…they were traitors, and as far as he was concerned, just as evil as the monsters they were fighting. Roman didn’t know what would happen to the Prime Minister, but he hoped it was something suitable for the coward he was.

Maybe he should be stuck on the front lines, and see just what the aliens were doing there. Either way was a win. ADVENT got a soldier, or he would die. Roman didn’t care either way, and it might redeem him in some way.

“Do you think they knew?” Stanislav questioned as they rounded street corners, the Legislature Building in the distance, looking very similar to the US Capitol Building. “Or did they really hide what the aliens were doing from them?”

Galina snorted. “If they showed that footage, and the people didn’t immediately demand Canada join, I would be utterly shocked. I don’t care what you think, if seeing…that….doesn’t make you feel at least somewhat inclined to help, then you’re an apathetic and selfish monster. So no, I don’t think they knew.”

“I never thought I would agree with this,” Elena said quietly. “But ADVENT is justified here. It’s one thing to think we’re wrong, it’s another to avoid the fight altogether and deny any help to the ones fighting. Even China knows the aliens are dangerous.”

“And unlike Canada, they’re actually preparing to fight,” Konstantin nodded, a hard edge to his voice. Out of all of them, it was him that Roman felt was the most affected, surprisingly enough. Or maybe not, since Roman had known that several family members of his had disappeared nearly a year ago. It might have been aliens, or it might have been simple kidnap and murder.

Roman hoped it had been the latter. Being a captive of the aliens was a fate worse than death.

They were now on the steps of the Legislative Building, and the Edmonton officers silently nodded and stepped aside and let them approach the door. “Get this open,” Roman ordered, and several Engineers approached, and pulled out laser torches, which cut through the hinges and locks within a few seconds. Working in tandem, Roman and his team got the doors open, and marched inside.

“We have a list of names,” Roman told them after they reached the entrance. “Galina, Maksim, set up a processing checkpoint here. Everyone else, you are authorized to take any people within this building into custody. Bring them back here immediately and do not use unnecessary force, or you will be punished accordingly. If they attack you, you are allowed to subdue them, but there are no circumstances where you should have to kill them. These people are not soldiers, and don’t have gauss weaponry. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Shieldbearer!” They shouted in unison.

“We clear this floor by floor,” Roman stated, turned around and beginning to walk forward. “Disperse and find them!”
At the chorus of affirmation, the ADVENT soldiers began moving through the building, dismantling the last Canadian branch that stood in the way of victory. Some ballistic gunshots went off, and the shouts and furious words of the people within were nothing against the might of ADVENT as they arrested them, one by one.

And at the end, they raised the ADVENT flag above the Legislature Building, the city of Edmonton now under the control of ADVENT.

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Parliament Hill, Ottawa, Canada

“The Prime Minister and the gathered senators are inside,” Ethan informed Saudia as she walked up the steps of Parliament Hill, a place she’d been not too long ago. How things had changed.

Saudia had not been surprised in the least when the Prime Minister had ordered the police and Protective Service to stand down. A pacifist to the end, it seemed. ADVENT had quickly secured the city, and was now surrounding the building itself.

Stein stood beside her, several hundred Peacekeepers behind her, in her combat-ready armor, and one hand resting on her stun baton as she appraised the area before her. Saudia also wore an adapted version of ADVENT armor, since no one was going to let her go without some kind of protection, although she had the helmet tucked under her arm, since she found wearing it stifling.

“We are ready to move on your orders,” Stein stated, glancing at Saudia. “I believe it is time to finish this.”

“Agreed,” Saudia nodded. “Begin as you will.”

While Stein shouted orders, Saudia proceeded upward, where the Engineers had unlocked the doors, and opened them as she approached. The Peacekeepers marched inside, and immediately began arresting anyone they saw, and Saudia continued forward, Stein at her side as they made their way to the office of the Prime Minister.

ADVENT Intelligence had determined his most likely location, and it helped that Saudia had been here before, and had been sure to study the schematics well beforehand. “What are you going to do to him?” Stein asked as they walked. “There are several different options.”

“An early retirement and a gag order will likely be sufficient,” Saudia answered, as she had given some thought to this. “Murphy is not someone to be feared. If he is silenced, he will be forgotten about. I see no reason to push for the maximum penalty. The circumstances do not warrant it.”


“There is going to be enough backlash to this, regardless of the footage,” Saudia answered with a shrug. “Much as I would rather get rid of him for good, the circumstances and actions do not warrant execution or imprisonment, even if a case could be made for both.”

“Fair,” Stein said, looking back forward. “I’ll be busy in the Middle East for the foreseeable future. And there are problems in South America that warrant some kind of response. It will be useful to not have to prosecute a former world leader as well.”

Saudia flashed a small smile at that. “I do my best.”

“Here we are,” Ethan said, as they approached some double doors, the wood ornate and carved
into various shapes. He reached over and opened it, and they stepped inside to see Prime Minister Murphy sitting calmly in his seat, looking not the least bit surprised to see them.

“Chancellor,” he greeted calmly. “We meet again.”

Saudia’s face hardened. “I did warn you.”

“So you did,” he nodded. “I somehow believed you wouldn’t cross the one red line the world wouldn’t support. And yet you have. Masterfully handled, I must say.”

“The red line for most is the sight of children being cut up on alien tables,” Ethan spat, stepping forward. “And yet you lacked the conviction to even do that. History will not remember you well, Prime Minister.”

“We have covered this topic before,” Murphy dismissed Ethan’s words with an absent wave. “I feel no need to repeat it. I do not regret my stance. Regardless of the crimes of the aliens, that does not change that I do not believe ADVENT has the best interests of Humanity in mind. It does not matter what you show, the immutable fact is that you have invaded and captured a country that had done no crime other than to peacefully oppose you.”

“Except your peaceful opposition has hurt our efforts in America,” Saudia countered. “Your refusal to cooperate in any way has cost countless lives. You might not understand it, but there is blood on your hands for that. I didn’t want this, Prime Minister, but this is larger than your country, and especially you. If needed, I will annex the entire world if they oppose the destruction of the aliens.”

“All you have accomplished today is a hollow victory,” Murphy said calmly. “Today people have seen the brutality of ADVENT. You have gained many enemies, and now there will be those who will stand against you. Fear and terror cannot be sustained forever, and your little regime will collapse before your eyes. You are not the first tyrant who believed themselves justified, and you will pay the price one day.”

Saudia was sorely tempted to punch him in the face. She wanted to very badly. As it stood, Ethan seemed to want to as well and took a step forward. “No.” Stein said flatly, raising a hand, and Ethan stopped. “We have no need to listen to his words any longer.”

She stepped forward, a pair of handcuffs at the ready. “By order of the Chancellor, you are under arrest, Prime Minister Murphy. You will be tried and sentenced. Please extend your hands.”

Murphy stood, a slight smile on his lips. “Ah, Saudia’s attack dog. I’m sure this is satisfying for you, Stein. No. I will not comply. If you want to arrest me, you will have to drag me out into the streets so the world can see how you treat your prisoners.”

Saudia’s own smile turned cold, and she imagined Stein had a similar one on her face. “You will not be a martyr, Prime Minister. You will be removed and the people will forget about you. Understand that the current plan for you is a simple forced retirement, and an order never to interfere in public matters. Lenient, all things considering. Resisting arrest would upgrade the charges to twenty years in prison.” She tapped her armor. “All of this is being recorded. There will be no disputing the evidence. I ask you again, Prime Minister, please extend your hands.”

Murphy shook his head. “No. I will not be intimidated.”

Stein nodded, and turned to Saudia. “Let the record show repeated refusal to cooperate with law enforcement. Proceeding to subdue.” She whipped out her stun baton and slammed it into the bottom of the Prime Minister’s chin with a crack. The shock was set for the level just short of
lethal, and he was knocked out almost instantly, falling down unceremoniously.

“Good riddance,” Stein muttered, placing her baton back and she reached down and handcuffed the unconscious Prime Minister, then slung him over her shoulder. “Hope you enjoy your time in prison, Murphy. You and them will probably get along.”

Saudia didn’t feel too bad about the Prime Minister refusing to cooperate. Even when presented with no other options, he somehow still managed to make the wrong one.

Stein had summed it up well. Good riddance indeed.

There would be one less traitor to make her life more difficult, and hopefully this would send a strong warning to those who believed that they could sit out this war with no consequences. Canada had been the world’s wake-up call.

Now it would be interesting to see who was paying attention.

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The Praesidium, Barracks

Sierra felt she wasn’t alone in feeling complete shock as the soldiers crowded around the TVs in the barracks, watching reporters announce, their own faces blank with shock, that ADVENT was actually annexing Canada. Sierra hadn’t even known that was something they could do, at least legally. At the same time, she shouldn’t have been surprised at that.

Sierra glanced at Liliyane and Jasmine, both of whom were blank masks as they watched. The Commander had apparently been gracious enough to let them know that ADVENT was going to take over their country, which she supposed was a point for him. Still, that meant that XCOM was definitely supporting this act.

And from the comments in the room, he wasn’t alone.

“Well, I guess this will help us,” the CT agent Timur said as news that Edmonton had been taken arrived. “Sounds like the Canadian military is supporting this.”

Sierra gave him an incredulous look. “You say that like it’s a fucking shock. They would be torn to pieces if they fought ADVENT.”

“Didn’t seem to deter the Middle East,” Fakhr pointed out. “They had no chance and they still fought.”

“There really isn’t much that can be done about it,” Liliyane sighed. “The Prime Minister made his choice; this ultimately comes down to the government acting like morons.”

“Seriously,” Matthew said, leaning back on the couch. “All they literally had to do was say, ‘yeah, you can go through our country and get all the benefits of ADVENT protection without having to actually join’. Sorry to you and Jasmine, Lily, but they completely had this coming.”

One of the North Koreans, Min-Su Song, stroked his beard thoughtfully. Sierra found it really weird to look at him; for some reason, beards just looked wrong on Asians. “I’m rather surprised the military put up with this Prime Minister’s obvious incompetence for so long,” he commented. “I suspect that had ADVENT not acted, there would have been a military coup in the future.”

Sierra rolled her eyes. “The world doesn’t follow Best Korea policies,” she answered. “The point of
loyalty is following your leaders even when you disagree.”

“Is it though?” Oliver interjected, surprisingly. The older man looked rather tired as he spoke. “The Chancellor did have a point. Can anyone stand by in good conscience knowing that if ADVENT fails, we’ll be treated like…” he gestured at the TV. “That? At what point are you complicit by neutrality? Look, even I’ll be the first to admit one of the biggest problems of the UN was that it didn’t do anything. They could have actually improved the world several times, but they held back for one reason or another. Right or wrong, the argument about not disturbing the sovereignty of a nation… it was valid.”

He shook his head. “But even I don’t think that is even a comparable thing. This isn’t just about some superficial disagreement. This is about our entire species. Is it right for ADVENT to completely annex the country? Maybe, hell I’d say probably. But are they justified? I think so.”

There was a chorus of agreement from the soldiers, and Oliver’s word did have some weight here. He’d openly said he disliked some ADVENT policies, but if even he was thinking that this was acceptable, then that might make up the minds of some who were torn on the entire subject.

Like herself.

The footage had been horrific; completely and utterly brutal, and it made her want to kill some aliens right now. But she couldn’t help but wonder if that was really the reason ADVENT was annexing Canada, or simply a convenient excuse to silence a vocal critic.

The problem Sierra had was that, regardless of the Prime Minister being a moron, annexation wasn’t necessary. She could bet that after showing that footage, there would have been an uproar from the population, and they would have pressured the government to do something. Maybe not join ADVENT, but at least ally with them.

The majority of people, even Canadians, weren’t anything like the Prime Minister. They wouldn’t stand by quietly. That was literally all ADVENT had to do, and watch the people turn against him. True, it might not work, but Canada was genuinely a place where she felt where public pressure would have an impact.

Then again, she was a regular American woman with no idea how Canada actually worked, so she could be completely wrong. Still though, at worst all ADVENT had to do was just ignore whatever Canada had said and go through the country anyway. Really, what could they do about it? Help the aliens?

It would likely be a lot more acceptable than just taking over the country entirely. By doing it, ADVENT has removed whatever moral high ground they had over Canada, or anyone else for that matter. Sierra realized that it wasn’t the specific act that was bugging her, but that the entire event was unnecessary. It didn’t feel like anything more than ADVENT sending a message to the rest of the world which boiled down to ‘Help us or we’ll take you over.’

But Oliver did have a point. Could they really apply regular morality to a war where defeat meant death and worse?

She didn’t know.

“I was in the Sectoid Hive,” Carmelita suddenly said, absentmindedly sitting away from the majority of soldiers, fingers absentmindedly rapping on the table, a faraway look in her golden-rimmed eyes. “When we first took it, before we turned it into this…” she gestured around the room. “What they showed was only part of it. I saw the other archives the Sectoids kept.
Meticulous bastards. It made me sick, some of the stuff they were doing. No matter what we as a species do, we will never come close to the aliens in sheer cruelty.” She looked up at the rest of them, a hand curled into a fist. “Canada doesn’t matter. Their reasons don’t matter. I don’t care if the coward Prime Minister was executed on live TV by ADVENT, if it leads to the complete and utter annihilation of the aliens, then it’s completely justified. Traitors don’t deserve anything, and ADVENT has every right to wipe them out. The Chancellor was correct. There is no middle ground here. There are either those who are willing to fight, or there are traitors.”

There were murmurs of agreement, and although Sierra didn’t exactly agree, she didn’t think it was a good idea to bring up some counterpoints to that. Besides, Carmelita wasn’t exactly the most objective person when it came to the aliens. Then again, if their positions were reversed, Sierra couldn’t say she wouldn’t be the same.

Sierra sank back into her chair as the discussion turned to something else. This was far more conflicting than it had any right to be. Maybe she just needed to sleep.

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Forward Observation Station, Mars Orbit

Ravarian watched the four holographic screens showing various Human news stations reporting the latest developments. The voices and sounds all blended into one, and all were essentially saying the same thing. “Mute.” He finally said.

ADVENT making a public address had been expected, and he had not expected that it would be anything more than a reassurance.

He had not expected Saudia to announce the annexation of Canada. Not now at least. Ravarian was well aware that ADVENT could annex countries if certain criteria were filled, but at the same time, he had wondered if they would actually go through with it.

His lips pressed into a hard line as he watched the soundless newscasters. He hoped that Battlemaster was happy. Imperator or not, they had had the perfect opportunity to at the very least subvert Canada, if not outright convert it, and they had done nothing.

A perfect opportunity wasted for no good reason.

With this ADVENT now controlled the nearly the entirety of North America, with the exception of the small amount of cities the Collective controlled in the United States, and now that ADVENT had Canada, they could come from the north and bypass some of their stronger fortifications. What was worse was that Canada was not a place they could easily take either without a significant increase of soldiers.

Japan had been an excellent victory, but there were no signs of ADVENT slowing down. They would infuriatingly adapt, and had shown surprising foresight by quickly evacuating Japan, and preserving the majority of their forces. Korea would be the next obvious target, and from a logistics standpoint, it was one of the only ones available.

The three main targets from Japan were Korea, China, and Russia. While China could probably be dealt with relatively easily, it would take a significant amount of time to do properly, and there was simply no way a country of over a billion Humans would be taken in a timely manner. And that was time ADVENT would use to get stronger, or worst case, use China as a proxy which would eat up Collective resources while their centers of operation were continually protected.
At the same time, China would have to be dealt with eventually, and the Chinese were just as focused on defeating them as ADVENT, even if they clearly disliked their global neighbors. Infiltration was nearly impossible, at least anywhere effective. Their authoritarian regime was being utilized to its fullest effect, and Ravarian knew that after the first proper battle with China, they would immediately begin attempting to reverse-engineer their technology, or worst case, accidentally awaken psions.

Were China actively attempting to sabotage ADVENT, that might be beneficial to pit them against each other.

The problem was that they weren’t.

Hence, they were a potential problem in the future, but not necessarily one that needed to be dealt with right away.

Korea was going to be a complete warzone at the very least, and probably much worse than Japan had been. Unlike Japan, Korea was on an actual continent, and it could easily be supplied and reinforced, and reports from the Zararch indicated that the defenses gradually became more and more secure up until the border between North and South Korea.

No matter how he looked at it, Korea had the potential to be fought to a stalemate, even assuming ADVENT wasn’t trying to learn from their mistakes. Defenders always had the advantage, but the sheer amount of firepower in the country, as a consequence of both of them preparing for a war against each other, was not something that could be ignored.

The coast would likely be breached easy enough, but Seoul was going to be a nightmare to beat without Ethereal support. Which he supposed the Battlemaster would be more than willing to provide. But in theory it could hold out against their forces indefinitely. It depended on how much the Battlemaster wanted to devote to the conflict compared to other areas.

That wasn’t even considering North Korea.

Ravarian grew mildly annoyed at that. There was almost no information on it, but based on the previous North Korean army, which was clearly the basis for the base ADVENT soldier, they appeared far more advanced than South Korea, and he knew that Gwan had made a point to prepare for their invasion. Ravarian didn’t know who’d been the fool who’d ordered an attempted abduction in the country, but it had allowed the North Koreans to accelerate their research significantly after they captured it.

The unknown was the greatest risk here, and he was not expecting it to be an easy conquest without significant support. They couldn’t rely on Caelior or the Creator’s pets every time. And right now, Collective forces were displaying their weaknesses every time they fought, and just as the Humans were adapting, they needed to as well.

Russia he dismissed for the time being. Their strategy was going to need to change in the coming months. Winter was coming, and if there was one thing he had learned from Human history, it was that there were certain regions that should not be fought in during that time. Granted, that was for Humans, but Ravarian wasn’t confident that his soldiers would fare much better.

Mutons could survive in almost any environment, but performance was more important than simple survival, and they would suffer. Berserkers would be severely neutered in snow. Most Vitakara would perform at Human levels or slightly better, with the exception of Borelians and the Oyariah, although even the latter was questionable. Chryssalids would have the same problem as Berserkers, and Andromedons would perform depending on how bad the weather was. Even still,
their performance would be reduced.

The cold would also affect the vehicles, mostly because Cyberdisks, drones, and Sectopods had the slight issue of their joints locking in cold conditions, which was a design flaw the Sectoids had never bothered to correct since they rarely, if ever, fought in the cold. There were no seasons anymore on Helion-7, so it was likely that reality had never entered their minds. Since they were still being ravaged by the cursed XCOM bioweapon, they would be too distracted to upgrade their mechanical units.

That took Canada and Russia off the table in the short term, which meant the focus of the war should turn to the southern hemisphere. America could still be fought over, and they would have to begin targeting South America and Africa, the latter of which ADVENT was ignoring entirely. If they worked to build their influence in those regions in the winter months, they would be in excellent position to pen ADVENT in when spring came and the cold abated.

Provided there were no more questionable orders, like leaving Africa alone for some arbitrary reason.

Ravarian waved the haptic display off, and turned to leave. He sincerely hoped the Battlemaster and Imperator had learned their lesson here. ADVENT was taking this seriously, and contrary to what certain Ethereals seemed to believe, they should as well.

Speaking of which, he should have Quisilia check on Nartha. He’d been on Vitakar enough to do whatever he wanted. It was time to move him to Desolan next, since he had suspicions as to the level of dissent there.

If Quisilia wanted to use Nartha, use him they would. He sincerely hoped this wouldn’t turn out to be a mistake. Nartha wasn’t an idiot, and if they were too obvious, he would put the pieces together and…well, Quisilia would kill him.

So perhaps they were safer than he thought.

Still, never hurt to lessen the risk.

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Riyadh Garrison, Saudi Arabia

Betos had to admit that the Chancellor knew how to handle a situation. Prior to this, she didn’t believe that it could be possible to make the indisputable invasion of a peaceful country seem reasonable…but the images of some of the monstrous things that aliens were supposedly doing were the most effective way to illustrate the threat.

She had almost been convinced to ignore the entire event, because it seemed rather small in the face of the alien brutality. Until Mox had wondered if the footage was even real.

She sat at her desk, a blank piece of paper in front of her. It was what she was going to say, and she didn’t know where to start, or if she should just throw it into the trash and try to do her best here. But now that Mox had put the possibility in her head, she couldn’t just ignore it. She hated how much she was reminding herself of those idiotic conspiracy theorists who liked talking about how Israel was secretly running the world.

The thing was, she had seen what was probably the darkest side of ADVENT, and she could see the higher-ups agreeing that something like this might be justified. There were several question to ask.
Would ADVENT be willing to stage the alien experiments? Yes, if the way they handled the Middle East was any indication. Their only justification was that no one could (or should) remain neutral in the war, and they would do whatever they deemed necessary to lessen the public outcry. Second question:

Did ADVENT have the resources to stage it? Undoubtedly. Betos suspected that if this was staged, then it probably had been done long ago, and they were saving even more for situations like this. No better way to cover up your crimes than showing ‘evidence’ that no matter how bad it was, the aliens were much worse, and therefore it was ok.

It boiled down to the simple fact that she didn’t trust ADVENT. The soldiers were just doing their jobs, they weren’t who she had issues with. It was the leadership and government. The Chancellor, her cabinet, and the Commander who seemed to have a disturbing amount of influence over ADVENT in general, not just military strategy. Something was off with XCOM, but that was a completely separate issue.

But true or false, it had at least made her see the situation in a less emotional light. ADVENT had ultimately invaded a country that had done nothing against them except be uncooperative. Was it idiotic? Yes. Was it wrong? Not to her. The thing was that there were some things that were either immutable or they were not.

ADVENT supposedly respected the sovereignty of independent nations. But apparently only to a certain point. That wasn’t acceptable to her. You either respected nations peacefully staying out of it, or you did not. ADVENT couldn’t play both sides here, much as some people were arguing that ‘here they were justified’. That was debatable, but now ADVENT had opened up the door to doing it anywhere.

Saudia had painted a clear line in the sand, and the insinuation had been clear: You are with ADVENT, or you are a traitor. Following that line of logic, ADVENT could target any non-ADVENT nation based on that alone. How long until China was targeted? Argentina? Hell, any of the remaining EU nations? ADVENT wouldn’t need manipulative footage, fake or not, in the future.

What was really concerning was that it was going to be all too easy for this to become commonplace. Betos was convinced this was only the beginning. It would be shocking now, but after it happened four or five times, people would simply stop caring. Easier to not think on if the ones in power were really doing the right thing or not.

Far as she could tell, it was already becoming commonplace. The methods used by the SSR; the riots put down by Peacekeepers; now annexation. There was only so much she personally could justify in the name of security and for the greater good. At some point those were just excuses; ones that conveniently hid the true motives.

She did agree with Saudia when she’d said the famous line where evil only continued to exist when good men did nothing. Was ADVENT evil?

She didn’t know. She really didn’t.

It was scarily possible that Saudia and the Commander genuinely thought every action they were taking was completely justified. It was entirely possible that this wasn’t done out of selfishness or power, but it was done out of fear. The impression that she’d gotten from the Commander was that he’d been skeptical of the ability of Humanity to govern itself.

That’s really what it felt like, now that she’d thought of it. ADVENT had given up on Humanity,
and it was going to force it to become what they believed their species should be. She’d certainly seen some of the worst of Humanity, but also the overwhelming good that could be done when Humans came together. She wondered if the Commander and Saudia had spent too long focusing on the problems, and had forgotten that the majority of people were ultimately good and just trying to live their lives.

Maybe ADVENT wasn’t evil. Not quite. But it was going down that path. How long would it be until ADVENT was performing similar acts on aliens or even Humans, while declaring it was necessary and that it was justice for their crimes of opposing ADVENT? It was easy to justify villainous actions if the victim was not worth defending.

No one was going to protest the rights of an alien or criminal, else they would be branded sympathizers or worse. It was insidious dehumanization, or dealienization, whatever the alien equivalent was. The most disturbing thing about ADVENT, was that they knew what they were doing. For better or worse, they understood how to manipulate the masses. They knew how to justify their actions.

And they might even genuinely believe they were in the right.

Maybe they were.

Perhaps she was the one who was wrong.

Then again, the question had to be raised: What good was it, if in defeating the aliens, humanity ended up becoming just like them?

Then they had substituted one form of slavery for another. And no one would be left to point that out.

She had often wondered if the men and women of the horrific regimes like the Nazis and USSR had encountered a similar crossroads. They had seen the beginning, and perhaps the slow declination of the government into tyranny and genocide. But they stayed in the end, maybe because they felt they had to, or because they felt they could be one of the ‘good ones’. And ultimately, by the time they realized they were complicit and nothing could be changed, it was too late.

She had a choice now: Stay, and bear responsibility for whatever came next, good or ill, or refuse to be a part of it any longer.

She picked up her pen and began writing.

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The Praesidium, Engineering Bay

Nuan picked up her pencil, and tried once more to write on the notepad she’d brought with her.

[Arri, ye whw retuse tw be slavss]

[Wltf ouf filsh and blwd, let us boild a graat wail!]

Nuan scowled and rested her head back against the cool steel wall, resisting the urge to snap the pencil in two. The doctors had told her that it would take some time for her to regain enough motor control of her new prosthetics to write properly, but it was maddening that she could hardly put together even a remotely coherent sentence.
She grimaced as she looked through the lines above the ones she’d just written. It was sloppy and... *illegible*. She *knew* how to write, but her hands were not cooperating with her. There was some marginal progress as she saw where she’d started at the beginning, but the characters were still mostly wrong.

She punched the wall in a flash of anger, the bang lost in the crowd of sounds in the Engineering Bay. Didn’t do anything, but it made her feel slightly better, because it seemed that was all the prosthetics were good for. At least she didn’t have to worry about hurting her hand anymore. She looked down at the prosthetics, still finding the feeling somewhat surreal that this *actually* happened to her.

They were skeletal in a way, dark gray steel and the inner workings protected by sheaths of metal, but the joints exposed enough to perform every motion of the hand. She didn’t think that it was fully synched up to her brain either, because she’d try and do some motion, and it would either do it partway, or something else.

The first few times it had happened, it had nearly freaked her out that a part of her body wasn’t responding to her commands. The helpless feeling was almost as bad as when she’d woken up with no arms. Now she had arms, and sometimes they wouldn’t do what she wanted. What was truly bizarre, and what took some getting used to was that her arms *were* now metal and wires.

There were maintenance panels on her wrist, and it was fascinating in a morbid way for her to open up part of her arm, and look inside. Even stranger that she could sort of poke around inside and not feel a thing. The arms hadn’t been calibrated for pain, which she appreciated, but they could still detect differing temperatures and pressure.

Though even that was iffy. The prosthetics were *much* stronger than regular flesh and blood, and she’d unwittingly broken a few glasses and pencils by exerting too much pressure. She was keeping Human contact to a minimum until she was reasonably sure she wouldn’t accidentally hurt someone. At least she could punch things with impunity.

Well, mostly. It wasn’t recommended, but the doctor had insinuated that it helped people deal a little bit with the inevitable frustration. In moderation, of course. And *not* on people.

Ironically, she could still shoot a gun reasonably well, and suspected that was one motion they had been sure to hardcode in, or whatever; she wasn’t a prosthetics expert. But it would make sense that they would want to get her back in the fight quickly. The guns probably wouldn’t be crushed in her grip either, so that was a plus.

But she was really uncomfortable with fighting at the moment, since she didn’t completely feel in control of her arms yet. She’d get there, but she didn’t know how long that would take.

Still, she wasn’t going to sit around doing nothing. Thus, she was here. Sitting on the floor against one of the walls in the Engineering bay, the notepad on her legs as she tried to learn how to write again. It made her feel a little less embarrassed to do this where there weren’t other people watching.

It was difficult to concentrate much as well, since she was torn between a kind of fear and satisfaction. The Canadian Prime Minister had completely deserved to be deposed for his backwards opinions and outdated ideologies, and seeing him being hauled out had given her a strong feeling of *justice*. Saudia was right that anyone who wasn’t helping fight the alien threat—who didn’t have to be with ADVENT – was a traitor. That she could agree with wholeheartedly. Especially after the footage of the Sectoids experimenting on people.
It made the Praesidium a lot more menacing now, knowing that this was where such acts had taken place.

Yet at the same time, ADVENT had actually annexed a country.

China could be next, and that scared her. She couldn’t know if people on either side would understand that would be an unbelievably bad idea. She was expecting orders within hours demanding to know if she had known anything like that was coming. They were going to be freaked out, and rightfully so.

To the best of her knowledge almost no one had known this was even being considered, which meant that if China ever made ADVENT angry for some reason, they could strike without warning. And Nuan believed it wouldn’t be with a fucking press conference, but likely similar to how Pakistan was taken. No warning, no mercy, and no chance to stop it.

That ADVENT was going to get their own psionic program was cause for enough concern, but China was going to have to make some serious decisions in the future. She wasn’t appraised of the current technological level of the Chinese military, but last she checked, they were nowhere near ADVENT, and probably would remain that way until they made a deal with ADVENT or the aliens attacked the mainland.

The alien dreadnought they had would probably help with some developments, but it was nowhere near what was needed.

She took a deep breath. She was probably exaggerating. China wasn’t run by emotional people, they would handle this with level heads. They’d made it this far, they would endure like they always had, regardless of how much more powerful ADVENT was now.

Nuan unconsciously rubbed her forehead, and flinched when the metal fingers touched her head. She still wasn’t used to that. It felt like someone else touching her, even when it wasn’t. These prosthetics were going to take some getting used to, but she wasn’t convinced that everything about them would become normal.

But it was far better than having no hands at all.

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*Undisclosed Location, Argentina*

Konstantine Volikov sat alone in his armored fortress, the unofficial headquarters of his little band of survivalists, or terrorists, depending on who you talked to. Technically this was one of many outposts they’d built across the country, but he’d stayed at this one long enough to think of it as almost a home.

He found it rather quaint, and exactly how he liked it. Minimal distractions, well-hidden, and well-stocked.

He shut off the TV in disgust, not exactly for what was on the screen, but because he knew he was distracting himself from something far, far worse. He glanced over to where the dreaded things lay on the collapsible plastic table, as undisturbed as when Elena had set them down and strode off without a word.

No point in procrastinating any longer. The damn report wasn’t going anywhere, and there was no way he was subjecting his clients to reading twenty pages of complete and utter boredom. He stood and walked over to the table and grabbed the report, and threw himself back into the chair, already
preparing himself for the worst.

He opened the page with some trepidation, and sighed as his worst fears were confirmed.

4:15: Team arrives on site and begins immediate preparations. Jason comments on the weather.

4:17: Rifle assembly delayed due to improper packing of equipment. Expected time delayed by twenty seconds, mission time delayed by same amount of time.

4:18: Faraday makes derogatory comment towards ADVENT Peacekeeper forces.

He loved Elena, but she was without a doubt the worst person to write a report he could even conceive of. He was going to have to read twenty pages of completely useless information and hopefully pull out stuff that he actually cared about. At the same time, she was by far the smartest one of them all, and it took her only a few hours to put together one of these. Times like these having a perfect memory would be extremely useful.

Anytime he brought that topic up though, she never answered. Maybe she didn’t know either.

As he continued the mind-numbing slog, he reflected on what he did know. The attack on the Peacekeeper forces had gone exactly as expected, and the casualties had been much higher than he’d hoped. That being said, it was only a matter of time before ADVENT actually started deploying some forces against them.

He smiled at the thought; his lips set in a grim line.

He wished them luck with that.

There was a reason he’d been sought out by the Argentineans, and their unofficial alliance with several other South American countries. When it came to survival, there was no one better than Volk, the Grim Reaper himself. How he’d gotten the label, he still didn’t know, although it might have had something to do with how everyone sent to kill him ended up dead.

Still, it wasn’t something he particularly sought out. Until now, at least. He would have been content to stay in one place, living off the land in peace. Unfortunately, he knew a bit too much for certain people to let him go. Savvin didn’t like people asking questions, and it was only after fleeing to Alaska and killing the CT Squad sent after him that he’d let him settle down peacefully.

And so he’d lived in Alaska for quite a few years, until some mysterious assassins had tried to kill him again, and this time he didn’t know if they had been sent from Russia, or the United States. From what he’d learned, the US hadn’t exactly been happy that he’d taken up residence in their country. Their loss, and so he’d finally decided to do something.

If no one was going to let him live in peace, he’d make their lives a living hell. So he started what he simply called a survivalist group, a cover that allowed him to train operatives; operatives that would be capable of getting certain political dissidents out of dangerous situations. China, Russia, Africa; all these places were havens for corruption and oppression.

He’d established contacts, and soon his name had gotten around as someone who could extradite people on the run from oppressive regimes. Sometimes he went himself, most of the time he sent his operatives to extract people and bring them back to his little hideout. Very often they weren’t anyone important, low ranking military or intelligence; journalists, very rarely was it anyone with any sort of actual power.

Not that it mattered to him. He wasn’t in it for the money, even though there were quite a few
organizations (usually those who came to him with job offers) who paid him, anonymously of course. And generally not in something worthless like the paper they used so often, but currency he could use. Weapons, food, supplies.

It was an arrangement he quite liked.

He knew he was bound to get the attention of someone important sooner or later, but had not imagined it would be ADVENT, who had sprung up out of nowhere, and within a few days of seeing them at work, he’d gotten the hell out of the United States, and to the next best place which wasn’t a sudden ADVENT member state: Argentina.

From there he’d tried to appraise the situation. The aliens had certainly been a surprise, but had been something on the horizon; something that didn’t affect his actual work. He was more focused on making sure the people were alive, before figuring out what to do next. It had become very clear that ADVENT was going to bring in a dark age for political oppression.

Had he been a heartless CEO who only cared about profits, ADVENT could have translated to more business for him, but ADVENT only made him worried. Even after a quick few days of investigation, he’d learned that ADVENT was not like the incompetent dictatorships he was used to dealing with. It was dangerous just how competent everyone seemed to be. It was completely bizarre. No one was ever putting people like this in charge.

Typically, Volk saw several different kinds of governments; ones with smart people, but bad systems; ones with good systems, but idiot leaders; and of course, ones with bad systems and idiot leaders. He had never seen what he would call a competent government, but then again, he’d worked against the worst of the worst.

The smart ones he’d never had any need to investigate. Until now.

Then in a strange twist of fate, the Argentinian government had made tentative contact, and asked to talk. He’d suspected a trap, of course, and had taken appropriate precautions. But they actually kept their word, and had a very interesting chat. As he’d wondered, they were worried about ADVENT expanding and taking them over, and Brazil especially was in the hands of a warmongering tyrant, posing another threat.

He could see their problem.

Now they of course couldn’t deter ADVENT, but they could distract them, which was where Volk and his people came in. Terrorism might have been a deterrent to some, but considering the target, Volk personally had no problem with it. When the Peacekeepers had opened fire on the protesting crowds, that had solidified his path.

And now ADVENT was indeed taking over countries they didn’t like. Wouldn’t be too long before they turned their attention to South America. The goal wasn’t to destroy ADVENT, he wasn’t delusional, but to make their occupation too costly to consider expanding. Of course Argentina couldn’t be connected to them, and this was all unofficial, else ADVENT would consider that reason to invade.

But he was a completely independent force. ADVENT didn’t know anything about him yet, and he intended to keep it that way.

He shook his head as he kept marking down actual relevant stuff from Elena’s report. The whole Canadian situation was one of the most manipulative pieces of propaganda he’d ever seen. Well handled, which again showed he was dealing with actual smart people, and the masses were going
to completely buy it, and the media would fawn over the Chancellor’s words like the gullible sheep they were, or at least until their ratings went down and realized bashing her was more profitable.

Volk didn’t know if the footage they showed was real or fake. It really didn’t matter. Wow. Shocking that the aliens were experimenting on Humans. Completely unexpected. Volk sniffed at the hypocrisy. If ADVENT wasn’t experimenting on Humans themselves, or aliens for that matter, in just as horrific and brutal ways, he wouldn’t just eat the headscarf around his head, he’d eat his damn uniform.

That this was shocking to anyone was a sad state of affairs. That was what people in power did, while at the same time using similar tactics to vilify their enemies. He’d known Russia had done Human experimentation, China had done it, and the United States had done it. There was no way ADVENT wasn’t doing it either. And especially on aliens, but Volk felt that if they had shown one of the Mutons getting a similar treatment, there would be people cheering for it.

Because aliens weren’t people, after all.

Volk didn’t care one way or another about the aliens anymore. No matter what narrative ADVENT wanted to push, they weren’t any better or worse than humans and as far as Volk was concerned, they were just as much a threat to the people as the aliens themselves. For all he knew, the aliens actually weren’t the completely evil puppy-kicking monsters they said. At this point he was considering everything they were saying as propaganda; they could say the sky was blue and he’d look out to actually check.

His life certainly wasn’t boring.

But now he had a mission to complete: Ruin ADVENT in South America. A challenging task, but he had several plans, which would hopefully culminate in the assassination of the bitch Luana herself. He might actually take the shot himself instead of assigning it to Elena.

It would depend on how he was feeling that day.

They were in his environment now, and guerilla warfare was one the ADVENT military was ill-prepared for. He knew the forest, he and his people could survive for weeks with nothing, and they couldn’t. He was looking forward to when the game actually began.

The door creaked open, and he looked up to see Elena walk through, her Vektor rifle slung over her shoulder and mask hooked to her belt. The hood of her trench coat was down, and she didn’t waste time taking off the mix of armor and cloth to get into something more comfortable. Everything had gone well then. If it hadn’t she would have said something.

Elena Dragunova, the woman who was ironically the reason all of this had started. No matter what happened, he would never forgive the Russian government for meddling in her life, and he was quite certain they would have terminated her had he not figured out the reason she was always different.

It had been a longstanding question he’d wondered. If the Russians actually wanted to kill him and be done with it, or get their guinea pig back as well.

He unconsciously stiffened just thinking about it. Over his dead body.

Although that had almost happened a few times.

Still, she’d been with him from the beginning, and had been the reason they’d managed to survive the first years. It had almost been unsettling how Elena had been able to predict where and when
they might be attacked based on contingencies and plans she’d only seen once, five years ago. It also helped that it was impossible to lie to her, and she’d saved him more than once from disguised assassins or infiltrators.

In some ways, she reminded him of a computer. A perfect memory, efficient, and dangerous. She was nearly as good as him with a Vektor rifle, and much better at close-quarters fighting. Despite how she was the most boring writer for AA reports, she was the person you wanted to lead the operation itself, because everything was accounted for.

He scribbled some notes down and stood. He could finish this up later. “Did you find anything unusual?” He asked her, as she finished hanging up her trench coat and taking off her boots.

“Negative,” she answered immediately, not pausing. “ADVENT Peacekeeping forces are reacting within expected contingencies. According to information provided to us by Argentina, it is likely that after a maximum to two additional attacks of similar scale and death toll, they will request additional assistance from ADVENT Intelligence or State Special Response forces.”

Volk nodded. Expected. Of the two, Intelligence was more dangerous than the SSR. SSR agents were little more than Peacekeeper special forces, and lacked any subtlety whatsoever. Easily dealt with, and their helmets were likely similarly weak to headshots. Hopefully. “Good. I think you’ve earned a break. Besides, I want you with me when we meet with our contact.”

She carefully placed her boots under her trench coat, and after giving everything a quick look over, she looked back up to him and smiled for the first time. He still hadn’t figured out what randomly prompted that. There were patterns to everything she did, yet there were moments when she acted completely normal when she saw someone she cared about. “At what time?”

He smiled in return, and motioned to her head. After a second, she tilted it and he straightened a wisp of loose hair, pushing it behind her ear. “Eight o’clock, two days from now. I think in the meantime I’ll look over the identified potential recruits.”

“If you are interested, I identified several more,” Elena suddenly said, turning away and quickly striding to get a notepad which she immediately began scribbling on. “I have yet to identify closing factors to solidify potential recruitment, but their age, ethnicity, economic status, and identified political affiliations warrant further attention.”

She handed him the quickly written notes, of which there were names, locations, and other pieces of information that would make his job much easier. Leave it to her to remember the little facts like that. “I never have to tell you what to do, do I?”

“No,” she answered as if it was a question, and tilting her forehead towards him. “You taught me to always be vigilant.”

He leaned in and kissed her on the forehead, pulling her close, which she allowed. “And you learned it well.” He let her go after a few seconds, and she glanced expectantly up at him.

“Are you finished for tonight?” She asked, and he inwardly sighed. No, not quite, but he didn’t want her to stay up waiting for him. Unfortunately, it was impossible to lie to her, and he knew there was zero chance of convincing her that it was alright to sleep. It was just something she did that he’d given up on her stopping.

“Almost,” he said. “It won’t be long.”

She nodded and went to sit at the foot of their bed, while he went back to his chair and resumed
noting down relevant stuff from her report. He wondered how she resisted becoming bored, because he would sometimes stay up for hours until his job was done, and she’d still be waiting in the same place, with the same expression, never once expressing annoyance.

He wondered if at some point she just flipped through books, committing them to memory and going back through them at points like this. He wasn’t even sure that was how it worked; something to ask a neurologist should he ever meet one.

Still, he wouldn’t keep her waiting too long.

He finally was satisfied with his notes; he’d type up a short one-page condensed report tomorrow morning and send it with one of his operatives. He really considered charging extra for the hassle of going through all of this, but they wanted reports, and reports he would write. He did write them extremely passive-aggressively as a form of revenge though.

Done, he shut off the lamp by his chair, and went to the bed, and on cue, Elena looked up and laid out on the bed, and he finally laid down beside her. No sooner had he hit the final lights was she snuggled up against him like always, and both of them fell into a peaceful sleep.

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*Riyadh Garrison, Saudi Arabia*

Betos stood in full armor, Mox behind her as she looked out into the assembled soldiers, all of whom were similarly in full armor, although they didn’t know for what. She’d just ordered a general assembly, quite possibly the last order she would ever give.

There was the very real possibility that there wouldn’t be enough soldiers who agreed, and they might try and stop her. But if that was the case, then so be it. At the very least it would let people know that they were not a monolith of unthinking drones who followed orders as if by inherent programming.

Still, out of all the combat operations she’d been in, this was the riskiest thing she’d ever done in her life. She waved to the soldiers. “Helmets off if you wish, this isn’t formal.” She had her own tucked under her arm, and there was a symphony of rustles, hisses of air, and clicks as many of the soldiers followed suit.

She surveyed the crowd, seeing the men and women who she’d commanded over the past few months. There weren’t any that she would personally say were bad people, they were the people that ADVENT needed, but from what she’d seen, the ones with her were the exception, not the rule. She’d probably had something to do with that as well.

“By now you’ve probably heard the news of ADVENT ordering the annexation of Canada,” she began. “I’ve also assumed you’ve seen the video of the human experimentation they used to justify their invasion. I think there is no question that the aliens have performed horrific acts, and those are likely not the worst they are capable of.”

She paused. A speechmaker, she was not, but she could only do her best. “But this is not unique to just the aliens. If one thing has become apparent to me, it is that all organizations and armies have their own dark secrets. It doesn’t matter the nation or person, but on some level, everyone knows the difference between right and wrong, else they would not try so hard to hide their crimes.”

Betos started pacing before them, having their attention as her address was not going how they expected. “All of us are soldiers. I was from Israel. Were there things my government was
complicit in that were illegal? Very likely. I would challenge you to find a government that is not hypocritical in some way. But we’re all soldiers, we serve because ultimately, we believe they earned our loyalty, and we believe they are fighting for the greater good. We don’t have to worry about if we are on the right side or not, or question what we are doing, largely because we are not ordered to go against our internal sense of right and wrong.”

Betos stopped, and looked at the crowd, from left to right. “When the abuses are hidden, they can be ignored. We can go about our day ignorant, and that is how we rationalize it to ourselves, even though in some way, we suspect we are complicit in their actions by simply being loyal to them. But the question that I have been considering is what to do when the abuses are no longer hidden, but simply ordered and allowed.”

She shook her head. “ADVENT has allowed and ordered actions that I cannot support anymore. Their annexation of an independent nation, regardless of excuse, is something that cannot be ignored by me any longer. It is another in the list of abuse that has only become more apparent to me throughout our war in the Middle East.”

There was quiet muttering in the crowd now, but they were raptly focused on her. “We’ve been ordered to execute governments without capture or trial; we’ve been ordered to fire on civilian targets; we kill hostages to stop terrorists. All of this is done in the name of security and order. But at some point we can’t just ignore it any longer. ADVENT will not change, and for better or worse, their colors are on full display.”

She hesitated. “You can argue that it’s justified; that if such measures are not taken, we will die to the aliens. Perhaps, perhaps not. There is no way to know for sure. But I do know that ADVENT has taken the easiest path here, not necessarily the best. It is easier to kill than capture; it is easier to make war than peace; it is easier to command through fear than hope. It is a question of what humanity is to become.”

Her voice lowered. “I do not see a viable future for Humanity under ADVENT. I see an indisputable regime under the guise of freedom. The leaders of ADVENT are smart, they do not make the mistakes others do. Do they do it for the right reason? That I cannot say. But are they the best ones to lead humanity? No, that I do not believe anymore.”

“Every single one of us must make a choice here,” Betos continued. “Hiding behind the word *orders* is that of a coward. We are not programmed machines, we are beings of free will. There is no ambiguity that can be ignored. We either support ADVENT, or we do not. Ignorance is no longer valid, there can be no excuses. I do not support ADVENT, and will not be complicit in their actions any longer.”

Now people began muttering, forming a low rumble in the crowd. “I will leave today,” Betos said over the noise. “I have no doubt I’ll be considered a traitor, but that is something I’m willing to accept. But doing nothing is something I cannot do anymore, and I know I am not the only one who has had doubts about ADVENT. But action must be taken now before it is too late. So those that wish to follow me, you may do so.”

She paused as the crowd quieted down. “And if some of you feel compelled to stop me, then that is your right. But my choice is made. It is now time to make yours.”

She put on her helmet and walked forward, and the crowd of soldiers became silent and parted before her. Mox was right behind her, and there were no signs of anyone stopping her. A good sign, she supposed, which meant she at least might get out of here alive. Then a soldier stepped behind her and began following, then another, and soon it was a wave of soldiers at her back as she headed towards the compound exit.
Betos glanced back, and saw that there were a few staying in place, but they were making no effort whatsoever to stop the throng of soldiers leaving. At the edge, the two perimeter guards came up to her. Her announcement had been broadcast to the base, so they knew what was going on. But it appeared they did not intend to leave.

Betos raised a hand and the soldiers behind her stopped, as she faced the guards. “Are you going to stop me?”

There was a tense moment of silence. “We are technically not under orders to bring you in,” he said. “But I am obligated to report this at the next interval, which I believe, is in two hours. Unless of course the antenna was damaged.”

Betos had a sad smile under her helmet. “Thank you. And I understand.”

He nodded his head. “I’d leave as soon as you could. The Peacekeepers are not as lenient as we are. I doubt this will be allowed to be repeated.”

Betos gave a single nod of acknowledgement. “No, it will not.”

“Good luck, Marshal,” he said, stepping aside. “But don’t forget who the real enemy is, and no matter what you believe, it is not ADVENT.”

Betos didn’t answer, but motioned for the soldiers behind her to load up in the Humvees and helicopters on-base. It was going to be a good while before they arrived at their destination. “I hope your friends are ready for us,” she told Mox beside her. “I didn’t think so many would join me.”

“I think they’ll be rather happy,” Mox said. “And if they don’t have room, well, they’ll make some.”

“I hope you’re right about this,” Betos said quietly. “I’m not a diplomat.”

“You convinced several thousand soldiers to leave,” Mox chuckled. “Getting a few African countries to work together should be simple.”

“I guess we’ll find out.” Betos said as the sun set in the distance.

Next stop: Africa.

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END OF ACT I

Chapter End Notes

And so Act I ends, and I’m rather happy with how it turned out. I admittedly did not expect it to be quite this long, but it was needed and sets up things nicely going forward. So now that this is something of a break, I think I'll write something up on what exactly my plan is for this going forward.

At this point I'm planning at least seven acts for the Advent Directive, and how long each of those acts lasts will vary. It's also entirely possible I'll add another one later on if I think it needs it. The short version is don't expect this to be finished anytime soon,
and I do have every intention of finishing it, one way or another. Without giving too much away, there is a lot of stuff going to happen in Act II.

The Reapers and Skirmishers (Who are not yet going by those names) are going to play a big role going forward, and Betos especially is going to have an extremely hard road ahead of her, as ADVENT isn't going to take her desertion lightly. The annexation of Canada is going to have lasting repercussions, and there is going to be a focus on the situations in other regions, especially in South America and Africa. ADVENT of course is going to keep doing what it's doing, but it's not going to be as easy going forward, as the aliens are going to actually try and be subtle. Or at least, more than they are.

And speaking of the aliens, more stuff with Nartha is actually coming, a lot more Ethereals are going to be introduced, and the Hunter and Assassin will make their debut relatively soon, though there will obviously be some different things from the expansion. Speaking of which, I'm not doing some of the more questionable things like the way the Chosen don't die, the Lost, and I still haven't decided if I'm going to actually put in the Templar psi-blades or not. Oh, and Geist will be showing up too.

And if any of you were unaware, I'm also writing a supplementary codex-like series that expands on quite a few topics, people, and units discussed in the story, and is usually updated after each chapter is posted with three or so files. It's in my profile as for those interested. You get to see Quisitia be snarky sometimes, so that may be incentive enough for some of you. Aliens and the Internet II will also be written sometime before Act II is finished, and maybe another file in a similar vein.

Thanks again to everyone reading this and providing their feedback. I plan for it to only get better from here.
Residence of the Chancellor, Switzerland

Saudia just needed to rest. Being the Director of EXALT had been an exhausting amount of work, but being the Chancellor was somehow more strenuous than that. And while she welcomed it to an extent, they were actually changing the world after all, there were some days where everything threatened to become overwhelming.

And today was one of those days.

The designated home of the Chancellor was very luxurious, and she’d ordered it to be designed as somewhat reminiscent of the Bastion, with the carpets, chandeliers in a red and gold color scheme. It had some familiarity compared to being far away from what had been her home for decades. It was a little overly large for her tastes, especially since the extra space wasn’t used much, but right now she didn’t care.

It occurred to her, as she opened the door, that she really hadn’t spent that much time here to begin with. Unsurprising in retrospect, since she got the majority of her sleep on planes, convoys, or just sleeping on couches in her office. Vacation was not something she was expecting to take anytime soon.

“Set up the usual perimeter,” she ordered her guard, not needing them to follow her inside. They nodded and began taking positions as she stepped inside. At least Ethan wasn’t on guard tonight, but he’d probably spent most of the day plotting out the guard rotations for her packed schedule of the next week.

That would have been enough of an ordeal, but the recent events had given her a lot more to be concerned about. Aside from the ever-present alien threat, which could strike from anywhere at any time, she now had to deal with the upcoming fallout from Canada, to some extent the Middle East, and now this desertion of soldiers.

Just thinking about the utter stupidity of pulling a stunt like that now was infuriating.

Unfortunately, she wasn’t sure it was wise to start a war with Africa to ensure that each and every one of those traitors was captured and executed. There were too many other, and somehow larger, concerns to deal with. The traitors could be obscured and their actions mitigated. It was the more visible issues that were pressing.

When those were dealt with, then the traitors could be dealt with.

“If you just want to go straight to bed, I won’t blame you,” Ethan said, walking in, dressed in a very casual gray shirt and shorts. He tossed the tablet in his hand onto a nearby couch once he saw her.

“Or you could go and shoot some targets. I know I’d want to.”

“What the fuck were they thinking?” Saudia growled, finally feeling free enough to speak her mind. “Do they not know we’re fighting a war?”

Ethan pursed his lips, took her stiffened form and guided her down to one of the leather couches in the room, which she sank into immediately. “The more likely explanation is that Betos was simply not fit to command, and she was given more authority than she should have had, despite her being
a red flag.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Saudia sighed wearily, closing her eyes and resting her head back. “Laura told me she believed that, despite the reservations of some soldiers, the aliens would keep most of them focused on the big picture. On the actual threat.”

“Can’t really blame her,” Ethan admitted, putting an arm around her, which she held onto with the opposite arm. Human contact had really been missing from her life the past few weeks. Handshakes didn’t cut it. “Betos is just a very short-sighted and naïve woman. At least it’s been mostly contained.”

“Except that they’re still out there,” Saudia said. “And I get the feeling they’re not going to stay quiet. They’ve somehow made us the villain in this, which is ludicrous.”

Ethan actually chuckled. “I think that her effect will be minimal. There has been near-universal condemnation of any mention of that story from the other soldiers, especially those who’ve actually fought the aliens. And the public will likely feel the same way, especially after you showed the video from the Sectoid hive.”

Saudia opened her eyes, staring up into the dull orange light of the chandeliers above. “I don’t know how long that will last though. They’ll be shocked for a few days, but they’ll go back to being a potential concern if the media decides to become hostile again.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Ethan mused. “Just like how France was suddenly wanting to join us after they were attacked, I think seeing what you showed might have the same effect on at least ADVENT media. I doubt the foreigners will care too much.”

“Hassan is going to have an interesting report for me,” Saudia muttered, adjusting her body to get more comfortable. “Things can’t stay the same now. But at the very least we shouldn’t have a Canada situation again.”

“Depends the reaction when we locate the traitors and demand we turn them over,” Ethan said. “Is any nation going to risk a few thousand soldiers over their precious sovereignty?”

“The problem is that unless she goes to a border country, we’d have to go through quite a few countries in Africa to do it, none who are particularly friendly to us. We can beat them, but it’ll take time we can’t afford to waste now.”

“Mhmm,” was the answer, and they both fell silent.

“I sometimes miss EXALT,” Saudia finally said after a few minutes of silence. “It was much simpler. Not a crisis every single day. Our enemies were usually beatable. Now there’s none of that.”

Ethan looked to her. “I suppose that’s the cost of being the most powerful woman in the world.”

“True,” she conceded, smiling for the first time since she’d arrived. “I suppose it should be more challenging…” her voice dropped. “But the problem is that this isn’t an enemy we can easily outsmart or outmaneuver. It’s a mismatch in every sense of the word. It’s not futility, not yet at least, but you saw what one of those Ethereals can do. And there are at least a dozen more we don’t know about.”

“But they can be killed,” Ethan reassured her. “Everything can be. It’s just a matter of finding the right strategy or weapon. Once we have our own psions…the playing field becomes much more even.”
Or it’ll trigger a convergence of multiple Ethereals, Saudia thought grimly, though didn’t voice that thought. There was enough depressing news without her adding to it. “I suppose at worst, we’ll avoid ending up like the Vitakara or Mutons.”

“Really, I’m against ending up with anything that results in everyone dying,” Ethan said lightly. “And I think we both should rest before we think about any more depressing threats.”

“Good idea,” Saudia stood and gestured to the second floor. “I assume everything is set up?”

“Yep,” he said. “Housekeepers do their job well.”

“I’ll see you in a few minutes then,” Saudia said, heading towards there. “I need a shower first.”

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ADVENT Intelligence Control, United States of America

Saudia and Elizabeth stood in front of a screen which displayed the figure of Helsa Betos on it, as well as some additional information about her. Aside from the apparent decision to shave her head, there was nothing about her that stood out. No marks, tattoos, or anything that said anything other than normal.

She looked rather plain, in all honesty; not what Saudia was expecting. Although she apparently was charismatic and was clearly intelligent, so appearances could be deceiving. Yet there was very clearly something off about her just from the picture. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but it was almost like Betos was too ordinary.

She’d have to think about it some more. And it wasn’t relevant to the issue. “Did you find where she is?” Saudia asked Elizabeth, not looking to her.

“She has an army several thousand strong,” Elizabeth answered, almost sarcastically. “It’s not hard to locate it. The problem is that Betos isn’t an idiot. Even if no intelligence agents deserted with her, she was a Marshal. She knows at minimum the basics of how we operate, and my agents are keeping well back.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Still unknown,” Elizabeth audibly sighed. “She’s still going deeper south, but the list of probable countries is growing shorter by the day. She quite likely wants to establish some kind of alliance with one of the countries there. Only a few might be acceptable for her. Nigeria seems the most obvious, but perhaps Sudan or Chad as well. I would suggest South Africa, but that seems too far south for her right now. She’s on a timer and knows it.”

Saudia’s lips twisted into a humorless smile. Ironic that her birthplace would house an army of traitors. “I almost regret we didn’t invest more into ensuring their government was in our control back in the day,” she said, not directly referencing EXALT, since even here it wasn’t entirely safe from listeners. Well, it probably was, but she didn’t like taking chances. “I never viewed it as a worthwhile investment. It is pitiful just how corrupt the entire continent is.”

“Tell Europe thanks for that,” Elizabeth muttered. “But in this case, I don’t think that will actually hurt us. You saw the report?”

Saudia nodded. “We can only hope events play out like that.”

Elizabeth twirled a pen between her fingers absentmindedly as she thought. “Africa, right now,
does not care about the aliens. They’re stuck in their decades-long feuds and their politicians, or rather, dictators, are corrupt beyond measure. So what do you think is going to happen when one of those countries gets their hands on gauss level weaponry?”

“Point it at the nearest enemy and fire,” Saudia answered dismissively. “I know how they work. I grew up there, remember. If Betos starts an African Civil War, it might actually help us in the long run. Depending on who Betos encounters, she might decide to take action herself. Although then she would be an undisputed hypocrite.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Betos is an intelligent woman, in the traditional sense. But she has a much greater flaw, she is a good woman. She is naïve and ignorant as to how the world works. Whatever fantasies she may have of African nations are likely false. How exactly is she going to maintain her self-righteousness when she deals with countries that deal heavily in human trafficking? Ethnic cleansing? Africa is almost as much of a mess as the Middle East in some respects, but the battles there are small; skirmishes between natives or governments putting down opposing parties of citizens.”

Elizabeth sounded even more amused as she continued. “She is going to have to make a choice. Either ally with the abhorrent leaders there, or force change to happen. And if she does the latter, what exactly differentiates her from us who she supposedly despises? If the former? Well, the headlines write themselves,” she raised a hand in the air, as if spelling out a headline. “‘Traitor to Humanity makes deal with known slavers’ fitting, I’d say.”

Saudia felt a little better about the situation, now that it was clear this was not going to turn out like how Betos was expecting. “And the reasons for her desertion have been kept quiet?”

“One of the first things me and Stein did,” Elizabeth assured her. “While I doubt it would have actually started mass defections, it would have created unnecessary problems. All the majority know is that Betos is a traitor that abandoned them when she was needed. As you can imagine, the majority are furious at her and for good reason.”

“And what of her soldiers that didn’t defect?” Saudia asked.

“Also handled,” Elizabeth nodded. “They have all agreed not to share actual details, and are being transferred to different Legions at the moment. Many of them were helpful. The media will talk about this for a while, but they don’t have enough information to keep the story going. Not to mention there are actual events to cover that are not rumors.”

Saudia pinched the bridge of her nose. “And I suppose the fallout from Canada has started?”

“Yes, but some of it was inevitable,” Elizabeth answered, starting to pace. “Your presentation of the alien experiments has quelled most of the civilian dissent that would have come up otherwise. Public approval took a small hit, but there were quite a few that were actually supporting the action. The Canadian population is torn between outrage at us, or outrage at the former Prime Minister for not doing something. They will not be a problem.”

“Good,” Saudia said approvingly. “It’s nice to know we’re not facing an immediate civil uprising.”

Both women chuckled at that.

“I find it funny that the European media has now taken up the ‘the people must act to change ADVENT’ tactic,’” Elizabeth said with some amusement. “Really, what exactly are they going to do? March in protest? Attack us?”
“I think they forgot peaceful protest is legal,” Saudia said, feeling good enough to smile. “And it’s simple fear-mongering. What they still don’t realize is that an alien invasion takes priority. Everything else is secondary. If the image of humans being experimented on doesn’t make them realize that, well, then very little will. They will be reformed once the EU officially joins ADVENT.”

“In a refreshing change of pace, ADVENT media is actually deciding to focus on the aliens,” Elizabeth continued, grabbing a remote and switching to CNN. “The other part is all the pundits talking about the annexation and if it was ‘justified’ or not. But they’ve run stories on Japan, Portland, and France. Interviews with soldiers and everything. I doubt it will last, but at least the ones who control what’s broadcast aren’t completely blind.”

“And how are our operations against the aliens going?” Saudia asked, turning fully to Elizabeth.

“In comparison to everything else, very good,” she said. “Operations in Australia are proceeding very well, and the rest of Oceania is following suit. It’s only a matter of time before they appropriately respond, but all of our agents are prepared for that. Unfortunately no one in Japan yet, but given how tight the aliens have locked it down, it’s understandable.”

“We need more intel in the States,” Saudia said, turning back to the screen. “Information on alien positions, numbers, and plans will be crucial when we launch our counterattack.”

“Noted, and will do it,” Elizabeth confirmed, pulling out her tablet and making a note. “The problem is that the aliens have a tendency to make every city into a fortress. Infiltration is difficult, but possible. There is another potential concern to be aware of. There seems to be a new kind of terrorist force working in South America. Specifically in Bolivia.”

Saudia frowned. “Explain.”

“We don’t know that much about them,” Elizabeth admitted, setting her tablet down again. “That’s the problem. They show up, hit really hard, and seem to vanish. These aren’t suicide bombers, or the old Islamic extremists. These appear to be almost professional assassins. Numbers in each attack range from one to as many as four, and to date, we haven’t killed a single one. They all appear to be excellent marksmen, and kill through primarily headshots and IEDs.” She grimaced. “The attacks have been few, but they’ve caused enough damage to warrant attention.”

That was concerning. “And you don’t know who they could be?”

“Descriptions of their attire don’t sound familiar,” Elizabeth shook her head. “Some kind of gas mask, trench coats, some apparently have body armor. One of the rare images shows a weapon that looks suspiciously similar to a Russian rifle.”

Saudia’s eyebrows furrowed. “Russia?”

“I doubt they’re behind this,” Elizabeth refuted. “But at the very least this weapon was based off of it. A knock-off perhaps. I showed the picture to a Russian weapons expert and he’d never seen that kind before. What’s also interesting is that they appear to have no goals, or stated motivations, other than attacking us—and only us.”

“They’ve just hit military targets?” Saudia surmised.

“Yes,” Elizabeth confirmed. “Though this might only be because the number of attacks has been small. But we don’t know for sure, and that is the problem. It is possible this group is independent, but they seem too well-armed, well-trained, and dangerous to not be affiliated with someone. The
question is who.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if they were independent, given how Luana has been acting,” Saudia sighed. “I thought Stein warned her to restrain herself.”

“She did,” Elizabeth said with a shrug. “I believe Luana is under the impression that because she allied with XCOM and joined ADVENT so quickly, that makes her immune to consequences. While she has brought some measure of order, I feel she’s causing more harm than good there.”

“She hasn’t officially broken a law yet,” Saudia reminded her. “But I will warn her that if she doesn’t restrain herself more, I’ll order her to be recalled. If you don’t mind, I’d ask you create a case supporting that order, because I have a feeling she’s going to force my hand sooner than later, especially if these terrorists continue attacking.”

“Copy that,” Elizabeth said with a nod. “The point is that I’m going to be dedicating a few agents to trying to figure out who is behind this. I doubt we’ll find them in the forests, but if they are being supported by a foreign government, that I can find much easier.”

“Then do it,” Saudia ordered. “And in the meantime, I’ll deal with the other issues that are left.”

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Edmonton Garrison, Canada

It was a stark contrast to the Middle East, at least to Roman’s eyes.

For the most part, the Canadians were taking what was essentially an occupation very well. Either ADVENT was extremely efficient, or the citizens just wanted some normalcy to return, but within a few days most were back to their day jobs, most of which didn’t rely on the government. Not to say there wasn’t one, but ADVENT was handling that.

And so they’d been helping establish an actual Garrison outside the city the past few days. Roman really was impressed by just how fast ADVENT could be when they really wanted to. The actual places for them to bunk were constructed within a couple days, even if it was just a shell. Roman didn’t mind it that much, all of them were used to sleeping on uncomfortable beds.

But now it was shaping up to actually be able to defend against an attack. Watchtowers were going up, although they weren’t like any he’d seen before, and they weren’t just restricted to the Garrison itself. They were being built around the city perimeter.

“[Keeps,]” Konstantin said to his side, as they all stood guard, watching the engineers and laborers at work.

Roman glanced to him. “[What?]”

“[Keeps,]” Konstantin repeated, gesturing to the towers. “[That’s what they remind me of. Those massive towers back in the Middle Ages, which were the last line of defense, and extremely difficult to penetrate.]”

Roman actually found that an apt comparison. If said Keeps were at least eight stories tall, with each floor packed with laser and gauss weapons, and culminating at the top with a number of AA equipment and missile defense systems which could only be described as ‘overkill’.

Although with the aliens, ‘overkill’ might not even be enough.
“[It’s certainly impressive,]” Maksim commented. “[Fits right into the peaceful cityscape behind it.]”

“[You mock, but I bet those towers will come in handy if the aliens ever attack here,]” Roman chided. “[Do you want to go up against that thing?]”

“[Oh, no, I like it.]” Maksim corrected. “[But even you have to admit it’s not exactly fitting in.]”

“[At least this went off so smoothly,]” Galina added, taking the opportunity to clean her weapon since absolutely nothing was going on. “[If this were the Middle East, the Peacekeepers would be hunting down insurgents.]”

“[Luckily the Canadians are a bit more civilized,]” Stanislav said approvingly. “[And smart. A few days, and they see we’re not whatever lunatics the Prime Minister tried to sell them. Besides, I think some of them hate the former Prime Minister more than we did.]”

“[Wouldn’t you?]” Galina asked. “[If I saw my leaders refusing to do anything when…that…was happening, I’d happily join the coup myself. No wonder the military helped us. They aren’t cowards.]”

“[Well said,]” Roman complimented, nodding her way. “[Luckily people like the good PM are being dealt with. Do we even know what happened to him?]”

There was a brief pause. “[I think he was taken away for a trial.]” Anton said, his voice uncertain. “[Probably military and behind closed doors. Either way I’m pretty sure we’ve seen the last of him.]”

“[Good riddance.]” Maksim said, raising a mock glass in a toast. All of them chuckled.

“[I’m more curious about how long this was actually in the works,]” Stanislav mused. “[There was no way this was decided in a few days. How does the Chancellor authorize an annexation anyway? Just gives the order?]”

“[No, it’s actually pretty complicated,]” Elena spoke up, standing in a more relaxed position. Even if she hadn’t told him, Roman knew she quite liked the country for the sights alone. “[From the guidelines that are public, there are two ways of ordering an annexation that I know. One is directly from the Chancellor, but they have to have pretty much every single organization sign off on it. So the Army, Navy, Peacekeepers, Intelligence, et cetera.]”

“[And the second?]” Roman asked.

“[I’m getting to that.]” she chided. “[The second is through the Congress. From what I can tell it’s introduced like normal legislation, and they vote on if it should be approved. It has to be a very solid case, otherwise that supposedly has repercussions. None of this is public either, everything is done behind closed doors. And if they do pass it, all that is needed is for the Chancellor to authorize it.]”

“[Interesting.]” Galina said. “[So I wonder which one the Chancellor chose?]”

“[She said she was ‘authorizing’ it.]” Roman recalled. “[Might be the wording, but it sounds like this went through the Congress in that case. Makes it look more diplomatic too; like she isn’t doing this as some kind of power grab.]”

“[If that’s the case,]” Galina said slowly. “[It means that this was planned well before Japan. It might have just been a coincidence then. I wonder what made ADVENT angry enough to decide
annexation was a justified option, beyond the government acting like idiots?"]

“[Even if Japan hadn’t happened, they’d probably still get support,]” Konstantin said firmly. “[They knew the aliens were doing that kind of stuff to us and still decided to do nothing. You don’t get to be neutral in this war. It’s one thing if they help us, but don’t want to join, but something completely different if they refuse to help at all.]”

“[That’s what doesn’t make sense,]” Elena sighed. “[Why did they not just let us go through and flank the aliens on the West Coast? It costs them nothing and we respect that. Is it that much to ask?]”

Galina snorted. “[The very short answer to that is because the Prime Minister was a pacifistic coward. End of story. He was a traitor and was dealt with like one.]”

“[Hey, on the bright side, at least he didn’t desert,]” Maksim said with false levity. “[Did all of you hear about it? It just broke a few hours ago.]”

Roman swung his head sharply to the marksman. “[Excuse me?]”

“[Seconded,]” Galina added.

“[Well, apparently nearly an entire garrison stationed in Saudi Arabia just left,]” Maksim explained, his tone becoming audibly angry. “[I wish I was making it up. But yeah, they honestly just deserted. Speculation is that they went somewhere in Africa.]”

There was a stunned silence. Roman coughed. “[I genuinely hope they were all mind-controlled to do that.]”

“[No psionics that have been reported,]” Maksim said grimly. “[Not that ADVENT would confirm either way, but I don’t think that’s the case. No official motivations were given, but with the timing, I wonder if the annexation had anything to do with it.]”

“[Fucking traitors,]” Galina growled, standing up and completely tense. “[Did they forget we’re fighting a war!?]”

“[No Galina, remember, ADVENT is a fascist dictatorship and the actual enemy,]” Anton mocked, although he was clearly angry as well. “[Sarcasm, but I’ve actually seen posts like that online. That being said, I didn’t realize that those idiots were actually in the military.]”

Roman found it hard to comprehend why any soldier would desert now of all times. Were they scared? Too selfish? He couldn’t actually believe they genuinely deserted because they felt that ADVENT of all things was the enemy. The complete lack of logic to arrive at that conclusion was mind-boggling. “[Did they not see the video?]” He wondered out loud. “[Did they not see Japan, the United States, or Australia? How…]” He trailed off, shaking his head. “[What are they thinking?]”

“[I think,]” Galina said slowly. “[That they actually want to die, and they don’t want to get killed by aliens, so they make ADVENT hunt them down instead.]” She shrugged. “[Go and tell me that doesn’t make as much sense as whatever these traitors were thinking.]”

“[Suits me fine,]” Maksim agreed lightly. “[Well, I’m certainly rooting for ADVENT Intelligence to hunt them down. Not sure if I want them shot on sight or brought back alive for a highly public trial.]”

“[Waste of bodies,]” Stanislav shook his head. “[Put those traitors to something useful. Have their
sentence being sent to become Human test subjects. Preferably to XCOM. Get some use out of them before they die.

“[Is that even a thing?]” Konstantin asked, Roman could imagine his eyebrow being raised.

“I actually think so,” Stanislav nodded. “[I was going through one of the Peacekeeper documents and one of the substitutes for the death penalty was ‘usage of the convicted for civilian or military experimentation’ or something like that. If anyone deserves capital punishment, it’s traitors.]”

“If I had a cup, I’d drink to that,” Maksim said approvingly. “[Hopefully they get killed by some disease in those jungles.]”

While that would be an ironic death, Roman was much more in favor of bringing them back, putting them on trial, and then...hmm...either means of capital punishment would be good. But while Stanislav made a good point about not wasting bodies, Roman knew he would quite enjoy putting down traitors.

And the best way to carry that out was with a bullet between the eyes.

He almost hoped he’d get that opportunity. If he wasn’t killing aliens, killing traitors would be nearly as satisfying. Maybe even a little bit more.

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ADVENT Command, Switzerland

Saudia was expecting Hassan to be somewhat miffed at the latest developments, but at least he had been informed about them beforehand. Still, she wasn’t surprised her Chief Diplomat wasn’t exactly pleased with how things had gone.

“Working with you is not boring,” was one of the first things he’d said. “I can say that much.”

Now that they were settled, and were standing in front of a holomap, Saudia waited for him to begin. “The good news is that the damage isn’t as bad as it could have been,” he started. “Annexing countries tends to get people nervous. Smart to add some emotional weight to the situation and give some plausible reasoning behind it.”

“Of course,” Saudia nodded. “Now what have been the major changes?”

“Well, France is fully integrated into ADVENT,” Hassan began, motioning to the map of Europe. “Prior to the annexation, that was a massive blow to the EU, and even afterwards there is a lot of talk of more countries joining us. Some of it is due to fear, but some of the smaller nations think they will have more influence with us than sticking to the continually weakening EU.”

“They would,” Saudia said. “No question.”

“A fact I’ve been stressing to make when talking with representatives,” Hassan nodded, looking rather pleased. “Iceland, Ireland, and Poland are in talks with joining, and if they leave, more will soon follow. The main holdouts that remain are Spain, the UK, Finland and Sweden. The rest appear to be in a more neutral position.”

Saudia’s brow furrowed. “Curious. Why those specific ones?”

“Presumably because they are heavily tied to the EU and retain quite a bit of influence over that. All of which would be lost under ADVENT. That, and in the case of Spain and the UK, they don’t
like the idea of not being independent. Finland hates Russia, and Sweden is more ideologically opposed to ADVENT, similar to Canada.”

At least Sweden wouldn’t give her nearly the same problems. Saudia couldn’t envision a scenario right now where they became relevant. At least not unless the war arrived in Europe. “They’ll come around eventually. All we need to do is keep weakening the EU bit by bit. If we start a domino effect, the rest will fall into place.”

“Exactly my thoughts,” Hassan confirmed with a nod. “But I think we can take our time with Europe for the moment. We slowly erode their power, and eventually assimilate them. I’ll focus on the three countries mentioned, and then move onto the next ones. The biggest issue coming from Europe isn’t the countries necessarily, but the media.”

“But the governments are staying quiet on the issues,” Saudia noted grimly, thinking. “They’re being rather cheeky. England especially since some of the organizations get government funding. Even if they aren’t giving the orders, simply allowing them to run anti-ADVENT propaganda is tantamount to supporting it.”

“Agreed,” Hassan said, handing her a sheet of paper. “I inquired about this, and the British Parliament sent this back which essentially says that ‘they will look into this’.”

“Translation: We aren’t going to do anything,” Saudia muttered as she read the piece of paper. “Unfortunately, there isn’t much we can do to stop it short of threats, and I would prefer not to resort to that.”

“Mhmm, and that brings up something I want to discuss,” Hassan said, moving around the other side of the holotable to face her. “Public opinion is highly polarized on ADVENT. Much as you want people to focus, quite rightly, on the aliens, most don’t think like that. People resist change, and to be brutally honest, you haven’t done that much to actually persuade people that ADVENT is indeed an improvement.”

He waved a hand aimlessly. “I’m surprised it’s taken this long for you to understand this. There are a lot of good things about ADVENT; progress that’s been stalled for decades. At the same time, ADVENT is far less forgiving of idiocy, and guess what ends up in the news? Videos of Peacekeepers putting down protesters and annexing countries. Remove context for the moment, that doesn’t look good.”

Saudia winced. “In the grand scheme of things, a focus on PR seemed minor compared to an alien invasion.”

“Fair enough, but it can quell some of the worries at home,” Hassan said. “TV interviews and your ADVENT reporting isn’t going to cut it. You’re relying on an educated and critically thinking population, which I’m afraid isn’t representative of most people. That won’t come for several generations, assuming we win.” He paused. “This isn’t my area of expertise, but you should put some effort into addressing this.”

“Don’t worry,” Saudia assured him. “I’ve established an actual Public Relations agency, which will go into effect soon. I already have someone tasked to lead it.”

An eyebrow rose. “Really? Excellent,” he cleared his throat. “Returning to the topic at hand, that wraps up most of Europe. Little has changed in the Middle East, aside from the desertion, and Karen is working as hard as she can to restore the area. Slow going, but things have…stabilized. But there is a potential liability in the region.”
Saudia waited. “Which is?”

“Two, actually,” he corrected. “Egypt and Turkey. This isn’t necessarily related to the Middle East conquest, but due to their status as *wildcards* of the region. Turkey especially should be addressed. They have a large standing army, and hold some crucial parts of land which lead directly to Russia and Europe, and coincidentally, right to the Middle East itself. Their position is largely why they were so valued in NATO.”

She frowned. “Do you think they might attack?”

“No,” Hassan said hesitantly. “But they might make life difficult for us there. Their army would be extremely useful, but there is a sizable part of their population that is, I would say, *fundamentalist*. Which translates to Islam is still practiced there, although not as much as it was, and as a result the people there are not exactly happy with us.”

“I suspect the issues don’t stop there,” Saudia guessed. “Armenia being part of ADVENT is likely something they aren’t thrilled with.”

A grim smile grew on Hassan’s face. “No, they certainly are not. And your under-the-radar acknowledgement of the Armenian Genocide is also something they take…issue with. The problem is that their government is much smarter than the rest of the Middle East, and stays out of truly extremist activities. They prefer working through proxies and the like. Unfortunately, I don’t think they’ll ever assimilate into ADVENT willingly, not with the current leadership.”

“So do you have a proposal?” Saudia asked.

“No, I’m not suggesting anything drastic yet. But I want to at least try and open negotiations with them. At the very minimum they might be willing to work with us.”

Saudia frowned. “They are a nuclear power. That should be taken into account.”

“Technically true,” Hassan acknowledged. “On paper. In practice…their nuclear weapons aren’t as much of a problem because they aren’t actually their own.”

Saudia recalled something like this now that he brought it up. “They were a part of the nuclear sharing agreement.”

“Correct,” Hassan nodded. “And it doesn’t help that the nuclear weapons they *do* have are simple bombs; nothing like modern nuclear weapons. If the United States were to request their bombs back, Turkey would likely comply because they know that if they don’t, it would give us a reason to deal with them permanently. Like I said, they might not like us, but I don’t think they’ll get in our way. Thus, negotiation for now.”

“Attempt it then,” Saudia nodded. “But don’t waste more time than necessary.”

“Understood,” Hassan focused to a new point of the map. “You’re already familiar with how things are in Canada and the United States, so I won’t repeat it. However, Mexico is finalizing their integration into ADVENT.”

Saudia smiled. “Excellent.”

“South America, on the other hand…” he scratched his chin. “Very little progress. The Southern nations like Argentina, Chile, and Peru are staunchly against any sort of integration, largely thanks to the infamous reputation of Miss Luana. I would encourage that she be put in charge of the
Brazilian Legion and get her out of what is essentially a perpetual military state. That isn’t representative of ADVENT, and she’s had plenty of time to put together at least preliminary elections.”

Saudia snorted. “Luana and elections? I see you haven’t actually met her. But I do agree. She’s becoming too unreliable, and Stein will step in if she doesn’t calm down soon. We’ll have to allow some time for things to settle, but I don’t think South America will become a major battleground for some time.” She didn’t mention that Elizabeth was looking into several of the mentioned nations. Depending on what she found, Luana may retain some usefulness then.

“Let us hope,” Hassan agreed. “Now…I have given your statement to various African representatives regarding turning over the traitors, should they request asylum. That being said, I’m not expecting much success. Many are unfortunately notorious and corrupt, which I’m sure you are aware of. Some of them would have no problem lying directly to us, and I suspect they are too focused on their own internal politics to really care what is happening outside their nations.”

“I am aware,” Saudia confirmed, resting her back against the wall. “I’m not concerned with them right now. If they cooperate, good, if not, we’ll take steps to correct that. But they are a secondary concern at best right now. What about China?”

“Radio silence,” Hassan answered immediately. “They are staying out of anything relating to ADVENT, and their diplomats have refused to give the ruling Communist Party’s official stance on our annexation of Canada. Or anything else for that matter. They appear to be very unsettled, and are going out of their way to not antagonize us, or even get our attention.”

“Interesting,” Saudia mused. “But nothing has changed aside from that?”

“Not especially,” he shrugged. “But their ranking diplomat did imply that if ADVENT required assistance, or something else from China, it might be provided.”

That was certainly good news. “That’s all we need,” she said approvingly. “In that case, they might be useful when the aliens attack Korea or when we counterattack Japan.”

“Hopefully,” Hassan said slowly. “But I don’t think we’ll know for certain unless we really need them. Until then we’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Or until the aliens attack China,” Saudia added. “That might force them to do something.”

“Given a choice between destruction and ADVENT, I would assume they’d choose ADVENT,” he agreed. “But I think that the aliens know this too. I’m not sure they would attack even if they could win easily.”

“Quite possibly,” Saudia noted grimly. “Anything else I should be aware of?”

“The only other event of note is the religious summit you wanted planned,” Hassan reminded her, cocking his head. “I do hope you actually remember that, yes?”

Ah. That. Truth be told Saudia had let it fall from her priorities in the past weeks, even if it was her idea initially. It was something that needed to happen sooner or later, and she’d rather have things figured out with the various religions before one of them decided to do something stupid. That being said, she was not relishing that particular meeting.

Although now that she was thinking about it, she figured she might as well get a head start on it. Maybe make it clear that certain things wouldn’t be tolerated under ADVENT, specifically with the Catholic Church. “When is the date again?” She asked. “I had it for next month, correct?”
He briefly looked down. “Yes, the twenty-first. Summons were sent out a few days ago, and only a few responses so far, which is to be expected.”

“Probably wondering what the goal is,” Saudia muttered. “But I want to meet a few of them ahead of time. Clear the air, so to speak.”

Hassan furrowed his eyebrows. “And that means?”

“That means I want a meeting scheduled with the Vatican,” Saudia said vaguely. “And put Elizabeth on this as well. Stein too.”

He smiled grimly as he saw her goal. “Is this an investigation or a meeting?”

She echoed his humorless smile. “Both, I think. And they won’t necessarily be the last either. Organized religion seems to attract criminals in some cases. That kind of hypocrisy is intolerable to me.”

“It will be done,” he promised. “I believe that covers everything important.”

Saudia nodded. “Keep up the good work. In the meantime, I need to actually speak with the new Manager of Public Relations.”

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ADVENT Command, Switzerland

Saudia had considered an exhaustive list of candidates for a manager of public relations. Public spokesmen, diplomats, business managers, speechwriters, and even some filmmakers and artists. Anyone who could craft and design a message and more importantly, convince other people to believe it. Someone able to manage multiple media campaigns and equipped with an understanding of human psychology would also be essential.

Finding people who had those qualities wasn’t especially difficult. The problem was they would have to be reliable and especially have the motivation and loyalty to carry out what would be at the best of times, a difficult job. Unfortunately, not many of those people existed and she wanted to avoid people who hadn’t had experience on similarly sized projects. Relatively, at least.

The good news was that she had found such a person. Kyong Suk-Chul had over twenty years of experience managing public relations for an entire country, was extremely well-educated with degrees in psychology, telecommunications, and interestingly enough, English composition. He spoke English, Chinese, and Korean flawlessly, and had a rudimentary understanding of Russian and Spanish. At only forty-five, he was incredibly young for such an esteemed position.

Said esteemed position was the Head of the KCNA, the former state media of North Korea. On paper he was simply the head of one of the few media companies allowed in the country. In reality, he was the one in charge of North Korean propaganda.

That alone had made several advisors want to dismiss him, not because of the position itself, but because putting the one behind decades of North Korean propaganda in charge of PR might look suspicious. That was indeed a risk, but Kyong had successfully controlled the population of an entire country through mostly non-violent means, and that was the kind of expertise she needed here.

However, she’d entertained other suggestions, and they unsurprisingly hadn’t been able to come up with someone with similar or superior qualifications. Iseul had assured her that Kyong was perfect
for the job, and while she was taking *that* endorsement with a grain of salt, he quite clearly knew what he was doing.

The first major meeting was today, and she’d tasked him with designing a comprehensive strategy for reducing civilian unrest and increasing the perception of ADVENT in both a domestic and international sense. A tall order, and she was curious what he would have for her.

Saudia reached the designated room where he was to meet her, and opened the door after gesturing for her personal guard to leave her be. It was pretty clear that anything discussed in this room would be as confidential as possible. After making sure the door was locked, she turned to see Kyong Suk-Chul sitting at the end of the small square table, reading something on a tablet.

He looked up as she entered, and placed the tablet down next to a neat stack of folders, then stood. He was much smaller than her, but he didn’t seem concerned by the size difference, as it was only a few inches. His black hair that had strands of gray in it was neatly combed back, and his face was cleanly shaven.

“Chancellor,” he greeted, almost no trace of an accent in his voice. “A pleasure to see you again.”

“You as well,” she answered, inclining her head as she took his extended hand for a single shake. “I trust you’ve acclimated to your position?”

“Exceptionally,” he smiled. “What was not suitable to me, I simply requested changed. Having the freedom to establish this operation as I see fit has helped considerably, with your overall guidelines taken into account of course.”

Saudia clasped her hands behind her back. “I’m curious what you have to show me. You have a plan?”

Kyong motioned to the whiteboard behind him, on which he’d written a few boxes of text. “Perception is what needs to be controlled, Chancellor. Not an easy task by any means, but completely doable if you have the correct tools and the resources to apply them to a global scale. There are several major areas of focus regarding *perception*, and the most obvious are the Peacekeepers, the ADVENT Administration itself, the Military, and the aliens themselves.” He followed the drawing he had written on the board. “To further complicate matters, this has to be applied to the differing perspectives of both domestic and foreign populations. The goal is to not simply appease the ones living in ADVENT, but be alluring to the ones who live outside it as well.”

He looked briefly at Saudia. “Chancellor, what is a sign of an effective government?”

She thought for a few seconds. “A controlled population and effective legislature.”

“Generic, but I would tend to agree,” Kyong said. “But control is not enough. Squeeze too tight and you create an army with nothing to lose, and generate sympathy for them by those in power. Be too lax and you have anarchy. No, my experience has been that the most effective governments have populations that are *content*.”

Saudia frowned. “That could be subjective depending on the person.”

“I said *content*, not happy,” Kyong corrected. “*Happiness* is subjective. People need certain things in their life, and the standard of living has continually risen. Food, housing, medicine, internet, electricity, provide a person with the basic necessities, and they may not necessarily be *happy*, but they will be *content*. Why should they support a revolutionary or questionable politician when they
are being provided everything they need to survive?"

He waved a hand dismissively. “All that are left are ideologies. The suppression of media, the removal of freedoms, all of these can be defeated simply by a correct application of arguments and critical thinking. Morality is the one consistent argument against us, and it is weak; relying on traditional and outdated values that fail to hold up in this war. But the reason people rally behind ideologies isn’t necessarily that they believe them, they just view the commanding administration as worse. But should their basic needs be provided for; if they are shown again and again how ADVENT being in charge directly improves their life, any argument levied against it will be completely dismissed.”

He smiled. “The architects of the Advent Directive, whoever they were, appear to have understood this. To truly fix the mistakes of the old governments, new ones must be built from the ground up, free of political ideologies, money, or influence. I’m quite impressed by it.”

“I’ll be sure to pass it along,” Saudia commented. “Eloquent, but how do you plan to apply this?”

“Very simply,” Kyong began, picking up one of the folders. “The biggest issue right now is that much of the coverage surrounding ADVENT has been negative. And ADVENT media has been neutral at best, at times going after the lies published by media outlets and refuting them. While effective, after a certain point, the negativity can become overwhelming for people. Then it becomes a war over who can weaponize the negative coverage best.”

He raised a finger. “However, there is a very simple antidote to this: Positivity. No, it isn’t a joke. People always respond better to good news than bad. They attempt to control by manipulating and stoking fear, anger, negative emotions that they hope will be taken out on their opponents, while at the same time not offering any substance as to why they are any better.” He smiled grimly. “The United States political system was rather notorious for this.”

Saudia gave a wry smile at that. “Most democratic systems are.”

“Which is why there is a unique opportunity here,” Kyong continued. “The reason this has now become so prevalent is that the narrative is completely reactionary from ADVENT. You order a controversial action, and it soon gets weaponized by your opponents. By the time you attempt to clarify further, much of the damage is done. The media, Chancellor, is like a parrot. It repeats back whatever it sees, and only later is opinion added. To be fair, you haven’t given many positive stories to tell, and that does not need to be the case.”

He picked up one of the folders and handed it to her. “Read this, Chancellor,” She did. It was a list of names, none of which she recognized.

She cocked her head at him. “And this is?”

“As a result of the decriminalization of certain substances, you had given the order that prisoners incarcerated for those crimes were to be pardoned,” Kyong explained. “That is a sample of the list of names. And if I understand correctly, you were planning to officially do this rather quietly. Why?”

She thought back. That event had actually been one she’d ordered quite a while ago, something Stein had brought up when they were…well, doing something. It had seemed simple to her. No point keeping people imprisoned who were in jail for a crime that was no longer one. Besides, the people freed would no doubt remember ADVENT was the one who’d been behind this. “I didn’t see a reason to,” she answered with a shrug. “This is just the result of a policy change, and I believed there were more important aspects to have the focus be on.”
“With respect, Chancellor, that is completely incorrect,” Kyong said with a smile. “You vastly underestimate how much people don’t know about your new policy changes. Out of curiosity I looked at one of the few polls out there, and while I’m certain it wasn’t entirely accurate, there was an alarming percentage of people who don’t understand how ADVENT works.”

He tapped a finger on the table. “Assume we are dealing with an uneducated public, Chancellor, how is that fixed?”


“Exactly,” Kyong said approvingly. “We are dealing with two different generations here: Older and younger, each with different ways of influencing them. The traditional media is largely what the older generations, normally those fifty and older, consumes. Most of them get all their knowledge about politics from them, like it or not. Most people prefer to have others tell them what to think. There is no reason we cannot exploit that.”

He paused to take a breath. “Returning to the mass pardons, this is an exceptional opportunity to not only inform the population that ADVENT is not only harsh on criminals, but recognizes and executes justice. This will be a public event where Stein will make the announcement. I guarantee that it will be the main subject for days afterwards, provided there are no more alien attacks.”

Saudia quite liked the idea, with some reservations. “I’m not sure that will be portrayed as completely positive,” she said. “There are some people who will be opposed to it.”

“Largely older generations, and their relevance is fading,” Kyong dismissed. “And I’d think you’d be surprised. It’s all in presentation. But think on the other aspects of ADVENT that you could highlight with simple press conferences. Free healthcare to all citizens; tuition-free higher education; government investment in start-ups and small businesses. The goal, Chancellor, is to focus on what ADVENT actually is, not what it’s rumored to be. Run tours in Peacekeeper training, give demonstrations of the technology being used; give the media access to certain parts of the Congress of Nations; give them access to battlefields and show the alien threat first hand. Do you notice a theme in this?”

Saudia nodded once. “We control the narrative. They react to what we are doing, and can’t ignore it because if they do, someone else will cover it.”

“And turn their need for ratings against them,” Kyong finished smugly. “ADVENT is simply too big to ignore. We are the story, and they know it, and much as their agenda may not favor us, they need us right now.”

“I’m impressed,” Saudia said. “Your plan seems satisfactory so far.”

“Which is only one aspect,” Kyong said, picking up another folder and flipping through it. “Now, the other important part that needs to be dealt with are the younger generations. Millennials and below. Ultimately, they are the ones growing up in ADVENT, and will be responsible for the future when we are gone. They are the demographic that needs to be targeted. They are potential soldiers and members in ADVENT which we need. The question is, of course, how to reach them.”

“The internet,” Saudia supposed. “Social media, things like that.”

“No.” Kyong stated flatly. “At least not like how you’re thinking of it. While ADVENT certainly needs a social media presence, having a twitter account or Facebook page isn’t going to cut it. They’ll never trust a government entity, at least not completely. No, who has the most influence over the younger generations?”
Saudia grimaced. “Celebrities.”

Kyong chucked at her derision. “That they do, unfortunately. Artists, singers, filmmakers, vloggers; these are the people who they look up to and admire. So while they might not believe an ADVENT official telling them that the Peacekeepers aren’t a suppressive organization, if their favorite YouTube star were to say the same thing, they will likely believe it.” He smiled sardonically. “Remember, many people like to have their thinking done for them.”

He handed her the folder. “In there is a list of some of the largest so-called ‘internet personalities’. Most have millions of followers, subscribers, or some equivalent of numerical fame. The topics range from politics, weapons, history, debate, video games, whatever you can imagine. And I would say that those numbers are not entirely accurate since there are many who aren’t registered who follow these people.”

“So what is your suggestion?” Saudia asked. “Hire them to reach their fans?”

Kyong snorted. “I’d prefer not to be so blunt. It’s unnecessary. But certainly reach out to them, give them some kind of access to something relevant to their blog or channel. Interviews with people of actual influence, tours of the Congress of Nations and Military training bases. Daring ones could be taken to areas near the front lines, the possibilities are not exactly few.”

Saudia nodded slowly. She was honestly surprised by how much he knew about this subject. The population of North Korea was very different from the rest of the world, but he still understood it like an expert, and this was one area she hadn’t really put much thought into. “I like it. Although I suspect there are some who hold negative opinions towards us.”

“Oh, certainly,” Kyong dismissed. “But generally political focused personalities, and even then most seem split at best, largely because many look at information available to them. What is especially helpful is that it is not easy to put ADVENT into a very clear box most people are used to. Aspects are more right-wing, but others are left-wing. The combination of the two is something some people have issues grasping.”

That was something Saudia could easily believe. “While it may be more traditional, I think we should also expand our own media propaganda. Recruitment, PSAs, that sort of thing. It has been lax in that regard.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Kyong nodded with a smile. “Short videos are best for that sort of thing. The better the presentation, the more people will be convinced. No need to do this internally. Do you really think the directors from what’s left of Hollywood wouldn’t jump at the chance to direct them with a nearly unlimited budget, and for a clearly good cause? Do you know how many artists out there would give up nearly everything to ply their craft not only for the cause, but to be officially recognized by ADVENT?” His smile grew. “I wouldn’t mind a return to the era of propaganda posters. Some of the art then really was excellent.”

“Perfect,” Saudia nodded. “What else is left?”

“I believe that covers the main points,” Kyong said slowly. “However, one thing to consider is that these are impersonal. The one thing that will change hearts and minds is people actually interacting with the men and woman of ADVENT, and if they have a personal stake in what is happening. This would be something that needs to be organized on local levels, but I believe Commander Christiaens has proposed bringing back the tactic of trench warfare?”

“Correct,” Saudia confirmed. “I will be discussing that with her later, in fact.”
“Exactly what is needed,” he said approvingly. “The task may be a daunting one, but people have attachments to their homes, do they not? Why not include them in the task of preparing their city for an attack? Compensate them of course, have it be organized, give them the tools and motivation needed to do the job. Soldier and civilian working side by side would do a lot to ease tensions and change minds.”

He looked up rather thoughtfully. “It doesn’t need to stop there. Send out emails and fliers advertising city events with Peacekeepers, leaders, and soldiers; give the public the ability to interact with ADVENT and ask questions. Let them know the Drug Recovery Centers and Mental Treatment Institutions are available for usage. Find the homeless on the streets and give them what they need to be productive and content members of society.” He paused briefly. “People believe propaganda is simply lies, and to an extent, it always is. But propaganda is the art of manipulating the narrative, and without question, the most effective propaganda, Chancellor, is that which is true.”

At that Saudia knew she’d made the right choice in appointing him. Propagandist or no, he was exactly what was needed. “Give me the details of what you need,” she ordered. “I want this implemented immediately.”

“Of course, Chancellor,” he answered with a smile. “I look forward to properly starting.”

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Busan, South Korea

“[You need to evacuate Seoul,]” Duri told Sandara without any ambiguity. “[It’s too dangerous to stay there.]”

His wife looked utterly exhausted and wrecked, which wasn’t surprising given that he’d only managed to let her know he was actually alive in the past couple days, and it had taken a couple more to actually set up some time for them to speak. Japan had everyone in the region on edge, and Duri knew there were already efforts to begin evacuating people into North Korea.

The irony of the situation didn’t escape him.

But times changed and he knew very clearly that North Korea wasn’t an enemy anymore. They’d proven that they were more than capable of supporting soldiers that weren’t of their nation, as Kang had proven right before he’d died. Whatever the past, they were all united in fighting back the invasion. Still, he wasn’t excited about any of them going to North Korea without him, mostly because he didn’t know what was actually there.

“[And you’re just going to stay there?]” Sandara asked sadly. “[You almost died.]”

“[But I didn’t,]” he emphasized. “[And there are probably going to be a lot of times I’m put in danger before this ends. Not that I like it…but it’s what I signed up for. To protect people. To protect you and the girls.]”

“[I…]” she trailed off, looking away. “[I know. But it was almost impossible to get through those days. I’d thought you’d died there. And I wasn’t the only one.]”

Duri rubbed his forehead. “[Just remember that it always takes a few days to verify for certain. Don’t assume the worst right away.]”

“[A bit easier for you,]” she sighed. “[It’s not like you always have to worry about if we are in danger or not.]”
“[And I’m going to keep it that way,]” he said firmly. “[Your safety is more important than mine. As long as you’re safe that’s all I need to know.]”

A moment of silence lapsed between them. “[I’ll get ready to move. They’re encouraging evacuations here as well. The girls are nervous about the whole thing. They’re getting more scared and I don’t know what to say to them. I can’t twist everything as a big adventure.]”

“[Just keep reminding them that I’m fine and they’ll be safe up there,]” Duri told her. “[The aliens, for better or worse, are being methodical. We can accurately predict where they’re going to go next and what the next points of attack will be. If they reach Seoul…then you can start to worry. But they aren’t anywhere close to that.]”

“[Hopefully the next time we talk I’ll be able to tell you what it’s like up there,]” she said after a few seconds. “[You always did want to see what North Korea was like.]”

“[True,]” he recalled. “[Be sure to take pictures.]”

She gave a wan smile. “[Of course I will. Be safe.]”

“[I’m doing my best,]” he told her. “[I love you.]”

“[I love you too,]” she answered. “[I’ll see you later.]”

The screen cut out, and left Duri alone sitting there with his thoughts. He was tired and needed some decent amount of rest. It had been non-stop since they’d evacuated Japan, and he’d personally felt he was lucky to be one of the survivors in the face of…whatever that alien had been. Half his team was dead, Beatriz was still recovering, and in general things were not good.

No one knew just how soon the next attack was going to come, but they were preparing for the worst. Busan had the largest military base close to the coast, so it was likely where the aliens would attack next in this region. Preparations were still being made, but he suspected that the real focus was going to be on converting Seoul into a fortress in the event the coast fell.

It was harsh, but Duri could understand the need to focus on that city, even if it meant they were writing off the coast in all but words. Not that nothing was being done, it just wasn’t nearly ready.

And the whole situation with Japan was not counting that there had been a lot of other events happening in the world. Canada had been annexed, which he’d found surprising until he’d actually seen the Chancellor give her justification, and from seeing the aliens firsthand…he couldn’t exactly feel sympathetic to the Canadian government.

Anyone who wasn’t working to defeat the aliens weren’t people worthy of consideration at best, and should be considered traitors at worst. Or were cowards. It was unfortunate for the people, but hopefully ADVENT treated them well.

And then the news had broken of a group of soldiers who’d deserted.

Deserted.

Duri felt furious just thinking about that. He’d never wanted to personally kill someone before, but if he ever met those traitors then he’d be sorely tempted to do so. It was so unfathomably selfish that he’d almost gaped when he’d heard it. It was one thing to desert in a war, but it seemed on a completely different level to just…leave when the fate of their entire species was at stake.

He’d quite liked Cara’s take on it, which she’d so eloquently stated after throwing her cup into a
wall after he’d told her. “Kang and Johan are dead, Beatriz is still unconscious, the aliens are cutting up babies and killing us by the hundreds, but these fucking traitors ran like cowards because ADVENT had the fucking nerve to stop that fucking moron running Canada!”

Just thinking of that made him feel a little better. For some reason he’d thought that the stakes in this war would prevent that sort of thing from happening. But apparently not, which was rather sad. Still, he was certainly going to drink a toast to whoever ended up putting those traitors down, provided he was still alive.

He stood and walked out of the room. There wasn’t anything else to do at the moment, so he figured he might as well find where Cara had gone to. They’d likely get new soldiers in a few days, but for now all they could do was wait.

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ADVENT Research Command, Brazil

“When XCOM provided much of their research to us, it expedited our own programs significantly,” Munju said as he guided Saudia into the lab. “Since many of XCOM’s own genetic projects were similar to our own, I have simply applied them as-is, and we are expanding further into areas XCOM has not. That we know of, that is.”

Saudia nodded as they stepped in front of several glass cages where there were multitudes of animals and flora inside them. “If that is the case, what are you making advances into?”

“Many of the new genetic enhancements are in the theoretical stages,” Munju explained, rubbing his chin. “At least as they are applied to Humans. I want to look into more…radical forms of alteration. Their Stinger modification was quite genius, and I want to look more into that particular line of research.”

He motioned her over to a small glass habitat, of which there were beetles inside. Saudia had never developed a fondness for insects, so she wasn’t particularly thrilled. “Beetles?”

“Bombardier beetles, to be specific,” Munju clarified with a smile. “Completely normal, aside from the defense mechanism where they eject a chemical spray. Harmless to Humans, of course, but that particular addition on a Human soldier might have a potent effect, especially if the chemical sprayed was a dangerous acid or poison. A promising line of research.”

He waved her forward, and she followed, curious. “But not the only one.”

Munju snorted. “Of course not. Although perhaps my easiest. This is one of my most radical.” They stopped in front of a glass cell, of which inside was what looked like a Human. But it was as if the Human was stretched and elongated, especially in the torso; stretching it out far beyond what was normal. Saudia almost winced, as it looked extremely painful and the subject was clearly still alive. “I suppose you have an explanation?”

“That is phase one,” Munju clarified, looking rather pleased. “First, to see if Human height, mass and overall size can be adjusted. This clearly proves they can be, but there are some…improvements that need to happen before I move forward at all. The proportions are…” he clicked his tongue. “Wrong. It looks unnatural, which should not be the goal.”

Saudia glanced down to him. “Yes, but what is the point?”

“The creation of a superior Human, of course,” he stated confidently. “Or at least one that can be specialized. I was inspired by the Ethereals themselves, and I believe a second set of limbs would
be a worthy goal to pursue. It would revolutionize nearly everything about our society.” He motioned to the test subject. “However, such an addition is impossible with Human body sizes, so those must naturally be changed.”

Saudia was slightly nonplussed at the image of that. While in some cases she could see how that would be an advantage, in a purely objective view, additional limbs seemed very unsettling. It was such a radical change that she wasn’t sure if that could really be classed as a Human, but something else. She definitely didn’t see it being applied to anything more than a few specialized soldiers; certainly not the entire species at large.

Innovation was good, but there was such a thing as too radical. It seemed to her like the manipulation of Human characteristics was more useful, rather than the straight addition of additional limbs. “Perhaps,” she relented carefully. “But I would prefer our focus be kept on immediate applications. While interesting, additional sets of limbs wouldn’t provide us with a clear advantage against the aliens.”

“Mhmm, I would argue otherwise,” Munju said thoughtfully. “But your point is made. In which case, I have another project to show you.”

She followed him through the sterile room until they were in what almost looked like a kennel due to how many dogs were in it. She noticed all of them were large, and had a history of being used for hunting. In fact, she was pretty sure there were several wolves in the mix. “The aliens have animals they have bred for war in those Chryssalids,” Munju began, motioning to the dogs. “I do believe we have our own equally valuable species. Dogs have always been excellent hunting companions historically, yet have fallen out of that particular role when their usefulness was reduced due to technology. However, with MELD we can turn them into highly effective and intelligent hunters of aliens.”

He specifically directed her to look at one of the dogs. It was a German Shepard, but this one was distinctly different. Its eyes were rimmed with gold, and its fur was thinner, allowing her to see the muscles bulging underneath it. Its mouth was open and its tongue hung out, showing its teeth which were longer than a normal dog’s and had a silver tint to them. Most noticeable of all, it stood nearly to her stomach, which had to have been twice its original height.

“This is the first success of Project Molosser,” Munju said proudly, pressing some buttons and opening up the glass cage, which slid up, and the dog happily trotted out. She resisted the urge to step back as the dog came to her, and she knew it was definitely capable to killing her if it wanted. But all it did was look up at her expectantly, and she tentatively held out her hand which the dog promptly sniffed.

“The good news is that canine minds are far simpler than Human minds,” Munju explained proudly, petting the dog on its head. “Some alterations to its mind make them incapable of attacking Humans, but that modification doesn’t seem to change their attitude towards us overmuch. We will likely remove such restrictions when we perfect the breed, but for now it is for our own safety. Their sense of smell and hearing have also been enhanced, even if they were already superior to our own, as well as their sight.” He paused briefly. “And I’ve applied the Iron Skin modification, which will make them extremely difficult to kill, and increased the strength of their jaws, allowing them to actually bite with some force.”

Now this was a project Saudia liked a lot. “An excellent idea,” she said, scratching the dog under the chin, while he wagged his tail happily. “Is it only successful for German Shepherds?”

“The German Shepherds have been the most reliable successes,” Munju explained, pulling out his tablet and scrolling through. “However, I believe that the Labrador, Husky and Grey Wolf breeds
will soon follow. I’ve removed breeds that don’t fit certain criteria, and those are the ones that I’ve deemed worth adapting."

Saudia wasn’t an expert in dogs, but did recall that those ones were known for their physical attributes and intelligence. She knew wolves weren’t technically dogs, but they were likely close enough that Munju wanted to use them. Perhaps she should get her own. She’d never really had a pet before and the idea of a war dog like this was appealing.

“I see that Dr. Munju is showing off his pets,” Tygan commented, almost with an air of disapproval as he walked into the room. “Chancellor, welcome once again.”

“You as well, Dr. Tygan,” she returned. “And I assume your own research is proceeding well?”

“Quite, Chancellor,” he confirmed, inclining his head. “In fact, I would be happy to show you, even if the recent output is not quite as…radical as that of my colleague.”

Munju actually chuckled. “He’s irritated that I had the idea before he did.”

Tygan sniffed indignantly. “It is more the fact that the amount of resources you expended upon this was higher than if I had been in charge. As an aside, the sight of dead animals is rather draining.”

“Such is the price of science,” Munju shrugged. “But do carry on and show the Chancellor your own contributions.” They both walked out of the kennel and into another lab which seemed to be dedicated to microbiology. She also noted that there were quite a few of the Sectoid cloning vats set up, and there were things growing in them.

But they passed all that and came to a table where there was, of all things, a burger. It sat on a white plate and looked…well, like a burger with a few leaves of lettuce, cheese and ketchup.

“Chancellor, if you wouldn’t mind, please sample what I’ve cooked today,” Tygan said, motioning a hand to the plate. “I’m quite curious what you think.”

Of all the people she would expect to play a joke on her, Tygan wasn’t one of them. Still, this seemed very odd. She didn’t really have strong feelings one way or another on burgers, so she decided to indulge him, wondering what the point of this was. After a few bites she did have to admit that it was pretty good, although she wasn’t much of an expert, and it might have simply been a while since she’d had one.

“What do you think?” Tygan asked.

“It’s good,” she said, setting the half-eaten burger on the plate. “I did eat before I got here, but I appreciate the thought.”

“There was a point to this,” Tygan said with a smile. “You would say that it is a good burger?”

Saudia eyed him suspiciously. “Yes? Are you telling me it isn’t?”

“Not in the traditional sense,” Tygan explained, clasping his hands behind his back. “What you just ate, Chancellor, was cloned meat.”

Ah, now she saw the point. “Really,” she noted. “I would never have guessed. It must have been a good cow.”

“Ah, but it’s better,” Tygan clarified. “The only part that we need for human consumption is the meat, so that is what was grown. No cows, cloned or otherwise, were harmed in the making of this burger. To put it simply, Chancellor, ADVENT has the ability to mass produce cheap, safe,
humane and delicious meat; and as this can be applied to other foods, it ensures that we will never face a food shortage again in our lifetimes.”

It took a second for the implications of that to reach her. She’d never truly thought about that particular application, but cloning food was something that could, and should, be done. No more famines, food shortages, no more unnecessary hunger. It might take some time for this to be turned into the size it needed to be, but Tygan just might have solved world hunger. It’s usefulness to the war was debatable, but then again, soldiers needed food, and if they didn’t have to worry about those resources, there was no reason they couldn’t have the best ADVENT could provide.

“Exceptionally done,” she complimented. “Every single humanitarian organization will thank you for your work here, not to mention those who have issues affording it.”

“As long as humanity benefits from this, that is all I require,” Tygan gracefully accepted. “But I would not delay this. The more hope that can be given to people, the better.”

“Your project was a very creative application of cloning,” Munju also complimented, tapping a finger on his chin and looking thoughtfully at the vats. “But I believe there are also ways it could be applied for the war effort, Chancellor. How much thought have you given to the idea of Human cloning?”

Saudia stood and thought for a few seconds. Truth be told she hadn’t given it much thought, mostly because she never thought it would be a feasible option. Although they could theoretically do it now, they had the technology. “Is that now a possibility?”

“Certainly.” Munju assured her confidently. “Though not much actual testing or research has been done. But that could certainly change, and from there the possibilities are extensive.” He turned to her, a hand extended to the vats behind him. “Chancellor, eventually we’re going to have a numbers problem. If not now, then in the future. We simply do not have enough soldiers to go to war with an intergalactic army. However, that could be negated by growing more Human soldiers, and we could apply MELD to them during the process, allowing them to be combat-ready the moment they step out of the vats.”

“Doctor, I do believe you are exaggerating the simplicity of such an undertaking,” Tygan warned cautiously. “This is not a slab of meat being grown, but a person. One that is far more complicated and with far more factors than simple vegetables or meat. Not to mention raising the question of simply bringing Humans into this world for the sole purpose of going to war.”

Munju sniffed. “I didn’t say it would be easy, but it would be worth it, and we will need to decide sooner or later. Chancellor, can we really afford to ignore this additional source of soldiers? We unfortunately can’t wait for the next generation of Humans to be born to replace the ones dying every day.”

Saudia wasn’t exactly put off by the ethics of the concept of cloning, but she did believe Munju might be a little overconfident in how easily this could be done. As far as she was concerned, clones wouldn’t have been born naturally anyway, so any kind of life was better than not existing in the first place. And it wasn’t as though, should they actually reach that point, that they would be treated badly.

Still, it would be a touchy subject for some people. But Munju was right, eventually they were going to need more soldiers, and cloning might allow them to even the odds there. That said, she didn’t think this was something she should immediately approve without some outside input. The Commander, Laura, Hassan, people who would have a better grasp on the possible social ramifications than she did.
“Chancellor, I perhaps have a much less controversial usage of cloning,” Tygan said slowly. “Since we do have the capability, I would suggest we utilize this technology to clone replacement limbs or organs; ones which would reduce any chance of rejection to the designated recipient. We could remove the need for organ donation and give millions their lives back.”

“I agree with Tygan here,” Munju said firmly. “Regardless on the status of Human cloning, there is no reason we cannot do this. As well as synthesizing blood, plasma, and other bodily fluids needed for survival. There should be no controversy over this.”

Saudia nodded. There was no question this was an immediately useful application. “Begin your work on that, and concerning Human cloning itself, I want both of you to begin preliminary research into it,” she ordered. “But no growing anything that could be considered a Human fetus. Determine equipment, possible template, but no actual implementation yet. This, at the moment, is not a priority, but I want to know just how feasible it is. Understood?”

“Of course, Chancellor,” Tygan said. “We will begin work on it as soon as possible.”

“Excellent,” Saudia said, stepping back. “Excellent work, both of you. I look forward to seeing your future projects.”

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New York, United States of America

Saudia scratched her chin. “You want to launch it now? Isn’t it too preliminary?”

Jasmine gave a short nod. “Starting sooner rather than later is the best strategy. To give you a timeframe, Chancellor, if you want this to become the dominant currency, it will likely not be fully integrated until the war is over. The sooner we normalize it, the better.”

That did make sense, and since Saudia knew that the denominations were figured out, all that remained was actually releasing the new currency to the public. As it was based and backed by the alien alloys, both thought it prudent that the name of the currency would be the ADVENT Alloy. There had been some debate on if they would continue using paper denominations of money, but ultimately they’d decided to keep it since it was more useful for convenience and people were too used to them.

“I am aware it will take some time,” Saudia said. “So proceed. What will be your plan for deployment?”

“Very, very slowly of course,” Jasmine chuckled. “There are some preliminary legislative measures that need to be taken before we actually launch it. First the Congress will need to officially recognize it as the official currency, and then mandate that all banks and businesses accept the currency legally.”

“They’ve been aware this has been in the works for a while,” Saudia told her. “Your primary contact has been Congressman Caspari, yes? I’m certain he has legislation already prepared.”

“Oh, he does,” Jasmine quickly confirmed, pushing over a folder with what she assumed was the official bill the Swiss Congressman would introduce. “He started drafting it after I approached him. He knows quite a bit about how to best introduce it without any superfluous loopholes. I’ve looked it over with several lawyers and my team, and it’s solid.”

Saudia opened the file and noted that there were four rather large stapled documents, not just one. “Ambitious,” she noted. “How much are you planning to get through Congress?”
“The first bill obviously establishes the Alloy as the official currency,” Jasmine explained. “More of a formality and not very complicated. The others are more important.” She pointed at the second, much thicker, document underneath the first. “That is actually the mandate to ensure that everyone in ADVENT eventually moves to the new system.”

Saudia began reading through it. “Currencies used by the State will be phased out over a five-year period until they exclusively operate under the Alloys. Good. That gives us plenty of time to set it up.”

“That was the quickest it could be done and still be effective,” Jasmine agreed. “And the same goal is for the rest of ADVENT businesses and corporations, although it is over a twenty-year period, with exceptions for those that do business with foreign nations. By then I think that most will be using the Alloy, and this does regulate that new businesses created one year after this has passed must use the Alloy domestically, unless they do business with foreign companies.”

“That is fair,” Saudia nodded, looking up. “Twenty years is more than sufficient for it to be implemented. The larger issue is the people who want to take advantage of the new currency and go and exchange it for Alloys.”

“Scarcity and inflation was a massive problem,” Jasmine sighed, rubbing her forehead. “One that can’t ever fully be solved. We’ve set the price in relation to our current stockpile and how much we actually need if the wealthiest people decided to go all-in on this. It’s incredibly likely that as the war goes on, we’ll acquire more, and should we discover just how the alien alloys are made, we’ll potentially have an unlimited supply.”

She paused for a moment, considering. “The way this is set up, Chancellor, isn’t like most currencies. This is because the alloys are being considered as more of a resource; we consider it valuable right now because it’s useful. It can do something besides look shiny, unlike previous standards like gold. This makes it a little more difficult because hopefully, we will be able to manufacture it, and by current standards of inflation, make it worthless.”

“Or you could establish a minimum value,” Saudia noted. “Something that would only increase in value, but if it dropped, it would still be worth something.”

“That makes the most sense, and what we came to,” Jasmine said. “Although this is theoretical; nothing like this has ever been done before. Ideally, we want to reach a point where money isn’t something that most people have to worry about. But to get there without problems, we’ll have to get very lucky because the market will take advantage however it can.”

Saudia nodded. “The more alloys in circulation, the less each one is worth. And the prices go up and things stay the same.”

“Which is why to have a chance of it working, ADVENT has control over all deposits of alloys, and are the only ones who have authorization to manufacture or create them,” Jasmine finished. “If we have a degree of control over how much is being put into circulation, and any surplus is directly controlled by us, the better chance the Alloy will not fluctuate as much.”

It was an interesting subversion of that issue. “ADVENT uses the alloys in terms of usage cost,” Saudia said, thinking. “If surpluses were kept internal, they wouldn’t be devalued because we always have a use for them. Any extra could be put towards weapons, vehicles, structures, and more. It could potentially be used so that any surplus is quickly used before it can potentially affect markets, and if we do develop the ability to manufacture it, we would only make what was needed for certain projects, and not actually introduce it into the market as actual currency.”
But as a resource,” Jasmine finished. “Exactly. Except that this still may not ultimately work. Money is interesting, Chancellor. On some level the concept only works because we believe it does. Literally every currency before this is based on nothing, and we only give it worth because we believe it has worth. All we’re really doing is exchanging paper and pieces of metal.”

Saudia did have some understanding of how fragile the whole system actually was, which was why she wanted the new currency actually backed by something. But Jasmine was right; the only way to know for sure if it ended up working was to actually do it. But there was always the chance of failure. “What of the rest of the legislation?” She asked, motioning to the final two stacks of documents.

“One of them is just regulations for the manufacturing of the paper bills and minting coins,” Jasmine explained, reaching into her pocket and tossing her a coin. “Got one to show off to you. That is officially worth one ADVENT Alloy.”

Saudia caught the coin, and flipped it over in her palm. It was the size of a quarter and about as heavy. It was a dark gray, which told her that this was actually made out of an alloy. On one side was the official ADVENT logo, and on the other was a side view of a woman. She raised an eyebrow. “Is this supposed to be me?”

“Officially, no,” Jasmine smiled. “It’s just the head of a woman; identifying features unknown. Unofficially, you were who I had in mind when I decided to add it. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Saudia said, palming the coin and placing it in a pocket. “Although I didn’t ever expect to ever be on any currency; inspired or otherwise.”

“As one of the founding members of ADVENT, it would be idiotic not to have you included in some way,” Jasmine said. “It only seemed right.”

Saudia was somewhat amused by that. Even in EXALT she’d never really planned on doing anything like putting herself on money. If Jasmine had wanted to be accurate, putting the Commander on it would be more accurate, since he was the one who’d started all of this. But he’d also likely be just as satisfied either way. “I won’t complain,” she said. “So what is the last one?”

“A little project I’ve wanted to implement for some time,” Jasmine said with a smile. “As long as we’re redoing the entire economy, I wanted to make it a little safer. That,” she pointed at the final document. “Imposes some additional regulations on how banks store financial data and transactions. It essentially mandates a certain level of security on them, and that they have to improve their standards if their current encryption is not sufficient, or a more effective method is developed. While most are up to standards for now, the goal is to ensure that they are kept to the highest possible standard, and there are too many that won’t do something until a breach happens, and I don’t consider that acceptable.”

“It seems like a good idea,” Saudia said with a nod. “Good work. I look forward to seeing this put into practice.”

“Appreciated, Chancellor,” she said, pulling back the file. “If nothing else, this will be an interesting experiment.”

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Intha, Vitakar

All things considered, the plan was going well. Nartha had played his role well, and helped the
Zararch remove some of the lesser dissidents and troublemakers, while misdirecting the ones who were actually who he considered useful. Sometimes he let them know, sometimes he didn’t. But his time on the planet was going to end soon, and he needed to firmly establish plans for moving forward.

The good news was that the Nulorian seemed to want to speak. He’d received a string of coordinates and a time, and nothing else through the communication link he’d established. Fair enough. By now they were probably aware that someone was slowing down the Zararch here, and he was the obvious candidate.

He doubted they would fully trust them, but he didn’t need that right now. All he needed was an ally, and in the meantime, Sareech was proving to be an exceptional ally in figuring out how to use the Aui’Vitakar. At the moment she’d kept much of what he’d shared with her to herself, but was making some small moves, particularly on Vienneth, which had quite curiously been killed the moment it had been introduced.

That had confirmed that there was indeed something there that the Ethereals did not want discovered. Unfortunately, he hadn’t been able to come away with much on his end, and everything related to that planet was classified. That being said, he was of a high enough rank to view it...provided he had the Zar’Chon’s permission.

He hadn’t come up with a reason to view it that wasn’t suspicious.

He might have to fabricate a reason to visit the planet himself. Perhaps he could say that one of the Nulorian he’d interrogated had mentioned there was a base there. Although he’d likely need proof for it to be credible, because the Zar’Chon was likely not going to just let him go if he was trying to keep something quiet.

However, he was following the actual reports from the war itself and things were not looking good for Earth. Japan had fallen and America was also slowly being conquered, and to make matters worse, it seemed ADVENT was taking advantage and capturing previously neutral countries. While he couldn’t exactly blame them, he wasn’t exactly comfortable with what was happening.

Then there was the new Ethereal, Caelior, who made the Battlemaster look weak by comparison. The Nulorian were going to either find that very useful, or very terrifying. Likely both. It didn’t bode well at all for their chances going forward, but there wasn’t much of a choice. They still had a chance, however slim.

Nartha finished his report to the Zar’Chon, with an addendum that he’d be investigating further in the Borelian Expanse, which would provide adequate cover to meet with the Nulorian, and buy him a few days. He sincerely hoped that they wouldn’t kill him if they decided he wasn’t trustworthy enough.

They were terrorists, after all.

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Russia, Center of ADVENT Engineering and Development

Saudia was very interested to see what Feng and Ophelia had come up with since the last time she’d visited. Given that they apparently had some new developments to share, she was hoping to be as impressed as last time. Hopefully they wouldn’t disappoint.

She stepped into the main wing of the Robotics Division, where Feng had wanted to show her
something relating to the MDU project. At least she assumed it was related, but she wasn’t quite sure just how much more the MDUs could be improved. Which meant this was likely a new project utilizing similar concepts.

The room was fairly loud, and there were quite a few engineers working and testing various systems, or were welding or constructing additional units. But she did see Feng and Ophelia at the far end, and made her way towards them. Feng gave her a nod of greeting as she approached.

“Chancellor, thank you for coming.”

“You said you had made progress,” she answered. “I’m curious what you’ve done.”

“Of course,” he smiled proudly. “Outside of my work on the Flak Towers and Trench designs Commander Christiaens asked me to complete, we had made progress in multiple projects. The latest of which is before you.”

He gestured before him to the machine before them. It reached to about her waist, and to her eyes, looked like a massive machine gun barrel attached to a platform with treads in place of wheels. It was appropriately armored, and the barrel was on some kind of swivel, and it appeared rather intimidating. “What is this?” She asked. “A portable turret?”

“Not exactly,” Ophelia answered, stepping forward. “The MDU fulfills its role exceptionally well. But it’s expensive and has limited mobility in enclosed areas. We wanted to create a similarly robotic enemy to fill that role; one that is much cheaper and can be easily mobile in enclosed areas. This is the result, the Super Heavy Infantry Vehicle, internally known as the SHIV.”

Saudia cocked her head at the machine. “No lasers?”

“The processor isn’t as large or advanced as the ones in the MDU,” Ophelia explained. “But the AI is still sophisticated enough to be extremely dangerous, even at longer ranges. The role isn’t as a precise weapon like the MDU, but it would perform more defensive tasks which would be dangerous to our own soldiers. A team of SHIVs could effectively suppress an alien force which would allow our soldiers to reposition, advance, or retreat with far less danger.”

“Good,” Saudia nodded. “And these are gauss weapons I presume?”

“Correct,” Feng stated, also stepping forward. “And we have designed the SHIVs with the intention of being adaptable to specific terrains or scenarios,” He knelt down by the SHIV. “We have this one using treads, which is more appropriate for more rough terrain that would be found in trenches or a typical battlefield. However, these can be easily swapped out for traditional wheels for locomotion.”

“In addition to that, there are multiple modes the SHIV can be put into,” Ophelia said, holding a tablet into her hand and motioning Saudia over. “Mobile and Entrenched. Putting it into the ‘Entrenched’ mode does this.” She pressed several buttons, there was an audible locking sound, and four smaller legs extended from the sides, then were planted on the floor. “All SHIVs have 360 mobility in both positons,” Ophelia continued. “However in this position, firepower will be more stable and accurate since more power can be devoted to targeting.”

“Can I see that?” Saudia asked, and Ophelia gave her the tablet controlling the SHIV. There were quite a few additional sensors on it, and the main image was of the SHIV facing them, all of them showing up as red blimps, which she assumed was from heat sensors.

“How is the power consumption?” She asked.
“Twelve hours without any kind of recharge,” Feng answered, walking back towards her. “Batteries for it take approximately one hour to recharge, and can be replaced easily. We attempted to have a system of continuous battery replacement, but there simply wasn’t room to accommodate it.”

“That should be sufficient,” Saudia nodded, already rather happy with the machine. “Well done. These are ready for deployment?”

“Yes, at your command,” Feng confirmed.

“Put them into production,” Saudia ordered. “And be sure to designate some for the Peacekeepers. They could use a machine like this.”

“Excellent,” Feng said, and began walking to what he wanted to show her next, which was out of the Robotics Wing. “We’ve been puzzling out how best to improve the Shieldbearer Armor,” he continued as they walked in the hallway. “The initial concept is sound, but putting it into practice is difficult. We are not yet able to develop reliable kinetic shielding, and the magnetic repellent was only effective against traditional ballistics.”

“Have you solved this problem then?” Saudia asked as they rounded a corner.

“To an extent,” Feng admitted. “The issue is that we still have not developed proper plasma weapons, and are relying largely on simulations from data gathered in the field. XCOM has been instrumental in helping us in this project, since they do have one plasma weapon to test with.”

“To put it bluntly,” Ophelia said. “We think we have a way to protect against plasma fire.”

Saudia blinked. “As in stop it entirely?”

“In theory, yes,” Feng clarified. “In practice, it would at minimum reduce the overall danger of the plasma burst itself.” He motioned them into another room which actually looked like a room for testing weapons, and in the range was a suited Shieldbearer. The armor was slightly bulkier than the previous iteration, and there was some built-in pack attached to the armor.

“There had been research into plasma before the war,” Ophelia said as they stood in front of the Shieldbearer. “While the alien application is far more advanced, the principles remain the same, and thus, it has many of the same vulnerabilities. Plasma, Chancellor, is highly influenced by magnetism as it is an ionized gas. Without boring you with the physics, the best defense is the utilization of powerful magnetic fields.”

“Can that really be powerful enough to repel plasma?” Saudia asked skeptically.

“Yes,” Feng nodded. “A strong enough magnetic field should, in theory, completely deter plasma, or at the very minimum negate its overall damage. And that is what the new Shieldbearer accomplishes.” He motioned to the Shieldbearer who pressed a button on his armor and a short antenna shot up from the back of his armor. A few seconds later he was surrounded by a visible field that distorted the image of him.

“I would fire some plasma weapons to prove this works,” Feng sighed. “Unfortunately, we are only capable of producing small and weak bursts, which while helpful, I’m hesitant to call as appropriate field tests. However, XCOM has confirmed that it does perform as intended, and I doubt they would lie.”

“The aliens rely on plasma weaponry,” Saudia said slowly. “This could change the entire war. Their weaponry would be useless.”
“Don’t get too excited yet,” Ophelia grunted, although she seemed rather pleased. “One, this hasn’t been field-tested. And two, the power drain from this is extreme. The longest it has lasted is ten minutes, more or less, before it quit altogether, and we don’t know how it would stand against sustained plasma fire. The energy issue is the biggest hurdle, and that can hopefully be resolved when we figure out elerium.”

“Still,” Saudia said in amazement. “That can be worked around. We can supply the power right now. I assume you’ve made non-Shieldbearer emplacements which perform the same function?”

“Yes, of course,” Feng said. “But they have a fairly small range, and take some time to set up. But those could be protected and they don’t require exotic resources to be created. And I have taken the liberty of ordering several thousand already to be sent to America and Korea. I assumed you would want more, but that will require your authorization.”

Saudia snorted. “I should sign an order not to need my approval for certain tasks. Like providing equipment that negates plasma weapons.”

“Now, there is one final thing,” Feng said, turning on his heel and walking out. “You recall the last time I was designing a fast-response troop transport. The good news is that I was able to construct the proof-of-concept without much issue.”

More excellent news. “You solved the propulsion systems?” She asked. “I believe you said that was an issue.”

“Yes, though it wasn’t as difficult as I had feared,” Feng explained as they reached a massive hangar. “Now that we have enough intact UFOs, it was a matter of reverse-engineering the systems and applying them elsewhere. The larger problem was finding a power source to temporarily substitute in place of elerium.”

“Did you?” She asked.

“Yes, but as I said, this is only to show that it works,” he clarified. “Alien propulsion systems are simply impossible to use practically without elerium, but when we do solve it, we will be able to deploy these dropships immediately.” He pointed to a fully constructed ADVENT dropship, in all it’s uniquely designed glory.

It still seemed an odd design to her, but she assumed it was more due to incorporating the anti-grav mechanisms than anything else. The four ‘legs’ of the craft were likely the main means of propulsion, and probably a few stabilizing mechanisms were on the underside of the craft itself. It was still pretty small, but she could see it being useful for quick deployments or reinforcing certain areas.

“Start it up!” Feng called, and the room was suddenly filled with a low hum from the dropship and after a few seconds, it started rising, the air underneath the legs being completely distorted and tinted red from the anti-grav effects. There were similar effects under the main body of the craft itself, and after the legs shifted to a horizontal position, it shot forward and flew around the expansive hangar.

Saudia was impressed how quickly it could speed up and slow to a complete halt within seconds, and after a few more minutes of demonstrations, it shifted back into a landed position. As it settled on the ground, Saudia nodded approvingly. “For a proof of concept, I would say it passed. But it drains too much power to be deployed?”

“Unfortunately,” Feng confirmed. “It can last nearly a half hour, but none beyond that. Clearly not
feasible for actual usage, but it will be ready once elerium has been fully researched and ready to be used.

“I’ll have Munju and Tygan bump that up on their priority list,” Saudia promised. “Another job well done.”

“I would like to see the alien’s faces when they realize plasma doesn’t work quite as well,” Ophelia said with a grim smile. “That would be entertaining.”

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Switzerland, Construction Fields

Saudia had never really appreciated just how secure Switzerland truly was before arriving. Once she’d realized that the country was an interlinked fortress, it hadn’t been a hard call to decide that it was going to be the official capital of ADVENT, although pretty much everyone she’d appointed in a military position had suggested the same thing.

It was also the place where Commander Christiaens had decided to test out potential tactics, structures, and equipment before deciding to actually deploy or utilize them. She’d essentially turned much of the country into a mixture of a testing ground and training area. And there was quite a bit to see here.

Right now both of them were walking through a small trench fortification, which gave her a much better idea of what Laura had said when she’d explained that she wanted to bring trench warfare back as an actual tactic. Saudia had been surprised to say the least, but Laura had said the concept was sound, and it would give them a much better chance to defend cities than only relying on barricades.

“The aliens are bad at open warfare,” Laura had said. “They don’t have any useful strategies aside from charging an open field and praying they live to find cover. Then they become dangerous. Several lines of trenches in front of any city will turn any charge into a massacre.”

She’d seen an obvious flaw then. “And what happens when there isn’t an open space in front of the city?”

“Then we clear out the area and make one,” she answered evenly. “Our strategies aren’t good enough right now, Chancellor, we need to adapt and pull out every trick we can.”

The stories of trench warfare were horrific, and despite their use, Saudia wasn’t keen on putting soldiers through that, but it had admittedly been at a time when conditions were much worse and technology nowhere what it was today. Laura had said that there were obvious places for improvement, and she appeared to have followed through on that.

To start with, the actual digging of the trench wasn’t done with crude shovels or by hand anymore. Laura had said it still could be, but with access to modern construction equipment, there wasn’t a need. The exact depth of the trench was seven feet, without counting the steel barricades placed along the edge of the trench facing outward, with the ground slanted upward for soldiers to move up to shoot out of. Along the short barricade were openings for soldiers to shoot through, while lessening the chance of getting hit in return. The width was seven feet, and on the ground there were ridged steel slabs perfectly cut to fit into the trench that could be cleaned, which made the trench ultimately more sanitary and safe.

Every ten feet there were what Laura described as ‘Emplacements’, which is to say, small armored
bunkers that had an M2 Browning deployed within. It was just high enough where the barrel reached a few inches off the ground, but there was enough room in the bunker to aim it in multiple directions. While obvious targets, they did give some more stationary firepower to the defensive line.

“There are designated ammo and medical stockpiles every twenty-five feet,” Laura explained as they continued walking. “Nothing fancy, just cut-out sections of the trench, but they are always available and can be resupplied from trench lines further back.” Unlike most of the trench she was in, this one had an armored cover tall enough that she could almost stand up in it. There was some basic lighting, stacks of ammo boxes, and med-kits.

That was another improvement Laura had ordered. There was intermittent lighting throughout the trenches, that would be directly connected to the city. It ran along the ground level of the trench, and the floor was also lit well.

“This is something that can be added should the aliens begin to use shelling or gas weaponry,” Laura said as they came to a new section. It was identical in function to where they’d been previously, but instead of the short barricade in front that allowed soldiers to shoot out of it, a metal ceiling extended over the entire trench and rested on the other side. It wasn’t fancy and more like fitting a particular piece together than something sturdy, but it provided more protection than open air. “The basic design of the trench allows armoring if needed,” Laura continued. “It will get stifling and uncomfortable, which is the downside, but it’s easy to set up and take down, and will protect against bombardments to a degree.”

“You could integrate a point-laser system to shoot down incoming munitions,” Saudia noted. “That could also negate the problem.”

“Agreed, but that’s not something that could be built easily,” Laura amended. “For the larger cities, absolutely. But for smaller ones it’s not justified in terms of resource cost.”

“Fair,” Saudia nodded as they finished walking through the armored trench, and exited above ground where both of them overlooked the long trench. “I’m impressed. You made significant improvements to the design here.”

“It needed to happen,” Laura said slowly. “I wouldn’t think of reviving them if there weren’t improvements to be made. The aliens themselves don’t have many good counters to this. They seem to lack any sort of heavy vehicles outside of the Sectopod, and that moves slowly enough where we can destroy it before it does much damage.” She stretched her hand out, illustrating the trench line. “At the very back we can place our conventional tanks and artillery to fire at the aliens. Their systems are good, but even they have to have limits. We’ve also not seen their aircraft have any kind of bombers, which negates that threat.”

The more Saudia thought about it, the more there seemed to be some holes in the alien military. They appeared to be largely infantry-based, which while varied, were also much easier to kill. They didn’t have many military vehicles, outside of the Sectopod and Cyberdisk, the latter of which didn’t seem to fill the role of a conventional tank.

They did appear to have some aquatic capabilities, strangely enough, but they didn’t seem to have any artillery whatsoever. Then there were the odd gaps in the air force. There were no bombers as Laura had noted, and no indication there was anything larger than a transport that was used regularly. They clearly had the capability to create larger ships, as the alien Dreadnought had shown, but ever since then there hadn’t been anything close to that size. She suspected it was because they had gotten used to a different form of warfare, or maybe believed psionics could substitute for anything.
But it all seemed very...conventional. She didn’t know a better way to describe it. Which made her wonder just how much of the alien technology was being hidden from them. Surely they had to have more than billions of soldiers?

Right?

She did sincerely hope she was wrong, but another part of her would be sorely disappointed if the aliens did turn out to be that unimaginative. “And all of this will be covered by the Flak Towers,” Laura continued. “Those will definitely take the most fire, but I’ve been sure to have them be as structurally sound as possible.”

“I would incorporate Feng and Ophelia’s plasma dissipaters into them,” Saudia suggested as they walked to the massive tower. “That would negate almost all of the damage at this point.”

“For future iterations,” Laura agreed. “But for now these will hold up well. This way, Chancellor.” Saudia followed her into the first floor of the eight-story tower. The sheer amount of firepower on display was something Saudia found very satisfying. In front of every opening was an M2 Browning or a stationary weapon of similar power. Ammo boxes were stockpiled in quartered sections throughout the entire open floor. In the center was the spiral staircase leading up. And in the middle of the staircase was a fireman’s pole which extended from the top, a contingency in case the stairs were destroyed or otherwise blocked.

“Did you think about the proposal Munju had?” Saudia asked as they climbed.

“Cloning?” Laura said, somewhat distastefully. “Yes, somewhat. I can’t deny that it would be useful if they can make it work. But...I’m not exactly thrilled with the idea of growing Humans just to send them to fight in a war. The concept itself is personally unsettling to me, so I’m not sure I’m the one best to answer the question. If you decide to approve it, I’ll use them to the best of my ability.”

“And that’s all you should need to do,” Saudia nodded. “But that is something that does have to be decided sooner than later. If you have objections, I’d want to know now.”

“That depends on your plan for them,” Laura said slowly, stopping and looking back at Saudia. “Would they have a place in ADVENT besides being soldiers?”

“To a degree,” Saudia said. “Those aspects haven’t been fully discussed. This is more about the concept itself.”

“Well, that ties into how I feel about it,” Laura pointed out. “I suppose my question is if they would be treated as Humans or not?”

“That is the goal,” Saudia shrugged. “Does that answer your question?”

Laura looked at her for a few moments. “For now, Chancellor. I need to think about it some more. Besides, there is still more to show you.” They reached what Saudia believed was the fourth floor, which was almost identical to the first floor, except that there were several AA weapons instead of stationary machine guns.

“Each floor can be locked down in case the lower ones are under attack.” Laura said, pointing to a lever on the floor near where the staircase had arrived. She pulled it, and the metal sheets built into the floor slid out, completely covering the entrance. “Useful,” Saudia nodded as Laura retracted the covering. “Continue.”

They proceeded further up, and the higher they went, the more weapons were specifically anti-air,
and there were now a decent number of precision laser weapons in addition to gauss defenses. They finally arrived at the top, where almost every single available space had a massive AA turret, and on each of the corners was a heavy precision laser to further augment the death trap that was the Flak Tower.

“I’d hate to be the first UFO that tries to run this,” Saudia said approvingly, clasping her hands behind her back as she overlooked the landscape. “I believe we just might be ready for when the aliens attack next. No more easy victories for them.”

“We just have to make sure they don’t get control of these towers,” Laura noted ruefully. “I don’t fancy our chances if we end up on the wrong side of these guns.”

“I assume you have a plan for if we do have to retreat from them?” Saudia asked.

“A crude one, but it should do the job if needed,” Laura explained. “There are several contingency explosives on the first, forth, and seventh levels that can be deployed if we’re going to lose the towers, which can be detonated remotely after setting them up. There isn’t much of a chance of the explosives going off accidentally since they aren’t primed, and it’s better than having an integrated self-destruct system the aliens might accidentally exploit.”

“Good planning,” Saudia nodded approvingly. “Better to have contingencies in place. I don’t consider it likely that we will never lose a Tower.”

“Still,” Laura said, looking away. “I’d prefer to avoid that contingency.”

Saudia smiled grimly. “Well, we’ll have to be sure not to lose them then.”

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Undisclosed Location, United States of America

Saudia had wondered what it was like to be a psion. The idea itself was alien to her, and the few discussions she’d had with psions had been…limited. Well, those had been limited to Patricia and the Commander, both of whom had generally been focused on other topics. Still, the power to dominate the minds of others was one she wouldn’t mind.

Out of curiosity, she’d wondered if she could be psionically awakened as well, and the standardized test to determine sensitivity had come back negative. A shame, but perhaps it was for the best. She’d prefer not to go around with a bomb in her head, or have any kind of mental conditioning, both of which she knew the Commander would require, especially for her.

But the ADVENT Psionic Research, Investigation, Enhancement, Specialization and Training Program, shortened to PRIEST, could very well be the most important weapon in this war against the aliens. The Ethereals might not have put much effort into developing conventional warfare, but with psions as powerful as they had, they didn’t necessarily need to.

The research XCOM had shared with them seemed to indicate that Humans weren’t as psionically capable as Ethereals, but equal with or surpassing most Sectoids. Psions on the level of Patricia or the Furies appeared to be rare, but even the weaker ones were more than capable of destroying conventional alien forces. It was ironic that in her quest to give EXALT psions, they had ended up giving XCOM one of their greatest weapons in the Furies.

At least something good had come out of that program. A shame Subject Four…Durand, was it? Well, it was a shame she’d died. Her power had been extraordinary.
“Chancellor?” Saudia turned away from the psionic pod she’d been looking at to see the Director of the PRIEST Program, Dr. Akilah Kettani, one of the leading neuroscientists in the world. As there weren’t any experts outside of XCOM in the field of psionics, she’d had to make do. If there was anyone who could puzzle out how best to figure out the phenomenon, it would be an expert on the brain itself.

“Dr. Kettani,” she greeted. “It looks like you have everything up and running.”

“Quite, Chancellor,” he agreed with a smile. “The next step is finding appropriate candidates for awakening. I know that the military is currently cycling through their forces, but I believe we should also begin expanding to civilian populations immediately.”

“You’ve mentioned this,” Saudia said as they began to walk down the corridor. “I’m not convinced that it would be a good idea to pair civilians with soldiers quite yet; unless of course the number of psions we acquire is too small to be useful.”

“You have the final say, but I would advise against that,” Kettani said, his ice-blue eyes looking pointedly at her. “If my calculations are correct, there is a sizable portion of the Human population that is psionically sensitive, and the majority of Humans are not currently serving. Psions are not soldiers and shouldn’t be treated exactly like them; civilians can learn, and they can be useful.”

Saudia raised an eyebrow. “When you say a sizable portion, what does that translate to?”

Kettani heisted, glancing up for a few seconds. “Right now I am only going by the number of psions that have been in XCOM, but I will not know for sure without a far larger sample size. However, given that XCOM has had a minimum of one hundred soldiers, and at least ten of those have been psions, that implies that five to fifteen percent of the Human population is at least capable of minimal psionic manipulation.

Saudia immediately tried to run some numbers in her head. There were about seven and a half billion people on the planet, just five percent of that would be... “Three hundred and eighty million, minimum,” Kettani said, anticipating her calculations. “Greater percentiles are over one billion. If even a fraction of those are awakened, it might be enough to overwhelm an Ethereal.”

Saudia nodded numbly. She’d believed that there would be only a few who could be awakened, maybe thousands at most. But if Kettani was correct, that would do more than give them a fighting chance, it might even turn the war in their favor. “That being said, this is still unknown,” Kettani cautioned as they entered another brightly lit room. “But I’m confident that there are more than enough potential psions to be awakened.”

“You have my authorization to proceed with recruitment,” Saudia said firmly. “And of course be sure that if there are civilians who join…that they understand the conditions and risks. I don’t want unwilling psions in my army.”

“Of course,” Kettani nodded as he guided her over to a table with a curious device resting on it. It looked like one end was a handle, which was connected to a block of equal width, possibly a power source, and two prongs extended upwards, angling towards each other but not meeting.

“Is this a weapon?” She asked, picking up the strange device. It definitely looked alien in origin, and not something she was even aware was being developed.

“Not exactly,” Kettani said, frowning as he looked at the weapon, reaching over and hitting a switch. Saudia almost jumped as a small ball of purple energy converged in the center of the two prongs. It had to be psionic in origin, but she didn’t know how that was possible.
“This was something XCOM gave to us,” Kettani explained. “They referred to it as a ‘Training Amp’ for newer psions, or those of lesser power. This is technically a misnomer though, as for one, from what I understand, it acts more as a focus than an actual amplification of power, and second, that isn’t actually psionic energy.”

Saudia glanced at him. “Then what is it?”

Kettani furrowed his brow. “I don’t know. XCOM didn’t explain, and even though they provided the full schematics…no one I’ve shown it to has been able to comprehend how this thing actually works. We can assemble it, and the power source comes from an elerium crystal specially treated with psionics…but how this actually produces the result, I haven’t been able to puzzle out.”

Saudia looked back at the device, which glowed brightly. “XCOM must have been able to figure it out.”

Kettani looked down at the amp as she turned it off. “I’m not so sure. But it’s irrelevant. They appear to work and will supposedly help with training.”

“And speaking of which,” Saudia said, taking the opportunity to change the subject. “How is that going to be handled?”

“In the beginning XCOM has promised to assist with the first generation of psions,” Kettani explained as they walked over to a window which overlooked a white room the size of a gym, which she assumed would be used for training. “I believe they want to maintain a presence here permanently, if for no other reason than they get their pick of psions.”

Saudia pursed her lips. “That I am not surprised at.” It had been another condition the Commander had added to approving the PRIEST Program, XCOM had the authority to select certain psions for XCOM and they had to turn them over. It was clearly a means of ensuring that ADVENT didn’t have the most powerful psions, but she didn’t consider it worth challenging. The Commander had promised not to abuse that agreement too much, but Saudia wasn’t holding her breath.

“XCOM identified four major disciplines of psionic power,” Kettani continued. “Offensive, Defensive, Telekinesis, and Telepathy. The XCOM Psion Trask has said that it’s possible for a psion to master multiple disciplines, but that is exceedingly difficult and rare, and each one will naturally gravitate towards the one they are most inclined towards. Training regimes will be built around these disciplines, and more can be developed for hybrid specializations in the future.”

“That takes care of that,” Saudia said, resting her chin on her hand as she thought. “The larger question is determining how powerful each psion is. Not all are equal, and there needs to be a way of determining weaker psions from stronger ones.”

“No worries there, Chancellor,” Kettani assured her, placing a tablet in her hand. “That has already been solved. The good news is that psionic potential is static, cannot be changed, and is easily determined. Measuring it was a rather exciting development as we needed to create the unit of measurement ourselves, as there is no baseline of power that is equivalent. As Patricia Trask was the first known Human psion, the unit of measurement we created is designated the Trask.”

Trask. That was not going to be a context that Saudia was going to get used to quickly, but it did make sense that the unit designating psionic power would be named after her. Seeing as how many units of measurement were named after people in the sciences, it seemed only fair. “I wonder if she approves,” Saudia wondered aloud. “I somehow doubt it was her idea.”

“She seemed rather indifferent,” Kettani shrugged. “But she did consider it an honor. Unless you
want the scientifically complex version as to how much a Trask is worth, I can simply explain the
system itself.”

“I would prefer that,” Saudia said.

“It’s actually simple,” Kettani said, motioning to her tablet where there were a list of ranks and
names. “The Trask Scale goes from one to one hundred, although it could be expanded, but the
chances of a psion exceeding one hundred Trasks is nearly impossible. One is very weak, one
hundred is exceptionally strong. A simple format.”

He nodded towards the list she was reading. “There are five ranks of psionic power; a psion who is
in the range of one to twenty Trasks is Awakened; twenty-one to forty is an Adept; forty-one to
sixty is a Psion proper; sixty-one to eighty is a Magus; and eighty-one to one hundred is a
Leviathan.”

“And the ranks are permanent?” Saudia said, looking up to clarify.

“Yes,” Kettani confirmed. “The Trask level of a psion cannot be changed. An Adept will always be
an Adept. Psionic sensitivity is genetic, or at least all current research indicates that it is, and there
is no research right now into genetic modification to increase psionic sensitivity, although that is
certainly possible.”

That was very useful, and would make it much easier to decide how best to use psions in combat.
“I’m curious,” Saudia said. “Did Patricia score well?”

“She is an eighty-four on the Trask Scale,” Kettani said with a smile. “The chances of another
psion with her raw power is slim, but possible. I suspect only an Ethereal would outclass a
Leviathan-Rank psion.”

Saudia was wondering what an Offensive Leviathan would look like, or even a Telekinetic
Leviathan. Probably something like Caelior. For that matter, she wondered where he would place
on this chart.

Likely exceed it. If there was one thing the Ethereals specialized in, it was psionic enhancement.
“Excellent work,” she said. “How long before we can expect psionic soldiers?”

“Several months, minimum,” Kettani said flatly, running a hand through his short hair. “We first
have to find suitable candidates, awaken them, and then train them so they aren’t completely
useless. But after the initial start-up period, we should fall into a pattern where batches can be
deployed regularly. I will also add that the more facilities for training, the faster it will go, and the
larger the batches.”

“Send over what you believe would be ideal,” Saudia ordered. “I’ll be sure you get what you need.
The outcome of the war could rest on this; and I will not throw this opportunity away.”

“Then I will begin recruitment,” he said, turning to look out into the empty training area. “No time
to waste.”

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New York, Peacekeeper Command

Saudia wouldn’t have expected that the visit to Stein’s headquarters would be the most relaxing
part of her trip, but it was. Stein had simply suggested that they have lunch and go over whatever
they needed to discuss, and had added in a deadpan voice “You’re probably tired of people walking
around and showing you stuff.” Which wasn’t technically true, but it had been an exhausting week, even by her standards.

“Cloning,” Stein commented thoughtfully as Saudia finished explaining the newest developments in the realms of science. “Interesting. People are squeamish about the subject for some reason.”

“And I suppose you’re not,” Saudia commented ruefully as she ate her salad. “I’m somehow not surprised.”

“There isn’t a reason to be,” Stein said neutrally. “The concept is good. It will allow us a disposable army while we can save our actual soldiers for missions of actual importance.”

Saudia frowned. “Considering that they will likely take several years at minimum to grow, I’m not in favor of throwing them away. This would not be a small investment.”

Stein snorted. “Bad phrasing, what I should have said was that will allow us to use them for riskier or dangerous assignments; ones that we’d be hesitant to sacrifice actual Humans for.”

Hm. Saudia wasn’t exactly pleased Stein had immediately gone the whole ‘clone equals not human’ route. “If we do this, the clones will likely be just as functional as us. There isn’t much of a point in growing more Humans only to discard them as lesser beings,” she said. “Otherwise we might as well just build drones.”

Stein took a sip of water, looking at her for a few long seconds. “Interesting. I wouldn’t have expected you to be sentimental about the topic. You would equate a natural-born human with one grown in a tank?”

“If there wasn’t a difference, then yes,” Saudia said. “I don’t see a reason not to.”

“Aside from the fact that one was born as the result of a mother and father, and another was grown like a plant?” Stein countered. “The differences may be hidden, but arguing that clones are the same as actual people is not correct in the slightest. And really Saudia, what is the point of growing an entire army if not to save Human lives? Because when it comes down to it, if given the choice between saving a Human and saving a clone, we save the Human every time. That is what I, and most other people would do. Good on you for giving them consideration, but we both know a clone army would ultimately be a means to an end.”

“Obviously,” Saudia said. “However, that doesn’t mean we have to be frivolous about it.”

“Of course not,” Stein nodded. “Another resource to be managed correctly. However, I’m more interested in where the PRIEST Program is going. In fact, I have a request.”

Saudia waited. “Go on.”

“I want some psions of my own,” Stein said, resting her arms on the table. “And I want to install them as justices. After we develop a stronger means of conditioning beyond a bomb in their head, of course.”

“Judges, you mean?” Saudia asked. “You want psions as judges?”

“Both are interchangeable, you understand the request,” Stein sighed exasperatedly. “I’ve been thinking about this quite a bit. We’re ultimately relying on the same standards of trial and judgement as we always have, and that works very well for some cases. Much of my work removing these troublesome dissidents is a simple matter of recovering evidence from their phones or internet posts, and passing judgement.”
She took a breath. “But it’s not perfect. Forensic evidence has its own set of problems, even if it is useful, and there are far too many cases everyday where it’s a matter of one person’s word against another, and then throwing the biases of a judge or jury into it.”

“We don’t have juries anymore,” Saudia reminded her.

“The point is that there are too many instances where criminals walk free because there isn’t enough evidence,” Stein said. “Or worse, are wrongly convicted. The PRIEST Program can get rid of the uncertainty once and for all. No more unanswered questions. No more wrongful convictions. No more criminals walking free. Only clear and undisputed justice.”

She took another long sip of water, then refocused on Saudia, her eyes intense. “I am personally quite sick of people deriding my work just because I do my fucking job. ‘I’m too harsh on protesters,’ ‘I’m a violent sadist who gets off on shooting people,’ ‘I’m only your loyal attack dog getting rid of your enemies,’ I can deal with all that idiotic crap, but what I hate is when people say I’m deliberately throwing innocent people in jail, or doing it for no reason at all.”

Her hand around her glass was clenched so tight Saudia wondered if she’d break it. “I want to silence those insults once and for all,” she growled. “Let the psions judge the accused, and there will be no disputing what is true or false. Kyong was right when we spoke; I need to do more to change the minds of people. I have enemies who will never change, but I should do what I can to ensure that people who are watching know all I’m doing is my job. If there are people who have been wrongly convicted, I want them freed, and then I want to go after the people who’ve eluded justice for decades. This time they won’t escape it.”

Saudia was silent for a few moments. “If there were some way to ensure the psion couldn’t lie, then I agree with this. But not before that.”

“Understandable,” Stein nodded. “That’s all I wanted to hear. But if the numbers you were giving on the PRIEST Program are anything close to what you were describing…not developing any kind of Manchurian Program or similar conditioning will backfire. We both know how powerful they could be, and we should risk it on this scale.”

“I agree,” Saudia said. “But for now we have to take every advantage we got.”

“Well, the future doesn’t look quite as grim,” Stein commented. “The question is what the aliens have been doing in the meantime.”

“Hopefully nothing important,” Saudia said. “But I somehow don’t think we’re going to be that lucky.”

Stein’s lips were set in a faint grin. “There isn’t luck in war, Chancellor, there is only intelligence and strategy. And I think in that respect, we can match them.”

“I suppose we’ll find out soon,” Saudia said, looking out to where Peacekeepers were patrolling. “It is only a matter of time before the storm breaks again.”
The long line of ADVENT vehicles and soldiers made for what Betos would call an intimidating sight. She was certain there were people who thought that they were being invaded by some hostile military, which was why she’d mostly plotted their path mostly along less-traveled routes. Although they were now getting close to the capital, so she’d had the majority of her soldiers set up a camp near Sarkin Pawa, which was one of the more desolate places in Nigeria.

It wouldn’t be permanent, but it would suffice long enough for her to have a proper talk with the President of Nigeria. She didn’t think it would look that good for her to march into their capital with an entire army behind her.

So she was instead just taking a few of her officers, Mox included, in full armor, since she wasn’t going to be stupid about this.

Mox had assured her that she would be safe, but she didn’t see a reason to take chances. She did believe Mox, but the President was only one person, and she could imagine that there might be some of his advisors who wouldn’t be thrilled with her showing up. Not that she could particularly blame them in this case, since she’d be suspicious too if a small army showed up with the so-called intention to help.

“How do you even know him?” Betos asked Mox as they drove to Abuja. “I never asked that.”

All of them had their helmets off, since it was far more comfortable without them on in the heat and humidity. Mox shrugged, his face not giving away what he was thinking. “Mutual acquaintance, he introduced us a while ago and we’ve kept in contact since. Nothing frequent mind you, and I wouldn’t call us ‘good friends’, but I know enough about him to say I trust him.”

“This acquaintance the same Mossad agent you joked about knowing?” Betos asked, amused. She’d always assumed he’d made that up, and it had been something of an inside joke between them for years, and she wouldn’t have been surprised to learn he did have someone like that he was friends with. Mox was very easy to talk to.

“What? No,” he chuckled. “He was from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, nice guy, don’t know where he is now. I think he was transferred to a more sensitive position. But he knew quite a few important people.”

“And so…what?” Betos asked, looking out the window at the dry land. “You just write the President when you feel like it?”

“To some extent,” Mox explained. “But there was a reason I was usually chosen as an escort whenever Israel sent someone down to Nigeria. They knew I was a friend and thought that would improve relations. They asked me to keep that quiet, which is why I never told you.”

“Fair,” Betos shrugged. “Hopefully he’s…reasonable about this.”

“Oh, he’ll be perfectly happy to accept your help,” Mox said, then paused. “Although when he hears about your larger plan, this might not be as easy as we thought.”

“It never is,” Betos sighed. “I’m more concerned he’ll want to use whatever we provide him to strengthen his own position, or worse, turn it against his neighbors.”
“He won’t support that,” Mox disputed. “His cabinet? Different story. A problem that I didn’t properly consider is that some of these countries…well, they aren’t exactly friends. In fact, some of them hate each other.”

“We don’t need the people to accept each other right away,” Betos said. “But if the governments work together, then the rest of the details can be worked out. Even if they don’t like each other, it shouldn’t be difficult to show them that ADVENT is a much more present threat. Besides,” she tapped the pistol at her waist. “If that won’t get them to at least listen to us, then what we can offer them will.”

“That it will,” Mox nodded. “I wonder if ADVENT has already covered up what we did.”

Betos looked back out the window while she answered. “The few times we’ve got internet access, I didn’t see anything major. Very likely they’re keeping this quiet.”

“Typical,” Mox snorted.

“We expected as much,” Betos said. “Should we become more established, we can work on making ourselves impossible to ignore. The greater concern is ADVENT taking preemptive action. They won’t take long to figure out where we are.”

“They have to go down half the continent,” Mox pointed out as they turned onto another street. “No way are they getting that far without either the nations being aware, or fighting back. And I don’t think they want to perform another hostile military attack so soon after Canada.”

Betos shook her head. “I’m not worried about that. They aren’t idiots. If they’re smart, they’ll be using XCOM Intelligence to keep an eye on us. I think we’re too large to all suddenly turn up dead, but I wouldn’t put it past them to assassinate you or me. Or anyone important who associates with us.”

“Mhmm, true,” Mox grunted. “We need to set up your own protection service. It’s not like we’re going back alive, so assassination is a valid concern.”

“Or we need to establish a clear plan and chain of command if I die,” Betos countered. “If ADVENT wants to kill me…realistically, I don’t know how much we can do to stop them. I wasn’t Intelligence, so I don’t know their latest methods, but I was a Marshal. That isn’t something I can predict well, and we don’t have any former agents with us.”

“I don’t think ADVENT will be particularly creative if they want you dead,” Mox stated, wiping some sweat off his forehead. “They are legally permitted to kill any of us now. It’s not like they need plausible deniability.”

That raised some alarm bells in her head, because Mox was right. “If that is the case…why aren’t they doing anything?”

“My opinion?” Mox asked rhetorically. “They’re likely predicting your plan, and they want you to fail at it. Best case for them is that it fails and distracts the most powerful countries in Africa, and worst they hope you otherwise weaken them, as well as yourselves. Or it could be because they don’t see us as a threat.”

“We aren’t one,” Betos said warily. “Not yet. Even if by some miracle we unite the African countries in an actual military alliance, they still aren’t strong enough to hold out against ADVENT.”

“Yet,” Mox clarified. “And they don’t need to be. They just need to be strong enough to give
ADVENT pause. If Africa is too much trouble for them, then they’ll move on.”

“In an ideal world,” Betos nodded. “However, I don’t expect things to work out that easily.”

And they drove in silence the rest of the way to the capital, as Betos prepared for what would be the first diplomatic attempt of her life. Hopefully she wouldn’t screw it up.

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Vitakar, En route to designated coordinates

From the moment Nartha had strapped himself into his speeder, he was certain someone was watching him. However, now that the Nulorian knew who he was, he would have been more surprised if they weren’t keeping tabs on him. There were no Zararch watching him, he was certain of that, having made sure to check and alter Zararch schedules as needed.

No, all they knew was that he was going to be investigating Nulorian activity in the Borelian Wastes. It would take him some time to get there, even with the speeder, but he knew he would make it on time.

Using the speeder was a bit conspicuous, since personal vehicles were rare, and most relied on the interconnected trains between and within cities. Personal vehicles were seen as unnecessary, and were usually only allowed for government workers. That had been one of the first shocking things about Earth, how it was more uncommon not to have a form of personal transportation.

Humans in general didn’t seem to be fans of such concepts. They did exist, especially in the cases of planes and cruise ships, but those were only ever used for long distances. Public transportation was an afterthought from what he’d seen. Well, with a few exceptions, namely Europe. But it wasn’t just owning a personal vehicle that was interesting to him, but how seriously some Humans took it.

Nartha liked his speeder. It was useful and got him places. But it was one of three models, different ones for different climates, and all of them were colored a dark gray. But some of the lengths Humans went to show off their vehicles, and the sheer amount of choice they had was amazing. He almost wished they could take some inspiration from the Humans and add some color to the speeders. It couldn’t hurt.

He looked over at his GPS which showed him approaching the coordinates. It was going to be right on the Borial Strait, which led into the Manda, the ocean that surrounded the entire continent, and home of the Sar’Manda Empire. Wonderful. Hopefully the Nulorian knew better than to encroach on Sar’Manda territory, although technically the entire ocean was Sar’Manda territory.

In theory.

Nartha had always found the Sar’Manda both curious, and extremely annoying. The way they had evolved was so different from any other race, it was virtually an alien species all to itself. Their way of life, technology, food, clothing; almost every aspect of their society was alien, even to other Vitakara. They became annoying when it was apparent that they didn’t care about anyone but themselves.

He was pretty sure the only reason they joined the Aui’Vitakar was because of some obligation, which they never did anything more than the bare minimum. If it didn’t affect the Empire, they abstained, and if it affected the Empire negatively, they usually ignored it. Because really, how could you regulate an Empire that is completely underwater?
So the end result was that the Sar’Manda never really did anything, and the rest of the races ignored them, and everyone was fine with it. But it was still irritating to deal with them, especially when they refused to use translators. Even the Oyariah at least participated in government, even if they were Ethereal puppets.

He shook his head. He wasn’t quite sure where that tangent had come from, but it did make him realize that the Sar’Manda would be rather useful if he hoped to turn the Vitakara against the Ethereals. Unfortunately, he wasn’t even sure they’d care. To his knowledge, they had never actually hosted an Ethereal in their Empire.

But that was a problem for another day.

“Arriving at destination,” the metallic voice stated as he pulled up to the edge of the Strait. “Disembark when ready.”

“Here we go,” he muttered to himself and popped open the hood with a hiss, then winced as the freezing air washed over him. He stepped out into the snow and took a few deep breaths; acclimating to the new climate. He was bundled well, but even without it, Vitakarians were very difficult to kill with extreme weather alone.

Adaptability truly was a gift.

It appeared the Nulorian hadn’t shown up yet, so he rested against the speeder and looked around the so-called “Wastes”. That pretty much translated to endless dunes of snow, not so much ‘wastes’ as the traditional word implied. It was beautiful though, especially from the moonlight shining down on it, giving it a sparkling quality.

The water in the Strait rushed noisily along, fairly rough for a river, but Nartha knew that it could be easily navigated with proper naval equipment. Then the water suddenly bubbled and a submarine emerged.

Nartha drew his weapon; eyeing the submarine warily. It definitely looked to be Sar’Manda, since they were the only ones who put any effort into naval tech, and this was not a commercial sub, but one used for personal use, or small groups. Given the circumstances, he supposed that the Nulorian had stolen one and were using it in their own operations.

A new thought struck him.

Maybe the reason the Zararch had never been able to track down the Nulorian was because their main base was only accessible by submarine. Which begged the question…how had they acquired it? Sar’Manda were notoriously hostile towards outsiders, and he couldn’t imagine something like this would be ignored by them…unless they’d struck a deal?

Nartha snorted at that, even as he kept his weapon up. It would definitely be like the Sar’Manda to ignore a terrorist organization if they promised not to harm the Empire. It would fall within their expected behaviors. The ‘roof’ of the torpedo-shaped submarine slid down and three figures stepped out.

Two were Vitakarians, both bundled and helmeted with stolen Runianarch gear, painted with the glyph of the Nulorian, and there were other writings in Ethereal script that roughly translated to defiant, defender, and a phrase that roughly translated to bane of the puppets. Very melodramatic, and what he expected from such groups.

Although the armor of the other one simply had numbers, which he didn’t know if they were kill
counts or something else. The final figure was a Borelian, also kitted out in stolen Runianarch gear. However, the leader appeared to be the one with the numbers on his armor. The figure gestured and the other two raised their plasma weapons. Nartha didn’t lower his own.

“You are Zar’nartha’inha?” The figure asked in an altered voice, albeit clearly male.

Nartha gave a single nod. “Yes.”

“You wanted to meet with us.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I suppose you did as well,” he answered back. “Else you wouldn’t be here.” Nartha motioned towards the sub. “Interesting piece of equipment you have. Sar’Manda wouldn’t give that up easily.”

“Most aren’t willing to give up what they own easily,” he answered back neutrally. “We don’t have issues taking from the puppets.”

Well, maybe the Nulorian were brazen enough to steal Sar’Manda equipment and get away with it. “You know why I’m here,” he continued. “Are you still interested in what I have to say?”

The leader motioned to the other Vitakarian who pulled out a kind of scanner and began approaching his speeder. “You’ve surprised us,” the leader said. “Yet we also know you turned over valuable assets while preserving others. You may be genuine, but your methods have cost us.”

“I am in the Zararch,” Nartha reminded him easily. “It is unfortunate I had to turn over your allies, but I have to ensure my own treason is not discovered. If you noticed, I preserved the more useful ones for you.”

“Asset classification is not up to you,” the leader continued. “But there are considerations that have to be acknowledged. We are acting under the assumption that you will prove more valuable than them.” There was a pause. “If that is not the case, we will be...disappointed.”

Nartha gave a single nod. “Understood. Are we going to have this discussion here?”

“No,” the leader said. “But before we leave, we need to confirm you are not bugged or otherwise compromised. I would request you leave your weapon as well.”

“No,” Nartha warned. “I am well aware of your reputation, and going wherever you are taking me unarmed is not something I will do.”

The Nulorian leader eyed him for a moment. “Then understand that any sudden movements will lead to your immediate termination. We do not take chances, especially with traitor Zararch agents.”

“Forgive us for not trusting you yet,” the Borelian rumbled. “But I’m sure you can understand our hesitation.”

“I can,” Nartha agreed. “I don’t suppose you’d share your name?”

“That is not relevant,” the leader said unsurprisingly. It had been worth a shot. “The less you know, the better. If in fact you are genuine, that doesn’t mean you will elude the Zararch forever. No one can withstand Sectoid psionic reading.”

Another fair point. Nartha glanced backwards to the other Nulorian. “You’re not going to find anything.”
“I’ll be the judge of that,” the female Nulorian said as she continued. “But I doubt you’d be stupid enough to try and trick us.”

“Stay and watch if anyone has followed him,” the leader ordered her. “Nartha, come with us.” They waved him toward the sub which had just enough room for one person per seat, and it was four seats long. They were larger than would likely be needed, but he could imagine the Borelian was thankful for the extra size.

“Second seat, mind the gap,” the leader said as he stepped into the pilot seat and began powering the haptic display. “Strap in. Submarine travel isn’t as smooth as you’re imagining.”

“Largely because of your driving,” the Borelian commented dryly. Nartha almost started at a Borelian of all things making a joke. He shook his head in disbelief and stepped into the seat and strapped in. “No hard feelings Nartha, but I’ll be holding a gun to your head the entire time,” the Borelian said as she took the seat behind him. “No hard feelings.”

Nartha just sighed and accepted that this was going to be an interesting ride. Joking Borelians and nameless Nulorian leaders who were bad submarine drivers. Whatever happened, he was looking forward to actually seeing how the Nulorian operated.

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Argentina

Seasons were really strange in Argentina. Volk had been surprised to find that it was almost entirely flipped from the United States, or pretty much North America entirely. Winter was Summer, and Fall was Spring, and even then it varied depending on where exactly in Argentina you were. Being in the middle of the country, the climate wasn’t…bad, especially since it was mild in the traditionally “fall” months.

Not that it really made a difference to him. The climate didn’t matter, he and his people could survive it.

Didn’t mean he couldn’t have preferences.

Most people would, before a meeting with a fairly influential government, do some kind of preparation. Maybe dress up a bit, review the material that would likely be discussed, or leave a few minutes early. And had this been a meeting he considered actually important, then he might do that as well.

But Volk knew exactly how this was going to go. Government rep (he didn’t care enough to learn the name; didn’t matter anyway) would review what they did, he would agree, they would say ‘thank you, here is your next list of targets’ he would accept, take the equipment they brought as payment, and leave. Rinse and repeat.

Or more unlikely, they would just terminate their contract and he was on his own.

Volk did not personally care if the Argentinians wanted to work with him or not. If they did, great, if not, then it wasn’t as though there was a shortage of work. Elena regularly brought at least a dozen letters every week from people requesting help, and if one seemed like a worthy cause, he’d send one of his people to extract them.

Barack managed all incoming messages, and Volk was happy to let him do the advertising/moderating. He had helped set up the initial points of contact, but over the past five years it had gotten much larger than he’d expected. Generally, most people were respectful of his
time and only tried contacting if they were in mortal danger. Then there were the idiots who thought that being censored on the internet was equivalent to being held in prison for writing an expose on a powerful government official.

Whatever, the point was he was never short on work, and with ADVENT on the rise, business would definitely not slow down.

He set the book he was reading down on his lap as he mused on the state of the world now. ADVENT became more and more odd the more he looked into it. It was a strange juxtaposition of differing countries and cultures trying to form a unified front. There were places where people were treated badly like all Brazil under the lunatic Luana, and then there was the Middle East, which, from the accounts he had gotten, was potentially worse.

And on the other hand, the other countries with established democracies like the United States were…he had to admit, not exactly what he would call ‘problematic’. The only issue was that ADVENT had shown a clear willingness to use their power to shut down those who stood against them, and Brazil, the Middle East, and Canada were proof that no matter how reasonable ADVENT presented themselves, they were ultimately ruthless and merciless to those they disagreed with.

Well, he wasn’t going to bring it crashing down, but he’d do his part to help out the people affected by them. And if he got paid for it, that was just a nice bonus.

He heard a couple people walking towards him and looked up to see Elena and Ali, one of his best operatives, walking up. Both were fully armed and armored, filtering masks strapped to their waists. “Good book?” Ali asked rhetorically. He’d never thought Volk’s habit of reading was a particularly good usage of time, and made sure to rib him about it whenever it came up.

Not that Volk cared that much. Reading was one of the few things he enjoyed, and if someone didn’t like it, then that was just too bad. He was entitled to some entertainment now and again. “It isn’t bad,” he asked, holding it up. “Thought it was rather topical.”

Ali snorted once he saw the cover. “War of the Worlds. Ha ha, very funny.”

“Keep your sarcasm,” Volk chuckled, bookmarking his spot and standing. “I like it.”

He’d gone on something of a science fiction-alien invasion binge lately for obvious reasons. It amused him quite a lot to read about how different people imagined aliens would be. All of them were mostly wrong, but that was to be expected. Some were closer than others in descriptions, some were even more alien than the real ones.

Volk wondered if any aliens had actually read any books of the genre, or watched any movies for that matter. The mental image of one of those Sectoids watching Independence Day and taking notes about what not to do was one he found especially funny. It was nice reading about how the Humans managed to find the one weakness of the alien, or otherwise defeated them with Human ingenuity.

Unfortunate that was likely not going to happen in the real world. He was certain ADVENT would try their best though, and he would certainly watch with interest.

“Anyway, we’re ready to go,” Ali said, bringing him back to reality. “Don’t want to keep the suits waiting.”

“It won’t kill them to wait a few minutes,” Volk said, slinging his own rifle over his shoulder. “But
they are paying clients, so best stay on good terms. Let’s go.”

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Vitakar, Unknown

The Borelian had been right. Or maybe all submarine trips were like that. Either way, the pilot had driven like what appeared to be like a madman, but what Nartha suspected was an attempt to completely disorient him. Spinning, complete reversals of direction, sudden plunges and rises, it was a good thing he didn’t get sick from this.

If disorientation had actually been the goal, it had succeeded without question. Nartha had absolutely no idea where they were, and were now rising into what appeared to be a cave.

“Up and out,” the leader said, as the top opened up and cool air rushed in. So likely still in Borelia somewhere. Definitely a natural cave, which was currently kitted out with elerium-powered lights, caches of non-perishable food and a lot of weapon caches. Not just knockoffs either, but genuine Runianarch plasma rifles.

The Nulorian should not have had this much high-end equipment.

There were more Nulorian in the cave itself, mostly Vitakarian, but there were a few Borelians in the mix as well, all of them either had weapons pointed at him, or were eyeing him suspiciously. Nartha figured the only reason he hadn’t seen different races was because of the climate. It was a documented fact that there was at least one person of every race, with the exception of the Sar’Manda, who was at one point Nulorian. Oyariah were almost unheard of, and the climate here was bad for Dath’Haram and Cembrarian. They likely occupied warmer bases.

“So, where to?” Nartha asked lightly as the leader walked forward, and the Borelian gestured for him to follow.

“Just follow me,” was all the leader said as they walked into a stony corridor. “You’ll talk to one of the Nularis, leaders of our cells. Don’t bother asking for names again, he won’t give you his.”

“Not that you’ll need it,” the Borelian said behind him. “You’re getting to speak to him. Be grateful we aren’t just interrogating you.”

Nartha sniffed. “It would be a pointless interrogation, and you’d be fools to assume I don’t have something in mind should you betray me.”

“Typical Zararch,” the leader muttered as the corridor turned. “That is a reason, yes, but you wouldn’t be the first Zararch agent I’ve killed.”

It appeared this was somewhat personal then. Fair enough. Nartha was somewhat disappointed he wasn’t actually meeting Miridian, the infamous leader of the Nulorian, but he wasn’t surprised. He assumed that should this go well, and he continued helping the Nulorian, he’d meet him eventually. But for now, one of these Nularis would suffice.

“In there,” the leader said, stopping to unlock a metal door. “Take as much time as you need.”

“Thank you,” Nartha said and stepped into the room.

It was much dimmer than the well-lit corridor, with only a few light posts in the small room. In roughly the center was a massive figure sitting at a beautifully carved Dath’Haram treetable, reading something on a haptic pad.
An Oyariah.

Well, this was certainly interesting. He wasn’t entirely shocked they existed in the Nulorian, but one in a relative position of power was an unexpected twist to this operation. No wonder the other Nulorian had felt comfortable leaving him in here alone. Oyariah were almost impossible to kill without specialized equipment, and his plasma rifle wouldn’t be powerful enough on its own to kill him.

Oyariah themselves had always been an intimidating race, even though their numbers were much smaller. They towered over every other race by several heads, even their smallest ones were eight feet high in Human measurements. But that wasn’t what made them dangerous.

The race itself had armor for skin. Nartha wasn’t completely sure of the biology behind it, but Oyariah had a simple weak layer of skin like most, and over time they would go through a scaling process which eventually hardened to something resembling stone. Over a period of years they would eventually grow what essentially amounted to their own suit of armor.

Most Oyariah, once the armor reached a certain point, began maintaining it more strictly. It wasn’t uncommon for them to sculpt their bodies into different patterns and styles. Some opted to only have what amounted to light armor, while others allowed their bodies to be as difficult to kill as possible.

But what most people found unnerving about the Oyariah were their faces. Or more specifically, the lack thereof.

Every part of their body grew armor, and their faces were no exception. Because of this, and due to evolving in underground caves, and facing the monstrous animals that dwelled down there, the senses of Oyariah were the best of any race, although they were naturally blind. Their eyes still existed, but had they not surfaced and joined the Aui’Vitakar, it was entirely possible they would have lost them altogether.

Since sight wasn’t needed in their underground cities, most Oyariah simply let the armor cover their eyes, permanently blinding them. Their mouths functioned mostly the same as the other races, but like the rest of their bodies, they had to carefully maintain the armor growth if they wanted to use it properly, else it would cover the mouth.

There were some Oyariah that let this happen, especially the Runianarch Titans, who instead took nutrient injections in place of actual food. It offered great protection, but there was a high price to pay.

This Oyariah had his mouth visible, as well as the eyes which were a silky white, although the armor around those parts was delicately designed to what appeared to be overlapping layers and Oyariah Hieroglyphs cut into the cheeks. Genetic engineering made it possible for Oyariah to see, and it was one of the few genetic procedures that was still allowed on Vitakar, and almost all Oyariah who visited the surface underwent it.

Including Nulorian, it seemed.

“You are Nartha,” the Oyariah rumbled in a gravelly voice. “The Zararch agent who has supposedly turned against the puppets.”

Nartha gave a single nod. “That is correct.”

The Oyariah set down the haptic pad to look at him fully. He stared for a long enough time that
Nartha was wondering if he was waiting for something. “Vitakarian. Recent genetic tampering. You were on Earth.”

Another nod. “I believe I mentioned this.”

“Zararch agents lie,” the Oyariah growled. “You could have made that up. You can forge documents with us none the wiser. You have resources we don’t. I do not trust without proof, and now I have it.”

Nartha crossed his arms. “And how did you determine that?”

The Oyariah pointed. “You still bear the smell of a species that I have never encountered. Your body reeks of the chemicals of genetic modification. The Zararch were attempting to replicate human likenesses. I know this. You were one of them. You were turned into an infiltrator, then you reverted to your natural form. The appearances change, but your body chemistry is forever altered.”

The Oyariah drew in a nasally breath. “It is not surprising you are unfamiliar with the capabilities of my race, but you are not a liar. Not yet. We shall continue.”

Nartha took a few steps forward. “I assume you acquired the contents of what I wanted delivered to you.”

“Yes.” The Oyariah stated, resting his thick black-armored hands on the treetable. “I was skeptical. But I cannot prove what you provided is not genuine; and if it is, that is something we can exploit. If the Elders can die to these primitive Humans, then they can die to us.”

“Whatever the Humans are, they are not primitive,” Nartha shook his head. “The Ethereals made that mistake, and now one of them is dead. They are fighting when they should have died. Underestimating Humanity is a mistake, and they are the reason I am here to begin with.”

“So you say,” the Oyariah said, the black skin armor seeming to absorb all light in the room. “The Humans do not matter now. They cannot affect Vitakar, and until they can, their accomplishments are pointless to us. Let them fight the Elders and die. I did not approve your visit to discuss what the Humans can do for us, but what you can.”

Nartha couldn’t entirely blame the Nulorian for dismissing the Humans right away. Right now there wasn’t anything that could be done. However, once the Humans figured out Gateways, that would be a different story. “Fair enough…Nularis,” he said, deciding a title was better than no name at all. “You know where I am placed, and I can help you.”

“You are ruthless with my contacts, but you do possess some tactical insight,” the Oyariah growled, standing. “Despite systematically dismantling our operations in Intha, you did preserve our most useful assets, if not coopted them. Some of my brethren do not approve, but we all have roles to play. You have proven so far your intentions are genuine, so I am willing to entertain what you can do.”

“You would depend on what you want,” Nartha said slowly. “I cannot predict where I will be sent next, but I can make impacts in other ways. Dropped Zararch interest. Vulnerable equipment shipments. Recruitment. What exactly do you envision for a Zararch mole?”

The Oyariah stared down at him intensely. “I want you to damage the Collective and the puppets that rule it. Kill, sabotage, or otherwise disrupt the war machine of the Collective. You will not ever be one of us, but that does not mean you cannot help us accomplish our objective, and we need to spread.”
“To the colonies,” Nartha said. “Desolan. The science facilities.”

“A means to an end,” the Oyariah dismissed. “Yes, but those places are irrelevant, with the possible exception of Desolan. The only damage is to hit the military. The Lurainian. The Runianarch. The Zararch. We need our people in there. That is how you can help us.”

Nartha considered a few moments. “Understand that I can’t just allow large quantities, nor do it often,” he warned. “It would draw attention. It is possible, but be realistic about the-“

“I do not require dozens of operatives,” the massive stone-covered figure rumbled. “One or two will suffice for now. Provided you follow through, of course.”

“As for colonies…” Nartha paused. “That might be easier. I have a contact in the Aui’Vitakar who would likely take care of the…more legal aspects. If one or two were to be added, that could be arranged.”

The Oyariah turned his head slightly. “I don’t suppose you’d share who this is?”

“She is in the Cembrarian Hierarchy,” Nartha said simply. “That is all you need to know.”

“Good,” the Oyariah sat back down. “I don’t care how you do it, only that it gets done. Our communication is established, and we will continue with it until notified otherwise.”

This was going much smoother than he’d anticipated. Excellent. “Then that will be all. I expect I will be recalled soon. And as a final warning, I would abandon this location, as I will be including the ‘clear remnants of a Nulorian base’ in my report.”

“Anticipated,” the Oyariah stated bluntly. “We will be gone. Understand this, Nartha, whatever goals you have for working with us, they are not the same as ours. You may wish to inspire us to fight for some ideal of freedom, but none of us care about that. All that matters is that we kill as many of the puppets as possible. That is our goal, nothing more.”

Nartha pursed his lips. “I’m aware of your methods. But I hope you see that can change.”

“That is a discussion for the future,” the Oyariah said, picking up the haptic pad again. “But I am not optimistic. Fare well, Zar’narthath’inha, may the Elders rot in the void.”

On that clear dismissal, Nartha turned and left. The Nulorian would be a useful blunt instrument to wield against the Collective to destroy the worst aspects of it, and weaken it overall. However, that wasn’t going to be the goal of his mission. It was something that could be achieved; he just had to work hard to realize it.

Besides, if the Nulorian didn’t come around, there were plenty of others that would.

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Nigeria, Abuja

Betos was fairly sure that this was the largest city in the entire country, or at least the most sophisticated from a modern standpoint. It didn’t seem too different from some of the cities in Israel, not even taking into account the various European and American cities. Still, at least here it wasn’t the third world country she had feared. Good.

And right now she was being escorted by the Nigerian Armed Forces to meet President Ndulue Okon, with Mox at her side. There was a decent amount of attention from the civilians who were
She frowned at that. While she could see why the President didn’t want this to be a major public event, that didn’t exactly give a good impression. Then again, ADVENT was surely watching local media...

No, ADVENT would know where she was. Trying to hide it was pointless. She’d have to bring this up with him once they met.

They entered the Presidential Villa which seemed to be a pleasant place just from the well-maintained landscaping and expensive furniture in the villa itself. The floors were tiled; a shiny tan for the color which their boots clacked on while they walked. Betos ignored most of the luxury, instead thinking about what was coming next.

Almost none of the soldiers had addressed them directly, except for the captain who had given instructions to follow. She wasn’t sure if they even understood English, but they had most certainly been taking second looks at their armor and weapons. “In here,” the captain said, stopping in front of two wooden double doors.

He opened them and Betos and Mox stepped into it, and were immediately greeted with a room that equaled the other ones in terms of luxury, with an abundance of the color white. The walls, tile, and most of the furniture was white, and bookshelves lined the walls, while in the center was a table prepared for three with the President standing and waiting for them.

He wasted no time. “Marshal Betos,” he greeted, stepping forward and extending a hand. “Welcome to my capital.”

Betos took the extended hand, getting a good look at the president. “A pleasure, President Odon.” He stood slightly taller than her, maybe six feet, had short graying hair, with a short beard to match. He wore some small-rimmed glasses as well, which gave him a more scholarly look than anything else.

He wore a standard black suit that contrasted sharply with the colors of the room. For that matter, all of them were in contrast to the color scheme. Well, not like they were trying to win any contests. “Mox,” he also greeted. “A pleasure to see you again.”

Mox inclined his head. “The feeling is mutual, Mr. President. I wish it were under better circumstances.”

“Indeed,” Okon nodded, motioning to the table. “However, this is the world we now live in. While we discuss this, I had food prepared so we can talk like civilized people.”

“Appreciated,” Betos said automatically. In truth she wasn’t really hungry, but no point in turning down a gesture of hospitality. They took their seats, her and Mox opposite each other, with President Okon in the middle. She looked at the dish before her. Some kind of steak she guessed, with a mixture of vegetables on the side. Not bad.

“I was surprised to hear from you, Mox,” Okon finally said as they tentatively ate. “Especially when you asked for what I can only assume is asylum.”

“Not asylum,” Mox immediately dismissed, shaking his head. “But a potential opportunity. You have been keeping track of the events in the world, I presume?”

Okon gave a grave nod. “It is troubling. Both the aliens and ADVENT.”
“And what is your opinion towards ADVENT?” Betos asked. “Do you foresee Nigeria joining?”

Okon gave a short laugh. “If that were the case, we would not be speaking. ADVENT is too...dangerous...for my tastes. For such a powerful organization to arise in such a short time...” he shook his head. “Whether this was planned ahead of time, or merely a coincidence is irrelevant. I will not willingly bend the knee to such an organization.”

Betos quietly set her fork down. “You would not be able to stop them.”

“No,” Okon admitted grimly. “That is unlikely. All that can be realistically hoped is for ADVENT to ignore us. We have our own problems here, and if we focus on them, we can hopefully avoid both the aliens or ADVENT.”

“You do not consider the aliens a threat?” Mox asked.

Okon took a sip of water. “Perhaps. I am more familiar with the aliens than you might expect. Nigeria was one of the countries to initially fund XCOM. However...XCOM was never completely on our side. By the end they were deliberately defying the sensible members of the overseeing body,” he paused, shaking his head. “The Commander of XCOM is not...someone who can or should be trusted. Seeing him have such influence in ADVENT is concerning.”

This was interesting. She and Mox exchanged glances. “Why?” Betos asked.

The President was silent for several moments. “I will not give details, Marshal, suffice to say I do not trust someone who would burn half of Earth if it meant defeating the aliens. Everything is expendable to him, and men like that in such positions are dangerous. Suffice to say I want nothing to do with him. Do not ask for more.”

His tone was even throughout, but Betos was fairly certain he was actually afraid of the Commander of XCOM.

Why?

He was ruthless, for certain, but that was not much different from quite a few people in ADVENT. What made him so much worse?

Either way, it sounded like that was a big reason why the President was so leery of ADVENT. Curious, but something she could look into later. “ADVENT wants to unite the world under their rule,” Betos said, changing topics. “It might not be now, it might not even be until the war is concluded, but they will try and see this accomplished. If nothing is done, that will happen to not just Nigeria, but Africa itself.”

Okon looked skeptical. “Unlikely. It would be far too much trouble than it is worth.”

“No, Mr. President, it would not,” Betos disputed calmly. “ADVENT captured the Middle East in roughly a day. Do you really think taking a continent would be something impossible for them?”

“China perhaps has the right idea,” Okon said. “Stay out of their way, and they will overlook us. I do hope you are not suggesting we fight them?”

“Oh course not,” Betos shook her head. “That would be suicidal. No, the only reason they do not want China now is because they would be too troublesome to properly deal with, especially during the alien invasion. And the more important reason is because China is large.”

“Size didn’t stop Canada,” Okon noted.
“There were some additional factors,” Mox chimed in. “Namely that the military betrayed the government to help ADVENT. Had that not happened, they would not have annexed the country so easily.”

Okon looked at her, his eyebrow raised. “You have an idea, Marshal?”

“If you wish to preserve any sort of autonomy, you need to establish yourself as a continental power like China has,” Betos began. “You, to be honest, are too small for ADVENT to consider any kind of threat, let alone a diplomatic power. But if several of the countries were to unite under one unified alliance, that would be a different story.”

Okon stared at her in what she could only describe as disbelief. “You want to unite the African nations?”

“That is the simple explanation,” Betos confirmed with a nod. “Not the non-binding alliance you have now. An actual military and economic alliance. It is the only thing ADVENT would recognize.”

“You would have us ally with Sudan, Libya, and Congo?” He asked in shock. “And be as equals?”

“Ideally,” Betos nodded. “It’s-

“I do not believe you know what you are saying,” Okon said, his tone suddenly cold. “It is one thing to maintain diplomatic relations with these countries. That does not mean that they are worth allying with, let alone trusting.”

“Betos meant no offense,” Mox quickly interjected. “And it doesn’t necessarily mean that they would be equals per-se. This would need a leader, after all.”

No, Betos thought, that’s not how this should work. But she held her tongue since she had badly underestimated just how strongly the President felt on the idea. “I did not mean to insult you,” she said carefully. “But please look at this from a logical standpoint. Trust is not required yet, but even if it is tenuous, it will send a signal to ADVENT that they can’t do whatever they please without consequences.”

Okon took an audible breath. “You are excused this time, Marshal, but do not suggest again such a notion that they would be of equal importance to us. The more important question right now is what you can offer us. If I am to…support…such an idea, with us dictating the terms, then we will need something from you.”

Betos carefully and slowly set her pistol on the table. “We have the schematics to develop the gauss weaponry ADVENT uses. If it could be mass-produced, your army has the means to potentially equal ADVENT’s own. It would give them more pause than conventional weaponry. In addition, you’ll have the support of my own soldiers.”

“I see,” the President said, his original calm returning. “Quite an offer. One no one else would have here.”

Betos was not exactly reassured by that phrasing. “I assume that this weaponry we are gifting you would be used responsibly,” she said neutrally. “It should be as a deterrent to ADVENT, as well as any other threats.”

“Of course,” the President said quickly. “We would not want to emulate ADVENT, would we?”

“We would need a more permanent location to stay,” Betos continued. “But we would help
construct it, of course, as well as training your own forces on ADVENT tactics.”

“I believe I can permit this,” President Okon nodded. “But you must first prove what you say is true. Once we have the schematics, you and your soldiers will be relocated to a more suitable location.”

She wasn’t comfortable with the deal hinging on if she was willing to give him the weapons. That was not her goal, but it seemed to be what he was focusing on. Perhaps wisely, since it would provide an effective deterrent to ADVENT.

And in the end, there wasn’t much of a choice if she wanted this to work. “Done.”

He gave a broad smile. “Excellent! I very much look forward to working together, Marshal Betos. I have a feeling that we will bring great change to the continent. In the interest of cooperation, of course.”

As they shook once on the deal, Betos couldn’t decide if the President was mocking her or not, but either way she couldn’t help but feel this was not going to turn out as well as she was hoping. But she was committed now, and would do her best to make this work.

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Vitakar, Intha Zararch Base

“For your time off, you certainly accomplished a lot,” the hologram of the Zar’Chon said as he addressed Nartha from the Communication Room of the Zararch base. This was one area where there was no question of which species had the better technology. Humans still hadn’t mastered or really even completely figured out having simultaneous worldwide communications in a realistic fashion.

Vitakara communication rooms were essentially a small circular radius with a holoprojector above, which could be configured for haptic displays as well, although that wasn’t needed as much. The holograms themselves were nearly photorealistic, with the figures only having a faint shimmering outline that you had to intentionally look for to truly notice.

He might have to see about getting this to XCOM. They could probably use it.

“Thank you,” he answered the Zar’Chon, inclining his head. “The Nulorian presence in Intha should be crippled for the foreseeable future.”

“They have spread farther than I am comfortable with,” the Zar’Chon muttered, looking at the hololist displayed from his prosthetic limb. “Nearly a half of one percent of the population of Intha was suspected Nulorian, and three quarters of them actually were. Unacceptable. We will need to take steps.”

Nartha internally winced. That was not good, but the Nulorian had to be expecting it with how they were becoming more brazen and recruiting more people. At some point the Zararch were going to come down on them hard. And unfortunately, he wouldn’t be there every time. However, he was curious if the Zar’Chon knew anything he didn’t. “Based on what I’ve found, the Nulorian are getting prime weapon models smuggled to them,” he said. “That shouldn’t be possible. Every weapons shipment is checked. And given the hideout I found, they also have submarine tech, which has the same sort of restrictions. Even more so since all commercial submarines are from the Sar’Manda Empire.”

“The Sar’Manda are being questioned now,” the Zar’Chon said coolly. “They did appear to have
notified us that one of their submarines were stolen.”

Nartha frowned. “And we never acted.”

“No, we did,” the Zar’Chon said slowly. “We recovered the sub. However, perhaps they forgot to inform us of a second one.”

“Or that hideout was older than I thought,” Nartha noted. “It is not like the Sar’Manda to lie.”

“No, it isn’t,” the Zar’Chon agreed with a nod, his eyes seeming to grow brighter. “Regardless, that is not your concern. The Nulorian are not a major concern at this moment, and they will likely not become one. Your job here is done.”

“Understood,” Nartha nodded. “What is my next assignment?”

The Zar’Chon glanced down at the hololist projecting from his hand. “We have a potential problem on Desolan. There have been several instances where Muton Berserkers have died due to unexplained chemical overdoses. This would not normally be a problem, except that is has been happening every day for the past two weeks. This indicates this was a staggered attack, as well as sophisticated.”

Nartha thought for a moment. “The number of people who both have access to chemicals of that potency as well as the knowledge to apply them can’t be high.”

“Desolan is home to nearly a billion non-Mutons,” the Zar’Chon reminded him. “Not including the ones in orbital stations. The list is exhaustive, which is why you will only be tasked with a specific list. I have multiple Zararch agents who are going to take other parts. I don’t know if this is a larger or coordinated effort, but it needs to be stopped.”

Wonderful. Well, he had a clear objective, one to possibly subvert, but to do so he would have a suspect list that would likely number in the thousands, and also be working against dozens of other Zararch agents. That was going to be a daunting task, but he kept a straight face. “I’ll head there immediately. Is there anything else?”

“Yes,” the Zar’Chon nodded gravely. “This Berserker incident is unfortunate, but one which doesn’t hurt our output. The larger concern is that there are entire groups of young Mutons who have disappeared. This has been happening over the past year, and is subtle enough that we haven’t been asked to look into it until recently.”

Nartha blinked. “How do entire groups just disappear?”

“Mutan development is not a well-documented ordeal,” the Zar’Chon said emotionlessly. “Many Mutons die before reaching a useful stage. Most bodies are accounted for, but in general no one cares if some are left unknown. This was all well and good until we realized that there have been as many as fifty-thousand to one-hundred thousand Mutons that are not accounted for.”

Now that was interesting. Barely a drop in the Muton war machine, but it was still a significant amount. “My point still stands,” Nartha repeated. “If even a fraction of those are legitimately unaccounted for, there is no way they could be hidden easily. The entire planet is War Camps if I recall correctly.”

There was a brief pause. “That is what I want you to find out,” the Zar’Chon said. “I suspect that there are sometraitors in the ranks. Running the camps isn’t glamorous, but it is necessary. Unfortunately, there are some who don’t believe the treatment of them is humane and might be ‘liberating’ them as a form of penance.”
Nartha was not familiar with the Muton situation, but he found it somewhat hard to believe that. Mutons were barely sapient, and while conditions might not be ideal, risking both their life and position to help them seemed preposterous. Perhaps there was something to this he wasn’t seeing. Mutons were a weapon, and if he could locate the ones behind this, a Muton army that size would come in handy.

Assuming of course, he actually could find these people while keeping the Zar’Chon happy. But that was a problem he could puzzle out later. “I’ll find these traitors,” he promised. “Do you want me to prioritize this issue, or the Berserker one?”

“The Muton disappearances are more pressing,” the Zar’Chon said. “Focus on that, although do some investigation into the Berserker overdoses as well.”

“Acknowledged and understood,” Nartha nodded. “I’ll head there now.”

“Good luck,” the Zar’Chon said, and promptly severed the connection, leaving Nartha alone in the room.

He’d wanted to ask about Earth, but figured that could be saved until next time. As he turned to leave, he began formulating potential plans as to solve these next problems. The Nulorian were certainly going to find this interesting, and he’d best keep them informed of his position. Maybe he could even help smuggle some agents to help assist with this.

The Nulorian could do a lot with a group of Mutons, and perhaps this rogue Vitakara poisoning Berserkers.

But it was going to be a lot more difficult than Vitakar. Time to get back to doing what he was good at.

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Argentina, Undisclosed Location

Volk was continuously amused that no matter the situation, government types always had to be as conspicuous as possible when ‘acting officially’. He would personally have dressed in something a little less conspicuous if he was meeting a small group of assassins/terrorists, but no, they still showed up in their suits like the good mouthpieces they were.

To be fair, there was no one around the area. Volk had several of his people scouting the area to make sure no one was listening in, while the meeting itself took place in a small house which was falling apart. The smell of rot and decay permeated the house, but Volk had been in worse. The two suits before him clearly hated it though. He’d hate to see how they’d like living in the wilderness.

Nonetheless, they had fulfilled their end of the deal and two more of his people were loading the supplies into their own vehicles as they discussed the finer points of their arrangement. Volk only had Elena with him, because she was one of the few he trusted with his life; because she visibly unnerved the suits, especially with her mask and robotic demeanor; and most importantly, because she would know if they lied to him.

He really hated liars.

While he’d been summarizing their operations, Elena had her right hand placed directly on his shoulder, while the other held a pistol. While it was certainly a kind of public intimacy, it meant something much different to Elena. For whatever reason, that was their method of communication during these conversations. If either one of the suits lied, she’d let him know without making a
“So to sum up,” Volk finished. “We did our job, the Peacekeeper bases you wanted hit were and we didn’t take any casualties. All in a day’s work for us. Questions?”

The first suit rested his folded hands on the rotting table, looking intently at him. Of the two he looked the most normal, with darker skin and cropped black hair, even if he was looking a little too intently at him. “You and your people have performed well. We are pleased.”

“Wonderful,” Volk said without any joy. It was exactly what he’d expected. “So, you want us to do it again, or do you not need us anymore?”

The second and more conspicuous man narrowed his one good eye at him. “You seem awfully dismissive of a potential government funded opportunity.”

Volk snorted. “No offense, but I like spending my time wisely. Honestly, these briefings are pretty much telling you what you already know. You either like it or you don’t, and you’re happy. So we either keep it going, or we don’t. Simple.”

“We are satisfied,” the first suit reiterated. “And we wish to continue working with you. However, this next task will be slightly more challenging than the last.”

He pulled out a small map and placed it on the table. “How familiar are you with Uruguay?”

Volk frowned, looking on the map. “Never been there. Why?”

The second suit stared at him. “A question for you, as it relates to your skills. Could you launch an attack and make it appear as though it came from a specific country, but not be able to prove it?”

Volk cocked his head. Well, this was going to be a little different. “Frame a country? Quite likely, it isn’t hard.”

“Without being able to prove it definitively,” the second suit emphasized. “This little detail is important.”

Volk didn’t like it. “Again, I certainly have the capability, but I’ve never felt the need to do that.”

“Then this will be your first opportunity to put that to the test,” the first suit said. “We need you and your people to attack ADVENT, and subtly implicate Uruguay in doing so.”

Volk stared at them in disbelief. “And just why the fuck would I do that?”

The first suit frowned. “Good assassins generally don’t ask questions.”

Volk heaved a dramatic sigh. “I do a lot more than just kill people you know. Contrary to what you
like to believe, that isn’t the main purpose my little band of people exists. Yeah, sometimes my job involves killing people, but please, don’t pretend like you think I’m a damn assassin. So give me an actual reason or I’m done.”

The suits were clearly baffled, which he found unreasonably amusing. “This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to work with us. Whatever your other clients, they cannot provide as much or as high quality as we can. You are a professional, and we are more than capable of paying professionals well. You would not walk away from this.”

“I don’t need you,” Volk said bluntly. “Yeah, your gear is nice and fancy, thanks for that, but please, don’t act like you’re the greatest thing since the toaster. Guess what? I was around before you guys found me, and I’m definitely not short on work. While I’m sure the idea of doing something just because it’s the decent Human thing to do eludes you, I don’t live by that same philosophy. I’m not in this for the damn payment, so promising it isn’t going to change my decision at all.”

He looked pointedly at the suits. “So, make up your minds. You going to tell me or not?”

They exchanged a look, clearly unhappy with how this was going, then the first suit sighed and began talking. “Argentina is currently in talks with several other South American nations, all of whom are concerned about ADVENT. Argentina wants to establish a continental alliance to maintain some level of autonomy in the future, since we’re certain ADVENT has their sights set on us.”

“Unfortunately, no country right now wants to risk dealing with ADVENT,” the second suit continued. “They are under the impression that if they stay quiet, they will evade ADVENT’s notice. It is a foolish and shortsighted decision, and so we are looking into ways to propel them to the table.”

“Marshal Luana is unstable, and highly reactionary,” the first suit said, a finger resting on Uruguay. “Her irrationality can be exploited, and if she can be provoked, say, to unjustly invade a small defenseless country…that might be enough to convince the holdouts that ADVENT doesn’t care if you follow their rules. If they think you’re a problem, they’ll take you out.”

Volk sat back. There was no pressure on his shoulder from Elena, so they were almost certainly telling the truth. The story made sense, and from a purely logical standpoint he could appreciate the tactic. It was brutal, targeted, and effective.

Very ADVENT-like.

“Interesting strategy,” he finally said. “You could have just said that from the beginning.” Volk then leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. “However, my answer remains the same. I could do what you ask, but I’m not going to.”

The face on the first suit hardened. “And why not?”

“Because, representative, I’m not in this for the same reasons you are,” Volk answered, his voice even. “Your government talks in terms of alliances, power dynamics, and practicality. I talk in terms of people, and there will be a lot of people hurt if ADVENT is provoked into invading another country. People are the first things taken out of consideration in decisions like this, so someone has to step up, and in this case it’s me.”

He took a breath. “I’m not going to intentionally bring ADVENT down on Uruguay just because you want it, no matter how justified you think you are. I think ADVENT is a problem, and worth
fighting, but not at the expense of the very people you claim to want to protect. Send us to hit some ADVENT Peacekeeper outposts near Uruguay if you want, that I can do. If ADVENT comes to that conclusion, then well, too bad. But my role is only going to be one of killing Peacekeepers. You get that?”

The first suit nodded. “A real god damn robin hood,” the second suit muttered under his breath.

Volk smiled at that; he was more altruistic than most, certainly, but he wouldn’t go that far. Still, he liked that nickname better than the melodramatic and childish ‘Grim Reaper’. Please, he was deserving of a much better nickname than that.

“Fine,” the first suit finally said, standing up. “Give us a couple days to put together a list of attack points as well as your compensation. No need for us to meet again; we will convey what we want through one of your contacts. Do not disappoint us.”

“Save your threatening insinuations,” Volk dismissed with a wave, which infuriated the second suit even more. “We’ll get the job done.”

The suits didn’t say another word, and left the building, leaving him and Elena alone. She took her hand off his shoulder and he glanced up at her with a smile. “I don’t think they like me very much.”

“I estimated there was a one in two hundred chance they wished to cause you harm,” she said calmly. “Had that number risen much further, I would have shot them.”

Volk chuckled. He still wasn’t sure if that was Elena’s version of a joke, or if she actually had calculations running in her head during all conversations like this. He definitely knew she would kill them without hesitation if she felt they posed a direct threat to his life. It was rather sweet, but he really hoped she was joking in this instance.

Well, he’d treat it as such until something actually happened. “Well,” Volk said as he stood and began walking out of the house. “I guess we should start looking at Peacekeeper outposts near Uruguay.”

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Mars, Forward Observation Station

Ravarian was relaxing, which was quite different to what other people prescribed that word to. He considered relaxing as time for reflection on what had happened so far and what might happen in the future. Not even in the context of likely outcomes based on fact, but simple unfiltered and unfounded speculation. Highly unprofessional, but no one but Quisilia would ever know he was thinking it.

He sat on a comfortable chair which displayed a truly wonderful view of space, as he had his windows configured to an outside display. In the distance were the stars and the occasional moons of Mars. Every so often it would configure to a different set of cameras, sometimes focused on Mars itself, or Earth from the Moon Forward Establishment. Not quite the same as having windows to the galaxy, but there was no way the Zar’Chon’s chambers would have such a clear weakness.

What also helped his relaxed mood was the small gray feline curled up in his lap. Quisilia, much to his chagrin, had actually gone through with his offer to get him one of the infernal furballs, and a box had suddenly materialized in front of him one day, with a message attached which said “She
And with dread in his heart, he’d opened the box, and sure enough there was a small gray cat within it, a kitten from the size but one old enough to walk around and constantly meow. He’d considered giving it to one of the staff here; one of his analysts had expressed affection for the felines, but after watching it look up at him with those big eyes and meowing, he didn’t have the heart to get rid of it.

So he’d let it follow him around, and to the little furballs credit, it didn’t seem to mind him not giving it attention as much as a normal person would. Taking care of it was far more trivial than he’d expected, thankfully. He’d set up automated food and water dispensers, as well as specific waste disposal, although it took a few days to get the stupid animal to realize that was where it should defecate.

But otherwise the cat took care of itself. It ate, drank, cleaned itself, and much as he didn’t want to, Ravarian found himself liking the animal, and it was a pleasant feeling when the cat suddenly jumped into his lap and made itself comfortable, purring all the while of course. But it seemed to know when it was appropriate to do it or not, and if that was Quisilia’s influence, then he would have to thank the Ethereal for that.

He supposed that if he was adopting this cat, it did deserve a proper name. He’d settled on Cali’Zar’Chon, or the Little Hunter of the Zar’Chon. Much better than naming it something idiotic like Fluffy.

So he sat there, petting the cat occasionally, and thinking.

Things were starting to stabilize on Earth. The annexation of Canada was disappointing, but the Zar’Chon knew things were at a turning point now. Someday, future Zar’Chons would look back on this entire operation and wonder how it could have ever been bungled so badly. In retrospect, this entire situation was the result of a series of mistakes and freak coincidences.

The Ethereals and their inexplicable tests were certainly something to consider, but there were factors they’d had little control over initially. It was unlikely the situation would be nearly as threatening if the United Nations hadn’t decided to put the Commander in charge of XCOM. Remove the Commander, and you remove EXALT, ADVENT, and likely XCOM itself from consideration. He was the catalyst to everything, and even should he die now, it wouldn’t reverse what he had set in motion.

EXALT was another instance of this, but to a lesser effect. The Ravaged One had overestimated his control and power, and as a result left a nearly broken Saudia alive. Foolish. He should have either killed the leadership or not intervened at all. All he’d done was turn Saudia against them. Remove her, and the current incarnation of ADVENT ceased to be.

One pattern, regardless of the big picture, kept emerging. They kept underestimating the Humans at every turn. There had even been talk before this entire situation if the Humans would last a month, but they had responded in the form of XCOM. The Collective had slowly ramped up operations in intensity, and they had responded by adapting their technology and fighting back.

They had attempted to terrorize the Humans, a poor tactic, and XCOM had responded by solidifying Germany as a nation against the aliens. They had retaliated by trying to destroy Beijing, and XCOM had destroyed the Dreadnought that was sent.

Ravarian grimaced as he continued remembering. They had believed they could control EXALT, and had ultimately been subverted by the fiendish Humans. The attack on the Citadel had ended
with the death of an Ethereal. The invasion had prompted a violent unification of Humanity. Even now the Humans were not panicking, but only escalating their tactics.

From an objective standpoint, it was both impressive and admirable.

And concerning that only he and the Battlemaster seemed to acknowledge it. He had accepted at this point the Humans would not surrender, and it was only a matter of time before they developed psions en masse. Then the situation would get problematic.

Once more, he had to wonder what the Imperator was thinking.

Humoring the Humans made no logical, tactical, or practical sense.

So why do it?

“Because the Humans ultimately do not pose a threat,” Quisilia answered, appearing before him. “He has plans in motion, Zar’Chon, and the notion that a single species, on a single planet could stop them is laughable.”

“Hello to you too,” Ravarian said, not being remotely surprised. Quisilia had lost the ability to surprise him a long time ago. “I assume there is news?”

“Of a sort,” Quisilia said humorously. “I’m quite glad I accompanied Nartha on his little adventure. Truly interesting. An Oyariah Nulorian, not something seen every day.”

“He certainly covered his tracks well,” Ravarian grunted. “Had we not discovered he was a traitor, I would not have suspected much. He did locate and remove Nulorian collaborators, but not all of them.”

“Oh, he seemed quite proud of that,” Quisilia said with a wave. “Not important, and those Nulorian are quite barbaric. Had I not been there, the initial team sent to meet him would have interrogated him for information and killed him.”

Ravarian frowned. “I thought they would be smarter.”

“Oh, their leader certainly was,” Quisilia amended. “That Oyariah I mentioned. Too bad he was stupid enough to send operatives that hate Zararch. They planned to just say he attacked and were forced to kill him. Foolish, but they’ll be on the receiving end soon enough. Won’t be quite as funny when it’s revealed that one of them is Zararch.” Quisilia finished with a laugh. Ravarian suppressed a sigh at what passed for the Ethereal’s more tangible form of entertainment.

“So he has established contact with the Nulorian,” Ravarian said, focusing on the main topic. “I presume you have the method how?”

“Of course,” Quisilia confirmed easily. “What is also interesting is his little talk with Sareech. I believe a visit to the Hierarchy is in order. I doubt they’d like the loyalist males being summarily executed for their treason. At the hand of an elder, some might even consider it an honor.”

“I’d prefer we deal with the Hierarchy in a more subtle way,” Ravarian cautioned. “Let them work for now. If Sareech becomes a larger problem, I will remove her. But remove her, and it might spook Nartha. Unless you feel he’s served his purpose?”

“Not yet,” Quisilia said. “Sending him to Desolan is good, but I’d prefer you give him some reason to visit the Federation. The Nulorian are not a threat. The Andromedons are different, and I would rather not take my chances quite yet with the Federation. Their distrust of telepaths is rather
inconvenient at times."

“Noted,” Ravarian said. “Then Nartha will stay a hostile asset for a while longer.”

“My work is done for now,” Quisilia said, walking away. “I believe the Battlemaster is working on the next phases of Earth operations. I expect he’ll notify you of them shortly.”

“Understood,” Ravarian said, then sighed as he decided to give the Ethereal a small victory. “And Quisilia?”

The robed Ethereal turned around. “Yes?”

“Thank you for the cat.”
The Praesidium, Research Labs

Sierra had recently realized that there was still quite a bit of the Praesidium that she wasn’t familiar with, beyond the training rooms, armories, and barracks. Science and engineering had never been of much interest to her, but now being with XCOM several months, she did have to admit she was curious about some of the stuff going on behind the scenes.

These people were making the stuff that was keeping them alive after all; might not hurt to go down and see some of the process.

The general labs were open to everyone; it was only a few areas that were actually restricted. Of course, those were the interesting ones, which if Sierra recalled, were the genetic labs. It was quite possible this was due to biohazards, but Sierra suspected it was because XCOM was doing stuff that wouldn’t exactly be looked upon favorably.

As to what that could entail…well, she could imagine quite a bit.

She did feel quite a bit out of place as she walked through the labs in her regular fatigues, but the scientists working didn’t seem to care about her, and kept working at their stations. XCOM had fully embraced a fusion of alien and Human tech, using devices that she’d never seen before with large running computers. Hologram and haptic displays were also used prominently, with them portraying genetic sequences, biological data, and other stuff she didn’t bother to try and puzzle out.

Sierra stopped as something caught her eye. It was a hologram recreation of what appeared to be a new suit of armor, which seemed to be like the Aegis armor, but with several attachments to the back. The blue hologram was deconstructing and reconstructing on set cycles, and she stepped forward to get a closer look.

No one was at this station, so Sierra watched it for a few minutes, reading the information that accompanied the disassembled pieces before they reconstructed into the suit again. From what she could determine, this was an attempt by XCOM to incorporate the elerium substance into armor for some kind of flight system.

Interesting.

“Tap on it if you want to pause,” a new voice interrupted. Sierra nodded at that, and reached forward.

“Thanks—“ she began glancing over to whatever scientist was speaking and almost had a heart attack when she saw the voice belonged to an alien; a female Vitakarian. She froze for several seconds, paralyzed as she wondered how there was an alien standing—

Oh. Wait. This was one of the Vitakarian captives XCOM had from the Fury Base. She relaxed slightly, even if her heart was still pounding.

It didn’t help that the Vitakarian was staring at her in a way that suggested that she’d had this same effect on other people before. Sierra still wasn’t completely used to how tall they were. Even their small ones were over six feet, and this one was a good few inches taller than her, dressed in a
greyish uniform that had the XCOM emblem on the upper right chest, and some other logo she didn’t recognize opposite it. A special kind of uniform.

The eyes were definitely the most disconcerting part, and it wasn’t even a soft blue light, but it was as harsh as was likely possible for their biology. Figures. Objectively, it was a pretty neat part of their biology, but it made all of them inherently intimidating. “Sorry,” Sierra said, once more attempting to relax. “I forgot that—”

“That there are aliens beyond the Elder in XCOM,” the Vitakarian answered, deadpan. “Understandable. Soldiers rarely come down, and you were not among the number who assaulted the Fury Base.”

“Yes,” Sierra confirmed. “Don’t often see you this close unless I’m fighting you.” She appraised the Vitakarian. “Always forget how tall you are.”

The Vitakarian cocked her head, trying to do an imitation of a smile. “Your species is rather short as a rule. Why are you down here…Who are you?”

“Sierra,” she said. “Mostly because I’m curious. I was wondering what stuff XCOM is working on.”

The eyes of the Vitakarian widened, but Sierra didn’t know what that meant. “That could cover a lot of topics, Sierra,” she said slowly. “But it has largely been focused on elerium, and the integration of it into your technology.” She motioned to the hologram. “This is the Icarus Project, originally conceptualized as a counter to Floaters, and as an infantry air unit.”

Sierra’s eyes lit up. “So a jetpack?”

The Vitakarian pursed her lips. “I do not understand that reference.”

Sierra waved her arm dismissively. “So anyone who wears the armor could fly?”

“This is correct,” she said. “We have taken the initiative and made some improvements to the absorption capabilities of the armor, so it won’t be immediately shot out of the sky. In addition to that…” she stepped forward and began manipulating the console next to the holographic stand. “Air combat is significantly different from ground combat, with its own strengths and weaknesses. While this is not my area of expertise, additional weapons are being developed to take advantage of what is being referred to as the Archangel armor.”

A new series of images appeared, what appeared to be various improvised explosives, wrist weapons like flamethrowers. “To be used effectively, there will have to be a minor neurological link,” the Vitakarian continued. “To manipulate flight controls in combat is impossible otherwise.”

Well, there would have to be some kind of drawback. “So like a MEC?”

“No,” she denied, shaking her head. “Nothing nearly as invasive. It would only be some simple commands and instructions, no side effects like personality degeneration in first-generation MEC pilots. With that said, the MECs will also be getting their own variant of this.”

She brought up another hologram, of what Sierra could describe as a MEC that seemed to be streamlined, sleek, and with bladed wing-like attachments on various parts of the body. “The Valkyrie-Class,” she said, with what sounded like pride in her voice. “The first prototype is nearing completion. I suspect both these projects will be completed relatively soon.”

Times like this Sierra felt like she was in a science fiction movie, complete with jetpacks, giant
robots, aliens, and weird purple space magic. Too bad there was a not-insignificant chance they might die. “Well, sign me up for that,” she said, then frowned, looking over at the Vitakarian. “You know, for being a captive, you don’t seem too upset.”

The Vitakarian looked at her for a few long seconds. Hm, maybe she shouldn’t have asked. “XCOM has treated us well,” she finally said. “And Aegis has revealed to us how badly our species has been used. It is difficult to feel loyalty to the Collective anymore, knowing what they have and are doing to us.” She looked away. “Not that any of us have much of a choice. We could either work for XCOM or die. Faced with that, at least I can take some satisfaction in my work.”

She shut off the console absentmindedly. “With that said, I do not enjoy knowing that my work will lead to many of my own being killed. But again, I have little choice in the matter.”

“Well, you’ve had a while to observe us,” Sierra said. “What do you think about us?”

“Your inclination and satisfaction you take towards violence is alien to me,” she said bluntly. “Your species is strange. Why you would not band together and unite despite what is happening is difficult to understand. Many of your kind seem obsessed with power and control, more motivations that I cannot realistically understand.”

She blinked once. “However, your species is brilliant and capable of incredible advancement. Within two years you have managed to reverse-engineer our technology for your own usage, and you have a capacity to adapt tactically that I have not seen in other species. I also find it fascinating that in the face of almost impossible odds, many of you do not seem to even think about surrender, even though you would most certainly live.”

“Depends,” Sierra said with a sigh. “All surrender would accomplish at this point would be ensuring we either die quick deaths, or long drawn out ones. I doubt they’d let any of XCOM live, and we would not do well as slaves or subjects to a higher alien power. That isn’t how we’re built.”

“I am curious,” the Vitakarian said. “If the Collective were to…the term is ‘sue for peace’, I believe, would you accept it?”

Sierra actually thought for a few moments. The possibility had never really entered her mind. It seemed to be an all or nothing outcome to this invasion. Either Humanity would win, or the Collective would. She didn’t see a scenario where the Ethereals would give up willingly, or one where Humanity just accepted, despite everything that happened.

Humans didn’t forget, and Sierra suspected most would not forgive in this case.

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly. “If they were actually genuine, and left us alone, maybe, but that’s just my opinion. I doubt the Commander will be satisfied until the Collective is destroyed. ADVENT either for that matter. They attacked us unprovoked, without even trying to contact us; there is no reason for us to believe they wouldn’t do it again.”

“I understand that perspective to a reasonable extent,” the Vitakarian admitted. “While I would prefer this war to be settled peacefully, you are correct in saying that you have no reason to trust the Ethereals. Why they have done this is a question I have continually asked myself. There was no reason to go to war with you, yet they did without so much as a chance to negotiate.”

Sierra snorted. “More likely they felt themselves above the lowly primitives.”

A nod. “That is another possibility.”

There were a few moments of silence as Sierra crossed her arms. “I never asked your name.”
“Sala’calintha’valian.”

Sierra nodded. “Well, you seem alright for an alien. Whatever side you were on before, you’re doing good work now.”

“I suppose I will take that as a compliment,” Calintha said slowly. “Thank you?”

Sierra grinned. “Just keep making jetpack armor and you’ll remain on everyone’s good side. We always like new tech.”

“Which I should return to,” Calintha said, turning the holographic console back on. “I look forward to when you can use what we are developing here for yourselves.”

Sierra chuckled. “So do I.”

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The Praesidium, Templar Training Arena

When he was much, much younger, Oliver remembered when he and his friends had all become obsessed with the medieval period, and for a time had gone all-out in pretending to be knights and kings. He had fond memories of holding mock battles and dueling his friends with cardboard swords. Eventually he’d grown out of it and realized that that period was never going to return.

Although now that seemed like it was going to change. Turned out all you needed to revive the age of melee combat was stronger armor, psionics, and upgraded weapons. There weren’t many Templars at the moment, but given that XCOM was primed to be getting a new batch of soldiers in the coming weeks, that was likely going to change.

Still, there was rarely a time where there weren’t at least a few people watching the Templars train. Sometimes Aegis was there, sometimes he wasn’t, but it didn’t entirely matter since they always came up with different ways to practice. Right now there was a mock duel taking place between Iosif and the two-man team of Carmelita and Chan.

Oliver had, quite foolishly in retrospect, thought that this would be a relatively tame affair, but from the way they had been warming up, they were clearly planning to go all out. The weapons weren’t actually XCOM standard, but the psionics certainly were. Carmelita wasn’t using her alloy cannon either in this scenario.

“Place your bets,” Oliver said lightly to the other person in the room; Nuan she’d called herself. He was pretty sure they’d talked a few times before, but not recently. She’d mostly kept to herself after first getting her arms chopped off, and then replaced. The prosthetics did look very well-crafted, but he didn’t know how well they actually functioned for her.

He wasn’t sure if it was normal or not, but he couldn’t help but notice her fingers continuously twitching and spasming. She also had a habit of flinching occasionally. If these were indications that she still wasn’t fully comfortable with the prosthetics, he didn’t know, but from what he’d seen, it seemed likely.

The Chinese woman raised an eyebrow. “Out of curiosity, who are you going for?”

“Two on one,” Oliver gestured as the Templars began preparing to duel each other. “They have the numerical advantage. Gonna have to go with them for this.”

She answered with a smile that didn’t quite seem sincere. “Well, someone has to root for the
underdog. But Iosif will win this. I’ve seen him do it before.”

Oh really? “You come here often?”

She shrugged. “Not really much else for me to do while I get used to these,” she raised a prosthetic arm. “And with all the stuff happening, I doubt people want to see a Chinese soldier. Besides, I don’t like people staring.”

“Fair enough,” he nodded. “I’ll try not to stare.”

“Which you have already failed at,” she dryly pointed out. “Quiet, they’re starting now.”

Oliver complied and turned his attention to the duel. All of them were wearing Aegis armor, with Carmelita armed with her longsword, Chan with a Zweihander, and Iosif with a ball mace, not the flanged one he usually had. Probably less dangerous.

Iosif made a gesture and his body was immediately enshrouded in a purple shield that seemed to fit over him like another layer of armor. Chan dashed ahead, stabbing forward, which was immediately deflected by Iosif with a swipe of his weapon hand. Chan took advantage by letting the deflection carry and released one hand, flaring with psionic energy which he directed at Iosif.

The directed barrage of purple energy aimed directly at Iosif’s face was blocked by another square shield Iosif constructed a second later. While that was happening, Carmelita leapt behind him and began attacking from behind, and he immediately backed to the side so he had both of them in view. One hand was kept up, maintaining the shield while he traded blows with Carmelita with the other.

The shield dissipated and Chan resumed taking the offensive, with Carmelita backing off to let him move unrestricted. It was clear that in this instance, Chan had the superior weapon. Iosif’s mace was just not long enough to get anywhere close to striking back, but to his credit, he was deflecting the blows well with the mace and minute applications of psionic shields.

Carmelita circled behind him and thrust out her left arm, and that stinger/tentacle thing shot out and wrapped itself around his arm for a brief moment, and he couldn’t physically defend against the coming strike from Chan which slammed directly into his head.

Oliver winced.

Carmelita retracted her stringer before Iosif could rip it off or otherwise harm it, and leapt towards the vulnerable Templar. Chan immediately made another strike, but Iosif had created another, larger, psionic shield which would briefly cover where he was being attacked. At the same time he raised a hand towards Carmelita and a psionic shield suddenly appeared in the middle of the air, which she promptly slammed into, falling to the ground with a thud.

Nuan snickered. “Idiot.”

To her credit, Carmelita recovered quickly, though she seemed shaken, and it allowed Iosif to rise to his feet and he seemed rather angry. He started attacking Chan with a combination of strikes and rather creative uses of offensive psionic shields, which were used to unbalance Chan, especially around his shoulders and ankles.

Chan stabbed forward, his Zweihander engulfed in psionic flames, with his hand positioned to blast Iosif with psionic energy at the same time. Carmelita threw out her stinger again, this time wrapping it around his neck and pulling. It wasn’t strong, but it was hindering Iosif who was focusing everything on blocking the psionic torrent of energy.
Iosif dropped his mace and twisted so Chan and Carmelita were roughly on opposite sides, and he gestured with a free hand at Carmelita, who stumbled back as a small horizontal shield hit her, forcing her to retract her stinger. Iosif’s hand briefly contracted and expanded, and Carmelita was suddenly in the middle of four psionic shields, practically imprisoning her.

Keeping his focus on her, he jumped backward and repeated a similar gesture towards Chan who realized the danger. But he was too late and four similar shields appeared around him. Chan immediately raised a hand with psionic energy and pressed it against one of the shields, and Carmelita began testing their strength with her sword.

For now, at least, it looked pretty even. Even if Iosif currently had them in makeshift prisons, it wouldn’t last forever and neither of them were hurt. “Alright,” Iosif said. “We’ll call it a draw.”

He let his arms drop and the shields dissipated, he went to pick up his mace while Carmelita sheathed her sword and Chan ceased his psionic energy output. “Well, I guess neither of us win anything today,” Oliver said to Nuan. “Shame.”

“They’re getting better,” Nuan nodded. “Although Carmelita still falls for the mid-air block. That’s generally how he wins. She goes too fast and he knocks her out. Or he dazes her for a short time and forces Chan to concede with a little addition to the psionic prison.”

Oliver glanced over at her. “Which is?”

“He adds a covering shield that slowly lowers itself,” she explained. “Like a juice press, except with people at the bottom. I don’t know if it’s actually viable or just for intimidation, but he said it’s very difficult to pull that off. Aegis taught him that too.”

“He should try that with the Battlemaster,” Oliver suggested. “It might slow him down.”

“Or make him angry,” Nuan winced. “I’d rather he not be faced at all until we can beat him. Otherwise it’s a suicide mission.”

“Can’t disagree there,” Oliver said as the Templars returned to individual exercises. “But I think we’ll be able to beat him eventually.”

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*Australia, Near Pippingarra*

Abby was honestly not sure what Harper or the Chronicler expected her to accomplish here. Her mission was to investigate Port Harland, a fairly large city, albeit not nearly on the level of Sydney. Still, losing it would hurt the hold the Collective had on the continent. But everything she had observed was that it was going to be impossible to liberate without a small army.

The Australian Resistance was not going to risk so much for what was honestly a temporary victory. She had observed Zararch snipers, Mutons, and Andromedons. They appeared to be using the population of Humans there to build…something. They were turning large portions of the city into what seemed to be factories of some kind.

Spaceports?

It wasn’t Gateways, because she had located three already deployed at various parts of the city, spread out enough that even if one was shut down, there would be at least another that could bring in reinforcements. So a straight attack was out of the question, and unless there was a significant amount of agents on hand, who somehow would manage to sabotage all Gateways at once, that still
left the army problem.

The other alternative was the Chronicler deciding to take a more...direct approach, but even she wasn’t sure he alone could beat an entire army. At least not without help. Well, she was supposed to meet one of Harper’s people to give a report. Unfortunate that it was going to be bad news.

Abby chewed a ration bar as the sun set. She’d gotten quite a lot of survival experience out of this whole operation, which she’d never really expected. Once the war was over, assuming she was still alive, she would have quite a few career paths available to her. Although it was unlikely that she would ever become a civilian again, she couldn’t go back to that kind of life after what she’d done and seen.

The bushes rustled and her pistol was immediately raised in the direction of the sound. She lowered it and scowled when she saw who it was. “What are you doing here?” She asked the Chronicler, who casually walked over and sat on a nearby stump.

“Getting my report, of course,” he answered, lacing his fingers together. “I’ve had my eye on this place for a while, and having Harper send you out gave me a good reason to execute my plan here.”

Abby narrowed her eyes. “This whole thing was your idea.”

“Of course it was,” the Chronicler answered easily. “Harper, while having good intentions, will not win this without some nudging here and there. Attacking small cities will accomplish nothing, but the bigger ones? Those will hurt the Collective.” He nodded in the direction of the city. “So, what do you think they’re building there?”

“They’re having the civilians connect, destroy, or renovate entire blocks,” Abby reported. “I couldn’t find out exactly for what, but it seems to be factories for either weapons, vehicles or spacecraft.”

“Spacecraft,” the Chronicler confirmed with a nod. “I’ve been able to confirm that from my alien operatives. The Collective wants to establish a presence on Earth beyond the Moon. Japan and Australia are the primary grounds for this. If they are allowed to continue, they’ll be fully operational in a matter of months, after which they will be that much harder to destroy.”

Abby bit her lower lip. “This might be a time where we call in XCOM or the Lancers for a strike. The Resistance doesn’t have the resources, and the aliens will beat any army sent. And even if one is successful, all that will accomplish is the aliens devoting more resources to protecting them.” She sighed, shaking her head. “They have three Gateways here. It would need to be an extremely coordinated attack, and we don’t have the manpower for it right now.”

“Mhmm,” the Chronicler mused. “Then I suppose we’ll have to improvise. Luckily, I have a plan for such an endeavor.” He lifted a hand, gesturing towards the brush and Abby froze as a half-dozen Vitakara, Vitakarians and Borelians, stepped out, fully armored and armed. Behind them she even saw two Andromedons.

“I have help for this,” the Chronicler smiled. “There is little point in having an army if I never use it.”

“And we are happy to help with this,” one of the helmeted Vitakarians said. “What the Chronicler has revealed to us has been illuminating.”

“You talk?” Maybe it was rude, but Abby was not expecting the aliens to be more than drones to
“Of course,” the Vitakarian answered as if that were obvious.

Having an army that cannot think for itself is useless, the Chronicler’s voice said in her head. It is not hard to ensure loyalty. It is a simple matter of changing how they think, what their motivations are, how they perceive the world. Direct mind control is a crude tool, and one that does not produce needed results. My army is loyal, but capable of independent thought, which is all I require.

How do they just follow you? Abby thought back. Don’t they wonder why they follow a Human?

I explained who I am, the Chronicler thought, almost smugly. It puts things into perspective for them.

That just made Abby more confused. Why do they care who you are?

I’ll explain sometime soon, was all he thought. But they are quite good company otherwise.

Speaking aloud, he said: “This is how we will disable the Gateways. Three teams, each who will await my signal, and then will act.”

“So that will take care of that problem,” Abby nodded slowly. “But we will still have the army to deal with. Not that I don’t doubt you could use your psionics to make them turn on each other, but this will get their attention, especially since they will wonder how the Resistance could take out a city on this scale. Aside from that, what about all the civilians?”

“We are not going to save the civilians,” the Chronicler said calmly, standing and clasping his hands behind his back. “This will be the first instance of a revolt. At the right time, every single Human will rise up against the aliens and begin fighting back. They outnumber the Collective significantly, and they will serve as an excellent reason for how such destruction could occur.”

Abby blinked. It was one thing to not let civilians affect the plan, it was one thing to kill innocent bystanders, but it seemed on another level to forcibly send many of them to their likely deaths. And how is that different? The logical voice in her head said. They will die either way, and this way at least they will serve a purpose.

She couldn’t deny that it likely would be a good cover for the actual means to destroy the city. An uprising would catch them off guard, and they might just assume this was a fluke to not be repeated. Yet they were civilians. They would be slaughtered, and she doubted the Chronicler would differentiate between the elderly and children.

He had to have known her thoughts on this, which was likely why he was being silent and staying out of her head.

“Why can’t you use your psionics on the aliens?” Abby asked.

“I could,” the Chronicler confirmed with a short nod. “But for one, Humans are easier, and revolt should be as authentic as possible. Assuming I simply took control of the aliens, then we now have the question of where to put all these people, and that would undoubtedly attract attention. Attention that would put the Resistance at risk, not to mention make them wonder how such an operation is possible.”

He shook his head. “No. This is necessary, as difficult as it may be to carry out.”
Abby wished she could simply dismiss the cloying feelings of guilt, loathing, resignation, and sorrow, but she kept finding herself unable to each time something happened that pushed her further down the path of no return.

*It’s not like you’re pulling the trigger here. He has the telepathy, not you.*

She shook her head at that. That was a coward’s excuse to avoid taking responsibility. If she helped, she was endorsing this action. Yet he was right, the spacecraft factories would have to be destroyed, and if they didn’t do something, a worse decision would have to be made down the line.

The longer the war went on, the more difficult the decisions would get.

The more people would die.

She’d performed horrific acts and seen worse in the service of protecting Humanity. One more couldn’t damn her more than she already was.

The Chronicler smiled.

“Fine,” she stood up. “Let’s get started.”

* ***

*The Praesidium, Psionic Training Area*

Patricia gritted her teeth as she slammed into the padded wall. She quickly reoriented herself as Aegis kept advancing on her in his slow and methodical fashion. Despite this being the third time facing him today, she was still amazed at just how powerful he actually was, and how inadequate she was against him.

And he was holding back.

She’d seen him training the psions with defensive affinities. He could manipulate those shields to crush her like an insect as well as trap her in stasis while he compromised her mind. But no, he decided to ‘play fair’ and restrict himself to telepathic attacks and wielding his blunt, psionically manifested sword to throw her around. He even wasn’t using his telekinetics.

With a yell, she flared with psionic power, distorting the air around her, including her own vision as she assaulted the wall that was the mind of the Ethereal. But no matter how much she tried, there was no way to break it. It was like a crystalline sphere, without flaw or blemish, and everything simply slid off it like water.

Aegis gestured, his own bared arm encircled in psionic energy, and Patricia was suddenly assaulted with a barrage of sounds. Bells, shouts, noises she had no words for, all happening at once in her head. She shook her head, trying to block it out even as she felt Aegis begin to actually assault her own mind.

It was similar to being in quicksand. Or at least that was closest she could think of in her scattered thought process. Maybe being battered with waves repeatedly. A dam, that was the best description. Right now she was one that was cracking even as the sounds got louder and louder until she could finally hold no more and collapsed to the ground.

And even on the ground, the sounds in her head got louder and louder as her vision blurred and flickered. The Ethereal was in her head now, and she had no idea where he even was, let alone how to even begin to get him out. This own private hell of hers continued for hours, or maybe it was
only a few minutes. Aegis had complete control of her and could have warped her perception of
time easily.

But she was beaten, completely and utterly.

When light began leaking back into her eyes and everything faded to relative silence, she found
herself on the ground of the training area, still in her armor and her throat raw. Had she been
screaming? She wouldn’t have been surprised, given how awful all around she generally felt. She
pushed herself up, and saw Aegis still standing above her, looking down upon her.

“You fucking done?” She growled, unlatching her helmet and letting it fall to the ground, feeling
the cool air of the arena wash over her face.

“Any further and your mind would be gone,” Aegis said simply. “I believed that was sufficient.”

She scowled. “Thank you for being so considerate. But I think you forgot I’m not a bloody
Ethereal.”

“Unfortunately, we do not have the luxury of that distinction,” Aegis said. “Or I should say, you do
not. The Battlemaster, despite his threat, is not who you should fear. Isomnum, Macula, or Quisilia
would break your mind apart and laugh while doing so. What I demonstrated would be considered
merciful compared to what they can do. And I need not mention the Overmind or Imperator.”

Aegis’s tone turned unexpectedly colder. “Your telepathy, Patricia, is not impressive. You recently
appear to have gotten the impression that the mind control of hundreds is a feat worthy of praise.
For a new species learning their power, perhaps it is, but right now you have perhaps the skill of an
Aegis in training; not a full one, and certainly not the skill of an Overmind.”

Patricia’s shoulders slumped. Were she actually mentally functioning, she might have had a few
words to say to him, but as it stood, she couldn’t think of anything, nor could she completely
disagree with him. “Then what am I supposed to do?” She asked tiredly. “Nothing works against
you. I’ve tried everything I can think of. You don’t have any weaknesses.”

Aegis’s helmet nodded. “Why do you have to beat me psionically?”

Patricia gave him her best ‘are you kidding me?’ look. “Read my mind if you want that idiotic
question answered.”

“Apologies,” Aegis said. “I phrased that wrong. What I should ask is why you believe sheer power
is the best way to defeat me, or any other psion?”

Patricia opened her mouth, then paused, actually thinking about it briefly. “It depends on the
context, I suppose,” she said. “But against someone like you, there is no other attack that will work
as well. You don’t have any clear weaknesses, and on top of that, you’re more powerful that I am.
Your Trask level is what, one-thirty?”

“One-thirty-eight,” Aegis corrected briefly. “But that doesn’t excuse your rather poor grasp of
tactics. What you are doing right now is the equivalent of taking a hammer and tapping a wall to
destroy it. It doesn’t work. So how would you solve that?”

“The easy way?” Patricia raised an eyebrow. “Plant explosives at the base, detonate, and watch the
wall fall down. And get a better tool than a hammer.”

“Good enough,” Aegis agreed. “So why not do the same thing here?”
Aegis was fixating on this, so she tried to force her mind to think about how best to figure this out. Alright. So Aegis’s mind was a wall, one he was focused on defending. So, what would be the best thing to do? If assaulting the wall itself didn’t work, then the next step was to weaken it. In this case, everything relied on Aegis’s own focus.

Ah, there was an idea. Disrupt his focus.

Now what was a good means of accomplishing that? The ideal thing would be to send mind-controlled drones at him, maybe force him to defend himself. That would weaken him a little bit. Then there would be her own weapons, for all the good it would do her. But it could still help make an impact.

Hmm…

“What were you doing to me?” Patricia asked. “You overwhelmed my senses, even without taking control of my mind. You used that to distract me; disrupt my own focus on defenses.”

“Exactly,” Aegis said approvingly, and she realized that she was getting enough energy back to begin sensing people beyond the immediate area. “You are familiar with how a network denial of service attack works? This is much the same concept. If you cannot penetrate the mind of the target, overwhelm them with noise. Trap them inside their heads; break their concentration; force them to either focus on defense or continue with a weakened attack. Either can be exploited.”

He looked away from her. “Your power is immense for a Human, Patricia, but against an Ethereal, you cannot simply overpower them. Even weaker ones like Revelean or the Creator have centuries of training and experience. They know how to defeat those more powerful than them, and that is because they think tactically. That is what you need to learn. Brute strength will not serve you well in this fight.”

Patricia nodded. “I understand that. Thank you, Aegis.”

“I think that is sufficient for now,” Aegis dismissed, turning away from her. “Rest and recover, Patricia, return to your lover. The time for more training will come soon enough.”

Patricia wouldn’t really disagree with that. At the moment, she just wanted to sleep, cuddle, or otherwise enjoy a break before the gathering storm broke. The aliens were being very quiet, and that had everyone increasingly worried.

They were preparing for something, and after this, she wasn’t sure she could handle it.

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Switzerland, ADVENT Command

“They have been very quiet recently,” Saudia mused as she looked at the holomap of the current alien-controlled territory. “Pulling back after their victory seems… odd.”

“Not if you think about their goals,” Laura interrupted opposite her. “I think it’s clear now that they don’t just want to win this war, they want to win completely. In theory, they could attack wherever they pleased. But they won’t do that, because we still control the majority of land and could quickly outmaneuver them.”

“Their actions make sense,” Elizabeth agreed, tapping a pen absentmindedly on the edge of the holotable. “Everything I’ve gathered indicates they are fortifying what they do have. They’re converting large swaths of Japan into factories, and I can only assume they’re doing the same in
Australia too.”

“And in America?” Saudia asked.

Elizabeth pursed her lips. “Unknown. No factories or anything like that, but they are rotating out groups of soldiers. They’re fortifying their strongholds there. They are going to make themselves as hard to dislodge as possible.”

“Expected,” Laura nodded. “They have to know our counterattack is coming. But it is interesting that they haven’t done anything, even if it’s not a full attack.”

“Speak for yourself,” Elizabeth muttered. “I’ve got to deal with a shitposting Ethereal every day and see if he’s revealing some secret alien strategy. I swear he’s intentionally trying to drive my agents insane.”

Laura rolled her eyes. “Yes, following his twitter is a draining task for you I’m sure.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Elizabeth muttered good-naturedly. “Here, look at this.”

Saudia was now curious and walked over to Elizabeth who held up her tablet for both of them to see it. The tweet she had up was suitably and unrealistically happy.

Quisilia @TheGreatQ – Oct 28, 2016

Save the date people! 10/31/2017 Big things are coming! Be prepared to hit that subscribe button! #OctoberSurprise #Halloween #suspense #hello #ADVENT #xcom #teaser #promo #capitalist #food #insinuation

Saudia smirked at that involuntarily, and that was before she saw the photo attached, which was a selfie of Quisilia with a white sheet over his helmet (which quite clearly didn’t look natural) and some crudely drawn eyes and mouth. She…thought he was trying (badly) to mimic a ghost. And of course he was holding up a hand with two fingers in the ‘peace’ slang sign.

Laura just looked confused. “What does that even mean?”

“Exactly,” Elizabeth muttered, setting the tablet down. “He does this every week, gives a date and hypes it up, and deliberately makes sure we know it there, and we have to spend time trying to figure out what he’s actually doing. He just might actually reveal some alien operation so we have to look into it.” She facepalmed. “So I don’t know if he’s opening up a fucking puppy shop on Halloween or teasing that Korea is going to be attacked.”

Saudia understood her concern, but it all seemed unreasonably funny. “Well, I suppose we could have Twitter ban him.”

“Not going to happen,” Elizabeth sighed. “One: Someday he’s probably actually going to give us something useful; Two: He’d just make another one, and three: He’s, ah, on the board of directors.”

Both women stared at her in disbelief. Saudia coughed. “Ah, how?”

“The short version is that he bought a ten percent stake in the company,” Elizabeth answered. “And yes, they did let us know what was going on. I let them give him the position, since he might actually let something slip. Technically he’s an ‘honorary member’, but he’ll likely become a legitimate one whenever they have the next stockholder vote.”
“What the actual hell?” Laura said to no one in particular.

“It’s bizarre,” Elizabeth agreed. “And by all accounts, he’s actually being a contributing member. He joins as many board meetings as he can by video conference, all without any disguise, of course, and when he can’t be there, he has his ‘intern’ take his place. An Andromedon of all things. Very polite too.”

“I feel like I’ve entered some alternate dimension where things don’t make any logical sense,” Laura said flatly. “An Ethereal is on a board of directors of one of the largest social media platforms in the world and is actually helping them.”

“Welcome to the Quisiliaphere,” Elizabeth said wearily. “What I’ve labeled for anything relating to him where reason and expectation are thrown out, along with most of your sanity. So,” she turned back to Saudia. “Let’s return both to something actually important, and which follows logic to boot. Our counterattack.”

“Yes,” Saudia nodded. “Laura, Weekes, and the senior commanders will be meeting and coordinating with XCOM on November first. In the meantime, we’re using that time to gather our forces and create more plasma dissipators, Shieldbearers, and SHIVs for the attack. We won’t have anyone from the PRIEST Program yet, but we should have some preliminary soldiers by the end of November.”

“Everything is on schedule,” Laura confirmed to Elizabeth with a nod. “Seattle and Las Vegas are the main targets, as well as pushing beyond Portland. We won’t take California and most of Nevada back, but we hit their major strongholds and that’ll loosen their hold there.”

“The Battlemaster probably won’t stay out of it,” Elizabeth pointed out. “Or Caelior.”

Laura smiled, and Saudia joined her. “We actually have something that might deter the Battlemaster,” Laura said. “Caelior too, for that matter. Risky, but the chances of it working are above fifty percent. We keep the Ethereals away, we can win with XCOM support.”

“Well, I’ll press for more details at the meeting,” Elizabeth nodded, looking down at her tablet. “You, Chancellor, have a busy few days.”

“Yes, my big meeting at the Vatican,” Saudia remembered. “That will be interesting.” She smiled as she thought about how that was going to go down.

“Considering what you’ve had me and Stein coordinate on the past few weeks, I’d imagine so,” Elizabeth smirked. “I mean sure, why not move against the most influential religion in the world? Joking aside, I want video.”

“Seems oddly timed,” Laura noted. “I mean, I can understand doing this normally, but it seems almost unimportant when the invasion is happening.”

“A few reasons,” Saudia said, tapping her fingers on the holotable. “This is more a Peacekeeping operation, not a military one, so the resources can be justified. Next, just because there is an alien invasion doesn’t mean we can’t multitask. In addition, having the Catholic Church on our side will be a large boost to recruitment and PR if they endorse ADVENT. And I want to get this out of the way before the Religious Summit. The Pope falls in line, everyone else will too.”

“I don’t think you understand how religion works,” Laura said skeptically. “They very likely might not endorse you because one, you aren’t religious, and two, their holy books might not allow it. Have you ever had a debate with a religious person before? They can be stubborn.”
Saudia sniffed. “In my experience, the leaders of these religions generally aren’t idiots, or suicidal fanatics. I don’t care about the regular believer, but their leaders can be swayed. If nothing else, they should realize that getting killed by aliens is not what their god would want.”

All Laura did was sigh. “Well, I wish you luck on that. I second Elizabeth. Take pictures.”

Elizabeth suddenly laughed. “Did you schedule this intentionally, Saudia?”

Saudia cocked her head. “Sorry?”

“You meet the Vatican on the thirty-first,” Elizabeth said with a grin. “The Reformation? The day when Luther rebelled against the Catholic Church?”

Laura snorted and Saudia smiled. “I wondered if they’d notice. I thought it was fitting. The world itself is reforming, and it is time for religion to join it.”

“I’d almost recommend against it since it’s completely insulting,” Elizabeth said humorously. “But I quite like the idea. Give the Pope my regards.”

“Don’t worry,” Saudia assured her. “I certainly will.”

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Busan ADVENT Base, South Korea

“We’re getting an extra one?” Cara half-asked, half-noted as they walked toward their designated part of the barracks, sidestepping the other soldiers in their way. “Generous of them.”

“Apparently ADVENT didn’t put some of their squads together as well as they should have the first time,” Duri explained, as he also twisted to avoid some soldiers. Maybe he should have put his helmet on instead of holding it by his side. “The squads were either too small, or didn’t have a good composition. Like mostly soldiers and no medics, for example. Have you ever seen an XCOM squad?”

Cara shook her head. “Not in person.”

“Pretty much every single soldier fulfills a specific role,” Duri explained. “Sometimes there is some overlap, but in general one XCOM squad is diverse enough to handle almost every single situation. The problem ADVENT seems to have run into is some squads being extremely useful in some instances, and utterly terrible in others.”

“So they’re going for jack-of-all-trades squads,” Cara grunted. “Fair, I guess. I hope that this works out better for us.”

“Far as I’ve been told, there will still be exclusive Engineering and Medic teams,” Duri said as they turned a corner. “But, for example, squads like ours will get one of each.”

“So who are we getting?” Cara asked.

“A Medic, Engineer, standard infantryman, and a Shieldbearer,” Duri listed off. “Apparently the Shieldbearers got an upgrade recently. They can supposedly deflect plasma.”

Cara’s eyes widened. “Seriously?”

“Memo sent out to all officers,” Duri said, pulling out the printed memo. “And yes, it seems to be just as big a game changer as implied. I need to do some scenarios with it in action, but ADVENT
is actually making stuff to help us. I’m sufficiently impressed.”

“I’m not surprised they’re trying to outthink the aliens,” Cara said, her voice slightly stunned at the implications. “But that they did it this fast. Really, how long was it since Japan? A few weeks?”

“They’ve probably been working on a project like this since the start,” Duri said. “It’s just taken until now to actually make something out of it. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve got stuff that can kill Ethereals in one shot in the works. Now if they ever deploy them is another story.”

“Think they should try for the smaller stuff first,” Cara muttered, looking back forward. “Figure out how to kill the Warlock aliens before trying for Ethereals. Honestly, what could kill something that pretty much single-handedly beat us?”

“Nukes?” Duri suggested, shrugging in his armor. “Really, I don’t know. But they must be working on something like that. They’d be stupid not too.”

“Agreed,” Cara nodded. “Normally I’d make a joke about how government and intelligence are not something that can be combined, but that seems somewhat false now. Maybe ADVENT is the real deal this time.”

Duri smiled grimly. “Maybe. Shame it took the threat of extinction to get it started.”

He hit the door to the squad barracks and it slid open, and both of them entered where the new members of his team, with said team being re-designated as Carolus Squad. That seemed to imply that it was unique, and he was treating it like that until being told otherwise. Given how extensive not only the English language was, but every other language, it probably wouldn’t be too difficult for each squad to have their own unique designation.

It was better than Squad 001 or something like that.

The soldiers in the room immediately stood at attention. Half of them were wearing their armor, the other two were not. Didn’t matter to him right now, he’d shown up in armor because he felt it appropriate to make a good first impression, but they weren’t technically on-duty, so he wasn’t going to be stuck up about it.

“Good, everyone’s here,” he began, looking over his new soldiers. “I’m Captain Duri Eun-Jung, or just Duri. Our Sniper Beatriz is still recovering from injuries sustained in Japan, but she should be back with us in a few days,” he gestured to his side. “This is Cara, Gunner.”

“Don’t have my gun here, sadly,” she added. “But yeah, hi everyone. Looking forward to killing aliens with you all.”

Duri nodded to the man furthest to the left, a man with the black armor of a soldier. He looked fairly young compared to everyone else. “Soldier Mana Kalei,” he said, giving a salute with a fist over his heart. “Former American Navy, Hawaiian deployment. Since that division is pretty much gone, they sent me out here.”

Cara visibly winced. “I’m sorry.”

Duri wasn’t familiar with the details about how Hawaii fell, but he did know there had been a fairly intense battle before ADVENT was forced to give it up. Now that he’d stated where he was from, Duri could definitely tell Mana was an islander, likely a Hawaii native. All the short dossier had said was ‘American’. This would have been some information he would have liked to know beforehand.
“We’ll take it back eventually,” Mana said evenly. “But priorities. We’re all needed more here right now.”

“That we are,” Duri said. “Your turn.”

“Aleksandra Savelievna,” the tall Russian woman said, her accent making her sound harsher than he words implied. “Shieldbearer Mark Two, Deus Vult freed us to be deployed elsewhere. Awaiting your orders.”

She wasn’t wearing her armor, but Duri had seen Shieldbearer armor, and it was much bulkier and heavier than regular armor, so he could understand why she was only wearing her fatigues. “I’ve seen the reports,” he said. “Have you tested to see if the armor can do what Command says?”

She smiled, or more accurately, essentially bared her teeth. “The armor works to all simulations, Captain, but only way to know is fighting aliens.”

Since ADVENT didn’t have plasma weaponry, Duri supposed that was the best he was going to get. “Good enough for now. Next.”

“Nobuatsu Yoshitaka,” the Japanese man answered immediately, also in his armor. At thirty-seven, he was the oldest of the group, and had an overall serious demeanor. His expression was also suitably intense. “But Nobu will suffice. Medic. Served in both Battles of Japan. Well aware of their capabilities, and hope to prevent more situations similar to Sniper Beatriz.”

About time they got a Medic. “Glad to hear it,” Duri agreed. “Your skills would have come in handy then.”

“I’ve gotten quite good at shooting xenos in addition to field triage,” Nobu said evenly, the corners of his lips curling up. “Acquired skill, and one I’m quite proud of. I would not want to be a liability in the battle.”

“And we appreciate that,” Aleksandra added approvingly. “No one likes bystander. You Medics are notorious for this.”

“Considering these aliens have my country, I’ve been willing to put aside my distaste for combat,” Nobu said coldly, the same grim smile on his face. “Bullets are a kind of preventative medicine; if we wish to get technical.”

Some of them chuckled at that. “I like you,” Cara nodded. “Doubt you’ll beat my record, but I wish you luck.”

“Alright, last one,” Duri said, turning to the final man. He was wearing Engineer fatigues, with plenty of tools strapped to him, all well-organized. To his side was one of the new SHIVs. Duri had never actually seen one of them before, only read the reports. He’d thought they were much smaller, but the SHIV came up to mid-chest in armor.

It made him somewhat uncomfortable how dangerous it looked. “Miguel Capmany,” the man said with a nod and salute. “Former Mexican Army Engineer, now ADVENT Engineer. I also maintain our new SHIV, which will help us in killing the aliens.”

Duri raised an eyebrow. “It’s bigger than I thought.”

Miguel chuckled. “ADVENT’s not making little drones, Captain. They need machines to kill aliens, and this little guy can chew through a Muton, armor and all.”

Miguel sighed. “This isn’t like the MDU. The intelligence isn’t as sophisticated.”

“And that is supposed to make me feel better?” She asked, deadpan.

“Have some faith,” Miguel chided. “I’ve looked at how this machine works. It doesn’t even go into a firing mode until we designate it. Even then, it only targets aliens, and even then, only ones the controller tells it to.”

“I don’t suppose we get our own MDU as well?” Cara asked hopefully.

“Unfortunately not,” Duri said. “They want to save those for larger operations.”

“No Purifier either,” Mana chided at them. “I’m disappointed.”

“No offense to them,” Cara said flippantly. “But I’d honestly sleep better without tanks of liquid fire anywhere in the building.”

Duri smiled, and Miguel chuckled at that. He didn’t completely disagree with Cara here. ClF3 was something he didn’t want to get near, let alone have to deal with it on a daily basis. Well, didn’t seem like there would be many problems here. Everyone was here, willing, and wanting to kill aliens. “Alright everyone, we’ll begin exercises tomorrow morning. Given the alien’s track record, I don’t want us to be caught unprepared, and we know they can attack at anytime.”

“I agree,” Aleksandra stated. “Whenever the attack, we need to be ready.”

“In that case, we get some sleep,” Miguel said. “Been awhile since I’ve looked forward to training exercises, but given all the new tech we have…” he looked around. “Well, I’m looking forward to seeing it in action.”

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Australia, Port Hedland

It might have just been her imagination, but the night itself seemed extremely ominous. The moon was obscured by clouds and a cool wind cut through her clothes, making her shiver involuntarily every so often. The plasma weapon one of the Chronicler’s Vitakara had given her was extremely cold to the touch.

The Chronicler was also wearing a special kind of armor that one of his aliens had brought him. His reason for not wearing it to begin with was because it was heavy and hot, though Abby suspected that he was not being entirely truthful. The armor itself was nothing like she had ever seen. It was a deep black, which reminded her more of a void than the color itself. The material it was made out of wasn’t standard alien alloys either, but some kind of porous stone that covered all his limbs and yet still allowed him to move freely.

The chest, legs, arms, and boots had another layer of this strange substance. There was some kind of strange text going down the sides of his chest armor, a language Abby had never seen before, not even from the Ethereals. On the chest was the simple outline of a galaxy, with some kind of strange…thing…above it. Something that reminded her of an outstretched hand.

It made her feel uncomfortable just looking at the armor, let alone the odd symbols on it. Whatever it was, it was not Human, and the longer she spent around him, the more she wondered just who he really was.
“Move forward to the Gateway positions,” the Chronicler ordered calmly to his alien subordinates who began moving wordlessly towards the city. “Await my signal.”

Abby frowned as they walked to the city. “Will they just be let in?”

A ghost of a smile made its way onto the Chronicler’s lips. “No, and that will have to be corrected. Wish me luck.” With that he placed the accompanying helmet on, a piece that was just as odd as the rest of the armor. It was a simple covering, with no visible additions, external feeds, eyeholes, or breathing apparatuses.

“Ah, now this is how it works,” Abby stared at the Chronicler as he raised a hand towards the city. His voice was not the same, it had a deep echo to it, as if two voices were speaking concurrently. It was not the layering effect that she’d heard from other psions like Patricia. This was a completely different voice.

Much like the first time she’d helped him.

“Little reason to be alarmed, Agent Gertrude,” the Chronicler said as the air around him became visibly distorted. He spread his fingers and it seemed as though the entire city briefly blurred. “I am simply getting used to the armor.”

“What is it?” She asked, her voice much smaller as he lowered his hand.

“A gift,” the Chronicler said without a further explanation. “One I had hoped would never be needed, yet it appears my concerns were for naught. Let us continue, agent, we cannot be stopped now.”

He clasped his hands behind his back and began walking forward, and Abby uncomfortably followed, her plasma rifle at the ready. “What did you do?” She asked as they walked up the deserted road.

“Simply altered their memories to recognize my own subordinates,” he said as if it were nothing. “And the minds of the humans are primed. They will respond to my signal.”

Abby blinked. “You only took a few seconds!”

“The method isn’t important, Agent,” he said without looking to her. “Now be prepared, we are approaching now.”

The entrance was guarded by a half-dozen mutons, two Zararch snipers above and three Runianarch soldiers. They raised their weapons as Abby and the Chronicler approached. The leading Vitakarian yelled something, and the Chronicler simply gestured a hand forward and sent a crackling wave of energy towards them.

The wave didn’t just throw them back, it tore through them, and to Abby’s perspective, vaporized them into nothing. The Chronicler kept walking, putting his hand behind his back like he had the entire time. Abby was stunned. She’d never seen that kind of power from anyone, human or alien. “How did you do that?” she demanded, wondering if she’d even need to fire a shot during this.

“The technique isn’t complicated,” was all he said. “It is a minor application of destructive psionics. It is rather small compared to the feats of the Ethereal Empire. The Reapers and the Division of the Maelstrom were far more impressive in their feats.”

Abby recalled that the Reapers were a group of Ethereals that…what did they do?
Destroy planets.

Right. That.

So maybe vaporizing a small group of aliens wasn’t impressive in that context, but still...Whatever the Chronicler was doing here, he had to be more useful in the actual war. Whatever he said, being stuck in Australia wasn’t where he belonged.

The Chronicler stopped at the checkpoint. “And now, let it begin.”

Nothing happened at first, but the air around her suddenly became more and more distorted, and she eventually realized it was coming from the Chronicler himself, who was almost indistinguishable in the distorted energy wave. The air itself had seemed to change as well, it was like her ears had just popped and everything seemed different.

Then the yells and shouts started. Few in the beginning, but they grew in size and intensity the longer they waited. Now there were Humans coming out into the street, soundless and yet with purpose. Without any words, they stripped the immediate area for weapons. There was little outside of steel beams and scraps of alien alloys, but they grabbed them all the same.

Men, women, elderly, children, all were under the Chronicler’s spell as they moved deeper into the city. It was also disconcerting that their eyes were tinged red. It was subtle, and only in what she saw as flashes, but it was there. Much like the effect Patricia had on mind-controlled victims, except then the eyes were turned a shade of purple.

She hoped she was just seeing things, and given how surreal this experience was becoming, she wasn’t sure she could trust her sight.

“Let us continue,” the Chronicler said, marching forward, and she carefully followed. “The first conflict is up ahead. Intervene if you wish, it will not change the outcome of this battle.”

That sounded ominous. But even through her distorted vision she could follow the sounds of battle. There were shouts, grunts, and weapons fire up ahead, but as she listened closer, she realized that she’d been wrong earlier. Alien screams were not the same as Human ones; they were as a rule noticeably deeper and she hadn’t heard a single Human one yet.

She rounded a corner, breaking into a jog, and stepped into what was complete and utter carnage. Hundreds of Human and alien corpses littered what was a street leading into a town square. Humans were attacking the remaining forty or so aliens, mostly Mutons, and it was going as well as she’d expected. Volleys of plasma were taking them down, but there were groups of Humans stripping the alien corpses for grenades and other explosives, since the plasma weapons broke upon death.

But what was completely unnerving was that it was done in near silence. The Humans didn’t speak, not even when getting shot. Further still, they didn’t seem to feel pain like normal. The Mutons seemed to have initially made the mistake of thinking that, and turned their attention away after the first plasma volley had knocked down the first wave, and then they’d been surprised when they had stood once more, missing limbs or flesh melting, but just as determined to kill as before.

Even the Humans on the ground that were not dead were pulling themselves forward, makeshift weapons in their hands. The latest wave of Humans was employing tactics now, some were holding sheets of metal and constructing barricades, while others were lobbing grenades at the Mutons, and an explosion just then killed another.
The Chronicler had said it didn’t matter what she did here, whatever that meant, so she was going to help. She raised her plasma rifle and fired at one of the Mutons. Three plasma bolts shot out in quick succession, with surprisingly little recoil. It slammed into the head of the Muton, and they suddenly realized there was another threat to contend with.

The other Humans used that distraction as a way to launch a coordinated charge with the front shielded by metal sheets and behind them a dozen more Humans with sharp kitchen knives, broken broomsticks, shovels and other improvised weapons. Abby fired a few more volleys at the aliens, who quickly scrambled back into some kind of cover.

Then the charge hit the Muton flank and Abby was initially taken aback at the brutal savagery of the Humans, who immediately aimed or dove for the exposed heads, hitting them in the exposed flesh and stabbing their eyes out, and repeating it several times until they were sure the alien was dead before getting up to move on to the next one.

Most of them were killed before they could even kill a fourth, even as she took out another one. Not that it mattered much as none of the surviving Humans seemed demoralized or concerned their counterattack didn’t work. Abby saw they were already organizing another similar attack. She wished the Chronicler could stop his reality-warping effect, since the distortions were making it difficult for her to line up accurate shots.

She’d taken out another one when a purple maelstrom appeared in the final group of aliens and vaporized them. The surviving Humans wasted no time and began walking to other parts of the city to assist other assaulted areas. “The attack is going well,” the Chronicler said as he walked up to her. “The pockets of alien resistance are slowly but surely falling. Let us move to the factory itself. I expect your superiors will appreciate information on what the aliens are doing.”

“What did you do to them?” Abby asked, looking at the mass of bodies around her.

“Helped them,” was the answer. “Humans are fighters to a degree, but at times there needs to be a nudge in the right direction. Pain is useless to me, as is unneeded noise. They are extensions of my will, and know what needs to be done to achieve their objectives.”

Abby shivered. Even Patricia hadn’t gone to that degree to her knowledge. It was enough for her to turn their enemies against each other, but this seemed both a step above and beyond that. Sheer numbers shouldn’t have been enough to beat an entrenched alien army, but that appeared to be exactly what was happening.

“Have you ever wondered how the Sectoids once waged war?” The Chronicler mused suddenly as they walked. “Much like this. A skill they have fallen out of practice in, but nonetheless an effective one.” He gestured around. “These people are linked, a forced link, but one where they can coordinate to a degree that is impossible to be replicated through speech alone. That is how all of them are adapting, remaining calm, and strategizing without speaking. They are in a pseudo-hivemind, one under my own control.”

Abby didn’t add on to that. The concept alone was something she would hate to be subjected to. Humans weren’t supposed to be these soulless drones dying in waves against an enemy, even if they ultimately won. Smoke was in the air now, and she looked in the distance to see fires beginning to rise as the triumphant Humans began torching the city.

Given the lack of reinforcements, she supposed that the Gateways had been destroyed as the Chronicler promised. Now the factories were up ahead. They were right now ugly combinations of Human architecture and interconnected alien alloys. Some buildings were destroyed, others were in the process of being connected together.
She followed the Chronicler as he stepped into one of the larger ones, and found more bodies inside, along with dozens of Vitakara dead; probably surprise attacks from the Humans working here who’d suddenly turned on them. There were welding torches, drills, saws, all kinds of improvised weaponry.

They stepped into an open conveyor belt area, where half a dozen were set up, and where there was a lot of screaming in pain. Alien screams. And she soon saw why. The Humans were continuing to execute the aliens still alive here, mostly who looked to be overseer types with no armor. Two or three Humans held them back while another one executed the alien with the weapons they had available.

One was using a chainsaw to cut up one of the aliens, another was using a blowtorch to melt the skin off another, all of them seemed to be killing the aliens in as painful a way as possible. “Many of the people here have fantasized about what to subject the aliens to,” the Chronicler noted, sounding amused as they walked through the factory construction. “I see little wrong with letting them execute these aliens as they wish. Considering what they have been subjected to, it is only just.”

Abby wasn’t sure about that. Drawing out the death of an enemy seemed little more than sadistic. It was one thing if there was a goal, but for simple revenge? It seemed wrong.

Then again, she couldn’t say she wouldn’t do the same in their position.

They stopped in front of an alien console, and the Chronicler began manipulating a haptic pad and accessing the alien HUD which Abby couldn’t begin to comprehend. “This is the mainframe for their operations here,” he explained. “While they will undoubtedly be abandoned now, I suspect this will provide your superiors with some crucial information as to what their plans are for the region.”

A small cube ejected from the console, and the Chronicler gingerly picked it up, and handed it to her. She couldn’t tell under the helmet, but he was likely smiling. “Thank you, Agent Gertrude. Your participation here is appreciated.”

Abby just stared at him. “Maybe you can tell me exactly what I did here? Or did you just want to show off?”

“You are ensuring that XCOM and ADVENT receive the benefits of my service, and allowing me to keep my anonymity,” he answered nonchalantly. “While I most certainly could do most of this without you, it would take longer and I would be forced to expose myself, and in these times, that is something I would not be able to use as an excuse not to intervene.”

That didn’t make much sense to Abby, but it was probably best she didn’t press the psion too much. Not now. It was very clear he had some ulterior motive besides just ‘helping XCOM out’, and the more she saw of what he could do…she was becoming scared at what that could be. “You may leave and report back,” he said, turning away. “Simply say you witnessed the revolt and took the opportunity to gather some information. By the time anyone returns, the aliens will undoubtedly be back in charge.”

She started. “I thought the goal was to destroy this place!”

“Originally, yes,” he shrugged. “But the plan has changed. When the aliens send their reinforcements, I will be waiting and turn them as I did the others. The factories will be burnt to the ground, and my forces will control whatever is built in their place. The end result is the same, Agent Gertrude, you do not want to press me further at this time.”
No, she certainly did not.

She quickly turned around, the alien data cube in-hand, and got out of there as fast as she could.

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**Vatican City**

Saudia had always wanted to visit the Vatican. Aside from the history of the place, it was very much one of the most impressive locations in the world. Still, it was one area that would have been extremely difficult to actually visit in the EXALT era since the risk of exposure or compromise would be too great.

There was even more security around the building than usual, and Saudia had brought a small army with her of Peacekeepers with her for ‘security purposes’. A reasonable enough explanation and one the Vatican had permitted due to her status and importance in the world. It wasn’t every day that the most influential woman in the world came to meet the Pope.

Well, the Peacekeepers weren’t all she had with her. Even the regular Riot Control outnumbered the Vatican soldiers, although no aggressive moves were being exchanged. Her own Personal Guard accompanied her as they walked into the empty halls of the Vatican, along with Stein who was in full Peacekeeper armor, her helmet under her arm.

Saudia was simply wearing her standard black uniform with the red sash across her shoulder, and a pistol at her hip. While there were no weapons allowed at the Vatican normally, there were exceptions that had to be made, and the Pope wasn’t *that* stubborn.

“I don’t suppose you’ve met him before?” Saudia said to make some conversation as they walked the ornate hallways.

“His Holiness Pope Marcellus the Third?” Stein asked sarcastically. “When the hell would I have met him?”

Saudia smiled to herself. “Fair point. Was just curious. I’ve never had the pleasure, so this should be interesting.”

“Elizabeth put together a dossier,” Stein reminded her. “You might know him better than maybe anyone else at this point.”

The priest that was leading them forward suddenly stopped in front of a massive double door, and the two robed figures beside it opened it up to let them in. In the interior was a massive wooden table with ornate walls and chairs. The room itself had a domed top, which was painted with a scene Saudia didn’t recognize.

In the room were eight elderly men in black cassocks with red bands around their waists; Cardinals of the Vatican and all advisors to Pope Marcellus. In the center was the Pope himself, wearing his formal white choir robe with the white cap.

“Chancellor Saudia Vyandar of ADVENT,” the priest said as they entered the room. “His Holiness Marcellus the Third, Bishop of Rome, Vicar of Jesus Christ, Successor of the Prince of the Apostles, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, Primate of Italy, Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman Province, Sovereign of the Vatican City State, Servant of the servants of God.”

She could practically envision Stein resisting the urge to roll her eyes at the ridiculous number of titles the Pope had. Saudia found it a bit excessive as well, but knew that level of embellishment
wasn’t used very often, so she treated it as something of an honor. Although she didn’t know how accurate that was.

She nodded to her guard and they waited outside. “If you would, Chancellor,” the Pope said, his voice soft. “I would prefer we conduct this meeting privately.”

Saudia could allow that. It wouldn’t change much. She was here to have a productive conversation after all. “As would I, your Holiness,” she nodded to Stein, who also nodded in acknowledgement and left. The Cardinals silently filed out of the room and Saudia walked over to the Pope, maneuvering a chair to sit opposite him.

“I appreciate you taking the opportunity to speak,” Saudia said as the Pope took a seat opposite her. The elderly man had an aura of calm around him, which she wasn’t surprised at given his position. He wore some spectacles, but otherwise was fairly ordinary outside the position itself. From what Elizabeth had been able to find, he was clear of any wrongdoing and seemed to more or less generally care about people under him and the common folk, as it were.

She didn’t have much inherent respect for religious leaders, but out of all of them, Pope Marcellus was one of the least offensive. She hoped this would translate to him being reasonable as well.

“For a woman in your position, I would think it foolish not to meet,” Pope Marcellus said. “You are one of the few who wield great influence in this world, and it would be irresponsible of me to not at least attempt to convince you to use it wisely.”

Saudia gave a small, humorless smile. “I do my best to both protect our species and maintain order. I am well aware of the responsibility of my position.”

“I cannot disagree with that,” the Pope agreed surprisingly. “You have your flaws, but we all do, and you seem committed to the people in a less traditional way.”

Saudia crossed her legs. “Crime and disorder should not be tolerated, Holiness. Being lax serves no one, nor does apathy and neutrality. While I don’t claim to be perfect, I believe it is time to hold our species to a higher standard. I believe you might understand this better than most. Sin deserves punishment, does it not?”

The Pope gave a similarly grim smile. “That it does, but the difference is that our sins can be atoned for and forgiven. There is no forgiveness under your administration, only punishment.”

“Justice, Holiness,” Saudia disagreed calmly. “Forgiveness should be reserved for the ones whose crimes have not ruined the lives of others. There is, I believe, a difference between a child disobeying his mother, and a man murdering a citizen. Would you truly believe these to be equally worthy of forgiveness?”

“All can be forgiven if they are repentant,” the Pope answered. “Yet I do agree that one is worthy of punishment and the other is not. But it is one thing to administer punishment, it is another to dehumanize them in the process.” He paused. “I can say little for this war with the aliens. I do not have answers for it, but I can look out for the people of this world. I can offer little that you would consider useful in military matters.”

Saudia sighed. “Punishment is supposed to be just that, Holiness, something unpleasant. I see little difference between our treatment of convicted criminals and the Hell you believe in. One is theoretically worse than the other.”

“Hell is only for the deserving,” the Pope shook his head. “Yet there are crimes of disproportionate
magnitude you punish. I do not suggest to remove it entirely, that would be irresponsible, but perhaps use this opportunity to reform the convicted into something better. People can change, Chancellor, and this is true of even the murderers, rapists, and thieves you take delight in punishing.”

“Reformation, Holiness, is something I believe needs to be earned,” she stated flatly. “I am not as draconic as Stein, but I do not believe in reformation for all. Truthfully, the world would be better off without certain people in it. We do not abuse our prisoners, if they do their job, they will receive food and medical treatment. If they maintain good behavior throughout the entirety of their sentence, then they are released with a blank slate. Reformation is a result of reflection, and those in prison will either reflect on their crimes and come to the conclusion they need to change, or they will not.”

The Pope was silent for a few seconds. “I would ask that you at some point speak to those in your system, perhaps that is the only way to understand that not everyone is beyond redemption. I am curious, Chancellor, I have wanted to speak to you, but what reason would you have to speak to me? You are not, I believe, a religious woman.”

Saudia gave him another smile. “No, I am not. But the Catholic Church is the largest unified religious body in the world, and I would prefer we meet before the religious summit itself. Many countries in ADVENT have Catholic populations, and if ADVENT had the support of the Vatican, it would be a substantial boon to both morale, and to reassure the population that we are not the villains we are sometimes portrayed as. The Catholic Church has been largely quiet in regards to ADVENT, so I would ask you, where does the Church stand?”

“ADVENT, as it stands, is flawed, but not what anyone would consider evil,” the Pope said after a minute of thought. “Your intentions are noble, you try and care for your citizens, you provide for the poor. You are committed to Humanity, but only a Humanity you believe to be superior. ADVENT is prideful, it is vicious to its enemies, it will be harsh when given the chance to show empathy, it will use violence to solve problems instead of diplomacy. And I am certain you believe that you are doing the right thing.”

“Without a doubt,” Saudia nodded. “Holiness, Humanity has to change. We have been plagued with division, corruption, and worse through these past decades. Your Church is not immune to it. It reached the point where democracies no longer represented the wills of the people; justice depended on money and skin color; power was seen as the end goal for government; countries stood by as thousands were killed in the name of radical ideology.”

She shook her head. “There will never be an organization that is perfect, but ADVENT is the best that has existed so far. Our leaders are intelligent; we are not subjected to fanatical ideologies; we punish crime justly; money does not control us; and influence and status is only a footnote. No one is immune to our reach, Holiness, and unlike the United Nations of old, we do not simply stand by as injustice and death happens in the world. We act.”

“No one can deny your proactivity, Chancellor,” the Pope agreed. “Yet you seek to impose your rule over every other one. Can you be so certain you are correct?”

Saudia eyed him evenly. “With the information I know right now? Yes, I can say that ADVENT is correct. Not all ideas, ideologies, and religions are equal, and they should not be treated as such. The days of entertaining the Nazis, anarchists, dictators, slavers, and racists in the name of ‘tolerance’ or ‘free speech’ are over. I do not apologize for this, and I suspect you will not be able to refute me without resorting to moralistic arguments.”

“I do not know you, Chancellor, but may I ask you a question?” He asked evenly in return. At her
nod he continued. “You are a practical woman, that is evident, but I am curious by what your measure of humanity is. Our morality is how we know right from wrong; empathy, kindness, and love are parts of what makes us Human. Our ability to care. Chancellor, do you care about, or love someone?”

“Yes,” she answered immediately. “And I actually agree to an extent. Our morality is how we know murder is wrong. It is something that separates us from an alien race like the Sectoids. But morality must also adapt as Humanity does. And morality, I would add, is highly subjective. Highly reliant on religion too I would add.” She paused briefly. “Empathy, kindness, love, there are places for these emotions, but they are no more or less valid than other emotions we experience. Anger, pain, hope, we should not be continuously subject to them, because emotions make us unreliable. Emotion rarely leads to sound results, I have found, and that must change within us as well.”

She laced her fingers together and leaned back into her chair. “Logic over emotion, justice over mercy, practicality over empathy, victory over restraint. These must happen if we, as a species, are to truly become something great and united, not to mention if we want to merely survive.”

Saudia leaned forward. “I do not need the Catholic Church to agree with me, I do not need you to like me, but I would like to ask a question of you as well: Do you believe that the aliens are a threat, and that they can be beaten without us?”

“The aliens have shown a desire to kill or enslave us,” he said simply. “I am not blind. We did not start this conflict, and I would never suggest that we simply give up. I do not know if you are our only hope, but at this point there is no one else.”

Saudia nodded. “Without ADVENT, the Catholic Church will be destroyed. I don’t know the aliens’ policy towards religions, but I doubt you would survive, or if you did, the result would be a twisted version of the religion you believe in.”

“And so that is your main argument,” the Pope seemed amused. “We are standing between you and death, therefore you should support us.”

“You could calm the populations of those who are apprehensive,” Saudia said. “You could play an important role in this war. I am not asking you to call a Crusade, but simply say that in light of the alien invasion, and visiting ADVENT countries, you will give the support of the Church.”

The Pope laced his fingers together. “Even if I were to do that, you do understand that this is not a unilateral decision. While I speak for the Church, I do not make decisions of this scale alone.”

Saudia rapped her fingers absentmindedly on the arm of the chair, wondering just how much to tell him. “And what is the current mood of them toward ADVENT?”

He cocked his head. “Some support you, many do not. They feel you are too extreme, and a threat to the Catholic Church.”

“Cardinals Francis, Medina, and Piacenza?” Saudia asked evenly. “I don’t suppose they are ones who have issues with ADVENT?”

He blinked in surprise. “I am curious, Chancellor, how would you know that? I suppose it would not be beyond you to place spies at the Vatican.”

She had a choice here. Let things play out like planned, or let the Pope in on what was going to happen. It depended on if he could be trusted, and despite his conflicting views, he did seem to
genuinely believe what he said. Which meant she would want him as an ally here. “Not so complicated as that,” she said. “Holiness, do you know why I brought Stein with me?”

“To perhaps put us on guard, or intimidate us?” He answered wryly. “If that was the goal, it failed. Neither I, nor my Cardinals, succumb to intimidation easily.”

“No, Holiness,” Saudia said. “It is because at the end of our meeting, the SSR will storm the Vatican and arrest the following list of people.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a copy of the warrant Stein had. “You are, of course, aware that there have been cases of sexual abuse by priests.”

The Pope stiffened. “Yes, of course. And I have made strides to make sure-“

“To put it bluntly, you failed,” Saudia interrupted, handing him the warrant. “You are not under suspicion, my Director of Intelligence personally cleared you. However, that is not the case for your advisors. We have started at the churches, and gone up from there. This is a systemic problem in the church that has been covered up for decades, and today will be the day this rot is removed from the world.”

As the Pope read the names, she continued. “Your Cardinals are thankfully not pedophiles, but they are arguably worse. They have helped cover up the cases that were reported, and they have also been responsible for monetary fraud and laundering. The paper trail and string of witnesses led us here. It took surprisingly little time to determine the culprits. Catholics are poor criminals, it seems.”

“And you are suggesting that their opposition to ADVENT is because of their crimes?” he said, his voice bordering on furious.

“It is certainly a part,” Saudia nodded. “I had never met you before today, so I was not sure how you would respond. We have our differences, but I believe you can be trusted. The image of the Church has suffered because of men like this, and you will not be able to change it without effort and pain. You were falsely lulled into believing this problem was close to being solved, and now you see you were wrong.”

He gave a single nod. “It is clear to me now.”

“We both have different views on punishment,” Saudia said. “But we can both agree that men like this deserve to be found and removed. ADVENT can help with this. We can give you the means to truly reform the Catholic Church into what you want it to be. We do not care about position, influence, or money. Justice will be served, and despite our differing ideologies, we are willing to do it.”

The Pope handed her back the warrant. “I do not suppose you have fully exposed the disgraces of the Church?”

“Not everywhere,” Saudia shook her head. “Not even in all ADVENT states. We cannot and will not start investigations in foreign nations, but we can follow evidence that leads to there.”

“And you were planning to do this without mentioning it to me, unless I passed your test of trust,” he said slowly.

Saudia gave a nod. “As I said, Holiness, we do not stand by when injustice is prevalent. If you had been implicated, you would be marched before the courts now. We do not care who you are, we only care about bringing justice to those who deserve it.”
He stared at her for a few moments, and seemed to come to a decision. “You have commitment, Chancellor, and more courage than I have seen in a leader in a very long while. I will need to consider what to do next, but after I make some changes to my advisors,” he pursed his lips. “You may start with arresting the criminals who have perverted this holy place.”

They stood and the Pope tapped a button on his wrist, and a few moments later some of the guards came in. He talked with them for a few moments, they nodded, and then left. “Do what you must,” he said, taking his place at the head of the table, Saudia beside him. A few minutes later the doors opened and the Cardinals, together with Stein walked in. That was the cue.

Saudia gave her a brief smile, and Stein returned it, ice in her eyes as she took her place opposite them. The Cardinals moved to their places. “Your Holiness, was your meeting productive?” Cardinal Francis asked, looking confused as he saw Saudia still standing.

“Indeed it was,” he answered, without looking over. “Chancellor Vyandar has reached an agreement with me.”

“Truly?” Cardinal Daniels, likely the youngest Cardinal in the room, said.

“Yes,” the Pope said, looking around at the small audience. “The Chancellor has exposed to me that the filth that permeates the Church is still alive and well, and worse, hidden by ones I considered friends and brothers.”

“Your Holiness,” Cardinal Medina said nervously, now eyeing Stein with obvious fear. “Please do not jump to any hasty conclusions. It is not beyond ADVENT to simply lie to achieve what they want!”

“How fortunate then that we don’t lie,” Stein said smugly, pulling out a thick file from a bag she must have received while Saudia and the Pope were having their conversation. “Please, Cardinal, read this and tell me if we are lying. She placed it on the smooth table and pushed it to them. No one moved to pick it up.

“Father,” Cardinal Farina said quietly. “What is going on-ah!”

All of them gasped as a dozen SSR agents stormed into the room, rifles bared and in full armor. Saudia smiled at their entrance. The SSR were the absolute last people you wanted to meet if you were a criminal. Their armor was similar to that of the Shieldbearers, and were specifically designed for armed hostile encounters. Their faceplates of their helmets were slanted in a downwards V, and the rest had been inspired by the Shieldbearer ones as well. Their armor was pure black, and they didn’t speak except through internal comms.

They only acted.

“Cardinals Francis, Medina, and Piacenza, you are under arrest for obstruction of justice, witness intimidation, money laundering, and failure to report criminal activity,” Stein declared as the SSR began roughly grabbing the gasping Cardinals that were named, tightening cuffs around their wrists and ankles. Perhaps a bit extreme, but it was standard procedure for any arrests done by the SSR to cuff them in multiple places.

“You will be tried, sentenced, and convicted under ADVENT law,” Stein continued, a satisfied smile on her face. “You will provide us with any additional information relating to crimes within the Roman Catholic Church and elsewhere. Failure to cooperate or perjury will result in an extension of your sentence. May God be with you, because we will have no mercy and you will be punished like the vermin you are.” She motioned to the SSR. “Take them away, put them with the
Without another word the SSR agents slung the protesting Cardinals over their shoulders and began marching out, leaving the rest of them alone, and the ones who were not expecting it, stunned.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Holiness," Stein told the Pope, inclining her head. "ADVENT appreciates it."

"It was needed," the Pope admitted. "I was not aware this had still festered. Understand this," he looked around at the remaining Cardinals. "As of today this will no longer be tolerated, and it will not simply be swept aside in the name of greater concerns. ADVENT has promised to help us rid the Church of these abusers, and I will be certain they are allowed to work." He nodded at Saudia. "You are right about one thing. We must change, and this includes the Church. And change must start from the top."

Saudia smiled. "I could not agree more."

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*Undisclosed Location, United States of America*

Saudia was rather happy with how that had turned out, so much so that she wasn’t miffed at Dr. Kettani calling her in to discuss something that apparently had to be in person. She knew he was beginning his recruitment efforts, and she hadn’t expected anything beyond updates for a while. So for him to contact her either meant that something was wrong, or there was a development so serious he needed her to review it.

She walked down to what were the acclimation rooms, where there were already some people waiting inside. They were white rooms that the potential psions waited in before being awakened, or at least that was their intended function. They were more or less glorified waiting rooms, while the doctors made the last-minute preparations.

Kettani was roughly two-thirds down the current hallway, with a few more doctors beside him, all muttering amongst themselves. "Doctor," she greeted, walking up. "What was so urgent that you needed me here?"

"Ah, Chancellor," he said, immediately turning to her. "Thank you for coming so quickly. To summarize quickly, we've hit something of an...unexpected development."

Saudia sighed. "Elaborate?"

"Do you remember how I said we probably wouldn’t be able to find many psions of similar power to Patricia?" He asked, clearing his throat. "Well...we did find one. A ninety-three on the Trask Scale."

Saudia blinked. "You’re certain?"

"We triple checked," Kettani assured her, handing a tablet with graphs and charts on it. "At some point we expected one like him, but not immediately. Normally, I wouldn’t bother you, but something this powerful will be a little harder to keep a hold of. Imagine Patricia, but potentially more powerful."

Saudia nodded. "What do we know of him? He had to have passed the psychological tests."

"That’s the thing," Kettani shook his head. "He seems completely fine. Normal. Lukas Von Theil, German Chemistry teacher, no criminal record, no military service, has a habit of posting in science..."
forums online, but otherwise nothing out of the ordinary. Has an interest in alien technology, which
was a reason he gave for expressing interest.”

Normal. Well, that wasn’t a word she’d really used in a while. Normal was definitely strange right
now, but she supposed that was just how it worked sometimes. Completely ordinary people were
elevated beyond what they could have expected. “I asked Elizabeth to put together a profile on
him,” Kettani said as they moved towards the window. “Also as innocent as you’d expect.”

In the center, sitting calmly on the cushy chair was Lukas Von Theil, who didn’t immediately
strike her as normal. Just from his posture she could tell he was a very controlled and deliberate
person, and his speech was likely the same. He had a buzz cut with his light brown hair barely
standing out on his pale skin.

“Intermittent relationships with various women,” Kettani continued. “Nothing malicious, but
everything seems to indicate he almost grows bored of them and breaks up with them when they
aren’t what he considers interesting.”

Saudia raised an eyebrow at that. “Odd.”

“He has very high student reviews too,” Kettani said. “He is, and I quote ‘Very laid back’,
‘Actually tells us interesting stuff’, and ‘Anyone who uses fire is cool in my book’. The last one, I
believe references an incident where Von Theil was almost kicked out for performing what was
designated ‘unsafe experiments’. When asked for his defense, the answer was, ‘Because students
aren’t interested in a damn baking soda volcano. They want something to remember.’”

“Fun guy,” Saudia commented. “Anything else interesting?”

“His online profile is ‘Geist’,” Kettani said. “Mostly restricts himself to scientific forums that I
mentioned earlier. Search history is mostly benign, chemical formulas, subjects, and he has also
been following the war closely.” Kettani paused. “What else? No stated religious beliefs or
political affiliation, no social media, keeps the very few relationships he has purely professional.
He appears to be a loner through and through.”

“So he seems to be clean, if somewhat odd,” Saudia said. “Why do you need me?”

“Because something about him is just off,” Kettani scowled. “It’s not just me either, everyone else
who speaks to him is the same way. Even the psion I had question him to determine without any
doubt how trustworthy he was said she felt uncomfortable performing the examinations. She
described it being like he knew she was going through his head, and like she was being watched
inside it.”

He shook his head. “Again, if this were anyone else, I’d just go ahead and do it. But considering
the ramifications, I don’t want to awaken a ninety-three power psion without explicit approval
when things are like this.”

Saudia thought for a moment. “Let me talk to him.”

“Be my guest,” Kettani said as he unlocked the door, and she stepped in. Lukas looked up as she
walked in. He didn’t get up, instead looking at her with unblinking grey eyes. His expression hadn’t
changed a bit as he looked her over. Already she felt what Kettani had described in how something
seemed off about him. It was like she was being visibly dissected, which was not a feeling she was
used too.

“Chancellor Saudia Vyandar,” he said, his voice not what she was expecting. It was sort of what
she was used to, but he rolled and accented his a’s, making it sound like he was drawing out parts of her name. “I did not expect you to take an interest in me.”

“How much has Dr. Kettani told you?” She asked.

“Oh, very little, but I was able to deduce enough,” he said dismissively. “You would only go through all these hoops because I would be considered a possible threat to your precious ADVENT.” He gave an eerie smile. “I assure you, Chancellor, I have no intention of breaking the terms of our agreement. You wish control, you have it, I only wish to awaken this gift inside me now.”

Saudia kept her expression blank. Yes, this person was not normal, no matter what Kettani said. “And why exactly did you contact the PRIEST Program?” She asked. “You understand the conditions.”

“Psionics has fascinated me since I first heard of it,” he said wistfully. “Ever since I have wanted to master the secrets of this existential and mysterious gift. Your PRIEST Program was the perfect avenue, and I appear to have reached the final stage. All I suppose remains is your approval. You would not meet with someone of minor power, Chancellor, so I know that I am already useful to you. I have no fear you will abuse the bomb in my head, because as of now, I am too useful for you to kill in a childish fit of rage or fear.”

Saudia’s lips curled up. “You seem awfully sure of that. You don’t know me.”

“I know that you are a woman of practicality,” Lukas said with no trace of doubt. “You do not tolerate those whose inhibitions prevent excellence. You do not hesitate when making decisions, you act. I am good at reading people, Chancellor, and if I did not believe you are who I think you are, we would not be speaking now.”

“And just who do you think I am?” She asked.

“Someone who wants to bring humanity under her control,” he stated calmly. “Someone who has a past they do not want questioned, and someone who will stop at nothing to destroy the aliens and the plans they have for our species. I do not care where you came from Chancellor, I suspect I will learn that in good time, but my place in this world has been one of little import by design. I know my strengths and limitations, and I intentionally placed myself where I would have the most impact. Those parameters have changed. Here is where my impact will be the greatest, and you will help me achieve that.”

This man reminded her of the Commander in his reading of her and complete assurance. It was discomforting how certain he seemed, like he knew what was going to happen. From his perspective it sounded like he was simply using her to achieve ‘his place’, or get wherever he had the most ‘impact’ which could mean a number of things. He didn’t strike her as an altruist, but if his intent had been otherwise, she would have been told.

Still, he had passed every test, and if a psion had gone through his mind and there was nothing… there was no reason to deny his awakening. Not that there had really been a question of throwing away someone who was a ninety-three on the Trask scale. She sincerely hoped he wasn’t a telepath.

Someone like that with telepathy was concerning indeed, bomb in the head or no.

“Thank you for speaking with me,” Saudia said. “Your awakening will begin shortly, Mr. Von Theil.”
“Geist,” he interrupted. “I would prefer to be referred to as Geist from now on. I never much cared for my name, and now is as good a time as any to change it.”

Saudia shrugged. An odd request, but she didn’t particularly care about this one. “As you wish… Geist.” Kettani would have to update paperwork, but that wouldn’t be too much trouble. She stepped out and closed the door before turning to Kettani.

“There is something strange about him,” she said. “But there is no factual basis to not use him. Put him in the pod. With that said…” she paused. “Have another bomb implanted in his chest. I think we would both feel better if we are not relying on one contingency.”

“Yes, Chancellor.”

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The Citadel, Situation Room

And here they were back again.

It didn’t seem that long since the Commander had been here during the first attack on the United States, and this would definitely not be the last. Saudia had been busy too, first with receiving reports of the newest tactics and technological advances ADVENT had made, some of them XCOM hadn’t anticipated. Then she had gone on to purge the Catholic Church of the degenerates in it, and otherwise demonstrate ADVENT’s reach and intent.

Good for her. This was what ADVENT should be doing. Enforcing the law, wherever it was established, borders be damned.

And now they were all preparing to perform one of the most significant counter-attack operations of the war. One he felt the aliens would be unprepared for. “Let us begin,” he said, and the holotable came up showing the West Coast. “Commander Christiaens, you can start.”

“Very well,” Laura first pointed at the top of the map. “There will be several objectives in this operation. We have to be very careful not to overextend otherwise the aliens will exploit that. If possible, we need to take the northwest completely, which amounts to Washington State and Oregon.”

“This means Seattle is taken and Portland is completely secured,” Weekes clarified. “From there, the Navy can reinforce the coasts and we can immediately begin establishing proper bases to corner the southwest.”

“At the same time, we take back the major Nevada bases and cities,” Laura continued, pointing for reference. “Las Vegas is destroyed, but the aliens have been making the remains and nearby bases into strongholds of their own. Should they be allowed to finish, it will severely hinder any further military operations.”

“So is that the priority?” The Commander asked, looking up at her. “I need to know where best to deploy my own soldiers.”

“Negative,” Laura shook her head. “Las Vegas would be an excellent bonus, but the bulk of our forces should focus on securing the northwest. Seattle and Portland for sure.”

The Commander nodded at Patricia. “Noted, we’ll have our best there.”

“We will still conduct a large attack on the Las Vegas area,” Laura reminded him. “But it’ll be a
much harder fight, both since the aliens are entrenched and the conditions are not favorable. But I believe it is possible to take.”

“I can assign some additional psions to help,” the Commander nodded, scratching his chin. “Our concern is not the aliens themselves, but if the Ethereals interfere. That will be the deciding factor.”

“America has been the Battlemaster’s theater,” Weekes said with a grim smile. “So we spook him. We fake a nuclear launch and chase him off. He won’t risk getting killed by a bomb.”

“Viable,” the Commander nodded, thinking. “Assuming he doesn’t come back immediately.”

“We’ll be watching for his transport,” Weekes said. “It’s an Overseer-class, and I believe we can take that out with enough Ravens. If we chase him into space, I’ll consider that a win.”

“And if he calls our bluff…” Laura shrugged. “We have Purifier teams for each operation. They’ll be held back in reserve unless he’s seen. All we need is to clip him and the chemical will do the rest. MDUs will also provide assistance if needed. It will be interesting to see if the Battlemaster is faster than a computer.”

Considering what he knew of the Battlemaster, the Commander was skeptical that any of that would actually work, but it was much better than nothing. They had plans for the Battlemaster, and if Caelior showed up…they could use the nuclear spoof. It might work once, but not for very long. “There is some news from Australia,” the Commander updated them. “Apparently the aliens are having some trouble keeping the populations in check. One city revolted and took out what appears to have been a spacecraft construction factory.”

He held up a USB drive. “And we also know why they’ve been quiet for so long. It’s like we suspected, they want to fortify the areas they do have. And they also want to purge the resistance elements from their controlled areas. That is currently having mixed results, but it’s buying us some time before their next attack.”

“Anything about Korea or China?” Laura asked.

“No,” the Commander shook his head. “Strictly related to the Oceanic nations. But we strike soon, and we delay them even longer. The Battlemaster does not seem to want to run a multi-front attack unless it is a diversion, so we can use that to our advantage. Let us keep him in the American theater for now.”

“That’s the plan,” Laura said. “A victory here would be a much-needed morale boost after the string of defeats. Considering what we have now…it can be done.”

The Commander smiled. “It certainly can. Now we just have to make sure not to screw it up.”
Research and Engineering VIII coming next (Bunch of XCOM files on the Sectoids should be coming soon too), and then there will be an actual battle. Been a while since there was one of those, but it'll be worth it, and then it will ramp up from there. Anyway, on an unrelated note, if anyone knows of any good artists, I'm thinking about commissioning some for the major characters/events written so far. Depending if I find a good one of course, which is why I'm asking around in addition to doing my own research. The more photorealism, the better, not interested in more cartoonish drawings.

So thanks in advance, and for reading as well!

*Blacksite 009 – ID: “The Prism” – Overseer: The Battlemaster*

The Battlemaster thrust out his hand and an entire squad of ADVENT soldiers went flying into the air. He immediately transitioned with his sword hand into a slash that killed an Officer and Gunner. Gauss slugs were screaming through the air at such a high rate and velocity that it was actually beginning to slow him down.

A problem.

He dashed a short distance until he was back on the rocky shore of the city beach. He raised a hand and the air directly in front of him rippled, catching the gauss slugs shot his way while he observed his current situation.

The extended beachhead was covered in at least several thousand soldiers, a result of what happened when ADVENT decided to send overwhelming numbers at him. Not that it was helping, and he was now convinced that it was just to buy time until the bigger guns were sent his way. Theoretically, they would be distracted by several other attacks, but maybe that wasn’t the case here.

 Normally, he would have moved further into the city at this point, but he knew there were Purifiers in the army, and that would make it significantly harder for him if he was caught even in just an alley or street. Then there were the MDUs, which would be inherently harder to kill, especially in larger numbers.

It was actually nice to consider an opponent a threat for once.

Ah, there they were.

The MDUs charged out, along with a few hundred more ADVENT squads. The Officers were shouting and yelling at their subordinates to get into position, and the Engineers were using the bodies to form makeshift barricades, sealing them in place with Symbiote dispensers. The Battlemaster spent a few more seconds looking over the composition.
He couldn’t stay here forever, but once he charged in again, he would be committed and vulnerable. There was the additional risk of an XCOM squad showing up, but if they had been interested in fighting him, they would have likely come by now. How many were supposed to be here? A minimum of ten thousand, so he still had a long way to go, provided they didn’t retreat.

The lasers were starting to hit him, and even if they just sparked off his armor, sustained blasts would weaken its integrity. Luckily, he knew how to disrupt computer processors. The soldiers could be ignored for the moment, the MDUs were the primary threat. He executed several dashes in quick succession, all zig-zag patterns, until he was close enough to one of the machines. He lifted one up telekinetically, crushed it, and threw the scrap metal towards another one, and at the same time telekinetically grabbed a squad of soldiers around him with another hand, throwing it at another MDU.

With two temporarily taken care of, he stabbed forward at another MDU, through its center, where he knew the actual processor core was. ADVENT’s engineers had been clever, using the head as a decoy that didn’t actually control the machine. It was an easy target, but too easy, and he’d been fooled exactly once when he’d decapitated one and it had still kept attacking him.

So he didn’t do that anymore.

He threw his sword towards another MDU, accelerating it to a speed that would penetrate a Sectopod, while extending his left hands towards another group of MDUs, twisting them and forcing their arms to crumple and ruin their weapons, which exploded in their hands. Unfortunately it didn’t kill them, and they charged his position, still looking to beat him to death.

He was hoping they would try that.

He sent out a telekinetic wave which blew back any ADVENT soldiers near him and took the initiative by charging the machines himself. For most this would be suicide, but he was still taller than the MDUs by a significant margin. If anything, they were the only opponents ADVENT and XCOM had that were a reasonable size to face him.

One punch almost punctured the armor of one completely, while he grabbed another by the head and squeezed, crushing whatever was in there, then forcing his hand down into the more delicate systems. That one taken care of. He kicked another, sending it flying back and grabbing the damaged one, quickly twisting the limbs off, leaving the machine in pieces.

He extended a hand to where his sword was, and it flew into his hand, slick with oil and blood. More MDUs were coming forward, and soldiers were running away in terror to better positions, and he turned to face them, until he glimpsed the orange armor of a Purifier. He didn’t even waste a second to clarify, but charged away, which in this case was to the right, unfortunately away from the water, which even if it wouldn’t protect him, gave him a lot more room to maneuver.

Just in time, as the Purifier’s flamethrower turned the immediate area he was in to a chemical inferno, killing several of their own soldiers. The Battlemaster quickly assessed if there were any more, and at the moment there were only three.

This was a problem.

One he could deal with. Two were dangerous. Three were deadly. The range of their weapons was extensive, he couldn’t just charge up and slash them without risking them blowing up, and getting close enough to perform telekinesis would take a minimum of a half second, which could allow the remaining ones to easily cover his immediate area.
He dashed again as they began shooting the white-orange chemical at him, and the other two were spraying the places he was being led towards. A clear trap, but one he couldn’t escape easily, since he couldn’t even let those flames touch him because even if he wasn’t in immediate danger, it would burn him, and Revelean had tested it enough to know it couldn’t be put out by anything they currently had.

Jumping over it was also risky, though not to the extent where it was a high chance of him becoming wounded. The problem was that he was also a big target, and again, there was no way to put out the flame. He was going to have to solve this issue soon, so he might as well take a risk. Instead of continuously dodging to the sides, he charged forward and performed a slash of a precision he hadn’t attempted in years.

And it was almost good enough. His intent had been to carefully sever the head of the Purifier, and he had, but had also clipped the tank. He immediately thrust out a hand sending the body flying backwards, while another hand shot out at the nearby Purifier also throwing him back. The decapitated one exploded, and the third one fired, and had started to fire as soon as he killed the first one.

He charged out of the way, but this time was too slow. Both of his arms were currently being burned, and his armor had locked up. Not good, and that brief pause had given the Purifier on the ground time to recover, and he was shooting another torrent of flame in his direction, this time scorching his right leg, which locked up alongside his arms.

And here it ended again. There was no way he could now get out of this, and both remaining Purifiers focused their weapons on him again and engulfed him in a final torrent of flame.

“Resetting field,” came the voice of the CODEX system overseeing the simulation. “Unlocking armor.”

The Battlemaster could move again, and the entire room disappeared, settling back down into a massive, flat room. The Prism, on its own, was comparable to a medium-sized Human city, like Las Vegas, now that he thought about it. The main part in any case. Very rarely was the entire size needed, but it was exceptionally helpful for actually simulating a battlefield.

The Battlemaster sighed and placed his sword on his back. It was a very good thing the Prism existed, otherwise he wouldn’t be nearly as effective as he was today. The Purifiers were a much bigger problem than he had expected, even more so than the majority of XCOM or the MDUs. How the Humans had even discovered a chemical that dangerous, and thought to weaponize it, was something he was impressed by.

And should he get into a bad situation, there was a good chance he might lose. Right now the rate was close to fifty-fifty for more than three at a time. He could now handle two reliably, but three was still an issue. It was unlikely they would pose a threat for the more powerful Ethereals like Caelior, but they were a concern for him.

The good news was that in simulated full-scale battles, there was still a perfect success rate. Even now in order to fully be concerned about the Purifiers, they needed to be desperate. If he stayed within ADVENT lines, they would not fire on their own. The CODEX was ruthless sometimes, and that was likely contributing to some of his defeats.

Correction, the CODEX was as ruthless as he allowed.

It was unlikely that ADVENT or XCOM would be as smart, or as practical as some of the scenarios here, but his general rule was to assume his enemy was smarter than he was, and prepare
for the worst. To date, the worst had not actually happened, but it made for an interesting practice. At least the Humans had something that gave him some pause, Sectoids were laughable, every last one of them; the Muton Praetorians and Sargons were a challenge, but the CODEX was still not good at processing how smart a Sargon actually was, but at least none of them could instantly kill him. Most Vitakara were weak and easily dispatched, with the possible exception of the Oyariah Titans, but even those were more entertainment than anything else.

Andromedons were the largest challenge, since they both had the Special Operators and had direct psionic counters. The issues were that the CODEX still hadn’t got their more sophisticated tactics right, and the basic Andromedons were still easy enough to kill.

Where things got very interesting was whenever he put another Ethereal in the scenario, mostly Aegis, and he was more and more concerned with the results.

Namely, that there hadn’t been a scenario where he had won against a fully hostile Aegis. Even if the CODEX was not as sophisticated as he’d liked, that didn’t bode well for an actual encounter with Aegis. It was very likely that should he be encountered in the field, he was simply not strong enough to kill him. Only another, stronger, one could.

That immediately ruled out himself, Sicarius, perhaps both of the Guardians and Quisilia. In his mind, the best one to fight Aegis would be Caelior, Isomnum, Deusian, and perhaps Macula. This was one instance where he felt this would be best handled by the Imperator himself. There were simply too many unknowns, and the simulator wasn’t able to properly detect or exhibit telepathy.

But for the moment, it was sufficient.

The main Prism room fell silent, and the Battlemaster waited for the CODEX to appear before him again. The room itself was a bright white when unsimulated, and composed of millions of ‘blocks’ which rose and fell to simulate terrain, buildings, and other physical scenarios. The Prism itself had three main levels, the lower two could combine into one massive one, although this was only used in space combat scenarios.

The top floor was more or less an armory of his weapons and suits, along with anything else that piqued his interest. Aside from that, it was rather bare and he hadn’t really figured out what to do with the extra space, so he’d more or less converted it to guest barracks, as the Lurainian did train here on occasion, as did the Zararch.

The CODEX materialized in front of him. “Battlemaster, would you like to repeat the scenario or choose a new one?”

The Battlemaster realized that the gravity still felt off. “Revert to standard gravity, and no, shut down for today.”

“Acknowledged,” she said, and the Battlemaster felt the gravity return to normal. Most would likely not train on three times the standard gravity, but it certainly came in handy and allowed him to move unhindered even on high-gravity planets like Desolan. It was more tiring than usual, but it was a temporary pain he could endure.

The CODEX disappeared and the Battlemaster turned before pausing. “CODEX, countermand that order.” He was suddenly feeling in a mood to relax a bit, and he felt he deserved an easier scenario. It wasn’t as though he had anything pressing at the moment.

The CODEX appeared before him. “Acknowledged. Please state a scenario or create a new one. If you have any additional modifiers, please also state them.”

“Any additional allied or hostile forces?” The CODEX asked.

“No.” He stated. “Only me, and only Sectoid forces inside.”

“Additional objectives?”

“None, extermination.”

“Any additional modifiers?”

The Battlemaster considered for a moment. Well, since this was not a serious scenario, he could afford to enjoy himself some. “Begin designated music tracklist upon start of scenario, Audiomachine, run on loop until end of scenario.”

“Understood,” she said. “Any additional modifiers?”

“No, begin construction.”

“Bringing Spacesuit from armory,” she said and disappeared, and he walked over to where it was coming down from to top floor as the room began darkening and changing. The Prism was the result of what happened when Sovereign technology was properly created and applied. Why the Imperator was so hesitant to use their tech was something he had avoided thinking about, but whenever he did, it made little sense.

It wasn’t just the Imperator either, the majority of Ethereals were surprisingly suspicious of their technology, and he couldn’t figure out why. On some level he suspected it had to do with pride, as Sovereign tech was far beyond even Imperial technology, but if that were the case, they would not be using Gateways.

There was clearly some suspicion on if it affected the users, and it did come down on some level to trusting the Sovereign Ones, which he had considered a valid reason at first, but at this point, he no longer believed that. If there were truly detrimental effects of Sovereign technology, the majority of the Collective would be affected simply because of the Gateways, not to mention constructs like the Prism itself.

On some level it was probably the Creator, and others unfortunately applied her insanity to Sovereign tech as a whole, even though her deteriorating mental state was likely due more to unrestricted boundaries and actual communication with the Sovereign Ones than use of their technology.

So what was the reason?

That was something to be solved after Earth was dealt with. But at least there were some who understood the value. Ironic that he and the Creator actually agreed on something. Fectorian was the only other one who was actively trying to figure out just how Sovereign tech actually worked, and the Battlemaster had been surprised to learn that the Imperator had ordered him to cease work on that, and instead focus on other, trivial projects.

Like that Avatar Project.

He shook his head as he changed into the space worthy variant of his armor. The Avatar Project
was useful in theory, but he failed to see how it was the game changer the Imperator seemed to think it was. Perhaps it was simpler than that. Revelean was one who believed there were some aspects of the universe that should not be tampered with, and he suspected the Imperator might agree with regards to specific aspects of Sovereign tech.

In the Prism’s instance, one reason only Fectorian had worked on it was because the technology used to make it function as well as it did involved the manipulation of dark energy. It was how the scenarios were able to be so realistic. The opponents fought were more than just projections, dark energy was able to be concentrated in specific points to give the illusion that he was cutting through something, and he could feel cutting through something. Just as he could feel the fake gauss slugs hitting him.

Some aspects couldn’t be replicated of course, like pain, burning, most forms of psionics, but it was far superior to nothing at all. If he suffered injuries, his suit would simply lock up and he couldn’t use it. Apparently Fectorian still didn’t understand how the manipulation of dark energy worked, because the Sovereign Ones had given him the exact schematics and instructions on how to build it, after he had inquired as to building a kind of simulator the Battlemaster had suggested once.

Implying that the Sovereign Ones had either had this already planned out, or they managed to come up with it in the space of a conversation. The Battlemaster was ignorant about much of the greater mysteries of the universe, but he suspected that being able to manipulate dark energy would be useful against the Synthesized.

He placed the helmet on, and waited for the HUD to initialize as the suit sealed itself. As much as it would be a failure of his to let the Humans get to that point, he somewhat wished he could fight in a proper space battle. However, when they moved on the inner galaxy, there would likely be plenty of opportunities then.

He’d ponder the Imperator’s reluctance to employ Sovereign tech later. For now, he was going to take an enjoyable break to the tune of some excellent music. If there was one area where Humans were absolutely superior to all other races, it was in the absurd variety of music they could make. Ethereals had never considered it something worthy of ‘entertainment’ so the concept of listening to music just because it was enjoyable was one that had taken some time to fully grasp.

He’d considered the benefits of it when listening to some Vitakara music, at least from what little they produced, the majority of which had surprisingly come from the Oyariah, but had really never found it personally to his liking. Sectoids and Andromedons had absolutely nothing, and records of Muton War Chants still existed, but they just sounded like a lot of screaming.

Humans though, that was something they were good at. True, there was some of it he didn’t care for, but there was enough that was for him to be completely satisfied. He personally found those from the rock, metal, and epic genres to be the absolute best, although Humans made quite good music for much of their entertainment, especially movies and video games.

After listening to some for the first time, he was beginning to understand why Quisilia had taken an interest in the species beyond a purely practical perspective. The Battlemaster found it somewhat depressing that Quisilia of all Ethereals was somehow the one he could most relate to recently. At least he saw this entire operation of at least some worth.

And he was not looking forward to bringing on Macula and Isomnum, but measures had to be taken. The next phases had to begin and more Ethereals were needed.

No, realities of war could come later. This was his break, and he was going to enjoy it.
“Begin scenario,” he ordered, after checking his suit for integrity. “Ten second delay.”

The room darkened, and the Battlemaster felt a sharp change in gravity. The area around him changed to that of space, and in the distance was a Sectoid Hiveship, a massive circular ship that gleamed in the artificial sunlight. Ten second delay was up.

The floor dropped out from underneath him.

“Scenario begun,” the CODEX said, and the music began playing.

The Battlemaster activated the jets on his back and legs, shooting forward towards the massive ship which had noticed him and started to fire plasma. Fortunately it was easy enough to avoid and he was small compared to most space targets, and he sighted the hatch he wanted to enter. On most scenarios he’d spend some time disabling the guns, but he didn’t feel like doing that at this point.

Using his jets to spin and dodge the plasma, he landed on the Hiveship with hardly a scratch, and with telekinesis he forced the hatch open and dropped inside on some terrified simulated Sectoids. With the music blaring in his ears, he began cutting his way through the ship, the troubles and concerns of the Collective fading to the background.

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Desolan Orbit

At times, Nartha wondered just how realistic the goal of rebelling against the Collective actually was. As he sped to the primary orbital station over Desolan, he was now worried he had been overly optimistic about their chances.

Desolan itself was a barren wasteland. It had always been like that. Even today volcanos went off daily, and that was nowhere as prominent as it had been even a century ago. The one large body of water was contaminated with ash, and barely drinkable without severe filtering. He did recall there had been a project to fully purify the Desolan Bowl, but he didn’t know how or if that was even happening.

That was not the only body of water of course, or the Mutons would have died out long ago. There were pockets of uncontaminated springs throughout the planet, all of which were continuously purified by Collective equipment to not destroy the last sources of water on the planet. From his understanding of Muton culture before their assimilation, this had been the most precious resource on the planet.

Muton tribes generally wandered until they found a spring, and went to war with each other for control of them. It was just one reason that they had been constantly at war with each other. The only reasons he could think of why they hadn’t died out with the scarce amount of water was because they had evolved to not require nearly as much water as other species, and because their numbers had been much smaller, only in the hundreds of thousands, not the billions as it was today.

“This is Desolan Primary Station Two,” the deep voice said, probably a Borelian from the inflection. “Please send identification codes or be fired upon.”

Nartha’s lips curled up. “Sending now. I’m on orders from the Zar’Chon himself.”

“Noted. Processing now.”

Yes, he probably was being overly optimistic.
Desolan was the heart of the Collective war machine. It was without a doubt the most heavily guarded planet in the Collective, and for good reason. To his knowledge there weren’t similar War Camps on other worlds, or there wouldn’t be until the Collective used up every piece they could of Desolan itself.

So that was why the Desolan Fleet alone dwarfed the entire Runianarch Navy, and it was about a quarter of the size of the Sectoid fleet, and a third of the Federation Navy. Just looking out his viewport he saw four Federation Carriers, a minimum of sixteen Cleanser Ships, ones which specialized in orbital bombardment, but were actually quite effective against smaller hostile spacecraft.

To make it even more ridiculous, there were no less than eight Sectoid Hiveships, the massive Dreadnought-class saucers that he was pretty sure were the size of an Earth city. The Sectoids didn’t build many medium-class spacecraft, it was either very large, or very small. But each Hiveship contained hundreds, maybe thousands of Sectoid Fighters, Scouts, and Transports.

But the flagship of the Desolan Fleet was actually the one and only Vitakarian Dreadnought, the *Elder’s Maelstrom*, built solely for the destruction of enemy Capital-class spacecraft, and higher. It was twice the length of a Hiveship, albeit only a fraction as wide, with angled armor plates that were symmetrical across all sides. It was largely due to the fact that the *Maelstrom* was essentially a massive gun.

Nartha didn’t know how it worked, only that it was supposedly powerful enough to destroy a Hiveship in one hit. On top of that the hull was dotted with point-defense lasers, missile launchers, plasma and gauss turrets for both fighters and medium-class spacecraft, as well as a small fleet of Runianarch fighters and bombers.

The Vitakara didn’t build spacecraft specifically for war often, but when they did, they were hard to match. Beyond the fleet itself, there were sixteen different orbital stations surrounding the entire planet, all with their own defenses, and each of the two hundred and eighteen Gateways to Desolan had a self-destruct sequence that any of the orbital stations could activate.

Hm. Perhaps that could be useful?

The point was that the chances of *anyone* posing even a slight threat to Desolan were very, very low. He wasn’t even sure an Ethereal could take the planet unscathed. Even if the fleet was somehow able to be destroyed, there was the planet itself.

Desolan was no longer the tan, rocky planet it had been. The War Camps could be seen from space and were spread out all over the planet. Removing the billions of Mutons, and other Collective forces, Desolan was not a friendly place for *anyone*. The volcanoes were bad, but not nearly as prevalent as the dust storms, arid weather, and high gravity.

That was something the Humans would have to keep in mind if they fought here. Their gauss weapons, or any other conventional weapons they still employed wouldn’t work quite the same, whereas plasma weaponry dominated here. At least there were no predators. The few other animal species found had been swiftly wiped out once the Collective had taken control, in order to remove as many threats as possible.

“*You are cleared for landing at Station Two,*” the operator said. “*You’ll be able to take a Gateway to the surface within. The Station Commander has also requested a meeting before you depart.*”

“Understood,” Nartha said as he angled his spacecraft towards the Hangar. “I’ll be there shortly.”
Now, how was he going to go about doing this?

He wasn’t interested so much in the person killing the Berserkers as he was in the method used to accomplish it. Should he acquire that, it might be useful later in the war. He’d do a cursory search, but he doubted out of all the Zararch agents, that he would be the one to find the culprit. Framing someone might draw him out, but Nartha didn’t consider that worth the risk. No, better to figure out how it was done, and use that later.

The Muton abductions on the other hand, that would be investigated thoroughly. That would be difficult, but no one could pull off an operation like this without leaving some obvious tells, and since they weren’t Nulorian, it might mean they wouldn’t be as professional and thus make his job more difficult.

The Zar’Chon hadn’t given him a specific amount of time that these issues needed to be solved, but the sooner he wrapped both of these up, the better. At the same time, he needed to be very careful. The idea that the Zar’Chon suspected something was off with him couldn’t be ignored, and he wouldn’t put it past him to order another Zararch agent to tail him.

So first he would need to establish if he was being observed, while investigating the Berserker deaths, since he didn’t plan to do much off the record with that assignment, and once he figured it out one way or another, he would proceed with the abductions. Then there was the high likelihood of encountering other Zararch agents, since more had been assigned to these cases.

The good news was that Zararch agents preferred working alone, so he hoped he was safe from that. A partner would severely complicate his job.

Entering the Hangar, he began bringing his ship down for a solid landing, taking a deep breath as he prepared to enter one of the most dangerous strongholds of the Collective.

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Mars Observation Station, Zar’Chon Chambers

Ravarian wasn’t quite sure he’d heard correctly. “How many did you say?”

“Three more,” Quisilia repeated, as amused as ever. “Yes, the Battlemaster wants to move this invasion to a more comfortable phase. Short of a final invasion, this is the best way to do it.”

“Good news then, I suppose,” Ravarian said, still thinking furiously, although he knew Quisilia could just read his mind to know his true feelings. He had met approximately five Ethereals in his entire career, one of which no one else knew about. Now that was going to be extended to three more he’d never heard of before.

And he was going to be speaking to them. “Are you certain I am best for this?” He asked. “I am aware that not all Ethereals are as…open to listening to other aliens as you and the Battlemaster are.”

“They’ll get over it,” Quisilia dismissed. “Both the Battlemaster and I believe it’s past time the Ethereals let go of our admitted xenophobia when it comes to alien species. Treat them with respect, and you have little to fear.”

“You say that,” Ravarian said dryly. “However, my experience with Caelior has me skeptical. He did almost strangle me once. Should I expect a similar level of resentment?”

“Unlikely,” Quisilia said, looking out the external feed of Mars. “Caelior is young and arrogant,
and has clearly changed as you’ve noted. If there is anyone you should concern yourself with, it is Isomnum, but his part in the war will be...limited."

Ravarian frowned. “Why?”

Quisilia gestured and on cue Fluffy jumped into his extended palm. “Because of his abilities, to put it lightly. He has a rather warped perspective, one that has arisen as the result of his ability to drive people insane. It’s a hobby of his, if I can be blunt, he makes Caelior look like a harmless kitten in perspective. But he is one of the oldest and most powerful Ethereals in the Collective.”

Wonderful, an Ethereal sadist.

“That is also not inaccurate,” Quisilia commented. “Still, be sure to never speak to him alone without me there. This goes for your people. Leaving him unattended will likely result in a large part of this station succumbing to sudden bouts of insanity.”

“Maybe this should be held somewhere else,” Ravarian muttered, bringing up a hololist from his palm. “This is sounding like a safety hazard for everyone involved.”

“I would tend to agree,” Quisilia nodded. “However, if you wish to change it, I suggest you do it soon.”

“Will do,” Ravarian confirmed. “And the Battlemaster wants me to present the information to them?”

“Also correct,” Quisilia said. “They will be unfamiliar with the current political and military situation on Earth, and will need it explained clearly and concisely. They will also need an explanation on the various figures of interest. I assume the Battlemaster has informed you about how he plans to proceed?”

“The overall plan,” Ravarian clarified. “Some details were intentionally vague, although this seems to be why. It is an abrupt change in strategy, but one I feel will ultimately serve us better than simple warfare.”

“It will be interesting to see how this plays out,” Quisilia mused, turning away again. “If nothing else, this is an excellent warm-up exercise for the main event. Really, if we cannot properly subdue a technologically inferior species, what hope do we have against the species of the inner galaxy?” He laughed briefly at the end of that.

“To be fair, we are intentionally handicapping ourselves,” Ravarian pointed out. “This war could be over in a matter of weeks if we truly wished to conquer them.”

There was the sound of Quisilia sighing. “Part of that is due to your unfamiliarity with our future plans, but please, if all we were interested in was the subjugation of the Humans, we wouldn’t be going through this whole charade, would we? No, conquering a species is easy, but if all we wanted was numbers, we’d just do what we did to the Mutons.”

Fluffy jumped down from Quisilia’s arm as he turned to fully face Ravarian. “The Humans are important. We want them on our side, not now of course, but that is what the new strategy intends to change. You are well aware ADVENT has its own secrets and black operations. ADVENT has enemies, and we do not need to stoop to petty lies to discredit them.”

Quisilia turned back to the external feeds, which showed Earth. “The Empire made many mistakes in retrospect, and this war has highlighted the flaws of the Collective itself, many of which the Humans have directly, and indirectly, exposed. We need to change, we cannot rely on force to win
our wars, it did not work before, and it will not work in the future. At some point we will face an enemy more powerful than us, and we cannot afford to face it with just this Collective.”

Ravarian listened intently. The Ethereal Empire was something Quisilia rarely referenced, but he didn’t completely see the point of doing this the hardest way possible. “At the same time, Quisilia, there is little the Humans could do to stop us if we really wanted it. All that is needed is for their leaders to be influenced to do as we wish.”

“A short-sighted answer,” Quisilia said coolly. “One that has long since passed. Humans are capable of psionics, that strategy is no longer viable for long-term operations. Too much has been done that they will never surrender willingly, not so long as Aegis is with XCOM. If we were to simply conquer the Humans, and treated them as the Mutons, it is unlikely we could harness their own ingenuity. It is impressive, is it not, how they have still managed to hold out? We will need that in the future.”

Ravarian decided to let the matter drop. He could see Quisilia’s point, but at the same time believe it was ultimately an interesting experiment that cost time, resources, and lives. However, he was very sure that Quisilia was not telling the entire truth. The real reason they were treating the Humans this way might be something only he knew.

Maybe one day he’d learn it, but for now he’d complete the objectives set out for him.

“The inner galactic species,” he said. “You are concerned about them.”

Ravarian didn’t know much about the inner rim species, aside from that Sicarius and Quisilia had gone on missions of their own, and that the exact details were only shared amongst themselves. But he was growing more and more curious about them as time went on, because once the Humans were dealt with, that was where their attention would be turned towards.

Quisilia just looked at him for a short time, almost as if coming to a decision. “Not the species themselves, but what they represent. You will learn in good time, Zar’Chon, prepare for the meeting. I will see you there.”

And the Ethereal promptly vanished in front of him. Cryptic hints, excellent. Well, he’d be thinking of that for the rest of the day. Or at least the time he wasn’t spending putting together a presentation suitable for five beings who could kill him with a single gesture.

His job was rather stressful sometimes.

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*Helion-7 Primary Hive*

The Battlemaster had always found it curious that despite the Sectoids being ludicrously small, even compared to other species like Vitakara, their architecture was open, tall, and massive. Helion-7 was the pinnacle of Sectoid architecture, as the entire planet was composed of nothing more than hundreds of Hives, megastructures housing millions of Sectoids that extended deep into the ground.

Sectoids didn’t have commodities like nearly every other species. They didn’t have homes, belongings or possessions. They didn’t sleep. They only required nutrient injections every week for food and water. All they ever did was whatever task they had been bred for. So every piece of equipment, building, and technology was always manned by at least one Sectoid drone.

But now it was certainly different.
There were noticeably fewer Sectoids than before, and the Greater Sectoid Hive had slowed down production of nearly everything to deal with the sudden plague. There had been little that could be done, and while the Battlemaster hadn’t personally overseen it, the most common tactic was complete sterilization. Entire Hives were terminated if they were infected or no, and to be safe all the nearby ones were sterilized as well.

It was another reason the Battlemaster didn’t like the species. Rather than try and find a way to stop or reverse the disease, they simply terminated those they found without further explanation. It was especially galling because Revelean had agreed to help, but when he went to the Hive Commanders, he had been told that they were ‘solving the problem.’

The Battlemaster would never understand the logic of those who would rather have control over a force of organic drones over a much smaller, but smarter alternative. Yet the entirety of Sectoid culture, if it could even be called that, revolved around it. Sectoids were grown to do one specific task, and that task was all they knew. They were completely useless anywhere else.

The only ones with any sort of individuality were the Hive Commanders.

And they were utterly emotionless. Were it any other species he would call them overly cruel and wasteful. But they were not Ethereals. This logic was simply what they understood and to them, he knew that every other species was viewed by them as overly emotional and compromised.

For this they made excellent scientists for performing the more unethical experiments of the Collective. The Battlemaster had always found them strangely fascinating in how they worked, while at the same time being repulsed by them. They didn’t have emotions, well, that wasn’t completely correct. But the only ones he had ever seen from them were anger, arrogance, and fear.

And even then, he wasn’t sure if they were ever truly afraid, or if they just pretended to be.

_Hive Commander Zero-Zero-One will speak to you now_, the scratchy voice of his Sectoid guide said in his mind. _Follow us._

So he did. His escort was unsurprisingly the Helion-7 Defenders, who had also seemed to be spared from the plague itself. They were considered the most dangerous force on the planet with the exception of the Hive Commanders, and even then that was debatable with how they worked. The Defenders wore orange armor that covered every part of their body, unlike most Sectoids, and had the ability to link directly to a Hive Commander. Supposedly their power was just below a real one, but the Battlemaster didn’t know for sure. To his knowledge, they had never been used in combat before.

His armored boots made almost no sound on the alloy floor, which radiated warmth, a side effect of the massive elerium generators that powered the Hives. It was a bizarre property of the metal here, but one he quickly got used to. They traveled through the towering archway and multicolored shields that permeated Sectoid architecture, and into a room that had what passed for individuality with the Sectoids.

The function of most Sectoid rooms was very clearly stated on the outside, a recent addition from incorporating Ethereal Script into their language, but here there were several combinations of technology that would never exist in any other room in the Hive. There were cloning tubes, dissection tables, stasis chambers and several glass chambers where this particular Hive Commander kept his specimens.

At the moment, Hive Commander 001 was over his ridiculously short dissection table, currently in the process of surgically removing the eyes of another Sectoid. For what purpose, the Battlemaster
could only guess at. What unnerved him about Sectoid experiments was that they didn’t use any form of anesthetic during their experiments. They had a drug that induced complete nervous system paralysis, but kept the subject very much alive.

To the Sectoids, anesthetic was something that accomplished nothing, and thus they didn’t use it. There was little he could do to stop the practice, but that didn’t mean he liked it, nor would he tolerate it in front of him. He reached out with his telekinesis using a lower hand and squeezed, and the body jerked as the innards of the Sectoid were suddenly crushed, killing it instantly.

Hive Commander 001 looked up at his approach, setting down his scalpel and tapping a button on his wrist that retracted the spindly mechanical arms that were assisting his project. *Battlemaster, welcome.* The Battlemaster could detect the sneering tone immediately, the unfiltered voice of the Sectoid entering his mind instantly.

He knew he was most certainly *not* welcome, but just something 001 was doing as a courtesy, as if they hadn’t determined his true motives long ago.

Sectoids did not have names. Not even the Hive Commanders. They simply had numerical designations, and Hive Commander 001 was supposedly the first, and by extension, oldest Hive Commander. He had been instrumental in shaping the Sectoid species into what it was today. Because of this he was regarded as the unofficial leader of the Greater Hive Commanders, even though they didn’t have standard ranks.

The spindly alien with ruddy orange skin barely reached to his knee while standing at his full height, but the solid golden eyes of 001 were incapable of expressing anything but sheer disdain and arrogance. Ethereals did not intimidate him. Nothing did.

The Imperator was not fooled. The Sectoids believed that the Collective was only a means to an end, and that the Greater Hive Commanders were preparing for the day when they were powerful enough to take control of all who they deemed lesser species. How little they knew, and how easily they had been manipulated into believing their actions were of their own accord.

Hive Commander 001 did not bother to hide his disdain for aliens, while most Hive Commanders at least made a pretense of an alliance. He rarely interacted with other Ethereals, instead staying on Helion-7, a recluse in the goal of advancing his species. The only reason the Battlemaster suspected they were speaking was because the Greater Hive Commanders had deemed it important to assure the Imperator that they were still committed to the Collective.

Yet it was clear 001 was not going to enjoy doing it.

“What is the status of your species?” The Battlemaster asked, knowing 001 would despise small talk. As did he, especially when dealing with Sectoids.

*We are moving forward,* 001 answered, turning to the Battlemaster slowly, tapping several buttons on his wrist gauntlet which brought forth a small floating platform he stepped on. *The diseased are purged and the drones will be replenished in weeks. XCOM mistakenly believed such a disease would cripple us. The drones can be replaced easily.*

The Battlemaster was unimpressed as 001 rose up to eye level on the platform. “You refused Ethereal assistance. While it certainly was not possible to salvage all of the drones, we could have prevented the bulk from succumbing to the disease.”

The Hive Commander blinked once. *The drones have served their purpose, and the previous iteration was flawed. We will begin phasing out the remaining defective drones once our numbers*
have been restored to sufficient levels.”

Phasing out. Which meant that whatever drone hadn’t been killed soon would be. Such a waste of perfectly usable units. “Then what is your solution? Your method of creating drones is clearly flawed. Another disease could do the same thing if you retain your methods.”

Walk with me, 001 essentially ordered as he floated forward. The Battlemaster followed, both of them escorted by the Helion-7 Defenders. The method is perfectly serviceable. Genetic diversity leads to divergence; to individuality; to a number of unknowable factors that would threaten the Greater Hive Commanders. If the drones die to these infernal tricks the Humans create, then little of value has been lost. The Greater Hive Commanders still stand, and we are all that matter.

“So you will do nothing.” The Battlemaster stated flatly. “Is it really a strain to ensure that if another bioweapon on this scale does hit, it wouldn’t halt your entire species?”

XCOM will not do this again, 001 disputed, the voice sneering. They are sentimental fools who believe this act horrifies us, or that we are crippled for years. If only. The drones mean nothing. They will be replaced, and nothing will change. Let the Humans build their weapons, let them see how little effect it has on us. A drone does not feel fear, it does not care if it is wasting away, it only will work to complete the task for which it has been assigned.

Self-serving imbecile. The Battlemaster was well aware that the drones could be replaced, and that they didn’t necessarily care as they died horrific deaths. But the problem was that, regardless of effectiveness, the Sectoid Fleet had been reduced to nearly a tenth of its strength over a period of months, and while that didn’t affect the war on Earth much, against an actual enemy, those months were vital.

Not to mention morale suffered as the non-Sectoids saw the effects of a bioweapon that turned the being to little more than mush.

“Then use templates,” the Battlemaster said evenly. “Diversifying every single Sectoid is impractical, but additional templates would reduce the chance of being wiped out again. It is wise to take precautions, if for no other reason than the next enemy we face who does this might not be as weak as the Humans.”

No, 001 growled into his head. We will not subject our species to the chaos of diversity. There are defined roles for our species, and that is how we have avoided petty conflict for thousands of years. Diversity leads to individualism, which leads to disobedience, which leads to conflict. The fist of the Hive Commander clenched at the sheer gall the Battlemaster had to question him. We will not change simply because you demand it. We care nothing for your arguments of morality, effectiveness, or resources. What you suggest undermines the structure of the Greater Hive Commanders, and this will not be permitted. These orders will not be recognized, no matter if they come from you, or by-

The Hive Commander stiffened as he felt the psionic forces converge around his body. The Battlemaster slowly walked around the large open hallway to stand in front of him, a hand raised with the fingers in a C position, as if gripping something. “You forget your place, Hive Commander Zero-Zero-One,” the Battlemaster said coolly, slowly applying more pressure. “It is one thing to disagree with our ideas and standards, but it is another to simply refuse our direction.”

You will not kill me, 001 said, eyes brimming with fury. The Imperator will not allow his little soldier to disrupt our great alliance.

The Battlemaster chuckled. “The Imperator does not care what you think. You can simply be
replaced, is that not what you espouse? I know Hive Commanders can be created, and the first
generations deteriorate over time. Perhaps it is time to phase them out.”

*Do not think to compare me to the thoughtless drones,* 001 spat back, although he did seem slightly
worried now. Although still surprisingly unafraid. *Your false equivalence is the tactic of one who is
in an inferior position. Do you honestly believe you are one to fear?*

The Battlemaster appraised him. “Fear is not a detriment, Zero-Zero-One, it can save your life. You
are inflexible; your methods are outdated and inferior to the coming wars; if you are incapable of
working with me out of your arrogance and pride, then there is no further use for you. If you will
not make the necessary adjustments, then I will find another who shall.”

With that he reached for his sword and the Helion-7 Defenders reacted, although he had
anticipated this and with his free hands, directed his telekinesis at the escort and squeezed. The
aliens squealed as their helmets and armor caved into their bodies, which leaked yellow fluid as
they began bleeding out.

*Battlemaster!*

He didn’t look over at the new contingent of scurrying Sectoids coming towards him, for fear it
might be a trick. He telekinetically pulled 001 towards him until his hand was snugly around the
spindly alien’s throat. Then he turned to see the one who had addressed him. It was another Hive
Commander, this one without any armoring, clothing or gadgets, but from his posture and tone, the
Battlemaster knew who it was.

“This does not concern you, or the Greater Sectoid Commanders.”

*I am unaware of the dispute,* 029 said calmly. *But you do have our oldest Hive Commander in your
grasp, and by default I believe we are entitled to know why you are attempting to kill him.*

“I, and the Collective, have tolerated his antagonistic behavior towards aliens, but my patience is at
an end,” the Battlemaster stated, just as calmly. If nothing else, 029 did pretend to be a diplomat
even if his ambitions were the same as all the others. “There is a point where willful ignorance of
the realities of conflict and military matters are dangerous to the Collective. Zero-Zero-One
believes that there is nothing to be changed as the result of the XCOM bioweapon, believing that
the introduction of measures to negate this from happening again will bring about the destruction
of your species.”

*I understand our history and ways are not your own,* 029 said with a nod, a mannerism he’d
adopted from his years of moving between the Collective as a representative of the Greater Hive
Commanders. *Nonetheless, I believe that his death is an extreme step. You are not one to kill out of
a simple disagreement, Battlemaster, it is unlike you.*

The little orange alien was clever. “Zero-Zero-One refused Ethereal assistance, and has stated there
are no changes to be made. He will not listen to reasons as to why this path is unacceptable. This is
not his first offense either. He believes he is beyond consequences. If the Greater Hive
Commanders will not reign him in, then I will.”

*Let me assure you that 001 spoke out of ignorance,* 029 said quickly. *To say that we are doing
nothing is absurd, but it is understandable you would come to that conclusion, as we have not
informed him of certain projects taking place. If you would walk with me, we can discuss this more
rationally and I can assure you that we will return fully to the Collective stronger than ever.*
That was a lie if he’d ever heard one. 001 was as close to a leader as the Sectoids had. The idea that anything would be done without his knowledge or permission was absurd, unless things had really changed in the Greater Hive Commanders. But for now he would indulge 029. All he cared about was results, and if an attempted execution forced the Sectoids to act, then that was fine.

With a flick of his wrist he tossed the tiny Sectoid away without a look, and walked towards Hive Commander 029. “Then show me what you are doing.”

_of course, Battlemaster_, he said as he began walking down another hallway. _Right this way._

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**Desolan, War Camp 402**

Nartha’s meeting with the Station Commander had been short and to the point. It had essentially boiled down to ‘do your job and don’t interfere without approval.’ Simple enough, and he’d figured that there was no point wasting time and headed directly down to the surface.

Desolan Gateways operated differently than other ones in the Collective. Instead of being accessible by any other Gateway, they were instead only accessible by certain other linked Gateways. Supposedly, Nartha wasn’t sure if that was actually true, or a piece of misinformation from the Zararch. The advantages to that would be that Desolan wouldn’t fall under a surprise attack, and the disadvantage would be that they had no way to easily counterattack the planet should it fall.

So from what he could tell, the idea of locked Desolan Gateways could go either way.

But for the moment, he was immediately not enamored with the planet itself. From the moment he’d stepped outside into the War Camp, the heavier gravity set in, and just walking around was strenuous. The planet was somehow even more arid than he’d anticipated, and overall he was not comfortable at all.

Still, this was the first time he had properly surveyed a Muton War Camp up close.

It was…interesting. One word for it, anyway.

Nartha had never seen so many Mutons in one place before. He couldn’t take a few steps without bumping into a twelve-sized unit of Mutons, all without armor which he’d found surprising. Instead there was some other kind of textile clothing they wore, heavily padded, but it cut down their bulk by a noticeable amount. He’d also found it interesting that not all Mutons were completely covered. Some had bared arms and legs; others wore face coverings; it wasn’t uniform, and that was surprising to him.

The War Camps were without fault divided up into specific sections. Each one was massive, and from birth to deployment, all phases were covered. The birthing stations were where the females continuously birthed Mutons, which were then taken to Infant Control, where they were watched, fed, and taught basics of language for the first few years of their lives.

Beside that began the Development Grounds. From what Nartha understood, this was where the equivalent of Muton adolescents and teenagers began their training. It was largely conditioning, with weapons training only coming in the latter years, before they were transferred to the Filter. The name appeared to have been a joke at first, but had stuck as it was extremely appropriate.

The Filter took the training of the Development Grounds, and amped it up to lethal levels. There were live-fire exercises, extreme conditions training with no additional equipment, and near suicide
missions. Only about half of the Mutons survived the harsh training here, as opposed to the ninety percent from the Development Grounds.

Should a Muton survive that far, they became a full Muton soldier, and spent the rest of their time in the Staging Area, which was an all-in-one training ground for Mutons, complete with training ranges, exercise machines, war games, which were assigned to them on a daily basis. The operation for each War Camp was a logistical nightmare to his untrained mind, but by now the system was clearly established.

Then there was the War Camp Command, which oversaw all operations and was run by the designated Sargon, the so-called ‘intelligent’ Mutons. Nartha had never met one, so he was curious as to how different they were to regular Mutons. The Command Center was a simple four story block that extended to the sky, and Nartha simply walked through the door.

The Vitakarian sitting at the desk noted his approach, and nodded in his direction. “The Sargon is awaiting you. First door to your right.”

“Thank you,” Nartha said, pleasantly surprised he was actually expected. He followed the instructions and walked down the steel hallway briefly before turning and entering what appeared to be a small medical bay, although small by Muton standards. It was rather large for most others. The Sargon himself stood in front of a desk, clad in green armor, with a curious sash over the armor looped around his shoulder, on which was the emblem of the Collective.

The Sargon was also larger than the standard Muton, and seeing him manipulate a delicate object like a haptic pad was not something he was expecting. “Sargon Desolan-402,” he greeted. “You were expecting me.”

“Agent Nartha,” the Sargon answered in a strangely cultured voice, as he turned to face him. “Good, you’ve come. You are aware of me, so I will not introduce myself. I’m glad to see the Zararch are finally taking an interest in this matter. It has become more serious the more I have looked into it.”

Nartha nodded. “The Muton abductions. What have you found so far?”

“That this has been happening over the course of the past five years,” he answered immediately. “This is not just restricted to this specific War Camp either. Multiple Sargons across Desolan have reported similar anomalies as information is transferred to them. As a result, the exact number of potentially abducted Mutons could be between two hundred thousand, to five hundred thousand.”

That was extremely interesting, because it confirmed several things. One, that this had been going on long before the Humans had entered the picture, so this wasn’t related to them, and two, that whoever was behind this was both extremely smart as well as had a sizable army on their hands. Certainly not a large number in the grand scheme of the Collective, but it was nothing to scoff at.

Still, some things were not adding up. “How exactly could that happen?” Nartha demanded. “Is the integrity of our security and records that easily broken?”

“Allow me to explain what we believe is the issue,” the Sargon said. “There appear to be a couple different phases when Mutons suddenly disappear. Just after they are born, or in their youngling years. After that there does not appear to be any activity. However, this appears to be done at extremely rare intervals.”

The Sargon paused. “Whoever is behind this believes that we will not investigate one anomaly, so their actions are limited. For newborns only one of one hundred that day will go missing, and there
will not be similar anomalies for a month. Or a newborn is reported as dead, but the body was never delivered for recycling. This also happens with the younglings, one may suddenly disappear, and one out of ten thousand is not something we would notice otherwise.”

“But since this is happening everywhere, it’s more noticeable,” Nartha surmised. “Clever.”

“Indeed,” he rumbled. “Had this not been noticed, I suspect it would have continued without our knowledge. But now that we are aware of this issue, I am confident that we can pinpoint the perpetrators due to their predictable tactics. We fortunately have access to the complete records as to those who interacted with the abducted Mutons, and in this War Camp, these are the ones you should question.”

He handed the pad to Nartha who began scrolling through the list. This was good and bad. The Sargon was right that it wouldn’t take long to correct, and the Zararch wouldn’t hesitate to kill every one of the suspects after a thorough interrogation to solve this issue. There were other Zararch agents working on this too, and unless these people had prepared for this contingency… they would not last long at all.

So he had to act fast.

“Thank you,” he said, downloading the information to a data cube. “I’ll begin investigating immediately.”

“Excellent,” the Sargon said, sounding pleased. “If you should capture one of them, please bring them back alive. An operation this large should not be allowed to flourish longer than it already has.”

“It will not,” Nartha lied. “I will speak to you again when I have results.”

How he was going to get those results was going to be interesting. If things didn’t go well, he might be better off letting the Zararch win this round. There were, at the moment, so many variables in play that he doubted he could successfully maintain his cover and help this group out. But first he would see what he found before writing this off.

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_Helion-7 Primary Hive_

_The Greater Hive Commanders recognize the need to change_, Hive Commander 029 said as they walked down another hallway. The Battlemaster didn’t fail to notice that there were more Defenders trailing behind them, for all the good it would do them. _Hive Commander 001 has expressed his desire to retain the original methods of drone creation, but it is by no means our only option. Even as we speak now we are making experimental genetic alterations to our drones that will only serve to benefit both the Greater Hive Commanders, and the Ethereal Collective._

“Clarify,” the Battlemaster stated, not interested in 029’s smooth diplomacy. The little Hive Commander was very good at talking, especially with aliens, and made obvious attempts to seem reasonable, but at the moment the Battlemaster was not willing to indulge that. “Simply changing the genetic structure and retaining cloning methods is not fixing the problem. You are still vulnerable to another similar bioweapon.”

_Apologies, Battlemaster, I was not clear_, 029 said quickly, the tone bordering on the line between condescending and earnest. _You are aware that our drones perform different functions in the Hive and Greater Sectoid Fleet, and the Hive Defender Force, as well as other positions under the_
Greater Hive Commanders. These Pilots, Soldiers, Scientists, Leaders; they have all had the same genetic sequences, with only minor alterations, which is why so many succumbed to the bioweapon.

They slowed as the hallway showed views into other rooms. Cloning chambers where drones were being grown by the hundreds per room, and grey Sectoid scientists were huddled over machines and microscopes performing with a chattering fervor. This event has made us realize that our efficiency is simply lacking, 029 said, gesturing to the work being done. We have failed to optimize the drones for their specific purposes. For example, there is little reason that a Scientist and Soldier should have equal intelligence, or durability. The balancing act is something of a concern, for we do not want to increase the drones to a dangerous level of sapience, but there is no question that there is room for improvement.

The Battlemaster didn’t know for sure if this was actually something the Hive Commanders had planned, or if 029 was improvising on the spot to spare the Hive Commanders from further embarrassment. As long as it resulted in change, he didn’t necessarily care. “So the genetic diversity will ensure that one strain will not cripple your species again.”

Yes, 029 confirmed, drawing out the s making it sound like a hiss. Several Hive Commanders have taken an interest in how the bioweapon was engineered, it can be replicated for different genetic strands, and we will certainly test it to ensure that if one strand is compromised, it will not affect the others.

“Good,” the Battlemaster nodded as they walked. “That is all that is required. I suspect the Greater Hive Commanders have additional plans beyond this?”

Many, 029 confirmed, the smallest hint of arrogance in his voice. While only simple drones were killed, this attack by the Humans was something that we will not sit idly by and ignore. Their supposed mastery over genetic engineering is nothing compared to our own. They will be punished for this action, and we will ensure their world will die.

His curiosity was piqued. “I want specifics.”

They stopped in front of another room, this one filled with hundreds of Earth plants, fruits, vegetables, alges, and numerous kinds of vegetation either held in stasis or potted. Their army is useless if it starves, 029 said. It is useless if it cannot breathe, it is ineffective against something that it cannot see. We are working on a successful and subtle contamination and subversion of their plant life, turning their food sources into poison, killing the plants outright, and otherwise ensuring that the very planet the Humans wish to protect becomes their enemy.

Well, there was certainly merit in that. He would have to check with the Imperator to see if the deployment of such things would be allowed, or if the Imperator wanted to preserve Earth as it was. Yet he found it an excellent response to the bioweapon. “An impressive effort,” he complimented. “I suspect the Humans will not be able to stop it until it is too late.”

They will not, 029 assured him, walking forward again. They believed they were clever by delaying the effects of their bioweapon, a subtlety that can only be respected, but they have underestimated how easily that can be turned on them. On the scale of months to years, weeks are nothing. Even if they were able to counteract our modifications, it will be far too late.

The Battlemaster wondered if they were being too long-term. He doubted this war would last years, and even months was pushing it. Once he spoke with the Imperator and got specifics on what was, and was not permitted, he could deliver specific instructions on what these plagues were supposed to do. Faster-acting ones were preferable, and should the Imperator wish Earth itself not
be touched, he could simply have Revelean reverse-engineer the plagues with antidotes and restore Earth after the war was over.

That would be an acceptable compromise. The Sectoids enacted retribution, the Humans were crippled, and Earth was restored at the end.

*This will take time to fully materialize*, 029 cautioned. *But we have more…practical…improvements that are soon ready to be deployed. We have been lax in the maintenance of our military forces, as there has not been a need until now, and our own forces are…insufficient…for the task at hand, and fail to adequately match the prowess of other Collective forces.*

Translation: We do not want to become obsolete.

Good. The Sectoids needed to realize their contributions would be further reduced if they failed to evolve with the changing times. Their fleet would likely one day be overtaken by the Federation, Mutons were already better soldiers than Sectoids, and the Vitakara, and likely Andromedons would overtake them in the science and engineering fields with time. The Sectoid species was defined by its stagnancy, something that would need to change.

Fortunately, it appeared that would happen.

“Then what are you doing to fix this?” The Battlemaster asked as the shimmering shield in front of them disappeared, and they stepped into a large arena, the oncoming group entering into an elevated area overlooking the lower floor. Standing in rows of ten, and blocks of four rows each, were armored humanoid figures.

*We have invested considerable resources into the creation of a combat unit*, 029 stated, clearly proud as he looked down upon the small army. *The Hive Vanguard, the synthesis of Human and Sectoid genetics to create a superior fighting unit as well as greater psionic prowess than any drone before it, excluding the Helion-7 Defenders.*

That was incredibly unexpected. The Sectoids creating a purely combat unit was a major step, because despite their fleet, the Battlemaster firmly believed they considered war merely a distraction and problem, not something they intentionally sought out, nor prepared for. At no point had he expected the actual combination of alien and Sectoid genetics.

They truly were fearful of becoming obsolete, it seemed.

The soldiers below him were slightly taller than the average Human, and armored from head to foot. The armor was an obsidian black, and smooth, but not too thick. On the chest was the insignia of the Greater Hive Commanders, a strange mishmash of shapes and lines that made no sense to him, but likely meant a lot to the Hive Commanders on some telepathic scale. Their helmets were simple and had no visible eyepieces, but a few breathing apparatuses on the nose. The wrists were also altered. They carried no weapons, but the left gauntlet certainly looked like a heavily modified Sectoid wrist plasma blaster, and the right one had some sort of smaller, but complicated device on it.

On a likely telepathic cue from 029, the armored figures reached up and removed their helmets in unison, giving the Battlemaster a look at the more visible changes to the unit. Their skin was no longer a grey, but closer to a pinkish flesh color, their eyes were much closer to Human-sized, and were a solid black orb instead of an orange one. Their heads were also in a much better proportion to their bodies. The only clear aspect they retained from the original Sectoid template was the mouthless faces, as it seemed nearly every other aspect had been improved with Human genetics. They even had five fingers now.
The Hive Vanguard is superior to standard ADVENT soldiers in every way, 029 said. Armor designed to lessen the impact of gauss weapons, an ability to coordinate instantaneously with nearby Vanguards telepathically, and more importantly, the ability to link with nearby enemies without full mind control.

The Battlemaster looked down at the Hive Commander. “Why not simply mind control them?”

Make no mistake, 029 clarified. They can, but that takes considerable effort, as Human minds are more complicated and…unorganized…hindering a smooth subversion. But this allows a simple telepathic link, which will allow the Vanguard to predict incoming attacks with ease and strike where the Humans do not expect it.

Ah, that was a very clever tactic. A shame he wasn’t telepathically capable, because that trick would be invaluable to test out, mind-reading without mind-control was a very valid tactic in hectic battlefronts.

Now I will demonstrate how much more effective these Vanguards are to certain current Collective forces, 029 continued, and on another telepathic cue, the Vanguards put their helmets back on, and marched to the far left end of the room, save one who stood alone as a door on the opposite end of the room slid open, and a half dozen Sectoid Leaders scurried in.

This is the most dangerous ground unit we have deployed, 029 said as the Vanguard raised the left hand and began firing. Let us see how six of them fare against one. One of the Leaders was taken out by the plasma bursts, and the others began raising their augmented arms to return fire. The Vanguard responded by holding up its opposite arm, with the smaller pieces moving quickly, and without warning a small purple shield materialized in front of the Vanguard, easily protecting it from the worst of the plasma.

The Battlemaster noted with interest that the shield did appear to draw on psionic energy, there were purple distortions around the hand, and he knew what a psionic shield looked like. Now protected, the Vanguard killed another two Leaders with the plasma blaster.

“The shield,” the Battlemaster said. “I have not seen a similar device.”

It is a recent development, 029 said as the Vanguard thrust its left hand forward, shooting a bolt of psionic energy which killed another Leader. The psionic gauntlet draws upon psionic energy and manipulates it into specific shapes. The configuration it is now in is a shield. There is a close-range melee configuration as well. Let it be demonstrated.

The purple shield around the Vanguard dissipated, and the pieces of the gauntlet reorganized themselves, and then there was psionic energy molded into the crude shape of a blade jutting from the wrist of the Vanguard. It extended well past the wrist, and was a standard blade design, although the edges were composed of nothing more than unstable psionic energy.

It charged forward at the remaining Leaders, sliced down at one and the blade cut through the unarmored alien with ease, and at the same time, the Vanguard shot the final Leader in the face with the plasma blaster. Once done, it disengaged the gauntlet, stepped back through the carnage, and seemed to be waiting for more orders.

“Impressive,” the Battlemaster complimented, impressed with the initial performance. “I assume that the psionic blade can cut through armor as well?”

Of course, 029 confirmed. Not as easily, certainly, but it can penetrate ADVENT armor with direct slashes and stabs. Even the weapons of the Templars would likely not be able to stand against them
for very long. Pure psionic energy cannot be stopped so easily.

“Move the Vanguards you have completed into the Collective Military,” the Battlemaster ordered. “I am aware that you don’t have many, but the ones you do will suffice for Earth, and more can be grown later.”

*It will be done*, 029 promised, as the Vanguards reassembled before him. *I expect they will serve the Collective well, and will show the Humans the inferiority of their species.*

The Battlemaster kept his amusement of that statement in check. Inferior was objectively incorrect, but competition would serve the Sectoids well, now that they knew their psionic aptitude was no longer special. For their place in the Collective to be retained, they would need to earn it.

And the result would be a stronger Collective. Which was all he wanted.

He would be very curious to see just how the Humans would respond to this. He expected it would not take long for them to similarly adapt.

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**Blacksite 007 – ID: “Watcher” – Overseer: Quisilia**

Of the few Blacksites Ravarian had visited, Quisilia’s was by far the most confusing, from a logistical and psychological perspective. There were no clear directions, there was no symmetry, and some of the rooms seemed like logical impossibilities. He’d taken a wrong turn at one point, and found himself suddenly standing in open space, although that couldn’t have been possible. He’d not thought about it at the time, and slowly backed out. Maybe it was a transparent substance, or external feeds, but still, why would Quisilia need that?

Probably just to screw with his head.

It wasn’t the only confusing thing. He’d spent a good few minutes walking in circles in a seemingly never-ending hallway, which shouldn’t have been possible. The Blacksite must have had some kind of ability to change internally, and he was just the unfortunate victim of either programming, or Quisilia making his life unreasonably difficult.

But eventually he’d arrived at what he assumed was the central room, and if it wasn’t, that was just too bad. If Quisilia wanted to move, he could lead him there himself. Ravarian wasn’t going to waste more time navigating this labyrinth. It was also the first time he saw other beings on the station. They all appeared to be analysts heavily cybernetically modified, especially their heads. They didn’t pay attention to him aside from a few glances to the side.

There were actually a fair number of Sectoids, in addition to the mix of Vitakarians and Dath’Haram. There was also an Oyariah Titan, surprisingly enough. What they were doing he didn’t know, and as soon as he’d entered the room, they’d cleared out, presumably to let him prepare. He didn’t know if Quisilia was actually on the Blacksite, but he assumed he’d show up whenever he wanted.

Probably wanted to make another Twitter status update.

He grimaced at the thought. It would be just like Quisilia to reveal there was something important happening.

But he pushed that thought to the side and began preparing. The room was unreasonably open, with some consoles on the far walls, but otherwise it was just empty spaces aside from the large haptic
projector in the middle. Along the far wall were external feeds of space, the current ones focusing on the system sun, although Ravarian knew they weren’t nearly that close to it.

He hoped.

Luckily the haptic projector was standard, and he had no trouble operating it. So there were three major points of note he wanted to address: The situations in Africa and South America, and the current problems in Australia. He knew the Battlemaster would likely add some more to the plan, but this would set the stage and context.

Ravarian had not considered there was anything more going on in Australia until he had taken a closer look at the reports. The Human resistance was one thing, but the recent attacks displayed were not their usual tactics. Something was extremely wrong on the continent, and he couldn’t figure out exactly what that was.

The most obvious tell had been the so-called ‘revolt’, where it seemed like literally every Human had suddenly turned on the Collective forces stationed there. The video recovered was concerning, as it depicted Humans fighting with a resilience and aggression they didn’t normally display. All in complete silence, and even including the children and elderly.

That was bizarre. Humans never risked children, and even if the Commander wouldn’t hesitate to kill them if the circumstances justified it, this did not seem to qualify. There seemed to be clear evidence of psionic meddling, but that would imply there was another Human psion on the level of Patricia in Australia, and then the obvious question became who?

The initial suspicion was an XCOM psion, but that didn’t seem likely the more he thought about it. They wouldn’t waste a psion there, not yet, and one on this level would have been used against them by now. Since ADVENT didn’t have psions of their own, it couldn’t be them. So that left two options, an independent Human psion, or an alien traitor.

Neither seemed likely. Whoever this psion was, they clearly had experience and training, likely of a pre-Invasion time period. And there had been no instances of psionic activity from Humans before that. And an alien traitor seemed equally unlikely since the only ones outside Ethereals who were psionic were Sectoids, and the only Sectoids that could do this were Hive Commanders.

It seemed absurd to think that a Hive Commander of all things was a traitor, but it unfortunately made more sense than a surprise Human psion not connected to ADVENT or XCOM.

Either way, that situation needed to be dealt with.

The other continental situations were luckily more straightforward. In South America their way into influencing the region was Konstantine Volikov, who had established contact with certain South American countries who were not a part of ADVENT. Volikov had enjoyed clear success against ADVENT, he was clearly intelligent, methodical, and had the loyalty of his elite band of assassins.

There were several different avenues that could be pursued in convincing him to work with them. He was a pragmatic altruist, and if he could be convinced that the Collective would be better for the people than ADVENT, he would likely fight for that. However, there were a few problems with this entire situation.

The first is that Volikov reportedly didn’t consider the Collective any better than ADVENT, and given what had happened, Ravarian couldn’t blame him from coming to that conclusion. He was only fighting ADVENT out of some moral sense of duty, or because he just disliked authoritarian
governments. Either was a possibility based on his background, and that was not especially great news for them.

Ravarian was assuming that the Battlemaster would state that there would be no mind control utilized, so that meant that whoever was sent down would need to convince him, and Volikov was not going to fall easily. He appeared to somehow detect when people were lying or not, and if he learned that the Collective was lying to him…they wouldn’t likely be able to kill an Ethereal, but it made their job in South America much harder.

So, they were best off not lying to him.

He supposed he would learn just what the Ethereals had planned for Humanity after the war was over.

Africa was likely going to be the easiest. All they needed to do was convince Betos that the Collective was a friend, and she would believe them. She was looking for a reason, and all they needed to do was provide it to her. Once that was done, then assisting her in uniting Africa would be the next logical step. He suspected that would not be difficult.

“As do I,” Quisilia agreed as he materialized in front of him. “Betos will not be a problem. Idealists never are.”

“No, but if we’re too obvious, it will bring ADVENT down upon them,” Ravarian noted, shutting down the projector for the moment. “That isn’t preferable until Africa is successfully united against ADVENT.”

“Considering-“ Quisilia suddenly stopped. “Oh, wonderful. I was not expecting him here.”

Ravarian was about to ask who, when the door behind him slid open and another strange alien stepped through. Ravarian blinked as he got a good look at the being. It stood nearly as tall as Quisilia, wore light grey armor with the same Elder emblem that was on Senorium’s armor in the center of the chest. It was similar in protection to Zararch combat gear; offering protection, but prioritizing maneuverability over everything else.

The most obvious feature was the hood that covered the alien’s head, and within it were two glowing blue eyes, and the outline of a smile underneath it. A sniper rifle of some kind nearly as tall as Ravarian was strapped to his back, and a similarly large pistol was at his waist. The conclusion seemed obvious after he had processed it a few seconds. Another one of the Creator’s Chosen as she’d called them, this one a severely altered Vitakarian it seemed.

“I do hope you have the Zar’Chon suitably protected,” the alien drawled, the voice already oozing with sarcasm and dryness. “I would hate for him to go insane from a simple conversation.”

“I would be more concerned for your own sanity,” Quisilia answered, stepping forward. “I do not recall inviting you here. How exactly did you know?”

The alien spread his hands in front of him, a Human gesture that was the equivalent to ‘not my fault’. “I only follow the orders of the glorious Creator bitch,” he said, the mockery catching Ravarian off-guard. Hearing an Ethereal being referred to in such a way was unheard of. “And her glorious Creatorness has decreed that I be her representative in this meeting which is no doubt going to be important, so take it up with her if you’ve got a problem.”

“Who are you?” Ravarian demanded.

“Ah, right,” the alien said smugly. “Where are my manners? I am officially known as Venadiar,
Watcher of the Elders, and Hunter of the Creator.” He sniffed indignantly. “And yes, it is an
idiotically long name no one ever remembers. But I don’t like it, so just call me Dave, or simply
my title as Hunter, I could really care less.”

Ravarian’s lips twitched. “I suppose you two get along.” Excellent. Now there was another mini-
Quisilia who seemed to be just as bad of a troll. ‘Dave the Hunter’ indeed. Still, he had no doubt
that this Hunter was extremely dangerous. He didn’t appear to be psionic, but he supposed looks
could be deceiving. And he’d alluded to Quisilia making sure he was ‘protected’.

“Well, since I’m here, what are we waiting on?” The Hunter asked, striding over to the haptic
projector. “I don’t have all day, and I have things to do.”

“You can postpone your hunting trips,” Quisilia said, amused. “I can promise this will be more
interesting than killing some Mutons.”

The Hunter pulled out his pistol and appraised it. “As long as I finally get to go to Earth, I’m fine
with that. I’m rather tired of the same damn planets over and over. I could kill pretty much
everything in my sleep, aside from the ‘prohibited units’.” He moved his head in a strange way,
and had Ravarian not known better, he would have assumed he was rolling his eyes. The Hunter
took on a wistful tone. “I’m rather interested in Earth. The Humans seem to be a fascinating
species, much more so than everyone else.”

Ravarian was not sure if that was an insult or not. “What exactly is your purpose?” Ravarian asked.
“Despite your title, I doubt the Creator has many enemies.”

The Hunter snorted. “Please, everyone hates the bitch. Find me someone who doesn’t, but the
difference is she’s too high on her own self-importance to notice, in addition to being a fucking
lunatic. So yeah, I don’t get many actual orders. So I spend a lot of my time just talking to the poor
souls who get sent to her. Fascinating stuff, especially from the Humans. Shame they only last
slightly longer than Vitakara.”

He tapped his head, giving an eerie smile. “Can’t talk to people long unfortunately, most can’t take
it. As for what I do the rest of the time, well…” he lifted the pistol, looking at it fondly. “I go
hunting. You name it, I’ve likely killed it. Well, except Sargons and the ‘special’ units. Ethereals
get annoyed when you shoot their pets.” Another indignant sniff. “As if they can’t just grow
another one. Cheapskates.”

Despite indications to the contrary, Ravarian was wondering if the Hunter was actually saner than
the Creator. He was definitely not normal, in more ways than one, and anyone who spoke with
such bluntness to and about Ethereals was obviously not thinking clearly. “Well, you finish up…
whatever you were doing,” the Hunter said with a wave. “I’ll just stand over here until things
actually start.”

Ravarian shook his head, and turned back to the projector, bringing it up as he tried to focus on
what he was going to present. It likely couldn’t get more outlandish than this.

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The Battlemaster was rather surprised that Macula had come to speak with him before the meeting
itself. He was an Ethereal who tended to keep to his own affairs, and had a standing tendency to
intentionally avoid Collective matters. The Battlemaster was aware that Macula wasn’t impressed
with the alien species, and isolated himself performing deep recon for the Imperator in the inner
“I have never bothered to visit this place before,” Macula mused, looking down into the empty box in the idling state. His voice was unchanged from the last time they had spoke nearly three years ago, a deep thoughtful tone with touches of condescension in it. “It perhaps might be worth an experimental run.”

“You would likely fail,” the Battlemaster said bluntly. “The Prism is not tailored towards receiving or simulating telepathic attacks.”

“Please,” an obsidian blade flew towards one of Macula’s gloved hands. “My telepathy is not something that I need to practice. I’ve had plenty of that lately, but I feel my combat skills have deteriorated as a result.”

“If you wish,” the Battlemaster said, not caring one way or another. While Macula’s reasons were rooted in his own arrogance, he would never discourage practice. Macula was one of the more interesting in the Imperator’s entourage. The Imperator had never said where he’d come from, nor had Macula bothered to answer that.

Some things were obvious, his skill with telepathy and preference for short bladed weapons meant he was almost certainly part of the Division of Shadows, but other than his name, nothing else was ever said. His attire didn’t help either. The Battlemaster didn’t know if Macula was trying to be a Battlemaster, Overmind, or Shadow, since his attire had elements of all three.

The silver armor was extremely limited, only covering the legs, arms, and chest. The rest was a blue alloy weave which was under the armor, and the main component of the gloves. Then he also had a cape that was identical to the Battlemaster’s except the color was a deep blue, and the material wove around the chest like a shawl; moderately obscuring the chest armor.

Unlike most Ethereals, Macula did not have a helmet, but his head was obscured by a hood exactly like the Overmind’s, one that hid the face entirely except for the glowing orange eyes. The look was certainly unique for an Ethereal, but it didn’t seem practical for open combat. Knowing Macula, he had likely made it just because he looked good in it.

“I assume you didn’t come just to inquire about my Blacksite,” the Battlemaster said, walking up beside him, easily towering over the smaller Ethereal.

“All business, you never change,” Macula chided. “Perhaps I just wanted to say hello before you inevitably reveal what your plan for Earth is. There are exciting developments in store, Battlemaster, ones that extend far beyond one little planet.”

“Do tell,” the Battlemaster said, looking down. “You have found another inner galactic species?”

“Considering the state those species are currently in, I’d say we have little to worry about,” Macula said. “All trying to subvert and one-up each other, at some point they will enter open warfare with each other, and our time to strike will be then. They will not expect us.”

The Battlemaster was unsurprised at the news. “It appears the galaxy never changes. Peace is only temporary.”

“That’s only part of the story,” Macula amended. “The situation is more delicate than that, and for now the Imperator wants Earth handled first. I admit, I didn’t believe this venture would prove to be so interesting. Who would have thought a little primitive species would be such an issue?”

“Even with our limited incursion, we underestimated them,” the Battlemaster agreed. “As it stands
now, they are highlighting the issues of our own strategies and military. They have proven useful.”

“But not a challenge, I suspect,” Macula sighed. “No matter. Whatever you have planned, I am rather interested to see what the future holds.”

“I am curious,” the Battlemaster inquired. “You wanted to assist in this. Why?”

“Because Humans are new, and my experience with them is non-existent,” he answered with a wave of one hand. “The Vitakara are laughably simple, the Sectoids are boring, and the Andromedons are too paranoid to have any sort of experimentation done to them. With Humans there are no such restrictions. While the Synthesized War certainly was our defeat, there was something I miss about killing thousands of thralls with my blades and mind alone.”

The Battlemaster could empathize with that, even as little sense it made logically. He could not deny the satisfaction of combat and victory. “There will be no shortage of that, but our strategy must be subtle as well. The phase of simple combat has passed. I approved your request because you can think strategically and are capable of subtlety. Both will be needed.”

“A challenge I cannot refuse,” Macula said easily, in a mock bow. “But you have been fighting them longest. I would prefer your honest opinion. How much of a threat do these Humans actually pose?”

The Battlemaster thought for a moment. “They are only as large of a threat as we allow them.”

“And if we allow them to become one?”

“Their numbers are few, their territory is limited, and they cannot reproduce quickly,” the Battlemaster said. “But they can adapt quickly, they are innovative, and they are capable of using the Gift. Should they become a threat, they will be dangerous indeed. And if Aegis is fully on their side, our chances lower drastically. At that point the Overmind would be needed.”

“Interesting,” Macula mused. “More than I expected. And not Deusian?”

“We do not want Earth destroyed,” the Battlemaster shook his head. “I will save the Reaper for when she is needed. The Overmind will be sufficient, and I doubt we will reach this point.”

“As do I,” Macula said smugly, turning away as he began walking towards the internal Gateway. “I do not believe there is any point in delaying, Battlemaster. I am curious what you have planned, and it wouldn’t be appropriate to show up late, would it?”

The Battlemaster agreed. The sooner they started this, the sooner the next phase could fully begin. ADVENT would likely attack in America within the next few days, and their next attack on Korea would likely follow soon after. At the same time, the rest of the Ethereals needed to establish themselves. Much needed to be done.

No point in delaying, as Macula said.

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Desolan, War Camp 402

Fortunately, the list of possible suspects that could be behind this was fairly short. There were ten in total, two guards, one instructor, two medical professionals, and five teachers who worked with the youngling Mutons. Nartha would not have been surprised if there were at least some, or all of them working together.
Cells tended to operate like that, with none of the individual ones knowing much about the others. If he was in charge of a Muton smuggling/slave ring, he would have every single member on a need-to-know basis. They would either be assigned targets for dead drops, or they would have free reign over choosing them, but would still have dead drops. They would never actually meet another cell member.

He would also have contingencies both he and cell members knew if, say, a Zararch agent came poking around. Either some ways of alerting him, or otherwise indicating that the cell was compromised. To be safe, in a case like that he’d likely prefer to intentionally deceive the Zararch agent in question and sacrifice a less important cell member. Deters the agent, and he would be able to return to business soon.

That was how an intelligence professional, or Nulorian operative would run it.

The biggest question was why they were doing this. Two possibilities existed: They were doing this to build an army, or other kind of operation where they were being compensated for gathering Mutons for some specific purpose. It was a pure business arrangement, and he would expect a well-run operation if that was the case, as well as professional cell members.

The other was that they were doing it because of the perceived moral wrongdoing regarding the species. He was well aware that usage of Mutons was considered slavery by some, and that might be enough to convince some of them to act. He had never really cared too much about the issue. The Mutons were barely sapient, and all complaining about it caused was getting the attention of the Zararch.

It just seemed like a waste of time. There were much more important matters than a species of idiot brutes. The Sargons didn’t seem to be like that though, but he knew that was because they had been specifically modified, so they didn’t technically count. If this was the motivation of these people, then his job was likely going to be easier. Idealistic people made mistakes.

The youngling schools were one of the more interesting parts of the War Camps. It was here where they were conditioned and prepared for the harsher parts of training. Basic speech, pattern recognition, basic firearm safety, basic physical training, everything was taught here. It was essentially a school of nothing but drill instructors.

As a result, the teachers were Vitakarian, Dath’Haram, or Borelian. Borelians generally taught weapons training and physical education, and for once this was one area where male Borelians actually dominated the field as opposed to their female counterparts. Dath’Haram exclusively taught language and pattern recognition, as well as some basic mathematics, though that was optional. Vitakarians could do either, and they were the minority of teachers.

He showed his identification to the guards at the door, and they stepped aside as he strode into the massive hallway. It was extremely wide, due to the fact that Muton classes marched in rows five wide and ten long, and they never deviated from this. The main hallways were large enough for two full classes to march past each other, with some room for the rare bystander at the side. The entire building was built for pure function. Hard angles, grey walls and floors, sharp white lighting, and no additional decorations of any kind.

Nartha walked over to classroom seven, where one suspect Dath’merina’haramal was stationed. He’d singled her out because of her name, that she was a Dath’Haram, and she’d been working roughly since the first known incident. There were too many red flags here to be ignored. That she’d kept the prefix Dath instead of Runi or Zar meant that she was technically a civilian likely from the Council of Dath’Haram, since teachers fell directly under their authority.
That was already suspicious. Nartha was surprised that that was even allowed, especially since of all the races, the Dath’Haram had, on average, put on record the issues with the treatment of the Muton species far more than anyone else. Actually, they were the only ones to publically hold any sort of stance on the matter. They never gained any traction, but it was always a Dath’Haram behind the latest moral outrage. That the entire species was incredibly pacifistic, far more than Vitakarians, was another oddity. The question of why a Dath’Haram would not officially join the military, but actively work on grooming soldiers was highly suspicious.

So he stayed to the back of the class behind Merina as she spoke to the assembled Muton younglings, and he simply observed the class. She typically dealt with classes ready for graduation to the next stage, so by now the Mutons were extremely disciplined. The younglings really didn’t look too different from their adult counterparts. Their skin was a little pinker, and there were less wrinkles on their faces, but there was no mistaking their species.

For five-year olds, they were already fairly strong. They were about the size of a Human teenager, and far bulkier on average. They didn’t wear armor, not yet, but they wore brown padding and thick boots and pants. Their arms were bare, and each one was assigned a mock plasma rifle which shot out little plastic pellets, which did go at speeds fast enough to hurt, but not puncture Muton skin or kill.

His understanding was that was part of a game, where instructors had classes fight each other to begin preparing them for the war games later. It was taught as a game, but not for fun. Each youngling was graded and scored based on performance, and their rank rose or decreased as a result. The highest ranking Mutons were at the front of the class, the latter in the back.

Nartha did find it impressive that whoever Merina asked a question, all of them answered at once. They were simple questions, ones with yes or no answers, but the response was immediate and always correct. Their voices weren’t even high-pitched, which he was ultimately not surprised at. Definitely a species of soldiers, he couldn’t think of a better suited one.

“All of you have performed adequately today,” Merina finished. “Dismissed!” All the class displayed their rifles in a form of a salute, he guessed, then marched out in a very orderly fashion. He suspected there were some Human teachers that wished they could teach Mutons. Humans were rather disorderly sometimes. Especially the children.

“Highly disciplined,” he complimented, stepping forward. “I didn’t know they were capable of doing that.”

The Dath’Haram woman bared her pointed teeth at him, their version of a smile. “You would be surprised. They catch on quickly.”

“So it seems,” he agreed. “You are clearly skilled at your job. I work with Mutons occasionally, and I might guess that the younglings are smarter than the adults sometimes.”

Merina put a haptic pad into her bag slowly. “I am not surprised at that, actually. Mutons don’t survive the War Camps without some kind of psychological damage.”

Good. Her responses were useful. “You would know more than I,” he conceded. “I’ve only just arrived.”

“You?” She asked, closing her bag, looking up thoughtfully. “What do you do? No one comes here just because they can.”

“I’m from the Runianarch,” he lied with an easy smile. “I had to speak with the Sargon about new
batches of Mutons. While he figures that out, I decided to take a tour. The War Camps are
something even we don’t see that often, yet it is an essential part of the Collective military.”

Merina was deliberately keeping her expression clear. “There are reasons for that. Ones you’ve no
doubt seen. Or if not now, you will.”

He cocked his head in apparent interest. “If you don’t mind, what? Everything seems to be up to
standards. Even the children aren’t disrupted. I’ve been pleasantly surprised.”

these younglings is just draining.” she motioned to the door. “By the end of it, at least half of those
younglings will be dead. And the survivors conditioned beyond recognition—she suddenly
stopped, realizing she’d probably said too much. “But it is necessary for preserving the integrity of
our army.” She finished.

What was it with these people being bad liars? Regardless, he had plenty to work with now. He let
some concern in his voice. “I’m aware the situation isn’t ideal, but having half those younglings
eventually die is unreasonably steep. That seems like a gross misuse of resources. Are you not
exaggerating?”

“Ha,” she chuckled darkly. “If anything, I’m being generous. You haven’t gone into the Filter,
have you? Go there and then ask if I’m exaggerating.”

“Apologies,” Nartha interrupted. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“No, it’s fine,” she relented, slinging her pack over her shoulder. “Not your fault, and you’re at
least somewhat concerned with it. Whatever way you look at this, it just seems like something is
just wrong with it. If half our trainees are dying, maybe something needs to be changed.”

“I will have to look into this,” he promised earnestly, frowning. “The Sargon will be providing an
explanation to me.”

She looked at him with new interest. “I wish you luck with that, really. Most just ignore the
problem.”

He sniffed. “Ignoring problems is why there are certain problems in the Collective. I will not do
the same here.”

“In that case,” she paused. “Well, if you begin making some headway, please let me know. I’m
Dath’merina’haramal.”

“Runi’narth’a’vitiary,” he answered in return. He would need to forge a record for that in case she
bothered to look. She wouldn’t find anything at best, or would find there was a Nartha in the
Zararch. However, Nartha wasn’t an uncommon name, which was why he kept it. Better there be
many results than an odd few.

As she walked away, and he exited the room to go talk to the next teacher, he figured that had been
a fruitful talk. She was definitely still a suspect, but now one who was more inclined to listen to
him. Should he play this right, if she was involved, she would lead him to who was in charge. If
she wasn’t, then he had a contact here in the future.

She was perfect for being turned against the Collective, but depending on how the rest of the
operation went, she might have to be sacrificed. Maybe he could give her to the Sargon once he
made contact with the actual cell leader; there was more than enough circumstantial evidence for
an arrest, and a Sectoid mind-probe would confirm one way or another.
But that was an inelegant solution. Right now, everything was on track.

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Blacksite 007 – ID: “Watcher” – Overseer: Quisilia

At last, all of them were here for the meeting. The more Ethereals arrived, the more Ravarian felt out of place in more ways than one. He was unquestionably the smallest one in the room, an unusual feeling since he was tall even among Vitakara, and that these Ethereals, and the Hunter for that matter, could likely kill him with a single thought or gesture.

It felt like a minefield where if he said the wrong thing…well, that would be the end for him, despite Quisilia’s assurances.

First Caelior had arrived, which wasn’t too bad. If nothing else, Ravarian was familiar with him and how he worked. At the moment they had a somewhat working relationship, and Caelior at least knew he was of some use. Ravarian swore that the Hunter had a death wish since his first greeting was calling Caelior “Little Storm”, which naturally enraged the young Elder.

So Quisilia had kindly responded by throwing one of his knives at the Hunter, impaling him in the chest. Ravarian had been stunned at the overreaction, as that was likely a fatal wound, but the Hunter had just sighed and said. “Yes, yes, I won’t do that again. I get the message.” And proceeded to pull it out with barely any trouble. He’d apparently noticed Ravarian staring, since he gave him an eerie smile soon after.

The Battlemaster and the Ethereal Macula had arrived soon after, the latter Ravarian was still unsure about. He didn’t talk much, and had yet to address him directly, but from his conversations with the Hunter, he got the impression that this Ethereal didn’t really respect anything that wasn’t an Ethereal. It didn’t even seem like he was toying with the Hunter like Quisilia would, but simply considered them an amusing distraction at best, complete with derision and patronization.

The Hunter didn’t seem to care, and continued his irreverent streak by taking his own jabs at Macula, ones that Ravarian didn’t fully understand, but actually seemed to make Macula pause, and look at the Hunter with a little more…not quite concern, but it was definitely something more than disinterest.

If the Hunter worked for the Creator, he likely knew quite a lot about the Ethereals that even Ravarian didn’t have any idea of.

And with that there was already plenty of tension in the air. Quisilia attempted to defuse the situation, but it wasn’t helping that Caelior was less than impressed with Macula, even if he didn’t say so. Nor did the Battlemaster seem to overly care either way.

Then Nebulan had arrived, and that had eased tensions. Of all the Ethereals, she seemed one of the more respected ones. She wore red robes with exposed arms, similar to the Ravaged One if his uniform had been pristine, but unlike nearly every other Ethereal, she had no helmet, nor any other means of hiding her face.

Ethereal heads were interesting. They were smaller than he’d realized, but rounded in a similar way to Vitakarian and Human ones, with slits in their faces where the nose would be, they had no visible ears that he could see, but they did have lipless mouths that stretched across their lower faces. What was extremely strange was that they didn’t really have chins, but the mouth was only slightly elevated from the neck itself.
It made him wonder if at one point the Ethereals hadn’t had mouths at all, and it was just an addition they had made later. It certainly looked like the head and neck were almost one complete organ, and the neck was longer than most species. Along the neck were visible cords and depressions, that rose and fall as the Ethereal breathed. Ravarian tried not to stare, but it admittedly was the first time he’d seen an unmasked Ethereal. At least he wasn’t looking at her fiery eyes.

Nebulan had actually greeted him, and they’d had a pleasant conversation about basic updates before the final Ethereal had shown up: Isomnum.

Just from looking at him, Ravarian knew he was going to be both insufferable, and cause problems for everyone else. He wore similar attire to Macula, save the grandiose cape and hood. But instead the helmet was close to a death mask of an Ethereal, and portrayed the silver face of the Ethereal without a mouth. It was clearly tight to Isomnum’s actual head, and covered the entirety of the head and neck, as well as moving as easily as if it were an actually functioning head. Truth be told it was extremely unsettling, and even with Quisilia protecting him from the worst of it, he felt the urge to get away now before he risked losing his mind.

Then the Hunter in all his infinite wisdom decided to speak. “And the grand edgelord has finally arrived.”

If Ravarian could have facepalmed at that, he would have. Humans had some excellent ways of displaying emotion. Isomnum had just looked over at the Hunter, who began blinking rapidly and started backing up, muttering to himself and reaching for his pistol. “Do not ruin the mind of the Creator’s pet,” Macula warned. “As insufferable as he is, she would not be pleased.”

“If the insect speaks to me again, that he speaks for the depraved Creator will mean nothing,” Isomnum said, his voice reminding Ravarian of the Ravaged One, a combination of vibrations and combined high and low pitches that had the result of inducing headaches in the ones he was speaking to. It conjured images of ancient monstrosities and layered screams of the void.

He sincerely hoped Isomnum didn’t speak much during the meeting.

“Enough,” the Battlemaster ordered, commanding them to gather around the haptic projector. “We will begin now.”

So they did.

“The first phase of taking Earth has begun,” the Battlemaster said, bringing up a hologram of Earth. “The purpose of this was to determine the extent of ADVENT and XCOM’s ability to wage an effective war against us. They are adapting, and skilled. It is unlikely they will fail to adapt as the war progresses, but I have determined that it is unlikely their threat will decrease. ADVENT is worthy of being subverted, as the Imperator originally suggested.”

“As should be anticipated,” Nebulan said. “The Imperator does not make idle suggestions.”

“That needed to be determined first,” the Battlemaster continued flatly. “Regardless, the war is ongoing, and it is time to move ADVENT to where we want them. They are expecting a continuation of the same strategy. Major attacks on cities. These will continue, but our reach will be far larger. Earth is composed of seven continents, six of which are relevant,” said continents were highlighted yellow on the blue display. “From here I will divide these into our respective spheres of influence.”

“Imagine that,” the Hunter said. “The great Battlemaster giving up his authority.”
“No.” The Battlemaster disputed. “Let me be perfectly clear: I am in command of this operation. Before launching any operations, you will inform myself, Quisilia, or Zar’Chon Ravarian, and only after I give my approval will you be allowed to proceed. There are no exceptions, is that understood?”

A few of the Ethereals, Caelior and Nebulan, nodded. That was not sufficient for the Battlemaster. “Say you understand, or leave.”

“Understood, Battlemaster,” everyone said, with various levels of resignation. Ravarian was relieved to know that. The Battlemaster was still without a doubt the most reasonable Ethereal. Under him there was a much lower chance of stupidity taking place.

“With that understood, here is where we stand.” The image zoomed to the Americas. “My sphere will be North America. Over the coming months it will become a battlefield where a large part of the conflict will take place. America holds a major cultural place in Humanity, and they will fight hard to keep it. Within days they will launch a counterattack, and it is entirely possible we will lose ground. This will be expected. Until our final time has come, this is a part of the world we will both win and lose often.”

“Believing the Humans will win will make it a reality,” Isomnum noted. “There is little point in entertaining their insignificant fantasies of rebellion.”

“With Aegis still aiding XCOM, that is exactly what we should do,” Quisilia cautioned. “You may have forgotten what exactly Aegis can do, Isomnum, but I have not. XCOM will not escalate this conflict, but this works both ways. They have more to lose doing it to us, but we must not forget that provoking Aegis will yield the same result on an admittedly smaller scale.”

“Then why bring me here?” Isomnum growled. “I will not restrain myself for the sake of a few billion alien lives. Aegis is a coward who will never kill one of us. The Humans and our thralls are insignificant.”

“Some thralls would argue otherwise,” the Hunter muttered under his breath.

“You are deluded if you actually believe that,” Quisilia chided. “Aegis won’t kill you, but I doubt he wouldn’t stand in the way of blasting your shrinking brains out, while he keeps you trapped in a stasis field. I doubt you’ll be laughing if that happens.”

“Quiet,” the Battlemaster interrupted, lifting a hand. “Isomnum, your role will be explained shortly. Suffice to say, Quisilia is right. I do not want to force Aegis to pick a side, not yet. We cannot rely on our abilities forever. If we cannot defeat the Humans with some degree of convention, we are useless against the inner galactic species, much less the Synthesized. Now…”

The image shifted to South America. “Zar’Chon, inform us of the current situation.”

His turn. “Yes, Battlemaster,” all attention on him, he pointed to the continent. “South America is in a curious and unstable position. ADVENT only has control of roughly half of it, the bulk concentrated in Brazil,” said country turned red, along with other ADVENT-controlled countries. “Right now Brazil is controlled by Marshal Luana, one of the more heavy-handed and dictatorial leaders of ADVENT. She is a warmonger, arrogant and easily manipulated.”

A hologram of the Marshal appeared. “ADVENT has at some point attempted to curtail her authority,” Ravarian continued. “But their efforts have been ineffective, or she is ignoring them. Either way, her actions, which include launching several invasions of other countries with scant evidence, has put every non-ADVENT country on notice, specifically Argentina and Chile.”
Once those countries were highlighted in green, he continued. “Officially, they are doing nothing except refusing ADVENT membership. Unofficially, they are backing a small terrorist organization led by a certain Konstantine Volikov, unofficially referred to as the ‘Reapers.’”

“A melodramatic name,” Macula noted dryly. “And uncreative.”

“Volikov apparently dislikes the name,” Ravarian shrugged. “But it is born as a result of their actions. The Grim Reaper is one of most well-known Human icons, transcending cultures and languages. The Reaper is Death, and Death cannot be killed or stopped. Having Volikov and his people be compared to it is nothing to scoff at.”

He briefly paused. “Many people have tried to kill Volikov, and failed. The Reapers leave body counts in the double digits with each attack, and reportedly have yet to suffer a casualty. The situation is tense there, and if ADVENT knew there was alien influence, they would annex the region. But if we were to act through the Reapers, and by extension, the Argentinian and Chilean governments, we could prepare the region to resist ADVENT, as well as weaken it.”

“This Volikov,” Nebulan said, looking at him. “Tell me about him.”

“A potential problem if we underestimate him,” Ravarian warned. “He’s an expert assassin, marksman, survivalist, and close-quarters specialist. And this is what we’ve been able to learn. He’s managed to evade both the Russian and American intelligence agencies, has penetrated and killed multiple members of third world countries, and those under authoritarian regimes. He does not view either ADVENT, or us, in a positive light. At best he considers us equally as bad.”

“And you think he is actually a valid opportunity?” Macula asked skeptically.

“All Volikov knows of us is what ADVENT has shown,” Ravarian reminded him. “He has never met an alien to his knowledge, and if we were to present ourselves as a reasonable party, and assist him in his goals, I am certain he would be inclined to at least listen to us. However, he will not tolerate dishonesty from us, and has an uncanny ability to figure out if someone is lying.”

“Which is why you will contact him, Nebulan,” the Battlemaster ordered. “I do not care how you do it, but you will ensure he is on our side. No mind control, and no lies, those are your only two restrictions.”

“Why handicap ourselves?” Macula asked curiously.

“Because at some point, we will not be able to solve our problems by brute forcing them,” the Battlemaster answered. “I want Volikov on our side. And I want him to do it of his own free will, not because one of you made him. Not only is this risky, since Volikov would likely have a contingency in place now that he is aware of our capabilities, but you don’t know how to think like a Human. ADVENT would determine alien influence much faster if you did this the fast way. You will handicap yourself, and if you are not smart enough to figure out how to do otherwise, then leave and someone else will do it for you.”

“It has been a while since I have attempted something like this,” Nebulan mused. “I will ensure that Volikov inevitably works for us, using only my other talents, of course. I assume we can bring our own personnel as well?”

“As long as I have approved it,” the Battlemaster nodded. “For you, Nebulan, the fewer, the better.”

“I will not need many,” she said. “I already have an idea of how to enter.”
“I assume you will be using your Asaru persona?” The Battlemaster asked.

Ravarian didn’t know what that was, but Nebulan gave a single nod. “Of course.”

“That is settled,” the Battlemaster confirmed. “The Asian sphere will be overseen by Caelior. Korea is where ADVENT is currently preparing, and it will likely need to be taken next. After this, China is a problem that will need to be dealt with sooner than later.”

“I am looking forward to it,” Caelior stated. “I will lead my forces to victory as I have before.”

The Hunter made the motion like he was rolling his eyes. “You had one victory. Don’t let it go to your head, Little Storm.”

“One more smart comment and this blade will go through your-“ Quisilia began before he was interrupted by Macula.

“There are simpler ways of subduing the simple-minded, Quisilia,” he said, amused. “The Hunter will not trouble us for the remainder of this discussion.”

Ravarian waited for something to happen. A few seconds stretched out and he glanced over to the Hunter to see what he thought, and the Hunter had one hand raised, mouth partially open as he appeared to be starting to speak, but he didn’t move further. After a few more seconds, Ravarian confirmed that the Hunter wasn’t moving at all. He glanced back towards Macula, who was returning his attention to the Battlemaster. For all intents and purposes, it looked like he had somehow frozen the Hunter mid-sentence.

Interesting.

“Quisilia, you will go to Australia and end this resistance,” the Battlemaster continued. “Our own current forces have proven insufficient, and our own operations are being impeded at a higher rate than is acceptable. Kill all of them, and bring any XCOM agents back alive, as well as any other figures of note.”

“With pleasure,” Quisilia said easily. “I could use a distraction. Hopefully they will provide at least some challenge.”

“Zar’Chon, now explain the situation in Africa,” the Battlemaster said, the image changing to the continent in question.

“Of course, Battlemaster,” he nodded. “If any of you were not aware, there was a defection of several thousand ADVENT soldiers and personnel, led by Helsa Betos, a former Marshal of ADVENT. Their reasons boiled down to ethics. They felt ADVENT was abusing its power and were too harsh against civilians and perceived enemies. Betos in particular is extremely naive and idealistic, though her beliefs about ADVENT are not unfounded, and we are extremely fortunate that she had no contact with any of our own forces, else she might have stayed out of obligation to defending her species.”

He paused. “But as it stands now, she is our gateway into control of Africa. Her likely goal is the African states all united as one force that is against ADVENT. In practice, this will likely be impossible without an African intercontinental war. The region is extremely volatile, something that most Humans are surprisingly ignorant of. Africa in general is ignored by most of the world, and as a result much goes unchecked.”

“So what do you recommend?” Nebulan asked.
“Betos has made contact with Nigeria,” Ravarian said. “We need to contact her, and assist in helping her unite the others, because if she tries to do it herself, she will fail. Barring that, we could use Betos as a cover to turn the various states into puppets, under our direct control. By the time ADVENT realizes what is happening, the region will likely be compromised. If we continuously supply Betos with our technology, and she passes it along, Africa now becomes a more dangerous place for ADVENT to try and invade.”

“You will contact Betos, Macula,” the Battlemaster said. “Do what you wish with the African states, but I want Betos on our side. Treat her as an ally, alien as she is, and no more or less. The constraints I stated for Nebulan apply to you as well.”

“Noted.” Macula said dryly.

“Isomnum, when the time is right, you will attack Moscow,” the Battlemaster said, looking towards him. “I have no intention of restraining you, but you will not operate outside of where you have been ordered. Russia is a place considered secure for ADVENT, and the Russians are recognized as a tough and hard people. Stereotypes are not always accurate, but they work to our advantage here. The sight of their leaders exposed to…you, will shake the morale of the entirety of ADVENT.”

“Then I await my time,” Isomnum said simply.

“That is the overview,” the Battlemaster said. “It is being put into effect immediately. Begin your preparations, the second phase begins now. Dismissed.”
The Praesidium, Tactical Research and Demonstration Room 9

The influx of soldiers was a welcome sight after several months of continually suffering losses. It had taken some time for Jackson to put together a comprehensive list of elite soldiers and pilots, in addition to the recent additions from the PRIEST Program which had initially thrown a wrench into the selection process. But now that was done, and their numbers were higher than ever.

The Commander stood before a group of twenty of the best men and women the world currently had to offer, all of them now in standard black XCOM fatigues and standing expectantly as he prepared to give them a proper introduction to XCOM and the strange aspects that came with it. This wouldn’t be his only orientation; there were three other groups scheduled, and although Shen was doing his own one for the new MEC soldiers, he would handle everyone else.

It was going to be interesting to see their reactions. He anticipated there was a lot they were going to need to get used to.

“Welcome,” he began. “You are all aware of who I am, so I won’t repeat myself. You were selected because you display some measure of intelligence, so I expect you to use it here. This is a relatively small organization compared to most, so I tend to take a more active role, and in XCOM, the most vital people are soldiers. Our science and engineering teams can create weapons and technology beyond what you can likely imagine, but you will be the ones using it. No one else can fulfill your role.”

He had the attention of each one. Good. “Each of you will have access to the best weapons and armor currently developed by the Human race, and will be provided with options as how to outfit yourselves. Each of you have different backgrounds, which we have taken into account when assigning your specializations, but you know your own strengths and weaknesses best. You are expected to know how to use the equipment you have, and if you don’t know right now, learn. Ignorance will get you killed.”

There were a few nods at that, along with some side whispers of agreement. “Now for the reason we’re all here: the Aliens. How many of you have fought them before?”

Roughly half of them raised their hands. “Good, several of you.” The Commander nodded, tapping a button on his prosthetic, and bringing up a hologram of a Muton from the holoprojector beside him. “However, I suspect the majority of your experience has been limited to only a few alien types, and some have none aside from what they’ve investigated for themselves. That isn’t going to cut it here. Name an alien, and we’ve killed it.”

He gestured at the hologram. “Mutons? The regular soldiers are little more than cannon fodder to us. They aren’t the ones we worry about. We fight the Elites and Berserkers,” the hologram shifted at his tap and an Elite replaced it. All of the holograms were scaled correctly, and he saw the eyes of some of them blink as they saw just how big an Elite was.

“These are the kinds of aliens we fight and kill,” the Commander continued. “And yes, that is their
actual size. You need to learn how to kill it, and the secret to that is working as a squad; who that squad entails doesn’t matter, all that does is that you leverage your abilities to work together. I expect all of you know this, but I’m going to repeat it so you understand that you aren’t going to kill this—” he nodded towards the hologram. “On your own.”

Another round of nods. “Floaters, Cyberdisks, Sectopods, Lurainian, Chryssalids, there are aliens you likely won’t have heard of before today. This is expected, and to an extent that is intentional. You are some of the privileged few who know more about the extent of the alien threat than most.” He paused. “There is a lot that we have not told ADVENT, about the aliens themselves and our own projects for stopping them.”

There were a few moments of silence, before one soldier slowly raised his hand. Cole, he believed the name was. “Respectfully, Commander, why not? Doesn’t that hurt our chances?”

Well, here was where it was going to get interesting. “No, it doesn’t,” he answered bluntly. “What ADVENT does or does not know has very little impact on our victory or not. ADVENT needs to bring the world to order, and we can focus on how to actually kill the aliens. But you do have a valid question, and the short answer is that I do not fully trust Chancellor Vyandar, nor certain people in ADVENT.”


The Commander smiled slightly. “Because I’m the one who put her where she is today, and warned that if she ever tried abusing her power I would kill her.” Ah, now there were the sharp intakes of breath. “Chancellor Vyandar is a useful ally,” the Commander continued unabated. “But people are right to be suspicious of her past. Prior to her appointment, she was the Director of an organization called EXALT, a conspiracy devoted to influencing world events. For a time they fought against us, but I convinced her that our interests were best aligned than opposed. If you want the longer version, there are plenty who are familiar with the situation. One of the family heads of EXALT is here now, in fact.”

Well, he had successfully managed to render the majority speechless. Funny how that whole incident seemed so much smaller in the grand scheme of the war. He had practically just admitted that there had been a world conspiracy that XCOM had fought, beaten, and now had turned to their side. “So…” one of the soldiers said hesitantly. “XCOM is actually controlling ADVENT?”

“No.” The Commander shook his head. “I intend to keep XCOM apolitical in regards to world affairs. Chancellor Vyandar has done great things for humanity already, and I expect she will continue to. However, should her goals change, or she attempt to remove us, we will not allow that to happen.”

There were a decent number of soldiers that now looked rather uncomfortable as to how much was really going on behind the scenes. They would get used to it. “If you’re concerned about the possibility of us ever fighting ADVENT, that is minimal at best,” the Commander reassured them. “But our job is the preservation of Humanity from the alien threat at any cost, and Humans can pose just as large of a threat to our species as any alien. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Commander!” They shouted.

“Good,” he said neutrally. “Before we continue onto several other topics ADVENT is not aware of, there is something that needs to be addressed. You are aware of it, as you signed the papers, but I doubt it is clear to you what is meant by genetic modification. It’s a word on paper, and without context it might not sound like something to be fully concerned about. In truth, it isn’t, but it’s important to understand why I’ve made certain genetic modifications mandatory.”
This had been a decision he’d come to with less reluctance than he’d thought he’d have. Originally he’d preferred to give soldiers the choice of genetic modification, since some did have personal or other issues with it, but that was a luxury that couldn’t be afforded now. They had the MELD stockpiles, and the baseline Human wasn’t going to cut it much longer. They needed to push every advantage they had on the aliens, and having both a small army of unmodified Humans and excess MELD was not something they could waste.

While he expected some objections at first, he felt the complaints would die once they saw just how improved they actually became. With that in mind, he continued speaking. “My job is to keep you alive. The aliens are more advanced than us, more numerous, and often more powerful. We have ways of mitigating this through weapons and armor, but that isn’t good enough anymore.”

He let his gaze sweep the room. “Dead soldiers are a reality of war, but that doesn’t mean I will ever write any off as simply expendable. I want you kept alive, if for no other reason than that there is another soldier to fight the aliens. You need to be better than you already are, and that is where genetic modification comes into play. How many of you actually read that section about genetic modification?”

A few raised hands, more than he’d expected to be honest. “It’s what would be considered an invasive procedure. It’s not without its changes, some more extreme than others.” He pointed to his own golden-rimmed eyes. “However, the tradeoffs are significant. A fear of genetic modification is baseless and that has been proven without a doubt. I don’t want my soldiers falling ill, so you will be modified to be immune to diseases. I don’t want you missing shots, so your eyes will be enhanced so that you can hit a Muton in the head five hundred feet away with a rifle. I don’t want you bleeding out or keeling over from exhaustion, so you will have another heart inserted. Those are mandatory, and if you want to go further, you can.”

There was some apprehension in the room, but also quite a bit of awe. He could sense that they felt what he was telling them was too good to be true. “If you want your skin to heal from wounds in minutes, or leap buildings in a single bound, that is also possible.” He smirked. “You don’t have to believe me, and no, it isn’t something too good to be true. The stories you heard about XCOM soldiers jumping impossible lengths and surviving attacks that would kill anyone else are mostly true. But XCOM soldiers can and do die, and this is a step to prevent that. Questions?”

No one spoke up, so he continued, and motioned the Vitakarian from the side of the room into the light. “One thing ADVENT is unaware of is that we currently have several alien assistants working for XCOM and applying their knowledge against the Collective.” There were several whispers and clear expressions of surprise. Completely expected, and Sci’traloa’vitiary just observed the group stoically like he did for everything else.

“This is Sci’traloa’vitiary,” the Commander continued. “Currently working with Dr. Vahlen on elerium-armor integration.”

“Greetings, Humans,” Traloa said, inclining his head. “I will assure you that I currently have no plans to violently assault your species, and it is likely you will not interact with me on a regular basis, so the possibility of my sudden betrayal is significantly lower than it would be otherwise. But do remember I am making the equipment you use,” he finished with a smile.

The Commander openly smirked at that. The soldiers were trying to figure out if he was telling a joke, or was being completely serious, and he knew Traloa was enjoying this more than he should. Of all the Vitakara here, he’d adapted the best, to the point of knowing how to crack jokes, which was made funnier by how he delivered them so deadpan.

“Yes, that was a joke,” the Commander clarified, because several were looking at the alien with
clear suspicion. “But that aside, we have very effective means of ensuring that the Vitakara here cooperate.”

“Quite,” Traloa agreed dryly. “It is of explosive effectiveness. Please do not stand too close if I ever turn on you.”

“Quiet,” the Commander warned good-naturedly, raising an eyebrow. “Joking aside, Traloa is an exception to the Vitakara here. Most of them are perfectly normal, and are unlikely to cause you any trouble. That being said, I would not be surprised if at least some of you had reservations about aliens being here, and a personal dislike of the aliens is understandable.”

He let his tone turn more serious. “However, you will not take that out on the aliens that are helping us. Save that for the ones trying to kill you. There are some very basic rules that you need to follow in regards to them here. You do not assault, insult, or otherwise degrade the alien residents here, I don’t care if you think it’s justified, it’s not allowed. If you actually have a concern, let me know but I will also not tolerate false accusations. I will have one of our telepaths read your mind, so be very careful if going that direction.”

He raised another finger. “Second: You do not interfere with whatever the aliens are doing. As they are experienced with much alien tech, their projects are sensitive and important. So don’t intentionally interrupt, sabotage, or otherwise make life difficult. This will not be tolerated. This does not mean you can’t interact with them, but do it when they’re not working.”

He sighed as he reached the third point. “Now this is a point I shouldn’t have to make, but unfortunately it is needed. Whatever devious thoughts are going through your head, you do not flirt with the aliens.”

“Unless you are fully prepared for the consequences,” Traloa added blandly. The Commander resisted the urge to give him a look of disbelief. He’d thought bringing the most ‘human’ alien might put the soldiers a little more at ease. However, this was backfiring more than he liked. Now this was going to raise a lot of idiotic questions all because of one idiotic incident.

Vitakara did not handle certain Human foods well. That had been made abundantly clear.

“Please ignore what he said,” the Commander said neutrally. “Now, with all those rules out of the way, all of which you are expected to follow completely, there is one more thing you should be aware of.”

At least this would make them forget about the previous topic. For now. “We have been able to make fairly accurate predictions about the aliens and their plans. This is not due to our own operatives, although we do have them. The Ethereals are, ultimately, the greatest threat to our species. You have all seen the Battlemaster and Caelior, and unfortunately, those are far from the only ones, and not even the most dangerous.”

He let that settle in briefly. “We know who they are, and what they can do. We have been able to develop technology far beyond what ADVENT possesses, some of which you will become very familiar with soon. These events we would not have been able to accomplish on our own, and the reason for this is because we have another defector from the aliens.”

Right on cue, Aegis walked out. Patricia was shielding everyone in the room from his aura, so their reactions were a mix of surprise, amazement, horror, and a lot of swearing. “This is Aegis,” the Commander said over the mix of voices. “Formerly of the Ethereal Collective, and now ally to XCOM. He is one of the largest reasons we’re able to put up a reasonable fight. Right now we have kept this a secret for a multitude of reasons, but make no mistake, when the time comes, he
will fight against the aliens.”

“Correct,” Aegis added. “I did not agree with the handling of your species, and I will not perpetuate the Imperator’s ignorant vision any longer. I will work with your species until the Collective leaves, or we die.”

“You have all been assigned barracks and duties,” the Commander said. “Whatever questions you have can either be answered with our archives we have compiled, or by speaking to other soldiers. There will not be much time until we launch a counterattack in America, so I would suggest you prepare as best you can. Dismissed!”

All the soldiers saluted, and walked out of the room in various stages of shock.

A good start to the day, if he did say so himself.

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The Praesidium, Barracks

The good news for Sierra was that she wasn’t going to have to go back into the tank anytime soon. She’d gotten the more unpleasant gene mods out of the way a while ago, since she’d had some suspicions it would go this way eventually. However, it wasn’t quite the same for the majority of soldiers who were going to have the modifications administered to them over the next few days.

Sierra was somewhat torn on the new mandate for specific genetic modifications. On one hand, she felt that this should be a decision each soldier made for themselves and forcing it was both immoral and unnecessary. But on the other, they needed every advantage they had, and having been extensively genetically modified herself, Sierra could see literally zero reasons to not become modified.

Seriously, the ability to laugh at bullets and jump from buildings wasn’t really something that could be matched. Being able to read the lettering of a poster from the opposite end of the room was also pretty neat. All in all, she wasn’t at all surprised the Commander had decided to mandate at least some.

Still, there were some nervous about the procedure itself, like the Egyptian Gamil Sultan, who she’d been chatting with the past half hour. “It’s not dangerous,” she shrugged. “I think anyone who’s undergone it is proof of that.”

“I know that,” Gamil sighed, furrowing his eyebrows and scowling. “But I do not like the idea of being in a tank, much less having MELD pumped into me. How does that even work?”

Sierra thought back. “Depends on what kind of modifications you get. The more you have, the longer it is. Each one has to be done separately, and for most of them you are sedated.”

“Most of them!”

“Technically I think it’s all of them,” Sierra quickly clarified. “Although the eyesight one is a bit iffy. I kinda remember that. Sort of. Have you ever had eye surgery?”

“No!”

“I think it’s sort of like that,” Sierra continued. “They place a little machine on your eyes, strap it to you, and flood your eyes with MELD. Or something like that.”
His blue eyes were wide in horror now, the air around him was slightly distorted as he clearly became more nervous. What was-ah, right, he was one of the new psions who’d been cleared to be awakened. “I thought you wanted to make it seem safe? *That,*” he paused dramatically. “*Is not* reassuring.”

Hm, yes, she was bad at this. “It’s not as bad as it sounds,” she clarified. “Really. You don’t really feel a thing. What’s a good comparison?” She paused, looking up for no reason. “Have you ever had a small mildly irritating itch in your eye? It’s sort of like that, but less so because you’re not really aware of it to the same intensity.”

“Oh,” he said, now visibly relieved. “Well, I can live with that.”

“You’re definitely one-hundred percent sedated for pretty much every other one,” she said, shifting in her seat. “They explain it before you go in. Whatever part of the body is being modified has to be exposed to MELD.” She held up her hand, the faint octagons on her skin becoming more visible in the light. “For the Iron Skin mod, they pretty much submerged me in MELD. For the Disease Immunization one, I think they pump MELD into your organs in small doses.”

“That can’t be done quickly,” Gamil noted. “Especially if there are multiple ones.”

“Nope, the entire procedure can take several days,” Sierra agreed. “But it is worth it, at least I think so.”

“I still don’t like the idea of infecting my body with millions of nanomachines,” Gamil admitted, resting his head on a hand. “It’s not some drug, its actual machines in your body. That’s just unsettling.”

Sierra shrugged. In all honesty, she hadn’t been overly concerned with that piece of information. The nanites weren’t dangerous once they were in her body, and she had been assured that they couldn’t be hacked or modified once their purpose was fulfilled. It *was* entirely possible that she’d been lied to, but she didn’t think so. The Commander wouldn’t have modified himself if that was a risk.

“You got some new ones, right?” Gamil suddenly asked. “I thought you only had the Iron Skin mod.”

“At one point, I did,” Sierra confirmed with a nod. “Well, and the eyesight one. But I needed a few more because of what I’ve been training for.” She smiled. “You’ll probably see it very soon, in fact.”

“This the Archangel program?” Gamil asked. “I’ve heard that was something recently created. Some kind of special operations group?”

Sierra chuckled. “Sort of. Can’t really say exactly what since the engineers are still working out some of the kinks, but it could be considered our own answer to the Floaters.”

“Really?” He perked up. “Huh. Well, that sounds good. Meanwhile I’ve been learning how to maintain a half-dozen stasis fields.”

“And how is it working with our resident Ethereal?” Sierra asked, leaning back.

“Aegis? He’s a good teacher, actually,” Gamil answered brightly. “I never would have figured some of this out on my own, or even with Patricia. He doesn’t talk as much as you’d think, but he’s alright for an alien.”
Sierra snorted as she realized that they were getting a batch of new soldiers today. “The rookies are going to be shocked at everything here.” Her tone imitated a much lighter inflection. “Oh by the way, we fought the Illuminati, put their leader in charge of the world, have a bunch of alien captives, and oh right, we have an Ethereal here. Welcome to XCOM!”

Gamil laughed along with her. “Hopefully they take it well.”

“Probably,” Sierra guessed. “You know how the Commander is. He’s probably got psyche profiles on everyone here. I doubt he’s going to choose someone that’s going to have problems.”

“Not sure about that,” Gamil mused. “I really think he doesn’t care what you think as long as you do your job.” He gave her a sidelong look. “Otherwise, I doubt you’d be here. You don’t know when to shut up sometimes.”

“Ha ha, very funny,” Sierra rolled her eyes. “Maybe, but I can tell you we aren’t getting any anti-ADVENT people in here.”

“You might as well say anti-Human,” Gamil said. “Anyone who goes against ADVENT at this point is a traitor to humanity. Fuck them.”

Sierra rubbed her eyes. “There is a difference between anti-ADVENT, and realizing that ADVENT is not the most perfect thing to ever exist. Really, what do you think? Egypt isn’t even part of ADVENT right?”

“Unfortunately not,” he admitted with a sigh. “I don’t see why either. I don’t think we’d do much worse with them in charge.”

“Maybe because they want to keep their independence?” Sierra suggested. “I can see why they wouldn’t join, but I agree there isn’t any excuse for not working with ADVENT. That is just bad.”

“So why do you have so many issues with ADVENT?” Gamil asked. “I’d say they’re doing a lot of good.”

“For now,” Sierra emphasized. “Key word. I don’t care who is in charge, I’m never trusting a government that openly spies on its citizens, attacks other countries unprovoked, keeps how its government works secret, chooses which people are up for election, and has a police force that is pretty much another branch of the military.”

“And when exactly has ADVENT abused this?” Gamil folded his arms. “They’ve been justified.”

“For now,” Sierra repeated. “If you can’t see just how much this could be abused, then sorry, you’re an idiot. They are justified now, but really, even that’s questionable. ADVENT goes out of their way to make the most public and visceral statement possible, and they act like dictators when they don’t need to be. Saudia turned the Canada annexation into a damn publicity stunt to say ‘Look! We can invade another country with no consequences whatsoever!’ Isn’t that a little concerning? ADVENT is basically daring the world to actually do something against them.” She paused for breath. “Sorry, that just rubs me the wrong way. If you have to do it, just do it, don’t make it into some stunt to show off just how powerful you are.”

“Fair point,” Gamil admitted. “Maybe it’s an American thing. I have more respect for governments that actually do their job than just talk about doing it. Might just be me, but ADVENT seems at least more honest. At least they’re open about what they do, and don’t hide it.”

“Which is a point in their favor,” Sierra agreed. “But yeah, the idea of ADVENT is good. I’d say it’s even avoided abusing its power so far, even if they do show off. But the problem is that
“ADVENT seems to rely on the people in charge having the right priorities, and I don’t believe that, and Human nature are compatible right now.”

“Perhaps that can be changed,” Gamil mused thoughtfully. “If there was ever a time for us to unite as a species, this would be it.”

“What an optimist,” Sierra commented dryly. “I think you confused ‘priorities’ with ‘good’. Good people don’t get to where Saudia and the Commander are. ADVENT doesn’t reward the good, it rewards the effective. I guess we’ll see if you’re right though, eventually.”

“Hopefully.” He gave a lopsided smile, standing. “No point in delaying this I suppose. Time to get my own gene modding done. Thanks, Sierra.”

She returned the smile, probably looking rather cynical now. “Anytime. See you on the other side.”

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The Praesidium, Psionic Training Area

The amount of newly awakened psions was almost staggering. The Commander had pulled from their current roster, as well as drawn a few from the PRIEST program, and now there were twenty-five other psions of various powers, a surprisingly high number of Magus-class psions, and even a few Leviathan-class ones like herself.

They were going to need specialized rooms for each discipline now, it seemed.

It was fairly split between disciplines when everything finally settled. Telekines and Defensive aptitudes were the most common, Offensive and Telepaths slightly less so. However, it was easier now that there were some actual veterans beyond Aegis and herself that were helping. She was focusing on the Telepaths, while Matthew focused on Telekines, Chan assisted with the Offensive-focused ones, and Aegis directly taught the Defensive-focused psions, as well as helping everywhere else.

Complicating training further, some of the psions had decided to join the ranks of the Templars, and with a few psions being in the Archangel program, that was going to change the application of their own attacks. It was an interesting balancing act, but one she felt would be settled over the next few days.

“Does it ever get quieter?” Patricia looked to her right as an exhausted-looking woman approached, face beaded in sweat and clutching a water bottle. She was fairly old for a soldier here, pushing forty if Patricia recalled correctly. She was also not up to the current physical standards, but she did have a legitimate reason for such, and the gene mods were helping.

Sussan Sevhonkian was one of the only psions XCOM had requested from the PRIEST Program, a civilian data scientist from Armenia; she’d never even held a weapon before joining XCOM, but had still felt compelled to do her part in the war nonetheless. Patricia respected her quite a lot, since she had been willing to leave her family to come here, and had finally forced XCOM to figure out what they were going to do with soldiers who had families.

For the most part, they had tried to avoid soldiers that had spouses or children, but with the PRIEST Program, that wasn’t as easy, and made the soldier in question a possible security breach. However, in this case, they had the ability to read minds, so any leaks would be shut down quickly. Besides, it was only one or two families they had to worry about. Some reasonable accommodations could be made.
Sussan herself was a Telepath just shy of the Leviathan class, but she was getting the hang of it pretty quickly. Patricia understood her question completely. “No,” she admitted. “But you eventually learn to block out what you don’t want to hear.”

Sussan shook her head. “How? I haven’t been able to sleep well at all because everything is just… overwhelming.” She took a long drink of water. “It’s fine when I’m awake, like now, I can just focus or do some kind of physical exercise to distract me, but it’s impossible when I close my eyes.”

Patricia considered that for a minute. “How do you visualize it?”

“Like a coordinate plane,” she chuckled. “Data points on an X/Y axis. I’m trying to work on visualizing it in a 3D plane, but it’s not as easy since all of them scream for your attention,” she waved a hand. “It’s just meaningless gibberish, and that’s probably the most irritating thing for me.”

Patricia scratched her chin. “To be honest, I don’t have a sure answer. I know what worked for me, but that doesn’t mean it works for everyone else. Telepathy isn’t an exact science, unfortunately.”

“I’ll take anything at this point,” she sighed. “What did you do?”

“I had someone to practice on,” she answered fondly with a smile. “I got better at focusing on him, and through that I figured out how to block out what I didn’t want subconsciously. Then again, my awakening happened more gradually. It wasn’t as quick as yours.”

“Hm, I’ll have to try that,” she said. “So…there really isn’t a limit on what you can do to someone once you’re in their mind? That’s what I’ve been getting from a lot of what you’ve taught us so far.”

Patricia gave her a humorless smile. “Exactly. The closest comparison is a puppet. You are only limited by your imagination.”

Patricia felt and saw her shiver at that. “There is some messed up stuff you can do,” she said quietly. “I think I accidentally killed one of those Chryssalids just by making it think it was drowning.”

“That’s the purpose of them,” Patricia nodded. “Experiment with the Chryssalids, and then apply to actual Humans. Our minds regulate everything in our body, and if they can be tricked, they can be turned against the body. Don’t feel bad about killing them, it’s only an alien.”

“I guess,” Sussan said, unconvinced. “I’ve never done anything like this before. Killing things is… unsettling.”

“This sounds callous, but you get used to it,” Patricia told her. “If you still have issues with it, just focus on the fact that more aliens that die, the better chance your family will live. That grid you visualize when using your telepathy? That is where you’ll be in battle. Think of it as removing bad data. You aren’t killing people, you’re killing aliens. Don’t forget that.”

“I think I’ll practice that,” Sussan nodded. “And…well, maybe find someone to practice on.”

“You ever want me to help, I will,” Patricia promised. “Aegis would also be willing.”

“I’ll consider it,” she said. “Thanks, Patricia.”

“Anytime.” Sussan walked off, and Patricia decided to walk over where the most interesting and
unnerving of the new psions was standing. Lukas Von Theil, though he preferred to be called Geist for some reason, was the most powerful psion ever awakened, at least on the Trask scale. Patricia had been somewhat surprised when he’d shown equal inclination towards telepathic and defensive disciplines, and so he’d trained for both of them at the same time.

He seemed wholly disinterested in traditional training, preferring to get basic overviews from her and Aegis and go experiment on his own. He seemed intentionally cryptic and vague for the sake of it when talking to anyone, and didn’t socialize with the other psions. Still, she was going to make an effort. He even felt odd compared to everyone else, making him stand out to any psion nearby.

All she sensed was an intense focus and curiosity. She didn’t pry, but he seemed completely unaffected by some of the other effects of psionics such as the initial loudness Sussan had complained about. Right now he was standing, looking down at the ground, hands clasped behind his back. “Interesting floor?” She asked.

“I am concentrating, Psion Trask,” he answered without looking at her. “I am attempting to conceptualize a more effective defense. The lack of creativity and utilization of psionics is surprising here, and stifling.”

“Really,” she said sarcastically. “And how did you come to that conclusion?”

“I am surprised you do not understand,” he said, looking up at her finally, his eyes tinged purple. He was definitely drawing upon his power. “There is a lack of ambition. Thus far few here seem to grasp the scale of what beings like us can do. There is little need to stay with the single-layered shields, single Chryssalids, and dummies. Those offer no challenge or ability for growth.”

Ah, so that’s what it was then. “Two reasons for that,” she said. “First, not everyone has the raw talent you do, and second, there is a limit to what we can do within the Praesidium. You want a challenge, talk to Aegis.”

“I am not foolish enough to challenge Aegis,” he stated in the same voice. “Not yet. He is much more skilled than he has shown to your psions. He is deliberately holding them back, be it because of their lack of skill, or other reasons. I do not care, but I will not waste time performing the trivial exercises such as simple domes and shields.”

He pulled out a clenched fist and held it out before him, opened it, and they were suddenly in a small psionically shielded dome, with Geist’s arm rippling with psionic energy. “This is trivial, Patricia. Much like how dominating a single mind is simple for you. But you did not stop at a single mind, did you?”

Patricia crossed her arms. Geist was working towards a point, and she suspected she knew what it was. “No. You don’t think the scale is adequate? Fair, but again, the psions need to get used to their abilities before they start pulling off mass mind control.”

“Scale is simple, complexity is not,” Geist stated flatly, letting the shield dissipate. “This is a lesson you seem to have yet to learn as well, Psion Trask. The ability to mind control hundreds is simply you applying the basic powers of your discipline on a larger scale. There are easier ways to kill, there are more effective means of sabotaging the aliens. Why not warp the alien commanders into sleepers or force their brains to shut off?”

Patricia raised an eyebrow. “Because that takes time. Time that isn’t always available in combat.”

“Spare me,” Geist said dryly, stepping forward. “No, it’s because of your habits, and because it is
His words were reminiscent of what Aegis had told her, about how she wasn’t thinking as much as she should, and brute forcing everything. Geist was blunt, and frankly rude, but he did have a point. “Point taken. You certainly don’t have issues speaking your mind.”

“I do not particularly care if you dislike me or not,” Geist shrugged. “But I don’t see a point risking this war because you are held to a standard beyond reproach.” He held his hands up, palms vertical to the floor, and two small psionic shields appeared, then two more, until there was a shimmering purple cube between his hands. “Aegis is talented, Patricia, but he will only teach what he knows.”

“That wasn’t an insult,” she said, referring to his earlier comment. “And yes he will, but if there is anyone who knows about psionics, it is him. Like it or not, he knows more than you.”

“What I would suggest, Patricia, is that we do not solely rely on him,” he corrected, disintegrating the cube in his hand. “Whatever he teaches, the Ethereals know how to counter. We are not still in this war solely because of one alien, but because we have adapted in ways the Ethereals did not anticipate. That is our strength, and this should be applied to our own psionic abilities.”

Patricia idly wondered if he would be this forward if he wasn’t a psion. She suspected he likely wouldn’t act differently. Still, she did appreciate the different perspective. It was slightly irritating, but perhaps he could actually meet the Commander. He appeared to have some ideas the Commander would like, and they were alike in their practical methodicalism.

“Were you actually a chemistry teacher?” She asked curiously. “Because you certainly don’t talk like a teacher.”

“Most teachers are sympathetic, and are predictable,” Geist said. “They do not fully understand their students, nor the intricacies of childhood. I understand people, and I know how best to engage them. I did not lie, Trask, I simply had different methods than most teachers.”

“Clearly,” she muttered. “But fair enough.”

“Most people I simply do not find engaging enough,” Geist continued. “I do not need Human interaction to function, nor lead what I consider to be a fulfilling life. And I think that more people appreciate that than the alternative.”

“As long as you can work with others, that won’t be a problem,” Patricia said. “You wouldn’t be the first quiet one I’ve worked with.”

He smiled for the first time, but it appeared closer to an imitation than the real thing. “Then I believe we have nothing to worry about. Now if you’ll excuse me, I would prefer some time to ensure that I am adequately prepared for our next attack.”

“I’ll leave you then,” she said. “Have fun.”

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_The Praesidium, Situation Room_

“One per continent, is that the suggestion?” Jackson asked, looking up from the holotable.

The Commander exchanged a look with Shen, who gave a short nod. “Yes, that would be ideal. Actual bases can be in the future, but for now we should have Hangars on standby, especially with
the Firestorms coming online shortly.”

“Right,” Jackson nodded, biting her lower lip as she thought. “And how many Firestorms are we talking about per base?”

“Twenty to start with,” the Commander said. “Likely more in the future.”

“I expect production to increase once we launch our own construction facility,” Shen added. “But it isn’t feasible to have the entirety of our air force confined to the Praesidium.”

“So we can aim for one per continent,” Jackson said, pressing some buttons on the holotable. “I assume ADVENT would assist in the construction?”

“If possible,” the Commander confirmed. “Otherwise, we can hire who we need; but I doubt ADVENT would pass this up. On the condition that this is not on record and the workers have the location of the base removed from their minds.”

Jackson pinched the bridge of her nose. “See, I don’t know if they’ll go for that.”

“I want this going to Saudia,” the Commander said. “Let her answer it before jumping to conclusions. Worst case scenario, we create an XCOM construction wing and do it ourselves to bypass ADVENT altogether.”

Shen frowned. “Why not just do that to begin with?”

“I do want to eventually,” the Commander clarified. “But in this case, speed is important. ADVENT can have Hangars built in several weeks if they leverage their crews. Doing this ourselves will take time I don’t know we have.”

“Makes sense,” Jackson said. “Alright, there are several obvious locations we could station a base. Brazil makes the most sense for South America, the United States for North America, maybe Midwest.” The holomap shifted to the other side of the world. “I would also suggest Germany and Russia for the other continents. Africa would be an issue, unless you want to wait until Egypt or South Africa joins ADVENT.”

“Are there alternatives?” The Commander asked. So far this was good, but he wanted to be aware of all his options.

“Potentially,” Jackson stressed the word. “We could avoid the continents altogether and instead set up bases along nearby islands. This would apply more to the coasts, but we could potentially construct more, and outside of ADVENT territory.”

“And what if there are no islands available?” The Commander asked.

Shen seemed to get it first. “You want to explore the artificial island possibility?”

“Exactly,” Jackson said firmly. “Maybe not at first, but something to look into when we have our own construction wing.”

The Commander frowned. “And is that actually feasible? How exactly could we create an island?”

“It technically isn’t ‘creating’ an island, so much as building on top of existing rocks, islands, and reefs to support something larger,” Jackson explained. “It’s a fairly simple, if involved process. For our purposes, we wouldn’t need much, but just enough to support a small Hangar, so the job wouldn’t be as extensive. We would need a large supply of sand to make it work.”
The Commander thought for a moment. “I suspect this has been done before successfully. We could look into how it was done before, for the equipment used if nothing else.”

Shen coughed awkwardly. “I’m surprised you didn’t know about this. China was the one who put the idea into action, and until recently, they’ve been constructing islands to cement their claim on the South China Sea. It was a large geopolitical issue for some time, though it died down once the aliens showed up.”

Hm, he must have missed that, which wasn’t surprisingly given that China hadn’t been a focal point during the past year, aside from causing issues with the Council. Even then he hadn’t needed to gather ammunition on their previous overreaches, since China was one country that kind of pseudo-intimidation wouldn’t work on.

However, this gave him an idea.

“How willing do you think China would be to do this for us?” He mused.

Jackson blinked. “That depends. What are they getting out of it?”

“How showing that they are willing to work against the aliens?” The Commander thought. “China apparently wants to play nice now. This might be a good opportunity for them to actually prove it.”

“It would lessen tensions significantly,” Shen said thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. “China would be seen as working with ADVENT, and the Communist Party can demonstrate that they are still influential enough to negotiate with the primary world power. A win for both parties.”

“ADVENT is starting Operation Kraken as well,” Jackson reminded him. “If they could get Chinese support, that would make their job significantly easier.”

Operation Kraken was one of the newer initiatives by ADVENT to leverage their naval forces to hinder alien supply drops in the Pacific theatre. It was their attempt to cover the ocean with submarines ready to fire at UFOs at a moment’s notice. Right now the majority were moving towards Japan, while several more groups were stationed at various intervals around Korea.

China joining, even if they weren’t as technologically advanced, would be a massive boon. Definitely something to at least attempt. “Send that to Saudia and Laura,” the Commander said. “And send it to the Chinese as well. Let’s see what they say. In the meantime, I also want continent Hangars planned. We can focus on the artificial island idea later.”

“Got it,” Jackson confirmed, looking rather pleased. “I hope they accept. If China and ADVENT actually work together, there goes the largest chance of an idiotic war.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” the Commander warned. “China won’t do this for anyone but themselves. The good news is that they’re not idiots…for the most part.” Their antics on the Council threw some doubt on that claim, but in hindsight, they had gotten out before he’d put a violent end to the Council. At least they took a stand and left instead of just complaining about him.

But that was in the past. If China was open to being an ally, he was willing to give them another chance. He had a feeling that they wouldn’t squander it this time.

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The Praesidium, Barracks
Oliver was still feeling decidedly odd after the genetic modification. It certainly hadn’t been close to the most unpleasant thing he’d ever dealt with in his life, but it hadn’t exactly been pleasurable either. Still, he couldn’t entirely argue with the results. He honestly felt better after all was said and done; stronger and more energetic.

To test this out he’d run a series of exercises that he knew would exhaust himself, and as opposed to feeling wiped out, he felt merely winded. That had been an amazing, and somewhat unnerving realization. Whatever he had been before, he was decidedly no longer a normal Human.

He wasn’t sure how he felt about that. The rational part of him realized that this was a great improvement, and it would likely save his life. On the other, he almost felt like he was cheating. He’d worked hard to get to where he was, and the gene mods had basically given him the end result with no effort. It was a minor thing, and didn’t make rational sense, but it did bother him somewhat.

The eye modifications were going to take some getting used to. He was still learning to focus them on what he wanted, because he’d gone through a period of focusing on things really far away, and everything else becoming blurry, and vice-versa. He’d been assured that was just a normal phase and that he’d adjust within a few days. It seemed to be accurate, and his vision had stabilized over the past few hours.

And now the new recruits had shown up, and boy were they providing some of the best entertainment any of them had seen in weeks. It was funny upon reflection, because under normal circumstances, what was happening in XCOM was literal world-shattering information, but it was something that just…happened at XCOM.

Really, Oliver couldn’t blame the young Frenchman who was having an incredulous conversation with Zara. If he’d been hit with the news that the Illuminati was running the world, and that XCOM was working with alien defectors and an Ethereal all at once, then he might be just as shocked. One he could handle pretty well, and he had, but three at once was a bit much.

“So you were not only running the media, you also had an army?” Leonard Bissonnette practically accused a highly amused, and smiling Zara. “Do I understand that right?”

“One, we weren’t ‘running the media’; we had a number of agents and had some monetary investments in the larger media organizations, but far from ‘running it’,” Zara clarified, raising a finger, then adding a second as she continued. “Two, an army might be a generous term. I’d compare it to more of an elite special forces group, commanded by yours truly.” She gave a mock bow.

“Uh huh,” Leonard said skeptically. “So you never killed stories or twisted the news to fit your narrative?”

“What? No, of course we did,” Zara admitted with a shrug. “Really, this shouldn’t be a shock. And honestly, we did everyone a favor. We mostly helped make sure that stupidly corrupt and idiotic people didn’t get into positions of power, and making conspiracy people look stupider than they already did. You’d want to ask Elizabeth, I’m just a soldier.”

“Elizabeth who?”

“Elizabeth Falka,” Zara said, clearly enjoying this way too much. “I think she’s the Director of ADVENT Intelligence now? I can give her a call if you want.”

“Fucking hell,” he swore under his breath, looking around at all of them. “Does this not seem like a
big deal or is it just me?”

“Honestly,” Ellinor, one of the newer soldiers, and soon-to-be Defensive Templar, interjected. “I was more surprised that there was an Ethereal of all things here. You know, the one thing that’s repeatedly beaten our soldiers?”

“Eh, I’m in a similar boat,” Shun shrugged, leaning comfortably into the corner of a couch. “Really, this kind of stuff just kinda happens here. Carmelita, remember when Soran turned out to be an alien?”

“Hard to forget that,” the little Korean woman snorted. Even without armor Oliver was quite sure she was the most intimidating person in the room. “I especially liked how weird Patricia was acting for a few months before she actually told us she was reading minds.”

“Or Aegis just showing up and surrendering,” Seok, another Korean, added with a nod. “Although we didn’t find out about that till later.”

“At least for me, XCOM showing up out of nowhere and helping us take the Fury Base ranks up there,” Zara commented. “And the Commander showing up and saying ‘Hey, want to run the world?’”

“With a lot of strings attached,” Shun muttered under her breath. “Still, wouldn’t have predicted that.”

“So I guess the point of this is that weird stuff happens in XCOM,” Oliver summarized for Leonard. “You get used to it pretty quick.”

“So…” Ellinor said after a few moment of silence. “Does, ah, anyone know exactly why the Commander made sure to stress not to, er, flirt with aliens? Did something…ah…happen?”

Oliver rubbed his forehead. Oh no, it was only a matter of time. He’d not heard of it, but having some familiarity with the internet, and people being curious to a stupid degree, it was one hundred percent not surprising that apparently something had happened. Because there was no way this was just something the Commander would casually require…months after they were originally acquired.

“He didn’t actually say that,” Zara snorted. “He didn’t, right?” She looked around for some answers.

“Don’t look at me,” Oliver shook his head. “First I’ve heard of it.”

“Hey, I heard it too,” Leonard added. “Didn’t help that the alien with him made what I think was a joke about it.”

They were interrupted by the light sound of Carmelita laughing, something it seemed none of them had heard before. It was a pleasant sound; a stark contrast to her normally dark demeanor. “I can answer that,” she said between laughs. “One of the scientists told me about it.”


Oliver was not sure he wanted to know, exactly, but this was the equivalent of watching a train wreck and he couldn’t really stop listening. “So,” Carmelita continued. “This was after some big project completion, didn’t figure out what. So the science team decides to celebrate and have a small party. So one of them, being a nice Human and all, decided to ask the Vitakarian who’d been helping them to join them.”
Oliver could see exactly where this was going. “From what she told me,” Carmelita explained. “It was a good start. The alien seemed a little restrained, if happy, to be participating, and as with any civilized party, there was wine involved. And chocolate.”

Ellinor sniffed. “Wimps. They should have something actually alcoholic.”

“She said civilized,” Oliver pointed out. “Not a bar fight.”

“Knulle deg,” she likely insulted in Norwegian.

“What?”

“Both of you be quiet,” Shun shushed. “Anyway, keep going.”

“Also, why is that they had chocolate important?” Zara added.

“I’ll get to that,” Carmelita said, raising her non-modified arm to focus their attention. “So yeah, everything’s going well. So a good ways into it, most everyone is drunk, and now the Vitakarian is a lot more relaxed. She was described to me as ‘high’.”

“Drunk?” Shun asked.

“No, high, like on drugs,” Carmelita clarified. “Not that I would know, but at this point one of the scientists was flirting with her, and seemed to be going over her head, and they were all just kinda laughing at the situation. Then, the Vitakarian says, and I quote, ‘I would like to have sexual intercourse with that Human,’ and she points at the guy who’d been flirting with her all night.”

All of them were torn between mock horror and amusement. “Brilliant,” Zara chuckled. “I have to use that sometime. Did it work?”

“Well…” Carmelita paused. “We definitely now know that Humans and Vitakara are… compatible. I think. My friend didn’t have the intimate details, although both involved didn’t seem to regret it afterwards. So I guess it worked?” She shook her head. “Although apparently the mood was killed several times when she started vomiting randomly. A few times after they went too their private quarters to, so I’m told.”

“Why?” Oliver inquired.

“The unproven scientific consensus is that Vitakarians get high on chocolate, and it makes them vomit if they consume it,” Carmelita said, cracking up. “I know there is at least one person working to convert it to a safe drug.”

“Send it to the science teams,” Ellinor chuckled. “We’ve got a new weapon to use against the aliens! We kill them with chocolate.”

“What if this is what they do when they’re high though?” Leonard asked jokingly. “I don’t know how we’d respond if they start yelling at random Humans if they want to have ‘sexual intercourse’.”

“Let’s hope the aliens don’t have a way to weaponize weed in response,” Zara added. “What do we get when both armies are equally stoned?”

“Let’s not go there,” Oliver said quickly. “I think this discussion has run its course.”

“Hey, at least they sort of look like us,” Leonard pointed out. “At least it wasn’t something really
"weird like an Oyariah."

"I don’t really blame the guy," Shun said. "As far as aliens go, they aren’t that bad. I wouldn’t say no. They’re pretty much like us, at least physically."

"Aside from their skin, and their eyes, and they don’t have hair, and they’re tall," Zara listed off. "But yeah, very similar."

"Oh shut up," Shun snorted. "You know exactly what I mean."

"I’ll stick with Humans, thank you very much," Ellinor huffed. "I would never be able to get past the whole ‘alien’ thing. What about you, Oliver?"

He was not getting dragged into this. "I’m sticking to attractive Human women thank you very much."

"Hey, does anyone know if there is any organized crime in the Collective?" Ellinor asked suddenly. "Because if there is, we definitely need to smuggle some chocolate to them."

They all laughed at that. "Better idea," Carmelita said. "We just send out some care packages to alien territory, like Australia. Just have them labeled as “Chocolate – Do not open” or something. Then of course they do, and eat them, and we give them food poisoning."

"Trolling worthy of Quisilia," Leonard commended with a nod. "I approve. Get this to the Commander right away."

"Why the hell are you following Quisilia?" Carmelita asked. "You do know he’s an Ethereal right?"

"Oh, he is?" Leonard said. "I was fifty-fifty on that, didn’t know if that was real or him just trolling everyone."

"He takes selfies."

"You do know Photoshop exists?"

"Really, I kinda don’t care he’s an alien bent on enslaving us," Shun admitted. "I mean, I kinda do, but on the other hand, I have to respect anyone that openly mocks Caelior, then trolls the Zar’Chon, and the Battlemaster. His Youtube channel is hilarious too. Say what you will about him, he produces good content."

All of them stared at her. "What do you mean ‘his Youtube channel’?" Carmelita asked, very slowly.

"You remember that really weird announcement on his Twitter that everyone freaked out about?" Shun asked. "Well, it turned out it was just the launch of his Youtube channel. He already has twenty-million subscribers, including myself, I admit."

"Traitor," Zara rolled her eyes sarcastically. "Alright, I have to see this."

"Count me in," Oliver added, grabbing his tablet and tossing it to Shun. "Pull it up, let’s see how Quisilia is giving everyone in ADVENT Intelligence a headache."

"Gladly," Shun smiled. "Bet you didn’t expect this when you came to XCOM, Leonard, did you?"

"Watching a video with a living memelord Ethereal?" Leonard said, as they gathered around Shun.
“Can’t say that I did.”

“Welcome to XCOM, kid,” Oliver grunted. “Like I said earlier, you’ll get used to it.”

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*The Praesidium, Research Labs*

There was quite a bit that Vahlen wanted to discuss, even though the majority of her work had been assisting Shen with other projects, which the elder engineer would be showing off soon. But it was built on the basis of what Vahlen’s team had learned, and there was still quite a few other projects in production.

Elerium had been the main focus of Vahlen’s team, and as a result there were elerium crystals everywhere in the labs; stored in jars, cases, hooked up to various machines with scientists running experiments on them. There was a louder than normal perpetual hum here, and the Commander suspected it was due to all the elerium being used.

Vahlen was in her regular lab coat and standing in front of a table with various unidentifiable tools attached to small elerium crystals. She must have sensed him walking up, because she turned to him, smiling, and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Welcome back,”

“You say that like you didn’t just see me a few hours ago,” he said, amused.

“Well, you haven’t been here in a while,” she amended, turning back to the table. “And we have been busy.”

“So I see,” the Commander noted. “Elerium?”

“That has been the primary focus of our team,” Vahlen confirmed. “As per your directive. We have continued to make some progress on the Manchurian Project, but that has not been our priority. Anti-Psionics has taken priority over that, and now that we understand elerium enough to actually use it, it won’t be long until we have plasma weapons of our own.”

*Excellent.* With that, they would be able to successfully match the aliens in pure damage output. While he knew that by no means would they stop using laser and Gauss weapons, plasma gave them some additional options, and in general would be more effective against standard alien units than the other weapon types.

He was going to regret this, and likely not understand half of it, but he had to at least make an effort. “In that case, how *does* elerium work? It couldn’t have been easy.”

“Initially, you’re right,” Vahlen said, picking up one of the blue-green crystals with a gloved hand. “How familiar are you with Moscovium?”

Oh dear. “Vahlen…”

“Oh, right,” she nodded rapidly, remembering she wasn’t speaking to a scientist. “Element 115 on the periodic table, it was discovered just over a decade back, but has only recently been officially recognized. This is important because elerium, as it turns out, is actually an isotope of this element.”

That was something he hadn’t expected. “That seems like a large coincidence.”

“Not necessarily,” Vahlen disagreed. “The periodic table is unlikely to change if we were to expand
beyond Earth. Elements don’t suddenly cease to exist, but we would likely just find more, or different properties of already existing ones. That the aliens have discovered this element and turned it into a power source isn’t exactly far-fetched.”

She set the crystal down. “Normally, finding, let alone stabilizing an isotope like this would be extremely time intensive, but thanks to the aliens, we know how to achieve this necessary configuration. That actually wasn’t the hard part, there is plenty of working alien tech to draw from; the issue was actually getting the elerium to react.”

“She assumed you figured out,” the Commander guessed.

“Yes,” Vahlen said, smiling. “We were looking at elerium the wrong way. We had always assumed it was, or at least primarily exists, in a solid state.”

The Commander looked down on the table, where there were quite a few very tangible-looking elerium crystals. He felt he was interpreting her statement wrong. “Are they not?”

Vahlen hesitated, clearly trying to think about the best way to explain this. “Not exactly. We now think that elerium is a kind of time crystal, based on how we’ve seen it react. Time crystals still oscillate, even in their ground state, which to not completely lose you, means that they can act as a way to carry momentum throughout its structure.”

She motioned towards the table. “To explain more simply, there is a large reserve of potential untapped energy in each elerium crystal, and if we know how to…jumpstart it, for lack of a better word, it produces an exothermic reaction, and through this we can produce stable energy nearly anywhere.”

He understood…most of that. “I assume you wrote a report on that?” He asked.

“Of course,” she nodded. “I forwarded a copy to you.”

He made a note to try and read it later. “So we know how elerium works, and can integrate it into our own technology?” He asked to clarify.

“Eventually,” she said. “Because we know what elerium is now, we can synthesize it ourselves, as well as constructing more generators. It will take some time to convert our power sources to elerium, but it certainly is possible.”

“Forward your research to ADVENT,” the Commander said. “They need to begin integrating this immediately. The discovery of cheap energy will benefit the entire Human race, not just us.”

“And now we can actually begin to research and design plasma weapons of our own,” Vahlen continued. “With elerium solved, our largest hurdle is past. The next step then, is anti-psionics.”

“Yes,” the Commander nodded, as Vahlen picked up a tablet and tapped a finger on it. “Aside from the Manchurian Program, what other possibilities have you explored?”

“A genetic modification that would be able to either shut down the parts of the brain affected by telepathy, or stop it entirely.” Vahlen turned the tablet to him, which showed pictures of brain scans which he didn’t know how to interpret. “There is a recordable difference between a brain affected by psionics and a brain that isn’t. There are some ways we are exploring to both detect, and shut this down.”

“No test subjects yet?” The Commander noted.
“No, preliminary research only,” Vahlen confirmed. “I didn’t want to begin Human testing until we have isolated the probable brain regions to modify, and the majority of my team was able to focus on this. Now that elerium is finished, we can focus on it. However, this will have several drawbacks.”

“Such as?” The Commander asked.

“We won’t be able to do it to psions,” Vahlen explained. “For obvious reasons, it would render them comatose. In addition, it is very likely that soldiers who undergo this modification will not be able to be enhanced with friendly telepathy. Distinguishing between allied and hostile telepathy is impossible.

Well, there wasn’t going to be something that was perfect, and he could live with those limitations. Psions could defend themselves, or at least learn how. But he was curious. “Does it have to be a straight modification?” He asked. “We have technology to detect and interact with psionic abilities, could we use it for creating anti-psionic fields.”

Vahlen set down the tablet, hesitating before she answered. “In theory…yes. In fact, it’s another avenue we’re exploring. However, we don’t know much about how that specific technology works to interact with psionics, and reverse-engineering it will take time. I don’t even know if it could actively block psionic abilities. But it is a possibility.”

“Is there any of the Sovereign technology schematics Aegis has that could help with anti-psionics?” The Commander asked.

Vahlen pursed her lips. “I don’t know. Much of what is in there is difficult even for me and Shen to fully understand, let me show you,” a few taps on her tablet, and she showed an image to him. It was six full pages of gibberish and formulas written in an alien language that wasn’t Ethereal Script, and only at the end were some schematics, which honestly to him looked like a sphere of some kind.

“And you don’t understand this?” The Commander asked. “Can’t really blame you.”

“We haven’t fully figured out the language the Sovereign Ones write in,” Vahlen admitted. “The main pieces Aegis brought, the Gateways and practice amps, those had already been translated by the Ethereals, and it wasn’t difficult to translate them to English. From what I can make out, whatever this device does ‘ensures that the thralls are immune to tampering of the mind’. From what I can also make out, constructing it requires both equipment and resources that don’t exist.” She set the tablet down. “It might be a mistranslation, but I’m not sure. Even for Sovereign technology, it is complicated. Even just the math is beyond me.”

“We can always bring in mathematicians,” the Commander reminded her. “You don’t need to do everything.”

“No, but I should at least be able to have some idea how this works,” she muttered scowling. “It’s frustrating to have to rely on others. Luckily, Shen isn’t having as much trouble. He grasps their formulas much better than I do. But maybe you’re right, what Aegis has brought us could likely save us, should we decipher it. The more people looking at this, the better.”

“I’ll have Jackson put together a team of linguists, cryptologists, and mathematicians,” the Commander told her. “You’ll review the list before they’re approved, but we need to do something to get an edge. I don’t think this war is going to get easier, and we can’t suffer any more defeats.”

Vahlen smiled. “I think we’ve come up with something that will help us out a bit with that. If
nothing else, it will give the Ethereals pause.” He followed her as she turned to head towards the Genetic Labs, and the Subject Cells. “However, before we get there, we do have something of a situation,” Vahlen warned as they walked towards the cells.

The Commander glanced down at her. “What happened?”

“Nothing major,” Vahlen said, looking mildly disconcerted as she psionically unlocked the door to the Labs. “As a general rule, I experiment with my own telepathy on the various test subjects. I’ve gotten rather skilled at navigating and influencing their minds.”

He was wholly unsurprised at that. She was a seventy-six on the Trask scale, a Magus-class psion and one of the most powerful in XCOM. Not quite Patricia, but closer than most. “Did you find something strange?”

“Not strange, but concerning,” Vahlen clarified. “We only experiment on convicts, thankfully, and that has never been an issue. Their minds are interesting, from a purely clinical perspective, but the problem is that we somehow have someone who is actually innocent of what he was convicted for.”

The Commander rubbed his forehead. As far as incidents, this was a thankfully minor, if irritating, one. “I hope you haven’t done anything to him?”

“No, nothing yet,” Vahlen assured him as they stepped into the Subject cells and stopped before one. “Once I found out, I quarantined him until I could speak to you. I’ve kept him well-fed and supplied him with actual amenities. But I did restrict him to the cell until we decided what to do with him.” The man before them, sleeping on an actual bed Vahlen must have moved in for him, seemed to be in his forties, with thinning black hair and thin stature; he was also extremely pale, likely from years of confinement.

“He’s seen too much,” the Commander muttered. “I don’t suppose you know who actually committed the crime he was convicted for? Or who actually convicted him?”

“He was accused of murdering his ex-girlfriend,” Vahlen explained. “He doesn’t know who did it, even if he has suspicions. I do know the judge and jury who presided over his trial. I don’t know the details of the case, but I’ve put together a report you can give to ADVENT.” She wrinkled her nose. “This is unacceptable. If ADVENT isn’t working on a judicial branch for the PRIESTs, this will keep happening.”

“Agreed,” the Commander said grimly. “Wipe his mind of what he’s seen here, and I want him moved out of here and to a country of his choice, with as much compensation as he wants. Give it to ADVENT too, maybe this will get them to accelerate their justice reform. I hope you included in your report suggestions to investigate this case.”

“Certainly,” Vahlen said. “I’ll have him moved, then alter his memories. He’ll remember us freeing him, but nothing of what he’s actually seen. I doubt he’ll care. He just wants to be free.”

“We don’t have any more, correct?” The Commander said.

“Innocent people here? No,” Vahlen confirmed. “Like I said, I discovered this almost immediately. However, I want us to have a telepath to investigate the ones being sent to us beforehand so we don’t have this situation again.”

“Better yet, just go through all of death row and solve the issue at the root,” the Commander half-seriously suggested. “I’ll have to talk to Saudia about this.”
“Now that we have that sorted out, we can move onto the developments,” Vahlen said, as they walked further down. “The more research we perform on MELD, the more baffled I am that the Ethereals haven’t put it to greater use. Genetic modification and mechanical augmentation is all well and good, but MELD is a lethal weapon if the potential is tapped.”

“This is for Artemis?” The Commander asked.

“It could be,” Vahlen clarified. “There are two methods of nanite weaponization we are working towards: Short-wave organic control, and bioproduction.”

“Promising,” the Commander said, since he suspected what both of those meant. “I assume short-wave is for in-combat usage only?”

“Correct,” Vahlen confirmed as they stopped in front of another cell. “The problem we continually have to worry about is the nanites being compromised. The way around this is nanites slaved to a specific frequency, and said frequency would be connected to a soldier via an implant. This wouldn’t allow the nanites to be altered or hacked.”

She tapped a finger on the glass and the man inside bolted up, eyes widening in fear once he saw Vahlen. “Couldn’t the implant be hacked?” The Commander asked.

“It’s not connected to a network, so no,” Vahlen dismissed, pressing a button that enabled communication into the cell. “Demonstrate nanite manipulation.”

The man nodded and turned towards a small orange cube on the ground. The cube began vibrating and suddenly dissolved and the small MELD nanite swarm flew into the air and rematerialized into a cube in his hand. For good measure he tossed the cube into the air once and caught it.

“He can control it with his mind,” the Commander noted. “An application of MEC cybernetics?”

“A lesser application, and nowhere near as complicated,” Vahlen clarified. “He’s technically not controlling them, he’s controlling the implant. The implant sends a limited number of signals that mean different things; up, down, left right, sphere, cube, and so on. It takes some practice, but I think that idea can soon be put into practice.”

“Give some soldiers MELD cubes, and this could kill the Battlemaster,” the Commander said as he thought about it.

“It’s nowhere near combat ready,” Vahlen clarified. “But the concept is sound, which is what I wanted to show you. The next usage will be useful to increasing our MELD production without relying solely on facilities.”

They moved down to another cell, where there actually wasn’t a test subject inside, but a dead, naked corpse. She was suspended over a clear glass vat underneath her, and the machine suspending her had a syringe arm just hovering over her. “Explain,” the Commander said dryly.

“MELD bioproduction,” Vahlen explained. “MELD has the ability to replicate itself, and there are hundreds of thousands of human and alien corpses that go to waste rotting. They are just a valid source of MELD, but they haven’t been utilized correctly as of yet. This was a specimen I requested from a morgue to test on, and I believe it will be beneficial to us.”

“That sounds extremely dangerous,” the Commander pointed out. “If it gets out of control-”

“Please, I know what I’m doing,” Vahlen told him. “One: The nanites have been programed to only harvest organic material, as you can see, there is no other organic material in the room. Two: It’s
been specifically programed to *not* harvest the other materials in the room, like the steel and glass. Three: The nanites can be shut off or destroyed at any time. Four: The room has several incinerators that will melt everything if that fails.” She pointed to the nozzles pointing out from the corners of the walls.

That seemed sufficient to the Commander. Although, he wasn’t sure if you could be too careful when it came to this. “Fair. Go on and demonstrate.”

“Well do,” Vahlen said as she pressed a button on a wristpad. “This can be done with only one nanite to start, but I would prefer you have the enhanced version.” As she spoke the syringe arm began injecting the yellow MELD into specific spots on her body; the feet, legs, chest, arms, hands and finally eyes.

The Commander grimaced as he saw the syringe go into her eyes. He never really liked seeing that.

“It will take a few minutes for the MELD to begin working,” Vahlen said. “Just watch.”

He did, and it took close to ten minutes before the first noticeable effects began showing. The body first began leaking MELD from cracks in the skin, where the nanites had eaten to that point, and began dripping down into the vat below. Then the Commander saw the MELD actually begin to dissolve the corpse entirely as the nanites replicated further.

Eventually it had eaten through the bones and tissue holding parts of it together, and parts of the body fell into the vat below, and were consumed by the nanites in the vat itself, while the ones still in the body harvested it. It seemed fairly slow, but the Commander then realized that the entire body had been turned into a vat full of MELD in just under a half hour.

“And that is enough MELD to fully enhance three soldiers,” Vahlen said proudly, as she pressed a button on her wrist. “All from one body. The nanites within can then be wiped and reprogrammed to whatever we want.”

“I think,” the Commander said slowly. “We might have potentially solved any MELD shortage we had. I would inform ADVENT about this use immediately. We now have a use for the bodies beyond fertilization and autopsies.”

“Gladly,” Vahlen said. “I take it you wish me to establish this program more fully?”

“Yes,” the Commander ordered, a smile growing on his face as he looked at the vat of MELD. “Let’s get this up and running.”

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*The Praesidium, Patricia’s Quarters*

Patricia hadn’t quite believed it before she’d actually sat down and watched it, but lo and behold, it was an actual thing, and was the funniest thing she’d seen all day. So she naturally had to share this with someone. “Hey,” she called to Creed who was laying on the bed. “You’ll never guess what just got greenlit.”

His face scrunched in confusion. “What? A new project?”

“Not related to XCOM,” she chuckled. “Well, officially anyway. You know, what they call entertainment that gets approved for production.”

His face lit up and he nodded. “Ah, right. Took me a second to make the connection. So let me
guess, they’re making a movie about XCOM?”

“Close…”

“TV series?”

“Got it,” she confirmed, sitting down beside him and holding up her tablet for him to see. “And boy is it something.”

Creed smirked when he saw it. “This should be good.”

The trailer was, all things considered, not completely terrible. It was treated completely serious… she thought, since the various actors seemed to be into their roles. The plot seemed to be set in the pre-invasion period when they were fighting small groups of aliens and dealing with abductions. Not too bad, but what they seemed to think happened during those times…yeah…

It seemed that the trailer seemed to think that the aliens had flat out invaded each and every town they’d abducted, taking the unfortunate civilians alive, who were of course yelling and begging for their lives. Then XCOM showed up, and it turned into some sort of hostage situation. Obviously supposed to be emotional, but she just snorted when she watched it. That wasn’t anything close to what had actually happened.

“I don’t recall it being that…exciting,” Creed said, lips twitching. “We were lucky if there even were aliens there and they weren’t already long-gone.”

“Keep watching,” she said, as it showed the first of the characters.

This might have been her favorite part, because it seriously looked as though someone had been told vaguely what the actual members of XCOM actually looked like, but nothing else. The ‘Commander’ here wasn’t too far off visually, likely because he had actually been seen in public, but that was where the accuracy ended. For one, he appeared to be portraying a stand-up, nice, and ethical person. That alone was amusing.

There was the second in command who she thought was supposed to be Bradford, but looked absolutely nothing like him, and had the most overdramatic voice of them all. His one line as XCOM soldiers were seeing an alien for the first time was the most exaggerated “What…is it,” she had ever heard. It was very funny.

Patricia presumed that no one actually knew who the science lead was, aside from that it was a woman, because the lead scientist was not Vahlen, but some Korean lady. Same for Shen, who she assumed had been described to them as ‘the older engineer’. For good measure they’d made “Shen” look like a semi-mad scientist, with a beard too.

Creed started laughing. “Did you know they were doing this?”

Oh, and apparently she was also in this. Apparently in this timeline, XCOM already had psionics and she was the resident psion, called “Patricia”. No last name was given, likely for legal reasons, but yeah, the actress playing her was too much of a copy for it to be a coincidence.

“They certainly think we use a lot of explosives,” Creed commented. “And…oh, come on. Who thinks these clichés are actually good?”

And that was the other thing, whoever had made this just could not help themselves, and included stupidly generic taglines like “Witness the beginning” and “Can they succeed” and crap like that. Her personal favorite was the line the “Commander” spoke at the end that was perfectly
punctuated by the dramatic music.

“Gentlemen, we are now dealing with an enemy…unknown.”

It was so overly dramatic and out of character for the Commander that it was actually hilarious.

“So,” Creed set down the tablet. “I guess this is a thing. Who’s even making TV right now? That just seems like a waste of time that could be put elsewhere.”

“ADVENT has to be behind this,” Patricia said. “This is complete propaganda, and giving the general population a distraction so they don’t lose morale. If we’re having problems beating the aliens in real life, they can just show the aliens losing in TV. Psychologically it’s very smart. But still,” she smirked. “Completely inaccurate.”

“I wonder if I get on…” he mused. “Because I just know everyone is going to have a love interest.”

“I’m probably going to end up with that Russian soldier,” she guessed with a smirk. “Just guessing, and I guarantee that the Commander will also end up with the science lady.”

“Do you think they actually asked him about this?” Creed wondered. “I mean, it’s only polite to ask first.”

“Probably, and he likely said ‘sure, but I have actual things to do. No, you can’t have a tour,’ the end.” Patricia guessed. “Well, whatever the case, I think we have a new base-wide event. We haven’t really had one of those for a while.”

“Oh yes,” he said as he thought some about it. “This is going to be great.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “I’m personally going to be mailing them about every inaccuracy I spot.”

“Careful,” Creed warned mockingly. “I don’t think executives would like being told that their entire show is inaccurate.”

“Hey, I’m one of the few known XCOM soldiers in the world,” she defended. “My word should count for something. And I can always threaten to mind control them.”

Creed groaned. “Please don’t.”

She lightly punched him. “Kidding, don’t worry.”

He rubbed his eyes. “Just wait till Quisilia hears about this. I’m expecting nothing less than full weekly reviews.”

“For some reason,” Patricia said slowly and sarcastically. “I think they’re counting on the publicity from that.”

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The Praesidium, Engineering Bay

The Commander was rather looking forward to seeing what Shen had managed to put together for him. If the list was all complete, it was a much-needed boon and boost to morale for the soldiers. While the Commander wasn’t thrilled with the way the war had gone so far, it wasn’t unexpected. He would have been more suspicious if they had been winning more often than not. It would have felt like a trap to lure them into complacency.
Ultimately, he knew that in the grand scheme of this war, these were only the beginning stages. They were still here, they were still making progress, and soon that was going to pay off. Today might just mark the moment when they started hurting the aliens, and preferably, make them scared.

The main threat the aliens had were the Ethereals. Just one could turn any victory into a near-assured defeat. They were the key to victory. Defeat the Ethereals, then the Collective would soon follow, and once it did, there was going to be retribution for this unprovoked war. But he would save his plans for when they were actually feasible.

Right now, he wanted to see what Shen had put together.

“Commander, welcome,” Shen greeted as he walked up. “Your meeting with Vahlen was productive?”

“Very,” the Commander agreed as they began walking through the whirring machines. “I expect now that we have elerium decoded, you can move forward with several other projects?”

“Yes,” Shen nodded. “We will be working with the science teams to get plasma weaponry deployed as soon as possible. But elerium has helped us complete several major projects: Firestorm, Stargate, and Icarus. More will be coming in the future, but it is looking very bright, even as ADVENT will no doubt make advancements of their own.”

He knew about Project Firestorm, and had passing knowledge of the other two. “Well, I’m ready to see what you’ve come up with.”

“Let’s start small then,” Shen suggested, and led him to a metal table that had some kind of weapon on it. The size was about that of an autorifle, and the main barrel was circular and chrome, and culminated in an end with four prongs extended, all sparking with electricity. “While we didn’t have many new weapons for you, aside from Templar requests,” Shen continued. “Several engineers came up with this little weapon.”

The Commander picked it up, noting it was much lighter than he was expecting. “So what is it?”

“This,” Shen said with an amused smile. “Is the WHEEE.”

The Commander gave an absentminded nod, until his brain caught up with his ears. “I’m sorry, what?”

“The Weaponized High Explosive Energy Emitter,” Shen explained, giving a rare chuckle. “The idea was taken from the original ARC Thrower, which has sadly become rather obsolete in both use and power. The design was taken and scaled up to a full-sized cannon. The best description would be…” he paused, glancing up for inspiration. “A mobile lightning gun.”

Well, that explained the weight. He began walking to the range, shifting it around as he figured out how it weighed in various positions. “I don’t think you’ll have to test this on me,” he commented as he saw the end prongs spark. He could swear Shen sighed in relief at that. “Let’s see how this actually works.”

Shen had luckily set up several dummies at the end of a quartered off range. One was a regular stuffed dummy in the shape of a Vitakarian, or other vague humanoid, and the next was a copy, but with some light armor on it. He aimed first at the uncovered dummy, noting that the weapon sparked at the prongs, and saw a small laser beam shooting out from the WHEEE, which reminded him of the old laser weapons. The moment he applied some light pressure to the trigger, there was
a sharp crack and bright flash, and the dummy was gone.

Only scraps of material floated down, whatever remained that hadn’t been atomized by the WHEEE bolt.

That was rather satisfying. “Impressive,” he complimented. “I don’t suppose this can be fired indefinitely?”

“Unfortunately not,” Shen said with a smile. “This current iteration can only shoot four blasts before it requires a replacement cell, and the cells take near ten minutes to fully recharge, even with elerium generators.” He motioned to the WHEEE. “However, there are three different cells built into the cannon, which you can cycle through, and the recharging process will begin immediately for the most recent cell. You’ll have to watch your fire, but we didn’t want this to be a limited-use weapon.”

“Smart,” the Commander agreed. “Time for a little more conclusive test.” He aimed for the armored dummy, wondering what would happen to the metal itself. If the person inside didn’t die from literal shock, he wondered what-

He fired another bright white bolt, and the metal turned a scorched black, and then fell to the ground as the dummy had the same reaction as the first one, which was a violent explosion.

Huh. He smiled.

“I think we have another anti-Battlemaster weapon,” he noted, cycling the cells even though he still technically had two shots left. “I don’t imagine all that metal armor would be good for him if he were to…say…get struck by lightning.”

“No,” Shen agreed as the Commander turned back to him. “I don’t think he would. This hasn’t been field-tested yet…but you can imagine why we’re pretty confident about the results.”

“Be sure to make enough of these,” the Commander said approvingly, gesturing for him to continue. “I think I’m going to keep this one.” He flipped the labeled safety switch and followed Shen as they walked to a different part of the Engineering Bay.

“First I’ll demonstrate the Stargate Project,” Shen said, and they stepped into an expansive area, where there were two full-sized and identical Gateways, set a short distance from each other. Engineers were stationed at terminals close by, and connected to, the Gateways themselves.

“You figured it out,” the Commander said approvingly. “How hard was it?”

“Reverse-engineering a piece of technology that allows instant teleportation?” Shen questioned with some rare sarcasm. “Fairly. Sovereign tech is…difficult to understand, even when fully translated to English. However, on a purely scientific level, it does make some degree of sense, though how this could have possibly been discovered I cannot imagine.”

The Commander and Shen walked to the middle, in between both Gateways. “So if you can explain, how does it work?”

“The Gateways act as tuning forks, which resonates two points in space by creating a harmonic function,” Shen began, and the Commander was already having trouble following. Physics was not something he particularly liked, or was good at. “This function is designed to resonate two points in space-time.”

“Right,” the Commander said dryly. “And how does it do that?”
“By creating a compound wave constructed by a fast-fourier transform, which spikes at two points on an infinite line…” he trailed off when he saw the Commander’s face. “You don’t follow?”

“No.”

“Ok,” Shen rubbed his forehead. “The two Gateways are resonating at the same frequency, and that is how they are connected. The connection is through two points in space through the space-time fabric. So anything going in one, comes out the other. It’s not necessarily instantaneous, but the more perfect the resonance aligns between the two Gateways, the more likely people going into Gateways will exit instantly.”

He understood that. “And if the resonance isn’t perfect?”

“Two possibilities,” Shen answered. “The most common is that it takes longer to emerge from the other side of the Gateway. Instead of instantly, it could be a minute or more. People who went in didn’t report any difference in how it felt to them, as far as they were concerned, it was instantaneous. The other danger, and this was when we deliberately messed with the resonance, is that whatever goes in just vanishes.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “Just vanishes? Nothing else?”

“The most likely outcome is that it was teleported, but to a location other than the second Gateway,” Shen explained. “Where that is, we can’t predict. It could be a few feet away, or the other side of the world. It’s not lethal, or so we think, but it could transport beings to dangerous locations. We didn’t test on people either, but we did need to know the potential dangers.”

The Commander looked to the Gateways. “I hope you have a safe version prepared?”

“I assumed you’d want to test it for yourself,” Shen said, pointing to the engineers manning the Gateway terminals. “Begin synchronization!”

“Synchronization beginning,” one of them called, and both the Gateways began shimmering with purple and black energy, the black hole in the center growing larger and larger as Shen and the Commander walked up to one. A few minutes later, the Commander could make out a blurry image in the Gateway, which appeared to be the very room he was in.

“Synchronization complete!” Someone called. “Resonance is stable.”

“Here goes nothing,” the Commander muttered as Shen nodded it was safe to go through. He took a single step into the Gateway and he was suddenly on the other side of the room. He blinked. It seemed anticlimactic, but he then remembered that he had literally been teleported from one position to another.

“I think it works!” He called out. He turned around and walked through the Gateway he had exited, and was immediately back beside Shen. “That was strange,” he commented. “I didn’t feel anything. It was instant.”

“The big test will be once we have Gateways across the world,” Shen said. “I expect there might be some delay, but for now, it is instantaneous. The schematics and plans are ready to be given to ADVENT, as well as construct more of our own, with your approval.”

“Done,” the Commander said instantly. “I don’t think the aliens will be pleased that we can have unlimited reinforcements now too.”

“Unlikely,” Shen agreed. “And with that, I think I’ll show you the other two projects. I think you’ll
be just as pleased with the results for them.”

With what he’d seen so far, his expectations were high. “Lead the way,” he told Shen, and followed him to another part of the Engineering Bay.”

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The Praesidium, Barracks

[Concerning the continuing development of XCOM technology, it has not slowed despite the continuing losses against alien forces. The main reason for this is that the Commander of XCOM has taken an extremely long view of the war ahead, and has accounted for a difficult initial defense. In addition, the presence of the Ethereal Aegiss, as well as Psion Patricia Trask has helped maintain morale.]

[In addition, there are several major projects that have been in development for the past several months, that I am not only just learning about. The FIRESTORM, ICARUS, STARGATE projects, as well as the ADVENT PRIEST Program have all significantly contributed to XCOM strategy moving forward, which I will detail below to the best of my ability…]

Nuan gritted her teeth as she looked over the currently typed report. The misspellings were bad, but it wasn’t something that she could particularly fix at the moment or easily. Her prosthetics, which rested on the laptop in front of her, were more of a hindrance than a help in more delicate situations like this.

While she was still thankful to have hands, it was more difficult to adjust than she was expecting. She hadn’t felt right ever since she’d started using them, and everything she tried to do to get more used to them only highlighted just how odd she felt. She was more dexterous with them than she’d been a few weeks ago, but still…

What continually upset her was there wasn’t any feeling. Not like actual skin. She could control to an extent how much pressure she exerted, even if she’d shattered a few glasses every now and then. She used plastic now as a result, but that was the only stimuli she truly got. She knew when she was touching something, but it barely mattered what.

Heat, cold, hard, soft; she couldn’t feel anything anymore. She knew the prosthetics could withstand extreme temperatures, so she wasn’t in much danger per-se, but she would have honestly preferred the ability to feel pain, over this blank nothing. Before this, she would have liked the ability to just ignore pain, but now she wouldn’t think of it. What people didn’t understand was that if you couldn’t feel pain, you also couldn’t feel anything else.

And she missed that.

It felt petty and selfish since she actually had functional limbs, but all it was reminding her of more and more was just what she had lost. It was difficult to just keep ignoring that, since it could happen at any time, even while writing a report for her superiors.

So she’d tried everything she could to take her mind off it, and decided to figure out exactly what XCOM had been doing to make the most comprehensive assessment possible. Turned out that XCOM had quite a lot of projects going which were all being completed now. Elerium was perhaps the largest game-changer, and she was debating putting in a section explaining how to use it from Vahlen’s report.

Considering the Commander’s overall attitude to giving away information, she was expecting the
majority of it to be redacted. Maybe she’d have to speak to him about it. Thankfully it seemed
China was actually not making any rash decisions and making sure not to antagonize ADVENT.
They were no doubt still concerned, but she was breathing a little easier now that she didn’t have to
worry about a Chinese-ADVENT war.

Although, once they learned the details of the PRIEST Program, that might change. China would
be trying to make psions of their own, but she doubted they would have much success. The
PRIEST Program would be considered a threat, but then again, pretty much everything was a threat
now. If anything, they were going to be more concerned about the rapid technological progress of
XCOM.

She was fully expecting Aegis to be censored as well, but maybe it would be enough for her
superiors to figure out that something was causing this rapid advance. The Gateways were the
largest tell and she hadn’t planned on even trying to include how they worked. There was zero
chance the Commander would let that fall into Chinese hands.

“Another report by the ever-diligent Chinese agent?” Iosif commented lightly as he walked up.

“Quiet,” she muttered in return, but she was rather happy to see him. He at least didn’t have any
issues talking with her, as the combination of her nationality and now perceived disability had
made her more unapproachable than ever. She wouldn’t have minded too much, but sometimes the
isolation was depressing.

Oddly enough, the MEC soldiers made for better conversation partners. Even if they couldn’t quite
relate, they at least understood more of what she was dealing with, even if they weren’t
necessarily...sympathetic. The newer-model ones that had just been converted did seem to retain at
least some of their personalities, one had even made a joke, but they still seemed more imitations
of personalities than the actual thing.

No, that wasn’t really fair. They just...their augmented brains must not be able to process emotions
and genuine displays like regular Humans. It was a strange combination to her, they were perfectly
capable of understanding various emotions, as well as breaking down causes for each, but they
couldn’t really express them for themselves.

She wondered if that was actually just a cost of heavy brain modification, not necessarily related to
the MECs. Either way, the MEC pilots were far from automatons that quite a few people
perceived. Still, it wasn’t quite like holding a conversation with an actual person. She glanced up at
Iosif. “Shouldn’t you be training those new Templars?”

“Where do you think I’ve been all day?” He asked rhetorically as he sat down by her. “I’m feeling
rather good seeing the new ones come in. The aliens won’t find us as easy to kill.”

“Let’s hope so,” Nuan muttered, looking back at the laptop screen, willing herself to keep going.
She did need to get this done. “The Commander has had his people advance a great deal
technologically.”

“I think we’ll be attacking the aliens in America next,” Iosif guessed. “Think you’ll be combat
ready by then?”

Her lips twitched as she thought. “Maybe. I can handle a weapon well enough.”

“But...” he finished, clearly sensing her hesitation.

“But I’m not comfortable with these yet.” She held up the prosthetic arms. “I’m not sure I’ll ever
be,” she admitted.

His eyebrows furrowed as he likely sensed she wasn’t exactly happy right now. “Is it really that bad? Have you talked with the engineers?”

“It’s not that,” she sighed, trying to think of how best to explain it. “Functionally, everything works perfectly. I can even write legibly now. My issues are more psychological, I think.” She paused. “I can’t feel anything. And that bothers me.”

“How can your hands work then?” He asked, frowning, nodding to the cup by her laptop. “You shouldn’t be able to pick that up then.”

“That’s pressure sensors,” Nuan corrected. “It’s…you’ve worn heavy gloves, right? You can still handle things, but it’s more difficult and you don’t have any sensitivity in them.” She twisted a hand, exposing it to him. “That’s what this is like. Permanently.”

“Ah,” he nodded in understanding. “That…hmm…I can see why that wouldn’t be pleasant.”

“I’ve found the best thing to do is just distract myself,” Nuan shrugged. “Exercise, research, talking; physical things mostly. Too much time alone and I just start thinking about it again.” She glanced back at her laptop. “However, some things just can’t be helped. We all have people we answer to.”

“Can I see them?” He asked suddenly.

“Sorry?”

“Your prosthetics.” He nodded to her hands. “I’ve not seen any up close, aside from the MEC pilots, and theirs are vastly different.”

She thought about it. It seemed a little strange, but Iosif probably had another point to this than just wanting to hold her hand. They were both professionals after all, and she had to admit that she would have been curious to see one up close if the positions were reversed. She didn’t answer, but extended her right hand to him, which he took rather gently, or so it looked.

He manipulated her hand lightly, turning it over, and visibly gripping it harder and lighter. “You can’t feel this?” He asked, looking up.

“I tell that something is holding onto it,” Nuan clarified. “I can’t tell the difference in how tight you’re holding me or not. Well, except if you’re barely holding on. Metal doesn’t bend easily.”

He tapped the palm of her hand. “So still nothing?”

“I know something is tapping it, but that’s it.”

“Thank you,” he said, setting her hand back on the table, which she kept there for the moment. “Have you looked into…” He paused. “Well, weaponizing them?”

She blinked. “No? I mean, I was just wanting to get used to them first.”

“Fair enough,” Iosif nodded. “But you can’t feel pain now. Honestly, something that might help might be to take advantage of this. If you can’t feel, I don’t think you’re going to come to terms with it just thinking of how much worse it is. Strength-wise, I think that only the MEC pilots are stronger than you. Maybe some of the modified soldiers like Carmelita.”
“I can punch walls and not be hurt,” she said. “I guess that’s something.”

“And you felt good, right?” Iosif asked knowingly. “Taking out frustrations on nameless walls always helps.”

“More than was probably good,” she admitted. “I really haven’t thought about these like…that.”

“Maybe think about it,” Iosif said. “At the very least, I bet punching an alien would feel good. I’d even say you’d make a good Templar, but if you don’t, I’d like to at least teach you some basic skills. It isn’t everyone who can punch with impunity.”

She cocked her head, somewhat surprised by the offer. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

He chuckled, extending his own arm, and she saw the faintly illuminated hexagons that lined his skin from the light above. “I have Iron Skin and psionics. I think I can take a punch. Might not feel good, but if my skin can stop plasma, it can take a prosthetic punch. Besides, this would take your mind off everything else.”

Nuan didn’t really see a reason not to do it. It was a kind offer, and one she probably wouldn’t get anywhere else. “Ok, I accept… and I hope you don’t regret it.”

“Regret?” He laughed. “I highly doubt that. I wouldn’t have proposed the idea otherwise.” He stood. “Anyway, whenever you finish writing stuff for the Commander to redact, find me. I’ll be waiting.”

She pointedly ignored most of his last sentence. “I will. Thank you.”

“Anytime, Nuan,” he said with a smile. “We’re all here to help each other, regardless of what expectations are.”

A good sentiment. If only more people would follow it, they likely wouldn’t have the problems they did today.

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The Praesidium, MEC Suit Storage

“You finished the Shinobi-Class MEC?” The Commander asked as they stepped into the main MEC Suit Storage area, where the suits were stored when not in use.

“We delayed it slightly, as we needed to account for several different variables the Battlemaster proposed,” Shen explained. “This is a MEC specifically designed for fighting him, and with Aegis’s help, I think he’ll be surprised at what exactly it can do.”

The Commander then saw the Shinobi MEC itself. With a pilot inside, and all powered up, the MEC itself stood twelve feet tall exactly, near the same size as the Battlemaster, which would already make the battle more even. The suit was white, and slimmer than the other MECs; more humanoid in some aspects. Every part of the joints and limbs were covered in a smooth metal layer, even if it was clearly not as much as a Marauder or Ballista-class.

There were two tanks of something on the back, and both wrists had attachments built into the limb itself, which didn’t stand out, but were clearly to be used for dispersing something. What that could be, the Commander could only guess at this point. There were also strange attachments on each of the joints, small, blunt protrusions that appeared to be a mesh, with a faint blue glow underneath.
The weapons it held was where his attention was directed. The right hand held a massive longsword, which seemed to be not quite as long as the Battlemaster’s, but at least eight feet long, and with equally large proportions for the hilt size and width. It had an upward angled crossguard, and a block pommel. The other hand held a dark grey rectangle shield, with the XCOM logo emblazoned on it in black.

“Impressive,” the Commander said, nodding in approval. “I assume it does more than just fight with a sword and shield?”

“Certainly,” Shen said with a nod, as Aegis also then stepped into the room. “Aegis will demonstrate it in a simulated battle.”

“While not perfect, Shen and his team have made an excellent effort to combat the Battlemaster,” Aegis said, not stopping as a purple psionic sword of his own appeared in one of his hands. “I am no swordsman, but I can provide an effective demonstration.”

The Commander was amused to see that Aegis was actually in the inferior position here since he was several feet smaller, but certainly didn’t act like it was a problem. He swung his psionic sword and the MEC answered by meeting the strike, then immediately began going on the offensive, raining down a series of sword blows and strikes that the Commander would not have thought possible. It seemed to him even faster than the Battlemaster.

“In theory, MEC pilots should have faster reaction times than purely organic beings,” Shen commented as Aegis was forced to use additional defensive psionics to protect himself, as the Shinobi used both the sword and shield offensively; stabbing with the sword while bashing the shield into Aegis when he wasn’t expecting it. “This includes the Battlemaster. We can’t fully match his charging ability, but we can try and react to it better.”

The Shinobi was also extremely mobile for a twelve-foot machine. The Commander noted that there were several small jets built into the legs, feet, and back of the MEC which fired off intermittently as the Shinobi moved, which must have been precisely controlled by the pilot since it never seemed to hinder the suit in any way.

Aegis apparently got tired of being attacked, and thrust out a hand, lifting the Shinobi into the air and tossing it back, then leaping forward to continue the assault. The jets on the Shinobi flared, and while it didn’t quite have a smooth landing, it recovered extremely quickly, despite losing its shield. While the sword hand blocked Aegis’s strike, holding him in a sword lock, the other arm raised and shot out a stream of white mist towards the Ethereal.

Aegis fell back, covering himself in a psionic shield as the Shinobi advanced, wrist raised and spraying more of it in his direction. “Liquid nitrogen,” Shen explained. “A potential way to slow the Battlemaster down, or any other fast alien. If nothing else, he’ll want to stay away from it.”

“Clever,” the Commander noted slowly. “I assume it can be adapted for other chemicals?”

“Yes,” Shen confirmed. “Acid, napalm, white phosphorus, thermite. The only thing that we didn’t design it for was chlorine triflouride for…obvious reasons.”

Aegis extended a hand, and the MEC froze in place, as it was caught telekinetically. Aegis moved around it, and suddenly there was a blue flash, making Aegis stumble back, freeing the MEC. It leapt toward Aegis, sword in hand and Aegis barely got his own psionic blade up to deflect it, as he was still dazed.

“Short-range electric pulse,” Shen clarified. “The Battlemaster wears metal armor. He is vulnerable
to electricity, and if the Shinobi is stuck telekinetically, they can emit this and it should disrupt his
control. Unfortunately it needs a brief recharging period, but it is effective, as you can see with
Aegis who doesn’t even have that.”

“It certainly looks like it will hold up well,” the Commander complimented. “Anything else it can
do?”

“Those are the main features,” Shen said, motioning to the two duelists. “Stand down!
Demonstration finished!” The Shinobi stood down immediately, and the psionic blade and shield
around Aegis dissipated as he straightened.

“As you can see,” Aegis said. “I believe this will provide an adequate challenge to the
Battlemaster.”

“Ah, one more thing,” Shen motioned to Aegis. “Stab her in the arm with the sword. There is
another feature we added.”

“Certainly,” Aegis took the offered sword from the Shinobi and stabbed towards the arm. The
Commander assumed this was part of the demonstration, even if it was an unconventional way of
showing it off. Aegis had to turn the blade to the heat setting, but he pushed the tip through and
withdrew quickly. Mere seconds later, the gaping wound leaking liquid and oil began closing, until
a few seconds later there was no visible wound at all.

“Self-healing MELD nanites,” Shen confirmed. “We expect the Battlemaster will land several
blows, and knowing him, most will be critical. The Shinobi suit has repairing nanites to repair
surface damage, and internal nanites to regulate internal systems. Not an infinite supply, mind you,
but it will increase survivability significantly.”

“The sword can be configured to be attached to the hand of the suit,” Aegis added. “As can the
shield. However, it is an optional function that varies on the style of the pilots in question.”

The Commander smiled grimly. “I’m looking forward to the Battlemaster encountering this.
Especially with Templars…”

“Or soldiers in general,” Shen said. “I imagine that a Shinobi-Templar-WHEEE combination might
be enough to overcome even him. No superweapons required.”

“I would not become overconfident,” Aegis warned. “This will cause problems for the
Battlemaster, but he will adapt.”

“Maybe,” the Commander agreed. “But I think sooner or later he’ll reach a limit.”

Shen motioned to the MEC, and the Shinobi walked off. “While we’re here, Commander, I do
want to appraise you of another project that isn’t officially in production yet.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. Shen doing something off the record. This was unexpected.
“Nothing too outlandish, I hope?”

“Depends on your definition,” Shen said slowly, and began leading him to another section of the
Engineering Bay, with Aegis following closely behind. “You recall the Athena Contingency?”

“I wrote it,” the Commander snorted. “Of course I do.”

“But as of yet, no steps have been taken in case we…need it,” Shen pointed out hesitantly.
“Considering our precarious position…I do think that is a mistake. Even with our advances, we are
still far from posing a dangerous threat to the larger Collective, much less more powerful Ethereals.”

The Commander suddenly frowned, recalling exactly what the Athena Contingency entailed. The implications were not...bad...but it was one where there were a very limited number of good outcomes. He hadn’t started work on it for a reason. This needed to be something that was handled very, very carefully. “Please don’t tell me you have a—”

“No,” Shen quickly clarified. “Not a sentient one. More of a...let’s say, proof of concept.”

“This is dangerous.” Aegis commented.

“I assume you read my mind?” Shen sighed.

“When it comes to machines, relying on them is dangerous, and giving them abilities to reason is cataclysmic,” Aegis answered. “There is a reason we avoided artificial intelligence. We observed multiple alien species believe they could harness the advanced capabilities of an AI. All of them were eventually betrayed by it, or otherwise sabotaged. One of the most likely theories as to what the Synthesized are is an AI that turned on its creators. You are playing with something you do not understand, Raymond Shen. I would advise—”

“You can advise all you wish,” Shen retorted, surprisingly sounding irritated with the Ethereal as they stepped into a circular room that was filled with alien computers that the Commander recognized from various UFOs. “But the fact is that our options and tools are limited. If you continue to not provide more tangible assistance, then we need to explore other possibilities. And since you admit that the Ethereals are unfamiliar with this field, I hardly think you are in a position to lecture us about the dangers.”

“I have seen where this leads.” Aegis stated flatly. “It has never turned out positively.”

“Enough,” the Commander demanded, raising a hand, looking at Shen. “Doctor, what exactly do you have to show me?”

“Yes,” Shen adjusted his glasses. “The CODEX system was what I am interested in. While it is not a true artificial intelligence, it can perform many functions and has an ability to respond to stimuli that is extremely similar to theoretical AI concepts. However, it cannot go beyond this, as there are programming blocks that prevent it from ever being able to answer or think outside the designated parameters.”

“So you took a CODEX and did what?” The Commander asked.

“The first thing I did was set up a working CODEX,” Shen said, walking over to one of the consoles. “It relies on databases for all information, as well as connections to UFOs or other systems. I and a small team created a system disconnected from any networks or systems. This still is not connected to any XCOM database.”

“At least you are sensible.” Aegis commented.

“And...here.” Shen pressed a button, and a solid blue hologram of the CODEX figure appeared, but instead of a faceless head, it instead appeared to be an older man, with glasses and thinning hair. He appeared to be based off a real person, but who that was, the Commander couldn’t guess. “As you can see, I made some visual changes. The CODEX system has quite a bit of untapped versatility, but the default is the faceless golden figure, with Female Voice Two, to be specific.”

“I see,” the Commander looked at the hologram closely. “Where are you?” He asked the hologram.
“I am currently, error: Location unknown,” the hologram answered in a generic male voice without any inflection. “Error: Data not found; Error: Database connection lost; Error: Local systems not accessible; Error: Likelihood of memory corruption: One Hundred percent.”

“Quiet,” Shen called to the hologram. “He’s not connected to anything. You won’t be able to ask him anything without getting roughly fifteen error messages.”

“‘He’?” Aegis said skeptically.

“Better than it,” Shen shrugged. “I doubt you referred to the CODEX as ‘it’ either.”

“Does he have a name?” The Commander asked, amused. “Or at least the system itself?”

“Yes,” Shen said, as he continued working at the terminal. “The JULIAN System. Named after a friend who worked in artificial intelligence. Expert programmer and my teacher many years ago.” Shen paused. “I’m afraid he passed away several years ago. I felt it fitting to name what may be the first artificial intelligence after him.”

“Fair enough,” the Commander nodded.

“I’m sure your friend would appreciate you jeopardizing the Human race in his name,” Aegis commented. “But the sentiment is commendable.”

“Comments like that aside, I do have another demonstration,” Shen said. “And…now. JULIAN, identify the following people in this room.”

“Current residents in the area,” JULIAN said in the same monotone. “Three: Jack Young, Shen Trey, Pablo Roberto. Do you have further inquiries?”

“No,” Shen shook his head. “Shut down.” JULIAN vanished as he continued explaining. “Even with a temporary database, I didn’t want to use actual data, so I simply put our pictures with different names. But you can see that it works near-instantly.”

The Commander scratched his chin as he thought. AI was not something he wanted done in secret, or with only a few people. While Shen had his heart in the right place, Aegis had a very good point that an actual AI was not something they had much experience with. “I’m expanding this to a full operation; find the best experts in artificial intelligence and put them on making this work safely. And I want to be appraised of every development. You don’t do things like connecting it to external sources, or giving it increased capabilities without my approval.” He looked to Shen. “This looks good so far, but this is either being done correctly, or not at all. We can’t take the chance.”

He glanced up at the Ethereal. “And you are going to work with Aegis on this. While he clearly doesn’t like AIs, I’d rather he disapprove and keep you from doing something stupid than have him not be involved at all. And this is going forward Aegis, even with the dangers.”

“I do not like it,” Aegis said. “But I will have to ensure you do not cause lasting damage.”

“Good enough,” the Commander nodded, before looking to Shen. “Now, let’s see what else you have to show off.”

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The Praesidium, Archangel Testing Area

“Coming in hot!” Sierra called out as she angled her armor to prepare for the rapid insertion. “Ted,
Anna, you with me?"

“Copy, Sierra,” Ted Holden answered, sounding way too excited about this. “Right behind you. Ready for this?"

“We are completely not,” Anna Pavlova disputed, slightly stammering as they approached the ground. “Fuck you and your idiot plans, Sierra.”

“Noted,” Sierra grinned as the target zone was highlighted on her HUD. She’d wanted to try this ever since she’d strapped on the Archangel armor. She would never have thought she’d be in this position, but now she didn’t want to be anywhere else. “Prepare to cut jets.”

A few seconds later the HUD flashed yellow, and she flipped her body up vertically, flared her jets with a mental command which briefly slowed her, and then cut the power and fell to the ground feet first. The first time she’d done anything like this she’d thought for sure she was committing suicide, but much to her surprise, the Muscle Fiber Density modification did let her drop entire stories without any damage whatsoever.

And it worked especially well for Archangel drops. She landed on the sandy metal flat filled with targets with a sharp thud, and immediately began firing her gauss rifle at the targets. Ted landed right beside her and thrust out his arms, which were encircled with psionic energy. Purple beams shot from them, incinerating the targets in question.

Anna landed on the other side, and began firing her own autorifle, marching forward as she fired, turning the targets into metal scraps and pieces of material. “Targets eliminated,” Sierra said. “Launch!” She triggered the launch command manually, and jumped into the air. She’d memorized the exact time needed for the jets to fully turn on, and timed correctly, she could be in the air again nearly instantly.

Ted whooped as they flew back into the midnight desert sky. “Now that was a combat drop!”

“Fifteen seconds and thirty-two targets removed,” Anna commented as they circled the sky. “Not bad for a first try.”

“I think I came in a little too early,” Sierra said, thinking on the drop. “I could have waited another second before killing the jets.”

“Good run,” the voice of Shen said. “Perform air-to-ground assault on Section 7. I’ll let you decide how to handle it.”

“Copy,” Sierra confirmed, and began angling her body and jets towards the section. Controlling the armor had taken some getting used to, and for a while she’d mostly gone through various stages of crashing it into walls and sand. But the moment when she’d actually flown in the air for a decent amount of time, and landed it without stumbling had been one of the best feelings ever.

The armor itself was largely controlled by a kind of neural interface, which was a much less invasive version of the MEC implants. Each time she technically had to be connected to the suit, and that allowed her a surprising amount of control over it. Everything vital was displayed on the HUD, but for direction, speed, and intensity, she mostly just had to think about it, and the suit would usually respond. It was a difficult thing to explain, but while the Archangel armor was bulkier than Aegis armor, she didn’t really feel it at all.

Complicating controls slightly were small pads in the boots that when pressed by the toes, gave the jet on that leg an extra boost. It had taken some time to not accidentally press it while flying, but
now she was good at keeping her feet still unless she needed a little extra control. She’d spent enough time in the suit that some of the more complicated maneuvers were starting to become familiar.

“Section 7 is urban chokeholds, yes?” Anna asked. “Or is that 8?”

“No, 7 is urban chokeholds,” Sierra confirmed, a grin stretching across her face once she said that. “Firestorm tactic?”

“Oh yeah,” Ted said gleefully. “Think I’ll let you ladies take point. I’ll destroy whatever you miss.”

Sierra checked her fuel levels for the suit heavy weapon. Archangel armor had several different integrated attachments, chemical dispensers and heavy lasers being chief among them, and the flamethrower was without a doubt her favorite weapon she had yet to use. “Anna, you take street two.”

“Oh understood,” she confirmed and sped past her as Section 7 approached. It was a mock city block created, with several buildings filling a small web of streets. No skyscrapers unfortunately, but it provided a good enough simulation. And on the streets were dummies in fake cover, presumably attacking allied or XCOM forces.

“Pulling up to the center,” Ted informed her and flew upwards until he was stationed more or less in the center of the section, having a clear view of everything. His arms were encircled in violent psionic energy as he waited to unleash it.

“Prepping flamethrower and coming around for the first pass,” Sierra stated as she manually prepped her flamethrower. She wasn’t as familiar with the weapon, and didn’t want to rely on mental commands through the suit with it yet. The Commander was probably watching, and he would want to see everything working.

She circled around, took a breath, and then sped forward, lining up with the street she was planning to strafe. She stuck her rifle to the attachment on her chest, which kept it in place temporarily as she got closer to the ground. Now came her favorite part. “Firing.” At the correct mental command, napalm shot out the nozzle on her left wrist, covering the entire street.

Sierra was now prepared for the kickback of the weapon, and had adjusted the strength of her jets to compensate. Once she reached the end of the street, and therefore the enemy line, she ceased the napalm stream and angled herself upward, shooting for the sky with a victorious cheer of her own.

“Strafing run complete,” Anna updated, and as Sierra angled herself around, she saw Anna’s chosen street burning as well. Ted was also shooting lances of psionic energy at the dummies that hadn’t been incinerated, which was almost none, bless his excitable little heart.

“You know, I wish you had missed a few more,” Ted commented, as he flew up to where they were congregating. “I didn’t really do anything.”

“Hey, the lights looked pretty,” Anna joked. “All we did was set some things on fire.”

“Good work, all of you,” Shen interrupted. “Return to Praesidium entrance. Nothing fancy when you come in.”

“Roger,” Sierra acknowledged. “We’re on our way.”

She turned herself around, and they shot back across the desert towards the Praesidium. In
retrospect, she considered herself very lucky she’d decided to go check out just what XCOM had been working on that one day, because if she hadn’t, she likely wouldn’t have been asked if she wanted to join the program, and she would have missed out on the ability to fly.

Flying was, unequivocally, awesome. There wasn’t a better word to describe it.

Granted, it probably wouldn’t be quite as fun when aliens were shooting at her, but she was more or less invincible, so she wasn’t quite as worried about that as she probably should have been. She wasn’t the only one of the current soldiers who were asked. She was an outlier in that she really didn’t have any kind of air experience whatsoever. Most everyone else had a background in parachute insertions, or other paratrooper activities. Anna was an Air Force TRF, and Ted had been a paratrooper.

All the new soldiers recruited specifically for the Archangel Program were all experienced pilots or paratroopers. All things considered, she felt she was holding her own pretty well. It helped that she completely loved doing this.

“Coming in for a landing,” Sierra said as she saw the landing pad, where Shen, the Commander, and a few other Archangels were standing. Per the orders, she took it slow, and angled herself up vertically about fifteen feet above the ground and killed the jets; falling to the ground and landing upright, Ted and Anna right behind her.

“Impressive,” the Commander complimented, inclining his head. “It sounds like you had fun.”

“As much fun as can be had, Commander,” she said tactfully. While she most certainly had, it might be best not to visibly have too much fun. “I expect things will become more serious in actual combat. But we are well-prepared.”

“We’ll find out shortly,” the Commander said, turning to Shen. “The pilots you have certainly seem skilled enough. Would you consider them combat-ready?”

“That is more of a question for the respective Dominion Archangels,” Shen said, cracking a smile. He hadn’t quite gotten into the whole titles they’d decided on, but since they were coming up with entirely new military divisions, most of them had decided to give themselves appropriately decent titles. Which the Commander seemed to recognize.

“Taking the whole ‘angel’ theme seriously, I see,” he said dryly.

Sierra smirked. “All the psions get neat titles, Commander,” she pointed out. “Only fair we get some of our own.”

“Well in that case, what do they think?” He said turning to the two Dominion Archangels, the ones with the most experience both with the suits and aerial operations in general.

There was Nu Jung-Hwan, who just went by Hwan, one of the most experienced South Korean pilots in their entire military. In his off time he was also proficient in multiple martial arts and had taken up swordplay as a hobby. Naturally, he was one of the few Templar Archangels, and there wasn’t anyone who had picked up on how to use the suit as well as he had.

Since he’d apparently helped design it, that wasn’t a surprise. Even with the limited time the suits had actually been able to be used, he was a natural at it, pulling off insertions at incredible distances and leaving again in mere seconds.

The other was Viktoria Hammarström, who had quite possibly the best name Sierra had ever heard. She was special beyond her name though, since she was originally part of the Swedish
Parachute Rangers, and was also a natural with the Archangel suit. However, aside from being more tactically-minded, she was also a Leviathan-class Psion, and with the Offensive aptitude of powers.

While still getting used to her psionic abilities, Sierra had witnessed her destroy the entirety of Section 7 once with some kind of psionic maelstrom. She was going to give Patricia a run for her money if she kept training.

“Most I believe are sufficiently combat ready,” Hwan stated confidently. “Some of the Templars have yet to fully master aerial melee combat adequately, as some are not in acceptable control of the suit. But who you saw today are quite ready, as I’m sure you’d agree.”

“I concur,” Viktoria agreed. “There is little more that can be learned from repeated exercises outside of actual combat. The Archangels here are more than adequate for combat.”

“Excellent,” the Commander said. “In that case, I would prepare yourselves. We will be taking the fight to the aliens in the next few days. I would advise that you be ready.”

They all saluted. “Yes, Commander.”

“Then return to your training,” the Commander said, returning the salute. “I look forward to seeing you in action against the aliens themselves.”

Sierra couldn’t agree more.

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The Praesidium, Practice Ranges

Oliver did have to admit that the new gene mods really did make a difference. He had literally hit every single target at maximum range and it had genuinely not been that difficult for him. He was going to have to ask that XCOM get some harder practice ranges, because it was almost stupidly easy now.

He hadn’t been the only one there either, and some of them had sort of tried to see who could make the most impressive trickshot. He was too old to really do stuff like that, and it might have irritated him before the mandatory upgrades. But considering how accurate he was with a pistol of all things, he was less offended by professional soldiers not taking a practice range completely seriously.

But he was done now, and would have been on his way back had he not spotted a very much armored Carmelita sitting in the background with some tools and a paint can of all things, working on something. He had to at least go and see what that was about. “Expecting trouble?” He asked, making her glance up.

“Oliver, right?” She said in her soft voice, looking at his face inquisitively.

“Yes.” He looked down at the table. “Project?”

Carmelita seemed to be working on some kind of helmet. It wasn’t the standard one issued to Assault-class soldiers, but a design he’d never seen before. It reminded him more of an astronauts helmet, if the faceplate was complete black and not transparent, as well as the overall design being more oval to fit the head better.

He raised an eyebrow, and he broke into a smirk once he saw what Carmelita had painted on the
front of the helmet. It was a smiley face of all things, in a bright Wal-Mart yellow, with two slits for eyes and a curved line underneath for a mouth. Nothing original, but it was not something he was expecting to see on a helmet. “Ah, what is that?”

Carmelita looked at the helmet fondly as she flipped it in her hands. “This,” she said, looking up. “Is one of the few unsolved mysteries in XCOM. It’s an old helmet, one of the first-gen kinds. As far as I know, only one was made and I found it, and didn’t want it to go to waste.”

“That’s the mystery?” He asked. It seemed rather benign to him.

“Nope,” she clarified. “Back in the beginning, this actually belonged to a sniper. No one ever figured out anything about him since he didn’t talk, but we had to go along with it. He never showed his face and only communicated in sign language.”

Oliver’s eyebrows furrowed. “Why? And isn’t that dangerous?”

“Never found that out,” Carmelita shrugged. “And you would think, but we somehow managed to make it work. Probably because the sniper was actually one of the best I’ve seen. I think he came with the Commander, but no one knows for sure that I could find.”

“He had a sense of humor, clearly,” Oliver said, looking down at the helmet.

Carmelita gave a sad smile. “No, a…friend…he found out where the sniper was hiding out, and made some ‘adjustments’ to the helmet.” Her eyes unfocused as she looked sightlessly into the distance. “Needless to say, the sniper was not amused, but I guess he liked it enough to keep it.”

Oliver found that very amusing. “Who? I’d give him thanks for creativity. That’s rather brilliant. And terrifying.” He added after a few seconds of thought.

“His name was Shawn,” Carmelita said with a sigh. “He’s dead. Chryssalid.”

“Oh.” That detail suddenly put this in a new context for him. Considering how Carmelita was acting, he suspected that this Shawn had been…important to her. “I’m sorry to hear that.” Especially if he’d died to a chryssalid. Hopefully it had been quick and not as a reanimated corpse carrying eggs.

“Appreciated,” she said tonelessly. “His was one of the first deaths. Hamburg. I should have been sent with him. He might have lived.”

_or, if he died by chryssalid, you would have had to shoot him._ He privately thought, but didn’t say aloud. “Not necessarily. I think you know that.”

She pursed her lips. “I was a better soldier than him. His chances would have been better with me protecting him.”

“Protecting?” He raised an eyebrow. “Interesting choice of words.”

“Don’t play coy, I doubt you’re an idiot,” she stated flatly. “I doubt it’s ‘interesting’ either. You try and protect the people you care about, right? Even if you know they can do that themselves?”

“True,” he admitted. “Although I’m afraid not in the same context as you.”

“Count yourself lucky,” Carmelita said coldly. “Mira was right. Attachments never work out in our line of work. All it will eventually cause is pain.”
The name was unfamiliar to him. “Another friend?”

“Wouldn’t call her that,” Carmelita said. “She’s dead too.” Carmelita looked thoughtfully around. “It’s funny. There aren’t really any survivors from the original team of soldiers. Only Patricia and Abby are still alive, and me. It’s strange, somehow managing to endure while everyone dies around you. I don’t want to think how many of the new people just coming in will die in the war.”

“That seems defeatist,” Oliver commented.

“Maybe,” she said slowly. “But all I can do is what Shawn would want. He would want XCOM protected, and I shall do that.”

“You’re only doing this for him?” Oliver asked.

“Not completely,” Carmelita shook her head. “He would want me to protect XCOM. But the only thing I really care about is avenging him, and every other Human killed in this war. I will either see all the alien worlds burning, or I will die. There is no peace with the aliens, regardless of what some think. They must be driven extinct, and I will work until my dying breath of make that a reality.”

Oliver felt like he was on thin ice right now. “You don’t seem to have much of a problem with the aliens here.”

“They are allied,” she said simply. “They are a danger, but one that can be controlled. That is the only possibility I see for aliens should we win. They will submit to us, or they will die. I would personally prefer the second option.”

“I see.” Oliver was not quite sure how to take this. He’d known Carmelita unsettled him on some level, but had largely chalked it up to her serious charisma and natural intimidation. But now he knew it was because he was quite sure she was a sociopath who would not be dissimilar to how some aliens probably viewed humanity. She didn’t seem unstable, not in the usual sense.

He’d seen broken people before. If the loss of her lover would snap her, it would have happened long ago. She was at a stage where that chance had passed, and all that mattered to her was vengeance, and she was perhaps one of the most dangerous women you could have for an enemy. When she said she intended to kill or virtually enslave every alien, he was inclined to believe her.

He wondered where the Commander stood in regards to her.

“So whatever happened to the sniper?” He asked, changing the topic. “Did he die too?”

“No one knows, actually,” Carmelita stated. “The mystery, as I mentioned earlier. He just sort of… vanished. XCOM Intelligence actually started up around that time, so I assume he was transferred there. But no one actually knows. Wherever he is, I’m sure he’s doing fine. I don’t see him dying easily.”

She flipped the helmet in her hands. “In the meantime, I’m going to use this. Maybe give the aliens something else to fear.” She put it on her head; Oliver heard it hiss as it clicked. “How does it look?”

She stood before him, fully armored. “Rather terrifying, actually,” he said honestly. A smiley face should not be scary, but knowing who Carmelita was, and the happy simplicity of the smiley face, it seemed ironically malicious. It might be funny, had said woman it belonged to not been carrying an alloy cannon, had a stinger that still made him shiver when she used it, and generally was a ruthless killing machine.
“Good,” she said. “I think he’d like me using his work this way.”

Oliver suspected that Shawn had likely intended it as a joke, and not a symbol for the aliens to fear, but then again, he might be wrong. “A good way to carry on his memory.”

“Yes, exactly,” she said, looking into the distance. “If I’m going to survive this war, I don’t want to forget what I fought for. This will help remind me.” She began walking away, and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Not often I have an actual conversation with people these days. Thanks.”

“All right,” he said as she walked off.

He wondered if he should keep an eye out for her, but decided against it. Whatever Carmelita did, there was almost no chance he’d be able to impact it one way or another, and he did not want to get in her way.

She already had entire alien species marked for death. He suspected that one older man wouldn’t even make her blink. Best not to risk it until he talked with her some more.

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The Praesidium, Hangar Bay 2

The Commander smiled as Shen brought him into the Hangar. “About time we had a modern fighter.”

Before him were ten of the new Firestorms, the first of the next-generation XCOM air force. The design had taken initial inspiration from the Sectoid UFOs, but had stripped down the superfluous aspects, and was ultimately much smaller. It had a single cockpit, and the back half of the Firestorm was a semi-circle containing the engine, the front half holding the cockpit and tipped ‘wings’, even though it was an aircraft that didn’t rely on such anymore.

“Adapting the alien anti-gravity systems was one of the easiest parts in constructing the fighter,” Shen said as they took a closer look. The Commander liked how sleek the fighter was. No wasted space or unneeded accessories. “Once elerium was solved, it was only a matter of shrinking the necessary parts to an acceptable size.”

“How does it pilot?” The Commander asked, peering into the cockpit.

“At the moment, the actual controls are not dissimilar to current fighter aircraft,” Shen explained. “Depending on how the Archangel Program turns out, we may investigate a means of similar connection between a pilot and a Firestorm.”

“And weapons?”

“Varies,” Shen said, motioning to the location of the twin guns, one on each side of the cockpit, within two sheets of metal which obscured it from being that visible. “We attempted to make it possible to swap out different weapons, but it was ultimately simpler to have slightly different models of Firestorms. One with laser capabilities, and one with gauss cannons.”

The Commander nodded, looking at the Firestorm. “Sustained laser, I assume?”

“Yes, and initial simulations are very promising,” Shen said, rapping his knuckles on the hull. “It’s a lot of work, but the alien XCOM did have the same type of weapon, so I think it’ll be able to be adapted.”
long distances is a feature.”

Now that was very good to have. The Commander wondered if the Sectoid UFOs had ever been considered to perform similar functions. The UFOs had the capability of hovering and firing, as Patricia had demonstrated during the first battle of Japan. For that matter, he wondered just how much of their navy he hadn’t seen.

By Aegis’s own admission, the Sectoid fleet was only one part. There was the Ethereal Dreadnought, but to date he didn’t believe that they had seen Vitakara or Andromedon crafts. He wasn’t counting the transports. And they had to have additional types of aircraft, such as bombers and frigates.

He wondered just how much the Firestorms would force the Collective to deploy to stop them. The basic UFOs probably wouldn’t cut it anymore. They had died to conventional weaponry, much less this kind of aircraft.

“And this is spaceworthy?” He asked, remembering that had been a requirement he’d put in.

“Correct,” Shen said with a nod. “There are life support systems, and the Firestorm can operate in zero-g environments without major issues. Oxygen supplies last twelve hours, and the hull is durable enough for atmospheric exit and reentry.”

“And no fuel needed,” he added, just to be clear on its capabilities. “Just elerium?”

“Yes, the only thing that needs to be changed is the elerium crystals that power the engines,” Shen said. “And elerium crystals of that size last a long time. There is little worry about the Firestorm suddenly running out of power. Multiple contingencies are in place to prevent that concern.”

“On that note…” the Commander began, after a few seconds of silence. “The Avenger Project.”

“Undergoing some revisions,” Shen said, adjusting his glasses. “While the schematics Aegis provided are useful, it was a prototype Andromedon ship, and one with some flaws in it. We are going to improve on the design, and then we will need to build a facility large enough to house it.”

“Leave that to Jackson,” the Commander assured him. “Just give her the size. We can have a suitable facility done in several months.”

“By then we’ll have a schematic in place,” Shen said. “To be honest, that is our initial concern. The Praesidium is large, but I expect that the Avenger-class ship itself will be the same size.”

“We’ll have to be careful with it,” the Commander said, thinking. “I don’t want to lose it to someone like Caelior. Or the Battlemaster for that matter.”

“I have some ideas to lessen the risk,” Shen assured him with a faint smile. “Depending on how the JULIAN Project turns out, that may be one way. Alternatively, I have found some rather curious schematics based on Sovereign technology, which I do not believe the Collective has taken note of.”

“Really?” The Commander said skeptically. “Why?”

“Because if I understand some of them correctly, they allow things to be done that shouldn’t be possible,” Shen said, then shook his head. “But that is a completely different topic. I trust you are satisfied with the Firestorms?”

“Very,” the Commander nodded. “I look forward to seeing them in action.”
“I think the pilots are eager to find out for themselves,” Shen chuckled. “I expect soon we will give them what they want.”

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The Praesidium, Situation Room

“I’m curious,” the Commander said. “Do you think you can defeat the Imperator?”

“Alone?” Aegis answered flatly, standing almost motionless opposite him; the holotable in between. “No.”

The Commander smirked humorlessly. “That was fast.”

“The Imperators were the most powerful of our kind by a significant margin,” Aegis said. “I am not delusional about how I compare. Nor any other Ethereal either, I suspect.”

“Right,” the Commander said slowly. “And you did know about this before defecting to us?”

“Yes.”

“So,” the Commander crossed his arms. “Despite that, you still felt it worth the risk. You never actually explained why you did it, besides disagreements with how our species was handled.”

“Because the Imperator is both apathetic and practical,” Aegis said. “Upon reflection, my kind have been…poor leaders. Only a select few of us have bothered to ensure that the Collective is something strong enough to fight the Synthesized, or any other enemy. But the rest? Unfortunately other aliens are of less importance to them. The Imperator does not care what happens to the Collective, so long as they eventually follow his orders.”

“But aside from that, anything goes?” The Commander said.

“Not once has he interacted with any alien representative,” Aegis said. “Which is why his continued interest in Patricia is disquieting. He may not hold aliens in high regard, but for some reason, your species he considers different. He plans in terms of decades, not weeks, or even years. I suspect over time he realized that both of us held significantly different views, and slowly cut me out of his inner circle.”

Aegis sounded rather offended as he spoke. “I do not understand his motives anymore, nor his strategy, if there ever was one he shared with me. There was only one way to effectively call attention to our isolated leader, and that was to leave. And XCOM was the natural place to head to. That, and the Sovereign Ones gave us the location of this planet for a reason. Under the Imperator, I feel your potential would be wasted. I will not sacrifice our chance against the Synthesized for loyalty.”

The Commander wasn’t completely sure if Aegis was telling the whole truth, but it sounded right. “Yet you say he considers our species different.”

“Yes,” Aegis reaffirmed. “I suspect it is simply your psionic potential. The Gift is exceedingly rare, and those with it can eventually pose a threat…or be turned into an asset.”

“So,” the Commander said, looking down at the holotable. “If you cannot fight the Imperator and win, what is your plan to defeat him?”

“I do not anticipate he will be defeated,” Aegis said bluntly. “Your species, like it or not, will not
win this war. The best you can do is extract too heavy a toll to justify continued assaults. Perhaps you will kill one or two of my kind. But you will not win completely. You are not facing just us, but the Greater Hive Commanders, Andromedon Federation, and the Aui’Vitakar. Even should you build an army of psions, it will not be enough.”

“So you want them to sue for peace.” The Commander stated flatly. “You actually think that we would just accept that after everything that has happened? And do you really think the Imperator would just forget that there is an entire species that was able to hold off his entire alien Collective?”

“As I said, the Imperator is practical,” Aegis repeated. “While I cannot speak for your species, if the Collective offers peace, I suggest you take it. The Imperator is the only one who can stop this war now, and if nothing else, he will keep his word. Though I expect there will be some stipulations.”

“And I think you’re being naïve,” the Commander responded, furrowing his eyebrows. “You’ve said yourself he likely has plans for us. Do you really think he’d abandon them, especially if he is as powerful as you say? What is to just stop him from coming himself and finishing it?”

“Because you are beneath his attention,” Aegis said, clearly frustrated. “You do not have a concept of how little you and your species ultimately matter, which can be forgiven, given the circumstances, but it is the truth. The Imperator would only fight if he actually considered you a threat. Whatever his plans are, they are decades if not centuries into the future. He has no doubt planned for such a contingency as extracting too high a toll from the Collective.”

“And what could such a contingency be?” The Commander asked. “If you said he wouldn’t break his word, that does not leave many options.”

“I expect that, should the situation worsen, the Imperator will order an autopsy of the entire Collective, and this war to figure out what went wrong,” Aegis said. “After a retreat, he will likely hold the Collective back for a century or two, wait until the prominent figures like you have grown old and died, and the war with the Collective is a distant memory. Your species will likely be different at that time, and throughout this I expect that the Imperator will order humanity be exposed to aliens on a gradual peaceful basis. The Vitakara are ideal for this.”

The Commander saw where Aegis was going with this, and he did not like it. “At some point, the Imperator will order an autopsy of the entire Collective, and this war to figure out what went wrong.”

“Aegis paused. “In the end, all you have accomplished in the grand scope will be the delaying of the Imperator’s plans by several centuries. Perhaps he will not even wait that long before beginning an incursion of the inner galaxy.”

The Commander pursed his lips. There was the Ethereal longevity in action. Time was not something that really affected them, while age would eventually kill any Human. Unfortunately, Aegis had a good point. Two hundred years was a long time, minimum, and even he wasn’t sure he would be able to prevent a more naïve humanity from falling to a hypothetical Imperator offer to join the Collective.

The Imperator, whatever his motivations, and whatever his plans, was not an idiot. Mostly. Despite bungling Humanity so spectacularly, the Commander figured he would learn from this. Which meant that there couldn’t be any surrender, peace offer or no. There were no good options. Keep on
fighting, they might very likely die, and stop fighting, and the Imperator won the war later.

“Whatever happens, you have changed the Collective forever,” Aegis told him, maybe trying to reassure him. “Few could do what your species has, and that is—”

“No.” The Commander interrupted bluntly. “I don’t care about that. You’re expecting to lose.”

“I am not expecting to win.” Aegis clarified.

“I am not interested in peace,” the Commander stated. “That is impossible at this point. I don’t care really what you think our chances are, but if you’re going to be here, you are going to help us on the assumption that we will win.” He held up a hand, forestalling any comments. “Now, will we? Maybe, maybe not. But we’re damn well going to try. We’re not trying to damage the Collective, we are trying to destroy them. It may take years, or even decades, but you had better be planning to win the entire time. If you aren’t going to help us with that, then go into isolation somewhere else.”

“I meant no offense,” Aegis said, apparently not surprised by his words. “But I do not like giving false hope.”

The Commander laughed ruefully. “There is a difference between false hope and planning to lose. Going by what you said, we should have surrendered the first time you bombed Hamburg, since the idea of soon facing an Ethereal and winning was simply impossible, yes?”

Aegis was silent. “I believe you once said that killing an Ethereal ‘should be impossible’,” the Commander recounted. “What is next? That it is impossible to kill the Battlemaster? That it is hopeless to drive the Collective off Earth? That it is outlandish to even think of taking the fight beyond it?” He shook his head. “No, Aegis. We are not going to give up until either the Collective is in ruins, or we all die.”

“I hope you maintain that optimism,” Aegis said neutrally. “And that it doesn’t lead your species to a fate that could have been prevented. Your ideals mean nothing if everything you care about dies in the process. What worth is there in a pointless sacrifice? Because that is what you are proposing. Alive, you still have a chance, however small.”

“It wouldn’t be pointless,” the Commander said. “Maybe it’s a Human thing, but we don’t like being beholden to an alien race who will enslave us in all but name. At the very least, we screw up whatever grand plans the Imperator has.”

Aegis looked at him for a few seconds. “It is a shame it came to this,” he mused. “Your species would have been excellent allies against the Synthesized.”

“We are allied to you, yes?” The Commander smiled. “Perhaps we still will be someday. That isn’t something we need to worry about for a while. But for now…” He looked back to the holomap of America. “We need to focus on the immediate threat.”

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The Praesidium, Psionic Training Arena

“How well did you know him?” Patricia asked as she and Aegis observed the psions training on targets, dummies, and each other. This topic was something that had been bugging her for some time, and she hadn’t gotten a proper chance to ask Aegis about the Imperator.

“Moderately well,” Aegis said, also watching the psions. “He never made an effort to befriend those around him without good reason. The only ones I would say who know him well are the
Battlemaster, Quisilia, the Overmind, and Sicarius. Everyone else...he was the Imperator, and our leader."

Patricia nodded. The names made sense except for one. “Sicarius? That seems odd.”

“Not so odd when you consider the Imperator practically raised her,” Aegis mused. “I suspect she is considered an adoptive daughter, though he would never say so to anyone else.”

“Really?” Patricia glanced up, surprised. “I didn’t realize that.”

“I have yet to determine how the Imperator actually found her,” Aegis recalled. “He ordered us to randomly stop on a planet that had been ravaged by the Synthesized.” His voice took on an odd tone. “And he went down alone, and returned with a young Ethereal girl, barely thirty, a child by our standards, starving and half-mad. That she survived at all is a miracle, and the Imperator took her with him wherever he went and personally trained her.”

Aegis’s voice became softer. “It is acts like that which make me believe that the Imperator is merely misguided, and not innately malicious. However, I cannot be sure if it was a simple act of decency or he found and raised Sicarius for the sole purpose of having a loyal assassin who could rival Quisilia.”

Well, this was new. “She’s better than Quisilia?” She asked. “Really?”

“I would say she is more dangerous,” Aegis amended. “She is not normal, especially for an Ethereal. Killing is instinct for her, and the Imperator has fed that over the years. Nuance and context are not things she can easily grasp. Quisilia can, and is far more independent. Sicarius does not care what she does, as long as it is what the Imperator orders.”

“Hmm,” Patricia thought on that. The Imperator was an odd figure. Absurdly powerful, so Aegis said, but not someone who ever seemed keen on using it. He was capable of, at least on the surface, performing selfless acts, but his motivations were a mystery. She, like Aegis, was not entirely convinced he was completely evil. But misguided seemed too naïve. The Imperator knew what he was doing.

The question was why?

“Why the interest?” Aegis asked, looking down at her. “Did you speak to the Commander?”

“Huh? No,” she frowned. “But considering the Imperator seems to have some interest in me, I’d prefer to know a little about him. More than that he’s a threat that could probably kill us all with his mind.”

“Understandable,” Aegis agreed. “Unfortunately, I am afraid I am of little help. I would not consider him a friend, and even as part of his inner circle for a time, we did not hold similar views. We have both changed since we emerged from stasis. Ever since then he has strayed more and more from our original goal.”

“Which was fighting the Synthesized, right?” Patricia recalled, confused. “Why? Wasn’t that the reason you intentionally froze yourselves? So you could fight them knowing what you were up against?”

“Originally, yes,” Aegis explained. “But something changed over the years. I do not know why, but his priorities shifted. He withdrew from managing the affairs of the Collective, and placed myself and the Battlemaster in charge. The Battlemaster has not wavered in this goal, but he did not see that the Imperator was just putting him in a position where he wouldn’t ask questions.”
“Risky,” Patricia noted. “I wouldn’t want the Battlemaster angry at me.”

“The Battlemaster is not a threat to the Imperator,” Aegis said. “Or so everyone believes.”

Patricia snorted. “You think otherwise?”

“No,” Aegis said flatly. “But if anyone could surprise me in this, it is him. There was a reason the Imperator chose him out of all the Battlemasters in the Collective.”

“Getting back to the point,” Patricia redirected. “So what else would the Imperator focus on if not the Synthesized?”

Aegis paused for a moment. “I do not know. It has to do with the inner galactic species. The first expedition he only intended to gather cursory information. He sent Quisilia, Sicarius, and Nebulan, and whatever they brought back…it seemed to have changed his priorities. Ever since then, he has been focusing on learning whatever he can about them. The Battlemaster believes he is simply gathering information for when they prepare to fight them, but I do not think it is just that.”

“Then what?”

“I do not know,” Aegis admitted. “The Imperator never shared what he learned from those expeditions. I do not even know their names, or even descriptions. But I do also know he became very interested in finding ruins and relics of previous civilizations. He was looking for something, that much I can say for certain.”

“For what, I wonder?” Patricia mused rhetorically, rubbing her chin thoughtfully. “A weapon? Information? You said you think the Synthesized have done this before? Maybe he’s looking for more survivors? I doubt he was the first to think of putting himself in stasis.”

“Perhaps,” Aegis was clearly doubtful. “I doubt it is a weapon, but information is plausible. But even that faded as he began investigating planets of different biomes. Water worlds and rocky dead ones became sites of interest. I only know this because of the copied reports I received from the Zararch agents, forwarded by Quisilia. I suppose he wanted to keep me at least partially informed, but whatever the Imperator was looking for, I do not think he found it.”

This seemed stranger the more she heard. “I guess I can ask him about that whenever he decides to talk,” she shrugged. “And I guess during this time, he just ignored the Collective completely.”

“Yes, though not because he didn’t have time.” A sigh escaped Aegis’s helmet. “I do not necessarily think it was intentional either. Time…it is not the same when you are immortal, Patricia. Years can pass you without really noticing. After some time, it becomes meaningless since it is not something to be concerned about any longer. Mortal species like yours, the Andromedons, and the Vitakara move at a speed that is alien to us who are not used to it. For some like myself and the Battlemaster, we are used to it, but the speed at which you research, develop, and build is foreign to one like Revelean or the Creator.”

“That actually explains a lot,” Patricia said. “I guess that it works to our advantage.”

“For now,” Aegis agreed. “But Ethereals are not wired for quick decisions. A week is considered fast by our standards, and even for the Battlemaster, a well-planned attack can take weeks to put together and carry out. This is a large reason why the attacks are fewer than you might expect. So yes, since you Humans work quickly, this gives you an advantage.”

“One which the Battlemaster will regret letting us have,” Patricia said with a grim smile. “He’s not going to know what hit him in the next few days.”
“No,” Aegis agreed thoughtfully. “I do not think he will.”

***

The Citadel, Situation Room – Two Days Later

Laura had clearly not expected him to show up in full armor, but the Commander figured it was time to take a more direct role in this fight. He was quite tired of just directing from the safety of the Situation Room. He didn’t want to get out of practice, and the soldiers needed to see their Commander fighting on the front lines.

“I didn’t realize you were going out there,” she commented as he joined her and Weekes, with Patricia and Jackson beside him. “And what is that?”

She nodded towards the WHEEE cannon strapped to his back. “That?” The Commander smiled. “The WHEEE.”

Weekes snorted. “Cute.”

“Wouldn’t mock it,” Patricia warned lightly. “I wouldn’t want to get shot by it.”

“Unimportant.” The Commander raised a gauntleted hand. “Are your forces in position?”

“Yes,” Laura brought up the holomap showing the West Coast. “We’ve got armies ready to converge on Seattle, Salem, Hillsboro, and Las Vegas areas. Purifiers, MDUs, and squads are all ready to go.”

“The Lancers are also going to be assisting,” Weekes said with a smile. “We’ve got enough gene-modded ones that the aliens won’t know what hit them.”

“Good.” The Commander nodded. “Seattle first.”

“There will be two main armies, one from the north and one from the east,” Laura said, focusing on the city. “The aliens have fortified it heavily, but they can’t withstand an army. Especially one supported by both the Lancers and XCOM.”

“We’re going to move beyond Portland as well,” Weekes said, pointing at the highlighted areas around the city itself. “Hillsboro and Salem are the two locations the aliens have entrenched themselves. They aren’t as heavily defended, so unless they get a sudden influx of reinforcements, I don’t think there is much we need to worry about.”

“Las Vegas will be an issue,” Laura warned. “Or what’s left of it. The aliens have turned the remains into a full military base, and assaulting it is going to be…challenging. That is where the heaviest fighting will take place. ADVENT Intelligence suspects that there might be a Sargon there, but I don’t think we’ll know for sure until we attack.”

“I have three teams prepared,” the Commander promised. “And one for whenever the Battlemaster shows up.”

“You think he will?” Weekes asked.

The Commander smiled. “Yes. But we have several plans for him.”

Laura nodded in recollection. “At your command, I will assume?”

“Or the ranking XCOM operative on-site,” the Commander affirmed. “Hopefully we won’t need it,
but I want it ready in case.”

“I suppose the question is where you will be?” Weekes asked. “And I assume Central Officer Jackson will act in your stead here?”

“Correct,” Jackson stepped forward. “I will handle communication and updates between XCOM personnel.” She paused. “I’m not experienced in tactics, but I will provide what assistance I can.”

“I’ll be leading the XCOM squad in Seattle,” the Commander said. “Patricia will lead one in Las Vegas, and Matthew Hawkins will assist in Portland. In addition to that, there will be two Firestorm and Archangel squads for Vegas, and one of each for Seattle and Portland.”

They both nodded, having been appraised of the capabilities of each earlier. “If you want numbers, I’m planning for one thousand Lancers for Las Vegas, and five hundred for every other location,” Weekes stated. “All fully gene modded and ready to go.”

“The PRIEST Program doesn’t have anyone yet?” The Commander asked.

“None combat-ready,” Laura shook her head. “A shame. It was likely going to change in a few days. Some of the soldiers are exhibiting appropriate control.”

“Not needed,” the Commander said. “We’ve delayed this long enough. What we have will suffice. Let’s give the people something to be optimistic about.”

“Not just the civilians,” Laura said with a weary smile. “I think everyone could use a victory about now.”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” Weekes warned. “The battle hasn’t even started yet.”

“True.” The Commander placed the helmet over his head. “But I have a good feeling about this.” He looked at both of them through his helmet. “Give the order. We begin retaking America now.”

“Copy that,” Laura said, pressing a switch opening the intercom. “This is Commander Christiaens. You are cleared to deploy and engage. Good luck, XCOM will be right behind you.”

That they would be. The Commander turned away, and began marching toward the Hangar, where his skyranger was waiting; Patricia right behind him.

Despite how badly it could go wrong, he was looking forward to what happened next.

What happened next would be a turning point, one way or another.

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Supplementary Material

XCOM File 0772

Subject: Current List of Psions

Author: Overseer Patricia Trask

Commander,

Due to the recent influx of recruits, and the development of the Trask System of measuring psionic power by the ADVENT PRIEST Program, I thought it prudent to put together a comprehensive list
of the current psionic soldiers, including Templars and non-Templars. I will continue to update this as more psions are awakened, but for now, this should suffice for our records. The list is in alphabetical order, and I will mark their power classification, Trask level, and psionic specialization by their names.

If you don’t want to look up the PRIEST Document ADVENT sent over, this is how the different classifications are broken down. The Trask level is from 1 to 100.

An **Awakened** classification is from Trask levels of **1** to **20**.

An **Adept** classification is from Trask levels of **21** to **40**.

A **Psion** classification is from Trask levels of **41** to **60**.

A **Magus** classification is from Trask levels of **61** to **80**.

A **Leviathan** classification is from Trask levels of **80** to **100**.

There is no higher classification, even though Trask levels can exceed 100. However, since I sincerely doubt we will find a psion of a higher power level than 100 outside of aliens, I will be classifying any individual with a Trask level higher than 100 as **Ethereal**.

This will obviously only apply to one specific being.

In addition to that, there are four specializations, or disciplines, if you prefer, of psionic abilities. These will also be stated by the psion in question. I will put them here for the record:

A **Telekine** primarily specializes in telekinetic abilities.

A **Telepath** primarily specializes in telepathic abilities

A **Defensive** specialization focuses on protection and manipulation of psionic solids.

An **Offensive** specialization focuses on destructive abilities of various focuses.

Without delaying it any longer, here is the current list of psions:

- Ellinor Aagard – Defensive Magus (**70**) [*Notes: Templar*]
- Taqi al-Pour – Defensive Magus (**66**)
- Saar Aron – Telekine Adept (**40**) [*Notes: Templar*]
- Iosif Bronis – Defensive Magus (**78**) [*Notes: Templar*]
- Leono Cantu – Defensive Psion (**56**)
- Mona Eriksson – Offensive Magus (**71**)
- Zama Elethu – Defensive Magus (**74**) [*Notes: Archangel*]
- Eddison Fisher – Telekine Psion (**49**)
- Ryo Ha-Sun – Telekine Psion (**55**) [*Notes: Templar*]
- Viktoria Hammarström – Offensive Leviathan (**81**) [*Notes: Archangel*]
- Matthew Hawkins – Telekine Magus (**77**) [*Notes: One of the recovered Furies - “Alecto”*]
- Ted Holden – Offensive Psion (**49**) [*Notes: Archangel*]
- Moriai Jin – Telepath Adept (**33**)
- Chan Jin-Taek – Offensive Psion (**57**) [*Notes: Templar*]
- Pall Johansson – Telekine Psion (**58**) [*Notes: Templar*]
• Charlie Jones – Offensive Psion (47)
• Ismail Mazar – Telekine Magus (68) [Notes: Recruited from ADVENT PRIEST Program; civilian background]
• Hugo Nilsen – Defensive Magus (62) [Notes: Templar]
• Alicia Sancho – Offensive Psion (53)
• Sussan Sevhonkian – Telepath Magus (80) [Notes: Recruited from ADVENT PRIEST Program; civilian background]
• Alicia Sancho – Offensive Psion (53)
• Gamil Sultan – Defensive Psion (50)
• Kawamura Taira – Telekine Leviathan (82) [Notes: Archangel]
• Fatima Tariq – Telepath Magus (80) [Notes: One of the recovered Furies – “Tisiphone”]
• Said Tariq – Defensive Magus (79) [Notes: One of the recovered Furies – “Megarea”]
• Lukas Von Theil – Telepath/Defensive Leviathan (93) [Notes: Prefers to be called “Geist”; Recruited from ADVENT PRIEST Program; civilian background; tested equally high for both Defensive and Telepathic disciplines]

And myself, of course:

• Patricia Trask – Telepath Leviathan (84)

And I didn’t forget about the other members of the Internal Council either:

• The Commander – Telekine Adept (36)
• Moira Vahlen – Telepath Magus (76)

And I didn’t forget about our resident Ethereal:

• Aegis – Defensive Ethereal (138) [Notes: Looking at this, I wonder what the other Ethereals come in at]

This should cover the current psions enlisted. I’ll update this when more come.

Chapter End Notes

Since I doubt I’ll be posting another chapter before then, I’ll wish everyone reading a Merry Christmas and again say thanks for continuing to read this story that's gotten much, much larger than I had ever planned for. On that note, the good news is that the next chapter is already written (And it will be even somewhat longer than this), so you'll likely get it sooner than later once my editing team finishes it up.

And thank Johnclaw Dragonhelm (One of my beta readers) for coming up with the explanations for Elerium and Gateways that are more plausible than anything I could come up with.
Outside Hillsboro, Portland – United States of America

11/6/2016 – 9:38 A.M.

Things may not have gone well for ADVENT recently, but Roman suspected that was going to change at this moment. For what seemed like the first time for him, the full might of the ADVENT military was gathered and marching from Portland to the alien strongholds in Hillsboro and Salem, two small cities that had been under alien control for months.

“A good day for killing aliens,” Anton said as they marched forward, still undetected by the aliens. “[They won’t see us coming.]”

“[Maybe not,]” Galina said as she looked into the fog. “[But they are going to hear us.]”

Roman grinned under his helmet. That they would. ADVENT had pulled out everything for this attack. At this moment the entire legion was marching on the split streets of the now-destroyed city of Beverton, and multiple squads were moving through the forests at the same time. American armored fighting vehicles like the M3A3 Bradley and Stryker were on the roads, guarded by MDUs and the new SHIVs.

That was where Roman and his squad were now deployed, alongside two of the Bradleys, with him in the front, as was his role as Shieldbearer. Behind the first line of tanks were dozens more squads, and multiple Strykers following them. But what Roman knew was really going to get the attention were the front lines, the shining white MDUs that marched silently, with the SHIVs and their operators closely behind.

But in front of even them were the Lancers.

Roman had known about the elite unit of the ADVENT military, even if he hadn’t actually seen it in action that much. But seeing them in person was something completely different. Their domed helmets and pitch-black armor that looked even stronger than his own made for a foreboding image.

They weren’t just at the front either. They were scattered throughout the ADVENT force, either alone or in small groups of two. The isolated ones had been holding sniper rifles, and their armor was slimmer than the others, so he suspected they were the sniper unit. The main Lancers; they were unique. Most carried some kind of firearm or gauss rifle, but others carried melee weapons in their hands; actual swords and hammers.

“[Executors,]” Stanislav had explained when the Lancers had started arriving. “[You saw the ones that XCOM called Templars?]”

He’d nodded. “[Yes. For fighting the Battlemaster, right?]”

“[Apparently,]” Stanislav had shrugged. “[The Lancer Executors are that same concept, but for ADVENT.]” He’d raised an eyebrow, clearly amused. “[Supposedly they’re dangerous.]”

“I hope this fog dissipates soon,” Elena muttered, checking her rifle again, bringing him back into the present. “[While we make a dramatic entrance, I’d prefer to actually see the aliens we kill.]”
“[Give it a half-hour,]” Roman suggested. “[It should be gone by then.]”

A half-dozen dogs started barking, and the Lancers froze, the leader immediately raising a fist and the entire army came to a halt. Once they stopped, the dogs immediately went quiet. That had been another recent addition to the ADVENT military. Roman liked dogs, he assumed most people did, but the Molosser Hounds as they were called, they unnerved him.

The explanation he’d been able to find is that they were currently genetically engineered and MELD-enhanced German Shepherds and Huskies, which seemed like a poor description for how enhanced these dogs really were. The damn things were up to his waist, their eyes were rimmed golden, and he could actually see the muscles under their fur.

Galina had stayed far away from them when the Molosser Handlers had brought them out. She was terrified of dogs, and ones that could probably kill her with a single pounce and bite was not something she’d wanted to be around. Had the dogs not made him slightly terrified himself, he would have found it funny.

However, he doubted ADVENT would use them if there was a risk of them biting Humans. Even the Handlers didn’t use leashes, and instead stayed close to their Hounds, which were covered in padding on their bodies and top of their head, while the belly and lower jaw seemed unprotected. Probably for mobility, and the padding also had some pockets he saw the Handlers reach into occasionally and pull out some kind of treat for the Hounds.

“[Guess that means we’re close,]” Konstantin said, lifting his autorifle, the grin present in his voice. “[Those dogs are smart.]”

Roman could only see the outline of the main city in the distance, since they were in the suburbs area so far. The distinctions were clear. The street was cut off by an alien barricade, and there were turrets and AA weapons mounted on and behind it, as well as the nearby buildings. The buildings themselves seemed connected by the barricade the aliens had built, and he could see faint outlines moving behind it, and on the roofs. “[Maksim, what do you see?]”

“[One second,]” Maksim raised his sniper rifle and looked through the scope. “[Hmm. Not much. They are not prepared at all. Some Vitakarian guards, a couple Borelians. No Mutons yet.]”

“[This is Chief Marshal Peterson,]” a voice suddenly interjected into their helmets. All of them listened raptly as the Chief Marshal of the Third American Legion spoke, something he would not do unless it involved the entire army. “We have moved to acceptable locations outside Salem and Hillsboro, and both groups are in positions to attack the enemy unawares. At my command, open fire and wipe these aliens off the face of this Earth. Remember Vegas, San Francisco, Australia, Japan, and take no prisoners today. Retribution has come, and the aliens will pay for it with their lives.”

“[Hell yes,]” Anton said, readying his weapon.

The Chief Marshal finished up. “Wing Captain Holder, you are cleared to begin your aerial assault. Morning Sky, you are cleared to deploy XCOM soldiers at your designated location. All ground forces, you are cleared to engage at will.”

The Bradley tanks aimed their weapons, which in contrast to heavier tanks, weren’t traditional tank cannons, but autocannons which he assumed were gauss-powered. All of them fired at once, breaking the silence with the sound of high-powered automatic cannons. Several alien guns exploded, and more alien bodies were thrown into the air or ripped apart outright. “Advance!” The leading Lancer shouted, and the black-armored soldiers rushed towards the fortified city.
“[Stay close to me, like we practiced!]” Roman shouted to his team as they gathered around him in formation. He pressed several buttons on his wrist, and the silver antenna on his back rose. His HUD blinked green. “[Emitter online! Move forward!]”

They shouted affirmatives and they, along with multiple other squads, charged into the fog that was beginning to be lit up with the green plasma of the alien defenders, and red lasers and brief orange streaks of gauss rifles being fired from the MDUs, tanks, and soldiers, all of whom slowly advanced. The tanks were continuing to fire at identified AA emplacements, and now the aliens were beginning to wake up.

“[Squad of four up ahead!]” Elena called, firing her weapon. “[Going into cover!]”

“[Emitter still good,]” Roman assured her. “[Keep moving!]”

“[I really hope the ADVENT engineers were right,]” Stanislav growled as the aliens prepared to fire. “[If I die, I’m going to haunt them.]”

Anton fired and killed one of the aliens, but the rest of the aliens started firing their plasma weapons directly at them.

Moment of truth.

The plasma streaked towards them, and then it suddenly bounced upwards or to the side as if hitting an invisible wall. The bolt dissipated a few seconds later, and the aliens froze once they saw what had happened. Maksim whooped and used that to snipe one of the Vitakarians in the head, while Konstantin and Galina focused on pinning down the last two with their autorifles.

“[Grenade out!]” Elena called, and chucked one towards the final two aliens. They yelled something in their language and ran back, warning several more aliens coming to reinforce of the danger, right before it exploded in a bright flash that was not shrapnel like he was used to, but instead closer to a massive firework.

The aliens screamed as the sizzling fire hit their silver armor, which seemed to offer little protection as it burned through the armor and aliens themselves, before Anton and Maksim killed them with a hail of gauss rounds. “[They were right,]” Elena said, sounding rather impressed. “[Thermite does work well.]”

They reached the actual line of alien territory, and fell into cover, with Roman tapping some more buttons on his wrist. “[Arrived at checkpoint. Shutting down emitter. Forty-seven percent remaining.]”

“[Good for another push!]” Konstantin shouted as the aliens began pouring out into the streets, and directly into the line of Lancers which were ahead of the leading ADVENT squads. Roman watched in amazement as one of the Executors directly charged a group of Vitakarians, and the other four Lancers just laughed off Plasma fire as they took shots, but it didn’t seem to slow them down at all.

The Lancer Executor was happily bashing the Vitakarians in the knees, head, and chests; caving in the armor and shattering their bones. The other Lancers systematically took apart a Borelian team, flanking and using explosives liberally. Aircraft streaked overhead and missiles were fired in the distance, even as the AA defenses the aliens had set up began working, shooting plasma and lasers into the sky.

“[We need to take those out!]” Roman called as a laser shot one of the Ravens out of the sky.
“[Got one marked on that roof,]” Maksim said, sniping from a makeshift elevation built on several crates. Roman looked over to where the massive laser battery was built onto the flat roof of one of the many abandoned stores in this city.

He nodded. “[Maksim, Galina, Konstantin, provide covering fire. Everyone else, with me!]”

“[Providing suppressive fire!]” Galina called out in affirmation as the rooftop manned by several Borelian soldiers was suddenly under heavy gauss fire. The MDUs were now in the city with them, and were advancing, drawing more fire away from them.

“[Forward!]” Roman yelled, and they ran down the narrow streets, which were still heavy with plasma fire now that the aliens were forming another barricade up ahead, with enough firepower to force the Lancers to hold temporarily. Roman kicked in the door to the shop which broke and swung open, throwing the alien behind it to the ground.

Stanislav chuckled as he blew apart the Vitakarian at point-blank range. “[One to the left!]” Elena warned, swinging her weapon and firing at another alien, this one a Dath’Haram which was much less armored, and subsequently died as the gauss rounds tore it apart.

“[One more,]” Anton called, as there was one final alien, backing into a corner, its hands up. “[Think it’s surrendering]”

Sure enough, the alien was yelling at them in their language, and clearly trying to be as non-threatening as possible. Roman pursed his lips and slowly walked over to the alien, pulled out his pistol and jabbed the barrel under the chin of the alien and pulled the trigger, splattering its brain over the wall.

“[No prisoners,]” he stated to the corpse, before motioning them to move up. “[Let’s take out that battery.]”

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Salem Airspace, Oregon – United States of America

11/6/2016 – 10:04 A.M.

It was one thing leaping out of a Skyranger in Archangel armor, but it was something else to do the exact same thing during the beginning of a heated firefight.

Didn’t make it feel any less amazing.

“This is Seraphim Morrow to Morning Sky,” Sierra said as she sped through the air, flying upward so she could get a good view of the situation. “We are in the air and preparing to make our first strike.”

“Copy, Seraphim Morrow,” Morning Sky replied. “Good luck up there.”

Sierra grinned as she noted that the aliens were already falling to the attack of ADVENT, led by the Lancers and MDUs, with tank support while hundreds of ADVENT squads moved forward. “We ready for this?” Anna asked, speaking through their internal comms, and coming up to hover beside her. “Should we recon first?”

“Yes,” Sierra confirmed. “They have AA defenses, so we’ll need to get rid of those first. We’ll have to fly low to avoid getting shot too often.”
“I can take care of the turrets if you cover me,” Ted told them, hovering a bit lower, his arms already emanating psionic energy. “Unless you want to rely on bombs?”

“Nah,” Sierra said, angling her body down and providing a thrust to her jets as she shot towards the city. “We’re wasting time. Let’s go!”

They swooped down, now getting a better view of the street-to-street fighting that was currently taking place between ADVENT and the entrenched alien forces. “Let’s introduce ourselves,” Sierra called, as she spotted an opening where a collection of Mutons were entrenched against an ADVENT force. “Right behind them!”

They approached the ground at a speed that would be lethal if they weren’t enhanced, and at just the right moment, Sierra turned her body upward, killed the jets, and fell to the ground, already reaching for the grenade on her waist and tossing it. It was a special weapon, one of the more dangerous explosive chemicals.

It landed right in the middle of the group and exploded in an anticlimactic burst, but then again, the explosion wasn’t the danger. The white smoke that expanded from it however, was. The effects were immediate. The unmasked Mutons immediately began clutching their faces and making grunts of pain, while their parts of their armor spontaneously combusted in small patches of flame.

White Phosphorus had been described to her as a half-acid, half combustible agent, which was absolutely lethal for anyone caught in a blast. It, like many chemical weapons, was not exactly approved of, but ADVENT and XCOM were a lot more lenient about what types of weapons were considered acceptable. And personally, Sierra thought that if it caused the aliens as much pain as it seemed to be, it was perfectly fine.

She fired her own laser rifle at the Mutons outside the smoke, and Anna killed three in quick succession with her autolaser. Ted tossed a White Phosphorous grenade of his own to another group of Mutons, and jumped into the sky, with Sierra and Anna soon following, all aliens in the area either dead or dying.

“Let’s hit their nerve center,” Sierra suggested, making sure to keep them all moving since staying still would let the aliens get a better shot, and the air was already lighting up with plasma as the aliens realized there were new threats. “Where do you think they’ll be most clustered?”

“City center, probably,” Anna suggested as she swooped down and tossed a plasma grenade onto a sniper nest, blowing it up in a bright green explosion. “Hitting the back would help.”

“Then we go there,” Sierra ordered, and they shot across the air, going extremely fast, albeit near to the rooftops. “Lot of aliens ahead.”

“Split and circle around,” Ted stated suddenly. “Let me have a shot.” His body suddenly swung vertically and he hit the metaphorical breaks on his jets, and swung up his arms that were wreathed in psionic energy, which grew more and more intense until unstable beams of psionic energy shot out to the street below.

Sierra had already swooped off to the left while Anna had gone to the right, so she unfortunately missed the initial attack, but swinging around back to Ted’s position, the results were apparent. There were at least two dozen corpses on the ground, with the street turned a scorched black, the corpses themselves charred and eaten away by the corrosive energy of psionics.

Ted was already moving forward, wasting no time, and Sierra and Anna shot after him. “Nicely done,” Anna complimented. “Hold on, going to blow up this turret.” She picked one of the plasma
batteries that was firing up in the sky, swooped down and landed beside it and began killing the aliens around it.

Sierra thought she might as well try it. “Going to get the one on the left,” she said, eyeing her target, which had a fairly small safe landing area. There were three guards on it, all fortunately Vitakarians or Dath’Haram, it was hard to tell with the armor. She gritted her teeth, this was going to be tight.

She killed the jets at what was probably the closest she could risk, and landed right beside a surprised alien, and unceremoniously, knocked him out with the butt of her rifle, sending him over the edge of the two-story building, and immediately shot the other two before they could react. She found what seemed to be the control panel, ripped it open, and fired a sustained laser into it.

There were a couple of loud pops, and the turret went still. Good enough. She switched cells on her rifle, and shot into the sky once more. An explosion further in caught her attention, and she saw Ted had blown up one with a devastating psionic lance. “Up ahead, that square,” Sierra said as she angled herself to circle it.

This was clearly where the alien control was. It was a fortress within a fortress, all the buildings were interconnected with a black alloy wall, and each rooftop was equipped with AA defenses and equipment for sniper nests. “That’s a nice fortress,” Anna commented. “It would be a shame if something were to happen to it.”

“It was nice of them to trap themselves there,” Sierra commented as the aliens continued to try and fruitlessly shoot them. They were just too slow to get an accurate shot on the Archangels. “We drive them out. You have the rocket?”

“Two,” Anna corrected, already readying the weapon attachment on her wrist. “Priming!”

“Alright, commence the White Phosphorous bombing run,” Sierra ordered. “Ted, you have the grenades?”

“Affirmative,” he said as they all swooped up. “In hand.”

“Loose them when you get a chance,” Sierra commanded. “Turn that fortress into a prison.”

Sierra herself tossed several of her White Phosphorous grenades into the fortress area when she got an opportunity, spacing them as she flew around the perimeter, covering as much ground as possible. Anna was aiming her own WP rocket at the most open area, though Sierra wasn’t sure that would be needed. It was going to spread no matter where she shot it.

Ted was also back in his psionic turret mode, blowing up another AA plasma turret, and whatever aliens around it he could see. His armor was slightly marred from taking some hits, but Archangel armor was designed to be able to take some plasma fire. The WP rocket Anna fired exploded in a mist of white smoke that immediately began spreading, already forcing the aliens to run away.

Sierra saw several Vitakarians on the edge of a building, trying to shoot at them, and she got an idea. “Pick your targets,” she told Anna and Ted. “I think we’ve done enough to destabilize their operations.”

“Copy that,” Anna said, and rocketed off to the front lines of the conflict with ADVENT.

“Confirmed,” Ted also acknowledged, as he seemed content to stay put and kill anything that entered his line of sight.
For herself, she angled her jets towards the Vitakarians on the roof and fired with her laser rifle, killing one immediately, then quickly attached it to her chest so her hands were free. When she got close enough, she killed the jets again and slammed into the alien, knocking her to the ground, if not knocking her completely out.

Sierra hooked her fingers under some bands of her armor, and leapt up, engaging the jets and soaring into the sky. The genetic modifications essentially made the weight of the alien she was now carrying irrelevant. Not that she was planning to hold onto her for very long.

She waited until she was at a reasonable height and then let the Vitakarian fall, who was only now conscious enough to realize what was happening. “So long!” Sierra called down as the Vitakarian fell to her death. Well, that was fun, if a little pointless. Still, considering how well everything was going so far, she could justify doing that.

Sierra looked around the battlefield, knowing there was a lot more to do. She grasped her laser rifle in her hands, and went hunting. She was curious to see if the aliens would be able to adapt in time before they fell to ADVENT.

She snorted. And the real XCOM squad wasn’t even here. She would hate to be facing them right now.

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Seattle, Washington – United States of America

11/6/2016 – 10:02 A.M.

The attack on Seattle was well underway as the Commander stepped off the Skyranger, followed by the squad of XCOM soldiers, and the Archangels close behind. The MEC Pilot Gloria had been dropped in her Ballista-class MEC, and all of them were waiting for the Commander’s orders to move in.

They were slightly elevated, and the Commander had a relatively decent view of the city in the distance, the heart of Seattle. The smaller towns outside it were not nearly as protected. Creed snorted as he saw it in the distance. “Andromedons. Too clever for their own good.”

“They are smart,” the Commander agreed with a nod as a squad of ADVENT soldiers jogged past. “That makes them dangerous.”

In the distance, the heart of Seattle was protected by a red-domed shield, which seemed so far to be impervious to any outside attack. Several missiles had been fired into it with seemingly no effect. A problem, but the Commander knew it could be dealt with eventually. “Let’s find out who’s in charge.” He motioned to the Seraphim of the Archangel squad. “Hwan, take your team and begin assisting ADVENT where you can. You will be contacted if we need you.”

The Templar drew his longsword and saluted with his free hand. “Yes, Commander. We will be awaiting any orders you have.” He motioned to the other two Archangels, Catherine Gosselin and Liliyane, another new Templar with a rather peculiar weapon of her own; a poleax of all things. But it fit an Archangel fairly well, and he knew she’d been practicing with it. “Up we go! Good luck, Commander!” All the Archangels leapt into the air, jets activating, and flew into the sky.

“Commander!” An ADVENT Officer came running up, accompanied by two Lancer Predators, the main fighting force of the Lancer Corps. “Chief Marshal Wilkins wishes to update you on the current situation!”
“Lead the way,” the Commander stated, already moving. All of them broke into a jog as they went to where the Chief Marshal was waiting, which was a commandeered store-turned-command center, heavily guarded by Lancers.

Chief Marshal Blake Wilkins was standing over a makeshift holotable, in full armor and helmet, with one of the Lancer Executors beside him, and some other Officers. “Commander,” he greeted as he looked up. “Glad to have you here.”

“What’s the situation?” The Commander asked. “My Archangel squad is already assisting in the air, as are our own Firestorms and Ravens.”

“Appreciated,” Wilkins nodded, motioning to the Lancer beside him. “This is Executor Jackson, Lancer Corps. We’re only launching smaller incursions now until we have a better idea of what we’re facing. With Andromedons, you can’t be too careful.”

Good. This person wasn’t an idiot. “How much do we have?”

“We are in Lynnwood now,” Wilkins pointed to the holomap. “Our army is coming from the north and the east, as well as some support from the US Destroyers we were able to get from the Puget Sound, that large lake.”

“I know what it is,” the Commander told him. “And you’re having issues?”

“Not necessarily,” Wilkins amended, tapping a finger on the holotable. “We wanted to get an assessment of what they have, and we do now. They’re entrenched both within the heart of Seattle itself, and outside. The force is mostly composed of Andromedons and Mutons. We’re also coming under sniper fire, so throw some Vitakara in the mix.”

“We have marked the main locations they are entrenched in,” Executor Jackson stated, pressing a button and various areas on the map lit up red. “Along with known and suspected enemy composition. We’ve held back our heavy hitters until this is determined. Now that you’re here, the actual assault can begin.”

“What are the casualty numbers so far?” Creed asked.

“In the low hundreds,” Wilkins stated. “We didn’t send them on a deliberate suicide mission if that’s what you were wondering. We didn’t want them to advance, only engage and hold the line. That is what they’ve done, and taken a fair number of aliens with them.”

“How is the air situation?” Rebecca Carr, one of his soldiers asked.

“Manageable,” Wilkins said. “So far they haven’t mobilized much, mostly Scouts. Their AA weaponry is making it difficult to provide air support on the ground.”

“We can help with that,” the Commander said. “And what do you plan to do next?”

“We send in our second wave,” Wilkins said, clasping his hands behind his back. “Our tanks, support vehicles, Lancers, Purifiers, and a few other tricks we have. And your people, of course. There is no point delaying it further.” He began walking to the exit, and all of them followed and they saw the massive line of tanks rolling into the cities, accompanied by MDUs and dozens of ADVENT soldiers.

“What is that?” Ellinor Aagard asked, noticing one of the leading vehicles.

The Commander was not surprised at the question, and he hadn’t actually seen one of those used in
combat before. It was a grey standard M1150 tank, but with an attachment on the front. There were
two arms that extended a good ways from the body of the tank, with a roller on the ends. Attached
to the roller were lines of chains.

“That’s a Mine Flail,” Creed said in amazement. “I didn’t even know they still existed.”

“Still exist, and I doubt even Andromedons can fully hold up to them,” Wilkins said coldly. “We
run into a deadlock, we send this in and fuck them up. I don’t have an unlimited number, so I’m
using them wisely. Tell us where you’re headed, and I will order the assault.”

“Oh,” Rebecca Carr, standing beside Creed interjected. “So how does that work?”

Creed glanced over at her. “Originally? It swings the chains around rapidly. As the name implies, it
detonates mines to make it safer to move over. But since we haven’t seen the aliens use mines…”
he trailed off contemplatively.

“Uh,” Rebecca Carr, standing beside Creed interjected. “So how does that work?”

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he trailed off contemplatively.

The Commander was somewhat amused at that, but returned his focus to Wilkins. “Where is the
fighting heaviest?”

“Pacific Highway intersection,” Executor Jackson answered. “That’s where the strongest
Andromedon line is.”

“Then we go there,” the Commander ordered, motioning to his squad. “Let’s go!”

“We’ve got transports to take you there,” Wilkins pointed to a couple of Humvees. “Though your
MEC will have to run.”

“Not an issue,” the Commander said as they entered the armored transports. “We’ll give you
support where needed.”

“Understood,” Wilkins confirmed. “Good luck, Commander. Glad to have you here.”

“Seconded,” Jackson added. “My Lancers will be assisting you when we can.”

The Commander only nodded, then entered the Humvee and closed the door, and they sped off into
the battle ahead.

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Moapa, Nevada - United States of America

11/6/2016 – 8:32 A.M

The ADVENT Army fully assembled was an inspiring sight. The flat landscape of Nevada made it
perfect for ADVENT to reliably deploy their heavier weapons and vehicles, and the lines of
Abrams tanks, Strykers, M6 Linebackers and a few more additions she hadn’t seen before, put the
size of the ADVENT Army to scale.

This wasn’t counting the thousands of soldiers, MDUs, Purifiers, and aircraft that she knew were
going to be deployed. Their own arrival had not gone unnoticed, and while they were not in range
of Vegas, that was intentional. They were waiting for her, upon request. The temporary command
headquarters were under a plastic shelter, and would likely be taken down soon.

“Fatima, Viktoria, Jim, follow me inside,” Patricia ordered as they walked up to the command
headquarters. “The rest of you stay outside and await orders.”

“Yes, Overseer,” they answered in unison, even as she could tell they were wanting to start the fight. There was a tangible feeling of anger and vengeance permeating the men and women here. That was only growing stronger and more emboldened as more and more arrived. She hoped it wouldn’t spill over into overconfidence.

She had specific plans for Fatima, and the two Seraphim Archangels, and they needed to know what to do to be most effective. The figures at the holotable were already waiting, and she sensed them becoming more confident as she walked in. Flattering how she’d developed a reputation, but one that was definitely earned.

Funny how they had no idea they were also accompanied by Viktoria, another Leviathan. After this, Patricia suspected she’d develop a reputation of her own. “Psion Trask, welcome,” a man in full armor greeted, clearly older than was typical, with greying hair and an eyepatch. Definitely a veteran. “Glad we have you to assist us. All indications are we’re going to need it.”

“With any luck, I’ll make sure you don’t have to worry,” Patricia assured him, smiling under her helmet. “We’re all ready to assist.”

“Good,” the man gave a curt nod. “Since we haven’t met, I’m Mathis Stettler, General of the ADVENT Army.” He gestured to the woman beside him, also in full armor. “This is Chief Marshal Sally Collins, American Legion Seven, and beside her is Predator Lorian Rudin, Lancer Corps.”

“A pleasure,” the armored Lancer nodded. “Your reputation precedes you, Psion Trask. I look forward to working with your squad.”

“As do we,” Fatima said. “We’ve worked well in the past.”

“Deus Vult,” Lorian recalled. “Yes, that was certainly a success.”

“And now we will continue those successes,” General Stettler redirected, raising a hand. “The short version, Psion Trask, is that Las Vegas is effectively an alien stronghold now. The city itself you are familiar with does not exist. The aliens destroyed any buildings they didn’t need, and heavily fortified the rest.”

“What did they remove?” Jim asked.

Chief Marshal Collins snorted. “You’d be better off asking what they kept.” She motioned to the holotable. “They cleared out a large section in the middle of the city, presumably for aircraft. The smaller buildings they seem to have turned them into a kind of barracks, and destroyed neighboring ones, maybe to free up space. They’ve kept many of the larger hotels and casinos, and turned them into sniper nests.”

“Nellis Air Force Base has been turned into a storage area of sorts as well,” Stettler added. “They seem to be keeping the majority of their heavy vehicles and weapons there. Cyberdisks, Sectopods, Mechtoids. Likely drones as well. I’d expect they’re storing Sectoid Fighters and Scouts there as well.”

“Using the hotels for sniper nests is smart,” Jim nodded approvingly. “The landscape is perfect for that.”

“Which is a problem,” Stettler grumbled. “Until we actually reach the city, we will be completely exposed. And we’re not getting in without a devastating fight.” He pointed to the perimeter. “They built a wall around the entire perimeter; a high one too, dotted with anti-personnel and anti-aircraft
turrets, and manned by Mutons and Andromedons.”

“A problem,” Patricia repeated, thinking. “How many do you think are in the city?”

“An estimate?” Stettler looked over to Collins. “Ten thousand? Maybe more? They have Gateways, so until we shut those down, this battle won’t end anytime soon.”

“Enemy composition?” Patricia asked.

“The full extent isn’t known,” Lorian stated. “But this is a military base. I’d expect pretty much anything.”

“Organic units mostly, then,” Patricia said. “Good. I won’t be able to help with the mechanical ones, but unless they’ve made modifications, the Mutons and any other organic enemy shouldn’t pose a threat.”

“The problem is they’ll figure out fast we have a telepath,” Collins noted. “I don’t know how fast you work, but if a large part of their military is augmented, you could be neutered. No offense intended, psion, but we need to prepare for that possibility.”

Patricia was more impressed than offended she’d been so blunt. “None taken, Chief Marshal. Which is why I want to go out ahead. Let me work before the main army gets here.”

Stettler frowned. “With the amount of sniper nests and flat terrain? You might get shot before you have a chance to do anything.”

She clasped her hands behind her back. “Unlikely. I know what to look for, and I don’t need to be close to begin working. They will be looking for an army, not one person. Trust me, General, I know what I’m doing here. I work first, and we don’t have to worry about their leader neutering what I can do. But that means you don’t attack until I give the signal.”

Collins cocked her head. “And what will that be? You telepathically contact us?”

Patricia shook her head. “Not you, her.” She motioned to Fatima. “It is difficult to focus on a specific person at long distances, but I can pick out psions easily enough, telepaths especially. She will inform you when to attack.”

“And how long do you estimate it to take?” Lorian asked.

“I don’t know,” Patricia answered. “It could be as little as a half hour, or more than three. Time is difficult to track when I use it over a large area, and try and do it right.”

“Fine,” Stettler conceded. “You’re too important an asset to waste, so if you say this would help, I’ll allow it. We can delay the attack until you’re ready.”

“Thank you,” Patricia told him sincerely. “You will not regret it.”

“Maybe,” Lorian chuckled. “You might make it too easy for us.”

“I think we could use an ‘easy’ win,” Collins sniffed. “At least I have no problems with it.”

“I’ll have a Humvee take you out,” Stettler said. “You can get off whenever you want.”

Patricia followed him as he exited the shelter and directed her to where the armored Humvees, Bradleys, and Strykers were parked, many of which were already loaded with soldiers. The General spoke with one of the drivers, then motioned her over as the young driver quickly got into
Patricia stepped into the passenger side of the vehicle and they were immediately driving off, down the road, leaving the rest of the ADVENT Army behind. She couldn’t see the face behind the helmet he wore, but her driver was definitely nervous; clearly he hadn’t expected to be driving her around, and she supposed to someone unfamiliar with her, she would be intimidating.

Her telepathy was likely also a source of it. She could only imagine the stories of what she could and had done. The funny thing was that a good part of it was probably true.

“Relax,” she told him. “I’m really not someone you need to worry about accidentally making angry. Trust me, if I had issues with random people I suddenly met, I wouldn’t get anywhere.” She reached up and took off her helmet, knowing that an actual face might put him at ease. “And don’t lie, either. I can tell when people do that.”

“Sorry…Psion Trask,” he stammered, not sure what her title was. “I’ve never met a psion before, especially not one like…well, you.”

“Patricia,” she offered. “And that’s understandable. Though we’re still Humans, just ones with some extra abilities.”

“I suppose,” he said cautiously. “If you don’t mind me asking…how does it work?” He gestured at nothing as they drove through the desert. “Are you reading my mind now?”

“Yes and no,” Patricia answered, thinking how best to phrase it without it sounding worse than it was. “I’ve…trained…enough, where I just hear thoughts just by being around people. Sometimes random images flash into my mind. You know how in a crowd you can hear dozens of conversations going on at once? It’s like that, but louder.” She smiled. “The point is that even if I am technically reading your mind now, that doesn’t mean I’m listening. I don’t do that just because I can, privacy is something I can respect.”

“Uh huh,” he looked around nervously. “Although I think I’m the only one in that crowd right now, unless you can still hear people from the base?”

“I’m also good at blocking out what I don’t want to hear,” she offered. “You have to learn that eventually…otherwise the voices will overwhelm you.”

“Ah.” A few moments of silence. “Is it easy?”

“Now?” She thought. “Fairly. I suppose it depends on the scale.” She looked into the desert where the sun was rising over the barren landscape. “An army is difficult to properly control. You have to continually impress your orders upon them, but fortunately the minds of aliens and men are weak. An individual is easy to manipulate, an army is difficult to direct without proper focus.”

She rubbed her forehead. “Hard to explain without you being one, but I believe psions can only become stronger, not the other way around.”

“Does XCOM have psions in their intelligence branch?” He asked, glancing over. “That sounds invaluable.”

She blinked, realizing that the answer to that was actually no. Huh, that was something that Zhang had brought up some time ago, but at some point they’d focused on having all available psions on the front lines, and intelligence was not something that had even been addressed.

That needed to be corrected. It was a major oversight. “Sorry, classified,” she told him. “So, my
“Malu Aolani,” he answered. “US Army Motor Transport Operator, formerly of Hawaii. Wasn’t deployed there when the aliens hit, which is likely why I’m still alive.”

She just nodded. “We’ll take it back.”

“Hopefully.” he didn’t sound convinced. “But I don’t think there’s anything there anymore. I doubt the aliens left anyone alive, or any building standing.”

“The aliens are effective, but they are generally not genocidal,” Patricia shook her head. “Not unless they need to be, and this current alien leader, the Battlemaster…He doesn’t target civilians intentionally. I doubt everyone left was killed.”

“The alternatives aren’t better though,” he said emotionlessly. “You probably know that better than most.”

Unfortunately, she certainly did.

“We’re getting close,” Malu said, looking down at the GPS. “I don’t want you to be exposed to snipers, and…your armor is somewhat noticeable.”

“I’m aware,” Patricia said dryly. “Which is why you’ll drop me off here.” Malu immediately slowed the Humvee to a stop in the middle of the road. “Stay safe and get back there alive,” Patricia told him, putting on her helmet again. “The next time you come here, you’ll hopefully be attacking.”

“Good luck, Patricia,” he said, giving her the ADVENT salute. “Make them suffer.”

She smiled under her helmet. “They will die, Malu, I can promise you that.” She returned the salute and shut the door, and he turned around and drove back up the road, while she turned to where Las Vegas was in the distance. Now she needed to be somewhat conscious. There would be snipers, so she needed to find a place that wasn’t obvious.

She walked leisurely up the road, beginning to expand her mental reach, not too difficult since there was no life around her. It would make aliens trivially easy to spot. A few minutes of walking found her behind one of the rare, and rather pitiful, trees, looking into the now-fortified city of Las Vegas. Stettler hadn’t exaggerated. It appeared to be an impregnable fortress, one with a black wall around it, and focusing her sight, she could see faint figures manning the walls, with turrets lining the walkways and entrances.

The larger hotels had indeed been turned into sniper nests, some with the windows busted out throughout the building and small platforms extending from them. The bad news was that they would be almost impossible to stop without getting close. The good news was that she was definitely close enough to begin working.

She assumed a kneeling positon, placing her hands on her thighs, bowing her head and closing her eyes, beginning to breathe in and out at a steady pace, and let her mind extend to the city before her. Alien minds were distinct, and with nothing else close, it was remarkably easy to pick them out and begin entering their minds.

Much as she would like to take Malu’s advice about making them suffer, she wasn’t going to do that initially. That would simply let them know something was wrong. Maybe once ADVENT arrived, but right now…the opposite approach was what she wanted. There were thousands of minds to corrupt, and she was going to do so to each one.
So she slowly began spreading her control, planting herself with hooks in their mind; backdoors no one but psions would even think about. She was a silent observer to their most personal memories and thoughts, all rushing and vanishing from her mind in an instant, and so once she set the hooks for her entrance, it was time to begin rewriting how they saw the world.

Aegis and Geist had been right in pointing out her flaws, and today she would correct that. Every being, no matter if they were alien or Human, had a small voice in their head, a monologue that dictated what they were thinking about and how they were feeling. This voice was typically the person’s own, or occasionally a close companion or friend. Most of the time it varied.

But no one ever paid attention to it beyond that. No one questioned what their mind told them.

And they would also not notice that the voice in their head that they had heard since consciousness, was not theirs, but her own. The thoughts were still their own, but the voice that dictated them was her own manifestation. She idly wondered if a change like this was permanent or not, as it didn’t technically affect their mind.

It did set the stage for her first commands.

She spent minutes or hours, she wasn’t sure which, reprogramming the voices in the minds of the aliens, to be the one that represented her. It was interesting how much of the same concerns and thoughts aliens had that Humans did. Thinking about their mates, stressing over deadlines and commanders, wanting their shift to end because they were hungry. Even Mutons displayed some kind of preference for certain people, even if they knew never to express it.

Ironic that was only making it easier for her to exploit them.

Now it was time to act.

*Everything is fine.*

*Everything is normal.*

*There was no Army, there are no soldiers, everything is normal.*

She began repeating this mantra every few seconds, over the course of uncountable minutes, bombarding their minds with this subconscious realization that nothing was happening. It was an ordinary day. Nothing worth raising an alarm. Patricia repeated this over and over, and decided to test it.

*Jump,* she directed toward the mind of a Zararch sniper, perched up in one of the sniper nests. He did, of course, and not once did his friends react as he calmly walked off the edge.

*Everything is normal. Everything is fine.*

The sniper felt nothing as he plummeted to his death.

*This is fine.*

She looked through the eyes of the aliens on the ground as they saw the sniper slam into the ground before them, becoming a yellow splatter on the ground, mixed with armor.

*This is normal. No reason to stop working.*
Everything is fine. We have work to do.

Excellent. She sent the prompt to Fatima. Begin the attack.

And she continued the mantra, drilling and impressing the command until they repeated it in their minds. No living alien was unaffected, and no alien was aware. They simply continued on, as if it was an ordinary day. And when the first bombs hit, the first shells landed, and when the encroaching army appeared on the horizon they did not panic, they did not worry; at most they simply wondered if this was even something they should bother thinking about.

Everything is normal.

Everything is fine.

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Seattle, Washington – United States of America

11/6/2016 – 10:52 A.M.

Nuan felt somewhat inadequate compared to some of the other soldiers fighting beside her. The first engagement against the aliens had gone…extraordinarily well. The alien force was primarily composed of Andromedons and Vitakara, who had set up in entrenched positions in a shelled intersection, black alloy barricades set up providing cover, not including the buildings the aliens were also using.

The two Templars, Pall and Ellinor had immediately rushed into combat. Ellinor was protecting herself with a psionic shield and Pall thrust a hand forward, sending a telekinetic wave which knocked the Runianarch soldiers he was charging off-balance. He immediately laid into them with his battle axe, nearly taking the head off one and caving in the chest of another.

Ellinor was performing similarly, Dane Axe in hand as she buried it in the unprotected seams of armor. The rest of them were taking up cover behind the first alien barricades, rallying the ADVENT soldiers behind them to advance. Creed, Rebecca, and herself were suppressing the back left line of Andromedons, while Cole, Ricardo and Eddison were focusing on the other half.

The Commander was on the roof, surprisingly enough not holding any weapon, but she’d seen him pulling out some kind of small spheres. She would have guessed they were marbles, but she knew that couldn’t be right. The genetic enhancements were definitely coming in handy, she was amazed how much of a difference they made in actual combat.

She could actually zoom in on an enemy, and fire accurately while doing it. It had taken some getting used to, but it was an amazing feeling. The result was that the Andromedons were pinned by unnaturally accurate fire, while the two Templars cut through the Vitakara force with laughable ease. Ellinor had a small shield before her as she advanced on a pair of Borelians, while Pall was incorporating his telekinetics into his attacks; disrupting balance, breaking limbs, pulling weapons out of hands.

Eddison was also acting in a highly supportive manner. “Acquiring targets!” Purple energy flowing off him, he extended a hand to a group of Andromedons in cover, and twisted his wrist, while pulling back his arm. The Andromedon soldiers were suddenly lifted into the air, completely exposed.

“Concentrate fire!” Creed commanded, and every XCOM soldier with a rifle began firing on the suits. They could take damage, but not even Andromedon suits could hold against a sustained
barrage of gauss fire. The viewports of the suits broke, and then went limp. Nuan didn’t know why they weren’t fighting back, but then realized that Eddison was likely keeping them in place telekinetically.

“Eddison!” She called, pulling out a plasma grenade, another gift from Aegis she’d heard. “Can you direct them?”

He got what she was asking, and gave a quick nod. She tossed the first grenade towards the suspended suit, and he raised his free hand as if to catch it, and moved it until it was in the shattered viewport of the Andromedon. Nuan repeated it for the second suit, with both suits exploding in a spray of plasma and fire.

The aliens had snipers as well, but the Commander was supposedly dealing with them. She glanced up at the rooftops to see Vitakarian corpses either hanging over the railings, or slumped on the ground. There were two left on one rooftop, and the Commander was just kneeling behind another nearby rooftop, one hand palm up.

Something flashed from the palm, a streak of silver, and the alien screamed and went immediately silent. Another flash and she saw that it was that marble thing in his hand again. Some kind of projectile? Whatever he was doing, it was working.

“Mutan reinforcements approaching!” Ellinor called out as she turned to face the reinforcements coming from the nearby street.

“Move up!” Creed waved for them to follow. “Cut them down where they stand!”

“Overseer!” One of the ADVENT Officers came running up. “We’ll clear this street for you.”

Nuan looked back to see several ADVENT Engineers moving into place some kinds of launchers, which were large enough that they required trailers to transport them, and aiming them at the street where Mutons were pouring in. “Copy,” Creed waved them to the sides. “Provide covering fire! Let them do their work.”

Nuan looked at the launcher, knowing she’d seen it before, then her eyes widened. “Mine clearing charges!”

Creed glanced over to her as he fired down the street. “Yep. Seems ADVENT thinks they’re useful for more than just mine clearing.”

“Snipers cleared,” the Commander added, jumping down from the roof and pulling out his sniper rifle finally. “That technique was surprisingly effective.”

“Matthew knows what he’s doing,” Eddison agreed, pulling his hands back towards him, and a half dozen Mutons stumbled into the street.

“Fire!” The ADVENT Captain called, and the launchers shot out long cables into the air with a bang, right down the length of the street. The Mutons didn’t know what those were, and the cables actually landed on some of the exposed Mutons. “Detonate!”

The street was lit up in a series of explosions as the Mine Clearing Charges did their work, though instead of mines blowing up, it was Mutons. “Forward!” The Officer called, while Creed and the two Templars moved forward.

“Keep pushing them!” He called, as even then Nuan saw more aliens coming in the distance. Another intersection was coming up.
“Nuan, ready your Thermite grenades,” Creed said as they moved forward, firing towards the next alien blockage. “Let’s see if Andromedons can stand up to that.”

“Yes, sir,” Nuan said, holstering her rifle and pulling out the two grenades delicately. XCOM was getting more brazen in their deployment of dangerous chemicals. Not that she necessarily had a problem with it, but just because ADVENT was using CIF₃ didn’t mean that Thermite and White Phosphorus were suddenly safer.

But they were effective.

Ellison hooked her axe on her belt, and fully devoted herself to erecting a shield that protected the entire street. “Get into position!” She roared. “Nuan, now!”

Nuan quickly took a look at where the heaviest concentration of enemies were. She decided to focus on the left groups, since they were composed of more Andromedons. “Grenades out to the left!”

She chucked them to the left, and the Andromedons nearby backed away, or at least as much as they could before the Thermite flared and burned through not only the nearby Mutons, but the cover as well. Unfortunately, while it did damage the Andromedon armor, it didn’t look to be fatal, and enough Andromedons had gotten out of the way.

“Shield collapsing!” Ellison warned, picking up her axe again. “Charge forward!”

“Center group being raised,” Eddison stated, lifting a palm up, and the front line of Mutons were raised into the air, and subsequently cut down by a combination of gauss and laser fire. The Muton forces were being completely overwhelmed by the combination of suppressive fire, and the Templars moving in and killing them within seconds.

The Commander was on the roof, and working on taking out some snipers on the opposing side of the street, to some success she saw as there were corpses on the other side. The Muton lines decimated, XCOM and ADVENT advanced further still, and now the Andromedons were retreating back. Seeing the Templars approaching them, they switched tactics, spraying acid from their gauntlets, forcing them to stay back.

“We’ve got trouble coming,” the Commander warned from the rooftops. “Elites, and a lot more Andromedons heading our way.”

“Understood,” Creed stated, taking the time to reload his weapon. “We fortify here.” Nuan took a position beside him, grateful for the aliens for making such useful cover. To her sides were more ADVENT soldiers, emboldened by the advance. Nuan wondered if they’d just gotten lucky so far. The aliens clearly hadn’t expected such a vicious attack, and were now paying a heavy initial cost.

But the aliens weren’t stupid. They would try to adapt eventually.

And this looked like the first true test.

Looking down her rifle, at the titanic Mutons approaching, easily twice her size, she couldn’t help feeling a little intimidated. But then she looked to the front, where Pall and Ellinor were standing firm, Ellinor with a psionic shield in front of her, taking the brunt of the initial fire. The Commander was sniping from the rooftops, Eddison was readying for another attack, and ADVENT was moving more Mine Clearing Charges into the area.

Maybe this wouldn’t turn out so bad after all.
The plasma began raining upon them, and the battle began anew.

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Las Vegas Ruins, Nevada- United States of America

11/6/2016 – 11:12 A.M

Oliver had been told that the aliens had built a fortress, but seeing it in person was something else. Whatever ruins there had been were gone, and in its place was what appeared to be an impregnable base. The black alloy wall that went around the perimeter was especially foreboding; especially as the harsh sunlight from the noon sun only made it stand out more.

“Begin firing!” One of the Officers called out, and the hundreds of tanks that had accompanied the ADVENT Army began their assault.

“Let’s see if I can get some shots,” Cassandra muttered, raising her sniper rifle as the MDUs began moving forward, as well as the Humvees and Breacher Vehicles that began zooming towards the desert. Explosions appeared on the alloy wall, and some into the city itself. Curiously enough, it didn’t look like the aliens realized they were under attack.

Odd.

“Load up!” Blake Harkin ordered, the XCOM soldier in charge currently as Patricia was occupied doing…well, he assumed she was the reason for the lack of a response. “Fatima, do your thing.”

“Got it,” Fatima confirmed as all of them boarded a Stryker. Oliver really hated traveling in confined vehicles, because he knew that everyone was just one bad rocket or mine away from being killed in suitably meaningless fashion. If he was going to die, he’d prefer it be because of his own mistakes, or even just being outnumbered. Anything as long as he had some control over it.

“I hate these things,” Mona Eriksson echoed his thoughts as she climbed in it.

“Have you even ridden in one, Mona?” Lin Zexian, one of the new Taiwanese soldiers asked.

“I don’t like confined spaces,” was her answer. The ones with them chuckled at that.

“It won’t be for too long,” Blake said as the Stryker began moving out. “From the sounds of it, it seems like the whole alien base isn’t even aware we’re here. Patricia did her job well.”

“They don’t even have automated defenses?” Fakhr asked skeptically.

“It’s not that easy,” Blake corrected. “The perimeter defenses are online, but there are no soldiers supporting them, there aren’t any aircraft, and I assume the Sectopods and Cyberdisks have to be activated manually. They might come, but by then it might be too late.”

“Pity,” Mona looked down at her gauntleted hands, which Oliver noted were different than the others. Thinner and made out of some different kind of fabric and no actual armor. Probably had to do with her abilities. Offensive Psions couldn’t use the same stuff as the rest of them since they were destructive enough to damage what they were actually wearing. “I was hoping to actually try some stuff out.”

“Believe me,” Oliver grunted. “You’ll have plenty of opportunities.”

“This is Seraphim Hammarström to appointed Overseer Harkin,” Viktoria’s voice said in their
helmets. “Looks like it’s sadly not going to be as easy as it looked. Guess the Cyberdisks are on some kind of contingency, and there are…” There was a pause. “Yep, I would say a few thousand coming to defend the wall.”

“Copy,” Blake confirmed, as the sounds of battle became more audible. “We’ll be ready. Fatima, I’d say start it now.”

“Affirmative,“

That was the benefit of having two immensely powerful Telepaths. One for neutralizing the enemy, and another for supporting allies. Oliver had heard what it was like to have Patricia supporting people, and he wasn’t sure it was something he was necessarily looking forward too. Anything that messed with his mind too much wasn’t something he was a fan of. But here he didn’t really seem to have a choice.

It probably wouldn’t hurt.

The Stryker stopped, and Fakhr hit the doors open and they charged out, first behind the tank so they had some cover from the enemy fire. The Strykers and other armored transports had parked largely the same way; horizontally to the wall, giving the soldiers cover until better defenses could be established.

ADVENT Engineers were already working to construct barricades between the tanks, supported by the rest of the ADVENT forces. The MDUs were still far behind the front line, but they were advancing and firing, and in the midst of them was the Goliath-class MEC, firing its massive railgun at regular intervals.

“Laying down covering fire!” Lin shouted as he began firing his autorifle at one of the turrets on the top of the wall. Oliver also began raising his own rifle to get a good look at what they were facing. The wall was even larger up close, probably close to twenty feet tall, with turrets lining the ground, middle, and top of it.

The middling ones sticking out from the wall were exclusively plasma, and the ones on the top were a mix of plasma and laser, the latter of which was proving to be the most lethal. Computers were more accurate than Humans, and alien programming was at least equal to that of MDUs, and Oliver ducked down as he saw an ADVENT soldier get sniped by a laser directly to the head.

He swung his rifle back up, focused directly on one of the laser turrets in question, and fired. His enhanced vision allowed him to make a shot he would never have been able to without specialized equipment. The turret sparked, and exploded in a red burst. “One down!” He called.

Several tank volleys took out a few more turrets, even if they were largely not having a major effect on the wall. The main line of Abrams tanks were providing good suppressive fire, and making a lot of dents in the wall, but they weren’t quite as accurate. That however was going to change as they began moving forward, and the MDUs strode ever closer.

“Cyberdisks!” One of the soldiers screamed frantically, as the disk-shaped machines swooped over the wall, and immediately deployed into their attack formation. The green plasma fire that was slamming into the sand around them was soon joined by the hissing golden streaks of Cyberdisk rounds.

“Cover!” Fakhr called, out as she stepped back and loaded a rocket into her launcher. Oliver and Lin complied, and lit up the area around them, even if that seemed somewhat pointless since they
were only dealing with machines which were harder to manipulate and distract. A yell from Mona, and Oliver saw a sizzling purple streak launch into the air and slam into one of the Cyberdisks, shredding the delicate insides and sending it plummeting towards the ground.

“Firing!” A rocket shot out and slammed directly into another cyberdisk, destroying it instantly while causing shrapnel damage to another one nearby. Another purple psionic lance, and another Cyberdisk was vaporized. Cassandra was doing her own share of work, resting her sniper rifle on the edge of the Stryker’s corner, and shooting at the turrets up above.

“What’s wrong with them?” She muttered as Oliver saw another turret explode. “They aren’t doing anything.”

Oliver aimed up to see what she was talking about, and frowned as he saw that the walls actually were being manned. They were definitely aliens, he could see at least a few Mutons and Runianarch soldiers up there. But they just stood there, looking down. It wasn’t even like they were frozen or incapable of moving. He could swear one of them was doing a patrol from the calm way they just walked across the wall.

Well, at least until a sniper shot from Cassandra ended his life. Or was it a she?

The Cyberdisks still kept coming, and had appeared to realize that not everything was ok, and began taking better positions and retreating as needed. More still were destroyed, and the turrets were gradually taken out. Throughout the battle, Oliver felt more and more calm; more focused; he didn’t have to think about where to shoot next because he knew his target would be there.

Fatima’s telepathy, he assumed.

Hm. Perhaps this was not as bad as he thought.

No words needed to be spoken by anyone as the ADVENT soldiers were under the same spell as the rest of them. Fire became concentrated, shots became focused and accurate, soldiers acted in time to save each other’s life from things they would have previously not been aware of. And slowly but surely, they began advancing the battle line forward.

The new wave of armored transports flew past them at some unspoken signal, approaching the wall itself. Out of them poured the Lancer teams, who destroyed what ground turrets remained around them, and began pulling out grappling equipment to scale the wall. Blake motioned them forward and they advanced to where the Lancers were.

This wasn’t so much a battle anymore as it was a rout. However, Oliver was not going to get his hopes up for an easy victory. This was just the outer wall, they still had the city itself to take, and it was only a matter of time before the aliens realized what was going on.

And yet, as he thought about it, he wondered what the aliens could actually do to stop this.

Hopefully, they couldn’t.

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*The Cultro, Earth Orbit*

*11/6/2016 – 11:52 A.M*

They were launching their expected counterattack.
It was much larger than he had anticipated.

The Battlemaster looked down at the golden haptic display of the West Coast of the United States. They were attacking beyond Portland, which was...not entirely expected. Out of the possible targets, he would have thought those would be lower on their priority list, and should the outlying bases fall, that would put the entire northwest at risk of collapse. Even if Seattle were to hold, it wouldn’t last long if the Portland area fell.

A problem. And given the scale of the attack, he knew the bases there were not equipped to handle it. Not without reinforcements. XCOM and ADVENT forces were cutting through the defenses with a disturbing amount of speed, and their technological progress had been far greater than he had anticipated.

Armored vehicles, these new flying XCOM soldiers, chemical grenades, and their plasma dissipaters. That alone was giving ADVENT a massive advantage, since the local forces were equipped with primarily plasma weaponry. That ADVENT had been able to, if not negate their weapon type, interrupt it, was not a good development. They should not have managed to do it so quickly.

Hm. Perhaps they had been pushed too quickly. That ADVENT was primarily using this told him that Aegis was unlikely to be behind it, since Aegis knew that if they pushed too hard, he would have no choice but to put a very quick end to this war. This was not a major problem ultimately, but right now the current battle strategy was insufficient to counter it.

Then there were the reports of a new kind of ADVENT soldier that seemed to be invincible, much like certain XCOM ones. Lancers most likely, and ADVENT had probably turned them into MELD-enhanced super-soldiers. Not unexpected, but the bases primarily composed of Runianarch soldiers would fall easily to them. That was a problem that he needed to solve later.

The bases in Hillsboro and Salem were likely lost, and all that remained would be to extract a large cost from XCOM itself. If it was going to fall, he wanted some idea of how best to handle them. It wasn’t worth direct intervention, but there wasn’t a need to sacrifice the Vitakara unnecessarily.

“Establish a connection to Runi’Yularan’s sarrah.”

“Establishing,” the CODEX said. The golden figure of the Vitakarian overseer of the Portland regional defenses appeared, in full combat armor and holding a plasma rifle.

“Battlemaster,” was his curt greeting, looking around in response to something. “Good to hear from you. We’re not holding well against-“

“I am aware,” the Battlemaster interrupted, raising one fist. “Your orders have changed. Your own forces are insufficient against what XCOM and ADVENT currently have. Order all Runianarch soldiers through the Gateways to safety, and you will follow them.”

Yularan was clearly surprised. “Retreat?”

“You will die if you stay,” the Battlemaster stated flatly. “I will not sacrifice your soldiers for a defeat. And while your soldiers will retreat, I fully intend to keep ADVENT and XCOM occupied. I will order Muto units from Desolan itself to reinforce the cities. In addition, I will be releasing the new Sectoid Vanguards, as I feel this would be an adequate field test for their skills.”

“But to be clear, the intent is not to win,” Yularan noted slowly, once more glancing around. “Then why continue fighting? Especially if you’re having our forces retreat?”
“Information,” the Battlemaster explained. “Both in how these new developments have changed ADVENT, and how the Vanguards perform. They are expendable and can be replaced. Your soldiers cannot. Carry out my orders and signal my ship when your forces have evacuated, and establish Gateway connections to the ID numbers my CODEX will send you. Execute this without delay.” The Battlemaster cut the connection and looked back to the map.

Seattle was likely going to hold. Even if it didn’t, ADVENT would pay a heavy price to acquire it, and likely not get much more than a leveled city. Collective Andromedon Overseer V’Thrask had spent his time well, and made sure Seattle would not fall easily, if at all. The Andromedons might suffer severe losses, but holding the city was important, because if that fell, then so would the Northwest.

It was a problem, but one he was sure V’Thrask could handle adequately. He had proven competent, and the only thing that would undermine him was incompetence or luck, the former of which didn’t exist with Andromedons, and the latter he didn’t believe the concept of to begin with. They would have to be outfought, outsmarted, and outmaneuvered to have a chance of losing the city.

Still, no point in taking chances. He’d directed a portion of the system fleet to assist in the air defenses, and V’Thrask had established Gateways to several Collective bases full of Andromedons, Zararch, and Mutons. He was curious to see how they would handle the new ADVENT tech, since they would not fall to it so easily. If nothing else, important data would be collected.

Now he needed to figure out what was going on with Las Vegas. Of all the targets that could be attacked, he’d been convinced that would be the main one. A military base of that size, and location was too large a threat to ignore, and had adequately addressed it by making sure the Sargon there had whatever was needed to turn it into an acceptable fortress.

But he’d heard nothing from them so far. There was a general warning they were being attacked, but the Sargon Vegas-1 had not informed him they were under attack. That implied that either the force attacking them was not significant enough to warrant an actual update, or they had been compromised somehow. Which also didn’t make sense, since signal strength there was perfectly fine, and all diagnostics connected to the Vegas base were online.

With that said, the Battlemaster suspected something was wrong. It had to be. “Establish a connection to the Las Vegas Command Base,” he ordered. “Priority One.”

“Confirmed, establishing now.”

Almost instantly, the hulking golden figure of the Sargon was before him. “Battlemaster,” he greeted. “I am ready to assist.”

“Status report,” the Battlemaster demanded. “The general alarm was sent to us. What is happening?”

“Interesting,” the Sargon said, almost in a monotone. “That must be an error. Everything is normal here. Everything is fine.”

The Battlemaster was instantly concerned. Sargons didn’t talk like that. Not usually. They didn’t use words like ‘fine’ either. “I will rectify this error immediately, Battlemaster,” Vegas-1 continued in the monotone. “I apologize for inconveniencing you-“

“Display exterior cameras on Vegas Base Command,” the Battlemaster ordered the CODEX. Normally he wouldn’t force an override like this; he had a fairly good idea of what had happened,
but he needed to know for sure. Holographic screens appeared, and it didn’t show some paltry ADVENT force, but what he would only assume was a large portion of their army.

They were bringing everything to fight, and based on how close they were, and that the aliens on the wall were getting slaughtered like animals, he assumed they were winning decidedly. Trask. Clever. He now knew for sure what was happening, and he’d made a mistake in underestimating that. Now defeating ADVENT here would be much, much harder.

“Override Seven-Seven-Two-One-Seven, Desolan, initiate Reset Protocol, Countermeasure Two-Two-Sargon-One,” the Battlemaster stated to the Sargon. They were supposedly immune to direct mind control, but there were clearly some flaws left in the programming, and so he had to reset the psionic immunity manually. Revelean needed to fix that immediately.

The Sargon visibly froze, then moved again. “Battlemaster, the situation is concerning. It appears that a hostile psion has managed to place the majority of our forces in a trance that leaves us unable to adequately respond to outside stimuli and information. We will not be able to forcefully remove them from this state without assistance.”

The Battlemaster knew his options were limited, but the telepathy had to be dealt with. “Activate all mechanical units; I will be ordering a Gatekeeper to assist. That should deal with the psion affecting the majority of our soldiers. Reinforcements will also be coming, as will I.”

“Acknowledged, Battlemaster,” Vegas-1 confirmed. “I will begin carrying out your orders and executing the appropriate contingencies immediately.”

“I will be there shortly,” the Battlemaster stated, and ended the communication. “Head to the Las Vegas base,” he ordered the CODEX as he began issuing orders for reinforcements. “This needs to be handled immediately.”

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Seattle, Washington – United States of America

11/6/2016 – 12:08 P.M.

They were getting closer to the shield, and now they were facing much stancher resistance than before. The Commander fought from the rooftops, and was now joined by teams of ADVENT Snipers, as they faced the Zararch agents across the city in a duel stretching entire city blocks. On the ground the Andromedons were being supplemented with Borelians, Mutons, and Elites.

XCOM was holding the line as ADVENT was rushing to reinforce the massive intersection that was now the location of the heaviest fighting in the city. There were no more open streets, instead there were black alloy barricades and the front of buildings reinforced. The aliens were not just using the apartments and two-storied buildings as mere constructs, but were fully occupying them and using them defensively.

“Pall, Ellinor,” the Commander said as he looked down the scope of his gauss rifle. “Clear the leftmost building and fall back.”

“Yes, Commander!” The two Templars followed his orders and dashed across the torn street, protected by Ellinor’s shield, and leapt into the window of the second floor. The Commander gave a grim smile as he executed a Zararch sniper on the roof of another building. That was one building done. Now they needed to deal with the line of aliens in the front.

“Gloria, prepare for a barrage on my designated position,” the Commander said, turning on his
marking laser and aiming it at the frontal alien line. “Fire at will.”

“Local ADVENT forces, prepare for rocket barrage on enemy position,” Creed called as he waved for the rest of the XCOM soldiers to fall into cover. The Ballista-class MEC soon showed just how dangerous it was as the missiles streaked down to where the Andromedons and Mutons were hunkering behind, lighting up the street in a bright explosion of fire and shrapnel.

The Commander fired at one of the Runianarch soldiers who was foolishly trying to take a position at a window, or perhaps use the plasma turret set up there. Another body dropped to the ground. His genetic enhancements made this almost laughably easy. He ejected the empty clip and put in a fresh one as the smoke cleared and he could see how much was actually accomplished.

He frowned. Unfortunately not as much as he’d hoped. All the Mutons, and most of the Borelians were dead, but the Andromedons were either heavily damaged, or had retreated into the buildings, and now subsequently coming out. Hm. That was new. Some of the Battlefield Engineers had a new attachment to their backs, and it looked to be one of their red shield projectors…now clearly mobile.

“Elites!” One of the snipers called. “Concentrate fire!”

The Commander looked down the smoking street to see at least twenty of the massive Elites marching down. “Concentrate fire down the middle,” the Commander ordered, reaching into a pouch on his waist and pulling out his alloy spheres. “Nuan, give them another thermite grenade or two.”

“Oh it,” she confirmed. “Throwing!”

The throw was perfect and landed in the middle of a group of four Elites; it sparked with a bright flash, but unfortunately barely seemed to slow them down. The armor was torn, scorched, and weakened; yellow blood spilled from the now-exposed flesh, but it didn’t appear to be stopping them in the least. The barrage of gauss fire didn’t seem to be doing much more than irritating them.

It was clear what they were planning to do. Overwhelming ADVENT with Elites was a valid strategy, and one that was extremely difficult to stop. The good news was that it looked like there was very little behind this push, so if they took these Elites out, they might be able to actually advance instead of being held to a standoff.

He held a hand, palm up, and one of the silver spheres glittered in the midday sun. While he knew he wasn’t the most powerful telekine ever, he had been working on a way to take advantage of what he could do, which it turned out, was more than he suspected. A small object accelerated to lethal speeds was not quite as impressive as mind control, but it was certainly more useful than what most people gave it credit for.

Not to mention he’d gotten rather good at it.

The enhancements to his body and eyes made his hand-eye coordination near-perfect, so lining up a perfect shot was barely a challenge. The sphere shot away instantly, directly towards the ornate eyehole of the Elite helmet, the weakest part of the entire thing. He was able to shoot it faster than the speed of sound, even if he needed some distance for it to be effective. But the Elites at the back? Those he could take out.

The farthest Elite in the back didn’t have any time to react as the sphere slammed into its eye and brain behind it, and withdrew to his palm all within the span of a few seconds. A rubberbanding attack, as he thought of it, easy to learn as it was close to a muscle reflex. He repeated the same
thing with the next-closest one, killing each one instantly with well-placed alloy spheres.

The remaining Elites, and their Andromedon support, were close enough that this technique wouldn’t be effective against them. He quickly pocketed the spheres, and appraised the situation below. The good news was that they were being held at the intersection, but the bad was that ADVENT was taking losses.

“Eddison, we need to lift them up,” the Commander said. “Pall, Ellinor, status inside?”

“Almost clear, Commander,” Ellinor panted. “Andromedons are not easy to kill with primarily melee weapons.”

“Ready when you are, Commander,” Eddison also added, beginning to stand up. “Give me covering fire!”

The Commander also focused his own power, extending his right hand down to one of the Andromedons. Telekinesis was an odd feeling to him; he wasn’t really powerful enough to grab more than one thing at a time, maybe two, so perhaps the experience was different for someone like Eddison who could lift a dozen.

It was both what he expected and not at the same time; an intangible hand he controlled that could manipulate whatever he saw. The invisible hand clutched the yellow-helmeted Andromedons and lifted into the air. And now came the part that he was quite good at. He might not have extensive powers, but he was going to be as lethal with the ones he had as possible.

Pressure was something he understood and applied, and he began squeezing. On the ground, Eddison, enshrined by the purple waves of psionic energy, raised both hands, and the front line of aliens was lifted into the air. A twist of his hands and they spun around, disorienting and rendering them incapable of firing back. Most Elites dropped their cannons, and the Andromedons clearly weren’t familiar fighting upside down.

The Commander didn’t distract himself with that, as he continued crushing the Andromedon in his grasp. The helmet casing began cracking, the acid canister on it’s back shattered, spilling the green chemical onto the ground. The hands were forced into misshapen positions, and the joints of the legs broken.

He unconsciously moved a hand underneath the one he was directing his power with, adding another hand to the one crushing the Andromedon, and applying two directions of pressure, the goal being forcing the alien into a broken, ruined ball of metal, flesh, and blood. ADVENT Rocketeers fired at the exposed aliens, blowing their armor apart, and gauss slugs ripping the exposed flesh apart in sprays of ichor.

The helmet of the Andromedon shattered, and the alien let out a final shriek before the oxygen hit its skin, turning it into a shriveled corpse in seconds. The Commander kept squeezing, and didn’t stop until the delicate controls on the inside were sparking and destroyed. He dropped one hand, and with an almost inconsiderate flick of his wrist, sent the ruined corpse of the Andromedon suit across the city.

The Elites were dying, slowly but surely as more rockets and grenades were tossed at them. Another thermite grenade by Nuan targeted their inverted bodies, and melted away their helmets as opposed to other parts of their body, allowing the ADVENT soldiers to fire away and kill them much faster. Andromedon suits lost their helmets, killing the pilots and reverting them to autopilot mode, which was solved by a few well-thrown plasma grenades.
Each dead alien was released by Eddison, and the aliens not caught in his telekinetic field were retreating further into the city. The Commander pulled out his sniper rifle again, and began firing at the aliens still exposed. Eddison had fallen to one knee, so the Commander knew he couldn’t hold this forever.

But they did it, and the last alien fell. For a brief moment, there was relative silence on the battlefield. “Status check,” the Commander said, looking down the scope of his rifle for more aliens.

“Eddison is wiped out,” Creed said, who had Cole kneeling down by him and checking up on him. “He’ll be fine though. Everyone else is good to go, but we should stock up before moving forward.”

“We’re fine as well,” Pall also informed him, as he saw the two Templars step out of the building they had finally cleared, their armor smeared with alien blood and soot. “Building cleared. Doesn’t sound like there are others right now.”

“Take a quick breather,” the Commander ordered as ADVENT began setting up a more permanent line. The Engineers were moving the massive Elite corpses towards the middle of the road, and stacking them up on top of each other, then sealing them with Symbiote sprayers as a kind of makeshift cover; a rather innovative tactic.

While the ADVENT squads moved up, they were also bringing in smaller necessities such as water, and small parcels of food for the other soldiers, which was being primarily handled by the ADVENT Medics who were treating the wounded and checking on the soldiers still alive; phasing them out with fresh soldiers so they could recharge and be ready for later fighting. The Commander wasn’t hungry, he doubted anyone was during combat, but water was welcome. He turned to jump down when his HUD suddenly blinked as he was receiving a communication from an unknown source.

He moved his hand to the button which would allow him to respond, but before he could, a voice preemptively spoke. “The skills of your soldiers and yourself was not exaggerated, Commander. I am impressed.”

That should not have happened. He had to acknowledge and approve any incoming communication. This was very bad, their communications were compromised if who he thought it was was actually talking to him. Instead, he moved to cut off exterior speech and communication. No one else should hear whatever this was. “Who are you?”

“I am Collective Andromedon Overseer V’Thrask, of the Andromedon Federation,” the being answered. It occurred to the Commander he hadn’t heard an Andromedon actually speak to him before. It didn’t sound too odd; the voice was deep, even if it sounded almost watery, and while it wasn’t a monotone, it didn’t have any additional emotion behind it. He would have expected nothing less from a species as inclined towards machinery and engineering as them.

“I don’t suppose you’ll explain how you broke our network encryption?” The Commander asked. He doubted the Andromedon would gloat; most aliens, it seemed, were not overdramatic attention-seekers, which was both a relief and worrying. So he wasn’t expecting a straight answer.

“You people are skilled with what they know,” V’Thrask stated. “But we have centuries worth of experience with network communications. Your methods are inferior to our own, but even still, it is not easy to break. Specialists are required, of which I am one. Most consider it not worth it to listen to one communication stream, but in this case it was warranted.”
That…was a longer response than he’d anticipated. “Why bother talking at all?” He asked. “Why not listen in and keep a tactical advantage over us?”

“Orders, Commander, I’m sure you can understand the need to follow them.”

He frowned. “That doesn’t explain it. Why are you talking to me? We are not going to surrender, nor do we plan to retreat.”

“Good, that would not be ideal,” V’Thrask surprisingly agreed. “But I would not be too concerned, Commander, I do not intend for your species to lose today.”

The Commander blinked. “What?”

“The shield will come down in approximately three minutes,” V’Thrask continued as if he hadn’t heard. “Move as many of your forces within it as possible, because it will not stay down forever. Current estimates place full repair at twenty-two point four minutes. Take advantage of this, because your assault will only take more time if you do not.”

“You’re helping us?” The Commander asked incredulously.

“I am under orders, Commander, I follow them.” A pause. “I am unable to explain now, but the Federation needs to understand why exactly your species has captured the attention of the Ethereals, and what is actually happening on this world. The Ethereals have not been forthcoming to certain elements of our leadership. Several have decided the only way is to discover that for ourselves. They are hiding something from us, and I suspect you can tell us what that is.”

Oh yes, he certainly could.

Assuming this wasn’t a trap. The story sounded plausible, but the Commander was not going to make the mistake of assuming V’Thrask was on their side. He was under orders, as he said. “I agree. But I’m also not convinced this isn’t a trap.”

“I would be disappointed if you didn’t consider that,” V’Thrask said, not sounding any different. “But that is irrelevant at the moment. I will keep in communication and guide you to the shield generator, and then you will meet us. Only a small number are aware of the current plan, and you will not share this with ADVENT. We are not interested in them. You will take us back to your base of operations and we will explain the situation in detail. If you are concerned with our motivations then, I am aware of your psions, and expect you to use them.”

The Commander began nodding to himself. If, and he still wasn’t convinced this wasn’t a trap, if V’Thrask was actually genuine, this could be an essential ally in the fight. That at least some Andromedons were willing to have their people defect to get information meant that the situation there was more complicated than any of them, even Aegis, had predicted.

When they learned an Ethereal defected…well, that would be interesting.

“Fine,” the Commander said. “We’ll work with you for now. And keep in contact.”

“Confirmed,” V’Thrask said. “Prepare for the shield to come down.”

The Commander jumped down to his XCOM squad, all of whom were largely recovered. “Squad communications only,” he ordered. The soldiers immediately complied. “And prepare to move out immediately.”

“What’s going on?” Creed asked.
“Look!” Nuan pointed, and sure enough, the massive red shield that had covered the inner city of Seattle suddenly turned off.

“The hell?” Pall asked in wonder. “What happened?” The other ADVENT soldiers were also pointing, and the Officers clearly trying to communicate with leadership.

“A change of plans,” the Commander noted as he pulled out his WHEEE cannon. “Mission parameters have changed. Our new objectives are to destroy the shield generator.”

“Assuming we can find it,” Ellinor muttered. “It’s a big city.”

“Won’t be a problem,” the Commander said with some amusement. “Because our second objective is the extraction of several Andromedon defectors. One of whom just contacted me and informed me what was going to happen.”

Seven helmets stared at him in stunned silence. “Andromedons?” Creed asked skeptically.

“I’m not convinced it’s a not a trap,” the Commander said. “But it appears the Federation isn’t happy with the Ethereals stonewalling them on certain matters, and has some of their own to get answers. I assume they sabotaged the shield generator, but it will be repaired shortly. We need to get in there, follow the instructions this Andromedon V`Thrask provides, then get him and his other defectors to the Praesidium. And we’re not telling ADVENT.”

“Then we better get moving,” Eddison said. “How much time do we have?”

“About twenty minutes,” the Commander said as he turned towards the city. “Let’s go!”

Hillsboro, Portland – United States of America

11/6/2016 – 12:17 P.M.

Roman fell back into cover as they kept moving deeper into the city, and the battle was in full gear for both sides. The air battle was lighting up the sky as enough AA guns had been taken out for the fighters to begin attacking in force, and the UFOs had been deployed in response. The aliens had also deployed Floaters to deal with the XCOM Archangels, which fortunately were in Salem, the other town nearby.

But the closer they got to the city center, the more entrenched everything was. The defenses were more established, and the defenders stronger. As of right now, the street they’d been fighting through now had several barricades set up in the middle of it, large enough for two aliens to stand behind and fire, and these were spaced as far as he could see. In the back were two buildings on opposite sides that had been converted into something of an anti-infantry tower, with Vitakarians manning plasma turrets and snipers on the roofs.

Not that ADVENT was in a bad position; far from it. Roman and his squad lead the charge with two other teams, several Molosser Handlers, and one Bradley tank, and hitched to that was some kind of launcher. A mine clearing charge if he’d seen it correctly. An interesting application if they would use it the way he was expecting them too.

“Maksim, can you get a shot on those gunners?” Roman yelled as plasma bolts rained down on them, even as the Engineers were working to establish better cover. Galina and Konstantin were laying down enough suppressive fire, supplemented by the Bradley to keep the ground-level aliens from firing temporarily, but the alien gunners and snipers were a different problem. They had
reverted to speaking English for the benefit of the other soldiers, since communication was key in situations like this.

“Working on it!” Maksim called, spinning out of cover and falling to one knee as he lined up a shot. “Got him.”

“Redirect fire!” One of the Officers called. “Loose the dogs!”

Roman ordered his team to comply and they all aimed for the towers in the distance. Most didn’t hit, but Roman had been appraised of this tactic and he knew what would happen. The Molosser Hounds dashed forward towards the first split alien barricades, barking ferociously. The closest aliens shouted as they were suddenly assailed by the animals, and were discovering that the massive hounds were a dangerous threat.

The Hounds had been trained well, and used their weight to unbalance the aliens first, along with chewing up the hands, which were usually not as protected. Roman also noted that the dogs were almost disturbingly smart. The Hound chewing on the Vitakarian closest to them had the alien by the arm, muzzle splattered in golden blood, and was actually dragging it in front of the barricade in a way to protect itself from enemy fire.

If Roman had been able to muster any sympathy for the aliens, he might have felt bad at seeing the hound begin biting out the throat of the Vitakarian as she struggled and screamed. A slow way to die, and the other hound had similarly dragged its unfortunate victim to a similarly covered area. The Hounds were vicious and quick, and they seemed to know when they’d done enough damage, and dashed back to their Handlers, leaving the alien to choke on their own blood.

Roman smirked as he saw the Handlers give their Hounds a treat for a job well done. Good boy.

“We need to get rid of those towers,” Stanislav muttered as they dashed to the barricade. “It’s only going to get more dangerous. Those turrets and snipers are not going away.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Roman said. “ADVENT Command, requesting A-10 airstrike on the following points.”

“Acknowledged,” came the response. “Awaiting target sites.”

“Mark the buildings!” Roman called for the two Officers, who shouted affirmatives and switched on their laser markers. The rest of them kept laying down fire on the target areas, as the aliens on the ground began firing at them. Two ADVENT soldiers fell from plasma fire, and Roman killed a Vitakarian who’d stuck his head out too far.

Elena cheered as the first airstrike slammed into the leftmost building with the sweet sound of the A-10 machine guns. He couldn’t be sure, but it looked like it hadn’t just taken out the snipers on the roof, but shot through the roof and killed whoever was on the second floor. The second airstrike came a few seconds later with similar results.

“Push forward!” Roman yelled, motioning forward, as Galina and Konstantin, along with several other Gunners began taking the initiative and moving forward, firing while the rest of ADVENT rushed into cover ahead. The Molosser Hounds dashed forward under the hail of gauss slugs, and began attacking enemies at random.

The aliens were outnumbered and outgunned, and they were thoroughly disoriented from the thunderous assault they’d carried out. The ones attempting to run away were shot in the back, the wounded ones were executed on the ground, the unlucky ones were torn apart by the Hounds,
while the aliens beside them either tried to shoot the dog, or backed away to get as far away as possible.

Some aliens were braver than others. A Borelian who was being attacked by a Hound was holding her own, even though the Hound had mangled her hand. However, she was completely exposed as a result and quickly executed. And just like that, the stalemate was broken, and they were in control of a fortified street, and the sealed city center was in the distance.

“I’ll have to find a detour,” the Bradley operator informed him. “Can’t get through these barricades obviously. Sorry.”

“We’ll manage,” Roman said as the rest of the ADVENT squads began appraising the area. “There doesn’t seem to be anything here right now.”

“Don’t speak too soon,” Galina warned as she reloaded her autorifle. “We’re not done by a long shot.”

“Right,” Roman switched to a different frequency. “ADVENT Command, we’ve secured our immediate location. Requesting additional forces to hold the area. Plotting a path for tank support would be appreciated.”

“Four squads will be deployed to hold this area,” the operator said. “Your team has done a lot, Shieldbearer Kostov, you want to let someone else take the lead for a bit?”

Roman looked around, and all of them shook their heads. “Negative. We’ve still suffered no casualties or wounds. We’re good to go. However, I could use a renewed shield battery. I’m under thirty percent on mine.”

“That can be arranged,” the operator confirmed. “Hold position and do not advance until the order is given. We’re waiting until the majority of our forces are in the same radius, otherwise we’ll be-“

“Flanked, yes, I know,” Roman finished. “Not the first time I’ve done this. Don’t worry, we’ll hold this position.”

“Excellent…wait, hang on.” There was a pause. “Shieldbearer, get your forces into defensive positions. Looks like you have company coming your way…we haven’t seen these before.”

“Everyone into cover!” Roman yelled, moving forward until he was at the corner of a building, looking down the street. “Unidentified enemies approaching.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Anton muttered as he and Maksim moved together some heavy alloy crates for cover. “Unidentified? Command, can you tell us anything else?”

“New unit appears Humanoid, black armor, very likely Vitakarian. Appears to be from the established Gateway.”

“Those are the Lurainian, right?” Elena asked, looking up at him as she helped several other engineers stack the alien corpses on top of each other for some crude cover. “We haven’t fought them yet.”

“Instinct says yes,” Roman said slowly, thinking on everything he knew on the Vitakarian Special Forces. “But I don’t think they wear black armor. And I know a lot of them are Borelian… Command, any Borelians spotted in similar armor?”
“Negative. But we’ve only seen a small amount. Lancers are moving in to deal with it in case it’s something else.” A pause. “Shieldbearer, we’re trying to get eyes on your position, but you have contacts coming from the north and east streets; they seem to be taking advantage of your advance to flank you.”

“Understood,” Roman cursed; this was not shaping up well. He waved Stanislav and Anton over facing that direction. “Anything-“

“Contact!” Maksim yelled sharply and fired. The black-armored humanoid leapt to the side as it came around the corner, almost as if it was expecting the shot. It didn’t appear to have any weapons on first glance, but when it raised its left arm he saw some kind of wrist plasma weapon.

“Fire at will!” Roman ordered, a command that was echoed by the other Officers.

All the ADVENT soldiers in the area began firing down the street, and the right arms of all the aliens flashed and they were suddenly holding purple shields on their arms, which looked suspiciously like… “Oh no.” Galina said.

“Command, the enemies appear to be psions,” Roman said urgently. “Requesting immediate ground and air support on our position.”

The psionic aliens didn’t advance, but instead lined up in a perfect line as Roman and his squad fired on them. Even though they fired a constant barrage, they didn’t manage to make a single shot. Roman took a few seconds to steady his aim, and instead of aiming at the head, aimed at the feet of the alien. It was a shot he knew he could hit, and the moment he fired it, the alien shifted his feet and the slug missed.

“What the fuck?” Maksim demanded. “Why aren’t we hitting them?”

“We’ve got bigger problems,” Galina called and Roman saw another line of the aliens forming, and the hands of these were rippling with psionic energy.

“Throwing grenade!” Elena called, and threw a standard frag grenade towards the alien line, but the grenade suddenly stopped, then reversed course in mid-air and back towards them.

“Down!” Roman yelled and rolled out of the way. The grenade exploded, and wounded a couple of ADVENT soldiers, but fortunately didn’t kill them. The Medics rushed to get them out of the way, even as Roman scrambled to cover.

“This is bad,” Roman muttered to no one in particular. Psionics were not something they were equipped to handle, and it was only a matter of time before they began using telepathy. Even as the thought entered his mind, a nearby ADVENT soldier bolted up and began charging straight into the line of fire muttering gibberish to himself as he suffered some kind of mental breakdown.

The aliens behind the shield line fired several beams of plasma that killed him instantly.

“Ugh,” Galina clutched her helmet. “Everything’s spinning, I can’t see clearly.”

“More coming from the right!” Anton shouted, and to Roman’s dismay he saw that even more of the aliens were performing the same kind of shield line.

“[Help!]” Elena called out suddenly, throwing her weapon to the ground. “[Get me out of here now!]”

Fuck. Without wasting a second he leapt towards Elena and tackled her to the ground before she
bolted like the other guy. “[Get off me! Get off me!]” She screamed as she struggled. “[Get me out of here now! Let me go!]”

They couldn’t defend against this. “Sedative!” He yelled towards one of the Medics, one who hopefully was still uncompromised. “Now!”

She tossed a syringe to him, and he set it down on the ground as he attempted to remove her helmet; luckily she was weaker than him, even if it was difficult to control the fully armored woman. But he got it off, and she looked completely and utterly terrified, the pupils of her eyes were severely dilated and tinged purple. He gritted his teeth and found a vein with the syringe, and a few seconds later she slowed her struggles.

“[It’s going to be alright,]” he told her as the drug took effect. “[It’s going to be alright.]”

Then he heard the sound he didn’t think he would hear again. The sound of an A-10’s guns. Stanislav cheered as the bullets suddenly ripped into the alien line, which for once they didn’t seem to have expected. Roman dashed back to his position and saw that there were a few aliens still alive, but only the back line, and even then only a few had managed to protect themselves with some kind of psionic shield.

“We’ve got backup!” Maksim called, pointing to the opposite alien line which was very much intact. Roman watched in amazement as the entire alien line was suddenly lifted into the air and... crumpled for lack of a better word, a yellow fluid shooting from the joints and cracks of their armor as they were juiced by whoever was coming.

“XCOM!” Anton whooped, and sure enough, the welcome sight of a full squad of armored and armed XCOM soldiers came around the corner. The psionic aliens that were still alive chittered something, and began backing up as they must have sensed the XCOM psions approaching. The Molosser Handlers took that opportunity to let the dogs out from their cover, and those ran down the black armored aliens, but unlike the others, these actually turned to defend themselves.

The shields in their gauntlets suddenly shifted to some kind of energy blade and stabbed down, actually managing to pierce the hide of the Hound. It yelped and backed up, and the rest of the aliens converted their shields to psionic blades and began slashing at the Hounds, which were being frantically called back.

Then suddenly all four of the aliens were lifted into the air. Roman turned to see the XCOM psion standing beside him, one hand extended palm up. He twisted the hand in a smooth motion, and the limbs of all the aliens suddenly rolled in a complete circle, sounding audible pops and cracks as all of them were crippled beyond repair.

Another gesture and the necks were snapped, and the psion let the corpses fall to the ground. “Good thing we got here in time,” he noted, looking around. “They had to start using psions eventually.”

“We appreciate it,” Roman said. “We’re not equipped to handle psionics.”

“Most aren’t,” the soldier nodded. “Psion Matthew Hawkins, XCOM.”

“Shieldbearer Roman Kostov,” he returned. “Ready to assist. What were those? I thought the only psions were Sectoids or Ethereals?”

“That,” Roman turned to the corpses. “Is a good question.”

“I’m checking that now,” a female XCOM soldier said; Roman noted that the flag on her armor
was Chinese, surprisingly enough.

“What’s the status of your forces?” Matthew asked him.

“I’m down one,” Roman gestured to Elena. “Several more casualties and wounded for everyone else. ADVENT is sending reinforcements, but we were attacked before they arrived.”

“We’re going to advance forward,” Matthew said. “Hold the line here until ADVENT tells you to move forward.”

“Uh, Matthew?” The Chinese soldier called out. “This thing looks a lot like a Sectoid.”

“What?” Matthew marched over to where she was standing over the corpse. One helmet taken off, and Roman could see what she meant. In fact, he wasn’t sure it could be anything else. No mouth, pinkish skin, that…shape of a Sectoid head…it looked like one, but if someone had decided to improve them significantly.

“Interesting,” Matthew said slowly. “Let everyone know. Vahlen will need to look at this.”

“I’ll inform ADVENT Command,” Roman told him. “And good luck.”

“Appreciated, Shieldbearer,” Matthew said, before turning back to his squad. “Come on! Move out!”

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Las Vegas Ruins, Nevada - United States of America

11/6/2016 – Unknown

The attack must have started, even if she had no concept of what was actually happening. The sounds she picked up on were the muffled and submerged sounds of assault weapons, tank shelling, explosions, and aircraft roaring overhead. Yet it didn’t seem important in the context of what she was doing. The mantra was still repeating over and over, and it was only getting easier as more died from assumed ADVENT fire, allowing her to increase her control over the remaining aliens.

*Everything was normal.*

When the attack had started, she’d come close to losing control of a portion of the aliens, but in the end, they were incapable of resisting her voice inside their heads. It was a surreal experience being so closely interconnected with so many aliens, simple and complicated. They were puppets on invisible strings that she manipulated, having no understanding of their lack of free will.

So she’d begun experimenting on just how far she could push their obliviousness; her own control over their minds. How much could she subject them to, and still not have anything be wrong?

Her will was ingrained deep enough that she could focus on specific groups, random aliens who were victims of her curiosity. Just by focusing on them for mere seconds, she was able to absorb the entirety of who they were; their desires, loves, likes, dislikes, and other feelings that were difficult to put into Human words. But there was enough overlap that she could understand them well enough.

All beings, it seemed, could be boiled down to understandable, base emotions that drove them. Some species exhibited these more than others, but the absences of some didn’t equate to none at
all. Fear was universal. Anger was universal. Joy was as well. Now what those meant to different species varied, but what it represented was unmistakable.

She was reminded of the psychological profiles of the various species she’d spent time reviewing. Weaknesses that they wanted to exploit. Every species had their breaking points, which could further be refined by individual. Inside the minds of these aliens, those were easy to figure out. Now to see just if she could keep their minds intact…temporarily.

Performing an act of suicide or mass murder was trivially easy. It was simple to have the mate of a Vitakarian place a pistol to her head and blow her brains out in front of him. Or another Borelian execute every tenth member of her squad. Or Andromedons casually dismembering a compliant Muton in front of a complacent and mildly curious audience.

Everything was normal.

Everything was fine.

A few cases weren’t a problem, those she could easily control the reactions of. Nothing they saw would elicit a response, not yet. Once she left their minds, the full weight of what they’d done would hit them, and psychologically drive them to madness. If they were lucky, they might kill themselves before their minds snapped completely.

A win-win. Even in the event her control was somehow disrupted…she sincerely doubted the majority of the Vitakarian forces would be in a position to fight. She smiled to herself at that. Simple commands. An endless march forward, which could lead directly to walking off buildings or into the line of fire. All while thinking contentedly that everything was happening as it should.

Target practice was a normal activity, and the fact that the aliens simply decided to target other living aliens at this time was perfectly normal and acceptable. Sudden suicides were not emergencies, only something they had gotten used to recently. Death on a scale of hundreds at a time was not something to be concerned about, but merely another part of life here.

Everything is fine.

Everything is fine.

Everything is fine.

Her control was becoming more tenuous, even as more died at her commands. ADVENT had yet to engage the main alien infantry forces, but even still were killing plenty on their own. But the more she warped their minds to accept the hell she had created, the more they were starting to realize this was wrong. On some level they understood that. The voices she had supplemented were screaming at what was happening, and she could only suppress it for so long.

Even she had a limit. Or did she?

How far could she go here? What did she have to lose by dominating these lesser beings? It wasn’t as though they mattered in the scheme of this war, and were only standing in the way of their eventual victory. Their fates were decided, the only question was how they would be removed from this war.

She would only get better with practice, and there was still more she was curious about…there were some limits that she needed to push, to see just how much she could subject these aliens to and prevent them from reaching their breaking point. Self-mutilation? Torture of others they cared about? Perhaps that would be an interesting test-
What the fuck is wrong with me?

It dawned on her exactly what she was thinking about doing, and what she’d already done. The distraction lessened her already slipping control of the aliens, and the dawning horror and insanity began rising, which she struggled to keep suppressed.

Everything is normal

She hadn’t intended to go quite that far when she’d started…but the curiosity had been too strong. She needed to see just how much she could do.

Everything is fine.

But there was a right and wrong way to do things, and she’d let herself slip into forcing beings, even aliens, into doing horrific things for no other reason than she was curious. And she still wasn’t sure why she’d snapped out of the experimental trance she’d been in. The Commander would have been disappointed in her.

This needed to just end now. She felt it more merciful to just give them a quick death. Something-

The final vestiges of control were shattered as the screaming penetrated her consciousness, forcing her to retreat into her own mind. Gatekeeper. In a rush the sounds, colors, and chaos of the world came back into view; initially disorienting, but fast enough to stumble to her feet and look forward.

The ADVENT forces were scaling the wall surrounding the city, and Rocketeers and Engineers were setting up charges to blast their way into the city. But there were reinforcements coming, and the Gatekeeper had to only be one of the units coming to assist. She opened a channel to her squad. “We’ve got a Gatekeeper, I’ve lost control of the alien forces.”

“Understood,” Harkin answered. “We’re in the city now, and…uh, well, whatever you did…it worked.”

She winced. “I won’t be able to provide much assistance until the Gatekeeper is taken out. I would assume that there are also other reinforcements coming, likely from Gateways.”

“Leave those to us,” Viktoria interjected. “We’ll locate and take out the Gateways…damn it. Looks like they’re getting air support now.”

“UFOs incoming!” One of the Officer yelled, pointing to the sky where there were a small fleet of UFOs coming. Twenty? Thirty? She couldn’t tell, but she did see the smaller UFO that indicated an Overseer. Patricia pursed her lips and switched her channel to Sabre Squad.

“Iosif,” she said slowly. “I believe the Battlemaster has arrived, and he’s brought another army with him.”

“Understood.” A pause. “We’re heading over there now.”

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Las Vegas Ruins, Nevada - United States of America

11/6/2016 – 12:38 P.M.

“Approaching enemy contacts,” the CODEX stated emotionlessly. “Dropping.”

The port opened underneath and the Battlemaster plunged towards the ground, allowing him an
excellent view of the current situation. It was...troubling, to say the least. ADVENT armored vehicles were approaching the wall, indicating the perimeter defenses had ultimately failed, and the UFOs were engaging their air forces, so a large part of the AA defenses had likely also been compromised. The wall had not been completely breached, but there were ADVENT soldiers pouring over it via established grappling hooks that pulled up soldiers from the ground.

The opening streets were now engaged in open combat with the now-freed Mutons, which would soon be joined by Sectopods, the Vanguards, more Cyberdisks, and Elites which would be coming through the Gateways. The first order of business was taking care of the ADVENT forces inside the base.

He angled himself towards the street with the heaviest fighting, and stabilized himself with a telekinetic blast towards the ground in the middle of ADVENT forces. He crushed one under his boots upon landing; transitioning to a full circle sweep which decapitated all the soldiers in his immediate vicinity.

“The Battlemaster!” One of them yelled. “Fall back now!”

Normally he might have felt inclined to take his time and get some kind of enjoyment out of this, or practice if nothing else. Humans couldn’t kill him, but they could provide a faint challenge. But he’d underestimated them so far today, and he could not afford to go easy on them. He raised a hand, extending a ranged telekinetic reach and clenched his fist, crushing their skulls in one brief burst of power.

The air around him shimmered as he dashed forward, violently stabbing one of the MDUs that had come over, then immediately dashing behind the other two accompanying it, stabbing another through it’s central control unit, while telekinetically grabbing the other and violently throwing an arm up, sending it into the air.

His other two hands were not idle either, both extending in the opposite directions of each other, throwing out a violent telekinetic wave which threw the ADVENT soldiers caught in it away, the force killing most of them outright when they collided with walls, or the unforgiving pavement. More MDUs jumped down from the wall, one of which he sliced in half since it landed next to him, and another he telekinetically yanked forward, pulling the weapon out of its grasp.

Then it charged him, attempting to pummel him into submission or death. Unfortunately the Battlemaster didn’t have time for sparring with the inferior robot and slammed a psionic-enhanced fist through the central processor of the MDU, while ripping the head off with a free hand. The wreck he tossed back onto a retreating ADVENT team, and now noticed that there were more soldiers literally jumping down to fight him.

These were different. Lancers. He recognized the distinctive helmets and black armor. And they clearly approached him with a plan in mind. Some of them wielded melee weapons; some which made sense, like warhammers, maces, and swords, but some that didn’t so much, such as daggers, katanas and other archaic Human medieval weaponry.

Clearly they had been inspired by the Templars, and he didn’t have the desire to toy with them, so he charged forward with an initial swipe upward which should have dismembered and beheaded the first Lancer in question. However, upon impact all it accomplished was sending the Lancer flying back with a yell of pain.

The other Lancers with gauss weapons were holding back and spreading out. Smart, not grouping up would make them survive longer. Their only problem was that they had forgotten he didn’t just fight with a sword. He thrust out one hand, blowing the melee Lancers away, and with his lower
ones telekinetically grabbed the eight Lancers aiming their weapons at him and lifted.

In his grasp, he dashed forward and swung for a beheading slash. But instead of it being clean, the blade got about halfway through the neck of the unfortunate Lancer, before getting stuck. The Human gurgled and likely died quickly, but that was enough to let the Battlemaster know what he was dealing with. His effectiveness with his sword was going to be reduced since they had genetically enhanced their skin.

The Humans really had learned their lessons from previous battles. In that case, rendering them incapable of further issues was the best method of dealing with them right now. With a gesture he sent them flying into the air and over the wall. It likely wouldn’t kill them, but he doubted they would bother him again.

The melee Lancers were charging him now, six in total, and he figured the best means of defense was to do what they didn’t expect. Their weapons wouldn’t hurt him, and his was likely to be more of a hindrance than help, so he threw it with as much force as he could summon at one of the Lancers, impaling her in the throat and sending her flying back.

They almost skidded to a stop, but he didn’t waste another moment and telekinetically pulled one to his hand, grasping the smaller Human like a toy as he held it by the arm, while using his other hands to simultaneously twist the neck, arms and legs until he heard them crack. Once that was done, he tossed the Lancer aside and pulled another one to him, repeating the same thing.

Now the Lancers were retreating, but to little avail. He dashed forward right behind them, and lashed out in a solid kick to the head of one, snapping his neck back and sending him flying, while pinning another under his foot, kneeling down and pulling up on the torso, breaking their back and likely killing them.

He summoned another Lancer to his grasp, and repeated the technique, slamming the unfortunate Human’s back onto his knee, eliciting a shriek before he threw her body irreverently to the side, while he extended a free hand to catch the final Lancer and held him tight with two hands while he twisted the Lancer’s neck with the other one like a screw.

The threat taken care of, he telekinetically recalled his sword to his hand, and realized that no one else was around to fight. Even the wall above him was free of ADVENT, which meant they were scared, especially since he’d taken apart their best units in mere moments. Understandable, and they had put up a decent fight. They knew they wouldn’t win against him, and in that context, retreat was the only valid tactic.

Mutan, Sectoid, and other Collective forces were marching to his position; oddly no Vitakarians he noticed, but that wasn’t important. “Spread out and eliminate the Humans,” he commanded, brandishing his sword as he turned to lead them down another street. “I will assist in driving them back. Deploy the Sectopods to destroy their armored vehicles-“ He cut off abruptly as the sound of an XCOM Skyranger streaked overhead down the area he was heading.

Something dropped from it, blocking his way, and the Skyranger was too fast for the plasma fire shot at it in response. The Battlemaster appraised the dropped machine…no…the machine stood, nearly his exact size, brandishing a shield and sword of its own. The armor was more refined and humanoid than similar machines, but it was no question as to what it was. A MEC.

More specifically, a MEC clearly designed to fight him.

“You will die today Battlemaster,” she said, lifting her alloy shield with the XCOM logo emblazoned on it. “We will ensure it.”
Just as she said it, another Skyranger flew over, and several soldiers jumped out, landing beside the MEC. All of them wore XCOM armor and wielded weapons. The Battlemaster was somewhat amused to note he recognized some of them. Iosif extended his mace in a salute, his body rippling with psionic energy. Beside him was Carmelita, who carried a longsword this time, and some kind of new weapon. She had a new helmet, with a yellow smiley face on it.

Were the situation different, he would have found that odd.

But there was no time to dwell on it.

There were three more Templars beside them, and another psion in the back, none of which he recognized. Two more of the soldiers ran backwards, and he saw the weapons clutched in their hands. Snipers. Perhaps useful if he was vulnerable to such attacks, but they would simply be detrimental to the overall battle.

“I will handle them,” he told the Vanguard who had walked up beside him. “Deal with the other ADVENT and XCOM soldiers.”

The Sectoid made an affirmative chitter, and the aliens behind him dissipated as he raised his own blade in a salute. There would be no toying with them today, but he expected them to put up a good fight, and that was worth acknowledging. He raised his own greatsword in a return salute, the steel brightly reflecting the sun as they prepared to duel on the torn pavement.

Then with a flourish, he charged forward to meet the soldiers head-on. The battle today would not be decided by armies, but by the outcome of this fight.

One which he knew he would win.

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Las Vegas Ruins, Nevada - United States of America

11/6/2016 – 12:22 P.M.

“Time’s up,” Harkin grunted as they came under immediate plasma fire from within the control station. “Patricia says they have a Gatekeeper. Guess that’s our next target.”

Oliver just nodded and kept firing on the small army of Mutons that was approaching from further within the city. The good news was that they had assumed control of one of the gate stations, and it fortunately wasn’t psionically locked, and had been relatively simple to open. There was a small issue in that it was in Ethereal Script, but Fatima had walked them through, even if her own telepathy wasn’t working thanks to the Gatekeeper.

“Elites!” Fakhr called. “And Berserkers incoming!”

“Hold this line until the gate is opened!” Blake commanded as he kept firing, taking out one of the unhelmeted Mutons in a burst of gauss fire.

The roar of the Berserkers sounded as they charged forward, directly towards their own tenuous position. With a yell Mona thrust out her arms, shooting purple lances of energy that violently eviscerated the aliens; not quite killing them, but severing their bodies and legs, leaving smaller pieces on the ground which still tried flopping towards them before they bled out.

Oliver dashed to the corner of another building for a better shot. Several shots from Cassandra, who had set herself up high on the wall, took out several more Mutons. ADVENT still had a
presence, even if grappling up on the wall was dangerous now that there were aliens firing on it. He fired a few shots, all at one of the Elites that was taking an open position and rendering the open street a death trap for anything in it.

An entire squad of ADVENT soldiers died, and Fakhr on the opposite of him hissed as her arm was clipped by a plasma bolt. “We need to take those things out!”

Duh, Oliver thought as another Elite joined the first, then another, and with the entire street covered, they began walking down the street. This was, as Fakhr had so expertly noted, ‘not good’. The problem was the Elites could seemingly survive anything, and on top of that didn’t feel pain. “Mona, can you do that again?”

Psionic energy was almost sparking off the psions arms as she hunkered from the barrage of plasma fire. “Not forever!” Despite that, she spun out of cover, falling to one knee and thrusting one arm out, shooting another beam of psionic energy into the middle Elite, literally blowing a hole through the neck, which was enough to kill it, and the body fell to the ground.

“I…can’t do that again…” she gasped, stumbling back into cover, and Oliver noticed how bad a shape she was really in. To begin with, whatever armor had been on her arms, or any kind of covering at all, was gone, leaving her skin completely exposed. What also didn’t help was that the psionic energy was quite literally tearing it apart, and it was subsequently repairing itself at the same time. He now understood why Offensive-specializing psions were required to get the Biomuscular Regeneration genetic mod.

“New plan,” Blake called as the Elites held position as four more approached, and behind those were a few dozen more standard Muton soldiers. “Target the guns. We can’t get their armor, but we can take out their weapons.”

“Hopefully,” Lin muttered as he once more tried his own return suppressive fire. “You guys take those out, I’ll try and slow them down!”

“I’ve got the left one,” Cassandra called.

“Me and Oliver can try for the right,” Blake said. “Fakhr, can you fight?”

“Stings, but I’ll manage,” Fakhr grunted, hefting her gauss rifle; the armor of the arm that had been shot either scorched or missing altogether. “ADVENT forces, provide covering fire now!” Several of the Officers yelled affirmatives, and the barrage of gauss slugs seemed to concentrate in the center of the street.

“Aiming,” Oliver called, swinging out and taking a few precious seconds to line up a good shot. The good news was that the plasma cannon was massive, and there were some clearly vulnerable areas. He aimed for the glowing plasma cells, or at least that’s what he assumed they were, and fired. The gauss rounds hit dead-on, and penetrated far enough to cause the cannon to spark, which immediately got the attention of the Elite who swung his cannon to unload on his position.

Oliver heard a roar and an odd-sounding explosion, and he turned to peek out and saw one of the Elites was now without an arm, and half the armor protecting his chest was shredded or gone. A burst of fire from Blake triggered an explosion on the other Elite, which unfortunately just took out both hands, and moderately damaged the armor.

“We’ve got help coming in!” Cassandra whooped, as ADVENT forces were now pouring through the almost opened gate. Rocketeers and Shieldbearers led the way, with dozens of ADVENT soldiers, Gunners, and Engineers behind them. The Elites began backing up, and their
reinforcements halted and instead began firing from their fixed positions.

“Protect the Flails!” One of the Shieldbearers called, marching forward and firing on the retreating Elites. “Street Sweeper stage is a go!”

Oliver was not completely sold on the Street Sweeper tactic, which involved the usage of tanks which had attachments affixed to them called Mine Flails. Truthfully, he wasn’t too surprised that they were going to try that on enemy positions, but he wasn’t sure if rapid spinning chains would be as effective against armor.

The streets themselves were wide enough for two, and behind the Shieldbearers, and flanked by multiple ADVENT squads were the Mine Flails themselves. They sure looked intimidating, even if the chains were idle at the moment. “Push along with the tanks!” Blake ordered as the Flails drove past the guard station. “Oliver, Lin, assist the front! Fakhr, come back to Mona so I can take a look at both of you.”

“Copy,” Fakhr said, and dashed over as her position was retaken by more ADVENT soldiers. The Elites tried firing on the Flails, but clearly weren’t sure where to fire. They couldn’t slow it down, since the Flails moved by treads, and was partially covered by the flail attachment itself. The Flail also had a main gun that was firing into the alien lines, but it was well-protected by armor, and the Shieldbearers whose emitters were rendering all alien plasma fire useless.

It was rather amazing to see devastating barrages of plasma just…turn away, not even getting close enough to cause any harm. The gauss fire by ADVENT and XCOM was unaffected, and dozens of aliens fell as they scrambled back. “More Berserkers!” Lin called, as four of the Juggernauts charged forward, unaffected by the hail of gauss slugs.

“Starting the flails,” came the warning from one of the drivers. “Stand back.”

ADVENT quickly repositioned and got out of the front, as the motors started working, and the chains began swinging around and around. It was slow at first, but it soon reached blurring speed in a few seconds. The Berserkers didn’t know what the tanks were, or didn’t care, but they were determined to destroy them all the same.

The first Berserker raised her wrist tipped with sharpened blades at the front of the Flail, ever charging forward, and with a stab forward, was immediately flung to the ground. It looked like part of the arm had gone flying off as well, but it happened too fast for Oliver to really be sure. What he was sure of was that the Berserker was first forced to the ground by the whip of the chains, and said chains completely ripped the alien apart, armor and all, in a spray of metal and blood.

Oliver blinked as the same thing happened to the other Berserkers who couldn’t stop their charges in time, and were literally torn apart by the spinning chains. Yellow blood was being flung everywhere as the Flails drove over the chunks of flesh, bone, and armor that had once been an alien. The entire ADVENT force cheered, himself joining them, as the Elites began backing up after seeing just what the Flail could do.

Oliver joined the march forward, fighting beside one of the Flails with several other ADVENT soldiers as they kept advancing forward. For once, they now had a way to keep going forward the aliens didn’t have a way to stop right now. The Muton forces were retreating, and were subsequently being killed off by the unrelenting storm of gauss fire.

He glanced behind him to see there were even more pairs of Mine Flails coming through the entrance, and turning onto different streets to take the fight to other areas of the city. Street Sweepers indeed.
Oliver grinned and marched forward, ever continuing their march on the aliens.

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Salem, Portland – United States of America

11/6/2016 – 2:08 P.M.

“Two Heavies behind you,” Ted called out as Sierra swooped to the left, shooting down another few of the regular Floaters that had been deployed in a questionable attempt to slow them down.

“Understood,” she acknowledged, then took a brief second to orient herself and twist her body around to shoot the Heavies behind her. They clearly hadn’t expected the maneuver, and swooped upward as she unloaded with her gauss rifle, shredding one and sending it plummeting to the ground. The other one was quickly shot out of the sky by Anna with several laser pulses.

“Time to get those Gateways?” Ted asked as he flew towards their position, faint psionic energy enveloping him.

“We’d better,” Sierra said. “You heard Matthew’s update. Some new kind of Sectoid. We need to shut those down now.”

“At least we know where they are,” Anna said as they blasted their way towards the city center. “They’re nothing if not consistent.”

Alright, we’re going to do flamethrower runs first, then touch down in the Gateway area,” Sierra ordered as they approached the small fortress, or what was left of it after their continued attacks. The only things that now even tried to fight them were Floaters, and they were running dry on those, especially with the ground forces getting overrun. “Anna, provide covering support.”

“Will do,” Anna lowered herself to begin hovering just above the fortress wall, laying down suppressive fire on the exposed squares where the four Gateways were stationed, and deploying Mutons, Sectoids, Vitakara, and Floaters in steady streams. Sierra assumed that they weren’t expecting anyone to be brazen—or crazy enough to attack here. They scattered once the Archangels flew over the wall, but for many it wasn’t quick enough.

Sierra lowered her wrist and prepared for the blowback of blasting the ground with her flamethrower. The white-orange flames engulfed dozens of aliens in a single sweep as she flew over the Gateway square. Ted was having similar success, and Anna was throwing what remained into disarray. “Are we trying to capture or destroy these?”

Sierra thought about that briefly as she shot around for her ground landing. Both had merit, but it would come down to if they could effectively hold them long enough for ADVENT or XCOM to secure them. If they couldn’t hold, the aliens might be able to repair disabled ones. “Destroy for now,” she said. “We can build them now.”

“Understood.” Anna focused her weapon on one of the Gateways, none of them sending out reinforcements, at least for the moment. The weapon was surprisingly having little effect on the structure itself, so instead she turned her fire on the elerium generator next to it, and destroyed it with a green explosion that took out one of the ‘arms’ of the Gateway it was next to.

Now more aliens were coming out, Runianarch soldiers who didn’t know anything about what was happening, so instead they just shot at whatever moved. Anna was forced to maneuver to the side, while Sierra angled herself towards a group of three; swinging her feet down and nailing one directly in the back, while shooting the ones to her left and right within seconds.
Once those were cleared, she clipped the rifle to her chest and aimed her flamethrower gauntlet at the active Gateway and fired into it. She smirked as she hoped she’d taken out a few alien reinforcements. After chucking a thermite grenade into the sightless void for good measure, she aimed at the elerium generator and fired, activating her jets to boost her back to avoid the explosion.

Several plasma bolts clipped her, throwing her off-course and she unceremoniously crashed into a stack of crates. She wasn’t hurt, but it reminded her how easy it was to be taken out of commission. But she was on her feet in seconds, firing at the trio of Mutons advancing on her position, plasma bolts flying her direction.

She fell to one knee and lined up her rifle on them. Easy. It took only a second to line up a headshot. She fired, lined up another, fired, and repeated the same thing for the last one. As the last Muto body hit the floor, she jumped into the air, jets blazing as she shot into the sky. Another elerium explosion took out another Gateway, leaving only one more.

All of them were in the air, but the aliens were putting up something more of a fight, and had smartly rallied around the last Gateway. At least it would have been smart, but all it enabled was a perfectly timed psionic lance from Ted whose blast either ripped their armor apart, or threw them back. Sierra swooped around their flank, and scorched the area with her flamethrower, incinerating anything that dared stand by the Gateway.

A few laser blasts from Anna ensured that nothing would come out of the Gateways again, and, mission accomplished, they got out of there as quickly as possible, heading straight for the safety of the ADVENT line. “Gateways at Salem are destroyed,” she informed Chief Marshal Peterson. “We’re going to restock before heading to Hillsboro.”

“Great job!” He congratulated. “I think we’ll be able to take it from here. They were not expecting us to attack here, that’s pretty certain.”

“We’ll be on call until the battle ends,” she reminded him. “Things start getting heated here again, we’ll fly over.” With that she cut the comms, and flew towards the designated resupplying area.

The aliens were going to need to do a lot better if they ever wanted to stop them. But knowing them, Sierra suspected that this kind of attack was not going to work as well in the future. Better to enjoy it while it lasted.

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Seattle, Washington – United States of America

11/6/2016 – 2:10 P.M.

Of all the ways Nuan had expected the battle to go, working with some (possibly) traitor Andromedons was not something she had ever considered. Granted, on some level it wasn’t unprecedented. There had been the entire incident with Nartha, and then Aegis had also defected, so it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility that an Andromedon could defect…but honestly the only thing that would have surprised her more was if a Sectoid had been the one to defect.

The Commander was clearly skeptical, but there hadn’t been much time to argue since the shield was going to come back online shortly, and they had to find and shut down the shield generator. The Andromedons helping them had surprisingly kept in contact, from the moment they had begun rushing deeper into the city.
“When you reach the intersection, hold position,” the Andromedon, V’Thrask ordered.

“You’re going to need to give a better reason,” Creed commented as they approached the designated intersection, all of their weapons up and ready. “We’re in your territory, and could be surrounded easily.”

“Take your position if you need to,” V’Thrask didn’t sound even mildly put off by Creed’s tone. “Unless you want to walk into a patrol of two dozen Andromedons, we need to lock on your exact position.”

Nuan did not like the sound of that. For one, they didn’t know if they could be trusted, and at the wrong moment they could betray them, killing the Commander of XCOM, not to mention all of them. Then again, there wasn’t anything stopping them from doing that already. A more precise lock likely wouldn’t matter much if the Andromedons really were planning to betray them.

Still, she wasn’t going to stay quiet. “Commander, I’m not sure that’s a good idea. Even if they are tracking us now, do they need an exact fix on us? Is there anything stopping a missile strike or worse once they have that?”

“To clarify,” a new Andromedon voice interjected, only a shade lighter than V’Thrask. “The lock is for us to establish network connections with your suits. Your locations are already known to us. I am A’Darrah, Andromedon Federation Collaborative Data and Systems analyst. I intend to sync your current HUD and radar systems with information directly from our own communications network.”

The frown was clear in Eddison’s voice. “Wait. How can you do that? Our own systems can’t be compatible with yours.”

“Not originally,” A’Darrah stated. “But the network and programming security of your suits is primitive and inadequate to coordinated machine intelligence hacking. The Federation has successfully reverse-engineered Aegis-level armor of XCOM, and are fully capable of hacking it if needed. You are fortunate functions are limited, otherwise this would be employed by our Battlefield Engineers. As it is, I contest the only reason this has not been put into practice is because of the small number of XCOM soldiers that exist. I would expect this to change in the future.”

“Let them do their thing,” the Commander said as they reached the intersection. “We’re committed now.” The Commander didn’t sound worried, and that was likely because he probably had a plan if the Andromedons did betray them. If there was anyone who would, it was him.

The streets were surprisingly empty, even if there were clear signs of fortifications and barricades at various parts of the roads. “Seems like everything dried up,” Pall commented, battleaxe raised as he looked for something out of the ordinary.

“I have redirected the necessary forces away from your current position,” V’Thrask explained. “Most are currently engaged in battling ADVENT Lancer squads, and the rest are holding back against other tank-led ADVENT Offenses.” A pause. “Your species is innovative with weapons of war. Your tactics are flawed, but nonetheless are effective against certain enemy types.”

“Thanks,” Ellinor muttered dryly. “Always nice to be considered a threat.

Nuan’s HUD suddenly blinked, and instead of the small minimap at the upper right corner of her screen, it was replaced with a completely different element, that was not originally Human. Instead of a small 2D map, it was a full 3D rendering of their immediate city, along with miniature figures
that were others in her squad, and red figures further on for enemies.

“Your HUD technology is insufficient,” A’Darrah said, and Nuan could almost imagine the barest hint of emotion in it. “I have replaced the current and ineffective element with our own. I have also marked out a path which will take you to the shield generator. V’Thrask will attempt to redirect Collective soldiers, but you will have to fight the ones guarding the shield generator.”

“Understood,” the Commander said, and they began following the designated line that took them deeper into the city. “What is enemy composition?”

Nuan couldn’t help but notice what the aliens had done to the city as they dashed through it. There were many buildings that were completely trashed, but the further they went in, the buildings started getting sparse altogether; clearly surgically removed, and the ones that remained were converted into small fortresses, with alloy paddings and barricaded roofs. The streets themselves were similarly protected, each intersection having barricades in all directions, as well as crates of unidentifiable supplies.

“There are two parts; exterior and interior defense,” V’Thrask answered. “Exterior defense will be your largest issue. There are four Muton Elite guards, sixteen Lurainian soldiers of various races, mostly Borelians. The area is covered by four Zararch Snipers, and there are twelve Andromedon soldiers.”

Nuan saw Creed exchange a glance with the Commander. “That seems like a lot.”

“Interior defenses are composed of two Battlefield Engineers and several dozen Vitakara support staff,” V’Thrask continued. “You will have little trouble disposing of them.”

“Still,” Creed sounded skeptical as they entered an alleyway, weapons drawn cautiously since they didn’t fully trust the radar. “That’s a lot. The Lurainian can be handled. The Elites will be difficult if we don’t deal with them immediately. The Andromedons will be a problem.”

“Anticipated,” A’Darrah interjected. “The Andromedon suits can be temporarily shut down. The onboard intelligence can be subverted with proper authorization, but the result will be that it locks me out of the system for a half-hour afterwards. You will likely only be able to rely on that once.”

Well, it was something. “And how long will that take them out?”

“However fast they decide to either contact the Overseer, or assume their suits have been compromised. Two to four minutes at least.”

Not a lot, but with four psions, and all of them genetically enhanced, it wasn’t technically impossible. Just highly improbable. “That’ll have to do,” the Commander grudgingly said. “But don’t launch your attack until I give the word. We might not need it.”

“Ah, and there is the shield,” Rebecca noted wryly as the sky was suddenly obscured by the red shield. “Right on time.”

“And we’re close,” Creed said, coming to a stop. “Lots of contacts ahead. We need to do this carefully.”

“Thank you for the exceptional advice,” the Commander said with as much sarcasm as she’d heard. “Get on the outlying buildings, I need to take out the snipers first.” With that he jumped onto the nearest roof and fell to one knee, aiming his sniper rifle in the distance. “They’re spaced out. I can probably take them out without alerting the main group. A’Darrah, are you blocking their communications?”
“I am personally redirecting all outgoing communications to my location,” was the answer. “They will be able to call for help, but no one but me will hear it. To do more would only raise suspicion.”

“Good,” the Commander said. “I’ve located all the snipers. Firing.”

He fired four quick shots, his rifle moving surprisingly little with each shot. “Snipers down.” Nuan blinked. She’d never seen anyone fire that fast or with such accuracy. Well, she assumed he’d hit everything.

“How did you do that?” She asked, even knowing it wasn’t the best time.

“Gene mods and natural sniping talents,” he said, pulling out the WHEEE. “I’d have never been able to do that without being enhanced. With practice I’m sure you could do the same thing.” He turned forward. “Alright, everyone on the roofs, we need to get a good idea of what we’re facing.”

Several minutes later Nuan found herself on the top of a two-story building that had once been a restaurant, overlooking the shield generator. This was one area the aliens had completely flattened and replaced. There was a wide square of nothing but asphalt and concrete, and in the center was the shield generator building. It looked surprisingly…utilitarian, which she supposed was normal for Andromedons.

The generator itself was housed in a cube structure, which curved into an arrow-like point where the antenna for the generator actually stuck out, and projected the shield. But the generator itself was massive, and she could see why it needed an entire team to work it. The cube it was housed in was at least the size of the building she was currently hiding on. There weren’t any obvious weak points either. Every potentially exposed part of the antenna was covered by some kind of alloy plating, and there seemed to be another shield projected just under the roof so someone couldn’t just chuck a grenade inside.

“I wish we had a telepath,” Cole muttered. “This would make things much simpler.”

“Well, we don’t,” the Commander said. “But with four psions, I think we can manage this small army. Eddison, how quickly can you kill the Elites?”

“Snapped necks should do the trick,” he answered, looking down. At least the Elites were in the open, four directly guarding the door. “But I need to focus everything just for one. I can kill them all, but it’ll take time.”

“That’ll work,” the Commander affirmed with a nod. “Ellinor, I need you to protect us with a barricade. No Templar attacks yet. Pall, same thing, but I want you to hold everyone in place. How large an area can you cover?”

“Honestly as large as you need,” he said slowly. “The drawback is that I won’t be able to distinguish people in the field. One of you jumps down, you’ll be stuck too.”

“Perfect,” the Commander pointed to a group of clustered Andromedons and Lurainian. “Trap those. Once I take them out, attack how you see fit.”

“And what about the rest of us?” Nuan asked.

“You will fire from this position first,” the Commander began, brandishing the WHEEE. “Once I kill enough aliens, or this runs out of charges, you can come down to ground level. Focus on the Andromedons. The WHEEE should be enough to kill an Andromedon or two.”
“Ready when you are,” Creed nodded. “Pall, Eddison, Ellinor?”

“At your command,” Pall confirmed, as the psions gathered their power.

“Now!” The Commander ordered, and the soldiers rushed to the edges of the roof. Nuan quickly dropped a smoke grenade at their position, while Creed, Ricardo, Cole, and Rebecca began firing their weapons down at the exposed aliens. Several Lurainian were killed immediately, and even an Andromedon helmet shattered from the surprise attack.

“Stay where you are!” Pall shouted, likely more a way to focus than actually something he expected the enemy to follow. Both hands were held down, invisible waves emanating off of them as he appeared to be keeping something down. Eddison extended his hands and one of the Elites was yanked into the air. The Commander was surrounded by a personal shield and he jumped down and aimed the WHEEE at the first Andromedon he saw.

Nuan saw the flash of a lightning bolt and the Andromedon exploded into several different pieces. The Commander aimed at the next nearest Andromedon, and fired again, achieving the same result, and subsequently shocking the Lurainian next to it into unconsciousness or death. The first Elite was dead, and Eddison was moving on to the next.

Now the aliens were firing at them, and Ellinor responded by using her free hand to create another purple barrier; instead of it being directly in front of them, it was directly in front of the back alien line, allowing them to kill the ones close, but protecting them from fire from the Elites in the back, and the Andromedons coming to assist.

The Commander meanwhile was appearing to have fun with killing the practically helpless aliens in the face of the WHEEE. He was putting his own telekinetics to use, unbalancing the Lurainian and Andromedons trying to shoot him, and frying them with the WHEEE. Although ‘frying’ implied there was something left. Nuan saw the lightning bolt hit a Borelian and it was just gone in a spray of golden mist and fur.

In the meantime, they were killing the disorganized aliens trying to find cover. Nuan shot the gun of an Andromedon, aiming at the seemingly exposed elerium core, which exploded and destroyed the helmet of the Andromedon as a result. A few well-placed gauss shots to the control panel killed the reactive AI.

“Elites are almost dead,” Eddison grunted, as the third Elite fell to the ground with the ornate helmet faced the opposite way. “And I want that gun.”

“Think we’ve got them now,” the Commander stated as he fried several more Andromedons clustered together; trapped in Pall’s telekinetic field. “Engage at will.”

“Copy that,” Pall stated, as he picked up his axe and literally leapt toward an Andromedon that was still alive. In the air he swung the blade down with enough force to bury the blade into the helmet of the Andromedon, and yank it out. It wasn’t shattered, but the crack was growing, and Nuan concentrated her own gauss fire on it, and ultimately shattering it and killing the Andromedon inside.

Ricardo and Cole also jumped down, and focused on cleaning up the few Lurainian who remained. But the lone Vitakara had little chance against augmented Humans. Nuan was continually amazed just how powerful XCOM was sometimes. Eddison was picking up aliens like toys, while the Commander made enemies explode with the WHEEE cannon.

They finally cleared out the majority of aliens, and the Commander gestured to the door, and
telekinetically ripped it off its hinges and they charged inside. “Kill them all,” the Commander ordered. “We want this place destroyed.”

The two Templars entered first, and Nuan knew it was going to be a devastating bloodbath. The largely Vitakarian staff hardly put up a fight as Ellinor and Pall butchered them with their weapons. The Battlefield Engineers were helpless to do anything as the Commander killed one with the WHEEE cannon, and Eddison crushed the other like an action figure.

“We’re inside, how do we destroy this?” The Commander asked once the last alien was dead.

“Do you see the main control console?” A’Darrah asked. Nuan saw the largest computer that was attached to the circular base of the shield generator. “You have two options. Shut it down manually, or destroy the generator. Destroying it can simply be accomplished by opening one of the panels exposing the interior, or making one yourself. Shutting it down requires the proper input commands, which are in my possession.”

“Can you prevent anyone else from turning it back on?” The Commander asked. “I don’t want to destroy this if we don’t have to.”

“Yes, that can be done.”

“Then we do that,” the Commander walked to the console. “Walk me through shutting this down.”

At this point Nuan was fairly sure all of them were convinced these Andromedons were actually genuine. If they were planning to betray them, they would have done that already. It took a few minutes, but Nuan heard the shield generator power down, going from a steady whine and thrumming, to the sound of air coolers for the machines themselves.

“All done,” the Commander said. “Marshal Wilkins, We’ve disabled the shields. You are free to launch aerial and ground attacks on the city interior. We’re going after the leadership.”

“I think you just won this battle for us, Commander, I can’t thank you enough,” Wilkins said. “I don’t know what happened with the shield the first time, but we need to thank whatever idiot engineer made that happen. Hell, I’d give them a pardon.”

Creed snorted.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” the Commander said, keeping the amusement in his voice to a minimum. “Good luck.”

“Amusing, but I don’t expect you to kill us,” V’Thrask said. “If you want to extract us quietly, we need to meet up and be extracted quickly. A’Darrah is sending coordinates. When we meet, we will likely lose our current advantages and have to fight to the extraction point. I advise you have your pilot ready.”

“Will do,” the Commander affirmed as the red line in Nuan’s HUD changed to where she assumed the Andromedons were. “We’re on our way.”

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Las Vegas Ruins, Nevada - United States of America

11/6/2016 – 1:26 P.M.

The initial swing by the Battlemaster was unsurprisingly blocked, but that was intentional. He
thrust down a free hand, sending a telekinetic shockwave that threw back the XCOM Templars closest to him, and immediately transitioned to block as the MEC swung the equally large sword in a swift dual strike.

The Battlemaster deflected one of the blows with his gauntlets and was briefly hit when the MEC bashed her shield against him several times, following up with a stab. Carmelita also leapt to him at the same time, and he attempted to take a step back, only to see that his foot was being telekinetically held in place by one of the Templars, even as Iosif and another Templar carrying a warhammer approached.

The strikes were ones he could take, and he let the MEC score a hit on his shoulder as he dropped his blade to his lower hand and stabbed at the exposed torso, while then telekinetically blowing the MEC back with his other free hands. Unfortunately the distraction allowed Carmelita to get an ineffective hit on him, but a mere alloy blade didn’t even scratch it.

He telekinetically grabbed Carmelita and tossed her towards Iosif, and the Templar beside him raised a hand and caught her, setting her down gently. The MEC was also recovered, having used some kind of built in jets to slow the throw, and the stab would he had inflicted had repaired itself. Smart, and not a good sign.

The other telekin psion had now joined the other Templar in effectively securing him in place, which he allowed for the moment so he could appraise the situation. He assumed that every soldier here was severely modified, and his sword wouldn’t be as effective. So he had to first deal with the telekines, and then the others.

He tossed his sword at the MEC, which impaled itself on the shield and cut right through it, though the damage was likely minimal. With his lower hands he sent out a telekinetic pulse that Iosif blocked with a shield. With his other two hands, grasped the two telekin Templars and pulled them toward his grasp.

No time to waste. Humans were far smaller than he was, and it made it extremely easy to snap their necks, which he did in quick succession and tossed the bodies away. Two down, five to go. The snipers he was not concerned with, as they had been firing already and done little more than glance off his armor. The MEC charged him again, and he recalled his greatsword to his hand to deflect the swing away from him.

All the XCOM soldiers were now shielded in purple fields; likely from the psion in the back. Iosif and another psion holding some kind of axe were closing on him from the sides, and Carmelita was charging forward with her sword the color of molten steel. That was a concern, but the MEC was not giving him any time to deal with it, as it fought like the machine it was.

The Battlemaster had never liked shields, and considered them a hindrance to his style of combat, and had rarely seen them be effective against him. But this MEC actually used the shield as a weapon of its own, not just for defense. Instead of turtling behind it, after each strike the shield was bashed against him, which while not hurting him, required him to focus on it.

Iosif was close enough to strike, and the Battlemaster kicked out at him, which the psion deflected with a shield, but did pause. At the same time the Battlemaster grabbed the shield, holding it in place while he slashed down at the axe-wielding psion, hitting him and sending him flying back several feet.

The Battlemaster pushed on the shield, twisting it to rip it off the MEC, while the attacks continued unabated. Iosif managed to score a hit on his lower leg, one he felt even if it didn’t cause damage. One telekinetic push back removed him temporarily. The MEC was still attacking with
her own sword while he grappled with the shield, and he couldn’t stop every single attack coming his way.

Carmelita jumped from behind, and scored a hit on his arm, leaving a noticeable scrape. The other Templar he pushed away with a roar, sending him back with enough force to dent the alloy barricade he landed against. The MEC then unexpectedly let go of the shield, and he stumbled back briefly, but it was all the time it needed to raise its wrist and he was suddenly engulfed in a freezing mist.

His mind ran through the possibilities. Cold. Freezing agent. Dangerous. Without wasting another second, he dashed backwards, and jolted forward as he slammed into a psionic barricade the supporting psion in the back had created. “You’re getting stronger,” he told them approvingly, even as they approached again.

The purple barricade behind him suddenly had additional walls on its sides, which extended to where the MEC was; the machine was approaching and raising its wrist to likely freeze him. The suit could withstand freezing temperatures for a short time, but it would not be sustainable for long, and he ran the risk of being frozen even if he was technically alive.

But the foolish psion had unfortunately doomed the MEC in question. The jets on the MEC were already warm, and was likely expecting a telekinetic attack. But he acted instantly and charged forward; a purple blur directly towards the MEC, greatsword angled directly for her head. The shield might have saved her, but she was unable to stop the charge.

The pointed sword ripped through her head, and his direct collision threw her to the ground, sending the weapon flying. Standing over the defeated MEC, he ground his boot down into the wrecked head to make sure it was destroyed, then extended a hand towards the other psion who had helped him, and blew him backwards.

He spun around to see Carmelita approaching, and performed a precise telekinetic grab, calling the sword to his hand. With a flick of his wrist he threw it far into the city, then returned his attention to Iosif who was the lone Templar left. “You’ve fought better, Templar.”

Iosif didn’t respond, but charged forward and the Battlemaster met his mace swing with the greatsword. The Templar was more creative with his attacks now, creating barriers which sprang up under his arms, or just before his legs in an attempt to trip or distract him. It did work to an extent, and the Battlemaster was suitably impressed with his skills.

Unfortunate that it would be for nothing. He yanked Iosif down with a telekinetic grab, placed a foot on his chest and took a reverse grip of his sword to stab downwards. Not even his genetic modification would save him here. “Do it!” Iosif yelled.

The Battlemaster risked looking behind him to see Carmelita aiming a weapon he hadn’t seen before at him, and that was enough of a warning for him to begin dashing away. The weapon sparked and his arm was struck with a bolt of pure electricity. It had barely glanced him, but the pure shock of the weapon drove him to the ground, involuntarily twitching as he struggled to stand up.

The arm that had been glanced was numb, and he couldn’t move it at all. His vision was blurred and his senses were severely impaired. The suit could withstand brief electrical pulses, but he had not designed it to withstand a pure lightning bolt. He thrust out with as much psionic power as he could muster towards Carmelita before she could fire that weapon again, and his blurry vision saw her go flying into the air.
On shaky legs, he debated retreating. At the rate he was recovering, if XCOM sent another team, he would be unlikely to emerge victorious. At the same time, there was only one more Templar, and...he glanced to the side to see the other psion was back up, the supporting defensive one. He took several breaths, and thought about it as rationally as he could.

Two on one. The odds were in his favor, especially since neither were armed with those electricity guns. Defense psions were also something he could handle easily. He wouldn’t retreat, not yet. The one arm hanging limply at his side, he marched toward Iosif to kill the Templar once and for all.

Seattle, Washington – United States of America
11/6/2016 – 3:19 P.M.

The Commander was mildly surprised to be reminded that the Space Needle had survived the attacks so far. Ironically, it was now the highest building in the city, so he wasn’t entirely surprised that the Collective had apparently turned it into their main command center. It had taken some hits, and the top platform was missing some sections, but otherwise it was largely intact.

“Big Sky, do you have the coordinates for extraction?” The Commander asked as they marched to the Space Needle.

“Affirmative,” he answered. “But if we’re flying Andromedons back, we’re probably going to need another.”

“Good thing we planned for an extra,” the Commander muttered. “Have Shattered Sky head over. We’re not going to leave right away once the Andromedons are extracted anyway.”

“Copy, good luck, Commander.”

“Enemies ahead,” Creed pointed forward. The Commander looked forward and saw the Space Needle defenses were smaller than he was expecting. It was likely that all of them were trying to fight off ADVENT penetrating deeper into the city, and because V’Thrask had ordered them away.

“Two dozen Mutons and six Elites?” Eddison snorted. “They really are running low.”

“I’d thank our Andromedon friend,” Nuan cautioned. “And I’m not getting cocky yet.”

“Listen to Nuan,” the Commander agreed, slowing down and letting the Templars take point. “The Elites are still a threat. Eddison, I presume you can take them out?”

“I can do a few more,” he agreed confidently. “Assuming the rest of you can handle the Mutons?”

“Permission to engage?” Creed asked, raising his rifle.

The Commander raised his own sniper rifle; electing to not use the WHEEE and let it recharge. One shot, and a Muton fell dead. “Permission granted. Pick your targets!”

The Muton reaction was immediate, and they gave their battle cries and fell behind their alloy barricades. The Commander also noticed that they activated several turrets on the ground he hadn’t seen earlier. They rose from the ground, and began shooting plasma bolts their direction. “Find cover!” He ordered, leaping forward to a building corner and beginning to take aim at the first turret.
Ellinor and Pall were not hindered by the turrets, and were quite easily slaughtering the unhelmeted Mutons. Ellinor buried the axe head deep into the skull of one, while Pall had his greatsword set to the high-friction mode and was slicing through the Muton armor with surprisingly little effort.

Creed and Rebecca killed one each, while Cole and Nuan concentrated on one of the turrets, causing it to explode. The Commander aimed for the barrel of another, and fired, destroying the firing mechanism. It still tried to fire, and subsequently exploded as a result. Eddison had both Mutons raised into the air, hand clenched in a fist as he brandished it in the air.

The Elites were squirming in the air, their plasma cannons lying on the ground, which the Commander assumed was the result of Eddison removing them himself. The psionic power seemed concentrated around their throats. Choking them. He approved of the tactic. One of the worse ways to go out, and he didn’t exactly feel bad the Elites were succumbing to it.

The basic Muton soldiers were essentially wiped out within a few minutes, with XCOM advancing rapidly forward, as the remaining turrets had to split between the ranged soldiers, and the Templars decimating their nearby forces. But soon the last turret and Muton died, with several XCOM soldiers putting gauss slugs into the heads of the Elites just to be sure they were dead.

“The outside is clear,” the Commander said. “We’ll wait here.”

“Commander…” Creed pointed inside the Space Needle lobby. “I think they’re already here.”

All the XCOM soldiers raised their weapons, and the psions subsequently lifting their weapons in warning or hands shimmering faintly with psionic energy. The Andromedons weren’t hidden, but the Commander was continuously reminded of how much larger they were than regular Humans, at least in their suits. The smallest ones, the Battlefield Engineers, were eight feet, and the Soldiers were close to nine, with the proportions to match.

Needless to say they towered over the Humans the closer they got. The Commander counted. Two, four, seven…eight. Eight Andromedons were coming, four having the red tint of Battlefield Engineers, with the accompanying drones. Three appeared to be standard soldiers, armed, even though their weapons weren’t raised. The final Andromedon had the same suit as the Soldiers, but there were odd shapes plastered to his helmet, symbols of some kind. It might be a language, or it could simply be a combination of shapes only Andromedons knew. It was very angular and symmetrical. Very Andromedon.

They exited the doors, and stood in front of the XCOM soldiers; two warring species placed in a very unexpected situation. The Commander didn’t have his weapon up, nor did the Andromedon who he assumed was V’Thrask. “Commander,” V’Thrask greeted, or at least acknowledged. “Arrival within expected time. Good. If there is anything that needs to be discussed, we should do it now. Your soldiers do not seem trusting.”

“No offense intended,” Creed said. “We’re just being careful.”

“You systematically destroyed defenses that were more numerous and larger than your own,” V’Thrask said evenly. “We are currently not equipped to handle psionic forces. Attacking you would be ineffective and suicidal. Aside from that, we do not intend to fight you today.”

The Commander was trying to get a sense of the Andromedons while he spoke, and he knew Ellinor, Pall, and Eddison were doing the same thing. He didn’t sense any dishonesty, even if Andromedons seemed colder than most Humans, or even aliens. But he didn’t seem to be lying. “Think he’s good,” Ellinor said. “I assume you shut off the Gateways?”
“Gateways and outgoing communications have been sabotaged and severed,” V’Thrask explained. “As of six minutes ago, the Ethereal Collective lost contact with this position. It will not be reestablished in time before ADVENT claims this city.”

“We have an extraction planned,” the Commander said, eyeing the weapons they held. “I assume we’ll be fighting at some point before we get there, but once we arrive, you will surrender your weapons.”

“Fine.” V’Thrask surprisingly said. “We are wasting time here. Let us move to the extraction point.”

That decided, the mix of Andromedon and Human soldiers began jogging towards the designated points on their HUDs. The XCOM soldiers were still not taking chances, and Eddison along with Cole were hanging behind the main body of Andromedons, with the two Templars up front by him and V’Thrask.

“Four contacts approaching,” a Battlefield Engineer he assumed was A’Darrah said, looking down at a haptic display on his wrist. “Likelihood of a Muton unit is high.”

“Weapons up and forward,” V’Thrask ordered, and the Commander let the Andromedon soldiers take the lead in a straight line, V’Thrask in the middle. Sure enough, a unit of Mutons marched directly in front of them. Seeing Andromedons, they didn’t pay them any mind. The Andromedons raised their rifles and fired plasma beams that killed the Mutons almost simultaneously.

“Hold formation and advance,” V’Thrask stated, now consulting his own wrist haptic pad. “No immediate contacts.”

“Initiating drone scouting,” A’Darrah said, the drone hovering over him flying off into the air, joined by the drones of the other Battlefield Engineers.

The rest of the way they didn’t encounter any large armies or concentrations of aliens. Several more Muton units were encountered, but they were killed within seconds of contact. The Andromedons had no hesitation killing those who had been their allies, and seemed suitably unaffected by their defection. Maybe they were always like this, but it seemed to be treated as completely normal.

An explosion rocked the ground, and the Commander saw one of the buildings collapse as a result of shelling fire from ADVENT. The air battle was just as intense as ever, but all the Firestorms were still operational, and ADVENT was also holding their own. On the torn streets, he finally saw the landed skyranger.

“It’s going to be a tight fit,” he warned. “Skyrangers weren’t made for Andromedons.”

“We will manage,” was all V’Thrask said.

To his mild surprise, there wasn’t a last-second ambush and the area seemed completely secure, or as much as it could be. The drones returned to the Battlefield Engineers, and the Commander turned to V’Thrask. “Load up, and the skyranger will take you to our base. Drop your weapons here, and your drones. They will be returned if you are officially cleared by us.”

“Very well,” V’Thrask set his own plasma rifle down beside the ramp. “I expect you to hold to that promise.”

Well, it was certainly nice that the Andromedons were being so compliant. He hadn’t quite expected that from them. It was refreshing. The Battlefield Engineers even powered down their
drones without complaint, and walked up the ramp. It was definitely a tight fit, with all the aliens standing, but it would work.

“We will speak when you return,” V’Thrask, moving his suit in a crude imitation of a nod. “I expect there is much you wish to ask.”

“To put it mildly,” he answered dryly. “Big Sky, they’re all loaded up. Be sure and let Jackson know what to expect.”

“Will do,” he said as the ramp was raised. “Aegis is going to love this.”

The skyranger lifted off, and shot off into the air, carrying what might have been the reason for their victory. “So what now?” Creed asked.

“We take Seattle back and kill whatever aliens remain here,” the Commander said, turning to them. “But they can’t recover from this. We’ve won here. All that remains is cleaning up.”

Several soldiers cheered at that, and with a smile on his face, the Commander led them back into the city to go hunting.

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Las Vegas Ruins, Nevada - United States of America

11/6/2016 – 2:42 P.M.

Things had seemed to be going exceptionally well, and for the most part they were. In fact, Oliver was not going to get the image of what Viktoria had performed out of his mind for a long time, if ever, and he knew the aliens wouldn’t forget either. While some people would be content with simply killing the aliens sniping from the hotels, Viktoria had decided the best course of action was to completely destroy it.

Oliver hadn’t had any idea that it was possible for a psionic maelstrom of that size to even be created, and ADVENT and even XCOM had watched in stunned amazement as the Archangel single-handedly brought down a hotel, literally ripping it in half with her psionic power. As they advanced, he’d also noticed extremely odd things that he wouldn’t have expected anywhere else.

They had begun finding Vitakara corpses strewn throughout the city, but all of them had either committed suicide, or…he hated to use the word, but almost ritually killed. No other explanation made much sense, or to clarify, more sense than a bizarre ritual. At least that’s what ADVENT probably thought.

It was unnerving, especially since some of the positions the aliens were in were downright bizarre. Finding four Vitakarians dead around a fully cooked meal, others with plasma pistols in their mouths, and some of the corpses were smiling when found. The only plausible explanation besides a bizarre ritual was that Patricia had done this and…that didn’t seem like it was a good thing.

He wanted the aliens dead and gone as much as everyone else, but this went to a level beyond what he thought was acceptable. Seeing some of the corpses, and those of other aliens…that was horrific and cruel for the sake of it. Killing aliens was one thing, even mind controlled suicide he could accept. But it seemed abundantly clear that she’d been doing far more than just ordering them to kill themselves. There was an air of experimentation and flair that wouldn’t have been present otherwise.

That bothered him. A lot.
More so because he didn’t know if there was a way of telling her “Hey, what you’re doing is kind of fucked up” without making her angry. Well, that was a problem he would deal with later. Right now all of them were rushing towards where the Battlemaster was currently at, thanks to the triggering of the distress signal from Iosif.

That meant things were going badly.

However, they were fairly close, and after commandeering several Humvees, they were speeding towards the location of the duel. “There they are, dead ahead.” Cassandra said, looking through her scope. “Yeah, it’s bad. Only two are left. Iosif and Said I think.”

“Weapons out and prepare to deploy!” Blake ordered. “Nuclear contingency is happening. I’ve sent the command, and we have to hope it works. Keep him distracted.”

Their Humvee driver slid into a stop, and the XCOM soldiers deployed, where Iosif was still attempting to duel the Battlemaster. Iosif was clearly exhausted, and Said was doing everything he could to deflect the swings of the Battlemaster, who, Oliver noted, also seemed injured. He seemed slower, and one of his arms was hanging limply.

The suddenly hail of gauss fire caught his attention, and he extended a hand out to them, and Fakhr and Blake were lifted into the air, and unceremoniously slammed into the nearby building. A roar from Iosif brought his attention back to the Templar, who managed to score a direct hit on the knee of the Battlemaster, actually making him stumble. The Battlemaster slashed upwards, the flat of his blade hitting just under his chin and sent him flying, carving off part of the helmet itself.

A roar of anger came from Mona as she unleashed a psionic lance at the Battlemaster who dashed back, missing the bolt completely. He faced the XCOM soldiers briefly, though Oliver didn’t know what he was waiting for, and only held out one hand. Within seconds the gauss slugs being fired filled up the telekinetic field he was projecting.

“Your Commander is willing to kill you to stop me?” He called, with a disbelieving tone. “Are you willing to die for…this?”

Oliver grinned under his helmet. He’d taken the bait. “If we die,” Iosif yelled, stumbling forward, helmet discarded as he raised his mace in another salute. “You die with us.”

Said created four shields, trapping the Battlemaster in a shimmering cage. A gesture sent him flying back, but it provided enough time for Iosif to charge once more to command his attention once more. “Your persistence is admirable,” the Battlemaster growled as he beat back the tired Templar, disarming him with a twirl of his blade and sending him back with a telekinetic blast. “But I do not intend to die today.” He looked toward all of them. “Your victory will ring hollow.”

With that he leapt up into the air and the whine of the Overseer UFO sounded overhead, an opening appeared underneath it which the Battlemaster entered, and closed underneath him. And just like that, it sped off into the bright afternoon sky. Mona spoke for all of them. “It worked.”

“We better hope he doesn’t come back,” Oliver said, rushing to where Iosif was laying on the ground. “At least we got here before anyone else died.”

“Not quite as bad as you think,” Iosif groaned, as Blake had also gotten up and was immediately checking on him. “Carmelita and Hugo are alive, just unconscious. He also thought he got Sung, but he just disabled the main processor. Get her out of the suit.”

Oliver glanced over to the beheaded Shinobi, rather glad that the pilot’s head hadn’t actually been
taken off in the fight. Better to be trapped temporarily than dead. “We’ll get her out,” Blake said. “But we need to get medical attention to everyone here. Looks like you gave him some trouble.”

“Forget these weapons,” Iosif grimaced. “We just need to have WHEEE cannons. I think that almost killed him. Fuck, we had our shot and missed it. He’ll just come back, and he knows now.”

“Hey, you’re the reason we’re going to win this today,” Oliver told him. “ADVENT is destroying the aliens now. They’re going to lose, and the Battlemaster could have rendered that pointless. You bought time, and that’s all we needed.”

“Hopefully,” Iosif said, looking a little better now that he had been given some water. “I’m guessing it’s not over yet?”

“Nope,” Mona said, walking over. “But it will be soon. There are still more aliens to kill.”

“In that case,” Iosif said, gripping his mace again and giving a weary smile. “Let’s get to work.”

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The Cultro, Earth Orbit

11/6/2016 – 3:02 P.M

The Battlemaster waited for something to happen. But as the minutes ticked by, he came to the ugly realization that he’d been tricked. ADVENT had somehow been able to fake a nuclear signature aimed for the city, and he’d subsequently been tricked into retreating. He couldn’t survive a nuclear blast; he knew that, and ADVENT and XCOM knew that as well.

If it were anyone else, he would have recognized it as a trick. But the Commander was the kind of opponent that would actually go through with such a threat. If he thought he could be stopped with a nuclear blast, the Battlemaster knew that the Commander would go through with it even if it cost him thousands of his own kind.

So a conundrum. He couldn’t take chances as a result.

“Order a retreat,” he told the CODEX. “Activate the Gateways and achieve it without delay.”

He had considered flying back down there, but he felt it would be the wrong thing to do. He’d been bested here, as had the majority of his forces. The Humans had earned their victory, and prolonging it would be a pointless waste on both sides, and there were clear flaws evident in his strategy that had been made extremely evident to him.

He had underestimated the Humans today, and as a result the Collective had lost ground. Checking up on the status of the other attacked cities was not pleasant. The bases around Portland had fallen, which had not come as a surprise, but Seattle also falling was unexpected and bad. What was more concerning was that communication had been remotely severed not long ago, which indicated that V’Thrask was either dead or captured.

He was more puzzled as to how that could happen without some kind of additional information. But right now he didn’t have any idea how Seattle had fallen, and that was almost more concerning than his defeat against XCOM. Something that he’d have Ravarian investigate immediately. But for now, he needed to reassess the situation.

The good news was that ADVENT and XCOM had revealed their hands today. He now knew exactly what they currently had, and already he had ideas on how to counter it. They had had the
element of surprise here, and that had let them retake three major areas, and nearly kill him, but they would not be able to replicate that so easily again.

The situation was far from ideal, but this was not a large setback. It would, however, give the Humans a morale boost and further establish ADVENT as the primary power of Earth. The political ramifications were not his concern, and they didn’t matter in the scope of the war, but he knew Ravarian and Quisilia would be following the aftermath with great interest.

Today had been a wakeup call, and one he would not let happen again. It was a rule drilled into the Battlemasters from the beginning: “Underestimation is arrogance; Pride is failure; Apathy is death”

Even he, it seemed, was not immune much as he tried. He had underestimated what they were capable of, as well as believed his own forces were enough to fight back, and had waited well beyond what he should have to actually do something. The resource and unit costs would be enormous, and he would bear the brunt of that.

There would be retribution.

But today was not that day.

The Humans had won the battle; they deserved to enjoy it while it lasted.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Praesidium, Patricia’s Quarters – Classified Location

11/7/2016 – 2:30 A.M.

Patricia sat on the edge of her bed in the darkness, which thanks to her enhanced eyesight, turned everything a faint shade of white, illuminating the room with near perfection. Times like this she wished it was like a switch she could turn off because she really would prefer everything to just be dark around her.

Really, she should have been sleeping now. The mood in XCOM was better than it had been in a long time not only due to the resounding victory, but also bringing back eight Andromedon defectors. That was something the Commander had said would be handled the following day, and encouraged everyone to get some well-earned rest, and the Andromedons had been put in the stasis cells for the night.

Certainly an interesting development, and she was intrigued as to what they would have to say to explain what exactly motivated them to do this, but she’d been too unsettled and disturbed with herself to really take a lot of pleasure in the victory. Reading the reports about what both XCOM and ADVENT teams had found, which ADVENT had trouble explaining, put into perspective just how far she had gone.

Even the Commander had a point he wasn’t comfortable with. He’d told her quite plainly that while he didn’t have issues with the mass suicide, she should attempt to keep her kills quick and clean. Prolonging pain for the sake of it was both unprofessional and sadistic, words that hurt all the more so since she had strived to not be that.

She didn’t know what had brought that on. At some point she’d stopped thinking in terms of beings, alien or no, and simply considered them…pawns. Pawns were puppets, tools to be used, experimented on, and discarded. It was a perspective she’d never been able to understand, at least before now.

The problem now was that she did understand it, and instead of violently dismissing it she was actually thinking about why exactly something like that had wormed its way into her mindset. This was not something spontaneous, but the culmination of her continuous training and growing skill in telepathy.

She didn’t necessarily have a problem with viewing aliens as tools. Some were more than that, like Aegis, but they were ultimately the enemy. The Commander had a point that she shouldn’t prolong the deaths, but what worried her was that she didn’t exactly feel guilty for doing it in the first place. She’d stopped because she knew she “shouldn’t be doing this”, but it wasn’t because she felt that it was wrong.

That worried her. Not because she cared for aliens, but because she knew that was a slippery slope down until she was thinking the same thing about people. Or worse, she’d already passed that point long ago.
No…not yet. Subduing Pakistan had been done, if not harmlessly, at least efficiently. No experimentation there. So she hadn’t quite passed the point of no return. But at some point, she feared that she might, and worse, not see anything wrong with it.

A telepathic flicker beside her, and Creed breathed heavily as she heard him wake up. She mentally sighed; he’d known something was bothering her, but assumed she was just tired. He didn’t know what had happened, and she wasn’t quite sure if, or even how to tell him. But that wasn’t fair to him, especially when he didn’t have the luxury of hiding stuff from her, even if it wasn’t necessarily something that he needed to know.

“I’d have thought you would be exhausted,” he yawned, sitting up and scooting over to the edge of the bed, swinging his feet over and putting an arm around her. “What’s going on?”

She sighed and rested her head against his shoulder. “Can’t sleep. And…just thinking.”

“Don’t be vague. About what?”

She hesitated. “You read any of the reports from Las Vegas?”

Patricia only sensed some confusion. “I didn’t read reports, no, but I do know you took out pretty much the entire alien force by yourself until the Gatekeeper showed up. I’d say you did good.”

“That isn’t the problem.” She rubbed her forehead. “I did do that…but I also did…other things. I decided to experiment; test just how far I could push things. I made all the aliens puppets and made them torture, mutilate, and kill themselves just to see if I could keep their reactions under control…” She trailed off. “The autopsy reports don’t exactly paint a pretty picture.”

She felt his immediate surprise and shock at her admission, though nothing physical. “You said you go into trance-like states sometimes,” he said after a minute or so. “Was this one of them? You didn’t know really what you were doing until a certain point? You haven’t done anything like this before as far as I know.”

“It’s not that simple, or really an excuse,” she muttered. “I knew what I was doing, but it didn’t really bother me because…well, they weren’t really worth caring about. They were aliens. Pawns. They were going to die, so I thought I might as well get some worth out of them. They weren’t thinking beings to me, just experiments.”

She was silent for a minute. “I don’t really even remember what made me stop. Maybe I’d commanded one alien to kill his mate in some horrific way, maybe something worse, but I knew what I was doing was wrong. So I stopped. I think the Gatekeeper showed up soon after that. Not that it made much of a difference. All the Vitakara were wrecks and the ones with their sanity intact killed themselves as a result.”

Patricia’s shoulders slumped. “Effective, I guess. But I shouldn’t have felt the need to go that far, much less actually done it.”

“But you did stop,” Creed pointed out. “And you realized you went too far. What are you really worried about? If you were too far gone, you wouldn’t even be this conflicted.”

Patricia closed her eyes. “Because even though I know it is wrong, I’m not sure it actually was.”

Now Creed felt actually concerned about her, and moved her to sit cross-legged on the bed, both of them facing each other. “I think you should explain that,” he said neutrally, taking her hands.

Right. She really had to. “Because it worked,” she said simply. “I know better what I can do. My
telepathy is more refined. Vitakara minds,” she took a breath. “Well, I think I’ve figured out most of them. Even Andromedons aren’t as much of a mystery. I don’t know…” She trailed off. “But they’re the enemy. We kill the enemy, or capture if we really need to. I don’t feel guilty about doing that to them. I know I should, but I don’t, and I don’t know if something is wrong with me or not.”

She briefly let go of one of his hands, gesturing around them. “That’s what we do here. We’ve defined ourselves by going past a lot of established lines in the name of protecting us, and honestly that is probably the reason we’re still alive. Is this actually a line that shouldn’t be crossed, or am I just scared because I know just what I can do?”

Creed looked down at her gently. “Do you remember when you told me that one of the things that terrified you was abusing your power? Is that still true?”

“I remember,” she said quietly. “And I want it to be.”

“Alright,” he shifted closer. “So why can’t it be?”

She shrugged. “Can I go back after this? I’ve already broken that rule I had.”

“And what makes you have to break it again?” He questioned.

She considered that. “Nothing, I suppose.”

“You can be powerful without resorting to what an Ethereal would do to us,” he told her softly. “You’re better than that, and I still believe it, even if I can’t read your mind. You wanted to improve what you can do, but I think what probably separates powerful psions is knowing just what they need to do. You can control yourself, Patricia.”

He was right on that point. Just because she did this once, didn’t mean she was gone forever. “You’re right,” she said with a nod. “I made a mistake. I don’t have to repeat it.”

“Exactly,” he smiled. “Now I think you should at least try to sleep—ah” He was cut off as she leaned up and kissed him, and they stayed like that for a few moments. “Or,” he breathed once she broke it off. “We could do something else.”

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Unknown

Unknown Time

“You have a lot of fucking nerve,” Patricia growled to the nondescript Human sitting in the middle of a flat horizonless room, in front of a table with a chair opposite it. “I suppose you just like watching, hmm?”

“I have little interest in your activities with your mate,” the Imperator said nonchalantly, his facial expression not changing at all. “I was simply awaiting the opportune moment, and I thought you would prefer to have this conversation where no one else could hear. You spontaneous plans had little to do with it.”

Patricia rolled her eyes, realizing she was in her armor. “How very, very thoughtful.” Nevertheless, she stormed over to the chair and sat down opposite him. “And just so you know, we crushed your little army and sent your Battlemaster running. Good luck trying to gloat this time.”
“Because I am certainly prone to such gloating,” he said, actually attempting to be sarcastic. How cute. “I have little interest in your victories, and a loss will only make the Battlemaster stronger. The notion that you achieved anything other than a temporary victory is a delusion, but one I do not blame you for partaking in.”

“Spare me,” Patricia ground out, glaring at the Human form the Imperator assumed. “Somehow, I don’t feel inclined to believe you right now. There’s only so many times you can say we have no chance before it becomes meaningless.”

“Your belief is irrelevant,” the Imperator said. “I was simply stating that your assumed reasons for me speaking with you were misconceptions. Your little Archangels, MECs, Templars; none of that has attracted my attention, but you, on the other hand, managed to get mine. I did not think we would speak so soon, but your performance at Las Vegas was exceptional.”

Patricia’s lips pursed. “I’m not going to apologize, but it will be quicker next time.”

“Amusing, that you think I care how many aliens die,” the Imperator said with a humorless smile. “They can be replaced, and I do not trouble myself with them. But I can sense that you are conflicted about your actions.”

“And I’m not comfortable sharing that with you.” Patricia said flatly. “You are the last one I’d speak to.”

“Psion Trask,” the smile became knowing. “Do you really believe this is the first time a telepath of exceptional power has felt as you do? The realization of power you experienced? The euphoria of control over so many minds?” He clasped his hands together. “You are likely asking yourself many things. Questions of morality, or life, of lines crossed or left alone. This is natural. It is normal. It is what all psions, but especially telepaths, go through at some point in their lives. It was only a matter of time before you reached yours.”

Patricia blinked. That shouldn’t be a surprise…but then again, she’d never heard Aegis or anyone else mention it. However, this was the Imperator- “Go ahead and sense if I am lying,” he said knowingly. “I have no reason to lie to you here.”

Still suspicious, she tentatively examined the projection of the Imperator. She couldn’t even begin to penetrate it, but he didn’t seem to be lying. “Did Aegis know?” She asked.

“Highly unlikely,” the Imperator answered. “Aegis, as much as you believe he is a telepath, it is not his specialty. He may be able to break into your mind, but he would never be able to do what you have done. He was designed to be an Aegis, and an Aegis he will forever be. If he had known, he would have prepared you better.”

Patricia leaned back. She wasn’t quite sure what to do now. “Let me guess,” she said. “You went through the same thing.”

“Yes, but not quite like you did,” he nodded. “The thrall species of the Synthesized were attacking one of our bases. There were four Ethereals left, and we were being hunted by them. I had recently been awakened, and taken command. I knew what I was capable of, or at least I thought I did, and at one point I decided not to run, and I alone destroyed the pathetic thrall aliens that had come to kill us.”

She suspected this was more impressive than it sounded. “And how many? A few thousand?”

“Four million descended upon the planet,” the Imperator said. “All were defeated. There were no
Director Flagships to command my attention. Not strictly telepathic, but I did reach an important realization, one which the Overmind assisted in."

Despite herself, Patricia was curious. “And what was that?”

“That holding back would accomplish nothing,” he answered, standing up. “Too many beings believe that all species are equal, or that everything deserves as much consideration as the other. But you and I both know that isn’t true. You learned that when you dominated the Vitakara like the puppets they are. You exposed the aliens for their weak minds then forced them to perform horrific acts. You know what they are, Psion Trask, but you do not want to say the words."

The Imperator’s appearance was changing as he spoke, the skin was becoming lighter and the eyes turning purple. “They are inferior,” he hissed softly. “There is no shame in stating facts you proved. You should not be ashamed to recognize yourself as better out of a misplaced empathy.” The chalk-like humanoid sat back down, lips curled back in an unsettling smile.

“Do you wonder why I do not take an interest in the Collective as those such as the Battlemaster do?”

Patricia was not liking just how accurate the Imperator was sounding right now. “I assumed it was because you’re lazy.”

“Amusing,” he said. “No. Because I do not need to. Their interests and goals are irrelevant. The species as they are now are merely setpieces until the real work begins. They are pointless and incomplete. Their purpose is none for me. Do you really think the Vitakara actually have a place in my plans?”

“Yes,” Patricia said. “Otherwise you would not have wasted time on them.”

“Mhmm,” the Imperator looked around the white emptiness. “I presume Aegis revealed some of what Revelean and Fectorian are working on? Perhaps I should have clarified that the modern Vitakara have no place. These species are tools, Psion Trask; ones which can be enhanced or discarded at will. If they cannot stand up to a single-planet species such as yours, explain to me why I should care about them?”

Well, she actually had an answer to that. “Because it’s wasteful otherwise. Doing nothing serves no purpose beyond some bizarre god complex.”

“Good,” he nodded. “An acceptable answer I feel. But returning to the previous point, why exactly are you afraid of accepting that you are indeed superior to those around you? Ignore your societal pressures and customs and explain.”

Patricia raised an eyebrow. “You really want to know?”

“I would not be speaking if it were otherwise.”

“Fine,” she grunted. “Because I still want to care. About people. About things. You might laugh, but I don’t want to lose my humanity. What I fight for. What I did.” She gestured around. “I didn’t care. I acted out of curiosity, out of a desire to be more powerful, skilled, whatever. But I didn’t care about those I dominated. They were just a means to an end.”

“Did you accomplish what you desired?” The Imperator asked.

“Yes.”
“Do you regret what you did?”

“No. I wish I did.”

“Then why are you still afraid?”

“Because soon that will spread to things I actually care about,” she admitted. “I don’t want to look at Creed and feel nothing. I don’t want the soldiers around me to become little pawns I control like a chess game. I don’t want this war to just become my quest to become more powerful. That is what I am afraid of.”

She exhaled loudly. “And I’m telling this to who is probably my greatest enemy. Wonderful.”

“If it is any consolation, I do not consider you an enemy,” the Imperator offered. “Consider me an observer if you wish.”

“Really,” Patricia said dryly. “I’m working to burn your little empire to the ground. At least grant me the courtesy of recognizing me as one.”

“I will, once you explain how your actions make me your enemy,” the Imperator said. “At worst you’ve killed a decrepit member of my species and killed a small amount of my armies. You have yet to threaten me personally. And enemies generally do not converse with each other.”

“I didn’t exactly have a choice,” Patricia pointed out.

“I haven’t kept you here,” he smiled. “You can sever the connection at any time.”

She glared at him, but silently conceded the point. “Let me ask you a question,” the Imperator said. “Why did you wish to become more skilled?”

“To make it easier to kill aliens, and you,” she answered honestly.

“So,” he sat back. “You weren’t acting out of pure selfishness. You had reason to experiment and grow more proficient.” His eyes bored into hers. “I assure you, Patricia, only the truly weak and unstable lose what drives them after experiencing what you have. You are neither. You simply just need to understand what is happening, and how to utilize it.”

“Fine, I’ll bite.”

“Never forget what your ultimate goal is,” the Imperator said. “Be it destroying the Collective, or even me. Grow your power in pursuit of this goal. Do not avoid your realization of the inferior, use it to your advantage. You need not abandon your connections to your lover or friends, after all, a victory with nothing left is simply hollow.”

He shook his head. “There are many theories as to what shapes people, and to an extent all are true. Love. Fear. Pain. But none reveal the nature of a person like power. The Human saying ‘Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely’ is not entirely incorrect, though corrupt has a negative connotation. Power changes, and absolute power changes absolutely. It does not sound as good, but it is nonetheless more accurate.”

He motioned to her. “You are, and will change, Patricia Trask. You can fight it, but you will no longer be the same woman you were even before this realization. You cannot reverse what has happened, but you can determine the person you will be. You could fight this, cut yourself off, restrict yourself, and ultimately, you would change yourself for the worse, or simply become what you currently fear.”
He leaned forward. “Or you could embrace what you are. *Use* your gift on your enemies with no remorse, and you will accomplish your goals. Anchor yourself in your goals and relationships, and you will be a terrifying and unstoppable force. But, Patricia Trask, only you can decide what to do.”

Silence stretched between them. “Why are you telling me this?” Patricia asked.

“Because I am not interested in the weak,” the Imperator stated, his voice growing noticeably colder. “The Battlemaster is right to challenge your world as he is. If our Collective loses, then so be it. If I die, then I failed. But if you are to win, then I will ensure that you will carry on our mission and crush the puppeteers that control this galaxy. I have no qualms about gifting you knowledge, especially in the art of the Gift. Use it. Or do not. But there is little worth in beating an unskilled opponent.”

He stood, smiling. “With that said, I think perhaps I should demonstrate just how outmatched you are.” Patricia found herself standing, and they were no longer in an endless room, but standing in the vast expanse of space.

Patricia didn’t have any smart comments here, this entire conversation was nothing short of unnerving and was definitely affecting her in ways she was *not* comfortable with. “Go ahead.”

He motioned down, and the Earth was beneath them, rotating so slowly as to be imperceptible. “So many people on your planet, and aliens as well,” the Imperator mused, and extended one hand toward it. The air around them shimmered, as screen-like squares made themselves apparent. Much like a screen it showed people inside them.

Civilians, soldiers, aliens, people she knew. Chancellor Vyandar talking with some military leader, the Commander and Vahlen sleeping, Abby walking through a desert of some kind. There were still more; Chinese generals looking over some kind of map, a Sargon speaking to some Andromedons, and even more, until they filled up the area around her.

“We cannot control time,” the Imperator said. “But perhaps we can affect it.”

He lowered a hand and everyone in the psionic screens froze. Mid-motion, mid-speech, just froze. She could still see them breathing, but they were just doing...nothing. Then all the heads turned to her direction, eyes sightlessly staring forward towards her.

“Perhaps this will illustrate the ineffectiveness of your armies,” the Imperator said. “This is no illusion, Psion Trask. All those you see are indeed appearing to look at you. They do not know why they feel compelled to look that way, but they do. If you do not believe me, well, there are plenty of security recordings available.”

Everything vanished and they were in the middle of a starry blackness. “Think on what I said,” the Imperator told her. “I suspect we will speak again. Sleep, Psion Trask.”

And the figure of the Imperator vanished, and Patricia fell into a deep sleep.

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*The Praesidium, Outside Stasis Cells – Classified Location*

11/7/2016 – 1:24 P.M.

Normally, he would be extremely happy on a day like today. There were the Andromedons to debrief, and he had some meetings with ADVENT to figure out where best to go from here.
However, Patricia explaining that little stunt the Imperator had pulled had put a damper on the whole day. It was unfortunately true, even if it was only for a few seconds.

Since Patricia hadn’t added anything else to that, he assumed that had been the entire point of the Imperator showing up in her mind again, just to childishly taunt her. Still, this was extremely disturbing and they needed some means of anti-telepathy fast. Vahlen was already drawing up some ideas, but the best case scenario here was a couple months at least.

He glanced over at the tired face of Patricia. She did not look like she’d slept well, and considering both the day before, and the Imperator, he could understand that. Maybe he should give her a break and figure things out for a short time, perhaps a week. She wasn’t the only psion anymore, and Las Vegas had been a warning sign that something needed to be done.

The Commander was more concerned about the Imperator contacting her again. Even it was only to intimidate her, he was doing this for a reason, and he didn’t know what exactly to do to stop it. There had to be something more to this than him just appearing and talking to Patricia, but then again, she reported that he had never once seemed threatened by her or Humanity for that matter.

Maybe he was just bored.

Could a being like the Imperator just do things for fun?

Aegis had openly warned Patricia that the Imperator was leading her to some specific realization, and Patricia had agreed, although she said that the most he’d done was just talk to her. And not once had he tried to turn her against them, or even offer for her to join. It was, as she had put it, “Strange”.

On that everyone agreed.

But now they needed to determine what V'Thrask and his Andromedons were actually doing here, and that would hopefully be settled fairly soon. The Commander waved his hand over the psionic sensor, and the shield shimmered and faded, and he, Patricia, Aegis, and Zhang stepped into the cell where V'Thrask was standing.

The suit had the acid launchers and tanks removed, but it had done very little to make the suit smaller. “An Ethereal,” V’Thrask stated, the most emotion he’d heard from the alien yet. The alien actually took a step back as Aegis appraised the smaller Andromedon. “Highly improbable.”

“I suppose this is confirmation that my defection has been suppressed,” Aegis said flatly. “Unsurprising.”

“Yes, we have an Ethereal working with us,” the Commander confirmed. “And it hasn’t been publicized for several reasons. Namely, that we don’t want the full force of the Collective being sent our direction.”

“This changes the parameters significantly,” V’Thrask continued. “All data gathered has been under the assumption of pure Human innovation. Ethereal support raises chances of success significantly.”

“To be fair,” Patricia said. “Everything ADVENT has done has been on their own. Aegis has only helped us out with some of our stuff. Mostly psionics and Gateways.”

“It is unfortunate that we are unable to establish contact with the Federation immediately,” V’Thrask said slowly, suit whirring as he looked down at him. “That the Ethereals have hidden this from us would be catastrophic.”
The Commander looked up at Aegis. “Would it?”

“Unlikely,” Aegis said. “The Federation would not move against the Collective. Tensions would rise, but nothing would be accomplished.”

A low gurgle came from the Andromedon suit. “Ethereal Aegis, I am afraid that you underestimate how severe things are becoming in the Federation. Your Collective is far more fragile than you are aware of. I am not talking of the ongoing feud between the Federation and the Greater Hive Commanders, but this is within the Unions themselves.”

The Commander crossed his arms. “I am very interested to hear this. So, why are you defecting?”

“As I stated earlier, I, and those with me, were under orders,” V’Thrask began. “I am from the Andromedon Union Viarior, and there are those from the Apear, Reinarm, and Haruma as well. You are familiar with them, Ethereal; you should know what that implies.”

“It raises questions,” Aegis said. “Viarior I can understand, but the others seem odd.”


“Before I explain why this is significant, you must understand the current situation within the Federation,” V’Thrask interrupted. “The Unions are beginning to split again. Lines are being drawn unofficially. Chief Overseer Chernior, the leader of the Federation, and by extension, our species, has been attempting to project some measure of unity, but it is only a matter of time before the Hive Commanders learn of it, and I suspect the Zararch already know.”

“Likely,” Aegis agreed.

“Are you saying the Andromedons are facing a civil war?” The Commander asked, frowning.

“That,” V’Thrask emphasized. “Depends on a great many factors, one of which is your own species and this conflict. The Federation is not nearly aware of what is actually happening here as you might think, but they know that this should realistically not be even close to a battle. Something else is happening, and they need to know why.”

He looked towards Aegis. “They suspected it was because Humans are psionically capable and the Ethereals wanted to take care. Now it might be due to that one of their own has defected. As I said, an improbable development.”

“So is the Federation waiting for something?” Zhang asked. “Our victory or defeat?”

“And that is where the rising Union tensions are coming into play,” V’Thrask explained. “There are certain Andromedons who are frustrated with the seeming lack of leadership in the Collective, with the exception of the Battlemaster, and want to split off from it. There are two things stopping this from happening, the first is that there is no reliable defense or information on the living Ethereals, and it would be suicide to face the Sectoids, Vitakara and Mutons all on their own.”

He paused. “The second, and more important, is that the majority of the Federation considers the Greater Hive Commanders a threat, and that, more than anything else, is keeping the Federation together. The Unions may hate each other, but faced with a larger threat, we will unite against it.”

“The Federation fears the Hive Commanders that much?” Patricia questioned.

“They are an amoral race of drones led by equally ruthless telepathic masters,” V’Thrask stated. “They have never liked us. We have always distrusted them. It has been that way for a century and
has slowly but surely deteriorated. The Hive Commanders build their fleets by the thousands, and hinder our own efforts. The Ethereals do not intervene, and most in the Federation do not believe we can rely upon them if it comes to war.”

“I suppose the question is if the Federation is willing to go to war,” the Commander noted. “Whoever made the first strike would likely gain the support of the Ethereals paying attention.”

“The Sectoids are psionic,” V”Thrask said. “That automatically makes them more valuable. But you are correct. Tensions will simply keep rising until one takes the risk. If the Ethereals are watching, and have chosen to still not intervene…then some suspect they will simply let the Federation and Hive Commanders fight if they avoid Vitakara and other Collective military worlds.”

“Incorrect,” Aegis interrupted. “A war would be ended in days. Whichever side started it would have their leadership purged. Do not make the mistake of thinking that the Imperator is not watching.”

“You still haven’t answered why you are here,” the Commander reminded him. “The situation is tense with the Federation. How does that relate to you?”

“There are a small group of Andromedons who would prefer you succeed,” V”Thrask said. “They see this as the best chance to break the Collective apart. They would support your war against the Collective. In return, should you defeat the Hive Commanders and Ethereal Collective, you would allow the remains of the Federation to establish themselves as an independent power.”

“The remains of the Federation?” Zhang noted.

“Openly allying with your species would lead to a civil war,” V”Thrask stated bluntly. “There are enough Unions and Andromedons who are Collective loyalists, even if they despise the Hive Commanders. The Battlemaster is extremely respected by our species, as is the Collective military.” V”Thrask bowed his head. “However, the Battlemaster does not expect treason, not from the Andromedons. We were placed here over a period of months for the sole purpose of eventually establishing contact with you, Commander. Our task has been accomplished and you are informed about the current situation. If you want, we can continue to provide our expertise against the Collective itself. Each of us are experts in our field. Engineering, artificial intelligence, chemical warfare. While your species has made impressive strides, you are lacking in many areas.”

The Commander exchanged a glance with Zhang, who gave a single nod. V”Thrask was definitely not lying; either Patricia or Aegis would have said something, and now they had potential allies should they ever move outside Earth. While he didn’t exactly like the idea of Andromedon allies, he wasn’t going to refuse their help, since they ultimately weren’t the real problem.

The information that the Federation and Greater Hive Commanders were on the verge of…if not war, then some kind of conflict…that was extremely interesting and useful. The more he thought about it, the less stable the Collective really was. The only thing that was keeping everything from completely falling apart were the Ethereals, and depending on how things went, more could die in the coming months and years.

There was no unity in the Collective. The entire thing was based on fear; fear that defying the Ethereals would lead to death. Not unreasonable, but impossible to build something sustainable on. While Ethereals like the Battlemaster did what they could, that clearly was not solving the underlying issue of what was keeping the Collective together.

He wondered if any Ethereal had come to this conclusion.
Perhaps they had, and they simply did not care. It would not surprise him.

“Fine,” the Commander nodded. “You help us get the Collective off Earth, and we’ll eventually get you back to the Federation and help kill the Hive Commanders and Ethereals. I’m sure we can find some use for you here.”

“Excellent,” V‘Thrask said. “While all of us are experienced in combat, I suspect it would not do to participate in operations alongside you. But we will assist where you need us.”

“In that case,” the Commander said slowly, rather surprised he was even in a position to say this. “Welcome to XCOM, V‘Thrask.”

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Unknown Location – Argentina

11/8/2016 – 10:17 A.M.

To say it had been an interesting week would be a severe understatement. There were plans and strikes to carry out as usual, and several of his people recently come from Africa were certainly talking of interesting developments. Supposedly something big was coming relatively soon, but he was likely going to be distracted by everything else that had happened. Africa, right now, was just not important.

The muted TV played silently in front of his chair, with some TV anchor showing the Chancellor giving some speech, which was likely some variation on “With this victory, we have reminded the aliens that we will not go quietly into the night, we’re going to live on…”

He snorted and shook his head. If the Chancellor decided to just blatantly rip off speeches from good invasion movies, he might be more inclined to watch. As it was, ADVENT’s own counterattack had been both a surprise and a curiosity to watch. The aliens had been clearly caught off guard, and he could give ADVENT credit where it was due, it was legitimately impressive.

Now if that would last, he was less sure of. In fact, he knew it wasn’t going to last. Ignoring that this was an alien species, it was just how war worked. ADVENT would get a big victory, which was going to come at some point, then likely a few days or weeks later, the aliens would fight back. It was just going to be a continuous back and forth until one side hurt the other too badly. And right now, Volk knew that ADVENT would exhaust itself long before the aliens did.

Still, their focus on the aliens was good for him. Less attention being paid to the lesser countries across the world, and the borders with foreign nations weren’t getting the attention they needed. Perfect for making sure the Peacekeepers stayed well away from Argentina. But there was only so much that he could do, and he’d been content with that given that work was never in shortage.

Until he’d received a very mysterious package.

That had been surprising on multiple levels, since for one, only a very few people knew his actual location, and all of them he trusted with his life, and said package had not come from any of them. It was unmarked, and was small enough to fit into his hand. The initial instincts of himself and his people were a very poor assassination attempt. Package bombs and poisons were not unheard of when his location was more public, so they’d followed their own procedures.

Once it had been confirmed that it wasn’t a bomb, or poisoned, they’d opened it and inside was some circular device with a note with instructions written in English, but decidedly strange handwriting. Volk had his suspicions when he’d seen the handwriting, and when it had turned out
that it was some kind of holoprojector, it had been confirmed.

He pressed the button on the holoprojector, needing to see it once again. A blue figure appeared, a seemingly large Vitakarian wearing some kind of light armor which had an unidentifiable emblem that was likely some hieroglyph or word in their language emblazoned on the upper right chest. Other than that, the alien had no weapons or other identifying features. Aside from the obvious glowing eyes and the timbre all Vitakara seemed to have when they spoke of course.

“Greetings, Konstantine Volikov,” the recording began, in perfectly spoken English. “My name is Zar’jorean’mattis, designated representative of the Ethereal Collective and the Elder Asaru for the purposes of this message. We have been gathering information on your world and are aware of your current operations in South America and beyond.”

The alien paused. “While we understand you may have some reservations given the larger situation, your own work indicates that you are aware ADVENT is not as truthful as it appears, and certain important facts about us have been…omitted, for admittedly obvious reasons.”

Volk had to smile mirthfully at that. While ADVENT were no saints, the insinuation that they lied about everything or even major things was questionable at best. Like the little fact that this entire invasion was unprovoked, or Australia for that matter. But he kept listening.

“We recognize that we have made some missteps in the handling of your species, and it is now time, we believe, to begin rectifying that and working with certain parts of your species more closely. We are willing to meet you and discuss your current operations and how we can support them, and with your cooperation, we can move forward from there. If you wish to accept, simply press the black button on the side of this communicator which will establish a link with me. Both I and Elder Asaru look forward to your response.”

The hologram vanished. He looked over to Elena who was staring at where the hologram had been, her face complexly blank as usual, but she was blinking intermittently and not messing with the partially disassembled pistol in her hands. He knew her enough to know that was her thinking overtime. “Still think I should go through with it?”

Right now, that was the plan. There couldn’t be too much harm in meeting. Well, there could be, but the aliens knew he existed now, which was not something he could ignore. For all he knew, refusing would just lead to them killing him. Accepting could at least give him some information about what they wanted. He wasn’t going to do anything he didn’t want to, but if he was going to force the aliens to kill him, it was going to be on terms he had some control over.

He was also curious to meet this Asaru.

“Impossible to determine plausibility of honesty without further interrogation of species in question,” she answered automatically. “More information can only be ascertained by contact. Answer unchanged.” She glanced down. “I am sorry.”

He set the holocommunicator down and went to sit by her, feeling guilty he’d brought it up again. Elena was taking her inability to determine if an alien, which she had no experience with, was lying or not, much harder than she really should. It wasn’t entirely her fault she was that way; he blamed the GRU for that.

“It’s out of your control,” he told her, taking one of her hands off the table. “You did fine. And I think you can fix that in the future.”

Her mind immediately jumped to what he could mean like that. “Interview/Interrogation of
Well, maybe not quite like that. “If this goes through...maybe you can just talk to them?”

One firm nod. “Acceptable. Deficiencies will be fixed. Upon contact, what is your plan?”

“Right, that.” He scratched his beard, a smile coming to his face. “I think we should make a lasting impression. Make it clear where we stand and that we’re doing this our way.”

Elena returned to assembling her weapon. “Aliens are notably advanced in technological aspects, and have displayed more military might than we currently command. Demands will likely be ineffective; negotiating advantage is not in our favor.”

“Perhaps,” Volk said slowly. “But I’m not going to be an alien puppet, and right now, I’m guessing the aliens need us more than we need them.”

Elena paused, looked up and frowned at him. “Implausible. Alien forces are estimated to outmatch our own-“

“Elena,” he interrupted with a smile, glad she was seeming at least curious enough to speak more about this outside of necessities. “If that were the case, then why contact me at all?”

She blinked twice, and considered for a few moments. “They approve of your work against ADVENT. Our work.”

He grunted. “Probably at least one reason. Really, Elena, I don’t know why, but I do have some leverage here, and I’m going to use it. But you’re going to be there when we meet. I don’t trust anyone else more than you.”

“Good,” she appraised her completed weapon. “Operatives retained are insufficient to properly protect you. If the aliens try to trick you, they will die.” Volk smiled at that, because he knew that wasn’t an idle threat. If Elena didn’t like where the aliens were leading him and blew the brains out of whoever this representative was, well, then the alien alliance wouldn’t happen. A shame, but he trusted her instincts over his own.

There were advantages to being the leader. He had many tricks, but very few would ever predict that the most effective one would just so happen to be the woman he loved.

Always amusing to see idiots underestimate both of them. And he knew exactly what he was going to do now. Risky, but then again, so was this entire event.

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Abuja – Nigeria

11/9/2017 – 12:02 P.M.

The good news was that progress was being made. President Okon had assured her that he had reached out to ‘certain parties’, though had not disclosed exactly who to her until now. In the meantime, she’d let him begin the political aspects, while she had worked to establish her own soldiers more permanently, and Okon had ‘gifted’ them a large district in Bwari.

While he didn’t explicitly confirm it, she was fairly sure he’d displaced the few people who were living there, much to her displeasure. It wasn’t even as nice as an ADVENT base, but there was electricity and running water, as well as plenty of bunks. They’d converted some of the buildings to
armories and storage areas, and the rest were improvised barracks. Some of the Engineers brought along were looking into improving what they had, but that would take time.

Unfortunately, displacing people was a topic that was something to bring up with him later, and in the meantime she’d been busy working on getting everyone situated. She had many of her soldiers working with the Nigerian military to bring them up to some level of ADVENT standards.

Betos did have to admit that the multi-national nature of ADVENT meant they had a rather diverse coalition, even if her own group was composed of primarily Israeli, American, and German soldiers. Still, the Nigerian soldiers had paid attention to what they did share, and the remaining deserters were deciding to take some liberties with their own armor.

She wasn’t sure if she should be enforcing some harsher standards, but she personally didn’t care overmuch if they decided to spraypaint and color their armor different from the standard black, blue, white, or green. They weren’t part of ADVENT anymore, and were technically not part of anyone else’s military either. So some standards could be relaxed.

“A word of warning, Marshal,” President Okon said to her while they stood overlooking part of the entrance to the Presidential Palace, where they were waiting for his guests to arrive. “These men may not be who you expect, though I ask you to forget your…prejudices…when speaking.”

She pursed her lips. “That is not for you to decide, President Okon. And I think it is past time you informed me who you are expecting.” Perhaps it was presumptuous of her to speak like that to the President of Nigeria, but she wasn’t ignorant of the fact that she was in a stronger position than he wanted to admit.

“I suppose you are owed that much,” he agreed, not facing her. “The presidents of Chad, Niger, and Cameroon; Babikr Kone, Ezeudo Ifekristi, and Atem Esaba, respectively, of course. They have agreed to speak about a more permanent alliance of African power.” He gave her a sidelong look. “You wish the unification of Africa, yes?”

She gave a nod. “That is the only way you have a chance.”

Okon chuckled. “Perhaps, perhaps, but you realize that cannot be done with peace exclusively.” His nose wrinkled in disdain as the first limo began pulling up. “There are many undesirables that inhabit our nations. Terrorists, thieves, rebels; people who disrupt our stability. An alliance weakened with this rot will not stand against anything, much less the might of ADVENT.”

Again, she was not liking the feeling she was getting from this. “Rebels and terrorists. I imagine they have motives?”

“The usual,” he snorted. “Corruption, ‘abuse of power’, pitiful excuses designed to appeal to western sympathies. As if they know anything about what is required to run a government.”

On one hand, Betos was unfamiliar with the intricacies of the African nations, and Okon did have a point. Revolutionaries were often more idealistic than practical, and the ones that emerged victorious had a fairly high chance of collapsing soon after, and terrorists had no motivation beyond killing those they hated.

It was an important distinction. Terrorists were driven by hate; rebels and revolutionaries by hope and dreams. Terrorists had no goal outside death; rebels at least had some larger goals to strive towards. And many governments often ascribed the word ‘terrorist’ when it wasn’t nearly as simple. Palestine had been handled that way, and in that lens, the outcome was almost assured.
Betos didn’t particularly like the idea that she was likely going to be working with some probably terrible people. She didn’t know for sure, and Okon was going to explain everything smoothly, but her instincts told her that this wasn’t exactly the right side.

“You would make a better first impression if you wore something more appropriate,” Okon said as he turned around, and Betos followed him into the Presidential Palace. “While it may be acceptable elsewhere, your military rank and…experience…is atypical, especially of a woman.”

Betos resisted bristling. “I doubt you are suggesting that they are intimidated by me?”

“Considering you are wearing armor to an otherwise formal occasion, it is not unlikely,” Okon smiled. “But consider it a warning that they are less likely to respect you.”

“Too bad,” Betos shrugged. “I’m a soldier, not a diplomat, and I’m not going to coddle supposed leaders of countries because a woman in combat gear makes them uncomfortable. I’m here to help you keep ADVENT out of Africa, and that’s it.”

“If you insist,” Okon sighed. “As long as you are aware of the consequences.” They walked through the ornate hallways, which Betos still personally found a little too gaudy for her liking. Maybe she just didn’t like the shining white paint everywhere. At least Okon had taken her advice about making sure everything was protected, and there were a fine mixture of her soldiers and Nigerian military guards at all doorways and hallways, not including the small guard that was following them.

One of the Nigerian soldiers came up to Okon and told him something quietly. The President nodded, glancing at her. “The first of our guests has arrived, let us prepare accordingly.” Just as well, since they were going towards the small dining room anyway. Okon planned to have the talks take place over a meal, which seemed fairly standard.

The dining room was very similar to where she’d first talked with Okon himself, with a beautifully set table for five, and delicious-looking and smelling food on it. The stage was set, and now all that remained was for the actors to finally meet. At the very least, she was making progress here, and the next few hours would determine if that was a good or bad thing.

Knowing how things typically went, she was assuming that it would be a little bit of both.

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Resistance Camp Outskirts, Northern Territory – Australia

11/9/2016 – 2:12 P.M.

Abby was rather happy, and not just because she’d identified another potential target to liberate. Adelaide wasn’t the largest city in Australia, but it was one that was under a fairly light alien guard, or so it had seemed from several days of scouting. Timed right, they could liberate thousands of people and damage the alien operations here even more.

They also didn’t appear to be doing anything important with the city either, so that would only make the mission easier. Harper could probably be convinced, and the Chronicler would almost certainly go along with it. And on top of that, ADVENT crushing the aliens in America was definitely something that, while she hadn’t expected, had given her a surge of confidence.

While they had been making progress here, ultimately they were doing little more than irritating the aliens. Abby knew their effect was minimal, and the heavy legwork would have to be done by ADVENT and XCOM, and recently things had not exactly been looking good. But now it seemed
like there was some measure of control being established.

Abby froze as her hand went to her pistol as she heard something scuttling in the bushes. While the arid and rather empty Australian wasteland was something she personally despised, one benefit was that it was almost impossible for her to be surprised. In contrast, the Resistance had set up where there was some cover from vegetation; scratchy bushes and trees, with some high weeds and ferns for good measure. Climate-wise, it was better, but it also allowed for ambushes, which she supposed was perhaps the point.

However, to her knowledge, Harper would have his soldiers just approach her normally, not hide in the bushes. And come to think of it, around this time there were generally guards...she holstered her pistol and unstrapped her rifle and took a cautious step forward. “Step out from the bushes!”

To her horror, there was a familiar animal shriek and a Chryssalid leapt out, spittle flying from its teeth and the purple carapace glittering in the sunlight. Abby didn’t even think and fired a burst from her rifle, which punctured the alien in the head and torso. It shrieked again and fell to the ground, and another burst with her rifle finished it off, though she fired again to be sure it was dead.

Once that was done, she immediately reloaded, because if there was one Chryssalid here, there would be more around, and if there were Chryssalids around, there were going to be other aliens. She had a sickening feeling she knew what had happened. That would explain why she hadn’t been able to update Harper earlier. She hadn’t thought much of it because communication was sporadic to begin with, and it wasn’t the first time she hadn’t been able to get into contact. However, she’d sent a message which meant…

She crept up to the bushes, trying to keep low as she surveyed the surrounding vegetation. Everything screamed for her to rush to the camp immediately since some of them may be alive, but she knew that was likely the fastest way to her getting killed. Calm, calm. She took a second to catch her breath and assess what she knew.

One: There were aliens here. Chryssalids and probably more.

Two: There were no sounds of fighting, which meant either everyone was dead or they were recovering. That there was a Chryssalid indicated the former.

Three: If they had access to the communications, they might be expecting her.

Four: Where the hell was the Chronicler?

Something like this shouldn’t have happened if he was there. He wasn’t flashy with his abilities, and she knew he didn’t like people knowing about them, but he should have been able to sense them coming and either redirect them or kill them. So either he hadn’t been here or...oh, that wasn’t good.

Or the Ethereals could have figured out there was a psion with the Resistance and sent one of their own to kill him.

Retreat might be the best option, but the problem was that she had nowhere to go. She had one little Humvee, which would not have enough gas to get to the other, smaller camps, which for all she knew, had been similarly attacked. She didn’t have powerful enough communication equipment to contact XCOM, and with all that, she needed to know at least if there were survivors. So she moved forward slowly, methodically, aiming her weapon at every sound.
Now that she was closer to the camp, the signs of battle were clear. There were piles of Chryssalid corpses, and even more bodies of Resistance soldiers, some of whom were torn apart from the Chryssalids implanted in the bodies and hatching. The odor was already pungent in the hot Australian sun, and the yellow and red blood of Humans and aliens splattered and drying on the dirt.

The mix of tents and temporary plastic structures seemed largely intact, oddly enough, even with some clear rips and dents. But it seemed deserted, aside from hundreds of people dead in the center area. She decided it was worth risking exposure, since there was nowhere else to go, even if it looked like no one was alive.

She carefully stepped through the mass of corpses, and began noticing that the methods of death were not the same. The soldiers on the edges of the camp were clearly ripped apart unceremoniously and messily; by claws and teeth. These...these were precise cuts. Abby knelt down, frowning as she looked at the corpse of a soldier whose throat had been split, and the ones next to him had been killed with a stab wound to the heart.

Yes, it definitely wasn’t a firearm, nor was it plasma or laser. How could someone get close enough to stab someone through the chest? The only aliens she was aware of that even used melee weapons were the Battlemaster, some Dath’Haram, and the Oyariah. Maybe this was done by Dath’Haram? But with the amount of corpses around with those same kinds, either a small army of nothing but them had come, or this was something else.

She scanned the faces, looking for ones she recognized. Harper would have gone down fighting with his men. She didn’t see Joseph either, though it was entirely possible he was just buried under more corpses or lying face-down. Nor did she see the Chronicler, who would be more distinct, even in this mess.

Abby made her way to the command tent, still not hearing anything, and pushed open the flap and saw everything largely as she had left it. The maps, table, and equipment were still there, but there was no one else, no bodies either thankfully. The air suddenly shimmered beside her and the Chronicler literally stepped out of thin air.

“Too late,” he muttered, not seeming to notice her at first. “A problem.”

“Where were you?” Abby demanded, temporarily forgetting his suddenly appearing out of nowhere. “Everyone is dead!”

“Wait,” he held up a hand, cocking his head. “No, not everyone. Harper and a few soldiers are barricaded in one of the barracks structures. You’re still in danger here. This place is not abandoned.”

Abby breathed a sigh of relief. Good news. Sort of. “What else is left?” She asked. “I killed a Chryssalid here, but there may be more.”

“The Chryssalids are gone,” the Chronicler stated, walking out into the open again, face hardening once he saw the mass of corpses. “This should not have happened. In answer to your question, I was doing some scouting of my own. Away from here, clearly. But I think the aliens know I exist.”

“Wonderful,” Abby muttered, weapon still raised as she looked around. “How?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, gingerly stepping forward. She wished he had his armor on, but instead he wore the typical desert survival gear most of the Resistance had, much lighter than her own. “But something was interfering with my telepathy, redirecting it, lulling me into a kind of
complacency. When I detected it, it vanished and I knew something had likely happened. So I came back.”

“We’ll discuss how you did that when we get Harper out of here,” Abby said. “Where are they?”

“In the-ah!” The Chronicler gasped and Abby leapt back as a dark grey blade sprouted from his chest, a towering armored figure appearing behind him. The being pulled out the blade, flinging the droplets of blood behind it with a flourish. The armor on the alien was slim and form-fitting, with a base of dark grey with a dark red highlighting the boots, pauldrons and gauntlets.

On the chest was the same stick-figure like Ethereal that she recognized from the report on the Senorium alien. While it did seem smaller in mass, it still had to be at least seven or eight feet tall. The helmet matched the rest of the form-fitting style, and was a thin grey faceplate with slanted eye slits which glowed purple.

“You aren’t supposed to be here,” the alien growled, a rasping and guttural voice, which seemed to actually be female in origin. It was hard to tell with aliens. “You were supposed to be away.” Abby fired her weapon and the alien raised a hand, stopping her gauss slugs and then gesturing, throwing her back where she slammed against one of the plastic structures.

The Chronicler had amazingly not fallen over, but instead turned to the alien, smiling even though clearly in some amount of pain. “You wouldn’t be the first to underestimate what I can do.”

She swung her blade clearly intending to either slice him open or behead him, but the Chronicler didn’t even move, instead let the blade come to him, only for it to hit an invisible wall mere millimeters from his neck. He peered curiously up at the alien. “Curious. Just what are you?”

“The one who will kill you,” it hissed, thrusting out a hand encased in crackling psionic energy and pressed it towards him only for the Chronicler to flick his fingers and send her flying backwards. She did recover gracefully and landed perfectly on her feet with a backflip.

“You are no Ethereal,” the Chronicler chided, taking some careful steps toward her. “Whatever you are, I think it is you who will die today. I’m afraid I don’t have that luxury yet.”

“Fool!” She growled, the air behind her shimmering with purple energy as she built up some kind of psionic wave. “I cannot be killed.”

With a push the wave roared towards the Chronicler, throwing bodies and debris that were already partially disintegrating from the corrosive energy, which the Chronicler responded to by raising a hand and a purple shield appeared in front of the wave, stopping it completely. Abby felt completely useless as she just watched; she knew she would only get in the way if she got involved again, and better to have the Chronicler focus only on this alien than worry about protecting her as well.

“Not bad,” the Chronicler complimented mockingly as he made a twisting motion with his hands, and all the joints of the alien suddenly averted with a loud snap, causing the alien to half-growl, half-scream in pain as she collapsed to the ground in a heap. But to Abby’s surprise, it barely worked for more than a few seconds.

The alien flung out one limb, as if snapping it back into place, did the same with the other one, and physically straightened out the legs, before standing, reaching for her blade. “Who are you, psion?” She demanded, now appraising the Chronicler more carefully. “No one has ever done that before.”
“Someone who is far more powerful than you can hope to be,” he answered, all humor gone. “I would advise you leave now before this gets worse.”

The alien chuckled. “A worthy challenge then.” She flourished her blade and vanished into the air and immediately appeared beside the Chronicler and swiped down, only to be blocked by the Chronicler’s own psionic blade which immediately moved to block her next few swipes, before she vanished again and materialized behind him, though the Chronicler blocked her just as easily.

The attacks the alien sent out became much more complicated. She was somehow sending out waves of psionic energy with her blade swings, and somehow teleporting to multiple angles within seconds of each other in an attempt to overwhelm him. The Chronicler surrounded himself in a psionic shield, negating the worst of it, but he appeared to be taking her more seriously.

This alien must have had some resistance to telepathy, otherwise Abby felt the Chronicler would have ended this a while ago. “Enough of this,” she heard the Chronicler rumble, his voice layered deeply as he was drawing on his psionic power. He extended a hand and the blade of the alien was ripped out of her hands, and he somehow imitated her teleportation attack, appearing right behind her and slashing downwards, cleaving successfully through the part of her shoulder that wasn’t as armored, and followed up by pulling out another smaller knife-like attachment in the hilt of the sword itself and stabbing it into her chin, and using the longer blade to plunge through her neck, and thrust a hand out, sending her flying back.

There was a brief interlude of nothing, as the alien was…not motionless, but not going to get up anytime soon. How it was still alive Abby had no idea, but it seemed to be largely over. She moved to walk over when the Chronicler raised a hand in her direction. “Wait.”

She raised her weapon, useless as it might be in the direction of the alien, which now had some nebulous purple aura around it, faintly clinging to the alien body, which first used her good arm to yank the knife out of her chin, and slowly pulled out the sword lodged in her neck while standing up. Both weapons fell to the ground with dull thuds, as the severed arm was pulled to her, and held under the stump that was light with bright purple thread-like lines and what looked like swirling matter.

Once it was attached, she flexed it experimentally, and with a motion the knife was returned to the blade with a click and she held it pointed to them. “I warned you,” she hissed, nothing in her voice indicating the injury she had sustained. “I. Cannot. Die!”

Abby saw the Chronicler frown. She had no idea what would happen. Maybe explosives would work? But the alien had not died from two fatal wounds, and was clearly enhanced with some kind of nanotech and psionic…something. The Chronicler was clearly more powerful, and could likely hold out for as long as the alien, but that wasn’t a large advantage when the opponent was seemingly immortal.

“Get Harper and the survivors,” the Chronicler told her as he appraised the alien. “I’ll keep her busy.” Abby didn’t wait to see what he did, and dashed towards where the Chronicler had initially pointed to where the survivors were, stepping over wrecked bunks and bodies, until she found a clearly barricaded door, which was supposed to be a debriefing room, although very, very small.

“Harper!” She yelled, hearing the unearthly sounds of psionic combat outside. “Open up now!”

“Is the area secure?” The voice of Harper called out.

“No,” Abby glanced behind her at the exit. “But it’s contained. You need to get out now!”
“Hold on.” It took nearly a minute of rustling and moving before the door opened to reveal a haggard, blood-streaked Lincoln Harper, with one less eye; the ruined one was an untreated gory mess. The rest of the survivors were not much better, with bandaged wounds, limbs twisted at bad angles, and otherwise looked exhausted, even if they still clung to their weapons. Three men and one woman were with him, some of the faces she recognized, but no one she really knew.

“What’s going on?” One of them asked.

“Some alien attacked me when I came back,” she answered. “She’s currently being fought off by…just come on, we shouldn’t waste more time. Can all of you move?”

“We can move,” Harper affirmed. “Though some of us can’t fight at the same time.”

Abby shrugged and waved them towards the exit. “Not much we can do to help anyway.”

She guided them out where the Chronicler was currently bathing the alien in psionic energy, which was causing severe damage to the armor, but otherwise didn’t seem to be hurting her, and she was continuing her teleportation making it even more difficult to actually keep her pinned. Harper looked on in disbelief. “That’s-“

“Yeah,” Abby said, keeping to the side of the conflict. “No questions yet.”

The Chronicler seemed to sense where they were, and released a massive telekinetic wave towards the alien which caught her and flung her backwards. “These aliens are more dangerous than I anticipated,” the Chronicler told her as they came closer. “They should not be possible, not without extensive technology the Ethereals do not possess. This will require further investigation. In the meantime, you need to be removed here to warn XCOM. Harper, were all the cells hit?”

Harper got over his shock quickly. “I don’t know, but I did have contact with several backup ones. Where were-“

“Unimportant,” the Chronicler looked at them, even as the alien was getting up and walking back. “ADVENT and XCOM need to be warned. I know one place that isn’t hit. You will be set there until we can determine the extent of this attack.”

“Set?” Abby wondered, nervously glancing at the alien.

“A way to get you out,” he gestured and it went flying again. “You’ll be able to contact XCOM and ADVENT from there. I would advise you keep my role quiet until I return. It will not be long, and this might feel strange.”

He raised a hand towards them, and there was a brief shimmer and they were all suddenly someplace else.

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Unknown Location – Argentina

11/9/2016 – 3:33 P.M.

Volk was definitely not planning to let the aliens see his actual base, so he and several of his people had established a temporary camp where, if things didn’t go right, the main camp would be safe. The designated meeting location was in an open plain right before one of the forests where they were camped.
It really was a beautiful day with a slight breeze and cloudy sky. The vegetation was a healthy green, and more importantly, provided his snipers cover while they were aiming out to where the UFO was set to land. Volk did not know exactly what to expect, except that the Vitakarian representative had assured him that Asaru would speak personally.

Elena was the only one beside him, and she had her hood up and geared for battle. He was similarly armed, though thought this would be best conducted face to face; hoods weren’t needed since they knew who he was already. Either way, he felt suitably protected and his scouts had confirmed that there were no alien snipers or similarly hidden agents.

The aliens could come to Earth, but they just were not experienced enough to blend in.

“Ah, here it comes,” Volk said to no one in particular. One of the circular UFOs he’d seen so often on the ADVENT news shot overhead and hovered over the plains. The metal was a dark grey as opposed to the regular bright shimmering silver the other ones had. But aside from that, it looked completely identical to one of the fighters.

He saw Elena grip her weapon tighter, and he knew she was getting ready in case she had to shoot something the moment it stepped outside. Unlikely to be needed, but that was just how she was. The UFO slowly lowered itself, not generating any wind, but somehow blowing the grass directly underneath it down.

“I don’t like how it feels,” Elena muttered quietly. “I don’t like how it sounds.”

Now that Volk paid attention, he did now hear the low constant thrumming that was just on the edge of his hearing. It was low and continuous, likely some kind of engine or generator, he did not find it difficult to block out. But every few seconds he did feel something like a pulse; imperceptible and it didn’t seem to do anything, but he still felt it.

*That* made him uncomfortable. Hopefully the aliens would shut it off.

“Let’s go greet our alien friends,” Volk said, and walked closer to the UFO. The pulsing was definitely based on distance, since he definitely felt it more often the closer he got, even if the intensity was exactly the same. He was getting concerned it was going to make Elena preemptively react to any surprises, and he couldn’t exactly fault her for that.

They waited for several minutes, and the pulsing suddenly stopped. Thank God. Still, the aliens were taking their sweet time coming out. They were deliberately waiting for something, and he was trying to not just go up and see if anyone was inside. Maybe they intended for him to enter the UFO? If so, they were going to be waiting a while. There was no chance he was going to go in there, Elena or no.

Then the multicolored shield that seemed to function as a kind of door suddenly dissipated. Good, at least they were going to come out. But to his surprise, no alien of any kind walked out.

Instead, out came the most beautiful woman Volk had ever seen.

Wavy brown hair sharply cut off at the shoulders framed a face that he could best describe as ‘regal’, with fair skin, unmarred features and entrancing violet eyes. Her face was warm, inviting and caring. Her body was just as perfect, well-toned and only slightly shorter than he was. She was also dressed in what appeared to be some kind of alien armor, which had thin silver plates that protected the limbs and torso, while the underarmor garments were a dark grey. Aliens liked that color. She carried no helmet, nor any weapons, and walked with a quiet confidence towards him.
He was immediately suspicious.

While he couldn’t deny that the aliens had somehow managed to figure out his physical preferences, it was suitably unnerving to be greeted with the sight of a likely ambassador to the aliens looking like she’d just walked off the runway of Miss USA. No one that good usually joined the military, and he’d bet even fewer would join the aliens of all things.

The most likely explanation was that this so-called Human wasn’t actually real, but some kind of genetic…thing…the aliens thought might, for some reason, put him at ease. He didn’t know if he should be flattered, or horrified at just how disturbingly accurate the aliens had guessed what he might like.

Nope, he was definitely feeling the latter.

“Konstantine Volikov, a pleasure to finally meet,” she said. Her fucking voice was even perfect; strong, seductive with a clear Russian accent. This was now very unsettling. She extended a gloved hand which he did take. It was pretty much as he expected, she at least felt like a Human, although with gloves that didn’t mean much.

“That is…mutual,” he said, keeping his voice normal. “You know who I am, but I don’t know who you are.”

She gave a dazzling smile. “Of course. I am Asaru; I believe you wanted to meet personally?” He couldn’t suppress a blink of surprise, which…Asaru seemed to find amusing. “Not what you expected, I presume?”

“No.” He said flatly. “I believe your associate identified you as an Elder, or Ethereal as ADVENT likes to call them. You are very clearly a Human.”

“The ruse serves its purpose,” Asaru explained wistfully. “But I find labels and such limiting. Once you tell people who and what you are, there are certain expectations that have to be fulfilled,” she sighed. “But I find such tiring. And you act surprised that a Human could be working with the Collective? Is that really so hard to believe?”

Volk raised an eyebrow. “I’m going to say yes. And even if they were, I don’t think they’d have such a position of…influence; which you seem to have. And I don’t think you’re actually Asaru.”

She clicked her teeth. “You are rather bold, but perceptive.”

Volk gave an unamused smirk. “I thought I was going to be speaking with her.”

“I assure you,” ‘Asaru’ said. “Everything we discuss here will be relayed to her. I speak with her complete authority.”

“Really.” Volk said slowly, thinking of what to do next. At the very least he wanted to get some information about the aliens, even if he was ultimately going to make Asaru herself come before they even thought of reaching some agreement. Best to play along. Asaru’s smile widened, seemingly for no reason.

“If you really represent her,” Volk said. “You should be able to answer some questions.”

She bowed her head. “That is why I am here.”

“Good,” Volk crossed his arms. “So here’s the most obvious one: Why is your Collective even here?”
“Through an interesting set of circumstances,” she answered. “We were led here, but didn’t know what we would find. We observed your species for a short time, before the ones watching took it upon themselves to begin conducting operations. Peace was thrown out, as they did not think your species would willingly join, and your species was nowhere near united enough to make such a major decision.”

Volk snorted. “How convenient. Everything just so happens to be someone else’s fault. Next you’ll tell me that those who made those decisions are dead or gone. Please. Don’t lie to me. If you forcibly assimilate species, just fucking say so. I promise not to be offended.”

“We do not as a general rule,” Asaru repeated. “However, we...misstepped with Humanity. We did indeed believe that you were both too primitive and violent to be peacefully assimilated. Something that has clearly been disproved rather violently. Contrary to what you might believe, most of the species in the Ethereal Collective joined willingly and peacefully.”

“Most?”

“The Mutons were uplifted, but they truly were primitive and fought our efforts.”

Volk was inclined to believe that. “So basically what you’re saying is that you did a bad job initially and now everyone is stuck in a war.”

Asaru pursed her lips. “In retrospect, it likely didn’t need to come to this.”

Volk rubbed his forehead. “And what is stopping you from just saying sorry and making peace? ADVENT isn’t the only power in the world for now.”

“Please,” Asaru dismissed. “Your species will never end this war voluntarily. XCOM and ADVENT will not allow it; perhaps they are justified, perhaps not, but unfortunately, ending the war is not possible, because at best it would only delay it. You see the danger ADVENT poses, now imagine what they will do in even twenty or fifty years?”

Volk was watching her face intently, now seeing some strange things that didn’t really add up to what she was saying. “And I suppose the Collective is much better than ADVENT?”

“What ADVENT does not tell people is that, ironically, we are more open than they are,” Asaru said with a knowing smile. “While each species government answers to us, they are largely autonomous. This is no overarching and oppressive empire, like ADVENT is, but we have no interest in a species forced to fit to what we perceive them to be. As obviously ADVENT is incompatible, the government you would have under the Collective is, quite literally, what you want it to be.”

Volk didn’t even try to disguise the skepticism he felt. “By that, I assume that includes working with alien ambassadors, as well as anyone else you’re contacting. I’m definitely not the only one here, am I?”

A rhetorical question, but one he wanted answered. “There are fewer than you think,” Asaru said. “There is one other, and that might expand further. While ADVENT doubtlessly believes that we prefer puppet leaders, that isn’t exactly true. Puppets have their uses, but they cannot build anything lasting. In general, I personally find them incompetent and require too much micromanaging.”

Asaru shook her head. “You are not a puppet, Volikov, that is why I have contacted you instead of appealing to the Argentinian and Chilean governments. I could, but they would be too scared of
what we can do to be of permanent use. You respect us, but you are not intimidated by us either. A rare trait in a Human.”

Volk was not sure if this was a genuine comment, or alien flattery. “Well, I’m surprised you consider me so highly. However, I assume you realize my influence is…limited,” he nodded towards Elena. “I don’t have a large group, and I’m definitely not a politician.”

“I have little interest in Human politics,” Asaru dismissed with a sniff. “Work with us, and we’ll provide you with whatever you need to first secure these regions, and then take the fight to ADVENT. You are Human, we are not. You know what is needed; you know the strengths and weaknesses here. You will lead our operations here, while I will only serve as an advisor.”

Much as he didn’t like to admit it, he had to admit she could make a good offer. Assuming she was telling the truth…hmm…there was a lot he could do. The problem was there were still things that just didn’t add up. “Let’s ignore that for the moment,” Volk said slowly. “Why even go through all this trouble in the first place? Much as ADVENT is saying otherwise, I haven’t exactly forgotten that you could likely destroy us quickly. So why don’t you?”

Asaru’s expression didn’t change. “As I said earlier, your species was mishandled. A war does not serve anyone, and simply conquering your species would accomplish nothing but increasing anti-alien sentiment and drive dangerous organizations with vast resources like XCOM and ADVENT underground, who wouldn’t cease until they are either removed or succeed.”

She paused. “There are several additional reasons, but some even I am not at liberty to disclose. Suffice to say the situation is more complicated than you might assume. Yes, we could dominate your species, but it would backfire more than our operations here already have.”

That…was an oddly logical answer. He hadn’t expected the aliens to admit they screwed up here, but it actually seemed like the being in front of him was actually saying that which was…oddly refreshing. From an alien of all things. “Go get him,” he told Elena, who nodded and walked away. Volk returned his attention to Asaru. “So instead you want to make…alliances with certain people. Show that the Collective can cooperate peacefully with Humans. Turn this from a species conflict to an interspecies one.”

“To an extent, yes,” Asaru confirmed. “I sincerely doubt standard operations will cease, but countries with our backing should be Human-led and controlled. ADVENT will simply use that as propaganda otherwise.”

Volk’s lips curled up. “Assuming they wouldn’t do that anyway.”

She mirrored his smile. “A fair point. I am curious now what you are thinking. You haven’t shot or refused, so I assume you are considering.”

“I am,” Volk eyed her carefully. “I won’t ask you for some guarantee, because both of us know promises are all well and good, but you can’t prove you’ll follow through. What you are saying sounds…promising…but I suppose we’ll see just how genuine you really are.”

Her smile didn’t diminish. “If you wish, I could provide you with what you would hope to be sufficient proof. I would certainly hate to try and find another qualified candidate.”

“It’s not about what you can give me,” Volk said. “It’s about what you’ll allow. So, you want me to wage a war against ADVENT with you and establish the New Earth Collective, or whatever you decide to call it? Then we’re going to do this my way. No exceptions.”
Asaru scratched her chin thoughtfully. “I suppose that depends on what you have in mind. I can’t promise no exceptions, of course, since even I answer to a superior. But you do not strike me as someone who would propose unreasonable action.”

Well, here it went. “First, all operational commands are handled by me, at least in the South American region. I’m not stupid enough to run your whole invasion, but you yourself said I know this area better. I know what works, I know what will get you willing allies. Give me your alien advisors if you want, or yourself even, but I get the final call on all combat and intelligence operations here.”

“Done.” She said.

He cocked his head. That seemed way too easy. “Second, civilian targets are off-limits, and if your military has a problem with that, too bad. I don’t care if you slaughter the entire ADVENT leadership with syphilis, but you’re not going to attack people who are just caught in the middle. Obviously I’d like you to keep your experimentation to a minimum, but I’m not delusional enough to think that would actually stop, but stuff like that Sectoid Hive is not really helping.”

“It is unfortunate the Sectoids tainted the image of all of us,” Asaru sighed. “Experiments like that are done at the behest of the Hive Commanders, which the Collective does not regulate, for better or worse.”

“Sure,” Volk noted skeptically. “But you didn’t address what I said.”

“Ah, yes,” she recalled. “Not an issue. Unless the civilian population is compromised by psionics or organic programming, standard tactics are to avoid intentionally destroying civilian targets. With that said, we, much like ADVENT, do not prioritize civilians over our own forces. I hope that is an acceptable compromise.”

“As long as it’s actually followed,” Volk agreed. “Very little that can be done to help civilians in warzones. Not intentionally targeting them is likely the best that can be done.”

“War is a sad affair, but mitigation is something we can do to lessen the damage,” Asaru nodded. “Ah, I see you brought over some more of your Reapers.”

Volk snorted at the nickname. “‘Reaper’, something ADVENT calls us to explain the assassins killing their soldiers. The name is pointless, but it is amusing.”

“You have quite the title as well,” Asaru reminded him as Elena walked up with Hadrian and two other Reapers in full combat trenchcoats and gas masks. “I assume you didn’t pick it?”

“No,” Volk said as he turned his attention to Elena. “Anyway, representative, this is Hadrian, one of my Reapers.”

“A pleasure, representative,” Hadrian said, taking off his mask to reveal the face of a man likely just over thirty with black hair just visible under the hood. “I assume Volk has reached an agreement.”

“We’re working on it,” Volk told him, turning back to Asaru. “Now to continue our conversation, there is something else I want to make clear.”

Volk didn’t glance over as Elena executed Hadrian at point-blank range. Once he heard the body hit the ground, he continued. “While I can respect sending spies to infiltrate us, I will not tolerate being spied upon. Your spies may be professionals, but they are not Humans. They do not fit in, and we notice.”
Asaru didn’t even flinch. “How did you learn?”

“All supposed Americans know the history of the American Revolution, yes” Volk asked. “You know, the one where John Adams led the Americans against the British Redcoats?”

Asaru frowned. “That would be assumed.”

“No, they don’t,” Volk said, deadpan. “Because the Americans were led by George Washington, not John Adams. A fact that he,” he nodded down. “Seemed to misremember, but was very sure was correct.” Volk gave an ironic smile. “You could always assume people who don’t know that are idiots, but idiots generally don’t speak two languages, have skin that somehow doesn’t scratch, and can see things us normal Humans can’t.”

In reality, he’d discovered Hadrian was an alien from day one thanks to Elena, who simply told him that he was making micro expressions and expressing body language that was both not Human, and contradictory to what he was sometimes talking about. Keeping any important information from him had been child’s play, and the gaffes like the (true) American Revolution mishap were more of an amusement than anything else.

The other Reapers dragged the body away, leaving just him, Elena, and the being who was supposedly a representative of Asaru. “I will ensure the Zararch do not watch you or your people,” she finally said. “This wouldn’t have been a concern as an ally, but I can assure you it won’t happen.”

Well, if she was lying, it would be easy to figure out. “Glad to hear it. And finally, I want a catalogue of your weapons, equipment, and other assets so I know exactly what I can have to use. I also want operation documents for the larger invasion. If I’m going to help with this, I want to know everything that is relevant.”

“A catalogue can be provided,” Asaru confirmed. “I can only promise to speak to the Battlemaster on the matter of invasion documents. That is beyond my authority.”

He’d expected as much, and to be fair, it was a fairly long shot. But no harm in asking. If the alien hadn’t killed him yet, it was unlikely she would at this point. Now he had one last thing to determine, which was a risk, but considering he was making demands of an alien Collective that, no matter what they said, didn’t need him, he felt one more couldn’t hurt.

Especially since he was almost completely positive.

“Think that’s the major things out of the way,” Volk said, a hand resting on his pistol. “But right now I’m wondering why you’re still lying?”

She gave a laugh. “About what? While you may not consider my word worth much currently, I am owed at least a chance to prove it.”

“Not about that,” Volk said. “You aren’t an ambassador to Asaru. I don’t even think you’re real.”

“I shook your hand,” she reminded him. “While…”

A shot rang out and Asaru’s head snapped back, though the body stayed upright. Volk kept the pistol aimed at the figure, and sure enough, the figure oriented herself, looking amused with a bleeding hole directly in the center of her forehead where he’d shot. “You are very bold, Volikov,” she said quietly, the Russian accented voice gone, replaced with what he assumed was the true voice of Asaru, a layered and melodical one that drew out the beginnings and endings of sentences. “You understand this could end badly for you?”
“Unlikely,” Volk stated as he holstered his pistol. “If you actually had an issue, you would have already killed me.”

“I believe that the right choice was made, contacting you,” she mused, the bullet hole in her forehead vanishing. “I am curious how you noticed.”

“Your mouth didn’t line up with what you were saying sometimes,” Volk said smugly. “And you kept referring to yourself the entire time we talked instead of ‘Asaru’s representative’, who I assumed wouldn’t be having the authority to give me what I asked, or speak with beings like the Battlemaster.” He smirked. “Always pay attention to the little things, Asaru. That I’ve seen what you Ethereals can do also helped, since I assume making an illusion isn’t too difficult.”

“More than you might imagine,” Asaru said dryly. “But I am impressed. Yet you still have not decided what you will do?”

“Assuming you keep your word? I’ll work with you,” Volk stated. “Give me what I need and I’ll give you this continent. Forget our deal and you’ll either never see me again, or you will kill me.”

“Very well,” she agreed. “You will have what you will need, and your requests will be fulfilled to the best of our ability. And concerning your operation in Uruguay, which I am aware of…” she stepped forward. “I believe I can assist with that significantly.”

Volk raised an eyebrow. “Go on then, I’m curious what you can do to help.”

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Abuja – Nigeria

11/9/2017 – 2:18 P.M.

Betos decidedly felt like an outsider at the meal for the talks. All of the Presidents arriving wore rather plain and generic black suits, aside from President Babikr Kone of Chad, who had a pistol openly strapped to his waist, in addition to an oversized knife. He was the one who made her the most uneasy. Tall and thinner than looked healthy, with a near-shaved head and tiny spectacles, he had talked the least so far, and seemed content to listen to the others.

He seemed dangerous.

Cameroon President Atem Esaba on the other hand didn’t seem too bad. He was the heaviest one, and definitely not in shape, nor carried weapons, but was the friendliest by far, even greeting her personally while the others had barely given a nod of acknowledgement. From what she understood, Cameroon was rather diverse as far as African countries went, which seemed to explain why Atem’s skin wasn’t as dark as the other presidents. Unfortunately, he did seem to be one of the few who actually took his responsibility to his citizens seriously, and the more she listened, the less appealing everything else looked. She probably should have gone there first. Atem seemed more trustworthy than Okon at least.

The President of Niger, Ezeudo Ifekristi, Betos wasn’t exactly sure what to think about, he was clearly once military, and was easily the biggest and strongest out of all of them. Since Niger was the source of multiple revolutions over mere decades…it did explain the heavily military-influenced nature of their government. He seemed fairly practical, which was not something Betos was sure was a positive here, but he seemed at least competent. He’d also shown up with the largest military unit, though for what purpose Betos didn’t know. Intimidation didn’t seem likely, nor did Betos believe he was in actual danger. If that were the case, he would have some kind of
weapon on him, which he did not.

Very odd.

The conversation had danced around the actual purpose, with the various leaders making small talk about the state of their countries and ‘allies’. Not much of importance was shared, and Betos interpreted it as a way for all of them to speak for some time to reacquaint themselves, before actually turning to more serious matters.

That, it seemed, was going to happen now.

“We have spent enough time discussing trivial matters,” President Kone finally said, lifting a hand. “President Okon, let us move to the reason you have asked us here.”

“Yes, this matter is of some interest to me,” Ezeudo agreed, lacing his fingers together. “Though consider me skeptical.”

“As am I,” Atem added, setting his fork down. “Though I doubt for the same reasons.”

“The idea is not appealing initially,” Okon admitted. “Though I believe such a measure will be the only way to keep ourselves independent from the ADVENT tyrants. Marshal Betos here has made me aware of ADVENT’s capabilities.”

“You needed her to tell you ADVENT is dangerous?” Ezeudo grunted, shooting a skeptical glance her way. “Anyone who is paying attention is aware of what they can do. They wish genocide among the inferior. The Arabs were the first, and it is only a matter of time before they move to us. This is not new.”

“With respect, Mr. President, that isn’t exactly true,” Betos interrupted, wondering how he’d possibly gotten that idea. “ADVENT, as authoritarian as they are, do not plan for genocide. You have to know how their leadership thinks. Above all else they are practical. Your countries are in danger, but not from racism or some kind of ethnic cleansing. What you should be concerned about is when ADVENT decides that you are a threat, or that you are not doing enough to help them.”

At least she had their attention. “At some point, they are going to come to each of you. They will open with standard negotiations, but if you deviate from those in any way, or refuse what they offer, there is nothing stopping them from simply annexing you like they did with Canada. They did nothing wrong except refuse to help.”

“The West has always ignored us,” Atem stated. “ADVENT will be no different. They do not care for us, nor we for them.”

“Do you really believe that?” Betos demanded coldly. “If it isn’t clear, ADVENT is nothing like what you are used to. They won’t ignore Africa. You have people; you have resources; you have land. ADVENT sees everything it doesn’t directly control as under possible risk of alien control.”

She paused. “The stark reality, Presidents, is that ADVENT cannot be stopped by one country, or even several. China is keeping its distance, and South America will likely capitulate soon as well. The Middle East was pacified in little more than a day. However, one continent would, if not stop them, give them pause.”

Her gaze swept across all of them. “Ultimately, the good news is that everything is secondary to the aliens, and that, more than anything, may be why ADVENT would back off from a united Africa.”
“Yet a united Africa poses a threat to them,” Kone said calmly. “You yourself stated they do not tolerate threats.”

“Immediate threats,” Betos clarified. “They consider China a threat. They considered the Middle East a threat. The reason they are leaving China alone is because they have not interfered with ADVENT and because a pointless Chinese-ADVENT war would drain resources from fighting the aliens. A conflict with a united Africa would be seen in much the same way.”

“Then if we do not interfere, they would leave us alone,” Atem said. “Cameroon has no interest in fighting ADVENT, nor interfering with their nations.”

“As Canada clearly shows,” Okon pointed out. “And even if they would, Marshal Betos has told me that ADVENT would not be above simply replacing the leadership with those friendly to them.”

“How American,” Ezeudo snorted. “But your point is made…Marshal…ADVENT will need to be handled soon. The question now is simply how we will prepare.”

“You fail to take into account that our countries are not prepared for a conflict,” Ezeudo told her, eyes boring into her. “Even now my country is plagued with dissidents; revolutionaries and terrorists.”

“On that we are agreed,” Kone nodded. “The terrorists in my nation are too much of a concern to ignore. Boko Haram is growing, and they may join with the rebels if they are not stopped. Public support is unfortunately growing, largely thanks to western propaganda.”

“Purge them,” Ezeudo stated. “There is no United Nations to manipulate the world into condemning defending our nations as we see fit. And ADVENT will not act, will they Marshal?”

“Unlikely,” Betos shook her head. “The aliens are their concern, and their official policy is not to intervene in foreign nations unless the situation is dire. Killing terrorists won’t be a concern.” She frowned. “How is Boko Haram still around? They were a jihadist group?”

“Once, but they are not nearly as fanatical as they once were,” Kone explained with a sharp grin. “Islam has faded in them like the rest of the world, and so they evolved. Their drive is no longer primarily religion, but nationalism, idealism, and anti-corruption.” He snorted at the last one. “They use the same tactics. Suicide bombers, assassination, killing of loyalists, but intermixed with propaganda and linking with lesser rebel groups to draw sympathy from the West against the ‘corrupt’ leadership.”

“You have a point, Ezeudo,” Okon nodded. “There is no UN to make empty threats, and all of us have been too gentle with these animals. Before we can think of ADVENT, we must bring our nations to peace.” He swept a hand towards Betos. “The Marshal has also provided me with the advanced weaponry used by ADVENT. Rifles and armor that far surpass the second-hand junk the West gives us out of pity. We have our own plants and our own manufacturers. There is no reason to not use these against the dissenters.”

“An excellent bargaining chip,” Atem said. “One you will not gift us unless we agree to your little alliance.”

“No, my skepticism is gone,” Kone suddenly said. “ADVENT has, for the worse, reset the world. The balance of power is abolished and consolidated with them. But we are stagnant. This is more than simply opposing ADVENT, this is the chance to reset our own continent. We gain nothing from remaining divided. The age of the small nations having any power is long past, only the large
powers have any influence.”

He nodded to Betos. “She understands this. If we do nothing, at best we will continue to be irrelevant in the world, and at worst, we will be puppets of the West and our land, people, and resources stripped and used. They have always used us and we had little choice. No. The time for our own sovereignty should arise now.”

“Change cannot be a mere alliance,” Betos warned. “You need leaders. You need authority over the ones involved. Otherwise you will make the same mistakes the United Nations did; a body with no power or purpose but to keep the peace.”

“Indeed,” Ezeudo looked towards Okon. “How many did you invite to this discussion?”

“Out of respect, every nation in the continent,” he answered, lips curled into a small sneer. “Even the Western puppets. Better that some are not here. The inferior should not have a place in this alliance.”

“Without a doubt,” Kone agreed grimly. “Should this be done, it will be done correctly. There are those in government who will oppose this. There is little need to keep the illusion of their power anymore. They must die.”

“I presume the military will follow you?” Okon asked.

“They despise them, and our promise to wipe Boko Haram and crush the rebels will win him over,” Kone dismissed with a wave. “I am less concerned for my soldiers, and more for yours, Esaba.”

“That is unlikely to be needed,” Atem said. “Some of the minority blocs might have issues, but they will fall in line through a party vote. Otherwise they can be replaced. My commander will follow my orders.”

“Good, good,” Kone said with a nod. “Our laws will need to be…unified. Rewritten. Not by the incompetent fools in the congresses, but by us and our soldiers. We know what needs to be done, and they will not have a stomach for it.”

Betos frowned. “And what do you have in mind?”

“We will need resources to rebuild and improve our armies,” Ezeudo grunted. “We control deposits of metals, gold, diamonds. And we have thousands of so-called citizens who are too weak and poor to do anything. It is time we used them.”

“Agreed,” Kone said with a smile. “The mines and factories will need workers.”

Betos blinked. “Forced labor? You are not going to enslave them!”

“Such an overdramatic reaction,” Kone chuckled. “I suppose that can be allowed for a competent woman. No, slavery of citizens is pointless, but they should put their lives to some use before they wither and die like parasites.”

“Slavery is better served as punishment,” Okon nodded. “Something fitting for the rebels and terrorists. Even the mere criminal in the jail would be better used for the state than simply storing them away.”

“While I agree with the concept of putting those in our nations to work, the Marshal has a point,” Atem said. “Taken too far, this could reflect badly on us. No one will care about the terrorists, as
they should not, but as justified as putting our people to work is, it will be opposed.”

“They have nothing now,” Okon reminded them. “They simply want food. Shelter. We give it to them, and we have our workforce. It is the presentation that will be crucial, not the act itself.”

This was getting out of hand quickly, Betos did not like where this was going, but didn’t know how to regulate four Presidents. “You should reevaluate what you are speaking about,” she warned. “Not even ADVENT would go as far as some of this.”

“We are not ADVENT,” Kone said simply. “I do not care what they would, or would not do. This is simply what must be done to protect ourselves, as you have rightfully pointed out. You understand that this does not happen without compromise.”

“I can refuse to help,” she reminded them.

“This is preliminary,” Okon tried reassuring her. “But none of this would happen without you. The expertise you provide will not be ignored, and you will have a guiding hand in the course of designing the laws of this body.”

“We will need a leader of the Army of our soldiers,” Ezeudo said. “You know ADVENT. You know how they work. You have combat experience, and I assume you participated in the War on Terror and hunted down the Palestinian vermin in your own country. I would support your position.”

Betos resisted bristling at the casual dismissal of the Palestinians. “As would I,” Atem agreed. “An especially high honor, for both a non-African and a woman.”

“And as we are the first to join in this union, we will be the leaders,” Okon said to all of them. “There is little need to simply rally around one simply because of tradition. We four will unite this continent and bring a new era of African influence.” He poured some wine in his glass and raised it. “To the formation of the Sovereign African States.”

There was a chorus of affirmatives, and Betos echoed their movements, realizing that this seemed oddly similar to how ADVENT might have formed. Leaders coming together in secret; making alliances; planning radical change; all united under one vision.

And now the vision she had was slowly becoming warped into what could be a dark mirror of ADVENT itself. But she had no choice now. She was committed, and needed to make sure these men didn’t grow more drunk on power than they already were.

But she was in way over her head, and didn’t know what to do to help herself.

This might not have been a good idea.

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Bagé Peacekeeper Outpost – Brazil

11/10/2016 – 5:21 P.M.

Jaylin had never really thought she would be happy to be on guard duty, but here she was. The first attack in Bolivia was far from the last. Attacks had begun happening at seemingly random times, and they were definitely all from the same group. No one knew who they were or who they worked for. Some thought that they were working for Argentina or another South American nation.
Jaylin, and most other people, mostly believed they were just extremely well-equipped terrorists. Although there were a few things that gave her pause as she’d looked over the reports gathered from across the country. As one of the survivors of the attack, and subsequent ones, she’d received a promotion that had put her on a team of trying to figure out exactly who these people were.

It didn’t make sense.

They had yet to capture one, or even kill one, which was not something she’d expect from anything other than a foreign intelligence agency, and these people didn’t fit any known intelligence group. She was even slightly wary of assigning them the ‘terrorist’ label since to date, they hadn’t targeted any civilians, which were the most vulnerable and easy attacks to carry out.

They were missing very basic information. They didn’t know if these people were native, they didn’t know who was supplying them, they didn’t know their goals or motivations. No group had taken credit, and all countries had denied involvement. Jaylin almost wondered if this was the result of some private billionaire who hated ADVENT.

It would explain the equipment and skill, and why no one would take credit. No one really thought China was behind it, since relations between the countries had been thawing to a degree, and more importantly, China wasn’t stupid.

But Jaylin, nor anyone on her team, knew what else to do. She’d requested assistance from Stein, who had personally informed her that ADVENT Intelligence would be deployed to handle this, which Jaylin really thought was for the best. They were definitely handling something they weren’t trained or equipped for. These assassins blended into the forests and knew the area better than they ever could, and the Peacekeeper armor wasn’t strong enough to block an expertly placed bullet.

But they needed ADVENT Intelligence here sooner than later. While everyone was worrying about the aliens, Jaylin was honestly more concerned with just randomly getting shot, as were most Peacekeepers deployed here. Uruguay citizens were also hosting border protests daily, which wasn’t helping matters at all.

Were they trying to make ADVENT mad?

“So you see the latest news?” Leon asked beside her as they stood behind the barricade that quartered off the Peacekeeper base, which gave them a view into the surrounding field. One of her suggestions to make ambushes impossible seemed to be working so far, since the base was in the middle of a place and they’d removed the nearby trees to give them plenty of open space.

Nothing was coming through without someone spotting it, and after the attacks, there was a 24-7 guard with Peacekeepers watching every angle, and even more standing guard over the Armory and vehicles. That was not including the other armed and on-duty Peacekeepers just wandering around and practicing on the mock range.

“Not really,” Jaylin yawned. “Unless you mean the Chancellor saying that the aliens are retreating and how great we all are?”

“Nah, a bit lower key,” Leon explained, tinkering with his rifle. “You remember that traitor? Betos?”

“I do,” Jaylin said, just the name itself beginning to make her irritated. “And also all the other two thousand or so traitors no one ever mentions for some reason.”

Jaylin knew she wasn’t the most empathetic person, but she could actually understand the issues
some people had with ADVENT, which would probably shock some people. It was why she didn’t really mind the deriding words she sometimes heard directed at Saudia and other various figures. Far as she was concerned, that was fine as long as everyone did their jobs.

With that said, under no circumstances was that ever justification for not only deserting, but going to a foreign nation and literally giving up state secrets. Jaylin was personally shocked ADVENT Intelligence had not just dragged her back and handed them to a probably gleeful Stein, but just shot her and be done with it. Literally no one would have complained. It was even worse that this was happening during an invasion.

So for her health, she hoped she’d never hear about the traitor again unless it was about her death or trial. “Well, she’s showed up with several African leaders,” Leon continued. “They announced the formation of the ‘Sovereign African States’ which seemed to be created in response to us. So that’s a thing. Four nations, but it’s drastically changing up the power dynamics there.”

“All thanks to the traitor,” Jaylin muttered, looking off into the setting sunset. “At some point we just need to take the bitch out.”

“Not saying I disagree with you, but there has to be a reason ADVENT hasn’t done anything,” Leon cautioned. “Although honestly, I can’t for the life of me figure out what.”

“Probably- hold up, something’s out there,” Jaylin interrupted, raising her rifle and peering into the distance where there was a figure walking up. Looked like the attire of the terrorists, but it was too far away. “Base Watch, unidentified figure north of my position. Possibly hostile.”

“Understood, sending reinforcements now and putting the base on alert,” the Base Watch, security managers of Peacekeeper bases, answered. “Best not to take chances. Looking through cameras now.”

The figure was definitely one of the terrorists, with the trench coat, hood and rifle. “Definite hostile contact,” she said. “Leon, you see it?”

“Yep,” he confirmed. “What is it doing?”

“Peacekeeper Tanika, can you check your camera,” Base Watch seemed confused. “We’re not seeing anything.”

Jaylin frowned, and saw two, three…“I don’t know what to tell you,” she said slowly. “And we’ve got bigger problems. There’s at least a half dozen coming up now. Opening fire-“

“Behind you!” Leon yelled and she turned around to see one of the terrorists right behind her, rifle raised. Leon fired and hit the being right in the head, but it didn’t even seem to do anything. It was like the slug passed through thin air.

There were more shouts around the base as more of the terrorists had somehow managed to get in, prompting guards to open fire but to similar results. Leon fired a few more shots, but all of them passed through like mist. Now she was thoroughly confused and concerned. There was no way this could happen, and the being was just standing there, arms spread mockingly.

“Sniper!” One of the Peacekeepers yelled as the one he was standing beside just fell down with a bullet hole in his helmet. Jaylin immediately took cover behind the barricade, as the area was filled with even more of the weird illusion-terrorists that were literally appearing and disappearing out of thin air.

“What the hell is this?” Leon asked as the chaos only got worse, as several Peacekeepers were
wounded by friendly fire from their own side from the ones that hadn’t figured out that some of them were illusions. And then it suddenly got much, much stranger. Before her eyes things started disappearing and appearing in different places. The barricade around the base melted before her eyes, and all the parked patrol cars just reversed direction, facing back instead of forward.

“We need to get everyone out of here,” she hissed into her helmet. “They’re doing something to our heads!”

“We’re seeing it too,” the shaky voice of the Base Watch communication said. “Everyone around me just vanished even though I can still hear them. A general retreat is ordered.”

More Peacekeepers were getting picked off from real attacks which Jaylin had no idea where the shots were coming from. She didn’t even know if the patrol car in front of her was real or not. She waved over some other Peacekeepers who were back to back and clearly unsure whether to fire on them or not. “Come on! To the car!”

She wasn’t the only one to have that idea, the rest of the armed Peacekeepers that weren’t getting picked off were either retreating to the vehicles or just running towards the city itself which was several miles away. Jaylin yanked open the door and climbed in, thankful that the keys were already inserted and ready to go.

Gunshots hit the patrol car, and she did her best to ignore them and luckily all of them missed. She drove forward, extremely glad she’d memorized the base and was easily able to follow the tracks from all the previous patrol car departures, even with things like the barricade gone. She was followed by several more cars, and a few explosions in the back indicated that at least a couple had been taken out.

She didn’t pay any attention to what was behind her, only gunning it forward to the city, and praying that whatever had attacked them didn’t follow. Whatever that was, there was no way they were going to be able to kill it.

ADVENT couldn’t ignore this any longer. They’d come under some kind of psionic attack, and either the aliens were helping these terrorists, or they had gotten some of their own.

Both possibilities were terrifying.

But both required a response. Immediately.

Chapter End Notes

To be perfectly clear, nothing in this chapter has anything to do with the Bureau. On another note, I have brought on another beta, Edumesh, who is a reader from the Spacebattles forums and has provided a lot of useful feedback. As with all the people I bring on, I’m positive this will only lead to better chapters going forward.
Crackdown

The Chronicler’s Sanctum, Unknown – Australia

11/11/2016 – 7:17 P.M.

Abby finally allowed herself a brief moment of respite, as she washed her hands of the blood that had gotten on them. Treating the survivors had taken up all her time, where she’d tried her best to set broken bones and bandage the other less severe wounds. None of them had discussed what had happened yet, and right now most of them were in a sedated sleep thanks to the Chronicler keeping an unusually robust medical cabinet.

That done, she walked to the steel fridge and pulled out a bottle of water, not even wondering if she should be doing that in his own home, but she didn’t particularly care right now. Now she could finally look around and see just how strange this place really was.

The Chronicler’s home, for that’s what it had to be, was definitely in some kind of cave. The walls were angled, jagged, and a smooth reflective grey that was cool to the touch. She didn’t see any light sources, but everything was still illuminated enough for her to navigate, but at the same time not overwhelming.

What was maddening was that there seemed to be no pattern to the layout, and she still had yet to figure it out. There were multiple different rooms, all connected via stone corridors, and each room was obviously for one purpose only. There was a kitchen and living room-like area, with top of the line equipment and furniture, and a medical suite with a wide range of drugs and even an operating table which she’d put to use.

But what made no sense was that those were the only two rooms she’d been in, and hadn’t encountered any others yet…despite deliberately taking different routes, either by mistake or to see if there was a different path. That hadn’t become readily apparent until now, but unless this was just a two-room cave with no exit, she was missing something.

“Thank you, agent,” Harper said wearily, also walking up to her after he’d made sure his soldiers were sedated. “There are a few more survivors thanks to you. I wouldn’t have been able to help them enough.” He did look better, now that his own wound had been properly treated and there were bandages around his head and eye, in addition to his other superficial wounds.

He still looked awful.

She shrugged. “It’s my job. Or was anyway. So what happened?”

He sighed and leaned on the counter, looking off into space, arms crossed as he continued in a forced emotionless voice. “We were attacked, as you can guess. First it was Chryssalids, an entire swarm. We’d not seen any indication of loose packs before now, so it caught us by surprise. We lost a few to them, but Chryssalids die fairly easily, and the…infected were easy enough to put down.”

Abby nodded, pursing her lips. “And then that thing showed up.”

It wasn’t a question, and Harper wordlessly nodded. “Cut through everyone like it was nothing. Nothing we did could even scratch it. Bullets were just stopped, and our own gear was pretty much
tissue paper against its sword. Within a blink, a dozen men were dead, and in another few seconds, another dozen. I ordered some of us to retreat and barricade ourselves in the barracks and command centers, thinking maybe enclosing it would give us a better chance.”

Abby recalled the carnage, even within the few she’d explored. “You were up against a psion. A powerful one at that. Nothing you could do. Trust me, I’ve seen how useless we are against psions.”

“Mhmm.” He looked to her. “So…did you know about Lucas? Assuming that’s his name?”

Her lips twitched. “For some time now. He asked me not to say anything. He doesn’t have a name as far as I can tell. Aliases at best. Calls himself ‘the Chronicler’. Make of that what you will.”

Abby interrupted with a humorless chuckle. “He most certainly is. Just not in what you think.”

“So…why?” He asked, despair tingling his voice. “Why isn’t he with XCOM? Or helping us? He can’t actually think we couldn’t use this.”

“He doesn’t like the idea of working for anyone,” Abby said, grimacing as a cool breeze washed over them. “And he’s been helping, I won’t dispute that. Our major victories? You can thank him for that, just helping in the background. I don’t really know his motivations, but he does have a plan.” Her shoulders slumped. “I just have no idea what it is anymore.”

“I guess the question is what happens now,” Harper mused. “Unless he plans to kill us, his secret’s out, and I have no intention of keeping it from ADVENT. We could have done so much more if I’d known we had a psion, and even if he helped us, that doesn’t mean he’s suddenly forgiven.”

Abby pinched the bridge of her nose. For some reason, she didn’t think the Chronicler was going to like that. “Good luck. Want to walk with me? I want to try and map this place out. Maybe find some way to contact XCOM.”

“I’ve got nothing better to do,” he said, pushing himself up, and followed her into the corridor.

“Once we get out, do we just leave?” Abby asked. “With how many have died…”

“I won’t know until I can determine just how much of our network is compromised,” Harper answered. “At the very minimum…we won’t be able to recover for several months. Operations in the other Oceanic nations may be compromised as well. I think-“

He abruptly stopped as they stepped into a markedly different room, this one the largest of all. It was a perfect square, in the center was an elevated metal platform with a clear pool of water underneath. Along each wall were metal consoles of some kind, with screens that extended to the ceiling.

The entire room was filled with ambient blue light, and opposite them were two additional exits on each corner. “This is…interesting…” Abby said slowly, taking a cautious step forward. “I don’t think we’re supposed to be here.”

“Probably not,” Harper agreed, walking to the platform. “But I’m curious now.”

Abby followed him and walked onto the empty platform, looking around once on it and still not
seeing what the point of it was. There was a small console on the corner, with buttons in some kind of language she couldn’t begin to decipher. It was definitely similar to the markings on his armor though. She cautiously reached to it and jerked her hand back as hundreds of micro-wire things sprouted from in between the button, hovering in the air for a few seconds before moving back into the console. “What the fuck?”

“I think we should leave,” Harper said upon seeing that, his eyes darting around the room to the other consoles. “I do not like that.”

They quickly departed and walked into the leftmost corridor, and soon stepped out into a much smaller room with no exit. It was a simple rectangle, with a walkway with black water rushing underneath. At the end was a strange organic….pedestal, and on top of it was one of those psionic artifacts she’d seen the Chronicler use.

She frowned and took a step forward, wondering if it was another, or the same one. The blue globe rippled with an inner light, and the pedestal seemed to be clinging to it. The whole area seemed oddly sacred. “Look at the walls,” Harper said quietly. “What is this?”

She glanced to the walls and could swear the room got colder, and the sound of the water rushing became louder. On the walls were lines and lines of the alien text, over and under diagrams and markings depicting things she didn’t even know how to begin to describe. Some of the outlines looked like the orb at the end of the room, and there were even more shapes and figures. Pyramids, tesseracts, cubes, and things that didn’t seem possible to make.

Abby felt an urge to look at the orb more closely, as it seemed to be glowing brighter on the inside. “Agent, I don’t think we should be here either,” Harper cautioned as she walked forward. “This isn’t right.”

She ignored him, and kept walking forward slowly, and was now able to hear…things, just on the edge of her consciousness. She couldn’t be sure if they were her imagination or not, but it was something like barely perceptible whispers, muttering in alien tongues. The orb grew brighter as she approached, and the closer she got, the more she felt a presence.

It emanated from the blue orb, and it felt old.

“I wouldn’t touch that,” the chiding voice of the Chronicler warned, as he appeared right beside the orb. She suddenly shook her head, as if snapped out of a trance. The orb wasn’t glowing any brighter, and the room was silent.

“What was that?” She demanded.

“Something you would have regretted if you’d gotten closer,” he answered, walking up to her. “In simple terms, you would not be Abigail Gertrude any longer.”

“Hello…Chronicler,” Harper said as he also walked up, his face stony. “Thank you for helping.”

The Chronicler sighed. “You can feel betrayed if you wish; it is earned, but it was necessary. I cannot explain it to either of you, but you’ll have to trust me here.”

“Really?” Harper demanded incredulously. “Trust you? Give me one reason to do that!”

The Chronicler arched one snowy eyebrow. “Because I saved your life, and more importantly, I plan to avenge this attack. I would prefer to leave your mind untampered with, but if you force me, I will take appropriate measures.”
“I might just prefer amnesia to this,” he growled. “It’s nice you want to fight back, but we’ll see what ADVENT wants to do with you once we get in contact.”

“Harper…” Abby warned, seeing the Chronicler smile.

“Amnesia is a simple and unnecessary solution,” he said dismissively. “Think carefully, Harper. If I’d been so obviously helping you this whole time, not only would the Ethereals have figured out what was happening faster, it’s unlikely any of us would be here now. Furthermore, you have a poor understanding of psionics if you think I’m just going to risk someone in your state exposing me preemptively. Now.” He raised a finger.

“Everyone needs to think calmly and rationally about this. The alien retreated after I dealt severe injuries to her multiple times, and I was unable to kill her. Unfortunate, but she can be dealt with in the future. The Ethereals now know there is a psion here, which poses a problem for you.”

“And I assume you have a solution?” Abby asked.

“Yes,” he nodded. “You return to XCOM, and let me fight the war here. I assure you I can do a much better job, and keep at least a few Ethereals focused on me, while making sure they aren’t turning their power on ADVENT. The Resistance here was always going to be defeated, but I can keep the aliens occupied for as long as needed. Now, if you doubt me, I can prove it.”

Harper still looked angry, but his features had relaxed. “How?”

The Chronicler smiled. “I am going to attack Sydney.”

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ADVENT Command Center – Switzerland

11/11/2016 – 10:14 A.M.

The ornate and plush room always seemed like a waste whenever Saudia actually looked at it, especially when anytime she was in here, she was either staring at the TV or sitting around the table. Not actually using the admittedly nice and comfortable furniture. But during times like this, everything just faded into the background as the smoldering anger at what she was watching took precedence.

“I thought,” she said very slowly and quietly. “Luana was handled.”

The TV screen blasted a much, much different headline.

ADVENT INVADES URUGUAY. GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN TAKEN INTO CUSTODY.

Stein stood beside her, wearing simple military fatigues with her hair pulled back into a ponytail. She was clearly furious, which she only expressed through her stony face that Saudia had come to realize was something she only did when she was preparing to execute someone. Truthfully, Saudia was tempted to bring down the full might of the ADVENT justice system upon Luana. She’d certainly earned it.

However, justice would be determined by Stein. Still, this was unacceptable.

“I had thought I had made myself clear,” Stein answered, just as slowly. “She seemed to understand as well. I had thought the matter resolved. I was clearly mistaken. She is a problem now, and one I am going to remove.”
“Do it,” Saudia stated immediately. “I want this situation contained immediately. In the meantime, I need to address this myself. What are you planning?”

“Commander Christiaens just countermanded all of her orders, and has stripped her of her rank,” Stein said. “On the other hand, Luana is ignoring incoming communications from us, but her subordinates are keeping us informed. Director Falka is compiling a list of evidence.”

“Idiot.” Saudia shook her head. “What was she thinking?”

“She’s a warmonger,” Stein noted emotionlessly. “She’ll take any excuse. The Peacekeeper bases being attacked was the only thing she needed, despite the fact that there is no evidence that Uruguay is behind it. The survivors are being interrogated now, and what I’m hearing right now is that there is more evidence that the aliens are behind it than Uruguay.”

“Just what we needed,” Saudia scowled. “The media is already having a field day. We need to make a strong statement of our own.”

“She has done enough to constitute treason,” Stein stated. “She will be arrested, tried, and executed as an enemy of the state. Leave the administration of justice to me, Chancellor. We will need a new leader for Brazil in the meantime.”

“Just make sure you invite the media when you arrest her,” Saudia said. “And what is the status of Uruguay now?”

“All our forces were ordered back, but not before they inflicted severe casualties on both Uruguayan military and civilian targets,” Stein answered. “The Oversight Division will conduct a review, but I sincerely doubt that the fault lies with the soldiers. They were following the orders of an unstable woman we should have dealt with long ago.”

“Great,” Saudia muttered, turning on her heel to face Stein directly. “Find out everyone who signed off on this and administer justice. Everyone. I don’t want just Luana, but her staff as well. Someone didn’t follow protocol, and there will be very public consequences. We do not need a PR disaster right now.”

“This is already a PR disaster, Chancellor,” Stein pointed out. “We just need to mitigate the damage. I would suggest at minimum reparations for the families who lost members, and direct assistance in whatever they want. Make out a damn blank check to their government.”

“I’ll get it done,” Saudia promised, not looking forward to any of this. “The Commander is not going to be happy.”

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Barracks, the Praesidium - Classified

11/11/2016 – 10:47 A.M.

It was always an interesting day to wake up and hear that ADVENT had invaded another country out of nowhere. Oliver and a few other XCOM soldiers were seated around one of the Barracks TVs, watching the news silently. “While ADVENT has released a statement calling the invasion a ‘rogue and unsanctioned operation’, it unfortunately does not erase the fact that the unprovoked attacks have left thousands of soldiers dead, and caused hundreds of civilian casualties. ADVENT has promised that the ones responsible will be punished, but at this point, there is some question as to if it will be enough.”
Oliver almost rolled his eyes at that. News anchors annoyed him with their overdramatic speech, as if anyone rational would be thinking that right now. It would clearly have to be enough, because ADVENT certainly couldn’t bring people back from the dead. What ADVENT was going to do would certainly be important, but he knew at best this would be viewed as a mistake, and very little would actually change. It wasn’t as though nations were going to leave ADVENT. Worse, despite it being unprovoked, he was not unaware that there was a vocal group that advocated the hostile takeover regardless of justification, or lack thereof.

“Do they really not think Luana’s behind this?” Terli Caixeta, one of the actual Brazilian soldiers asked. “Is it really that difficult to figure out?”

“She hasn’t said anything, I think,” Anna said slowly, shaking her head. “I’d think right now she’s more concerned about convincing Stein not to arrest her.”

“Please,” Terli wrinkled his nose. “Marshal Luana would think she is completely justified in this. She’s a good leader, but you don’t put her in charge of a country because then she does stuff like this.”

“I really want to know how this even happened in the first place,” Sierra interjected. “Aren’t there specific protocols to make sure something like this doesn’t happen?”

“Supposedly,” Oliver said, still watching the screen but not really listening. “The thing is we have no idea what actually happened. The only thing we know so far is that there were several large attacks on Peacekeeper outposts, and the next day Uruguay was invaded.”

“And now a bunch of people died for nothing,” Sierra said sourly. “If it were actually serious, ADVENT wouldn’t have pulled out literally hours later. But when your military is literally unkillable compared to whatever the hell Uruguay has, a few hours is all you need to completely decimate them.”

“I guess we’ll see what they do,” Anna shrugged. “Someone is probably getting executed for this. Invasions don’t happen without a lot of approval.”

“I’ll be impressed if ADVENT does something beyond saying they’re sorry,” Sierra grunted, looking back to the TV screen. “Or paying the country with a few million Alloys. If they want to actually be different from the controlling totalitarians they enjoy being, they need to punish everyone involved.”

Anna’s lips curled into a smile. “Stein is a stone-hearted bitch, but this is the kind of stuff she loves. Say what you will about her, she won’t leave a criminal unpunished. I’ll say she’ll likely be willing to go against the Chancellor if needed.”

“We’ll see,” Sierra said skeptically. “I don’t really trust ADVENT to do the right thing here.”

“You know, all of this is distracting us from the more important question,” Terli said suddenly. “If Uruguay didn’t attack those Peacekeeper outposts…who did?”

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ADVENT Peacekeeper Compound, Brasília - Brazil

11/11/2016 – 11:02 A.M.

Jaylin didn’t have a specific clue as to what was going on at the moment. Upon reporting the attack, she’d been transported to the Brazilian capital and a few hours later transferred to the main
Peacekeeper Compound, which was far more impressive and expansive than the ones she’d been in for the past few months.

Something was clearly happening beyond the attack, as there were an abundance of armed Peacekeepers, Riot Control, and she’d even seen some of the SSR speaking with ranking officers. If the SSR was involved…well, maybe the Peacekeepers were going to take the threat seriously. They needed to at this stage.

She’d been provided food, clothes, and other amenities, even if she wasn’t allowed anywhere unsupervised. The initial medical check had likely been more to check if she was mentally sound… which she was as much as she could be. The whole event felt like a bad dream, but she knew it was very much real. They hadn’t told her the casualties, but she imagined it was bad. The armor cam would probably tell the story better than she could.

Right now she was just sitting in an interrogation room in a wooden chair, facing one-way glass, and her arms resting on the wooden table. The security camera looked down at her from the corner, and she just stared up at it, waiting for something to happen. Finally the door creaked open and Jaylin straightened up, then shot to her feet when she saw who it was.

“Chief Stein!” What was actually happening? “How can I help-“

“Take a seat, Officer,” Stein interrupted sternly, her grey eyes unblinking as she stared at Jaylin with the detached gaze that was curiously intimidating. Stein was surprisingly fully armored, rifle strapped to her back, and pistol and baton on her hip. The scarred gray armor was polished to dimly reflect the harsh light from the ceiling. She didn’t have her helmet, but Jaylin thought she would get that when she needed it.

Her face was completely expressionless, and while Jaylin didn’t know her well, she knew the more collected Stein was, the greater chance that something…important…was going to happen. Or brutal. No one had forgotten how she’d put down that riot. Jaylin complied and took a seat, nervous despite knowing she’d done nothing wrong. But Stein was a woman whose reputation and presence instilled at least some level of fear.

“You were one of the few to survive the attack on the Bagé Outpost,” Stein stated as she took a seat opposite Jaylin, resting her gauntleted hands on the table. “Explain what happened.”

Jaylin swallowed and gave a nod. “Yes. Around five in the evening, I was on watch and spotted several approaching figures. The terrorists we’ve been having trouble with. I informed the Base Watch, who questioned what I saw even though they sent reinforcements.”

“Why?”

“It wasn’t showing up on their cameras I guess,” Jaylin explained. “Then moments later we were suddenly surrounded by the terrorists who’d somehow gotten into the base. Things deteriorated after that, and the shooting started. That’s when things got…strange.”

“I’ve looked at the armor footage from the survivors, including yours,” Stein said. “The reality paints a much different picture. There were several terrorists, but not the dozens both you and others claimed. It also doesn’t account for the strange actions taken, such as hiding behind non-existent cover, or claiming to see things that are, or are not there.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Jaylin defended. “That is what I saw. I don’t know how else to explain it. I knew something was wrong, but I didn’t know what was going on. Base Watch was compromised or dead, so I found who I could and retreated. Whatever they were doing…it
Stein gave a single nod. “How familiar are you with psionics?”

Jaylin frowned. “Not especially, I know some things it can do. That alien in Japan was one, yes? Aren’t some XCOM soldier’s psions as well? Telekinetics, mind control and shields, right?”

Stein’s lips twitched in…amusement? “Yes…your story doesn’t make sense, but it correlates to other survivors, and fully fits the description of a psionic attack. These terrorists, they have never utilized psionics before?”

“No,” Jaylin shook her head. “Attacks have strictly been sabotage, assassination, and small-scale attacks. If they had psions, I would have expected them to use them before now.”

“I agree,” Stein laced her fingers together. “Which means these terrorists have somehow figured out how to awaken psions, or they are receiving alien support. Have you recovered or reported anything that indicates this?”

Jaylin shook her head once more. “No. But we have yet to capture one alive, or even recover intact gear. But they’ve never used plasma or laser weapons, nor special grenades. Their attire also doesn’t match alien clothing or armor. If they’re getting help from the aliens, it must be a recent development.”

“Troubling,” Stein looked her in the eyes. “Do you know if these terrorists are connected to any foreign power aside from the aliens?”

“If they are, we haven’t found any connection,” Jaylin confirmed. “We don’t even have names, structure, or actual specs on what they use, much less motivations or goals. Honestly, it’s more likely this is a privately funded group instead of one backed by a government. Quite possible a rogue intelligence or special forces agency.” Jaylin paused and risked continuing. “Frankly, Chief Stein, this is not something we are equipped to solve. This is something more for ADVENT Intelligence to investigate. All we can do is react and try to extrapolate from there. I’ve requested assistance before.”

“I’m aware,” Stein acknowledged. “However, there have been other matters we needed to focus on. However, this has now become a larger threat. You are certain it was only these terrorists who attacked, possibly with alien support?”

Jaylin frowned. “I don’t think we have enough information to say either way but…yes. At the very minimum it was the terrorists, and no one else. We don’t have enough to accuse anyone if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“A smart officer who doesn’t jump to conclusions,” Stein commented wryly. “Perhaps you should be in charge of Brazil. No matter. The situation has deteriorated since you arrived and we’ve attempted to sort out the mess. Your outpost was not the only one that was attacked. There were two others of equal size and along the border. All had survivors, and reported roughly the same thing you did.”

Jaylin didn’t know if the fact that she wasn’t losing her mind was a good or bad thing. “Not good,” she muttered. “What’s our response going to be? And for me-“

“Director Falka is beginning an operation to find and kill these terrorists,” Stein interrupted. “This will be done with Peacekeeper and SSR support, and as you are the highest ranking survivor, with experience on these terrorists, you will be working with them. It is likely XCOM is also going to be
involved, since this will likely have an alien component. I trust you are fine with this?"

It wasn’t as though she had a choice, but she was *definitely* fine with it. “Yes sir. My partner was also a survivor and has similar experience-“

“Yes, he can stay on with you,” Stein preemptively approved blandly. “However, there is more you need to know. After you reported the attack, and more information came in, Marshal Luana took it upon herself to invade Uruguay in retaliation, and took the government into custody and destroyed much of their military.”

Jaylin straightened further and blinked in shock. “What? Did they actually find out-“

“No.” Stein stated flatly, almost hissing. “Marshal Luana simply acted in her own interest and stupidity, and in doing so, has created a major international incident. We have pulled out since then, but Luana has overstepped her bounds for the last time. We’ve been more lenient than we should have, and in a short time we are going to arrest her and place the entirety of the Brazilian Legion Military Cabinet under the control of the Oversight Division. The Chancellor wants this fixed personally, and Luana will be arrested, tried, and executed for insubordination and treason.”

She stood. “Suit up, you’re going to participate in this operation. I anticipate we’re going to need some protection from the crowds and media.”

Jaylin stood numbly as Stein left the room without saying anything else, and moved to follow.

This day had certainly gotten a lot more interesting.

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*Executive Tower, Montevideo - Uruguay*

11/11/2016 – 11:11 A.M.

Saudia believed that it would be prudent to speed up Gateway development, since it would certainly cut down on the hectic flights and trips when crises arose. After giving her brief update to the media, now she needed to meet with the Uruguayan government, who thankfully were all still alive, if a bit shaken.

She’d look at the reception to her speech once this was done, as she hadn’t had time to pay attention to the immediate response while she brought herself up to speed on the situation. Stein was getting ready to arrest Luana, and in the meantime, she’d personally try and smooth over diplomatic relations with Uruguay.

Kyong had assured her that he was perfectly capable of doing the same thing, but she had been able to convince him the optics would be much better if she directly participated herself. Her small entourage consisted of Kyong, Commander Christiaens, and the Chief Overseer Kevin Watkins. Saudia figured that since the Oversight Division was going to be getting their first major investigation, that it would be good to have him there to assure the President that this wouldn’t happen again.

The political response to the event had definitely been bad. Argentina and Chile had announced an alliance against ADVENT aggression, for all the good it would do them. The EU had universally condemned the attack, and for once public support was on their side. Even China felt bold enough to release a statement criticizing the standards that led to this, without necessarily condemning them.
The biggest problem was going to be the new SAS, who were almost certainly going to gain a few more nations into their little empire. Every time until now an operation of this scale and consequences had been justified, and it only took one mistake for people’s faith to be shaken, which was not what they needed, and was going to be a blow to morale especially in the light of the victory in America.

Not unless they fixed this fast.

The Executive Tower of Uruguay was rather plain as far as government buildings went, but was nonetheless the seat of executive power in the country, and where President Luis Carvallo had agreed to meet them. The older and gaunt man looked suitably exhausted, even as he had agreed to hold this conversation. He looked fine otherwise, and his wispy grey hair was perfectly in place, but she didn’t fail to notice his nervous glances to her personal guard that accompanied her, and had visibly been relieved when they’d left.

In an ordinary office building, Saudia and her entourage sat at a thick wooden table, and on the other side were the President and some members of the Uruguay General Assembly, who were eyeing them with a mixture of suspicion and fear, which was admittedly for good reason. Once the door closed and both groups were alone, she decided to speak.

“Mr. President, I said this over our call, but I will repeat it again to apologize for the incident,” she said, keeping her voice clear and controlled. “This should not have happened, and it will not again. I promised to determine those responsible and suitably punish them, in addition to reparations for our error.”

“I will add my own apology,” Commander Laura added earnestly. “This was caused by one of my subordinates, who we have been too lenient to, and some of the blame for this falls on me.”

“We cannot bring back your citizens and loved ones, nor replenish your numbers,” Kyong added. “But there are things we can do to help your nation rebuild and heal. That is what we are here to discuss. This was our error, and we expect nothing in return for this other than a wish for you to understand this was simply a mistake, and one we will fix.”

“Words are nothing,” the woman to the President’s right spat, who Saudia recalled as Isabella Nores, President of the Chamber of Representatives. “You say you will fix this. How?”

“No, I want to know what you will do to the ones who invaded our country,” Juan Gaos, President of the Senate Chambers interrupted. “The soldiers who came and slaughtered our people?”

“The soldiers were following orders,” Laura answered. “They had no reason to believe the orders they were receiving were illegitimate. Punishing them will achieve nothing, and they already feel guilty for their role in this. I’m sure that your military advisors would say the same thing—“

“Not all of us are warmongering imperialists,” Isabella sneered. “We don’t make a habit of invading countries, and our soldiers are trained not to follow illegitimate orders. Invasion is one of them. But I suppose it’s just something so familiar none of your soldiers question it!”

“We do it when justified, and we will not apologize for it,” Saudia cut off Laura before she could respond, lifting a hand. “This is a case where it was not. We won’t punish soldiers who followed their orders as expected. However, this was a failure through multiple chains of command, of those who did know better. That is what we can promise to fix.”

“Indeed,” Kevin continued, directing their attention to him. “You are likely not familiar with me, so to introduce myself, I am Chief Overseer Keith Watkins, of the ADVENT Oversight Division.
My job entails ensuring that our standards are kept, and issues within ADVENT are discovered, investigated, and resolved.”

“With all due respect, I believe you do not have a good track record here,” President Carvallo said. “This was a systematic failure. One you failed to prevent.”

“To an extent,” Keith said neutrally, knowing full well he had recommended to Saudia before that Luana was not exactly reliable and should be replaced, but at least he’d kept that to himself. “Marshal Luana had technically not violated guidelines before now, which was why she retained her control. I am already working with the Congress of Nations to introduce legislation to refine the qualifications for dismissal. But ultimately, all we can do is work to improve in the future.”

He laced his fingers together, taking a brief moment to gather his thoughts. Saudia watched with approval as the former FBI Director held their rapt attention. He certainly could command focus, which was certainly essential in his new position. “As you are already aware, Former Marshal Luana Russo will be arrested within hours by Chief Stein, and she will be tried and executed for insubordination and treason. My operation will consist of the thorough interrogation and investigation of the entirety of the Brazilian Legion Military Cabinet, and however far down this goes. Given the seriousness of the situation, I expect the investigation to conclude within one month, and all those who are arrested will be tried, convicted, and sentenced to somewhere between five years, or executed. It is impossible to fully tell this early in the investigation.”

All members of the Uruguayan party looked surprised at his words. “While I can’t prove that this will achieve the results I promise,” Keith continued. “I will do my best to prove that I fully intend to find and punish those who have smeared our image and Directive we uphold. If you wish, I will keep the Uruguayan Government updated in every step of our investigation. While we will punish Former Marshal Russo ourselves, we are willing to negotiate the extradition of anyone we uncover during this investigation.”

“That is…generous,” President Carvallo said slowly. “You make very bold promises. I hope you will follow through on them. Chief Overseer, we certainly do wish to be informed of the results of your investigation.”

“Certainly,” Keith inclined his head. “Simply direct me to your point of contact, and I will personally ensure they receive it. With that said, understand that what they and you will receive is confidential and is not to be shared outside of those it is designated to. We take breaches seriously, and any leaks will result in the loss of your access.”

“That is fair,” President Carvallo nodded slowly. “Now what of the families of those you killed?”

“That is largely dependent on you,” Kyong said earnestly. “At the moment, we are willing to pay each family who lost someone in our attack nine and a half million pesos. The exact amounts can of course be adjusted depending on family size and situation. In addition, we are also willing to pay off all debts and schooling for their children, should that be applicable.”

That definitely shocked them. “That is nearly half a million US dollars,” Isabella said in amazement. “How can you afford that?”

“We control a majority of the world economy, in addition to our own currency,” Saudia answered. “While it certainly isn’t a substitute for the loss of a loved one, we can at least ensure that their family no longer has to fear monetary troubles. Do not concern yourselves with our financial situation.”

In terms of monetary value, this was not nearly as much as they were thinking it was. The amount
of alloys ADVENT had recovered from the most recent battles had already paid for this ten times over. Not to mention their economy was nowhere near what would be considered healthy, making the investment not as large as it would be otherwise.

“In addition to the military damages sustained, we can of course assist in that as well,” Laura said. “We are willing to replace all physical assets with the highest quality weapons and armor of our own. We can’t replace your soldiers, but we can make the ones you have left equal to our own. Provide us with the equipment lost, and we will match it exactly.”

“This, of course, does come with a slight caveat,” Kyong said with a smile. “We don’t provide this easily, so we expect you to ensure that these weapons do not fall into foreign hands. What we provide you is for Uruguay – and only for Uruguay. We expect you to keep our technology out of foreign hands, or we will be forced to reevaluate any deal reached. Is this a fair compromise?”

The three Uruguayans exchanged glances, some in mild shock and amazement. Good, that meant they were likely not going to make the political situation worse. “It appears so,” Juan said with a slow nod. “Once we reestablish our military structure and appoint replacements…we can discuss details.”

“Excellent,” Laura nodded. “Finally, this is simply an offer should the future require it. The aliens are a clear and present threat, even if it is not so apparent here. Your own opinions are not important. With that said, if Uruguay is under the threat of a foreign or alien power, ADVENT will be willing to provide military assistance to your country. In light of what has happened, I would understand if you do not trust us, but nonetheless, the offer will remain open should you request it.”

“Chancellor,” President Carvallo said, leaning forward. “What do you want from us? You would not do all of this for no reason, and despite what your people did, this is what I can only describe as overcorrection. No one acts out of altruism or compassion.”

“The reason is simple, Mr. President,” Saudia said, also leaning forward. “We pride ourselves on professionalism and legality. We do not act outside the law. We do what is necessary, nothing more. Mistakes like this go against our vision for Humanity, and are insulting to everyone who wears the armor and bears the flag. If we are to sustain ourselves and unite our species, we must be held to a higher standard.”

She motioned to the table. “Change will not come unless forced. People like Luana are no longer acceptable in positions of power. Each and every one of them must be systemically purged and removed, and only the ones who can responsibly wield power should do so. I do not care about money. I do not care about repayment. A mistake was made, and we will need to fix it.”

Saudia made sure to look him in the eye. “If you really believe some repayment is due, acknowledge that we have fixed our mistake. Tell the world the truth, not what the media is turning it into. There is certainly a political element to our actions, but we did not need to respond in the first place. The minimum would have kept people quiet. But again, Mr. President, if we are to unite our species, we must hold to a higher standard, and that starts from within.”

“Well said, Chancellor,” Kevin agreed with an approving nod. “I am aware of the reputation organizations like mine have, where we’re simply only for show and the abuses of power go unchecked. But we are different, ADVENT is different. Now is the time we need to prove it to not just your country, but the world itself.”

President Carvallo nodded, and stood. “For now, Chancellor, you have convinced me with your words. I hope your actions follow suit soon, but for now it is enough. Your apology is accepted, and there is no doubt a population to address. I would ask that you join me in this.”
“Another speech before the media,” Saudia cracked a smile. “I would welcome the opportunity.”

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Situation Room, the Praesidium - Classified

11/11/2016 – 2:16 P.M.

While the ADVENT invasion was certainly taking up the majority of global attention, the Commander was more and more convinced that the larger problem was the fact that three Peacekeeper Outposts had been destroyed, and the reports explaining what had happened indicated a very sudden and suspicious shift in how the war was going to be conducted.

“What do you think?” The Commander asked Aegis who stood with a tablet in his hand as he read the report the rest of them had. Patricia stood in the background, with Zhang beside her.

“Psionic attack likely,” Aegis mused. “Unlikely to be confirmed without a telepathic examination. But this is, if I had to label it, an attack by Nebulan. This is the kind of work she specializes in. Making beings see things that are, and are not there; spreading chaos and confusion; never showing herself. If she is involved, then that is bad.”

“Aside from the obvious, how is this worse?” Patricia asked. “At some point we knew it was likely either her or Macula were going to become involved.”

“Because that means the Battlemaster has changed his strategy,” Aegis explained. “He’s no longer relying on blunt force. These terrorists that ADVENT has been fighting in South America, they have likely been subverted by her. They will become more advanced, and therefore, more dangerous. She will be sure not to leave physical evidence, and worse, directly assist in combat.”

“The bigger concern is when they start targeting nations,” Zhang pointed out. “They can turn them against each other; keep us fighting each other instead of the Collective.”

“Unlikely,” the Commander shook his head. “ADVENT Intelligence is watching all governments closely. The moment they start getting the merest hint of alien corruption, the country will be annexed. Taking control of various terrorist groups and using them gives them plausible deniability, and ultimately makes them easier to operate in compared to countries controlled by ADVENT.”

“Indeed,” Aegis stated. “However, Nebulan prefers working in smaller groups. She doesn’t utilize mind control maliciously, which indicates to me that she is not dominating these Humans, and instead working with them. Perhaps they have been assimilated into the Phantom Division.”

“Which is?” Patricia asked, frowning.

“Nebulan’s personal army,” Aegis answered. “Many Ethereals have them, and I suspect by the end, Humanity will fight each one. I unfortunately know little of it, as she kept much of it secret, as with most Ethereals, but I suspect it is largely composed of former Zararch agents and other modified Vitakara. She does not like Andromedons or Sectoids, and considers Mutons crude.”

“Former Zararch?” Zhang arched an eyebrow. “Are you sure you don’t mean ‘transferred’?”

“That would be more accurate,” Aegis corrected. “The point is that Nebulan does not rely on mind control to maintain her subordinates’ loyalty, which raises questions as to how and why these Human terrorists are working with her. She would not hide herself from them.”
“Assuming this is her,” Patricia added. “Things like making entire buildings vanish and things just appear…Quisilia could likely do that.”

“Quisilia is more subtle,” Aegis dismissed. “If he wanted to attack, none would have survived.”

“Subtle,” Patricia muttered. “Even as he posts memes on Twitter.”

“Let’s assume we’re dealing with Nebulan here,” the Commander brought the conversation back on topic. “If she’s acting on her own, we need to start becoming involved. Once ADVENT sorts out this business with Uruguay, they will turn their attention to these terrorists. Zhang, I want you to prepare several agents for investigation.”

“That is not wise yet,” Aegis cautioned. “If you prepare agents, they will simply die. At minimum you need psions who can resist her illusions. It would be preferable if either cybernetic or genetic alterations were developed to negate her, otherwise you are throwing agents away.”

“Good point,” the Commander nodded. “Do you have any telepathic agents you can use?”

“Not here currently,” Zhang shook his head. “I don’t have many psionic agents to begin with. We need to make ADVENT aware what we’re dealing with here, otherwise they’ll face as much trouble as us.”

“The PRIEST Program is deploying now,” the Commander reminded him. “I’m sure they’ll be able to spare one or two telepaths to assist. And there is the Human element to deal with, which they don’t need psionics for.”

“I would not expect Nebulan to forget that,” Aegis warned. “The Phantom Division is extremely dangerous, and I do not know just what she has done to them. Psions they may not be, but any in the personal army of an Ethereal are far more dangerous than the standard alien.”

“I want to think you mentioned these personal Ethereal armies,” Patricia muttered. “But I somehow think that slipped your mind.”

“If it did, I did not intend it,” Aegis said, not sounding too apologetic. “If I didn’t mention it, it was likely because I really don’t know much about them, nor was it relevant.”

“Perhaps our new Andromedon allies could assist on this,” Zhang pondered, rubbing his chin. “I expect they have their own idea on how to counter psionics.”

“It is unlikely,” Aegis dismissed. “They are unlikely to stop something they cannot use themselves.”

“I’ll make that assessment for myself,” the Commander said dryly. “In the meantime, I should check in with Saudia and see how she’s resolved the Uruguayan situation.”

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*Unknown Location – Argentina*

*11/11/2016 – 3:28 P.M.*

Volk was impressed at just how effective the aliens were at constructing entire bases out of practically nothing. He had realized early on that these were not the standard aliens he was dealing with. To begin with, every single UFO that had arrived had been visibly cloaked, and Asaru had assured him that she wasn’t using any telepathy, as that would be pointless.
He wasn’t sure he believed that, but it was minor at worst.

The UFOs ranged between large transports, and small troop carriers. They weren’t the standard UFOs either, the shiny circular ones. They were distinctive, and he suspected Ethereal. The transports reminded him of barges. Black rectangles that had nothing but space and a small bridge. The troop transports were also similarly shaped, but they were more angular, and didn’t…land.

They were more akin to dropships, flaps opened up on the underside and two dozen Vitakara at a time jumped down onto the ground. Volk wasn’t a xenobiologist, but he was fairly sure that dropping from twenty or more feet would cause broken legs, but none of the aliens had even so much as acknowledged the fall.

Considering XCOM soldiers could do unnatural stuff like that, he supposed it wasn’t surprising that the aliens could do that as well. As for the aliens themselves…they were strange. He wasn’t sure if there really was something off about them, or because he’d really not interacted with any before.

All of them were the one race of Vitakara; Vitakarians if he remembered. The ones that looked oddly like Humans. They were at various heights and body types, both male and female, but all of them seemed to boast a strength that was comparable to a small forklift. That they didn’t have machinery didn’t seem to deter them as they worked and handled alloy beams and sheets with almost no trouble.

The other odd thing was that their eyes were noticeably altered. He knew that Vitakarian eyes glowed blue for some reason. These glowed varying shades of purple, that only got darker as the sun set. None of them wore armor, only some kind of form-fitting grey jumpsuit that lacked any sort of identifying mark or insignia.

And he had stood there initially, not sure what to do until he saw some of the Vitakarians working on laying out a room, following a holographic projector. He could definitely follow directions, so he’d instructed his people to help the aliens. If they were going to be working with them, they might as well get to know them some.

Luckily the aliens could speak English, and figuring out that his strength was inferior to their own, let him do most of the precision work with tools that he could only describe as flash-welders and a cement gun. It had taken a few hours, but they’d completed the room, roof and all, and were now taking a short break, and he decided to see just how it would turn out.

It was flat, and was definitely going to take up the majority of the clearing. All one story, and frankly boring and uninspired for the most part, which he didn’t care about. Practicality was king as far as he was concerned. But the skeleton was complete, and all it lacked now were internal systems. Or at least he thought so, he had no idea what they were planning for this.

“Impressive, isn’t it,” a deep voice interjected, and Volk turned to see quite possibly the largest Vitakarian he’d ever encountered.

Large didn’t quite do it justice either. The Vitakarian towered over him, standing a minimum of eight feet, and with the obvious strength of a bodybuilder on steroids. He wore the grey jumpsuit the rest of the aliens wore, and his skin was a dark grey, approaching a shade of black. The most noticeable feature was his face, or more specifically, his eyes which were not even a blue or purple, but a blazing and intense red.

His smile was quite off-putting as a result.
Volk eyed him warily. “You build fast.”

“If pressed, we can,” he agreed. “I am Zar’joreal’mattis, I believe we spoke before when you contacted us.”

Ah, now Volk recognized the voice. Although the hologram had failed to convey some obvious physical features. “Joreal then, right?” Volk asked. “If I remember, you use the middle name.”

“Exactly,” Joreal confirmed, still with the smile. “A pleasure to meet you, Asaru wouldn’t work with you if she wasn’t confident in your skills.” He extended a hand, which Volk took after some brief initial surprise. His own hand was dwarfed in the much larger alien one.

“I suppose you would know more than I do,” Volk said. “No offense intended to her, but I’m innately skeptical of those who literally promise the world.”

“Which is fair,” Joreal acknowledged. “But I can affirm everything she said to you. She does not lie to her allies and friends.”

“Awfully quick to just accept us,” Volk noted. “I don’t disapprove, but I’d have expected some measure of alien superiority. Your friend in Japan for example.”

Joreal laughed. “Caelior is, to borrow some of your words, a little arrogant bitch. No one with any kind of authority gives him serious consideration. He is powerful, but his power is simply a tool those smarter than him use. If we were actual alien supremacists, it would make our Collective a little difficult to form, wouldn’t you say?”

A friendly alien, something of a surprise. “Interesting. Although for a supposedly friendly collective, your diplomatic skills are apparently…” he raised an eyebrow. “Lacking. Making an enemy of an entire species speaks to some mismanagement at best.”

The alien gave him a thin smile. “I believe Asaru has given…reasons…for that mistake. But don’t think that all aliens are quite like Caelior. You probably wouldn’t want ADVENT for example, to punish entire countries for the actions of a few, to put this into perspective.”

“So how much do you actually know?” Volk asked curiously. “What do you even know of our reasons for fighting ADVENT?”

“More than you probably think,” Joreal answered. “I prefer to do my own research before coming, which incidentally, was a somewhat condensed version of your species history. Your kind really are fascinating, even compared to others in the Collective.” He smiled. “However, for your original question, you despise authoritarian governments, of which ADVENT is one. But more than that, you hate the abuse of power, which is why you don’t just fight ADVENT. An admirable goal.”

“Glad you understand that,” Volk said with a nod. “Although I’m surprised you find us more interesting than the other aliens, if I understood correctly.”

“You would not be if you knew the history of the others,” Joreal said dismissively. “Andromedons have nothing in their history but war, which honestly gets old after the first three millennia, and Sectoid history is so dry aside from one or two fascinating events. Even our own history is mundane, and only becomes interesting once we unified.” He glanced up contemplatively. “Although, that of the Oyariah and Sar’Manda is an exception. And some parts of the early Borelians.”

“What of the Ethereals?” Volk asked.
“I’m afraid Asaru has yet to divulge the secrets of the old Ethereal Empire,” Joreal admitted. “It is unlikely she will for some time.”

Well, even that was interesting. So the Ethereals had an Empire, which implied that they didn’t any longer. Which in turn implied that something had destroyed it. Or perhaps they had destroyed themselves?

An interesting revelation nonetheless. “So is this your first time on Earth?”

“No,” he answered knowingly. “I’ve spent some time on this planet, largely to acquaint myself with how Humans…” he motioned with a hand. “Work for lack of a better word. It was more complicated than I anticipated, and in ADVENT controlled territory I had to be especially careful.”

“I’m very curious how you managed that,” Volk commented. “You do stand out, ignoring the glowing red eyes.”

“Oh, I don’t use this form,” he chuckled. “Far too obvious, even if I relied on holoprojection. No, this is simply the one I prefer. When I was on Earth I was much smaller. And looked more Human. And I can assure you I was a far more convincing one than that fool Zararch agent you killed.” He wrinkled his nose. “How the details of the American Revolution are unknown to them is pathetic. The Zararch needs to reevaluate their standards, and not send junior agents to important assignments on this planet.”

“I see you’ve acquainted yourself, Joreal,” the voice of Asaru said, and Volk turned to see a Vitakarian woman walk up, no longer the Human model he’d seen. “Good. You two will be working together, so I expect excellent results.”

Joreal bowed his head. “Of course, Asaru. Once the base is established, we will begin our operations, with your assistance, should you offer it.”

“I assume your Elena has reported my contributions,” Asaru turned to him. “Already our attacks have forced an international incident which ADVENT is rushing to fix.”

“Argentina will be thrilled,” Volk sighed. “I would have preferred we didn’t provoke an invasion, but at least this will get Luana out of power. A shame. I wanted to kill her myself.”

“I have been following that development,” Joreal added. “Assuming ADVENT is intent on ‘fixing’ this mistake, it will lessen their efficiency for some time if the Oversight Division is working through the Brazilian Legions. This gives us time to…prepare.”

“We shouldn’t be worrying about ADVENT right now,” Volk interjected, directly to Asaru. “Useful as you were in the battles, you aren’t exactly subtle. It will take ADVENT about two seconds to figure out that was a psionic attack, and another two to determine it was likely alien. We’re not going to be getting the SSR, Lancers, and whatever else they have, but also XCOM. This is not going to be as easy as you think.”

“Easy,” the figure of Asaru hooked an arm around Joreal’s massive one. “ADVENT and XCOM are not experienced in fighting a telepath, regardless of any assistance they have. This will likely be a challenge, though not one that has a chance of victory.” She smiled wider. “Let us first see the vaulted effectiveness before becoming concerned about it.”

Volk gave a lopsided smile. “That is not a bad idea, though I have a rule not to underestimate opponents. Especially ones that control a good portion of the world.”

“For now,” Asaru said. “We will see how true that holds in the coming months.”
Stein was fully intending to make a statement.

Jaylin was joined by nearly one hundred other Riot Control Officers, most of whom were stationed in formation around the place where the active President of Brazil worked, a building which had some unique architecture, like the massive solid overlay of the building itself, a more traditional small skyscraper with glass windows underneath, if a bit wider than normal.

The media of nearly every major and local outlet was almost salivating as they watched more and more Peacekeepers arriving, their TV anchors speaking frantically to the cameras about ‘developments’ and occasionally showing the ever-growing crowd of people showing up. Luana’s rise to power had not been popular, and even the rumor that ADVENT was going to remove her was enough to get entire crowds, who admittedly stayed a healthy distance from the Riot Control line, knowing that they wouldn’t hesitate to put down disobedience.

Within the perimeter of Riot Control Officers was where the true operation was being prepared. There were fifty SSR soldiers, in their imposing black armor that made her own feel inadequate. It was complete overkill, but again, Stein was making a statement. In addition to her own personal guard of Riot Control Officers, of which Jaylin shared the honor with three others, there was team of a half-dozen Molosser Handlers, with the largest dogs Jaylin had seen.

She’d known about them, of course, but hadn’t known the Peacekeepers were using them, let alone actually seen one. The size she had underestimated considerably. The grey-furred hounds could probably take down a Muton, and they were supposedly modified to be immune to projectiles…she was keeping one eye on them, because just one look at their fangs made her nervous.

Still, the way they rolled over for their handlers who rubbed their bellies and gave treats was cute.

If that wasn’t enough, Stein had also brought in another hundred State Officers, which she likely intended to use to secure the various floors, which Jaylin personally felt was overkill again, but she was not the one in charge. Jaylin also suspected that this wasn’t only to make a point, Stein just really didn’t like Luana, which wasn’t necessarily surprising.

“March.” Stein commanded, taking her place at the front of the Peacekeeper formation, and Jaylin by her side, began walking forward. Their riot shields were up, and Jaylin had the baton in her hand, set to lethal mode. Stein had been very clear about their purpose. Either the ADVENT guards inside would submit to their authority, or they would die. As far as she was concerned, failure to follow the commands of the Chief Peacekeeper herself was grounds for direct treason.

Jaylin didn’t entirely disagree, although capture might be a more preferable goal.

She certainly wasn’t afraid of dying, since they were flanked by the SSR, who had their rifles raised. Stein reached the glass door, and stood outside it. She pressed a button on her gauntlet, and began speaking, her message being transmitted to all nearby ADVENT equipment. Everyone in the building would hear it.

“This is Chief Peacekeeper Stein,” she began, voice flat and emotionless. “All ADVENT Personnel within this building are ordered to stand down and assist us in the arrest of Former Marshal Luana Russo. Failure to comply is grounds for treason and all attempts to hinder our
operation will result in immediate execution. To former Marshal Russo, turn yourself in immediately and prepare for your arrest. This is your only warning.”

She cut the open channel, and moved to the door. “Move in.” Stein opened the unlocked door and they entered the first floor, where there were several dozen ADVENT soldiers who were standing alone, their weapons and sidearms on the ground or holstered, and some of them with their hands in the air. Good, none of them were stupid.

“Chief Stein,” one of the Officers approached as the State Officers began securing the rest of the first floor. The SSR, stayed directly behind Stein. “We are willing to provide whatever assistance needed. The Marshal is on the third floor, last I heard. The Presidential Office.”

“ Appreciated, Officer,” Stein stated, inclining her head. “However, everyone in this building is now subject to the Oversight Division. Exit the building and they will take you into custody. If you have done nothing wrong, there is little to worry about.” Not sparing another glance, she pointed to the stairs. “Move up and we will secure the former Marshal.”

“Yes, Chief!” They all shouted, and began the march up the stairs. All things considered, Jaylin thought it was going rather well so far. In very little time they were on the third floor, in an open lobby area that had the white tiled floor that was so common in this building, and the fairly high-end furniture.

The Presidential office was not far forward, and along the way there were cases of various pieces of art. The ADVENT soldiers on the floor were similarly disarmed and submissive to the Peacekeepers, and Stein ignored them this time as the SSR gave them instructions. There were four ADVENT soldiers outside the doors to the Presidential office, all with their weapons pointed at the door.

“ Former Marshal Luana and her staff have not left the room,” one of the soldiers said as they approached, lowering their weapons and stepping aside for Stein. “We have ensured they cannot exit, though we do not know if they are prepared to fight or not, nor the status of their arsenal.”

“Good work,” Stein acknowledged. “Report to the SSR outside. Your actions will not be ignored here. We will handle it now.” She gave a brief salute, which the soldiers returned quickly before filing away.

“Are we marching in?” Jaylin asked as Stein stood in front of the double doors for a few seconds.

“Let me see,” Stein tested the door handle. “Locked,” she reported with almost grim amusement. “Break it down and execute any who open fire.”

“Yes, Chief Stein,” the heavily synthesized, almost mechanical voice of the SSR soldier stated, as four of them stepped forward, some kind of charges in their hands which they attached at the corners of the doorframe, and over the handles themselves. “Stand back,” the one SSR soldier warned as she pulled out a detonator. “Prepare for hostile fire.”

The door imploded inward with some startled shouts from the inside. The dust had yet to clear before the SSR soldiers charged in two at a time, subduing the first targets they found, shouting “Target suppressed!” for each unarmed officer they pinned to the ground. Once there were twelve SSR soldiers inside, none of whom had fired a shot, Stein and her Riot Control guard followed suit.

The Presidential office was very open and bright, with white tiles and a nice office desk by the windows. The majority of Luana’s staff were sitting on couches or standing, looking rather
worried, as they should be. “Take them into custody and take them to Oversight,” Stein ordered, as she focused on the cause. Luana stood in front of the window, fully armored and helmetless, her back still to them.

Four additional SSR soldiers followed Stein, their weapons drawn and aimed at Luana, even as she made no effort to act against them. But the SSR didn’t take chances. “You could have knocked,” Luana said, an undercurrent of amusement in her voice. “I rather liked this office.”

“You should have come down and turned yourself in,” Stein retorted, stepping forward. “You have no one to blame for this situation but yourself, traitor.”

“Traitor?” Luana turned around, looking more weary than anything. “Call me insubordinate if you wish, but a traitor I am not. Nor will I apologize for my actions.”

“You invaded a country,” Stein said flatly. “Not only that, under fabricated pretenses. You betrayed our Directive, and ignored the chain of command. You are a traitor to ADVENT.”

“No.” Luana growled. “I was simply taking initiative. Ultimately, does it matter what the reasons are for bringing these pointless nations under us? That is our goal, is it not? ADVENT will control this world, and we have nothing to gain by tolerating these independent states.”

“Incorrect,” Stein answered. “We will unite Humanity, but it will not be solely by force. We are better than imperialists, nor are we warmongers as you are. We act if it is justified, no more, no less. If that means the independent states survive, so be it. Should we abuse our might, we are no better than the Nazis, Soviet Union, or any other tyrannical power in our history.” Jaylin imagined her lips curling up in disdain. “There is no place for people like you in the new world. Submit yourself for arrest.”

“And you are willing to weaken us in the eyes of the world, just to appease one minute country?” Luana sneered. “I’ve watched your pathetic response. You’ve bent over backwards and shown weakness to the world. We were feared for good reason, and now ADVENT plays politics like the UN.”

The woman was delusional, and Jaylin wanted to give her a good whack on the head with her baton. She saw some of the other soldiers similarly tense at the utter crap she was spewing. “That,” Stein practically hissed. “Is because of you. Unlike you, ADVENT will admit and fix our mistakes. If that weakens us, than so be it. But I will not ask again. Submit yourself for arrest.”

“So you can parade me before the media, yes?” Luana mocked, crossing her arms. “If you intend to try me for treason, the sentence is usually death. Why shouldn’t I just force you to kill me now?”

“Because if you really desired death, you would have killed yourself already,” Stein stated, stepping forward. “You will not force me to act because I will simply kill you, and you do not want to die. Not yet. No, you want me to make you a martyr, as if that would happen.” She raised a finger. “You are not worth the effort. You are nothing but a criminal, and you will be tried, convicted, and executed as the piece of filth you are.”

Handcuffs ready, Stein stepped forward, and Luana pulled out the baton she had at her waist, set it to lethal mode and, spikes angled and primed, gave a swing towards Stein, who responded with a deflection with her own baton. Luana had clearly not practiced much, and it showed as Stein disarmed her by hooking the spikes in her own and twisting it out of her hand.

The SSR fired in unison, and she fell to the ground in pain, bleeding from the knees. At the same time Stein trapped the arm that had held the baton and placed her pistol to the elbow and fired,
blasting the joint apart and eliciting another scream. She looked down at the legs and fired two more shots, permanently destroying the kneecaps and turning the traitor into a sobbing wreck.

Stein ignored her screams of pain and proceeded to handcuff the arms, regardless of injury, and grabbed the woman by the back of her collar and hoisted her off the ground. “I don’t think she can walk, sir,” one of the SSR politely noted. “We’ll have to carry her.”

“No,” Stein disagreed. “She will be dragged like this. Let the world see what happens to traitors, and let her be a warning to others in ADVENT who believe themselves above the Law.” With that Stein began walking away, the former Marshal firmly in her grip, leaving trails of blood in her wake as she was dragged across the pristine floor.

Jaylin shook her head and followed, not exactly knowing if she should take pleasure from the woman’s screams of pain from each bump as Stein dragged her down the stairs. But she couldn’t find it in herself to feel sympathy from her.

The woman had broken the law, and now she would be punished for it.

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ADVENT Busan Command Base, Busan - South Korea

11/13/2016 – 12:07 P.M.

“[I think things are getting better,]” Duri told Sandara. “[If we can push them back in America, then it bodes well. You should see some of the defenses here.]”

“[I’ve been seeing the same thing here.]” his wife agreed. “[The towers. Outside the city they’re making trenches, always with lines of volunteers. We help out wherever we can.]”

Duri smiled, glad that Sandara wasn’t quite as nervous as she had been. He was even happier to hear her and the girls helping. “[They definitely appreciate that. I assume you’re staying in Seoul for the time?]”

She glanced off the camera. “[For now…I don’t like the idea of going north, and we’re not in any immediate danger. There are evacuation protocols in place if we need it. If we’re in danger, we’ll leave. Right now they’re keeping all of us – civilians – in the center of the city. Everything is regulated and managed. It’s well done, and the girls still have classes, but it’s different.]”

Duri nodded. While he’d initially thought they’d be safer in the North, that was when he’d been more concerned about how ADVENT could hold on. In their recent discussions, they’d talked about it more rationally, and with ADVENT lessening the urgency for evacuation, they’d mutually decided that it might be best to stay put for the time.

It was also unlikely that as long as they were in potential war zones, that they would keep civilians on base housing. They needed it for soldiers, and it exposed them to unnecessary danger. He knew she would be treated perfectly fine. “[The girls are settling in then? They sounded fine to me.]”

“[Yes, thankfully.]” Sandara cracked a smile. “[They think you’ll be a hero after seeing the American soldiers raise the flag over Las Vegas. They’re a bit more hopeful, which is a relief. They’ve made some more friends too, and I’ve started to socialize a bit more. It feels better knowing I’m not the first to…well, adjust to this.]”

“[I’m glad to hear it,]” he said sincerely. “[Time you broke your anti-social habits.]”
She sniffed. “[Says the man who’d barely talked to a girl before me.]”

Ouch. “[Point taken.]” he said dryly, hearing a beep. “[I’ll talk to you again soon. Love you.]”

“[I love you too,]” she answered. “[See you later.]”

He stood and exited the room, letting someone else use it. The on-base activity was unabated, since they were, at some point, likely to be attacked. But if the aliens had wanted to have an easy victory, that time had long since passed. ADVENT was very entrenched now. The entire beachline was a massive trench, dotted with Flak Towers and barricades. The islands by Busan were fortified barracks with dedicated divisions, also dotted with lines of defenses and Flak Towers.

That was to say nothing of actually marching into the city itself, which was a mixture of trapped streets, barricades, fortified buildings, and other traps ADVENT had been laying and creating non-stop since they had been marked as potential targets. It was difficult to fortify the entire city, of course, but ADVENT was doing their best, and if given enough time…well, they might do it.

In short, the aliens were going to need a miracle or an Ethereal to get through it.

So right now, he just felt like watching the Engineers transport massive weapons through the base, overlook schematics for more defenses, or toy with their SHIVs. He tried to temper her confidence, but the recent victory in America had given him what might be considered unreasonable hope. There was still that alien that threw around carriers like toys, but then again, he’d wondered if the Battlemaster could be beaten, and he had been.

Not killed, but it was a start.

“Good chat?” Beatriz asked, walking up, not in armor, but her sniper rifle slung over her shoulder.

“Always is,” he answered. “Mostly recovered now?”

“Yes sir,” she rolled her shoulders. Beatriz had officially recovered a few days ago, and was now getting back to her full strength and speed. “Wonders of ADVENT medicine. I would have been out for much longer without…whatever they did.”

“Hopefully you’ll have a bit longer to recover before we’re attacked,” he said, leaning against the concrete wall of the barracks.

“You think we will be?” She asked. “They seem to be having problems in America. Maybe they’ll want to focus there?”

“Maybe,” Duri shrugged. “But I somehow think that if they wanted to have more than one focus, they could. Korea is the next logical step in that…and they wouldn’t ignore here.”

“Right,” Beatriz’s face grew a bit grimmer. “So. I need to apologize. I handled what happened in the battle…badly.”

Well, it appeared they were going to have that talk then. Truthfully he’d half-forgotten it, half put it off since there were other things to focus on. But her bringing it up unprompted was good. He turned to her, noting that she definitely seemed somewhat self-conscious. “You didn’t lose it completely. Which I suppose is a good thing.”

She swallowed. “Yes. Mostly because you yelled at me. I don’t handle death well, especially with people I know.”
Duri appraised the smaller Hispanic woman. “I don’t think any of us want to get accustomed to it. With that said, you can’t let it affect you as badly as it did.” He raised a hand as she opened her mouth. “You don’t need to tell me if it’s personal, that’s not my business. But it is your responsibility to get it sorted out. If you think you need to work some things out, that’s what the counselors are for.” He gave a lopsided grin. “I’d like to not rely on me yelling at you. I don’t like it.”

“Yes sir,” she nodded, apparently almost expecting worse. “You won’t have to worry about it again.”

“All I need to hear,” he agreed. “Hopefully we won’t be in that position again.”

“Being chased a horde of aliens and a psionic necromancer?” She said sarcastically. “I hope not.”

“I don’t think those were people,” Duri chuckled. “But it could be worse. We could have had to listen to him speak and give more praises to the glorious Creator.”

“Don’t forget that he’s the Creator’s Greatest Champion™,” Beatriz snickered. “As terrifying as it was, in retrospect some of it is funny. He sounded like he read all the lines that are supposed to be intimidating, but really aren’t.”

“To be fair, I think he relies more on his psionics to add the intimidation,” Duri acknowledged. “I wonder if the aliens get sick of it too.”

“I wonder,” she mused, looking back to the busy ADVENT base. “You think they have anything we do? Cities? Families?”

Duri shrugged. “I don’t know. Not really something we need to worry about. We just know how to kill them.”

“True, true,” Beatriz agreed with some hesitation. “But I am a bit curious. Hard not to be. There has to be something…more…than just fighting for them.”

“There probably is,” Duri agreed, her words also now making him wonder. “But if there is anything else, I somehow don’t think they’re going to share it with us.”

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Abuja – Nigeria
11/13/2017 – 6:28 P.M.

“Did we do the right thing?”

Mox at least looked more sure of himself than she felt, leaned up on her desk, arms crossed and contemplating. She’d been doing that a lot recently. This had seemed like a good idea at first, but the more she saw the SAS take shape, the more she wondered if she’d unintentionally made everything much worse, not just for the people, but the countries as well.

“We didn’t really have a choice,” Mox stated. “It was either this or just go on the run. We’re at least making a difference here.”

“Is that really a good thing?” Betos asked wearily. “You know they’re seriously considering citizenship tiers. A fucking caste system, with their chosen master castes. Do you really think that’s a good difference?”
“I doubt they’ll do that,” Mox dismissed. “Just talk from Kone. They don’t want to make you angry, and they have to know something like that would.”

“Taking that out of the equation, are things actually better?” Betos asked. “Whatever promises they make about compensation, they’re still gathering up people and forcing them to work. They’re arresting people who question them. How is that,” she swept a hand around. “Any better than ADVENT?”

That at least got Mox to frown some. “And before you ask, I could certainly do something,” Betos continued. “However, I don’t trust these men, at least not the smart ones. They would betray me if they saw the opportunity, and me sabotaging their great plans might very well get me killed.” She sighed, rubbing her forehead. “And on the other hand, doing nothing is just as bad. Even if we all left, they have the schematics and have a unified government for perhaps the first time. The SAS isn’t going away.”

“The way I see it,” Mox said slowly. “We didn’t have any good options. We stay and make sure ADVENT stays in power, or we take a chance and try and make things better. Maybe it’s not turning out exactly how we hoped, but we can at least try and make it better. We couldn’t do that in ADVENT.”

“True,” she sighed, getting back up and walking around to her desk. “Well, they gave me authority over the military doctrine, so I at least have that. I better get to work.”

“I’ll let you be,” Mox said, standing. “We’re all still behind you, and we’re getting the armies into an actually decent fighting force. So not all is bad. Let me know if you need any help.”

“Will do,” Betos said, opening her laptop back up, beginning to focus on the screen as Mox left and shut the door behind him. It took close to an hour, but the more she worked the better she felt. At least this part of the SAS would be bearable, and if it clashed with whatever the hell Kone and Okon were planning, then that was just too bad.

One crisis at a time, she told herself. She could only try and fix one thing at a time, and-

A knock interrupted her. She frowned. “Yes?” She called.

“Package,” another voice answered. “For Betos.”

She had guards, so she doubted anyone would be let through if they weren’t legitimate. Still, she kept one hand on her pistol as she walked to the door. Outside the man didn’t even look like a soldier, but just a random Nigerian citizen. In his hands wasn’t a package, but some kind of silver circular device.

“Betos,” he said. “This is for you. Please press the button underneath if you wish to acquire another ally.” She took it gingerly, looking down at it.

“Who—” she began, looking up and the man had suddenly vanished. She blinked, looking up and down the hallway, knowing he couldn’t have just gone so quickly. She looked down at the device in her hand. It was unlikely to be dangerous, as there were so many better ways to assassinate her than strange… devices.

She pressed the button on the bottom, and almost dropped it as a blue light appeared on the top, and soon formed into the figure of an alien.

Not just an alien. One of the leaders. Ethereals they were called. “Greetings, Helsa Betos,” the Ethereal began, Betos unable to make out his face underneath the hood that covered his face. “I am
The problem, Betos was realizing, was that she had no idea what to really do here. The aliens were the enemies of ADVENT, but since they were also enemies of ADVENT, it didn’t really mean that much. They were portrayed as monsters, but it was also ADVENT who was saying that, so they couldn’t be trusted to be fully objective.

Which resulted in her being woefully uninformed, especially in regards to the leaders. She hadn’t fought against them, so she couldn’t even recall that for information. All she could do was improvise, and right now that seemed prudent. “I suppose that was one of your people?” She asked.

“A mere pawn, no one important,” the alien stated. “He completed his mission, and is happily with his family. I prefer not to work through such, but I felt it would be…inconsiderate…to approach in person. I am aware our appearance and deviation from Humans is…unsettling.”

“You wouldn’t go to this trouble for no reason,” Betos decided to get to the point. “What do you want?”

“I have been following your actions for some time,” the alien continued. “I am impressed you defected from ADVENT, and even more so that you have managed to get these shortsighted fools to unite. I do not believe you understand the implausibility of that. Nonetheless, my reason is simple: I would first like to meet with you, and discuss the possibility of an alliance of our own.”

“With the SAS?” Betos asked. “I don’t make decisions like that.”

The alien gave what sounded like a fake chuckle. “The so-called Sovereign African States, foolish old men drunk on power. They will indeed have a part to play, but I have little interest in tolerating their type. I will discuss working with you, for you have earned some measure of respect. You are concerned with more than just the power and glory; you have vision, you have plans. You are the kind of leader the Humans will need, not the ones you have allied yourself with.”

Betos found it oddly ironic that an alien was saying this, and wasn’t quite sure how to feel about that. It sounded like a compliment, but what did that really mean to an alien? Could she even apply Human logic to them? “I see,” she said slowly. “Flattering, assuming you mean anything you say. I’m afraid I don’t know much about you, other than ADVENT Propaganda.”

“Which as we are both aware, does distort the truth,” the alien gestured with a gloved hand. “I will not deny we have killed many Humans. Many more will die before this war ends; that is simply the nature of such. But it would be a mistake to ignore the cost to our own. As a Human, I expect you will have your reservations, but I suspect you are intelligent enough to move past that as this is the cost of war. I do not enjoy wasting time, Betos, do you wish to converse or not?”

“Fine,” Betos said. It couldn’t hurt, and she was curious what would happen. It couldn’t be worse than accidentally possibly creating an African ADVENT. “When and where? And who are you?”

“Your office is fine,” he said. “Do not worry about watching for me, I will arrive within the next couple of days. And you may call me Macula.”

“Macula,” Betos tested. “In that case…I look forward to it.”

“As do I, Betos,” the alien – Macula – answered. “I believe we have much to discuss.”

The hologram clicked off, and Betos was left alone again.

This definitely changed things, and she could only imagine what the aliens would be interested in.
This would be a very good thing, or it could be yet another mistake. But she’d made quite a few already.

What was one more?
Abby did not particularly like where the Chronicler lived. Element-wise, it was actually perfectly comfortable, and there was no shortage of food and drink, but there was a smothering, unsettling feeling that permeated the entire place. The feeling was one that she would swear meant someone was reading her mind, but she’d never felt that either from Patricia or the Chronicler.

And while Patricia had her own ethics, and Abby trusted her, she wasn’t naïve enough to think the Chronicler wasn’t constantly monitoring her. However, as far as altering her thoughts? She hadn’t noticed any evidence of that.

Then again, would she if it happened?

She shook her head. That was a rabbit trail that was pointless to dwell on right now, especially when things were likely going to become much more interesting in the next couple of days, assuming the Chronicler was actually going through with his initially outlandish plan to attack Sydney.

But he ‘needed time’ to get things in place, apparently. Now though, it seemed like he wanted to bring everyone up to speed, which was about time, since aside from sending XCOM a short affirmative signal telling them she was alive, she’d refrained from actually contacting them both because the Chronicler requested it, and she couldn’t really do it without it being likely suspicious.

She still had no idea how she was going to explain this, short of telling the truth.

In the meantime, she and Harper had spent the time fully recovering, and getting the rest of them in more or less stable conditions. While Harper was naturally suspicious of the strange gel the Chronicler had, in addition to traditional medicines, it was by far the most effective. Abby didn’t know how it worked, but it healed whatever it was placed on in a matter of days.

Christopher Williams, Roy Weaver, Derrick Ellison, and Norma Anderson were the sole survivors of the largest Australian Resistance cell, and while all of them were devastated by it, they were also wanting to exact vengeance on the aliens themselves. Harper had initially said that the goal was to leave since there wasn’t any more they could do, before the Chronicler had interrupted and said that if they wanted vengeance, they would have it.

There was an assurance in his voice that made Abby believe him, and judging by the rapt attention he’d received, they felt the same. She didn’t know if that was his telepathy, or just them wanting something to latch on to. She understood how they felt to an extent; leaving now would mean they’d essentially accomplished nothing. It would be an uncontested defeat.

Something all of them despised.

So now it was time to see what the Chronicler had to show them. Abby walked into the cool stone hallway, wanting to go to the central command center she and Harper had stumbled upon the first time. She also thought she’d figured out how this place worked. It seemed like all she needed to do was think of where she wanted to go, and it would lead to that room. It didn’t make any sense, but
her attempts of mapping the place out had led to her going in circles, reaching dead ends, and initially freaking her out.

Since the Chronicler was annoyingly vague about it, that was probably the best she was going to get, and with how weird everything else was here, a constantly shifting cave system was probably not too special.

The rest of them, minus the Chronicler himself, were already on the platform above the clear water, with some more consoles and a holotable of some sort being in the center. That hadn’t been there before. All of them wore their former resistance gear, which the Chronicler had one of the machines repair for them, so it was as good as new.

“No sign of him?” Christopher grunted as she walked up, and Abby really wished he’d just cut the rest of his beard off, because right now it was a black patchy mess.

“Not yet,” she answered, looking down at the holotable and seeing it was definitely different than usual. “Knowing him, he’ll likely make some dramatic entrance.”

“Whenever he gets here, we need to figure out the issue with ADVENT and XCOM,” Harper said, crossing his arms and giving her a brief nod of acknowledgement. He now wore a black patch over his missing eye, to her relief. “I’m not keeping this a secret, and if he wants to go through attacking Sydney, he won’t be able to either. And either way, they’re going to hear about a strange Human psion from the aliens at some point.”

“Well, I can’t keep putting it off,” Abby sighed. “This is a mess.”

“One he could have helped us avoid,” Norma said under her breath, the lighting making her dark skin even more shadowy. “Selfish bastard.”

“Not really,” Abby admitted. “He’s been helping, he was just not obvious about it.”

“Either way, nothing can be done about it now,” Harper interjected. “All that’s left is what happens next.”

“Exactly,” the Chronicler said smoothly, stepping out of thin air before them.

Abby sighed.

“Glad you joined us,” Christopher said sarcastically. “Busy?”

“Mocking as your tone is, yes,” the Chronicler said without missing a beat, as he pressed some buttons on the strange holotable. “But that’s settled, and now it’s time to let you all know what is happening.”

The holotable came to life, but it wasn’t holograms that were displayed. Instead, almost microscopic bars rose up from the table and formed into shapes with tangible density. No, not bars, little nanites it appeared to be, since bars couldn’t make some of the 3D shapes. They were a dark grey, and formed into the city of Sydney, complete with buildings and everything. It was actually impressive how accurate it was.

“This is the target, which all of you are familiar with,” the Chronicler said, pointing to the display. “So I won’t repeat it, save that it is the main command center of the alien operations in Australia. Destroying it would not only get their attention, but slow any hope of expanding beyond the Oceanic Theatre, which for ADVENT means Korea, and maybe China.”
“Wonderful,” Norma said, eyeing him skeptically. “Thank you for your insightful commentary. It’s not like we figured that out months ago.”

Abby almost smirked. But really, she had a point. The Chronicler like usual didn’t take offense. “Appreciated, Miss Anderson, but I am going somewhere with this.” He motioned back to the display, which created small recreations of an Andromedon, Muton, and Vitakara, all at separate points.

“Each of these represents one of my forces,” he continued. “I’ve been working on upgrading them since our last operation, Agent Gertrude, which will be necessary since I only have several thousand, and Sydney,” he nodded again. “Has roughly ten thousand, not including Gateway support, much less any surprise visits from the aliens, or Ethereals.”

“When you say ‘upgraded’,,” Roy interjected, eyeing the Chronicler intently. “That means…”

“I’m glad you asked,” the Chronicler smiled and motioned to one of the cases that was resting against the wall. It floated over to them, and still hovering, the Chronicler opened it and inside were perhaps the most…alien…weapons she’d ever seen. At first it looked like some kind of rifle, with an odd stonish exterior, that was until she saw that the stone was pulsing.

The Chronicler reached in and all of them flinched as thousands of little silvery wire-like things sprouted from the stony flesh of the weapon, and embedded themselves in the Chronicler’s hand, which he didn’t even acknowledge. “This is a particle weapon, relatively low-tech, but I don’t want to make things too difficult for my first attack.” He noticed all of them staring and raised an eyebrow. “No, it doesn’t hurt. It’s perfectly harmless, but once you use this, you won’t want to go back to regular unconnected weapons.”

“You say that…” Roy said cautiously.

The Chronicler sighed, then suddenly tossed the weapon in Abby’s direction and purely on instinct she reached up and grabbed it, and the countless little wires were now drilling into her hand. She yelped, but immediately realized that the Chronicler hadn’t lied. She really couldn’t feel anything. Abby looked down at the hand grasping the barrel, feeling the little things go deeper into her arm, but it just felt odd, not painful or even unpleasant.

She properly grasped the handle, once again feeling the wires go into her wrist, fingers, and arm, and cautiously let go of the barrel with the other and instantly the wires retracted, like they were never connected at all. “The hell?” She muttered, looking at the arm and not seeing any trace of the punctures.

“Go on, test it out,” the Chronicler encouraged with a smile. “You won’t hurt anything, although I’d prefer you not hit the consoles.”

“Or any of us,” Christopher added.

Abby nodded, turning away and looking down at the rifle which was morphing the stock, and eventually solidified into what seemed to be a stock perfectly adjusted for her. Testing it out, she lifted it up, her other hand grasping the barrel like normal, and the wires entered her once more. Yep, perfectly tuned to her. Even the handle was reforming and allowing her a tighter grip. She aimed at the wall ahead, and fired.

A crystal blue beam shot out with a sound like a continuous high-pitched energy discharge. The beam slammed into the wall and a section practically exploded, then she unconsciously stopped firing. The beam ceased, and the aftermath was a section of the stone wall that was just…
vaporized. There was an impression at least an inch thick, in a perfect circle with a two foot diameter.

She was about to compliment the weapon’s power, when she realized she hadn’t actually pulled a trigger. Abby looked down to confirm, and sure enough, there wasn’t anything. Was she firing by pure thought? Was that possible? To test it again, she raised the fire and gave the mental fire command. The beam shot out, and impacted another section of the wall.

“Where did you get these?” Harper asked incredulously as she walked back.

“Nowhere you’d know,” the Chronicler dismissed. “And no, you won’t be able to just make these. They are…fickle. If the wrong person picks one up…well….boom.”

Abby raised an eyebrow. “Sentient rifles?”

The Chronicler chuckled. “Not exactly. But this is how I’m augmenting my army. You saw my armor, Agent Gertrude. It functions in a similar way. But now I have a proposition for each of you, Agent Gertrude excluded.”

“Go ahead,” Harper said after a few seconds.

“It’s rather simple, actually,” he said, clasping his hands in front of him. “I have an army. But I would prefer to have some Human support. Leaders. Generals if you wish. Regardless of if we win in Sydney, the war will be far from over. Australia will be a battleground until the war on Earth is over, so I would humbly extend an offer to join my efforts in making the Collective uncomfortable here.”

The former Resistance fighters exchanged a look. “Flattering,” Norma said slowly. “The thing is, we’re just Humans, and to be honest, we’re not much of a help. Even if we have those,” she gestured at the weapon Abby held. “That’s not going to help us, especially if we’ve got Ethereals coming to kill us. And we’re not psions.”

“I know,” the Chronicler assured her. “Which is why you’ll have to be enhanced as well.” He pointed to some black cylinders on the side of the room Abby hadn’t noticed until now. They were some kind of metal, and there was a console with glowing lights close to it, but otherwise it didn’t appear special.

“The procedure is painless, I promise,” he told them as they moved to get a closer look. “When it is finished, you will not be Human, not entirely anymore. But you will be better, faster, and stronger. While I cannot promise immortality, you will come close. Very close.” He looked to Harper. “In addition, it will repair any previous injuries.”

“This sounds way too good to be true,” Christopher said slowly. “What’s the catch?”

“The catch?” The Chronicler looked upwards thoughtfully. “You will simply have to fight the same battle I have been.”

Abby got the feeling he wasn’t talking about the current war with the Collective.

“I don’t need an answer now,” the Chronicler said, moving back to the particle table. “But before the battle would be preferable. I don’t intend to launch it for several more days. Agent Gertrude, please come here.” She stepped to him as he was punching buttons on the device.

“I assume that offer didn’t include me?” She asked, as Harper moved away to talk with his soldiers.
“I doubt you want to be tied to events here, though I won’t turn down your help if you really want to provide it,” he said without looking at her. “Truthfully, I believe you will be useful elsewhere. Do not worry, I won’t send you away without anything. I have some gear specifically for you as well, but this is my war now. Subterfuge isn’t as important. Now, I need you when I speak to the Commander.”

She blinked. “You’re going to-“

“Yes,” he sighed, looking up. “Unfortunately, my time in hiding must come to an end. I, of course, could simply force you and the others to refuse to give details, but due to recent events, that would be a pointless waste of time. Better XCOM is aware of the situation completely, instead of accidentally disrupting my work.”

The grey particles suddenly formed into the shape of the Commander, which was an odd sight since his features were almost perfectly completed down to his hair, but he could be mistaken for a statue if he wasn’t moving. “Who is-“ He blinked. “Agent Gertrude. We’ve been concerned,” he saw the Chronicler. “Who are you?”

“That is why we’re talking, Commander,” the Chronicler said, inclining his head. “We’ve met before, I believe. I was with Saudia when you came to the Bastion, although you didn’t speak much with me.”

“Ah, right,” the Commander nodded. “I remember you. You had a title, Chronicler. A pleasure to see you, I suppose, but what are you doing with my agent?”

“A long story,” Abby said, briefly summarizing what had happened with the Resistance coming under attack. Then she got to the part where the Chronicler had come and fought off the alien, with his psionics.

The Commander’s gaze immediately focused on the Chronicler. “I see. So they have more of those aliens. And you are a psion. Interesting. Saudia forgot to share this information with me.”

The Chronicler smiled. “She didn’t know. I never told anyone.”

“Why?”

“Call it a code,” he said. “There wasn’t a need to, and my job was simply to gather information, and ensure that the Director of EXALT never came to harm. She has plenty of protection now, and we have a war to win, do we not?”

He paused. “Apologies for keeping Agent Gertrude from informing you of the truth of the situation, but I did need to take some precautions. However, we’re both professionals, so if you want, I will get to the point.”

Nice of the Chronicler to cover for her, even if it would likely make the Commander angry. But all he did was simply state, “Go ahead.”

“I will be taking over the war in Australia,” he stated without any ambiguity. “I suspect I will have at least a few of what remains of the Australian Resistance join me, and I have dominated a respectable number of aliens. I can wage a war, in addition to any other unexpected surprises.”

“Your war will last until an Ethereal arrives,” the Commander warned flatly. “As much as Saudia will want to kill you when she finds out who you are, I would also assume she would prefer you alive until then. Psion or not, you can’t fight an Ethereal on your own.”
He smiled. “Perhaps. But I’ll take my chances. I don’t answer to you, Commander. I’m not asking for your permission, I’m just making you aware that Australia will be a warzone, which I will handle until XCOM and ADVENT push the aliens back everywhere else. Then I will of course, cede the conflict to you.”

“How generous,” the Commander said dryly. “Unfortunately I’m not in a position to really interfere either way. I assume you also contacted me for a reason beyond this?”

“Aside from suggesting that Agent Gertrude be recalled,” he said. “This type of warfare is not for her, and while I would like her to see me fight in Sydney, she would be more useful elsewhere. However, I will not return her empty-handed. And if you wish, I can inform you of the plan of attack.”

The Commander thought for a moment, then gave a nod. “Fine. First tell me your plan.”

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Desolan, War Camp 402

11/15/2016

Nartha decided he definitely had enough evidence at this point. Being Zararch gave him access to quite a bit of equipment, much of it for surveillance purposes, and after placing a monitoring nanodrone on Merina, he now had access to both her location and high-quality audio, and he’d had a small video drone follow her around, always making sure to be hidden. Andromedons made excellent micro-drones, and the Zararch had plenty incorporated into shells that looked like insects.

This posed something of a potential issue, since there weren’t really any insects on Desolan, but as long as it stayed away, that was all that was needed. The days of monitoring had paid off quite handsomely, as Merina was definitely altering records, and then taking the unlisted Muton children and leaving them at dead drops, which were soon picked up by another hooded figure.

He had spent some time debating actually bugging the boxes, or even the area, since he didn’t want to spook her, or anyone else for that matter. However, he also doubted that they had the means to detect nanotrackers, and he had installed one in it just in case. That being said, now was probably the time to do something about it. He’d spent some more time speaking to her, and she definitely viewed him in a positive light, and in time, might possibly bring him on board her little trafficking operation, but he simply didn’t have that kind of time.

So he’d invited her to his temporary quarters, which he’d ensured were scrubbed of any listening devices of visible and nano variety. It was to ‘discuss improvements’ as he’d lied, but in truth he was going to get some answers out of her. The door buzzer beeped, and he unlocked it, and Merina stepped in, baring her teeth in greeting as she saw him. “Nartha.”

He didn’t return the smile. “Merina. Please take a seat.” He gestured to the chair on the opposite end of the table he was at, a bare thing, and there wasn’t anything on the table itself except for his holoprojector. While she moved forward, he locked the door behind him, and activated his white noise device just as a precaution.

“Already down to business,” she said, not appearing to notice his much colder demeanor. “Did you speak to the Sargon?”

“Merina, I am going to get to the point,” Nartha said tiredly, straightening. “I’ve spent enough time
She froze, blinking at him in astonishment before his words registered. Her mouth opened and closed several times. “I…I don’t know—“

He pressed a button and activated the holoprojector that showed in perfect detail her leaving the container containing the Muton child at the dead drop. “Really?” He said dryly. “Or should I play the last one?” He didn’t have it, and had been rather lucky to get this, but she didn’t need to know it was a bluff. “Or perhaps I could pull up the records you altered, to make it appear like there were only fifty-seven babies when in reality there were fifty-nine?”

He gave a humorless smile. “Your operation is clever, but this happening on such a large scale? We were going to notice eventually.”

She was a much paler shade of green now, staring at him in terror. He turned off the holodisplay. “You are very, very lucky that you weren’t discovered by another Zararch agent, otherwise you would be before one of the Sectoid Interrogators. However, we both share similar goals.”

That seemed to shake her out of her paralysis. “What?”

“I am a Zararch agent,” he told her simply. “But one who has…issues with the Collective. There is a lot happening you do not know about. Our species has been taken advantage of by the Elders, and the time has come to change that. I’ve been working to locate and unify the resistant elements within the Vitakara and Ethereal Collective as a whole.” He nodded towards her. “I received this assignment personally from the Zar’Chon. My instructions were to find the cause of the abductions, and stop them. I intend to unite them with the Nulorian, and deliver a suitable target to satisfy the Zar’Chon.”

He paused for a few seconds. “So I need to know the details of your operation.”

Merina visibly swallowed. “What…what do you plan to do?”

Nartha cocked his head. “I don’t know without understanding how you operate. How many mature Mutons do you have?”

“I don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. “They keep details like that secret. But thousands at least.”

A start, and they would have likely not been subjected to the brutal training, which was bad in that they might not be as effective, but good in that they quite possibly may be smarter or more competent. “Your people have a substantial army of untouched Mutons to use against the Collective, that’s what I plan. In addition, you will be put in contact with the Nulorian, who can likely make your operation run smoother without bringing the Zararch down on you again.”

“You don’t understand,” Merina suddenly interjected. “We took them away because we didn’t want them to go to war! We didn’t do it for…” She gestured wildly. “Your grand plan of rebellion!”

He’d wondered about this. Yet it seemed a pointless goal, so he hadn’t devoted much time to it. What was the point of abducting Mutons over a period of years if you weren’t going to use them? It wasn’t as though they were smart enough to be useful otherwise. “I see,” he said slowly. “Then why go to all the trouble for no future use?”

“You really are a Zararch agent,” she hissed in frustration. “Not everything is a resource or tool. Much as you like to pretend otherwise, these soldiers you think are mindless are not. They only are
because that’s what we make them. From the moment they are born, these children are tortured. They know nothing except violence, and that’s repeated until they die or pass the tests! They are aliens, but they don’t deserve this. Not without a choice, which we take from them.”

“The Muton program is ineffective and needs to change,” Nartha agreed. “And that was at the creation of the Elders. Direct your anger at them, not me.”

“And why not?” She demanded. “You want to use them as an army!”

He nodded. “When the time comes.”

She stared at him. “And how does that make you any better?”

He didn’t exactly want to get into a debate on how much the individual Muton was worth, but he thankfully didn’t have to argue that point since he had plenty of other ones. “Because I will be using them to free our species from the Elders. I will use them to establish our independence and rebuild our species into what it should have been. This is bigger than you, Merina, what I am working towards will affect not just my species, but every other one in the Collective.”

He pressed a button on his holoprojector, and brought up an image of Earth. “I don’t know how familiar you are with this planet, but a species was discovered here. Humans they are called, and right now they are fighting the Collective. They may even win. But this is perhaps the only chance to make change happen.”

He looked up at her. “You are accomplishing nothing now. You have no tangible goal. What you are doing now is ultimately meaningless if you are actually telling the truth. You will always be raising Muton children and watching them die. Perhaps you’ll ‘save’ several, but nothing will actually change. I could have ended your operation now, and everything you were working towards would die. Do you know what the Collective would do to those Mutons you saved?”

She flinched, and he nodded. “They would kill them,” he confirmed. “Likely not a quick death either. Maybe throw them to the Berserkers. Maybe turn them over to be experimented. Perhaps using them as target practice for the others who would like nothing more than to kill their traitorous brethren. And you? If you’re lucky they would kill you right there. What is more likely is you’ll be sent to the Sectoids.”

“I get your point,” she muttered.

“I don’t think you do,” Nartha said bluntly. “The only way this changes is for the Collective to fall. You will not survive forever. The only future where you achieve what you really want is helping me take it down. You have two choices here. Take me to your contact, or refuse, and I arrest you and bring this operation down.”

She looked at him, almost sadly. “You would destroy everything just because you can?”

“No,” he answered. “Because I don’t have time to waste. If I cannot establish contact with your group, I have no reason not to prove to the Zar’Chon that I am still loyal to the Collective. While it is disappointing, you are not the only opportunity I have.”

She was silent for a few moments, thinking. “I will give you my contact,” she said. “But I don’t know if he’ll agree.”

“Let him know what I want,” he advised her. “I don’t want any surprises. I want to speak with the leadership, no one lower. Make it happen or I will bring this down.”
Now this was a risk. If whoever was running this was smart, they would have contingencies beyond one or two operatives being discovered. Logically, one compromised operative should not bring down the entire thing, it was a calculated risk on his part. If his theory was correct, all the Mutons were probably in one centralized location, and the goal was not to raise an army, but just to allow them to…exist.

They were in this for the moral reasons, not the logical, and he could use that. If things went bad, he would simply arrest both of them and turn them in. The contact would at least give a starting point. There was also the possibility that he wouldn’t show up, but that was where the message that he was a Zararch agent came in.

At the very minimum, it would tell the leader that the Zararch were investigating this and their days were numbered. Then there was the ultimate backup, which was the bugged crate, and he had all that data saved and ready to be turned over. But he felt he could hold that information back for now.

Alternatively, he could always go to the location he’d discovered, but that might get him killed, and definitely not make a good impression on them. Although, practically blackmailing the operatives might not either, but his choices were limited. He sincerely wished they’d had a smarter goal in mind when they’d started this, so this would be less…contentious.

“I’ll let you know tomorrow,” she said without any enthusiasm as she stood up.

He simply nodded, not worried about her fleeing. She still had the nanotracker on her. She would lead him to the center of this operation, one way or another.

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Undisclosed Location – Argentina

11/16/2016 – 2:17 P.M.

Today was certainly going to be interesting. Volk once more sat across from the same suits as before, and neither of them looked especially happy. Personally, Volk felt they should be conducting these meetings in different locations, but once more he’d ensured the area was secure, and now his own forces were augmented by Asaru’s aliens.

It was almost symbolic in a way, now that he thought about it. The rotting and decaying building they were in adequately represented what he felt was a deteriorating relationship with the Argentinean government, although perhaps he was just anticipating the worst.

At least Elena was still standing behind him, one hand on his shoulder.

“Volikov,” the first suit said slowly, and very deliberately. “What exactly happened in your attack?”

“I had my people attack three Peacekeeper Outposts bordering Uruguay,” Volk answered. “If I recall, that’s what you wanted. I didn’t quite expect ADVENT to respond like that, but I unfortunately can’t predict the future.”

“Yes…” the suit continued. “You did what we wanted. With that said, perhaps it went a little too well. ADVENT managed to turn this into a PR victory, Uruguay is out of our hands, and is little more than an ADVENT puppet now, since they’ve been trapped using their technology…on the condition that they can’t share it with anyone.”
Volk rested his hands on the table. “That,” he said. “Is not my problem. You didn’t specify what you wanted, so I did what I thought was needed.”

“The question is how,” the second suit finally spoke, almost glaring at him. “You are a professional. Your record speaks for itself. One Outpost destroyed makes sense, but three? How did you do it?”

Well, best to get it out in the open. “I received a message from an alien representative some time ago,” he said, leaning back. “I met, and decided to form an alliance with them.”

They must not have been expecting him to just admit it, since they visibly became nervous, while looking at him incredulously. “What were you thinking?” The first suit demanded. “Do you want ADVENT to annex us? You put the entire country at risk and didn’t even ask us if that was a good idea?”

“I’m thinking long-term,” Volk explained calmly. “And I didn’t contact you, because it wasn’t relevant. I work for you; I don’t answer to you. The aliens didn’t want to talk to you, they wanted to talk to me.” He shrugged. “And I was curious what they had to say.”

“For such a smart man, I can’t believe you did this,” the second suit growled. “Do you know how much danger we’re in now? We’ve been funding an alien-backed terrorist group. What do you think ADVENT is going to do if they find out?”

“To be fair, this is your own fault,” Volk pointed out. “You could have kept using me, and stayed ignorant, but you asked. I’m well aware that ADVENT would annex Argentina over this, but this ultimately comes down to what you want the future of your country to be.”

Volk leaned forward, his tone turning as serious as he’d ever been. “Let’s be perfectly honest with each other. There are only two sides that matter. ADVENT, and the aliens. If you think that independent countries are going to exist at the end of this, you are sadly naïve. ADVENT is just looking for an excuse to annex you. One day they will find it. And if you think the aliens will let you maintain independence…” he chuckled and shook his head.

“No,” he looked back up. “At some point, you need to decide which side you will be on. I’ve chosen my side for now, and now you have the same choice.”

“And why are the aliens better?” The second suit demanded. “Because they told you?”

Volk smiled. “Better? That’s a relative word. But they’ve certainly been more amenable to me than ADVENT ever has. There is no such thing as a good government, the aliens will always perform their horrific experiments, and ADVENT will do the same. I’d bet you guys also have some black projects you wouldn’t ever share with me. That’s how the world works.”

Volk exchanged glances with each of them. “With that said, I’ve managed to get some concessions out of them. No civilian targets, human leadership should they win, advanced weapons and tech. I’d say that they might be more humane than ADVENT at the end.”

“How can you possibly think they’ll keep their word?” The first suit asked. “What stops them from just betraying you when it’s convenient?”

Volk smiled mirthfully. “Absolutely nothing. But I could say the same about you. What stops you from betraying me once you no longer need me? A calculated risk. Because I’ve figured out that the aliens need us. They don’t want to conquer us, and deal with Human terrorists for hundreds of years. They need Humanity on their side, and to achieve that, it means they’ll support the ones that
He pulled out a dull silver pistol he’d started carrying around. “This is what they’ve armed us with. Plasma weapons and more. The aliens you’ve been seeing are not the true power of the alien army. More importantly, I think they’ll keep their word because they have no reason to go through this if it were otherwise. The first time I met their leader, I was talking to an illusion the aliens created with their telepathy. There was, and still is, nothing stopping them from manipulating my mind. If that was their end goal, then why go through all this trouble?” He smiled. “It’s not likely I could stop it.”

“And this is your way of asking Argentina to support the aliens?” The first suit asked. “You understand what you are asking?”

“If you want to keep Argentina out of ADVENT, then yes,” Volk said. “If you want, I can put you in contact with the alien I’ve been coordinating with. But that is up to you.” Volk leaned back again, causing the chair to creak. “I’ve made my decision. I don’t need your funding anymore. Keep me on for jobs if you want, but I’m not stopping my fight until ADVENT is beaten.”

The two suits exchanged a glance. “May we take this?” the first one asked, motioning to the plasma pistol.

Volk motioned Elena to go get the black case he’d propped up against the wall when they’d arrived. “No, this is mine. But I’ll give you something better. Consider it a gift from the aliens.”

Elena set it on the ground, and opened the case, which displayed one of the sleek alien plasma rifles, one of the railgun-like rifles, a plasma pistol, with accompanying power cells, and a recharger for good measure. “Test them out whenever you like,” Volk said as the suits stood and appraised the weapons with obvious desire. “But be careful. If ADVENT catches you with these, I don’t think they will give you time to dispose of them.”

He stood, and began walking to the exit. “I’ll be waiting for your next contact, or if you want to discuss an alliance with the aliens. Think it over, and think about what you really want for the future.”

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The Praesidium, Situation Room – Classified Locations

11/15/2016

“The Chronicler,” the Commander said to Zhang. “And there isn’t any more information on him?”

The stony face of Zhang frowned, and shook his head. “No. Unsurprising if he’s a psion.”

“Wonderful.”

The Commander didn’t claim to be omniscient, but it was rare that he was caught off guard. Learning that not only had Abby, and the entire Australian Resistance, likely been compromised since the beginning, but also that it was at the hand of a completely unknown Human psion certainly qualified. If it had been an Ethereal, he could have at least understood that, but a Human?

That raised a lot of questions. If Saudia had genuinely not known one of her advisors was a psion, then who had actually been in control of EXALT during that time? No one had ever noticed any obvious tampering, but the idea that a telepath just stayed with EXALT for years and done nothing was ludicrous.
And now he wanted to single-handedly fight in Australia? No, there was something else going on here beyond a psion appearing out of nowhere. He was clearly experienced with his abilities, at least according to what Abby had added. He’d have to have Geist or Patricia examine her when she got back to ensure there wasn’t any permanent tampering, but given his age, and that he was likely a telepath before the invasion, he was probably more skilled than both of them.

What confused him was that not only was he strictly maintaining independence, but that he’d waited until now to actually make himself known.

Why?

“When did you first start investigating Earth?” The Commander asked Aegis, who’d been standing silently as they’d discussed the issue.

“The first discovery was twenty years ago,” Aegis answered. “However, no actual action was taken until roughly two years ago, when the first abductions began. The first scouting missions should not have contained equipment to enable psionic awakening.”

The Commander pursed his lips. “So assuming that the Chronicler has been a psion for longer than the war, how was he awakened?”

“There are only two possibilities,” Aegis said. “The most obvious is a catalyst; awakening through a psionic object or device. It is perhaps possible he was involved in a high-stress situation that awakened his abilities…but in that case, I suspect there would be more psions.”

The Commander walked around the dark holotable, powered off, thinking. “Having someone like that loose is dangerous. At the very least we need to interrogate him to ensure he isn’t a threat. He’s possibly been using EXALT the entire time, or worse has been influencing other powerful people for longer. I don’t trust him.”

“Aside from a coordinated operation, I don’t know what we can do,” Zhang cautioned, crossing his arms. “He’s not hostile…for now…and until that changes, I don’t think we can justify spending time solving this mystery. Whenever he attacks Sydney, that will give Abby something to report. But I only think keeping an eye on him is recommended. No more than that.”

“At minimum,” the Commander scowled. “But this implies that there are potentially other aliens that have been here before the Collective. Aegis, how sure are you that these intra-galactic species aren’t exploring on their own?”

“Because if they were, we would have detected them,” Aegis said immediately, the silver helm looking down at him. “It is possible, of course, that they sent probes that crashed on your planet, but the issue is that none of the species are psionic.” His voice turned contemplative. “With that said, this is a puzzle I wish to solve. If you wish, I can go examine him and determine the answer to this, since I doubt he will give his secrets willingly.”

“Maybe once things calm down,” the Commander picked up a tablet resting on the corner of the holotable. “ADVENT is getting ready to fully take back America, the Collective will likely launch another attack soon, and maybe the Chronicler will get himself killed and solve this problem completely. Zhang has a good point. Until we have a good reason to devote time to him, we just make sure he’s staying out of trouble and focusing on more important things.”

“Speaking of which,” Zhang interjected. “The PRIEST Division has officially been established. Right now they only have military and training branches utilized, but they have three more they will begin using upon completion of the Manchurian Project.”
“We should focus on getting that done,” the Commander nodded. “That incident with the Imperator was a wakeup call. We can’t have our psions going rogue or turning into double agents. Anti-psionics should be prioritized.”

“You may wish to update Vahlen on that,” Aegis said. “However, I would encourage her not to be…overzealous in her efforts. One certain project she is working on is…disquieting.”

The Commander and Zhang exchanged an ironic look. Knowing Vahlen, that could mean a number of different things. She hadn’t had ‘benign’ projects for some time, or at least none a normal person would consider such. “You’ll have to be more specific,” the Commander said, raising an eyebrow.

“The one with the…” Aegis paused, as if recalling. “Octopus. The unnatural multi-limbed creature.”

First jellyfish, now octopi. The Commander wasn’t sure what project that was, but given how Aegis didn’t seem to like anti-psionics research in general, he was taking it with a grain of salt. She was probably looking at it for its regenerative aspects or something similar; he couldn’t see the immediate connection to psionics.

Regardless, he certainly wasn’t going to restrain her just because she made Aegis uncomfortable.

Who would have thought one, though admittedly brilliant, Human woman would be able to get such a reaction from a being who could shield entire planets and dominate minds with his psionic abilities?

He would have to tell her that later, she’d find it funny.

“The PRIEST Division will likely be our greatest weapon for a long time,” Zhang said thoughtfully. “Smart that ADVENT wants to deploy it, and press our advantage before the next alien attack.”

“It’ll come down to the plan,” the Commander said, although he nodded. “But I expect that it will be suitably comprehensive. Commander Christiaens is good at that, at least.”

“Indeed,” Zhang looked up at Aegis with an amused smirk. “I suppose you’ll refrain from participating as well.”

“There is little need,” Aegis stated immediately. “I will repeat again that when the time is right, I will help. But not before then.”

The Commander sincerely hoped that wouldn’t be tested for some time, but he felt that with each advance ADVENT made, that day was coming faster and faster.

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The Hall of Steel, Blacksite 05 – Unknown

11/16/2016 - ?

The Battlemaster wondered at times if Fectorian was overly paranoid. Approaching his Blacksite in the Cultro, he was always first struck by just how large the space station really was. A Gateway would have been preferable, but Fectorian didn’t have any connected to the network due to security concerns, although the Battlemaster doubted that he couldn’t have found some way to protect himself.
The station didn’t look like a secretive Blacksite, but something close to a shipyard. It was segmented into clear levels, with a central square pillar and square blocks for each of the floors, all the size of a small city. On the third level there was an extension that was a full shipyard, which could be adjusted to create anything from small fighters to capital ships.

Fectorian was almost a military power unto himself, and no one had any idea. The entire solar system was augmented and trapped by his fleet and drones. Each planet was in the process of being mined for resources with his extensive automated forces, which was likely why he’d chosen a barren system to begin with.

Further small sections extended from various floors, but otherwise weren’t nearly as eye-catching as the shipyards, but what also soon became apparent were the extensive arrays of defenses on the station itself. Plasma, beam, magnetic, and since the Battlemaster genuinely didn’t recognize some of the weapons, he assumed Fectorian was actually incorporating Sovereign tech into his designs.

Good. More Ethereals needed to start doing that.

Behind the station was the first project he had undertaken upon the completion of the Hall of Steel: The Star Harvester, a vast collections of complicated rings, automated drones, and other small structures around the star of the system, which continuously harvested energy from it. As a result, Fectorian ended up with more energy than he knew what to do with, and stored his stockpile on one of the planets, and gave as much as was needed whenever the Collective asked.

As the project had only been completed recently, the Battlemaster had discussed developing these in other controlled systems, but now he didn’t expect that to happen until the Human matter was dealt with. The Human Solar System might be a good place for one, since it would take an extensive amount of energy to fully modernize it.

“Battlemaster, please approach Hangar level 2. Fectorian is expecting you.” The automated voice cut out, and the Battlemaster directed his ship towards the appropriate level. He knew the Blacksite was run by a machine intelligence Fectorian had developed, and would have expected by now it would figure out that he knew the way.

And that he’d just been here several days ago.

A few minutes later, he finally landed the ship and stepped outside into the Hangar. Fectorian was almost as much of a showman as Quisilia sometimes, since there was no reason to have entire rows of his soldiers in every Hangar. All were organized according to species and race. They were always the lowest version possible, since Fectorian saved his actual masterpieces for his private use, and rarely showed them to anyone.

In general, the augmented rows of Vitakara, Mutons, and Sectoids weren’t ultimately much different than normal. Ever since the creation of the Star Harvester, Fectorian had taken that as his emblem and all of his soldiers had the outline of the rings around a sphere on their shoulders, or on other pieces of cybernetics.

Most had exclusively cybernetic limbs, with some having one or two original ones. Eyes were usually replaced with mechanical alternates, and each soldier had an implant that covered the entire spine and ended at the base of the brain, further enhancing their abilities. The soldiers stood as still as statues as he exited, except for one…Human…who approached him.

This was new.

It was a female, and for one, didn’t look augmented in any way. Long black hair, porcelain skin
and a face Human males would likely describe as ‘attractive’. She was clothed in the armored harness Fectorian’s workers wore, a mixture of black sleeves, gloves, silver armor plates, and grey harnesses which held a collection of tools and equipment. “Battlemaster,” she greeted emotionlessly, but giving him a smile. “Follow me.”

Even her voice didn’t have the artificial tinge the rest of his army had. Curious. He knew Fectorian was experimenting on Humans, but not to such an extent. The modifications were likely internal then. Fectorian didn’t like making replicas, so he doubted that this was a purely automated machine that just looked like a Human.

They reached the end of the room, and the woman pressed a button which opened the door and they stepped inside a steel box. On the inside, the woman then entered some information into the panel, and the door shut. Fectorian had designed the station so that as little time was wasted as possible, which meant that the station was partitioned into hundreds of separate sections, all of which could be reached by a magnetic rail system, which combined with an internal Gateway system to allow anyone to reach any part of the station in seconds.

So it was not even half a minute later when the box transport stopped, opened the door and they were in Fectorian’s personal lab. Or one of them, at least. He had at least twelve, which he used for different kinds of experiments and fields. This was clearly one devoted to alien autopsy and scanning, as there were stacks of aliens in stasis, in various states of health. All of them were faced with life-ending injuries, and had been sent to him as a result.

Some would become part of his army, others would simply die, and he would recycle them. The room was exceptionally clean, as metallic drones scrubbed the steel floor continuously, and turned whatever materials and waste they picked up into more resources. There were several complex scanning machines on the left side of the room, and on the right were medical machines with suites of nanomachines and medical drones which would generally ensure that the subjects didn’t die before Fectorian got to them.

In the center was Fectorian’s main suite of cybernetic enhancement tools. There was a main table for holding the being in place, with multiple drones for lighting, delicate tasks, and providing more tools. Monitors and consoles were to the sides, displaying vitals and additional medical information. And Fectorian was there himself, though for once not working on some Vitakara or Muton.

It appeared that he wasn’t in his full armored suit this time, and had his ‘engineer’ suit on. Fectorian seemed to never decide what to wear when they met. As he was extensively modified, with his two lower arms being cybernetic replacements, as were both of his legs, and even his unmodified arms had ports to plug enlarged cybernetic limbs into them. He wore no cloth or soft material of any kind, but different types of metal plating that always changed in complexity.

The back of the armor had an attachment that acted as yet another set of small spindly limbs which could angle in front of his body, and could be used for pinpoint manipulation, holding trays of small tools, or laser cutting. The eyes were mechanical with a purple shining iris, and the helmet was simply an extension of his armor, covering his mouth and head, while leaving the eyes exposed, though there were panels built in that shut if he was in substantial danger.

Still, he only stood close to nine feet. His other suit did allow him to stand as tall as the Battlemaster himself, but it was mainly for combat, or so Fectorian said.

“Good, you came at the right time,” Fectorian greeted, his voice lacking the layered vocals of other Ethereals, and having a metallic tinge instead. “How do you like her?”
The Battlemaster looked at the Human who walked a few feet past him, and turned around. “I don’t know what you did,” he said, not entirely interested. “She was efficient.”

“Hm, you didn’t notice anything?” Fectorian asked, walking over to him, appraising the woman. “Excellent. That was the point. I’ll consider this a success.” He pressed a button on his wrist and the woman started changing. Her skin dissolved before him, the hair receded and even the clothes melted away as if on fire.

What remained was a metallic humanoid figure with dark grey metal limbs, with noticeable grooves and lines on them. Only the teeth actually remained white. Fectorian walked over to her and pressed several buttons which made the machine’s jaw drop open on its hinge, and the upper skull slide away to reveal the inner brain.

“A replica,” the Battlemaster slowly nodded, looking inside as the ‘brain’ which was a grey box with wires and LED lights in it. “I thought you disliked those?”

“A prototype, as I said,” Fectorian explained, reverting the replica to a normal state, with the jaw and head back in place. “I first needed to see if I could create a passable replica, and I appear to have succeeded here. Furthermore, I can control the entire physical appearance of the replica itself.”

The replica suddenly grew new skin, hair and clothes, and the Battlemaster was now staring at a dark-skinned woman with curly white hair, with severe burns on the left side of her face. “Nanites are useful machines,” Fectorian said with satisfaction. “However, I know you didn’t come to see my projects, but rest assured I will have much to show you in the future.”

He motioned him to follow and the Battlemaster did. “It was an interesting challenge you posed,” Fectorian commented. “But with what you provided, I was able to fulfill what you want. Your arm is fully healed, correct?”

“Yes,” the Battlemaster had been forced to have Sana repair the damage, but it was a minor injury at worst. “But I would prefer not to have that happen again.”

They then stepped in front of a small pedestal which Fectorian was proudly displaying the request the Battlemaster had given him shortly after the battle: A new and improved suit of armor. The basic design was almost entirely the same, but there were several obvious differences. The first was that the armor was lined with small rods which were positioned at an upwards angle all the way down the torso. The rods then curled to the back, and connected to an armored cylinder close to the back of the neck.

The arms and legs also had rods lining them, four in total, spaced evenly apart and growing connected into one towards the torso itself, and then also connected to the cylinder on the back. The fingers of the gauntlets were now tipped with the rods as well, but also had a point which the Battlemaster guessed could be retracted into the gauntlet itself.

“One electricity-proof set of armor, as requested,” Fectorian stated with a flourish. “I appreciate you gathering the materials needed, and finally providing the schematics for your Battlemaster equipment. Unfortunate your division was so secretive, since there were many improvements to be made in the designs, but I do understand now.”

The Battlemaster didn’t comment. Truthfully, he’d never expected his armor to fail him, and there had been no reason to disclose the secrets of the Battlemasters. However, it was time to move past that and Fectorian was one who could be trusted with them. It wasn’t as though he could simply make more later.
“And I assume you have tested this extensively?” He asked.

“You know me better than to ask,” Fectorian dismissed. “Yes, of course I did. And if XCOM tries to electrocute you again, every blast will simply gather the energy into a battery of my own design. Once it becomes powerful enough, you can discharge it back at them. Fitting, I think.” He pointed to the armor. “Electricity follows the path of least resistance, so there are plenty of more conductible metals to attract a lightning bolt.”

“I doubt that’s enough to absorb the entire blast,” the Battlemaster said skeptically.

“In the event where that is likely, I have lined the internal suit with additional non-conductive materials,” Fectorian continued. “And there is an additional layer of nanites between that, which are specifically designed to absorb bursts of electricity. You will not be harmed by lightning while wearing this, and you will retain the durability of the armor you wear now.”

The Battlemaster looked at the suit. At least it looked similar, but it was still a change he wasn’t entirely comfortable with. Still, he had to adapt and being immune to electricity attacks was a major advantage, especially if XCOM kept using those weapons. He had no reason to doubt Fectorian, but would definitely gain some practice before the next attack.

“Excellent work,” the Battlemaster nodded. “And the other project?”

“Ah, simple,” Fectorian stated absentmindedly. “A sensor upgrade is not difficult, and it was quite needed. You needn’t fear being tricked by fake nuclear signals. We will know if they are actually being used, or in the vicinity.”

That was perhaps even better news. “I believe at some point I will wish to use your own forces in battle,” the Battlemaster said. “I assume you would be able to spare some?”

“Finally,” Fectorian said, spinning around and not waiting for him to follow. “As powerful as my army is, it is rather pointless with nothing to do. It would be good to actually gather usable combat data. But don’t use my basic units. I have plenty more advanced models that need field testing, and a few more I am working on.”

They reached his table again, and Fectorian activated a holodisplay. “Units which…address key weaknesses in our forces. If the Humans wish to escalate this conflict, I am more than happy to test their limits.”

The Battlemaster looked over the proposed units, along with the accompanying project names. The ARCHON Project was certainly in response to the Archangels, while the REPLICA Project was definitely for more clandestine operations. It was clear what the Replica was, as Fectorian had demonstrated.

The SPECTRE Project appeared to be more of a doomsday weapon, one which could easily backfire, but Fectorian was not one for making mistakes. “How close are these to completion?” He asked.

“The base goals of the SPECTRE and REPLICA are essentially done,” Fectorian said. “Sadly, ARCHON is in the beginning stages, but I will endeavor to finish it if it is needed.”

“Do that,” the Battlemaster said thoughtfully. “I have other uses for what remains.”

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Situation Room, the Citadel – United States of America
It didn’t feel too long since the last meeting, since the first counterattack. Quite a bit had happened, and ADVENT apparently wanted to push this advantage, since the Collective would almost undoubtedly try and correct their mistakes. The Commander was joined by Patricia and Zhang, for once none of them in armor, just standard fatigues because as the Commander had understood it, this was just a planning meeting, not something that would be carried out right away.

They were all familiar with the routine now, gathered around the holotable as they waited for Laura to begin her presentation. Beside her were Weekes and Elizabeth, with Saudia and Mercado at the end of the table, and opposite her was a new addition to the leadership.

Finn Gerstner, Vicar General of the newly launched PRIEST Division Military Branch was almost the perfect poster child for the program. The Swiss man had been an extremely popular government official, and had been one of the largest supporters and recruiters of ADVENT, and had joined the PRIEST Program once launched, and had encouraged others to follow suit.

It turned out that he was one of the six Leviathan-class Psions ADVENT had, and in the initial training he’d proven an excellent leader, as well as quickly grasping the basics of psionic theory fast. Vicar General had been deemed the best place for him, especially with his Offensive psionic affinity. He also stood out because the PRIEST attire was much different than standard ADVENT military fatigues.

In addition to the…interesting designation of Vicar General, a title clearly born of old religious titles, the PRIEST Division had also decided to fully embrace the pseudo-religious elements the name entailed. Their non-combat uniforms were a white-silver vest and pants, with the title and affinity symbol on their upper chest, the golden ADVENT logo was embroidered on the shoulders, and there was a short ceremonial white shoulder cape similar to the Officers. They wore no gloves or gauntlets, nor had any sort of self-defense weaponry, but their psionics clearly made up for that.

The translucent quality of his white skin, and golden-rimmed blue eyes also indicated his extensive genetic modification, which the Commander assumed was fairly standard for the PRIESTs.

Commander Christiaens cleared her throat, and began speaking as the holotable lit up with a map of the Western United States.

“Thank you all for being here. Since we are making the final preparations, it’s time everyone be brought up to speed,” she looked up, briefly glancing at all of them as she continued. “While we made a lot of progress in retaking America, much of that can be attributed to the Collective underestimating us. We caught them flatfooted, and we can’t assume they won’t try and make adjustments against future operations.”

She rested her hands on the holotable. “Simply put, we have an extremely limited window to act before the advantage we have is lost. We have the Shieldbearers, SHIVs, MDUs, XCOM has the Archangels, and we now have our PRIESTs. The Collective does not have any answers right now, and we need to press that. This opportunity will pass before too long, so over the past couple weeks, I’ve been working with the entirety of the military to devise a plan to take back the rest of the United States and push the aliens back to square one.”

The states of Nevada, California, and Hawaii lit up in red. “This will consist of two operations,” Laura continued. “Operation Sherman, which will take back the United States mainland, and Operation Kamehameha, for reclaiming Hawaii.” She manipulated the focus of the holotable, and the holotable zoomed to focus on Hawaii.

“Operation Kamehameha will initially serve as a distraction to Operation Sherman,” Laura
continued. “Over the past weeks we have been massing our naval forces to the Bering Sea, off the coast of Russia, and off the Pacific coast of Mexico. ADVENT Intelligence has determined that the islands are heavily fortified, but can be retaken with a dedicated attack.”

“What forces have been identified?” The Commander asked.

“Vitakara, primarily Vitakarians and Cobrarians,” Laura answered immediately. “This is in addition to a strong Muton presence, and they suspect there is a Sargon in charge of the islands. Luckily, the force is primarily infantry, although there is a strong automated line of turrets and point-laser defense systems. But no naval forces.”

“Andromedons?” Saudia asked.

“None that we have located,” Laura responded. “There are a minimum of twelve Gateways spread out through the islands, which will allow them immediate reinforcements, but they also lack any air support.”

“Which might be a problem,” Weekes pointed out. “While I know our carriers have Ravens…”

“Which is why Operation Kraken will go into effect here,” Laura countered, looking at all of them. “For those who are not aware, that is our operation using our extensive submarine forces to deny air assets. Which essentially means once we detect UFOs approaching, they surface and fire missiles into the air. Although in this case, they would be armed with both conventional and nuclear weapons.”

Finn raised a hand. “Excuse me Commander, isn’t that a…well, bad idea?”

“Not as bad as you think,” Laura reassured him. “Nuclear weapons are indeed devastating on land, but in the atmosphere the radiation is greatly reduced, or negated entirely. Using them at a high enough altitude will prevent the ensuing blast and EMP from affecting ground forces. While we should be hesitant using them on land, there is little reason to refrain from using them in the air, and the blast will remove any threat the Collective sends to reinforce Hawaii.”

Several submarine figures appeared on the holomap. “Submarines will be deployed around the island six hours before the operation commences and prepare their payloads. There will be two paths of attack, from Russia, and from Mexico, hitting the islands of Kauai and Hawai’i respectively.”

“Hawai’i will be a long one,” Weekes commented. “Insertion will be bloody.”

“Not if done correctly,” Laura stated. “We will use a combined force of Lancers, Shieldbearers, and PRIESTs for the initial invasion, while our naval forces provide long-range bombardment on all the islands. Upon establishing a beachhead, teams of Engineers will establish Gateways and bring in reinforcements from our more secure locations in the Eastern United States, Russia, and India.”

“Good idea,” the Commander nodded. “But the Gateways will pose a target.”

“They will, but they will also be transported in pieces to be assembled,” Laura answered. “Our teams are able to get a segmented Gateway working in under ten minutes. Our initial teams can hold out long enough for that. Then we will begin taking the islands, moving to the next one once the current one is taken. Portable artillery will be established to fire at nearby islands as well, if applicable.”

“This will certainly get their attention,” Saudia commented. “They are definitely not going to just
“That’s what we’re hoping for, hence the perhaps disproportionate force,” Laura clarified. “Once we know we have their attention, we launch Operation Sherman, and what I consider the more important one.”

The holotable shifted to the United States again. “Their only territory are outpost bases in Nevada and most of California,” Laura continued. “They have been heavily fortified, but they are vulnerable to a sudden, blanket, and surprise attack. And they have made one critical weakness in their defenses.”

Finn raised an eyebrow. “Explain?”

Laura gave a grim smile. “They haven’t secured the rail system. There are rail tracks that go straight into every city in California. I don’t know if this is an oversight, or they don’t know how dangerous that is. But this is what we’ve been working towards, to exploit this before they figure it out.”

The map disappeared, and in its place appeared a train, but not a regular one. This one had been reinforced with alloys, making the carts protected boxes, and on the top were AA, laser, and various other kinds of weaponry. The main engine was similarly protected, and the back car was simply carrying a tank.

“This is the converted ADVENT Battle Train,” Laura explained. “There are many countries that have extensive rail networks, and that is something we can’t forget. Europe, South Korea, and America all have them, and all will likely become battlegrounds in the future.”

“This has been a project we’ve been working on for some time,” Mercado said, speaking for the first time. “Prototypes were tested and constructed in Russia, which involved experiments with molten salt reactors, and more recently, elerium generators to vastly improve its power output. We added various turrets and armoring to allow it to survive sustained barrages, but it is an extremely fast and devastating method of quickly striking targets.”

“Once tests were conducted successfully, we’ve been converting trains into this in the Eastern United States, and more recently Canada and Mexico,” Laura continued. “This is to throw off any spies watching us. The Battle Trains will be packed with soldiers, vehicles, equipment, and Gateways and hit the major cities.”

“All of them?” Saudia asked with some skepticism. “Do we have that many?”

“We have plenty,” Laura reassured her. “And not all of them will be Battle Trains. We’ve also been mocking up some suicide trains, old ones, which will contain MOAB explosive devices, and several deployed per identified alien stronghold in the smaller cities will take out substantial numbers, and this done in coordination will cause chaos in their communications.”

“So for the main attacks, what is your plan?” The Commander asked.

“Battle Trains with primarily Lancers, MDUs, and PRIESTs will make up the first wave, along with armor units,” Laura said, returning to the map with the rails highlighted in red, going to the major California cities. “The Trains will establish themselves to provide supporting fire as the rest of the forces establish beachheads. Several railroads will be left unoccupied to allow for Suicide Trains to go into the heart of their cities and detonate. Once they are fully occupied, the second waves will come.”
Holographic planes appeared over the cities. “At this time will we be deploying the second wave of Battle Trains, with primarily infantry reinforcements, in addition to those coming through the Gateways, and begin airdropping additional vehicles, Lancers, Shieldbearers, and conducting airstrikes on marked targets.”

She highlighted the ocean around California. “Operation Kraken will also be applied along the West Coast. While this might not completely negate air support, it will hinder it. With the second waves in, the general advance for the rest of our forces will commence, and we should have hopefully overwhelmed the aliens enough to take back California and Nevada before they realize what is happening.”

The Commander was impressed with the whole plan. There was just something he needed to bring up. “An attack this scale will warrant a reprisal, not just a defense,” he pointed out. “We’ll need to be prepared.”

“That’s the question,” Laura nodded gravely. “Theoretically, they could attack anywhere. I’ve ordered South Korea receive extra reinforcements, and it’s also possible that Mexico or Canada will be attacked, Canada more so since there is a small alien presence in Alaska.”

“And Caelior or the Battlemaster could show up,” Weekes added. “Which our forces can’t really stop.”

“Leave the Ethereals to us,” the Commander said. “If you do encounter them…have your forces immediately pull back and let us handle them. We almost killed the Battlemaster once. We can do it again.”

“At the end, what I hope we achieve is a reclaimed America,” Laura finished. “For once, I believe we have the advantage here. Not just in strategy, but also in psionics. If this goes well, they will only really have Australia, most of the Oceanic nations, and Japan.”

“Indeed,” Saudia nodded, looking over to her. “When will this be launched?”

“Within the next week,” Laura said. “We need enough trains ready, and in several days we’ll have a critical mass of PRIESTs ready to go. If the aliens launch an attack somewhere else…we can launch it and at minimum draw their attention.”

“XCOM will be ready to provide support wherever you need,” the Commander said. “I’ll begin preparing squads whenever you need them.”

“Appreciated, Commander,” she inclined her head. “Hopefully we’ll be enjoying another victory soon.”

“Indeed,” he smiled grimly. “The aliens being forced to retreat would certainly be a nice change of pace.”

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Mars Observation Station, Mars Orbit – Solar System

11/17/2016 – 1:14 A.M.

ADVENT was doing something, and Ravarian didn’t like how it looked at all. The holographic report in front of him didn’t assuage that feeling, and the fact that the Battlemaster was standing in front of him waiting for him to say something didn’t make him feel better either. “When are you planning to launch the attack on Korea?” He asked, shutting off the projector in his palm.
“Within days,” the Battlemaster answered. “I want an accurate assessment of ADVENT’s forces. Your agents will determine the speed of how soon we deploy.”

“They will have that to you within two days,” Ravarian said, knowing that would be more than enough time. “However…ADVENT is clearly preparing for something. Likely our attack, but we’re not completely sure what it is.”

The Battlemaster looked down at him. “What do you have?”

“A name,” Ravarian said. “PRIEST. We suspect it has something to do with psionics, and if so… there is a high possibility that ADVENT is going to begin fielding psionic soldiers in the future, if they don’t have some already prepared. Their naval forces have also been rapidly moving through the pacific.”

“Unsurprising,” the Battlemaster said. “Utilizing the psionic potential within their species was inevitable. I will have to factor this in. The naval forces either imply an attack in America, or more likely, preparation to defend Korea. Alternately, they could be preparing to strike us in Australia or Japan when we don’t expect it.”

“Should we deploy some Andromedon Aquatic Forces?” Ravarian asked.

“No, not yet,” the Battlemaster dismissed, raising a hand. “Let us see what they do first. It is more beneficial for the moment for ADVENT to make a move, if they can. They believe they have an advantage, and they will likely wish to exploit it since they know it won’t last forever.”

Ravarian agreed, which was why he wasn’t entirely comfortable with doing nothing until ADVENT acted. “The defenses we’ve recorded for Korea are more extensive than we expected. I’m not certain our forces are adequately prepared for taking the cities. ADVENT has been smart in constructing their defenses.”

“I am aware,” the Battlemaster nodded. “But they can’t win a war of attrition. And their attempt at turning our attacks into sieges will likely fail. Trenches are an interesting idea, but it will be a temporary issue at best.”

Ravarian didn’t quite know if he should politely disagree. He’d initially been skeptical when he’d seen the first of the new ADVENT defenses. The towers were impressive, but ‘Trench Warfare’ as the Humans called it was an alien concept. However, after performing some research, he was of the opinion that it was tactically a very smart move, especially since ADVENT had clearly worked to negate the disadvantages of the tactic.

And it made him acutely aware of the fact that the Collective didn’t exactly have a powerful artillery unit. Or artillery at all. The Sectopods had a limited range, but the military was primarily composed of infantry units. Their spacecraft was an advantage, but everything he’d read indicated that attempting to cross the famed ‘no-man’s land’ was not only questionable, it was suicidal.

ADVENT was on an even technological level, weapon wise, and he had the vision of a frontal charge leading to ADVENT tearing them apart.

That wouldn’t do.

“With respect, Battlemaster, that I do not believe is accurate,” the Battlemaster looked over to him, Ravarian swallowed, and continued. “Utilizing trenches has, historically for Humans, been devastating to infantry forces. It wasn’t as effective against vehicles, but still dangerous. The Collective is primarily composed of infantry, and an open area with no cover is not optimal ground
The Battlemaster looked at him for a few moments. “Noted, Zar’Chon. I will keep that in mind. Is there anything else?”

Ravarian shook his head. “Nothing major. ADVENT has begun arming their trains of all things. Perhaps they think we’ll be attacking their supply lines, but otherwise it doesn’t make sense.”

“ADVENT doesn’t do something without a reason,” the Battlemaster mused, turning away. “Ensure that your agents have a comprehensive report. I do not want ADVENT to become comfortable, nor get any ideas.”

“Yes, Battlemaster,” Ravarian confirmed. “It will be done soon.”

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Abuja – Nigeria

11/17/2017 – 12:28 P.M.

The alien had said he would come to her, and that it would be soon. Betos didn’t know when or how, but she had her soldiers on the lookout for anyone suspicious. So for now she just stood leaning against the outside of her refitted command center, thinking on what the implications of this would be.

Getting the attention of the aliens was not something she had expected. Not yet at least, it would have come in the future, but not for a long time yet. They would still have ADVENT to contend with, and SAS was relatively small when compared to the larger war. She hadn’t really thought which side she really fell on, although right now the answer was definitively neither.

ADVENT she would not support, but that didn’t mean that the aliens would be any better. They wouldn’t be fighting if they were intent on actual peace, although given the leadership of ADVENT, perhaps they didn’t want that to begin with. The largest problem was that she didn’t know much about the aliens to begin with. She hadn’t fought them, or ever seen a live one.

Videos, briefings, and images yes, but all of those were from ADVENT. They listed appearance, combat abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. Not really anything about their motivations, goals, or organization, aside from ‘kill the Humans.’

She snorted.

No, at the very least there was more to the aliens than war. She doubted a culture could be sustained by such to begin with, but the question was what said culture entailed. They could be just as bad, if not worse, than ADVENT. But she didn’t know, and hopefully this Macula would clarify some for her.

If there was one thing she was apprehensive about, it was that this was an Ethereal, and they were rather…notorious. First the vaunted Battlemaster, and the other one, Caelior. Both could single-handedly take on entire armies and win. Could all of them do that? And they were all psionic as far as she knew, so she was at risk of being mind-controlled.

The issue was now that it didn’t really matter what she wanted. Even if she refused, they could control her mind. But they’d found her without any effort on her part, so they intended for her to have some role, and she doubted that it needed to be voluntary.
“It doesn’t,” the layered voice of Macula said beside her. “But there is little of value in that.”

Betos jumped and had her pistol in her hand the moment the Ethereal began speaking, but she wasn’t able to do anything as it was yanked out of her hand and hovered in front of the raised palm of the alien.

The Ethereal was much more intimidating in person. He towered over her, at least three meters or more, his attire a mixture of a silver armor that protected his legs, arms and chest, with some kind of blue cloth or weave underneath it. There was also a cape of the same color that fell from his shoulders, and attached to it was an obscuring hood that shadowed his entire face, save for the glowing orange orbs within it; eyes most likely.

She swallowed.

“No reason to be alarmed,” he said, orienting his palm horizontally and the pistol floated back to her, which she took. “If I wanted to kill you, you would be dead already.”

“I expected you to make an announcement, not appear out of nowhere,” Betos said, holstering her weapon. “Apologies, Ethereal Macula.”

“Accepted, Lady Betos,” he said, appearing to nod slightly. “Now, I believe we have some things to discuss.”

Betos looked at the door, now realizing that the height of the alien might be an issue. “The office may be somewhat…confined.”

“Then we walk,” Macula said.

Betos glanced around, actually surprised that no one had stumbled upon them yet. “Someone may see you-“

“No,” Macula raised the opposite upper hand. “They will not. I have made sure of that. Walk with me, Lady Betos, there is something I believe you should see.” He stepped into the street, and Betos followed, becoming more concerned at the ominous words. The implications were disconcerting at best, and terrifying at worst.

Would an Ethereal really kill her soldiers to make a point? Especially if he wanted an alliance?

They rounded a corner and she suddenly saw what he was talking about. It was filled with soldiers, sitting around, talking with each other, or in formation. It was something completely normal, except for one minor detail.

All of them were completely frozen in place.

Dead silence filled the area, aside from the steps she and Macula made as they walked forward. It was bizarre. They appeared alive, and she did note they were still breathing, but otherwise they didn’t seem to register anything else. She stood in front of one of her soldiers, one who was walking, and got no acknowledgement.

“What did you do to them?” She asked slowly.

“Simply altered their perception,” Macula said, standing behind her. “The measurement of time is a curious subject. It cannot be truly stopped, and controlling it is little more than a fringe theory, but what can be controlled is one’s perception of it.” He motioned to the frozen crowd. “They do not realize anything. Their minds are in the moment, unable to move forward. Should I release them,
they will not be aware of any difference initially. Frozen in this moment, they are blind to the world around them.”

Betos blinked. “What about their bodies? Their thoughts?”

“Theyir bodies function, but they will not realize or feel anything until their minds are released,” Macula explained. “They could starve, die, burn, and they would not react or feel. Their thoughts are frozen in the moment they were stopped. Painless; elegant; something I have mastered over decades. An army is useless if their minds can simply be trapped in the present.”

So this was a demonstration of his power. Fine, though for what end she could only guess at. “I assume you have a point to this?” She asked.

“Of course,” he said, walking around to face her directly, amusement permeating his voice; amusement and confidence. She could barely look into the glowing eyes; she was not easily intimidated, but Macula was an exception. “I know what you fear. You are no fool. You know ADVENT will not ignore your alliance forever, and you will eventually be crushed. You know your influence over the SAS is limited, and it is becoming what you fled in the first place. You have lost your power, if you had any to begin with.”

He paused. “But you have something useful to me. You have a vision of your ambitions. And unlike many, you follow this vision even if it leads to undesired results. You have risked your life, and that of your friends, and in doing so, you managed to begin the reformation of this continent. The men you allied yourself with are self-serving and dangerous, more concerned with their own power than the future. They cannot see beyond their settled scores and conquests. ADVENT is propaganda, the aliens don’t exist, and their enemies are ripe for defeating.”

The Ethereal sounded like he chuckled, a low rumble. “You value honesty, Lady Betos, so I will comply. I care little for your species. The majority are not worth my time, and there are greater concerns in this galaxy. Yet if I must intervene, I will shape your people into something acceptable. But though I have the vision, I am not human. You have vision, and you are. In some ways, our goals are aligned.”

“I think,” Betos said slowly. “That what we have in mind for my species would be radically different.”

“Are they?” He asked, almost a hiss. “I desire a species purged of the corruption and filth that permeate your kind, one that is incapable of betraying our Collective, and one trained and prepared for the wars to come.” He inhaled. “There are wars coming, Lady Betos, ones far larger and greater than this one ADVENT wages. The other species are flawed, shaped by forces beyond our control and our leaders lack the resolve to force change. Humans have the potential to be uplifted correctly, controlled and freed from the weaknesses of the lesser species. That is what I wish from your species.”

He motioned to her. “The details of how that is accomplished…that is where you come in. Governance, laws, cultures; these concepts I have little interest in, much less building from nothing. You do however, or you know who you would need. That is what I offer you, Lady Betos, a chance to complete my vision, and reforge your species as you envision it. And with my support, you have no fear of being stopped.”

His arm suddenly lashed out to the side, and a thin obsidian dagger flew into a nearby man, talking with one of her soldiers. It buried itself in his throat, yet his expression didn’t change as the blood slowly seeped out of his neck. “What—“ Betos began, as Macula telekinetically pulled the dagger back, and blood began pouring out, soaking his shirt in it, while his expression stayed the same.
“An ADVENT spy,” Macula explained. “One sent to watch you. As we speak my own operatives are purging the ring of spies ADVENT has embedded within the SAS and will establish means to ensure this does not happen again. You would be assassinated if ADVENT believed you posed a threat, and continuing on your path, you would be.”

The body suddenly collapsed to the ground, as the man died, the same expression on his face. “I can protect you against ADVENT, the men you have allied yourselves with, and anyone else,” Macula continued. “Work to achieve my vision, and none will be able to stop you. You have wished to make a difference your entire life. There is no better opportunity than now.”

Betos thought for a moment. The saying “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is” came to mind. But at the same time…any alien that could do…that…could be a powerful ally. She wasn’t sure if his ultimate goals were something she wanted to accomplish, but if he did allow her to have a hand in shaping the future, could she really afford to pass it up?

At the very least, it couldn’t hurt, and if Macula was telling the truth…

Perhaps she could do things the right way. No more worrying about corruption, power plays, or the things that had plagued humanity since the beginning to time.

She met his burning eyes. “Very well,” she said. “I accept. Where do you want to start?”

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*Unknown – Desolan*

11/18/2016

Nartha felt that he was in a decent enough position. He was still armed, the dead man’s switch was working which would immediately send everything to the Zararch if he unexpectedly died as had been clearly pointed out to Merina’s contact, which was a male Vitakarian who hadn’t exactly been pleased to meet him, but hadn’t wasted his time and simply gestured to follow him.

He’d then been directed to a Desolan-issue speeder, which all of them had climbed in and they’d shot off beyond the War Camps. It wasn’t too unusual, since there were speeder patrols every so often and there were cases where various officers used them to travel between War Camps. Nartha wasn’t relying on memory to get back, since he wasn’t familiar enough with the geography to have a chance to begin with.

Things had started to become more interesting when they’d entered one of the mountains and had gone progressively deeper. There were no light sources other than the speeder itself, and Nartha couldn’t help but feel slightly nervous since the speed hadn’t been reduced, which made him concerned that they would suddenly crash into the stone walls.

That would be anticlimactic.

“No wonder no one has found you,” Nartha muttered. “Everyone who followed would die.”

“Yes,” the driver said without hesitation. “They would.”

No further elaboration was given, so Nartha decided to stay quiet for the time. All he really knew was that he’d be meeting the leader, and they weren’t planning on killing him. Fair enough, since he wasn’t planning on doing anything like that either. He hadn’t pressed for details, knowing he’d likely get that eventually, and questions would likely only make Merina’s contact even more suspicious of him.
After some time, they shot into an illuminated and open area deep within the mountain. Nartha blinked to adjust to the sudden light, and he then got his first good look at the…base? Sanctuary? He wasn’t sure what to call it, aside from that the area was massive and had to have been at least as large as a War Camp.

But it was noticeably different in several ways. There were waterfalls with a steady stream coming from several points, and small canals had been dug creating some variety to the brown dirt, which culminated in a central lake-like depression. There were small square houses built from clearly flimsy material, but given that there were zero elements to worry about, it was competent enough.

He looked up at the light sources, and they were indeed artificial, both hanging from the angled mountain roof, and built into the stone itself. The illumination was extensive, and was just as bright and clear as if it had come from a sun. But what truly captured his attention were the hundreds of Mutons that occupied the area.

He was so used to seeing them in armor that it was…startling to see them wearing primarily cloth coverings and garments the Vitakara normally wore. What few of them did have armor, it wasn’t the bulky plating, but maybe a few alloys woven into regular garments, with some kind of language written on them.

The Mutons themselves were physically different than the ones in the War Camps. The males were not as stocky or tall, even if they would outmass a base Human or Vitakarian. The females were the most notably different, as they were much smaller, and ended up only being only slightly taller than the males, and stood straight instead of hunched over like he’d seen from several of the Berserkers.

Taking them off combat drugs and harsh training regimens had really changed them. Hm. It wasn’t ideal, but they could function well if properly armed and armored. Hopefully the tradeoff for this had been a substantial increase in intelligence. If not, at minimum they would serve as a good vanguard to a more dangerous force.

The speeder finally stopped, and the cockpit hood lifted, and all of them got out. It was by the edge of the artificial lake, and a short distance away was a small open tent, where several figures Nartha couldn’t determine were gathered around. It was surprisingly not as hot as he’d been expecting, and he assumed they had also installed either cooling or air conditioning systems into the cave as well.

“This way,” their guide said, and began walking toward the tent. They were beginning to attract some attention, especially from the various Mutons. He noticed that the groups tended to be either what he thought were…families, as odd as that sounded, since there was one male, one female, and usually three or four children, or groups of just children. It was odd seeing that from Mutons of all things.

Intermixed were other Vitakara, largely Dath’Haram, but also Vitakarians and Cobrarian, all of whom were armed and looked at him with obvious suspicion. They were apparently protective of the children, since they made sure to get in front of them while watching him.

Interesting.

The tent had three individuals. One of them was a Dath’Haram male, the next a Vitakarian female, and the final a Muton male. All of them were speaking with each other, and stopped once they walked up. “Zar’nartha’inha,” the Dath’Haram greeted, baring his teeth in greeting. “Welcome, to our Enclave.”

Merina and the guide had disappeared, leaving him alone. That was fine by him, since they
ultimately didn’t matter anymore. The Vitakara were wearing a mixture of tan desert survival gear, while the Muton was one of those that was armored. None were armed as far as he saw, and he inclined his head. “I appreciate you inviting me so quickly.”

“Considering you threatened to expose us, don’t pretend it was a simple request on your part,” the Vitakarian spat at him.

“He is Zararch,” the Muton said. “They do not know other ways.”

Nartha looked at the Muton and frowned. “There are other ways, but I did not have time for them.”

“We can’t change the circumstances now,” the Dath’Haram said, raising a hand in placation. “But we are all here, so let us talk. I am, or was, Dath’uurian’haramshiral, a former xenopsychologist and xenoanthropologist. This is Runi’zerinth’a’vitiary, our head of what passes for security.” He motioned to the Vitakarian woman. “And this is Chief Ryarik, of the D’Rarrah Tribe.”

“I welcome you, Zararch,” the Muton said, still retaining that glare Mutons had, and Nartha suspected he might actually mean it this time. Surprisingly literate for a Muton who wasn’t a Sargon. Perhaps this wasn’t a bad sign after all.

“You have an impressive operation,” Nartha complimented, sincerely meaning it. “I figured it would have to be well-hidden, but the length you went to explains why the Collective has not found you yet.”

Uurian gave a single nod. “It took many years, but our operation is as close to thriving as we could make it. Outthinking the Collective was not an easy task.”

“No,” Nartha interrupted bluntly, shaking his head. “While I appreciate how effective this was, you are not as smart as you think you are.” Zerintha’s face hardened, but Nartha raised a hand to cut her off. “I will be honest with you, since you’ll probably appreciate that more. The only reason you have survived this long is because the Collective hadn’t noticed until now. They do now, and now they have us looking for you. It didn’t take me long to figure out who was likely behind them, and then it was a simply matter of applying pressure. Your operation has flaws that any intelligence agency will exploit. You are not safe.”

Uurian appraised him. “I see. And yet you are against the Collective?”

“Correct,” Nartha confirmed. “My orders are to find this operation, and destroy it. I think it would be best to turn that against the Collective. I have already acquired allies in the Cobrarian Hierarchy, and established contact with the Nulorian. My goal is to establish a coordinated resistance through the entire Collective, and this operation would be an excellent asset.”

Zerintha’s eyes narrowed and she took a step forward. “You’re working with the Nulorian? The terrorists?”

“Of course I am,” Nartha answered evenly. “They are the only ones on Vitakar who shared this goal. You are the only other ones.”

“Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you,” Zerintha said coldly. “That isn’t our goal.”

“So your operative Merina stated,” Nartha said evenly. “So please, enlighten me as to what could be the point of this other than to resist the Collective?”

“I can not speak for Elders Uurian and Zerintha,” the Muton Ryarik said, in the gravely stunted voice of his kind. “But we are trying to…restore…what we once were. Not trying to…” he broke
out into something in the Muton tongue, before Zerintha told him something, the language sounding odd from her lighter voice. “Forget,” he finished. “We do not want to forget.”

“I will give you a short history,” Uurian told him, stepping forward. “I was…unaware of the extent to which the Mutons had been reduced. When the Collective sent me to this planet, they first wanted me to figure out means to break them easier and further reduce their already shattered culture. I am ashamed to say I was…instrumental…in helping them understand Muton psychology, in figuring how far they can be pushed. How to turn their traditions against them.”

He motioned to the area. “You would not know it today, but the Mutons were not just brutes as you likely think they are. They are only that way because the Collective needs a disposable weapon, and everything else is secondary. What little of the Muton culture that remains is warped to be unrecognizable, and anything resembling what they were is gone.”

He clasped his hands together. “Near the end, I decided to do something. I’d learned what the Collective was going to do, which they hadn’t bothered to tell those involved. We had believed we were working to figure out how to lessen their more violent tendencies and uplift them, but everything we discovered was simply used to make hardened, better soldiers. When they began the birthing centers and War Camps, I began gathering resources with a small group of similarly-minded colleagues, and we established this sanctuary here.”

Uurian motioned around him. “During the course of my research, I’d learned as much about the species as I could. I didn’t want that to be forgotten, and whenever possible, we began smuggling Mutons born for the war camps to here, where we raised them as best we could. Not perfectly, of course, but we tried keeping what we could to at least retain some aspects of their culture. Their society, titles, rituals, we tried respecting that as best we could.”

“Admirable,” Nartha nodded. “But to what end?”

Uurian sighed, shaking his head. “Zararch live for plots and motivations. I don’t. My only goal is to save at least some of the millions of Mutons, and ensure that what they were isn’t forgotten. There is no larger goal than that, short of expanding to other places once space runs out.”

That, while certainly ambitious, struck Nartha as incredibly short-sighted. Really, what was the point of going to all this trouble if nothing was going to change? What the Mutons were didn’t matter in the larger war. This wasn’t even really hurting the Collective, nor was it making a point they would recognize.

There was literally no point to any of this aside from a strange sentimentality.

Baffling.

“We raise families here,” Ryarik said. “Our children are told the stories; what history we can remember. Our ways that the Elders have recovered. They live free of the death of the War Camps.”

“To what end?” Nartha questioned. “Is their goal just to exist? If they can never leave this place, what future do they have? What is the point?”

“When the alternative is a life of mindless servitude and likely death?” Zerintha asked rhetorically. “Just ‘existing’ seems acceptable to me. Do you think the same is true of the citizens on Vitakar? What is the point of them existing?”

“Not the same thing,” Nartha disputed with a shake of his head. “Everything, for good or ill, all
comes to ultimately improving Vitakara society and strengthening the Collective. There is something they work to, even if it is as simple as protection or expansion,” he motioned around. “You are confined to one area, and at best to the underground network of caves. What are you working towards?”

“I think we have succeeded in the main goal,” Uurian interrupted. “We have a self-sustaining and growing population of peaceful Mutons who retain some of their old ways and history. They have children, they grow, they learn. They don’t need a larger goal to be content.”

“Sustainable,” Nartha said, a mirthless smile on his face. “Perhaps if you hadn’t been discovered. The Collective is aware of your operation now, and what do you think they will do once they find out what you’ve done? Just let you be? What do you think they will do? Are you even ready to defend them?”

“We have some means of defense,” Zerintha said, glaring at him. “But no, we don’t have an army. We rescued them specifically to make sure they wouldn’t have to be soldiers. That was the point!”

“As long as the Collective exists,” Nartha retorted. “You will never be safe, and eventually you will be found. I’m offering you something to actually work towards. If you truly want to revive the Mutons, allow them to actually have a chance to flourish, you must prepare to fight back. Otherwise the Muton species will die down here, and this time it will be forgotten.”

“I’m not so ignorant as to not make contingencies,” Uurian noted calmly. “But we’re not fools. War and violence have never caused any good. Call me a pacifist as the Zararch like to call us, but the Nulorian are no better than the Collective. What they did to the Muton species is unforgivable, but the Nulorian would purge whoever they deem unworthy.”

He bared his teeth once more. “You have an admirable goal. One I hope you succeed in. But I know what you are thinking. You don’t see sentimental aliens here, you see an army you can use against the Collective. That I will not allow. I will not turn them into warriors to die in your war.”

“We are content with our existence here,” Ryarik added. “We do not desire war, even if it is against the ones who destroyed us. We do not want to die.”

**But you will, it just won’t be right now,** Nartha thought in frustration. They didn’t seem to realize that they didn’t have a real choice here. And they were pushing him towards some unsavory options. He wasn’t going to turn them over to the Collective, they were still too valuable a resource to ignore, but they were clearly not going to be compliant because of their damned pacifism.

“So what are you going to do?” Zerintha demanded. “Will you destroy us because we didn’t agree to your request?”

Nartha sighed. “No. There is little point in assisting the Collective further. I could force you, but that would accomplish little. But when the Zararch does eventually find you, I will not prevent them.”

“That, I suppose, is all we can ask,” Uurian said. “Thank you, Nartha. I’m sorry we couldn’t give you what you wanted, but I wish you success.”

And with that, Nartha unfortunately knew what his next step would be.

Not ideal, but some things were required if the Collective was to be brought down.

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The Battlemaster was quite surprised at the most recent development. His interactions with the Guardians were generally limited, as if he needed to speak with the Imperator, it would be in person, and interacting with the Guardians was rarely needed. The Battlemaster had always had respect for the Guardians as an organization, but it was a step he rarely needed to actually stop and take.

With that said, they were the closest the Imperator had to ambassadors. He usually only sent them if something needed to be urgently communicated, and couldn’t be intercepted; as a warning, which he had done several times to the Creator; and finally to assist in whatever the operations were taking place. To date, this had only been offered during the Muton Subjugation, and he had refused since the help wasn’t needed.

To outsiders, there would likely be little point seen in having the Guardians as they seemed to fill the same role the Division of the Battlemasters had. Their armor was also heavily based on Battlemaster designs, although they used elerium-powered plate armor which augmented their already extensive strength and speed significantly, even if visually it didn’t look dissimilar to the Battlemaster’s own.

They wore deep purple capes, also similar to Battlemasters, and their helmets were not ornate and simply covered their heads and mouths, though allowed the eyes to be seen, but during combat, flaps would slide down and cover them completely. The Battlemaster suspected the helmet was designed that way to work better with the hood that could be put up over it. While not as heavy as the Overmind’s or Macula’s it performed the same function.

However, neither the cape or hood were mandatory, and some Guardians eschewed both and made this decision largely based on their fighting styles. Like Battlemasters, each Guardian had their own unique style of combat, and their own set of unique weapons; the Guardian Sabers. Each Saber was designed and constructed by the Guardian themselves, and was based on highly unstable nanotech.

They were some of the most effective and highly configurable weapons ever invented. However, the Battlemaster personally found them on the verge of cheating due to their effectiveness. Not to mention they had their own drawbacks. They were excellent for the purpose they were designed for, but it was not a weapon he would ever personally use.

There were only two left, the First Guardian, and the Second Guardian. One was expected, but both being sent at once was unheard of. “The Imperator sends his greetings, and commends you on your efforts in bringing Earth under control,” the Second Guardian began, easily distinguishable not because of her voice, but because she wore the full Guardian set of armor, cape, hood and all.

Her delicately designed Saber was attached to her waist, with one lower hand resting on it at all times. Fortunate the two had decided to distinguish themselves, because otherwise they were difficult to tell apart otherwise. Both were the same height, and just as tall as he was, as they were almost always selected from the Division of the Battlemasters to begin with.

“It is appreciated,” the Battlemaster said slowly. “However, the Imperator would not send both of you here to simply offer his…compliments.”

“Because he has not,” the First Guardian stated, lacking both the cape and hood in contrast to his counterpart, and his lower hands clasped behind his back while his twin Sabers were hooked to his waist. “We are here to offer our support to your efforts once more.”
Interesting.

If ADVENT was preparing to field more psions, it would certainly not hurt to have more Ethereals at his disposal to mitigate them. Both Nebulan, Macula, and Quisilia were occupied for the foreseeable future, and he didn’t want to utilize Caelior too much outside of necessity. The Guardians could be essential in ensuring what they controlled remained under Collective control, and expanding it further.

“Is this by order of the Imperator, or your own request?” The Battlemaster asked.

“Both,” the Second Guardian said. “It has been too long since we have plied our trade against an enemy, and continued training only helps so much. We requested this of the Imperator, and he agreed. You are familiar with our skills, so you know what we can do.”

“Do not take this as a slight, Battlemaster,” the First Guardian clarified. “I suspect that you could take both of us and win. We simply wish to assist in any way we can, for the Imperator and his eventual victory.”

The Battlemaster nodded. “Granted. I have several operations that could use additional support. How familiar are you with Earth geography?”

“Moderately,” the Second Guardian answered, exchanging a look with her counterpart. “We studied the major battlegrounds so far, including additional areas of interest such as China, Canada, and Russia.”

“Then you are aware we’ve suffered some setbacks,” the Battlemaster stated. At their affirmation, he continued. “Korea will be our next major offensive, and it will be a difficult one. Afterwards we will retake the ground we lost in America, and additionally launch offensives in Canada and Mexico. More are planned, but if you are involved, you will spearhead some of these operations.”

“Acknowledged,” the First Guardian rumbled. “We look forward to testing ourselves against the Humans. They have posed a greater challenge than either of us have anticipated.”

“That they have,” the Battlemaster agreed. “But even their best will still be insufficient.”

“They face the Guardians of the Imperator,” the Second Guardian said with a flourish. “We will ensure their threat is removed. On that you have our assurance.”

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Desolan, War Camp 402

11/19/2016

The best case scenario would have had the Muton Enclave group working to militarize their extensive forces independently, and keeping in contact with the other groups he was coordinating. However, since they were not interested, he would have to co-opt their resources through other means, and that was going to involve a lot more work on his part.

Specifically, he was going to have to get the Nulorian on Desolan.

The good news though, was that once they were on the planet, they would easily be able to find where the Enclave was. Nartha had seen enough to know that they couldn’t just pack up and move, no matter what contingencies were in place. So he had embedded nanite trackers on the speeder he had ridden in, and various places within the Enclave itself. They would not be detectable, but they
would be sending constant signals.

In addition to the location of the Enclave, he also had a list of each War Camp the speeder had gone too, which meant there were others there who were contacts. This would be useful for the Nulorian to secure the Enclave network against the Zararch.

He didn’t know exactly what the Nulorian were going to do to the leaders of the Enclave, or the Mutons for that matter. He didn’t especially care, but he did know that they would turn them into an acceptable fighting force, and run the operation much more securely as a result. It would likely not be pleasant, and he felt some guilt as ruining what had seemed to be a good operation with a mildly noble goal.

However, that would mean absolutely nothing if the Collective won. The Nulorian would give the Mutons at least something to fight for, beyond just existing and hoping they were never discovered. He would have to wait and see what the Nulorian could actually send, but in the meantime, he’d sent an encoded message explaining the situation. Maybe they’d think it was too risky, which he was also prepared for.

What absolutely had to be done was closing the Zararch investigation, which was going to be the trickiest thing to do. The Zar’Chon would want, if not results, at least a lead on where to go. Fabricating *anything* like that was a nightmarish undertaking, and simply setting up scapegoats with planted evidence wouldn’t be enough…

Hmm…unless he could establish an *interplanetary* smuggling ring? Data could be faked, that wasn’t the issue. The issue would be proof, because who would actually want to be behind that?

He rubbed his eyes. If it were anything else, he would bring down only part of the organization and let the other half live on. Unfortunately, this was too tied to a central location, and the ring of informants and cells would only lead to it. It was too risky to turn any part of it to the Zar’Chon. Not if he actually wanted to use it.

Worst case scenario, he could write this as a loss and move on. As much as he hated to admit it, he didn’t know what the best solution was. He supposed he could kill Merina, turn her over, say she fought and he had to kill her, and forge data to lead to somewhere else on the planet…

Hm. Maybe. Something to figure out.

He glanced down at his datapad. Hopefully the Nulorian would respond with something. It would at least give him some indicator on if he should continue focusing on this planet, or wrap this up completely.

There were no good solutions here.

But he’d have to make the best of it.

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*Sydney Outskirts – Australia*

*11/21/2016 – 12:11 A.M.*

The gathered army of the Chronicler was an awe-inspiring sight, and one that even the aliens would be intimidated by. They were no longer the normal aliens she’d seen, but altered similar to how Harper and his people were. They wielded similar-looking particle rifles, and wore armor similar to the grey stonish armor the Chronicler himself wore.
The only exception to this were the Andromedons, who now sported various organic-like attachments to their suits. “They aren’t going to know what hit them,” Harper said grimly, walking up to her. She still wasn’t used to how he looked now. Harper, and all of his soldiers who had joined him, were now clearly…altered.

The most noticeable were the eyes. They appeared to be somewhat mechanical in nature, and the irises were a glowing blue, with no other colors whatsoever. There was something unsettling about looking into them, and the much more subtle change was that to their skin, which was a shade darker than it was before. Harper had explained this as some kind of…recovery layer, and had demonstrated by cutting his arm and she’d seen the wound almost immediately close.

Still, Abby had to agree with him. “No, they won’t.”

In the distance was Sydney, which had now been turned into an alien stronghold. They must have seen them coming, because there were at least a thousand Mutons in the distance taking up positions in fortifications, barricades, and towers just outside the city, joined by various Vitakara. She wondered what they were thinking, as Australia was the last place they’d expect a major confrontation.

She looked down at her own gauntlets, the same stony texture and color as the rest of the armor the Chronicler and his army wore. It was without a doubt the most comfortable armor she’d ever worn, and durability-wise, it probably ranked up there as well. Like the weapons, the complete interior of the armor had been riddled with the wires which were now embedded in her entire body.

Abby had tried not to think about it as she’d geared up. Even if it didn’t hurt, it made her acutely aware that she was essentially joining with the armor, which was probably why it had adjusted itself after she’d worn it a few minutes, and she noticed continuous tinkering to weight and tightness as it tried to form to what she wanted.

It also had a neat feature which would allow her to go invisible whenever she wanted. Like the weapon, all she had to do was think what she wanted, and it would happen. As far as she knew, there wasn’t a hard limit on time, which raised the question of just how the hell this thing was powered.

That she’d have to investigate later, but as the small army marched forward, she felt she would be putting it to its limits soon. She flipped the helmet around in her hands and put it on, feeling the wires begin the unsettling penetration of her face (eyes and nostrils included), and skull. Abby really wanted to know what the original designer of this technology was thinking when coming up with that feature, because as useful as it seemed to be, it would completely freak out most people.

“Quite impressive, isn’t it,” the Chronicler commented, walking up in full armor and hands clasped behind his back. He certainly was pleased with himself.

Abby nodded. “I really want to know where the hell you got all this stuff.”

The Chronicler chuckled. “That’s a secret I’ll keep for now; suffice to say it is quite scalable.”

“It would also help if you gave this to XCOM or ADVENT,” she added. “Assuming this is as good as you say…we could use it.”

“Trust me when I say that is a bad idea,” the Chronicler warned, glancing to her. “Everything has a cost to use, and technology like this…is best kept away from government and paramilitary organizations. For more reasons than one.”
“Even when the world is at stake?”

“Yes.” He answered firmly. “I’m afraid you can’t fully grasp the consequences without certain… sacrifices. Harper knows now, as do those who joined him. I cannot say more than that.”

That didn’t make much sense, but Abby couldn’t help but feel some agreement with him. Whatever these weapons and armor were, they were far beyond Ethereal tech, and Abby didn’t know if they should be touching this without figuring out how something like this worked, because so much of it didn’t seem possible in the first place.

Besides, the Chronicler was still going to use them, and if things got too bad, he could probably arrive and assist ADVENT or XCOM. However, that wouldn’t happen until Australia was taken, which could be some time yet. It would ultimately depend on how the upcoming battle for Sydney went. All signs pointed to a victory.

But she wouldn’t believe that until the last alien had been executed.

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Portland, Oregon – United States of America

11/20/2016 – 8:01 P.M.

Roman and his team were mostly prepared for the surprise attack. So surprising, in fact, that no one had really been told until a few hours ago. Apparently ADVENT wasn’t going to sit back and let the aliens retaliate and had decided to just try and take back America for good. One massive strike into the heart of their territory.

He quite liked the plan.

He did not like, however, relying on the trains to take them there. Assuming that the aliens hadn’t touched the tracks with mines or explosives, he just didn’t like trains. Not exactly the best reason, but he found them uncomfortable, confining, and loud. But they all had to make sacrifices, and he had to admit it was a good way to get people excited to be the first out and in.

“[Hope the mindrapers don’t show up this time,]” Elena muttered as they moved to board the trains. She’d recovered with no visible injuries from the battle, although she’d been shaken for some time. Roman didn’t know how recovered she actually was, but she’d told him enough about how completely terrifying the feeling of losing control was.

The more he thought about it, the more Roman didn’t like psionics. It seemed to cause a lot more problems than it fixed. But that wasn’t how the world worked, and they needed to harness the power themselves to fight it. An endless loop, and ADVENT had adapted in kind with the new PRIEST Division, their own army of psions.

“[We’ve got some of our own now,]” Anton said, patting his rifle. “[Think the greys will be more focused on them than us ordinary soldiers.]”

“[Either way, this is going to spook them,]” Galina commented as a team of Lancers boarded. “[I don’t know what they were waiting for, but I’m looking forward to killing a few dozen more of them.]”

“[Get in line.]” Roman smirked as he did one final equipment check. “[The only good aliens are dead aliens.]”
“[It’s a bit funny,]” Elena said. “[I’ve wanted to visit California. But I didn’t expect that to happen while liberating it.]”

“[Assuming that there’s anyone left,]” Konstantin pointed out grimly. “[Doesn’t make sense to keep a lot of civilians around. If I were them, I’d have gotten rid of them a while ago.]”

Roman felt he was correct. As nice as it would be to personally liberate the cities, the aliens probably wouldn’t risk keeping Humans around, especially with ADVENT so close already. He hoped that they were still alive, but he supposed considering what the aliens did to the captives… perhaps it was better that they weren’t.

All they could do was avenge.

And that was something all of them were prepared to do.

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ADVENT Command – Switzerland

11/20/2016 – 10:55 P.M.

“The final preparations have been completed,” Commander Christiaens informed Saudia through the holographic display. She was joined by a fully armored Weekes, Finn, and the Commander of XCOM. “All forces are prepared and ready to deploy.”

“There are multiple PRIEST Squads prepared and ready to assist,” Finn added. “Both Archpriests of America, and two dozen Protopriests are awaiting the order.”

“Noted, Vicar General,” Saudia confirmed. She was extremely interested to see just how large an effect the PRIESTs ended up having in the battle. Psions could change the course of battles, and having this many on their side? That could ultimately save them. But still, everything had to go exceptionally well.

“I have six XCOM Squads ready to deploy, and two held in reserve in case the Battlemaster or Caelior arrive,” the Commander added, who actually wasn’t armored, which likely meant he would be assisting Laura at the Citadel. “I believe we are ready to begin. There is no point delaying; we’ve been lucky they haven’t done anything until this point.”

“On that we agree,” Weekes said, giving a sidelong look at the Commander. “The Lancers are also ready, and now that the Hussar, Cuirassier and Dragoon Corps are also cleared for deployment, they have been prepared to assist as needed.”

“Excellent, you have my authorization to launch Operations Kraken, Sherman, and Kamehameha,” she stated. “I will inform the public tomorrow morning when the operations are fully underway. Congress will be notified as well, and they will begin drafting legislation for funding for rebuilding and projects, should you succeed.”

“How familiar are they with this?” The Commander asked.

“Familiar enough,” Saudia clarified. “They are aware that we have several major operations being planned, and that we will be launching them soon. This will not be a surprise to them.”

“I have also ordered Korea be put on guard,” Laura added. “If the aliens retaliate anywhere, it will likely be there. We should anticipate a war on two fronts within the next couple days. This could turn into a siege, Chancellor, be sure to warn the public to that idea. Not every battle is
“Noted, Commander,” Saudia nodded. “Good luck to all of you. You will have whatever support you need, and that of ADVENT as well. Wipe the aliens out.”

Weekes gave a wide smile. “With pleasure, Chancellor.”

All the holograms winked out, and Saudia sat down in the chair behind her. Everything was coming together much better than she’d hoped, which made her wonder what they were missing. Contingencies were in place, preparations were made, and they were rested and ready for battle.

Perhaps she wasn’t missing anything. Maybe they had done everything right.

But it was always the unexpected that ruined plans, and that was what she was ultimately concerned about. They could only push the aliens so far before they started an escalation. But that was inevitable.

They wanted a war. Now they were going to learn what that really meant.
There was something exciting about being on the edge of a massive US carrier, surrounded by a half-dozen destroyers, a cruiser, and an even larger amount of submarines beneath the ocean, all moving towards an enemy target in the dead of night. Sierra smiled.

The aliens had no clue what was about to hit them.

“Twenty minutes at most,” Carmelita said, walking up with her helmet tucked under her arm. “Your team is ready?”

“Of course we’re ready,” Anna grumbled beside Sierra. “Fun as these suits are, they’re not exactly light.”

Carmelita’s lip twitched, perhaps in amusement. “Noted, Archangel. You’ll have free reign to attack initial defenses. They likely have AA defenses, so be aware.”

Sierra looked towards the direction of where they were headed. The island of Hawai’i was now in sight, and the ADVENT soldiers were getting ready to deploy; set in specific formations as they prepared to deploy in the helicopters and on the boats with the amphibious assault ships from the supporting expeditionary strike group. Lines of MDUs were visible on the destroyers, also preparing for deployment, while the carrier held the majority of soldiers themselves.

ADVENT was not using their standard soldiers for the initial push, but their elite, including the newly deployed Priests. The standard units that were on the ships were ADVENT Snipers and their respective Officers, who would coordinate sniper fire from the ships while the initial sea invasion began. The landing ships were filled with Shieldbearers, Engineers, and Molosser Handlers.

However, the first wave of ships would be the ADVENT Special Forces, the XCOM squad, and Priests. The Lancers were there, but they were not the most visible ones anymore. It turned out that ADVENT was also using this battle to launch their additional special forces groups, which while not as elite as Lancers, were probably close to their level of lethality.

Dragoons appeared to be Lancers, only with a lot more explosive equipment. Their armor was somehow bulkier, with rocket launchers strapped to their backs and micro-missile launchers built into their gauntlets and additional attachments on their shoulders. Grenades were also strapped to their waists, and some had grenade launchers instead of rocket launchers. Unlike the Lancers who had black armor, theirs was a mixture of black and red, the red color accenting their helmets, gauntlets, and torso.

The other special forces group were the Cuirassiers, who were much more numerous, and what Sierra considered a more ‘generic’ variant, although she wasn’t sure of that. None of the Cuirassiers were as heavily armed, and some actually appeared to be medics instead of purely soldiers. Their armor was much different as well, it wasn’t as blocky and more form-fitting, and was a dull white with blue accents.
The priests though, those were definitely the ones that grabbed the attention of not just her, but most of the other soldiers as well. Their armor was similar to most in ADVENT, but it was more... elaborate. There were golden engravings on the pure white armor, reminiscent of the religious influence that seemed to permeate their ranks. All wore shoulder capes, similar to the Officers, and their helmets were noticeably unique. It was more elongated, and resembled more of a blast shield over the face, with no obvious eye sockets or breathing apparatuses.

There were two types she could see, the basic priests, and the leaders, Protopriests. The Protopriests were distinguished by their golden capes and accented armor of the same color. The golden engraving turned to white if the area around it was colored as well. The Priest armor was without a doubt something she loved artistically. Probably didn’t need to be like that, but Sierra was not complaining.

“Well, this is where the fun begins,” Ted commented as the island grew larger in the distance. He flexed his hand, creating a small ball of psionic energy in it, then made it dissipate just as quickly. “Always wondered if I’d be a part of something like this.”

Sierra chuckled. “Copy that.”

“I’d ready your jets,” Carmelita said, as a klaxon began blaring. “The attack is getting ready to start.”

It definitely was. Jets on the carrier were getting warmed up and moving into position. The landing ships were now accelerating towards the island, and the destroyers were angling their guns towards the island. Their cue to attack would be when the jets launched, and that was going to come in a matter of minutes.

“This is Admiral Walter to all ADVENT Forces,” the Admiral, and commander in charge of this mission began broadcasting. “This operation is authorized to begin immediately. Today we purge the aliens from our homes and land. It is not the first time we have suffered loss at this place, but today we ensure that it will be avenged. Remember the lives lost to these aliens, and return the favor in kind. Begin the attack, Admiral Walter out.”

“Cleared for takeoff!” One of the personnel directing the planes yelled over the sound of the roaring jets.

“Our turn as well,” Sierra said, transitioning to her piloting mode. At her mental command, the Archangel armor began roaring to life and with a running leap she shot into the air.

“Seraph Morrow to Overseer Alba,” she said as they began speeding towards the island. “We are airborne and heading to the target island.”

“Copy, Seraph,” Carmelita’s brisk voice answered. “We’ll be right behind you. Save some for us.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem,” Sierra commented as she had her HUD zoom into the initial defenses. The night vision of the armor was good, although not as clear as she was accustomed to. Still, she immediately spotted the defenses around the town of Hilo. The aliens hadn’t just fortified the town, they’d turned it, and the coast as far as she could see, into a fortress.

“Lower altitude,” Sierra ordered. “Increase speed and ready weapons. We don’t want them sniping us out of the air yet.”

“Yet?”

“Figure of speech,” Sierra snorted. “You know what I mean.”
They swooped lower until there were roughly five feet above the swirling water itself. Even at night Sierra could still make out the blue, although that was probably distortion from the visual feed. Sierra readied her flamethrower, making sure everything was checked ready to use. “Up on the wall, unload at will,” she commanded, and once they got close enough, Sierra angled herself upward and forced a hard stop to her suit.

Just over the height of the wall she raised her wrist and unleashed a sustained gout of flame at the unfortunate aliens patrolling it. They were Vitakarians and Cobrarians who barely had time to scream before the white-orange flame cooked them alive in their armor. Behind them was a barracks of sorts where Mutons and Vitakara began running to get armed and into position.

As Sierra swept her flame gauntlet along the wall, Anna fired her White Phosphorus missile into the mix of aliens, and immediately followed up by tossing several WP grenades to places where the missile hadn’t reached. Ted, psionic energy swirling around his body and especially arms, shot lances of psionic energy at the laser and plasma turret emplacements which were turning their positions to the encroaching ADVENT fleet.

Sierra ceased her dispersal of flame, and pulled out her Gauss rifle and began firing at anything still left alive from the white phosphorus. She scored several kills and headshots as more Mutons began arriving from the connected parts of the base, and now plasma filled the air around her. “Scatter!” She ordered, and immediately took evasive action. And that was when the fleet began their bombardment.

Cracks and bursts of orange light in the distance signaled the guns of the destroyers firing, and the wall was hit with high-powered shells and gauss rounds. One of the alien outposts along the wall splintered and killed the lookouts inside who were communicating frantically, likely to somewhere off-planet.

“We should move along the wall,” Ted suggested as he glided beside her. “Let’s give all the soldiers a fair chance.”

“Good idea,” Sierra confirmed, and angled herself towards gliding along the wall, braking, ascending, and falling as she and the rest of her Host picked off the aliens on it little by little, making it near-impossible for them to even see what was coming, much less prepare for it. Plasma shot into the sky around them, but only a few glancing hits were suffered, and behind them the invasion force advanced, and when it hit land, it would spell the end for the aliens.

Ted gestured and a Muton was engulfed in a small psionic storm, roaring as it fell off the edge, while Anna blasted two Cobrarians apart and Sierra took a more direct approach by swooping around in a tight circle and getting close enough to grab one or two Vitakarians by the arm and fling them into the ocean to either drown or be killed by the coming soldiers.

Another burst of flame from her wrist incinerated another tower, and with that the landing ships were close enough and the Lancers, Cuirassiers, Dragoons, and Priests stormed the beaches. Purple already flared from the Priests as they directed their power at the wall, and the Dragoons raised their explosive devices in the same direction.

Sections of the wall were slammed, cracked, and destroyed in quick succession, and the Lancers led the charge through the breaches. The battle of Hawaii had now truly begun.
The bright moon illuminated the small army marching on Sydney, the Chronicler and his five new followers leading the army, composed of dominated aliens under the thrall of the Chronicler’s psionic power, or perhaps his technology. Abby wasn’t sure anymore. She hung towards the back, having a clear view of the entire battlefield, but suspected that it was going to become exceptionally dangerous for her, and she hadn’t been…improved…like the others.

Best to stay out of the way, and kill what aliens she could.

There would be several stages to his attack, as the city itself was surrounded by now-abandoned residential areas; empty buildings and houses that the aliens had either destroyed themselves or converted into defenses. From what was built before them, it seemed to have largely been the latter. The houses had their roofs completely redone, with turrets and sniping nests on top, and before them were alloy barricades and ground turrets.

For whatever network the Chronicler was using, she was on it, and when the command “Open fire!” was given, she was ready.

The army raised their weapons in unison and began firing. Blue beams of energy slammed into the aliens who had refrained from firing since they’d clearly not known what they were. They paid for that with their lives as the beams cut through the encroaching and exposed Muton force, and shredded the static defenses with ease.

Instantly a city-wide klaxon rang out, and the other defense-houses went on alert, and plasma joined the blue beams in lighting up the battlefield. The Chronicler raised a fist, and the army stopped on cue as a massive purple shield appeared in front of them, easily absorbing all the oncoming fire, and while it completely protected the army, no small feat, it did allow the aliens to begin to organize.

“Submit to me,” the Chronicler growled, extending his other hand towards the mass largely mae up by Mutons and some Vitakara. “Forfeit your mind!”

Immediately the plasma turned towards the emplacements and within several more minutes they were destroyed. The Chronicler released the shield and kept marching forward, Abby continuing to follow. The dominated aliens now formed the front line of his army, and they were coming up on stronger defenses, who were as prepared as they could be.

And unlike the previous force, these were not just organic units, but Sectopods and Cyberdisks as well, with their Drone escorts. Green plasma bolts slammed into the compromised Muton line, downing several immediately, as the rest of the alien forces opened fire. The Chronicler’s army responded in kind, firing their particle beams at the defenders.

The defensive lines were a series of interconnected houses that had undergone similar conversion, with a multitude of turrets, lined by Muton and Vitakara soldiers, with Andromedon engineers. Snipers were deeper in the city, and Cyberdisks hovered above. To the sides were the two Sectopods, plasma guns extending from the ports in their main ‘pods’.

The aliens were already spread out, and the Chronicler’s army responded in kind as plasma rained down upon them, quickly slaughtering the front line, but Abby was pretty sure that was the purpose the Chronicler had intended for them. The stony-armored aliens proved more durable, with plasma shots seeming to be absorbed into the armor, only leaving black residue behind.
As before, the beams shredded the insufficient barricades, with confused alien shouts and cries coming from the alien lines. One of the Chronicler’s new agents, she couldn’t tell if it was Harper or another one of his men, lifted a hand and blue energy seemed to materialize around the palm before it shot out towards the alien line.

The sustained beam of...energy...Abby didn’t think it was psionics, but another application of the Chronicler’s particle weaponry, it easily cut through the Cyberdisk line, causing the machines to explode or simply fall to the ground in pieces, killing or grievously wounding the aliens underneath them. The rest of Harper’s people performed similarly, one aiming at the right-most Sectopod, directly into the place where the main beam was.

The machine tried to get away, but the slow and cumbersome alien machine could not do so fast enough. It took nearly fifteen seconds, but the beam penetrated the armor and burned into the heart of the Sectopod, causing it to explode in a rain of fire and metal, shaking the ground beneath it. The Chronicler raised a hand towards the other one and it was lifted into the air.

Abby could hear the metal groaning as the Chronicler slowly crushed it, dents first appeared on the outside, and the shell slowly began crumpling. Fluids leaked, and small internal explosions were heard. The sound of metal snapping and bending like cheap plastic were the final sounds of death for the towering alien machine, which was tossed aside with a flick of the Chronicler’s wrist as he continued his march forward. “Continue. They will not survive today.”

The surviving aliens were retreating, and flat-out running away, even the Mutons. The Chronicler, voice altered by his psionic usage, chuckled and sharply swept out an arm in front of him, with an arc of energy following his movement. The crackling purple arc swept towards the retreating aliens. It did minimal damage to the buildings themselves, albeit leaving cracks in the structures, but it was instantaneous death to the aliens it hit.

Vitakara and Mutons were bisected from the psionic arc traveling right through them with little resistance, with most not dying instantly. The upper torsos were writhing on the ground, screams from the Vitakara reaching their ears as they bled out slowly, and even the Mutons were unable to suppress the pain of being cut in half.

The Andromedons, what few of them there were, had also died from suit ruptures caused by the arc of energy. But the suits themselves were not gone, and turned to face the Chronicler’s army before being shredded by the hundreds of particle beams. Unabated, the near-silent army continued forward over the rubble, corpses, and metal. There was the occasional blast of blue from a mercy kill, but otherwise there was nothing.

Now came the next phase, after some open land that had clearly been razed by the aliens. The city proper was visibly in the distance, but there were still plenty of residential districts to go. Just from what she’d seen, Abby figured that the Commander was probably going to be fine with the Chronicler running things here.

It probably wasn’t safe to do otherwise, and the Chronicler had not even suffered a single casualty, aside from the recently dominated aliens.

The next defensive structure was dead ahead; similar to the second one, it was an interconnected series of converted houses and barricades, but stretched much farther. “Coming from the side,” Harper informed as the Chronicler’s army suddenly formed a semi-circle as aliens began firing not just from ahead, but from the sides as well.

Abby took cover from behind a tree, glad she hadn’t stayed in the middle, because as good as the armor was, the hailstorm of green plasma hitting the aliens could not be good for integrity. She
supposed that it should be expected that the aliens could flank them, given that they were the equivalent of a dagger striking the heart of the city.

They couldn’t hit *every* perimeter defense.

Andromedon Battlefield Engineers were deploying their shields from the sides, and these were sufficient to provide protection from the particle weapons, although it could apparently be overloaded much easier, since she saw some of the generators explode after a sustained barrage.

Abby looked up and saw a cloud of Cyberdisks flying in from throughout the entire city, and deploying into their battle mode from a good distance away. Sectopods stomped over from the sides, and didn’t bother deploying their guns, only opening up their center pods and charging the main laser. Harper and his soldiers were using their palm-weapons and slicing through generators, aliens, and cyberdisks, but they seemed to be suffering some damage.

A shot from deeper in the city hit one of the Chronicler’s Mutons in the head, and it collapsed with the head smoking, the first casualty suffered. The Chronicler, lifted his arms and twin barricades in front of the Sectopod beams appeared, just as they fired. “*Enough.*” At that statement all the organic aliens clutched their heads, screaming in pain.

One Sectopod was raised into the air, and flung towards the other causing both to tumble away in a crumpled ball of metal, fluids, and explosions. For good measure, a flat, psionic shield slammed down onto the wrecks, smashing it beyond all repair. Whatever the Chronicler was doing to the living aliens, it was awful enough where the Vitakara were shooting themselves in the head, and Mutons were trying to bash their heads on walls or sharp objects.

Harper and his soldiers destroyed the rest of the turret emplacements and Cyberdisks, and with no more plasma fire raining upon them, the rest of the Chronicler’s army put the rest of the living aliens out of their misery until there was a brief silence on the battlefield. Three had died so far, and considering how close they were, that was almost perfect.

Sniper fire still came from within the city, but it was intermittent, and the Chronicler had a shield in front of them as they continued marching forward, ever deeper into the heart of the alien operations in Australia.

Abby realized that she hadn’t had to fire her weapon once yet. For as much danger as they should be in, she felt strangely calm. With the Chronicler around, there didn’t seem to be any reason to be afraid.

She would have wanted to know exactly what the aliens were thinking.

She hoped *they* were scared for once.

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*Mars Observation Station – Mars Orbit*

*11/21/2016 – 5:15 A.M.*

When Ravarian had been woken up by reports of attacks, the first odd thought that came to his mind was *Hawaii? Why attack Hawaii of all places?*

And not only were they attacking Hawaii, they were clearly intending to *conquer* Hawaii. Ravarian knew that they had to use their navy at some point, but had expected them to focus on defenses rather than for attacking a lone series of islands. It was strange, no matter how much he thought
about it. He understood that the islands had sentimental value, especially for Americans, but in the end, it was a small series of islands in the ocean.

The main hub of the Observation Station was as chaotic as it had ever been. Several dozen analysts and Runianarch strategists were centered around haptic consoles or holographic displays showing feeds from the battles going on.

The short version was that it was going badly.

ADVENT had indeed been working on a psionic branch of their military, and from the footage he’d seen, they were much more dangerous than the Vanguards. There was some obvious variance, but their most powerful Priests easily eclipsed the static capabilities of the Vanguards. He kept his expression clear as he saw two Priests annihilate an entire Muton team, psionically ripping them apart and leaving a gory mess behind.

The Battlemaster was coordinating reinforcements, but at least half the islands had been lost already, and it was going to take an emergency Gatekeeper to have things stabilize, as well as liberal deployments of Muton Elites and Andromedons. Resources that shouldn’t be devoted to an island. Were it up to him, he would have called a retreat and bombarded the island from orbit.

But that would give ADVENT a victory, and a bigger boost in morale. The Battlemaster had a plan, but what that was had yet to be revealed.

And that was before the attack in Sydney had been reported.

He’d thought he’d misheard at first, but no, Sydney of all places was under attack. No one had been able to identify if it was ADVENT, XCOM, or something else because the reports couldn’t agree what they were being attacked by. Oyariah had been cited as a potential perpetrator, and there were apparently other aliens in the ranks, so likely a telepath was behind this.

And now for the question he was trying to answer: Why?

The only possible motive for attacking strange locations, or at least Hawaii, was as a distraction. Was it a distraction for another attack in America? So soon again? Or Japan? ADVENT had been mobilizing forces in America, and they were fortifying in Korea…or were they simply trying to drain the Collective of as many resources as they could? Even if they were ultimately pushed back, it would be the Collective who would suffer a morale loss instead of ADVENT, who could point to the exceptionally high body counts over an unimportant island.

And since they were poorly equipped to fight psions, anything short of bombarding the area was going to cost time, resources, and lives. Ravarian shook his head, just instinctively, thinking how frustratingly slow the Collective was to adapt at times. At some point they needed to be able to win against ADVENT without relying on an Ethereal to ensure victory.

*Return to your chambers, Zar’Chon, it is time to discuss the situation.*

Quisilia. About time.

Without a word he turned on his heel and began walking towards the cylinder lift that would take him to his chambers. Australia was Quisilia’s sphere of influence, so perhaps he would have some idea of what was actually going on. A few minutes later he was in the circular and dimly lit room that had a haptic map of Hawaii and Australia, with the Battlemaster and Quisilia standing over it.

“Battlemaster,” Ravarian inclined his head. “What are we planning in retaliation?”
“I’ve ordered transport reinforcements with a fighter escort,” the Battlemaster answered immediately. “Gateways are inefficient, but they will assist in stemming the advance of ADVENT. These Priests are more numerous and dangerous than anticipated.”

If only there had been some warning that ADVENT was probably doing something like this.

He knew better than to speak that, but he sometimes wondered what the point of his job was if the information he gathered wasn’t actually used. The Battlemaster was smart, he couldn’t deny that, but when it came to Earth it was almost like he wanted the Humans to get continuously stronger, and watch what they were doing instead of intervening in any way.

At some points he wondered if the goals of the Ethereals had changed.

Not changed, but the Battlemaster wants to know the capabilities of the Humans before responding in kind. There is only so much more they can do. They have copied our weapons, armor, and now psionics. What do they have left after this?

Quisilia. While Ravarian could intrinsically see some value in letting the enemy overdevelop and tailor exact responses to that…it still struck him as unnecessary. But that was something to consider for another time. They had a crisis to resolve. “Reinforcements will be needed. Should I request Cleanser Ships?”

The Battlemaster looked at him, considering for a moment. “Request a unit. Hold them here, and do not deploy without my order. Now that ADVENT has a critical amount of psions, additional measures will need to be taken.” He returned his concentration to the haptic map, which was a real-time display showing the territory captured by ADVENT so far. “ADVENT has established mobile Gateways, and their forces are comprised of largely special forces and elite units. Losses they suffer will hurt them.”

The development of Gateways had been an initial surprise, but Ravarian didn’t consider it completely surprising as they were supported by the traitor Ethereal. They had reports of them being built in cities, so their usage in battle was expected.

“Numbers will do little good,” Quisilia noted. “The Lancers especially are enhanced, not to mention XCOM and the Priests.”

“Yes, which is why we will begin deploying several of Fectorian’s units,” the Battlemaster answered. “Elites will also be used. I intend to bleed ADVENT in this fight; winning is unlikely and intervening over an island isn’t a priority.”

Quisilia turned his head toward him. “The Spectres?”

“No. This is a distraction for ADVENT. The Spectres will be useful when their true attack strikes.”

“It’s been hours since their attack,” Ravarian reminded him. “If this was a distraction, what are they waiting for?”

“Unknown,” the Battlemaster admitted. “But let them show their hand before we respond. I have put Japan and our outer territories in the United States on alert. But if they march an army our way, we will know ahead of time.”

“Australia is a larger issue,” Quisilia said, moving around to look at the haptic display of Australia. “What is happening is quite curious.”

“Indeed,” Ravarian mentally pulled up the appropriate file and raised his prosthetic hand and
projected the holographic image of the mystery army to them. “Whatever they are…they do not appear to be ADVENT. Or XCOM for that matter. Their weapons are shredding our defenses, and there is at least one psion with them.” Ravarian allowed a frown. “This doesn’t make sense. If either organization had developed this level of weaponry, why aren’t they using it?”

“Because they didn’t,” Quisilia mused, looking at the image. “Quite curious. Especially since I made sure that the cells were destroyed beyond salvaging.”

“You mentioned there was a psion that escaped,” the Battlemaster noted. “But one psion should not result in this.”

“No,” Quisilia laced his fingers together, sounding amused. “However, it does explain several things. Who else could possibly possess technology more advanced than our own?”

Ravarian cocked his head. “Sovereign tech? Impossible. The Humans would not be able to comprehend it, much less actually construct it. Aside from that, are you suggesting that there is one who is helping them?”

“Not necessarily helping,” Quisilia said. “But it’s quite possible someone found it, and has devoted their lives to solving its mysteries. Interesting they would emerge now. We know they have visited this planet before, as they directed us toward it, but we always assumed it was because of the Humans…” he trailed off contemplatively. “Perhaps it was something else.”

The Battlemaster looked to Quisilia. “Can you handle it, or will you require assistance?”

“I only require two of the Spectres,” Quisilia said, lacing the fingers of his upper hands together. “I will handle this issue decisively.”

Ravarian knew Quisilia was a master spy, but direct combat did not seem to be his specialty. “With respect, Quisilia, that seems inadequate for the task at hand.”

Quisilia gave a short laugh. “I have killed a Director Flagship, Zar’Chon. I have killed millions of Synthesized thralls. Putting down an army enhanced by the gifts of the Sovereign Ones can be handled, I assure you. And if there is a puppet leading them…I can also handle them.”

He waved a hand and vanished from sight. Ravarian decided to trust Quisilia knew what he was doing. If nothing else, if he got himself killed he really didn’t want to have to look after two cats instead of one.

Right now though, the battle in Hawaii was more important, and he focused his attention on what might possibly be the biggest waste of the war on both sides.

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The Island of Hawai’i - Hawaii

Operation: Kamehameha – Day 1

11/21/2016 – 6:32 A.M.

The Collective was rallying, for all the good it would do them. With their defenses fully breached, they were fighting ADVENT on a street-by-street level, and while they weren’t pushing them back, they were giving up ground far more slowly. This likely had to do with the sudden influx of Muton Elites, and the Priests had reported being disrupted, which meant a Gatekeeper was probably here.
Their telepathic advantage was unfortunately gone, but unfortunately for the aliens, the Priests were still showing just how lethal they were. Having crossed the current battlefield several times, swooping and flying around it, dodging and tanking plasma fire, Sierra had a pretty good grasp on the state of the battlefield.

Time to focus on where they were needed.

“Destroying the Gateways is the priority,” she said as she fired her pulse rifle at several Vitakara who were trying to set up on one of the rooftops. “But it’s too dangerous to hunt them by ourselves without knowing where they are.”

“Not to mention I’m running low on missiles and grenades,” Anna added as she swooped to the side, providing suppressive fire on a street held by several Mutons. One was ripped apart and the others were forced back into cover, which let the four Lancers charge forward and kill the stragglers. “Permission to fly back and restock?”

“Granted,” Sierra allowed. “Make it fast, me and Ted will provide support in the meantime.”

Anna didn’t waste time and was already flying back to the carrier. Sierra glanced around the battlefield, looking to where help was needed. “Carmelita, what’s your status?”

“Making progress,” the lightly strained voice of Carmelita answered, sounds of battle in the background. “We’ve got around twenty Elites on us and another small army of Mutons. Ah, correction, make that fifteen Elites. We’ve got it under control, and ADVENT is coming to support us.”

Sierra smirked. “Copy, we’re looking to provide support elsewhere.”

“Seraph Morrow, we could use your assistance,” the voice of Admiral Walter interjected. “We’re moving up Purifiers to begin cutting off parts of the city to the aliens and box them in. We would appreciate it if you could clear the area of the majority of hostiles.”

“Copy that,” Sierra confirmed as the location appeared on her HUD, on the edge of the city. “We’ll be there shortly.”

She angled herself towards the designated location and shot off; Ted was right behind her. “Purifiers are risky, but they will definitely allow asset denial.”

“And there they are,” Sierra commented as she saw teams of two Purifiers, with one Priest behind them, moving within the parts of the city ADVENT controlled. They definitely moved like robots, slow and methodical, as if each step could blow them up. Since they were carrying ClF3, this was an actual danger.

Probably what the Priest was for. “I can see the problem,” Ted noted as they came up to the street where the Purifiers were supposed to go. “God damn Sectopods.”

An accurate assessment, Sierra had to agree. The two-way street was now utterly wrecked, and there were several dozen Cuirassier and Lancer corpses. This was due to the towering Sectopod in the center of the intersection, flanked by four Cyberdisks. ADVENT was only set up partway down the street, a mix of Dragoons and Cuirassiers firing at it.

The smoking wrecks of several Cyberdisks and the potholed street filled with Muton and Runianarch corpses spoke to some effectiveness, but they were pinned now by the Cyberdisks and Sectopod launching barrages, which only seemed to have had minimal effect due to the two Priests in the back creating psionic bubbles.
However, the relatively untested psions would likely give out after some time. “Provide covering fire,” Sierra instructed, deliberately overshooting the mechanical pod of aliens. “Readying a flame circle.”

“Copy,” Ted agreed, arms awash in the purple mist of psionic power as he caught the attention of the back row of Cyberdisks, shooting weak lances of energy at them. Golden streaks flew his direction, forcing him to take evasive action and not concentrate on building his power. While he served as the distraction, she readied her flamethrower once more.

While not the liquid hell the Purifiers had, Napalm was still effective. From her knowledge of Cyberdisks, ordinary Napalm wouldn’t be especially effective if they were closed. However, when in their battle configuration, there were many vulnerable components exposed which would melt if exposed to a hot enough flame.

As she circled around, going faster than she’d done before in practicing this maneuver, she raised her wrist in preparation. The force might make her spin out of control, but she was going to have to master this sometime. “Ascend!” She barked as flame spat from her wrist, immediately engulfing the front row of Cyberdisks.

She immediately commanded the jets to angle and spin her around the pod of Cyberdisks and while the sheer force almost made her invert herself, she held on and continued shooting the white-orange flame in a circle of fire that caught all the exposed Cyberdisks in a perfect ball of orange. Several loud pops and sizzles were heard as the machines either fell out of the sky or exploded into scrap metal.

Sierra let out a whoop at the sight, adrenaline flowing through her and she stabilized and shot upward, finally slowing down to observe the results. The Sectopod had slightly turned and partially angled up the main pod towards her, the plasma cannon deploying and beginning to fire. It was obviously unaffected by the fire, but that hadn’t been the goal.

Sierra easily avoided the plasma projectiles, although some got exceptionally close. “Keep its attention!” Ted called, shooting more lances at the Sectopod. “The Purifiers are here!”

“As descend, Archangel Morrow,” a synthesized female voice said. “We do not want you caught in the blast.”

“Confirmed,” Sierra acknowledged and shot into the sky and angled towards the ADVENT line. She twisted in the air and looked down to see the Purifiers released their payloads. White-orange flame shot from their flamethrowers and the entire street exploded. The Sectopod was almost immediately blow apart as the joints melted and the hellish chemical seeped into every weak point and crevice available. The abandoned cars also went up in explosions, and the asphalt itself caught fire, as did the buildings around it.

“Burn in hell, alien trash,” Sierra muttered to herself as she looked down at the ground which was a sea of fire that spread far down the street. The Purifiers swept their weapons in small arcs to ensure the entire street was literally on fire. She also noted with some amusement that the alien corpses that had littered the street were just gone; likely vaporized from the flame.

As dangerous as it was, she was considering asking Shen to see just how…safe he could make it to
carry ClF3. Maybe a small amount?

“Did I miss anything—oh,” Anna said as she flew towards them, fully reloaded and equipped. “Nice.”

“We’re not done yet,” Sierra reminded her. “I doubt that was the only Sectopod, and we’ve still got the Gateways—“

“Alien reinforcement ships have just entered the atmosphere,” Admiral Walter suddenly interjected on the open channel. “All air forces initiate temporary retreat. Time to greet our new arrivals.”

Ted whistled. “He’s actually going to do it.”

Sierra grimaced. “I really hated this plan,” she switched the comm channel. “Carmelita?”

“We heard,” she answered. “They know what they are doing. Land temporarily just in case.”

Sierra targeted a flat roof that was a comfortable distance from the burning street, and settled down, just in time to see the faintest image of the alien fleet incoming. “They really want this island,” she commented to no one in particular.

There were at least twenty, maybe more, alien transports likely filled with soldiers flying in, and this was with her HUD as zoomed in as possible. They were surrounded by a mixture of Sectoid Fighters and Scouts, along with odd dagger-shaped ships she hadn’t seen before. They definitely looked like fighters. Vitakara maybe? Andromedon?

“Missiles are away,” the Admiral said, voice deceptively calm, and Sierra witnessed one, then two, then three nuclear missiles shooting towards the oncoming fleet. Using nuclear weapons was yet another questionable decision ADVENT was making, and she had to wonder just why they thought it was a good idea.

Supposedly the negative effects were lessened in the atmosphere, where it was set to detonate, but considering that there was also an accompanying EMP blast, not to mention that this hadn’t been tested in decades if at all, it seemed like a horrendously bad idea. And if something went wrong, or it detonated too early, well, they might all be vaporized or irradiate part of the ocean.

If it did work, though, she would give credit where it was due. It just seemed a massive risk to just test out. Using conventional missiles seemed safe and just as effective.

She was going to laugh if the aliens just shot it out of the sky though.

“So when will it be close enough?” Ted asked as they watched.

“I’m assuming we’ll know,” Sierra shrugged. “Nuclear weapons aren’t exactly subtle.”

Nearly a half-minute later the sky exploded in a blinding flash that temporarily made her HUD see nothing but white. It was a good thing that the helmet protected her actual sight, otherwise she’d probably be blind. Her vision was temporarily restored, only then two more successive blasts were seen and felt, and when the whiteness finally cleared, there was a smoking cloud in the area where the fleet was. Zooming in, she saw maybe a few pieces of scrap metal, but otherwise, the fleet was just…gone.

She waited a minute, and no other ships emerged from the wreckage. She engaged her engines, and floated a foot or so off the ground. They hadn’t been hit by the EMP aftereffect either, so
everything seemed to be ok. She looked back up, and there were still no ships coming. “Well,” she said slowly. “It actually worked.”

“I really want to see their faces,” Anna chuckled as they ascended once again. “What do you think they’re telling the Battlemaster? ‘Sorry sir, I’m afraid we just lost all our reinforcements.’”

“Someone’s probably getting executed,” Ted commented. “Alright, we should go hunt down those Gateways. And we have a Gatekeeper to kill.”

“It might be more effective if one of us just carries a Purifier wherever we go,” Sierra suggested half-seriously as they shot towards the battle once more. “I mean, they destroy Sectopods in one hit.”

“Take it up with Viktoria,” Anna chuckled. “But I’m pretty sure additional passengers are not recommended.”

“In that case,” Sierra said as she checked the status on her gear. “We’ll just have to make do with what we’ve got.”

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**ADVENT Media Center – Switzerland**

**11/21/2018 – 9:18 A.M.**

The Media Center ADVENT had constructed was one of the less grandiose buildings she normally was in, and she quite liked it for that. It had some of the tightest and most up-to-date security measures invented and rigorous identity checks and facial recognition systems, with ADVENT Intelligence agents watching ensured that no one entered without authorization.

As disconcerting as it seemed for the media, at the very minimum they could be assured that they would be completely safe within the walls. As far as media centers went, Saudia was quite pleased with how it worked. Communication was essential, and if the media was to (hopefully) be an effective source of information, they should have access to pertinent information.

The main lobby of the building had multiple kiosks and rooms for each different branch and agency of ADVENT for the sole purpose of communicating with the media. While not all of them were open 24-7, they were open every day, for the majority of the day. The media was likewise unrestricted in when they chose to take advantage of this opportunity. They could arrive anytime, and either speak with a representative or schedule a meeting with someone even higher up.

As far as Saudia was concerned, when it came to transparency, they had no reason to complain. Of course not everyone was allowed; reporters for extremist, intentionally slanted, or otherwise sources of disinformation were not allowed. The bar of entry was not what she considered exceptionally high, and any media outlet, including those existing on social media such as Twitter and Youtube could participate provided they could prove that their reporting had clear effort put into it in the interest of informing the public.

And to make it better, there was a small restaurant that served multiple kinds of meals that were on the house for ADVENT. Free food and drink always made people more agreeable and dispelled the irritated attitudes people sometimes had. It was hard to write a hit piece on the evil authoritarian ADVENT when they made you steak and a nice cool tea. Or coffee in the morning.

The main briefing room itself was fairly standard. Red carpet lined the floor, and chairs filled the rectangular rooms in a neat order. At the end was an elevated platform and podium which the main
speaker presented from. Behind the podium was a white wall with a red and black ADVENT banner hanging down. There were always two SSR soldiers who stood behind the speaker, as well as two guards per door in the event of emergencies.

It wasn’t uncommon that she addressed the Press, but it was usually scheduled in advance and rarely this early. The room was always filled to the brim, and today was no exception as the media had been reporting nonstop about the sudden attack on Hawaii, and now that the trains had been deployed, they would soon be talking about the rest of the attack.

Three nukes had been launched into the air from the latest reports, which had so far caused no negative effects other than wiping out an entire fleet of alien reinforcements. She had breathed a sigh of relief at that, because as much as the scientists had assured her it was mostly safe, using nuclear weapons was always a risk.

Nonetheless, her risk had paid off and Hawaii would almost certainly fall to ADVENT.

Now, time to begin.

“Ladies and gentlemen, and all citizens of ADVENT. By now you are likely aware of the current military operation taking place in Hawaii.” On cue the reporters scribbled on their notepads and tapped on their phones. “I can confirm that yesterday I, along with the ADVENT Military, Intelligence, and XCOM, authorized an operation to retake Hawaii…”

She paused once again. “In addition to the remainder of the United States,” she raised her voice slightly at the sudden burst of gasps and whispers. “This operation is commencing as we speak, and will strike directly into the heart of alien controlled territory in the country.”

Saudia let that revelation sink in for a few seconds. “The latest reports from Hawaii are extremely positive. We have caught them by surprise and are currently pushing them back until every last one is either captured or executed. Their reinforcements have been annihilated due to our strategic usage of surgical nuclear missiles, which have been deployed in such a way that the negative repercussions are negligible, and the alien reinforcement fleet is in ruins, leaving the islands free for our soldiers to take.”

She briefly swept her gaze across the room. “As for the mainland operation, it is too early to say, but I have every confidence in our brave soldiers who are fighting to ensure that each and every citizen of ADVENT is protected from the aliens. Each of you will be continually updated as the situation develops, and there will be no questions today, thank you all.”

Saudia gave the ADVENT salute and stepped down. Despite what she’d said, the Press always shouted questions as if they expected an answer…just after she had said she wouldn’t.

Maybe she should write a rule against that.

A minute problem for another day. Right now she had an operation to oversee, and she sincerely hoped that it would continue going as well as it had been so far.

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Mars Observation Station – Mars Orbit

11/21/2016 – 7:07 A.M.

Ravarian, along with most of the Vitakara in the main station command center stared in disbelief at…well, it was a blank screen now. There was nothing left. Disciple-7, who had been assisting in
determining resources and tactics, was equally silent. “Are there any left?” He finally rumbled.

“No,” one of the analysts, a worried Vitakarian woman, said meekly. “No signals or feeds. All of them are gone.”

Ravarian was trying to think of what the Humans could possibly have that could wipe out an entire landing fleet. Three missiles had been detected, but they assumed that even if they hit, the damage would be minimal, and unless they had developed some kind of super missile, even their largest ones shouldn’t have wiped everything out.

*What the fuck happened?* That was what he wanted to say, as Humans did have excellent phrases for almost any situation, but at the moment, the last thing any of them needed to be reminded of was the word *Human*.

“ADVENT aircraft pulled back before the missile launches, yes?” Disciple-7 asked suddenly.

“Yes,” another analyst confirmed. “The spotted Archangel units also temporarily landed.”

“The scenarios are limited,” Disciple-7 said slowly. “ADVENT has either developed a high-yield anti-aircraft missile, or they have launched nuclear weapons. Considering nuclear weapons often disperse an EMP blast, it is imperative that all aircraft and vehicles be outside the radius. As nuclear weapons launched in the atmosphere have limited damaging effects on the environment, using them in this scenario is plausible.”

“Feed from the ground coming in now!” Another analyst called out, and the holographic display showed the airspace the reinforcements had once occupied, which now bore the telltale sign of the nuclear mushroom cloud.

Well, they’d actually done it. Ravarian had wondered if they would resort to using their effective, but highly destructive weapons. Given their historical averseness to the weapons, he had expected it to only come in the later stages in the war, and against ground or high-value targets. For some reason, it hadn’t occurred to him that they could be potent air weapons as well.

Regardless of the reasoning, ADVENT was now willing to use nuclear weapons, and they were also capable of vaporizing entire reinforcement fleets. Which potentially meant that any entry point was now a hazard. And in major operations like attacking entire countries, that would not be a massive target for their nuclear submarines.

And to think he’d actually suggested utilizing the Andromedon Aquatic Forces. Maybe if the Battlemaster had actually taken his advice, they wouldn’t be in this situation now. He was going to bring it up again, now that he’d been proven right here.

At the irritating cost of an entire reinforcement fleet.

The situation suddenly became worse.

“Outpost Two-One is under attack!” One Zararch officer said in disbelief, as the area pulsated red on the holomap. It was joined by more blimps of red. “So is Outpost Seventeen! Eleven!”

Ravarian blinked. This was the expected counterattack, but there shouldn’t have been any surprises. ADVENT couldn’t move an entire army without being watched, and he had his agents watching the main Legions. “How?” He demanded. “How heavy is the attack?”

“Uh…” The officer looked down, briefly speechless. “It appears the outposts affected are…gone.”
“Sacramento, Los Angeles and Redding Bases are under attack!” Another called out.

“What do you mean gone?” Ravarian demanded.

“They aren’t responding,” the Officer said slowly. “The main feeds are offline. Communication is cut. I would suggest it was a bomb…but there was no aircraft reported in the area.”

“How are they attacking the major bases?” Disciple-7 demanded harshly.

“Pulling up feeds,” an analyst said. “Center display.”

And Ravarian was greeted with a very familiar sight. “Trains.” He said without any emotion. He didn’t think there were any other words needed to describe the situation. There were those armored trains his agents had reported, except they were now outside the bases and carrying ADVENT soldiers and equipment. There were turrets on them as well, already firing into Collective defenses.

There were no other words for what he was feeling now; like an idiot.

So that’s what they were for.

He had literally had the information in his hands, and misinterpreted it. Granted, he didn’t know how much blame he should take, and trains were almost never used for anything beyond transportation. He doubted they had ever actually been used in battle before now, but history didn’t matter. The railways they hadn’t really thought to do anything with, and ADVENT was taking full advantage of their ignorance.

He had to admit, they’d outsmarted him here.

“How many of our bases and outposts are under attack?” Disciple-7 asked.

A brief pause as the officers and tacticians looked down at the holomap. “Almost all of the American territories,” one said in disbelief. “They’re going to try and drive us out completely.”

And with how much they’d been outplayed already, in addition to suffering substantial losses, they might very well succeed.

No. Ravarian shook his head.

ADVENT had made their play. Whatever plan the Battlemaster had, he had better plan to put it into motion now. The loss of America would delay the war months at least, and give the Humans a persistent morale boost. They couldn’t keep suffering defeats just because they didn’t want to cheat.

But if so…that raised a rather disturbing question. If the Humans could beat them now in a fair fight, how much more dangerous would they be the longer they were allowed to advance?

This entire operation needed to be reevaluated. But once it was over, one way or another.

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Redding, California – United States of America

Operation: Sherman – Day 1

11/21/2016 – 9:12 A.M.
“Deploy!” Roman yelled, both to his squad and the other ADVENT teams as the trains came to a stop, gauss fire already pounding from the train turrets. Konstantin threw open the doors and the soldiers poured out of the train cars. Roman activated his PDS field, and knew that for a short time they would be protected.

The rising sun illuminated defenses that Roman found almost laughable compared to what was coming to hit them. At least the way it was now, the train had stopped in front of a clear alien base in the city. It had been some distribution center at one point, but was now fielding plasma turrets, and a substantial Muton garrison that was already rushing to defend it.

Some of the Mutons carried grenade launchers which were already raised at the charging soldiers, gauss fire already rushing towards the aliens. Had the ADVENT force not also been accompanied by every branch of the ADVENT Special Forces, the Priest Division, and XCOM, it might have held out for some time.

The Mutons began firing as they fell into cover, and seemed to stutter as plasma bent away from Roman and his team, as well as every other Shieldbearer deployed. The Muton Grenadiers fired their payloads, but that was almost as ineffective as one of the Priests raised a hand, stopping the grenades in the air, and several were even blasted out of the sky. Probably one of the Hussars, since they were composed exclusively of snipers and scouts.

The Dragoons were almost as impressive as the Lancers had looked initially. They were close to what Roman would describe as walking tanks. One planted itself firmly into the ground, raised their hands and oriented themselves toward an alien barricade, and a stream of micromissiles shot out and eradicated both the structure and aliens themselves in a bright orange explosion.

The train turrets were firing at the main base behind the alien lines, collapsing the doors and sealing any possible reinforcements within. The Lancer Executors finally reached the alien line, and were as lethal as Roman had expected. More so, in fact.

As strong as the Mutons were, they were poor melee combatants. With roars they swung with fists and rifles, but their efforts proved futile as the Lancers bashed their skulls in or crushed their bones. More Mutons fell from Hussar fire who had deployed in makeshift sniper nests on the trains, and within them as well.

“Shield running low,” Roman updated those around him. “Shutting down in half a minute.”

“Acknowledged,” the Officer beside him confirmed, as did his team and the Lancer squad also beside him. Although Roman honestly didn’t know how worried they needed to be. The Muton line was shattered as the Executors were going through and slaughtering the Mutons with seeming ease. More were charging forward from the base, but they ran straight into a hail of gauss fire.

However, these Mutons were slightly different. They had helmets. Not a massive difference, but a noticeable one. Several purple lances suddenly sprouted from the arms of advancing Priests, which were able to damage the armor substantially, leaving smoking and charred metal, even if the Mutons were still alive.

The PDS fields from all the Shieldbearers were down now, so there was no intrinsic protection from the plasma anymore. The outer perimeter was breached, however, and ADVENT was claiming the outer defenses for their own and preparing to encircle the alien force still inside. The aliens were doing likewise, enacting downed barricades and rolling out what appeared to be portable turrets, both automated and manual.

Interesting.
“[Suppressing fire on center-left group.]” Galina informed as she began suppressing a group of four Mutons behind the dark alloy barricade. [Heads up! Grenadiers incoming!]”

Now it was apparent that there was someone smarter coordinating the Mutons, as Roman noticed that the Grenadiers had moved back, and the standard soldiers were taking the brunt of the ADVENT assault. There was enough volume of plasma fire to stop the advance completely, and even the Executors weren’t braving the sudden outpouring of plasma bolts crossing the battlefield.

A few moments later after Galina’s warning, dozens of plasma grenades were shot towards the ADVENT lines, to varying degrees of success. A few were shot, and some were caught by Priests or deflected by sudden psionic shields. Some landed on ADVENT positions, however, extracting the first major casualties from the attacking force.

“Wing Captain Leewood to Redding forces,” the leader of the ADVENT air forces in this attack suddenly said. “The main AA defenses for the city appear to have been taken out. Commencing aerial drops.”

“[Not a moment too soon.]” Elena commented. Roman concurred, this was where the main wave of reinforcements was going to come from, before the main army itself of course. The airdrops would bring soldiers, supplies, and even some tanks. Speaking of vehicles, the MDUs should be coming up soon…

Right on cue the lumbering white robots strode up behind the lines, and began laying down their lethal firepower against the Muton defenders. The high-powered lasers didn’t kill them in one hit, but it did keep them in cover. Several Dragoons protected by Priests stepped out and unleashed their payloads on the Muton lines, blowing holes in the barricades and Mutons themselves.

Roman observed that the majority of Muton soldiers began focusing their fire on the MDUs, and managed to take a few down from the sudden green barrages, but this just left openings for the rest of the soldiers to focus fire on the defenders. Roman fired several shots and the barrage of fire hit, but didn’t kill it, though the second shattered the weak alloy helm and blew the head of the Muton apart.

The Priests in the area were now also taking the upper hand. While few, once entrenched Roman could see just how powerful they could be. A storm of psionic energy destroyed one squad of Mutons, cutting through their armor with almost no effort. Random Mutons suddenly began attacking each other, although they were quickly subdued.

Other Mutons were lifted into the air and exposed to the full firepower of ADVENT, while others deployed defensive shields, allowing the Engineers to construct makeshift cover from corpses, and deploy the portable cover they always carried with them. “This is Buckeye One coming in to reinforce,” a female voice came over the radio. “Stand by. ADVENT Reinforcements dropping close to your position.”

“[Looks like they’re here!]” Anton whooped, glancing up. Roman briefly followed suit and saw the planes overhead and parachutes opening up as tanks and soldiers were dropping. An XCOM Skyranger shrieked overhead flying at a ludicrously low height and one figure jumped out, shimmering with a purple shield over the body, and fell towards the Muton lines.

Roman blinked as he saw…him? Her? It wasn’t easy to determine gender from armor, but whoever it was, they were attacking the Mutons with a damn axe. A Templar, one of the XCOM psions that fought in melee then. He hadn’t seen one properly in action before, and it was rather amazing to behold. The soldier must have been enhanced beyond psionics, as they were striking with enough force to puncture the helmets and killing the Mutons in one or two hits.
As the soldier was covered in the purple shield, nothing seemed to be able to damage them, and the soldier seemed to laugh off plasma as they struck, kicked, and dashed from alien to alien, fighting with a zeal that was even forcing the Mutons to back off, despite outmassing the Human by a significant margin.

The alien lines were faltering, and the XCOM squad that had arrived was now entering the fray. One of their gunners began striding right into the alien lines, yelling for them to advance as another Templar joined the first one in taking the fight to the Muton lines. That was the cue for the Executors to charge the front lines, and they joined in the carnage, eradicating the Muton lines and clearing the way for them to advance.

“[Move forward!]” Roman commanded, seeing a fairly safe opportunity to move forward. The Mutons were in full retreat, and they were being picked off as they ran by the Snipers, Hussars, and MDUs, not to mention the Executors and Templars running them down with a furious rigor. The first alien stronghold was taken.

The battle for Redding was fully underway.

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Near Los Angeles, California – United States of America

Operation: Sherman – Day 1

11/21/2016 – 9:02 A.M.

The dimly lit train rattled as it sped towards LA, although Patricia wasn’t focusing on that, nor the soldiers around her. Eyes closed, she tried getting a sense of what was going to be facing them within the next few minutes. LA was expected to be heavily fortified, but she had taken Vegas without extensive strenuous effort, and she could do the same here.

Creed would lead the actual assault in her stead while she exerted her telepathic dominance over the aliens, and the squad she had would likely perform expertly. It was going to be the first conflict for some, such as Sussan, but the new psion would likely perform well once the battle began. Just in case, she had been sure to project a calm aura over the entirety of the train itself.

“Quite a curious plan,” a familiar voice mused as a shadowy figure stepped up beside her. “Yet I am not sure you consider the…consequences of such an action. Your strike, while bold, is one of escalation; a grasping chance of exploiting your apparent advantage before it is lost. One I cannot fault your species for, but you should know the reality of the situation better than most.”

She turned her head to see herself standing directly beside her, a perfect replica except her double wasn’t wearing the helmet she had on now, and the eyes were pools of black. She briefly glanced around at the others in the train car, and none of them seemed to notice the figure. How shocking. The doppelgänger smiled slightly at that.

What are you doing here now? She thought, knowing the Imperator would be able to hear her. Don’t you have better things to do?

“Considering all of this is the result of my decisions, I have a vested interest in keeping my eye on it,” he answered, the deep voice sounding wrong coming out of her mouth. “And the scale of this is one that I am personally interested in. You don’t know what you will unleash with this.”

Get to the point, or get out of my head. She thought with as much disdain as she could muster, narrowing her eyes at the figure. I really do not have time for more of your mind games.
“This is what will happen,” the Imperator said, her double clasping its hands behind its back. “Los Angeles is a stronghold of thousands of Mutons, a network of twenty-five Gateways, and five thousand more mechanical units including Sectopods, Cyberdisks, and Seekers. Enemies which you are poorly equipped to handle.”

Which is why I’ll focus on the thousands of Mutons. She responded. Like how I’ve always done it.

“Your attack will initially succeed,” the Imperator continued. “You will gain ground. The Mutons will fall. You will dominate them. Yet I am amused you have not thought about how this is going exactly as you planned. Why are you allowed to attack with no initial response?”

Patricia smiled under her helmet. Because maybe we outsmarted you?

Now the Imperator was amused. “No. The only reason your initial attacks are succeeding is because the Battlemaster is waiting. He wants you to make the first strike. He wants to see the composition of your forces, because then he can counter them. The Battlemaster is many things, but he is not someone who can be easily tricked.”

I don’t suppose you’ll tell me what he is planning then?

“The Battlemaster is one of the few I cannot read, but I can certainly speculate,” the Imperator nodded, the unnatural smile deeply contrasting the black pools of eyes. “Fectorian has been developing infantry units. These are far more powerful than the ones you have been fighting. You have little experience with controlling a mind enhanced by cybernetics. You will try, but you will exhaust yourself long before the battle is over, not because of your lack of power, but the incorrect application of it.”

Get to the point.

“Of course,” he raised a gauntleted finger, pointing it at her. “You are powerful, Patricia, but almost all you have learned has been through trial and error. Experimentation. You have had no training. You have had no teacher. At this point you have as much mastery as the ancient Ethereals of old who had begun to fully harness the Gift. Aegis has certainly done what he could, but he is no telepath, as I have said before.”

Again, get to the point.

“I can help you,” he said. “The cybernetic mind is one that can be dominated as easy as an organic one…but it is different. The techniques and outcomes are changed. All you need to do is allow me to transfer the technique directly into your mind. I will do that, and nothing else.”

Patricia had to smirk at the absurdity of that statement. Do you really think I’m that gullible? I’m not stupid enough to think letting you into my mind would just be for information.

“And what motivation would I have for lying to you?” He asked knowingly. “I could break your mind at any point, Patricia, but I am choosing not to. If I intended to do such to you from the start, we would not be speaking now. There would not be choice. But you have one, Patricia, your choices are true and they matter. Your choices will decide the outcome of this war and the future of your species.”

He smiled at her. “I am simply offering you one more, with no catch, aside from the consequence that your mastery over the Gift will grow. I will be watching, and if you choose to accept my offer, I will be waiting.” With that, he instantly vanished from sight.

She would have found his dramatic exits amusing if the conversations weren’t so disconcerting.
She jolted as a hand rested on her shoulder. “Hey, you alright?” Creed asked, cocking his head. “We’re almost there. Can you sense anything?”

“Fine,” she said curtly. “I’m…ready. There are a lot of Mutons. Sectopods, Cyberdisks, and Seekers as well. More Gateways than expected I think too, Muton minds aren’t the clearest.”

“Allright, good,” he nodded, and all of them gripped their weapons as the train began slowing down. “Prepare to deploy!” He ordered, with all of them and the ADVENT soldiers lining up at the doors. The Archangel Host was supposed to deploy immediately after initial engagement, so Patricia knew that would give some extra flexibility in dealing with the immediate entrenched defenses.

And now she could sense the hordes of aliens directly ahead, Mutons of all kinds. The question then was what she was going to force them to do. There were many options, but she felt like it would be best to…take advantage of the information the Imperator had given her.

Sound seemed to slowly fade as the doors opened and the XCOM and ADVENT soldiers charged outside and towards the fortified city. She stepped out half-aware of her surroundings, the map of minds in the city dominating her own sight. With one hand extended towards the mass of concrete, stone, and metal, psionic power flowing around her, she began to dominate the minds of those within.

With each mind she infected like a virus, she gave a specific order: *Destroy the Gateways.*

She wouldn’t have to worry about cybernetic units if there wasn’t any way for them to come.

What she didn’t see, was the immaterial form of the Imperator standing behind her, observing with the faintest of smiles on the face of the doppelgänger he imitated.

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Sacramento, California – United States of America

*Operation: Sherman – Day 1*

11/21/2016 – 9:27 A.M.

Oliver had gotten used to psions over his time spent in XCOM. Once you got past the whole ‘doing things with their mind’ part, they were regular nice people. Iosif beside him was one such psion he got along with easily enough, and of course respectful to his fellow soldiers. The new psion Moriai Jin was also a pleasant soldier. While supposedly weaker than most psions, he was dedicated to being as helpful as possible.

Geist on the other hand, was unnerving.

Every single action or word spoken by the man seemed to be calculated and deliberate, with a delivery that would make a machine seem to have more emotion. And when Geist decided to actually put some emotion into his voice, it sounded nothing short of malevolent and sinister. He had yet to put on his helmet, despite everyone else doing so, and seemed utterly unmoved by the oncoming sounds of battle ahead.

Granted, all of them were soldiers and used to battle at this point. But from what Oliver knew, Geist was not even a soldier, but someone they had recruited from the PRIEST Program. He’d also gotten the feeling that during the brief time they’d spoken, Geist had been poking around in his head.
While he didn’t necessarily have anything to hide, the number of people he would be comfortable with in his mind did not include Geist among them.

However, the Commander apparently had enough confidence in him to make him Overseer…so he supposed they would have to wait and see how it went. The skyranger lights turned red, indicating that they were coming in for a landing. Unlike some of the other squads, they were not going in on the trains, but to reinforce by Skyranger.

“Do not move forward until I give the order,” Geist stated in a tone that did not allow compromise. “We will appraise the situation on the ground, then deploy as needed. Understood?”

“Yes, Overseer!”

The Skyranger ramp descended, and they were greeted with the sight of a mix of ADVENT soldiers, Lancers, and Cuirassiers engaged in a perimeter shootout with a large contingent of alien defenders who were within the city itself. The aliens had actually demolished much of the outer buildings by the tracks, and there was a small no-man’s land between the converted defensive towers, and the ADVENT forces.

The Engineers had set up some small defenses, but most were using the train itself as a defensive structure. The train defenses were firing at the aliens, and there was visible damage, but it was an essential stalemate until ADVENT decided to commit. Focusing on the alien defenses, Oliver saw that the ground forces were a mix of Muton soldiers and Elites. Not good.

It appeared the aliens within the structures themselves were Vitakarians, snipers and soldiers occupying all four floors of the building and raining green plasma down on the ADVENT train. “Telepath Jin,” Geist said slowly, raising a hand. “Establish telepathic enhancement to as many sniper and long-range personnel as you can. Templar Bronis, gather the Lancer Executors in the vicinity and prepare to move forward. You may take Engineer Kun to assist.”

“I can do that,” Iosif said slowly, shifting the mace in his hand. “However, I don’t necessarily command them—”

“You will take command temporarily,” Geist stated flatly, not looking to him. “If they refuse, inform me and I will take care of it. Understood?”

Oliver winced. This did not seem a good tactic, and one ADVENT would not approve of. Iosif just started walking to the respective Lancers with a brief nod and Nuan followed him. Jin was already finding a safe space to begin his own telepathic support. “Scout Man, Assault Darego, move towards the designated Goliath drop point and prepare to provide covering fire.”

“Yes, Overseer,” Khulan Man nodded as she and her Nigerian counterpart dashed off to where the drop point was.

“The rest of you follow me and fire at will,” Geist said, and they began walking; walking way too slowly for Oliver’s liking, towards the ADVENT line. It was maddening, he wanted to run to some kind of cover, but he really couldn’t. He didn’t know if it was Geist or some innate knowledge that sticking to the psion’s side was best, but he felt unnecessarily exposed.

“What’s the plan, Overseer?” David Cannon asked, his rifle raised. “I assume you have one?”

“The enemy has the defensive advantage, and we will suffer unacceptable casualties if we attempt to cross,” Geist stated. “Their primary support is within the two defensive towers, with secondary support on the ground. With the towers negated, and cover established, ADVENT can make a
methodical charge forward.”

“Right,” David said, noticeably unimpressed. “And the plan?”

“Join the initial fight,” Geist said, pressing a button on his wrist. “This will be unnecessarily difficult without coordination.” His arm suddenly was engulfed in purple energy, and he motioned towards the open space and purple shapes suddenly materialized out of nothing. “The cover will protect you,” Geist assured him. “Aegis has been helpful in refining my applications of psionics.”

Oliver looked at David and shrugged. No reason not to do it, and no matter what he thought about Geist personally, he did appear to be a competent psion. With that in mind, they charged towards the shimmering shield arranged into cover. Now green plasma was raining down upon them, and both of them managed to avoid the worst of it and on instinct Oliver slid into cover.

Interestingly enough, despite being translucent, the cover held and some quick testing did seem to indicate it was steady. Well, as plasma bolts started hitting it and vanishing, that was proven rather quickly. Oliver wasted no time in firing back with his gauss rifle, aiming towards the Mutons on the ground since they were easier to target.

“This is XCOM Psion Geist to ADVENT forces in the immediate vicinity,” Geist said over the radio. “All PRIEST Division forces in the area please converge upon my location. Remaining forces prepare to advance. XCOM Goliath support is incoming shortly.”

“Think they’ll come?” David asked as he fired.

Oliver managed to hit one of the Mutons, although not kill it. As nice as the enhanced eyes were, it still wasn’t possible to turn assault rifles into sniper rifles. “If someone sounds like that and orders you to come? I think you get over there.”

“Yeah,” David grunted. “I don’t want to make him angry.”

They continued the fight for minutes more, and now there were ADVENT soldiers who were also taking advantage of the psionic cover and taking much better shots at the aliens. The ground suddenly shook, and a look back confirmed that the Goliath had indeed landed. The lumbering behemoth raised the massive gauss weapon and immediately started firing at the defensive towers.

The bare battlefield suddenly was lit up with more psionic shields acting as cover, painting the whole area with purple streaks. “ADVENT Forces advance at will, stand by for tower negation.” A few moments later, the towers were suddenly encased in purple. It didn’t seem to be doing anything, but all fire was immediately stopped.

Huh. He had to admit that was a pretty good tactic. “Forward!” Iosif yelled, and with the sudden ceasing of the majority of plasma fire, he and the dozen or so Executors dashed through the maze of psionic cover towards the now-weakened Muton line. ADVENT soldiers were also charging forward and taking places behind the cover.

Oliver and David followed suit, getting closer and closer to the defensive stronghold itself as Iosif and the Executors hit and began destroying the ground line of aliens. Armor didn’t protect them as Iosif bashed their joints, heads, and weapons with his mace and more often than not seemed to kill on contact with a vital body part.

The towers were still imprisoned, and Oliver watched with some amusement as the aliens inside were trying to break the shield by shooting or hitting it. Out of curiosity, he looked behind to see Geist with a dozen Priests beside him calmly marching forward. So encased by psionic energy was
Geist that Oliver found it somewhat difficult to make out his form.

The Priests beside him were also enshrined by psionic energy, though now they were gathering it in preparation for something. The answer to that came shortly, as the shield to the first tower fell, and it was immediately hit by the Goliath’s weapons, and purple maelstroms of psionic energy. Rockets from ADVENT Rocketeers also slammed into the tower, telekinetically enhanced by the Priests, and within a few short minutes the first tower crumbled to the ground with a crash.

The second shield fell soon after, and it met the same fate once the Goliath fired a half-dozen missiles at the structure, and the Dragoons and Priests unleashed their tools and powers on it. The moment the second tower fell, all of the psionic cover disappeared and as ADVENT rushed to claim the previous alien territory, Iosif and the Executors cleaning up the last of the aliens, Geist looked further into the city.

His golden-rimmed eyes flicked minutely every second as everything was taken in, calculated, and planned. The neutral expression on his face didn’t change, but briefly Oliver thought he saw some satisfaction flicker over it. “We move forward,” Geist said as he strode up. “This was a first engagement. Now the real battle begins.”

Despite that, after the display Geist had put on, Oliver wondered just what the aliens would have to stop them.

Hopefully nothing. It would be good to see them run for once.

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Mars Observation Station – Mars Orbit

11/21/2016 – 10:17 A.M.

ADVENT had finally shown their hand, and it was one with more ferocity than the Battlemaster had expected. He had, at most, anticipated ADVENT attempting to completely secure Nevada and perhaps the outer cities of California. But instead, they were going to attempt to push the Collective completely out of the country itself.

Now that the Zar’Chon had confirmed that ADVENT was mobilizing their full army, if there wasn’t a suitable response, they would succeed. Now that ADVENT was fielding psions, he now had to contend with the possibility that they wouldn’t succeed, or at minimum suffer heavy losses. ADVENT had escalated this conflict, however, so he would need to respond in kind.

There were three holograms before him, Fectorian’s Replicas he’d begun seeding throughout the Collective military. While the machine intelligence was not perfect, they could be isolated and their purpose was to report and observe without the risk of falling to telepathy, exhaustion, disease, or poison.

Now that the chocolate problem had become more…extensive, poison was an actual concern, if largely unwitting.

He felt frustration at that thought.

No time to focus on it though. Pushing that away, he addressed the holograms, all reporting from different cities. “Have the assaulting forces been categorized completely?”

“Confirmed, Battlemaster,” the Sacramento Replica said, having the appearance of a Vitakarian female missing one eye. “Corroborating data with other units indicates a similarity in unit
These initial attacks are composed of ADVENT Special Forces, and a varying amount of XCOM support. We are currently facing a Goliath-class MEC, and an unknown number of psions."

"Due to unit irregularity and comparison with previous battles, it is likely that XCOM Psion Patricia Trask is attacking this location," the Los Angeles Replica reported, appearing as a Vitakarian male. "We are losing substantial ground."

"Reinforcements will be arriving shortly," the Battlemaster assured them, glancing down at the data stream to confirm their uploads. This was all he needed. "Continue observation and engage as needed."

He shut off the holograms and the image reverted to the haptic map of the United States. So ADVENT wanted a fight. They had committed their forces to driving them out, but they had made the mistake of assuming that his resources were finite. While in actuality they were, the numbers were so far beyond what ADVENT could contend with they were virtually limitless.

However, he was never one to throw away resources unnecessarily. Even Mutons didn’t need to be wasted.

But there was a problem here: The Collective had a distinct lack of advanced units to counter the elite units of ADVENT and XCOM. Fectorian’s soldiers solved this to an extent, and the Elites played a substantial role, but one-on-one, a Lancer or XCOM soldier, much less a Priest, was a match for any soldier in the Collective, and usually exceeded them.

He would have to take a hard look at the military composition and make adjustments once this battle was over.

He pressed a button on his wrist, signaling for the relevant beings to meet him. It was time to fully launch their attacks and counterattacks. He brought up a haptic display and sent the signal for the designated fleets to begin arriving in the Solar System. He was going to need a lot for what was coming next.

The door slid open soundlessly and those he had summoned began walking in. The Zar’Chon of course, along with Disciple-7, and finally two of the Creator’s Chosen, the so-called Hunter, or “Dave” as he liked calling himself. He had another name, but the Battlemaster saw little point in using it. He had a tendency to be disrespectful, but as long as he did the job, the Battlemaster could tolerate it.

Considering he came from the Creator, it was understandable that the alien had developed means of coping.

Then there was Senorium, the unflinchingly loyal zealot and complete tool. Little independent thought, but he had his uses. Then came the two Guardians, who the others had clearly never seen before. The Warlock bowed deeply, and even the Hunter stood at attention. The Zar’Chon did likewise, and Disciple-7 didn’t react whatsoever.

“ADVENT has revealed their plan,” the Battlemaster began. “It is unlikely they have the resources to launch additional attacks. At this moment our major bases are under attack, and they are facing trained psions and genetically enhanced special forces units. In addition, they have revealed that they are capable of eliminating fleets entering the atmosphere using nuclear weapons.”

He swept his gaze over them. “ADVENT is willing to escalate this conflict. We will oblige them.”
“What is the plan then?” The Hunter asked, a sly smile on his face. “Bomb them from orbit?”

“No,” the Battlemaster said flatly, slightly offended that was even a suggestion. “We will launch attacks of our own. I have identified appropriate forces to respond to the current attacks, and depending on how those hold, we will take additional measures.” Parts of the map illuminated red. “I have authorized a full invasion fleet against Alaska, the Yukon territory, and British Columbia. This is in immediate effect.”

“They will not expect that,” the Zar’Chon nodded approvingly. “Their forces are out of position.”

“In addition, I have also authorized an invasion force to target Mexico,” the Battlemaster continued. “Specifically, the city of Guadalajara and the surrounding area.” The Battlemaster looked at the two Chosen. “Your…sibling…will lead this attack.”

He pressed a button on the console and the map shifted to one of Asia. “Finally, the attack on Korea will commence as planned. Hunter, you will participate in the attack.”

The Zar’Chon seemed slightly taken aback at the plan, but nodded nonetheless. “And what of us, Battlemaster?” The Second Guardian asked.

“You will stay until the situation develops further,” the Battlemaster said to her. “However, you may coordinate the attack on Alaska and Canada. You may be needed in California, First Guardian, but it is too early to make the assessment yet.”

“And what of me, Battlemaster?” The Warlock asked.

“You will accompany me,” the Battlemaster stated. “I intend to show ADVENT the consequences of escalating this conflict.”

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**Redding, California – United States of America**

**Operation: Sherman – Day 1**

11/21/2016 – 11:24 A.M.

The fight had been taken from their initial command bases to the streets of Redding itself. They had taken a short amount of time to regroup and refuel after taking the base, and Roman had gotten word that the other attacks had gone similarly well and that ADVENT was sending the Legion proper to help mop up, assuming they didn’t purge the aliens before that point.

Priests, XCOM, and Lancers; there seemed very little that could stop them when working together. Even more so as they marched down the streets themselves.

The aliens had been working on constructing more turrets and barricades on street corners and in intermediate places between intersections, but they were clearly not prepared for an all-out assault. Roman actually believed that they had expended the majority of their Muton force, since now they were fighting Vitakara Runianarch soldiers.

Red lasers and green plasma was exchanged down the streets, but the Runianarch were clearly going to fall soon. In addition to all of his squad, his march forward was accompanied by a full Dragoon team of four, two MDUs, and three XCOM soldiers. The one Templar had turned out to be a woman, Ellinor Aagard, who was joined by two more soldiers, Rosario De Leon and Fakhr al
Din, the latter also carried enough explosives to be a Dragoon.

The Priests were assisting elsewhere, but frankly, they weren’t needed.

Two Runianarch fell to his rifle shots, largely thanks to Galina pinning them in place. More were running up, or slithering in the case of the armored Cobrarian soldiers. Those were definitely the most unsettling, as the idea of fighting man-sized snakes was something he’d only really heard about. The Borelians were the hardest to kill by far, still fighting after sustaining what he would consider lethal wounds.

“Firing rocket!” Fakhr yelled, launching a missile towards a barricade several aliens were hiding behind. Several were killed in the blast, and the soldiers quickly picked off the ones who ran away. Maksim seemed pleased he sniped a fleeing Vitakarian and Cobrarian in their backs.

“[They don’t take hints, these aliens.]” Maksim commented as another shot brought a Borelian to one knee. “[Brave aliens, but I don’t think we’ve taken many losses yet.]”

“No,” Roman agreed as he fired some more shots at the aliens. “[I don’t think we have.]”

Ellinor had largely been standing in the middle of the street, maintaining a psionic shield in front of her, while she protected everyone else as they advanced. The Dane Axe, glistening with alien blood was hooked to her side, since she apparently needed two hands to maintain the various psionic shields. Now that they were close to the major intersection, which the aliens had turned into a mix between a checkpoint and tower, she dropped the supplementary shields and grasped the axe in her hand.

“Hit the tower!” She yelled to the Dragoons. “Everything you have! Fakhr, you too!”

“Locking on for barrage,” one of the Dragoons stated, planting himself in the ground, the other one joining him. Roman saw launchers extend from their shoulders, angling towards the intersection. “Firing.” A dozen micro missiles shot into the sky and descended on the frontal position of the aliens in seconds.

With nowhere to really run, most aliens in the area were ripped apart by the blast, and Ellinor charged into the fray. Roman and the rest of the soldiers took this opportunity to charge as well. Laser blasts from the MDUs took out soldiers hiding out at the top of the platform overlooking the intersection, as well as those hiding out in the buildings.

Fire licking at the metal and aliens still alive, they were already backing up, although the confined space did very little against Ellinor who took all of them on in a fifteen-to-one charge. Or at least it would be that way until ADVENT caught up with them and had clear shots through the smoke and metal.

But Roman could see some of the action. Nothing seemed to be able to touch her as she not only slammed the axe down on the various aliens, particularly focusing on the Borelians who had parts of their face exposed, but also disoriented them by lashing out with her hand and throwing them back with the force, or lashing out with an armored foot towards the joints.

By the time Roman and his team had clear lines of sight, the aliens were either on the ground and killed with straight execution shots, or they were dead. One shot killed a Cobrarian soldier, and Roman looked up to see Ellinor bury the axe in the faceplate of a Borelian soldier, kicking the now-dead soldier away. “Think that’s all of them here.”

“Nice work,” he complimented, taking the opportunity to reload. “Don’t know if we needed to
“Even help.”

“No,” she surprisingly agreed, twirling her axe, flinging yellow droplets of blood around.

“But it is appreciated.”

“We’ve got Andromedons incoming!” Rosario yelled from outside. “A lot of them from two sides!”

“They probably have an Andromedon leader,” Ellinor said contemplatively to herself. “Saving their own for last. We hold out here, we can probably take the town.”

“Unless they have Gateways,” Elena pointed out. “Do we have enough to withstand a flanking attack?”

“That depends on how many they’re attacking us with,” she said slowly. “However…we might be able to even the odds a bit.” She pressed a finger to her helmet. “Captain de Leeuw, requesting an airstrike at the following location. Andromedon forces are converging.”

“Request received, A-10 squad being sent to your location, hold out for a little while,” the answer came instantly. “De Leeuw out.”

“Fakhr, set up main defenses on the right flank!” Ellinor called out, as she motioned to Roman. “You and your team will help me hold them back until the A-10s raze them.” Roman nodded, and they dashed out from the platform to the left side of the intersection.

“Well, that’s not good,” Galina commented as she saw the Andromedon force approaching. There were a minimum of a dozen Andromedons marching forward…and it appeared they had received some kind of upgrade. They marched directly down the street, unafraid of any oncoming fire, which Roman assumed was because of the red shield that was being projected from small mechanical extensions on their arms, which didn’t seem to interfere with holding and firing their weapons on the now-defending ADVENT forces.

Behind the front line of Andromedon soldiers were some Battlefield Engineers, and there was another hulking unit that Roman hadn’t seen before; this one didn’t seem to carry any weapons, and bore massive tanks on their backs, with what looked like chemical dispensers on the arms.

“Contamination Operatives,” Ellinor said grimly, hooking her axe on her waist. “We can’t let them get near.”

“Thank you for that very helpful advice,” Maksim said deadpan. “I can see why XCOM are considered the experts.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ellinor snorted as the plasma fire began hitting their position. “However, I can keep them in place for a time.” Arms glowing with psionic energy, she thrust out one hand and a massive psionic shield stretching from one side of the street to the other appeared, taller than the Andromedons themselves.

The aliens stopped and began shooting the shield experimentally, although they quickly found out that it was pointless. Instead they began backing up, presumably to find a way around, before Ellinor chuckled. “Oh no, you’re not running away.” It was difficult to see, but Roman thought he saw another shield go up in the background, effectively trapping the Andromedons in a neat purple box.

“Here it comes!” Anton yelled as the sound of aircraft overhead was heard. Ellinor let the shield fall and the Andromedons barely had time to make a decision before the sound of the A-10 guns ripped
through the air and shredded the area the Andromedons inhabited. Their suits were punctured, scrapped, and in some cases a plasma weapon exploded.

The sheer volume of fire and damage even rendered the suits unable to come back to life, and all that was left were a pile of Andromedon corpses and suit wrecks. “That was fun,” Ellinor commented, turning around. “Let’s go help out the others.”

Roman turned to follow, thinking that even with the Collective trying to make advancements of their own, it didn’t seem to help them much when psions were involved. And really big guns. The battle for Redding wasn’t over, but he didn’t see a way that they could be stopped.

Their victory was only a matter of time.

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Sydney Outskirts – Australia

11/21/2016 – 8:22 A.M.

The city proper was in sight, and the aliens were struggling to actually combat the Chronicler’s army. There had been a few losses, but the numbers were continuously replaced by the Chronicler dominating the next group of aliens encountered. They were now engaged with an Andromedon defense force, who had presumably also been the ones responsible for the red shield going over the inner city.

These Andromedons also had rectangle energy shields in front of them, apparently projected from new forearm attachments. They actually were managing to hold up against the particle weapons of the Chronicler’s army, but at the same time, they were overloading them far quicker than Abby presumed was normal.

But in true Andromedon fashion, they were handling this with some degree of intelligence. Soldiers were almost immediately swapped out if the personal energy shield fell, and drones flew in front of the Andromedon, deploying another shield to absorb fire while the Andromedon retreated and another took his place.

At the same time, their plasma weapons were not highly effective against the Chronicler. At best they were absorbed by the armor of the aliens, and otherwise didn’t do anything at all if they were absorbed by psionic shields or missed entirely. Sniper fire was still steadily coming in from the city, also to limited effect.

“Enough of this,” the Chronicler growled, dropping the psionic protection and extending a claw-like hand towards the Andromedon line. “Your shields cannot protect you.” The area around the Andromedon lines was suddenly distorted, and to Abby it almost looked like the reality itself was being warped and compressed.

The Andromedons were suddenly flattened and crushed under the psionic grip of the Chronicler. Yellow chemicals rose from their shattered helms and the suits sparked as they were broken. Drones became metal pancakes and weapons exploded in green flashes of plasma. How many had the Chronicler killed there? Twenty? Thirty?

How long could he actually keep this up for? They’d been fighting non-stop for at least four hours now, with the Chronicler performing similar feats against the aliens. On some level he had to be enhanced by the suit, but even then he was still one man.

Limits were still apparently unknown to him though, and he continued marching forward deeper
towards the now-shielded city. “Elites are coming,” Harper called, pointing further down the road they were on. Abby focused in that direction, and there were indeed a lot of Elites coming. A small army of them in fact, accompanied by the black-armored figures of the Sectoid Vanguards.

“Little threat,” the Chronicler said. “They will join our army.”

The heavy plasma cannons of the Muton Elites began firing, and the Chronicler’s army responded in kind, blue lances returning the fire and cleaving through several of the Vanguards who then activated their psionic shields and began returning plasma fire which proved as ineffective as before.

“There is something else…” the Chronicler said slowly. “Something wrong…”

A sustained barrage of plasma fire managed to take down one of the Chronicler’s Mutons, but in retaliation several of the Muton Elites were targeted and shredded by repeated blasts from the particle weapons. The psionic shields the Sectoids had seemed to be protecting them, and they were moving to psionic attacks, as Abby saw purple energy forming around their wrists.

What was taking him so long? The Chronicler should have been able to dominate these aliens by now.

Abby leapt onto one of the small flat tops of the buildings; a perk she’d realized her armor had, in that it allowed her to perform physical feats that were impossible except through genetic modification. She raised her own rifle, which configured itself to something she assumed was long-range, and she fired on one of the Vanguards.

It would have been perfect, had the Vanguard not immediately moved the shield to where she had fired, blocking it completely. Odd, but she immediately moved to one of the Muton Elites and fired a sustained particle blast on the face of the alien, and a few seconds later it burned through, causing it to tumble to the ground.

Just as they were gaining the upper hand once more, the Chronicler audibly growled and violently gestured towards the mass of aliens. Corrosive psionic energy convulsed around him, and the alien mass was suddenly engulfed in a massive psionic maelstrom that vaporized the ones at the center, and just as easily overwhelmed even those on the edge.

And just as quickly as he had brought it into existence, the maelstrom vanished, leaving only purple wisps. “Something is blocking my telepathy,” the Chronicler stated. “Or more accurately, someone is protecting the aliens.”

“You can’t break it?” One of Harper’s soldiers asked.

“Not on my own,” the Chronicler admitted. “The skill is…unlike anything I have encountered before. Nonetheless, we should be able to continue even with this roadblock.”

Then in the middle of the street, in the center of where the psionic maelstrom had been, the air shimmered a faint purple and an Ethereal literally stepped out of thin air, much like the Chronicler had done before. A very familiar Ethereal, now that Abby thought about it.

Quisilia raised a hand in greeting. “Hello there!”

Every alien of the Chronicler’s army, and Abby herself, trained their weapons on the lone Ethereal. The Chronicler himself stepped forward. “Ethereal. I was beginning to think you would let me continue unopposed.”
While Abby didn’t know the exact abilities of Quisilia, that he was apparently powerful enough to block the Chronicler’s telepathy was concerning. “I’m afraid not,” Quisilia said mockingly. “I must say you…aren’t quite what I expected. Just who are you? Not ADVENT or XCOM.”

The Chronicler seemed amused. “And just how would you know that?”

“Because I’m looking into the mind of your XCOM associate now,” Quisilia said clearly from behind her. Abby jumped and flew around to see the Ethereal standing behind her, the metal helmet looking forebodingly down at her. The Ethereal raised one finger to where his lips would presumably be, and vanished from sight.

Heart pounding, she returned looking to the street, where Quisilia was still inexplicably there and continued. “It appears she doesn’t know what you really are. Not surprising. Puppets usually stay quiet in these situations.”

“Like you are any different, Ethereal,” the Chronicler responded. “Or has your arrangement with the Sovereign One changed?”

Quisilia vanished and suddenly appeared directly before the Chronicler, standing over him by several feet easily. “I somehow doubt you know the intricate details, little puppet, suffice to say you vastly underestimate just how much we know.” He vanished and reappeared further down the street in his original position. “Do you really think we are as ignorant as the puppet species normally are?”

“I think you’re stalling for time,” the Chronicler responded, psionic power gathering around him. “I would expect nothing less from those who ran from the ones who destroyed their species. Even now you fight using the tactics of a coward. Otherwise you would not be able to stand and fight.”

Quisilia laughed and something flashed in his hand and he vanished once more and reappeared behind one of the Chroniclers Vitakarian soldiers and stabbed him through the chin with some kind of blade. With another arm he did the same thing and a third dropped some kind of ball that exploded into a black swarm of nanites that crawled up and into a nearby Muton, eating him alive.

Quisilia vanished and reappeared in the same place as before, now accompanied by a perfect copy of himself, then two, then more until the street itself had several dozen. “You are not fighting the Battlemaster, little puppet. Fighting fair is only for the naïve and honorable. Even then, when faced with overwhelming odds, even the Battlemaster would use every trick he could.”

The Quisilia figures pulled out another blade, this one colored obsidian and clearly visible. “So show me what you can do, little puppet; show me the gifts your benefactor has blessed you with.”

The Muton being consumed by the nanites suddenly flared in psionic fire, incinerating it completely presumably to kill all the nanites and keep them from spreading. “You are walking a dangerous line, Ethereal,” the Chronicler warned. “You don’t want to make me angry.”

“Oh, I do, little puppet,” Quisilia mocked. “In fact, I’m counting on it.”

The Chronicler swept out an arm, sending an arc of crackling energy towards the alien. It passed through the illusions without doing anything, and they all vanished. “Come and find me, puppet. I will be waiting.”

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Busan – South Korea
“This is Chief Marshal Kong to all ADVENT Forces,” the Chief Marshal said into his helmet as Duri led his squad towards the trenches, accompanied by thousands of ADVENT soldiers all rushing to their positions. “We have confirmation of alien invasion fleets heading to the city, as well as other cities in South Korea. Flak Towers are online and armored vehicles and artillery are moving into position now. Take position and push these vermin off our world.”

“Encouraging speech,” Cara commented as they ran. “Bold to attack when we’re crushing them in America.”

“No, is smart,” Aleksandra countered as she checked her armor. “ADVENT busy with America. Might not be elsewhere.”

Duri would have found that argument a little more convincing except for one minor detail. “See, if they wanted to exploit that, South Korea is the last place they should have attacked. We’ve been preparing for weeks.”

“I don’t think this is in response to that,” Beatriz added as they reached the descending trench entrances. “I think they’ve been preparing for this for a while. They just decided to launch it now.”

“All right, let’s get focused and get ready to fight,” Duri interrupted, cutting everyone off as they descended into the trenches. They’d spent enough time training here that all of them were fairly comfortable with what would likely be a prolonged fight. They had been assigned to the Yongho 1 District of the city, which had several important components such as hospitals to protect.

In theory, ADVENT would want to have the entire country protected from coast to coast, lining the border with Flak Towers to blow any alien attack out of the sky. Realistically, they needed a more concentrated defense and resources were not infinite. So the main trench line had been formed around the district itself, and ADVENT had gone from there.

Fortunately, there were dozens of trench lines that were interconnected throughout the city itself. There was at least one route that ran the entirety of the Busan city itself, with some working as tunnels instead of trenches. In front of the trenches themselves, there was a flat, open space that had once been a forest.

The goal was to give the aliens clear places to land, otherwise they might resort to bombing runs or orbital bombardment, neither of which were ideal. So there had to be some spaces that were ‘designated’ for alien landing. However, the no man’s land was massive and there was no cover whatsoever for at least several miles.

Further compounding the issue for the aliens was that mines had been laid at random in the open space itself. The massive Flak Towers also dotted the trench line, just constructed behind the trenches at intervals of half a kilometer, with the trenches also being a means to access them. True towers, Duri was constantly amazed at how much firepower those things had at every floor.

Behind the trench lines were lines of tanks, artillery, and armored M2 Browning machine guns, as well as other stationary turret defenses. Throughout the trenches themselves were also stations where they were established as well, one of which Cara was going to be using; something she had told him she was looking forward to.

The trenches weren’t covered, unfortunately, but tops had a metal sheet slanted away from them, allowing them enough sight to view and fire from, while providing some kind of protection. The entrances and exits had metal protection as well, as did the trenches going under the Flak Towers.
All in all, the aliens were in for a really bad time.

They reached their position, and Cara took the elevated position and grasped the Browning in her hands. “Oh yeah, forgot how good this feels.”

Duri grinned under his helmet, and made sure everyone else was in position. Mana took a position on the other side of Cara’s emplacement, rifle raised to the currently-empty battlefield. Aleksandra took her position beside the Hawaiian, glancing over to Duri. “Say when you want me to create field.”

“If everything works correctly,” Duri said, rechecking his weapon again. “You won’t need to.”

Beatriz took a position by him, and rested her sniper rifle on the edge of the ground and was already peering through the scope. Nobuatsu was rushing to the nearby medical and ammo sections of the trenches, making sure everything was ready. The roles had been decided long ago, most of them were going to be fighting, but Nobuatsu was going to be performing medical duties wherever he was needed, and Miguel would be making sure everyone had ammo.

Speaking of Miguel, he was moving his SHIV to an appropriate position, which was on the edge of the back wall of the trench, overlooking the squad itself and cannon aimed down the open area, waiting for anything to even get within range. “SHIV in position,” Miguel reported, hooking the remote control to his waist and turning to Duri. “All of you let me know when you even think you’re running low.”

“Copy that,” Cara said giving a mock salute. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to deliberately waste ammo.”

“I wouldn’t be concerned about that,” Miguel shrugged. “We’ve got enough ammo to probably fight off an alien army three times the size of whatever’s coming.”

“UFO on approach!” Beatriz suddenly said. “Four of them, Scouts I think.”

“Time for the Towers to do their thing-“ Mana said before he was interrupted by the thunderous sound of the Flak Towers firing every available weapon on the oncoming UFOs. Duri looked into the sky to see the orange-white streaks of AA fire combined with lasers that sped towards the oncoming UFO fighters.

The frontal two UFOs were ripped to pieces by the rounds hitting them and further carved apart by the lasers. The latter two only survived a few more seconds before they were similarly torn apart by the towers. Cara cheered as the UFOs crashed into the nearby ocean or just behind the trenches themselves.

Collateral damage was a concern, but supposedly ADVENT had thought ahead to a degree and stationed the new Priests in various positions around the city, many of them telekines to deflect or catch falling debris. That was really all that was missing on his squad now, a Priest. Although they seemed to work in teams made up of their own, so that probably wouldn’t happen.

Perhaps it was for the best. He wasn’t sure how comfortable he was having someone like that on the team.

“I don’t think they try that again,” Aleksandra said wryly.

Well, they knew the Flak Towers worked now. Duri suspected that the aliens had assumed the same, and almost felt sorry for the pilots who had clearly been selected for suicide duty. Then again, they were aliens, so he didn’t feel they really deserved it to begin with.
“Now we wait,” Duri said. “Won’t be long now.”

As it turned out, he was partially right. Roughly twenty minutes later the first blips of the aliens appeared from the other end of the no man’s land, from the remains of the forest that ADVENT had left. “They’re just a little out of immediate engagement range,” Beatriz said. “Looks like a mix of Mutons and Vitakara. No armor units yet.”

Cara whistled. “They are going to get slaughtered.”

Duri had to agree. That was perhaps the worst composition possible to use to attack the trenches. The plan regardless was to let the aliens advance a certain ways, and then open fire and kill a large number at once. They’d figure it out eventually, but the goal was to make the initial engagement as costly as possible.

“Do you think they’ll charge?” Miguel asked. “Or-“

They were all suddenly cut off by a loud burst of static, which seemed to be affecting all of the nearby soldiers. “Greetings, ADVENT, and it is a pleasure to fight you on the battlefield today,” a dry, sarcastic voice said over the radio. “I am Venadiar, Watcher of the Elders and Hunter of the great bitch herself, come today on behalf of your soon-to-be alien overlords, and am to give you a warning that if you do not surrender, blah, blah, you know how it goes.”

The ADVENT soldiers looked around in confusion. “I’m sorry,” Cara said to no one. “Who the fuck is that?”

“We all know how this goes,” the alien continued. “And unlike my idiotic alien brethren, I won’t waste any of our time anymore. But on the orders of the glorious Elders, I will lead the Collective to victory against you. Except that’s rather trite and boring if I’m being honest, so we’re going to do something a little different today.”

Duri didn’t know if this was something he should find intimidating or funny. Right now he just felt confused. “We’re going to play a little game,“ the speaker, the Hunter, said. “The rules are simple and straightforward. There are two sides, Humans and aliens, you will fight each other. The one left standing, wins!” A pause. “And in the meantime, I get to kill whoever the fuck I want.”

Duri exchanged a look with Cara in disbelief. “Was that supposed to be a threat?”

“The Vitakara seem just as confused,” Beatriz reported. “I…don’t think they know what is going on either.”

“Get moving, imbecile aliens!” The Hunter growled. “I’m not going to wait just because you’re scared!” Duri heard the faint sound of a weapon firing, even though he didn’t know from where.

“Uh…” Beatriz looked up at him slowly. “Three Mutons are dead now.”

“Same goes for you, Humans,” the Hunter said. “If I have to kill all of you too, I will. And no, your trenches won’t protect you.”

The weapon fired again and Duri heard a scream further down the trench as a soldier was thrown back, helmet completely caved in and dead before he hit the floor. “How the fuck did he make that shot?!” Beatriz asked, alarm clear in her voice. “And from where?”

“Aliens are charging forward,” Cara reported, voice tight. “Guess our trigger-happy alien friend is spooking them as well. Preparing to fire.”
The long-range artillery fired in the background, and the lower floors of the Flak Towers also began firing from the windows. “Let ‘em have it!” Duri commanded. “Open fire!”

As one the trenches of ADVENT fired, sending lethal gauss rounds and bullets into the defenseless alien horde, and the front line was ripped apart almost instantly. While they were still too far away to make an accurate shot, Duri contributed by firing in the general direction of the alien forces.

The armor the Mutons and Vitakara had was essentially worthless against the hail of ADVENT fire. Intermittent explosions claimed more aliens, as even more were falling in sprays of golden blood and torn metal. No man’s land was also lit up with artillery fire, taking out even more scores of aliens. It wasn’t anything close to a fair fight.

“This is more like it,” the alien hummed in approval. “A bit too one-sided though. Let’s even the odds a bit.”

Duri heard, more than saw the explosion behind the trench lines. “What was that!” he yelled.

“Artillery piece!” Miguel yelled from behind him after around half a minute, one hand to his helmet as he listened to radio chatter. “Don’t know which one or how that was taken out in one shot!”

“Yeah, you run away cowards!” Cara shouted as she sprayed more rounds from her Browning. “They’re running away!”

“I can’t blame them,” Duri said, as he saw what remaining alien forces there were turning around and fleeing back to the alien-controlled territory. “I’d run too instead of a suicide charge.”

“Oh, dear,” the Hunter chortled. “The aliens are running. Well, I don’t always pick my targets.”

“Yep, he’s actually shooting at them,” Beatriz confirmed. “They’re apparently arguing about what to do. Looks like they’re going to try and build some kind of trench of their own.” She snorted. “Which is going to be difficult since they don’t have any tools. And assuming that we don’t kill them first. Or our Hunter friend decides to take out a few more ADVENT targets.”

Either way, the trench lines had held against their first major charge. How well they would continue to hold up would depend on what the aliens did next, and if this Hunter was going to continue shooting at both sides.

Duri grimaced. Someone who could apparently make a shot anywhere was not a risk he enjoyed having hanging over his head.

Based on how the alien talked, he suspected the alien enjoyed having that effect on people.

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The Island of Hawai‘i - Hawaii

Operation: Kamehameha – Day 1

11/21/2016 – 12:44 P.M.

The attack on Hawai‘i was proceeding well, at least from what Sierra could tell. ADVENT had established Gateways on the island, as well as temporary command centers and supply depots. One of which she was at now, refueling and restocking before she went back out there. The good news was that the island was sparsely populated, and all the defenses were on the coast, where both sides
were under attack as ADVENT was attacking from multiple points.

“Hey, Sierra, looks like the aliens are sending in their stronger units,” Ted reported. “Elites are being reported. Almost all the gateways in this town are shut down or destroyed. The last few have Sectopods and Elites. They need our help.”

Sierra activated her engines after doing a quick check to make sure everything was ready. “Copy, on my way now.” She shot up into the air, roaring to rendezvous with the other members of her Host. The aerial view of the city illustrated the situation much better than she could put into words. The Purifiers had continued their work and there were noticeable swaths of the town burning, boxing the aliens in a ring of fire preventing retreat and putting them between ADVENT and toxic flame.

A fitting end for them, Sierra believed.

The Purifier teams had of course come under attack, but with Priest and Lancer support, as well as their own whenever they were called, there wasn’t much that could stop them. Sierra saw where Ted and Anna were flying over now, plasma bolts flying up in their general direction. Anna had expended her replacement rockets some time ago, and was simply using her autorifle.

Ted was still shooting psionic lances, although he was noticeably becoming more tired as the fight progressed. The armor around his arms and hands was blackened, cracked, and in poor condition. XCOM really needed to develop more psionic-resistant armor. Two Runianarch Soldiers crumbled under one lance, and he swooped to the side as Sierra shot in, flamethrower extended as she moved to torch the street.

The orange-white flame spat from her wrist, engulfing the street and torching the Mutons and Vitakara as one. She spotted the Gateway not too far away, the massive red-armored Elites pouring through and beginning to raise their plasma cannons to her. ADVENT was advancing on the streets below, the Lancers picking off whoever was still alive.

Anna swooped down to briefly land on a flat rooftop as she laid down gauss fire on the Elites, causing them to roar in pain as they brought their rifles to bear on her. Sierra reached to her waist and pulled out a thermite grenade, and tossed it towards the trio of aliens. “Ted! Cut the power when I give the word!”

“What?” He demanded as the Elites howled as the thermite ripped through their armor and Sierra dropped from the sky to land in front of them. Anna saw what she was doing and began targeting the other aliens around her.

“Be quick about it,” Anna warned as she shot a flanking Vitakarian soldier. “I can’t hold them back forever.”

“Doable,” Sierra confirmed, raising her wrist and engulfing the weakened Elites in napalm. The exposed plasma of their weapons couldn’t handle the heat and exploded, taking off their arms and much of their torso with it. That out of the way, Sierra took a few tentative steps forward, focusing on the Gateway itself, directing the flame towards the concentrated maelstrom of purple ethereal energy.

“Now!” She called to Ted who swooped down towards the powering cables, while she continued spraying flame into wherever the Gateway was connected to. She thought she heard shouts in the distance and smiled grimly at that. Ted’s arm glowed with crackling psionic energy; a purple lance of energy shooting from his arm and with one swipe he severed the power.
The swirling purple vortex dissipated almost instantly and Sierra ceased her fire, and leapt into the air, jets firing the moment she was airborne. “One more Gateway for us,” she commented in satisfaction. “Good job everyone.”

“Think most of the aliens are cleared out here,” Anna said, also rejoining her in the air. “Been listening to ADVENT comms. The other assaults are going well, and Hawai’i itself is almost taken. Nearly all Gateways are down and the stragglers are all that’s left on this island.”

“What about the inner islands?” Sierra asked, shooting down at one of said stragglers, a Muton who she killed with a few rounds to the head. “That’s where the alien command is.”

“Intact for the moment it seems,” Anna said, swooping to the side and outflanking a Borelian soldier which she promptly tore apart with her autorifle in a spray of golden blood. “Don’t know what they’re planning, but the leadership is intact. Right now they’re exchanging fire with ADVENT naval forces. Neither side is doing much right now. Guessing that will be our next target.”

“Then let’s clean up here,” Sierra ordered. “Ted, how are you holding up?”

“I’m alive,” he said non-commitally. “I can’t feel my arms, and I’m exhausted. I need a stimulant, telepathic or otherwise, if you want me to keep this up for another island. Assuming that it’s at this level of difficulty.”

Sierra thought for a brief moment. “We’ll finish up on this island, then we take a short break. ADVENT will likely want to have a coordinated attack for the inner islands. We’ll take a look at you once this is done. Can you hold out until then?”

“I can,” Ted confirmed, and as if to prove it, gestured a purple-encased hand towards a Muton and the alien was encased in purple energy which began eating away at him. “Let’s finish this up.”

An explosion in the distance several blocks over signaled another Sectopod falling. The bright sun above, Sierra appraised the scattered alien forces below her, determining where best to strike. In the end, she supposed it didn’t matter too much. She picked one out, and angled herself down and gunned him down from above, like a lethal bird of prey.

That wasn’t too inaccurate, in fact. They were indeed hunters.

Alien hunters, but hunters nonetheless.

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Sacramento, California – United States of America

Operation: Sherman – United States of America

11/21/2016 – 11:46 A.M.

One thing Nuan had never really grasped before actually participating in combat was the sheer scale of war. It had been decades since there had been an actual, proper war with armies fighting over cities. Was World War II the last one? Every one after that seemed to get smaller, and more asymmetrical. Armies were removed in favor of guerilla forces, maneuvering was less important with the rise of airstrikes and drones.

Enemies were harder to defeat if they had no allegiance to a country. Terrorism had changed how war was fought, conducted, and won. But it clearly wasn’t that way anymore. The aliens were a
clear, present, and entrenched threat. They wouldn’t be defeated by drone strikes or guerilla squads. Only by legions of men and women marching to fight them.

And it was going to take a very long time.

The mass of ADVENT and XCOM forces marching down a barricaded street was one Nuan figured would be on every propaganda piece ADVENT put out after this. Which she couldn’t fault them for. It was a powerful image, especially seeing Humans of all various nationalities and backgrounds coming together to fight a common foe.

Somewhat romantic, in fact.

She was dreading the war coming to China though, not simply because it was her homeland, but because the war there would be messy at best. Beijing or Hong Kong consumed by war would be a nightmare of tactics, logistics, and scale. Not to mention that she didn’t know where the civilians would go.

They couldn’t just relocate hundreds of millions of people. And where would they go? What could support them?

China hadn’t shared with her, and she doubted they would bother to ask her opinion.

The road, or the road the aliens had carved out, as it was clear that they’d removed multiple buildings and houses to accomplish it, was seeded with towers, barricades, and other defenses. They weren’t close to the main base proper, but the defenses had only gotten more and more extensive. They’d just punched through a small base which had two Gateways, both of which they’d been forced to destroy.

Now things were getting more difficult as plasma was fired from the distance. Not to mention Geist had mentioned a little problem.

“Something is blocking me,” he’d said non-commitally, brow furrowing as if it was a minor issue. “Large telepathic attacks are being negated. I suspect there is an Ethereal supporting them. An issue. I will work on subverting this.”

Nuan found the man unsettling, yet at the same time trusted that he knew what he was doing. Maybe he was a good actor, but when he said he was ‘working on subverting this’, she got the feeling he might actually have a plan. She wished she had the ability to be literally unfazed by anything. The sheer confidence and command in his voice had also made him the leader of the current ADVENT forces they were with.

Although, she had to admit, he hadn’t given them much choice.

Geist planted his feet and extended an arm, psionic energy flowing off him as a massive barrier appeared before them, effectively cutting each side off from each other. “Begin the establishment of a defensive line,” he commanded. “Shieldbearers, prepare activation of PDS fields.”

The MDUs in the group also advanced to the front, aware enough not to try and fire at the shimmering shield. The alien fire had stopped as well, and Nuan focused to see exactly what they were facing.

It was not encouraging. Four towers that were abruptly cut off at four stories were arranged in a square, and covered by a layer of black alloy. Within them were automated defenses and openings manned by what appeared to be Vitakarian soldiers. They were connected by walls roughly one story high, manned by....
She frowned. These were new. They appeared to be Mutons on first glance, but they were... altered. They were black-armored, almost mechanical in nature. They wore helmets and the eyes were a bright orange. “Iosif,” she said slowly to the Templar as ADVENT continued setting up their line. “Do those Mutons look different?”

Iosif cocked his head and took a step forward. “I would say they were the Centurions. I know there were some in Japan, but they haven’t shown up for a while. But they were different. Larger and they seemed more...alive.”

Nuan, after watching them a few more seconds, realized the same thing. None of the Mutons had moved so much as an inch. Their weapons were also different. Many plasma weapons the aliens employed had exposed plasma innards for some reason, one Nuan could only imagine was for cost or maybe energy output, but nonetheless was a major flaw in the design.

The weapons these Mutons had kept the main model of the plasma rifles, but it was bigger, encased in the black alloy, and completely covered up the exposed plasma. “New unit?” She wondered out loud.

“Yes,” Geist said unexpectedly, walking up to them, the familiar serious look on his face. “They come from Fectorian, an Ethereal specializing in cybernetic enhancement, and deployed on the direction of the Battlemaster himself. The aliens are intent on keeping these cities, we should prepare for an extended siege.”

Both she and Iosif looked at him in mild surprise. “How the hell do you know that?” Nuan asked.

Geist sniffed. “The one protecting the aliens here is either incompetent or simply doesn’t care. While I cannot take control of the aliens, there is shockingly nothing preventing me from reading their minds. These mechanical units have their brains cybernetically altered, which ironically, makes their thought patterns straightforward. I suspect I would not be able to alter their minds even if they were not protected, not at first. But it is not important, at this moment, they are waiting for orders.”

Nuan somehow found the idea of Geist referring to an alien that was managing to somehow protect all aliens from mental control as incompetent highly amusing. But she limited it to a smirk under her helmet.

“I was similarly amused,” Geist nodded, the faintest sliver of amusement running through his eyes. “But they are Ethereals in all likelihood. They are arrogant by nature and uncreative in their pursuits.”

And he was right back to being creepy. “Please don’t read my mind,” Nuan said. “Take a cue from Patricia.”

“Patricia is idealistic and deliberately handicaps herself,” Geist said flatly. “I do not. But this is not the time for that discussion. We need to prepare for our attack.” And with that he marched off to go speak to a trio of Priests.

Nuan decided not to dwell on it and regrouped with the other XCOM soldiers who were grouping near the front of the shield, behind the cover ADVENT was establishing. Soldiers were already using it, aiming their weapons at the alien fortress. More were massing out front, and she saw a mixture of those enhanced Mutons and...she squinted...Oyariah.

“Titans,” Moriai stated, the scowl plain in his voice. “I remember them from Japan. The damn things took several rockets to take out just one.”
Nuan had never seen them in person, and they definitely looked foreboding. They stood as tall as
the Mutons, carrying massive shields that seemed to be made out of stone, nearly as tall as them,
and in their free hands they held flanged clubs like Iosif’s. Nuan knew they were naturally tough,
and the black armor they wore was only going to make them more difficult to kill.

Then as one they began moving forward down the street towards them. The twenty or so Oyariah
stood in front of the larger number of enhanced Mutons, effectively providing a barrier. Not that it
was needed as the shield prevented anyone from firing on them. “Clever,” Oliver commented.
“Guess they’re going to force us to do something unless we want them to get close.”

“Take your positions,” Geist commanded, walking up, with a dozen Lancer Executors beside him.
“I will be lowering the shield momentarily. Begin firing. The Priests will provide offensive
support, and when the Lancers and Iosif charge, focus your fire on the base itself.”

The energy pulsating around his arm vanished and the shield fell. “Open fire.”

The pounding gauss fire slammed into the Oyariah line, the sheer force causing them to slow
momentarily, before they closed ranks even tighter than before and began advancing, although at a
much more methodical and slow pace than before. Rockets firing from the Dragoons sped towards
the Oyariah line and the Mutons behind them, although the damage done seemed negligible to the
Mutons who shrugged off the loss of armor or limb and continued forward.

The Oyariah Titan shields hit had pieces blown off, but they still maintained their integrity. That
was when the Priests began their attack. A psionic maelstrom erupted in the Muton ranks, ripping
one apart at the center and causing substantial damage to the ones around him. Psionic shears of
energy slashed around the Titans, although it seemed to not be having much of an effect outside of
damaging the armor.

One Priest screamed some kind of battle cry, as she extended a hand towards the encroaching
Titans, and one was slowly lifted into the air, and with a thrust of her wrist, was sent flying into the
sky. Nuan was doing her own part as she firing into the line of aliens, although they all had to
contend now with the fire from the base, which was constant and unrelenting; barrages of green
plasma raining down upon them.

The Goliath was the focus of a good portion of the defense, and the Priests were maintaining
shields on it as it returned fire. “Engage at close range,” Geist directed calmly. “All ADVENT and
XCOM forces, focus fire on base defenses and personnel.”

Iosif and the Executors charged forward, and the Oyariah took the opportunity to finally split and
charge the encroaching Humans. Over a third of their number had been killed, so it was a much
fairer fight than before, discounting the Mutons behind them. Fortunately, Geist and thePriests
were also on top of that.

The Mutons were clearly able to take more damage, and were unrelenting in their attack as they
moved forward, firing steadily at the defensive lines. However, Geist seemed to have a way to deal
with them. One Muton was suddenly surrounded by psionic walls, and the ceiling barrier above
him suddenly slammed down, crushing it to the ground. A small psionic barrier also popped up
between the melee duel and the Mutons, forcing them to go around while the Priests continued
their psionic attacks.

As for the duel that was taking place, it was not exactly going as planned. The Humans were
smaller and faster, but the Oyariah were also faster than they looked, and easily outmassed even
the strongest of Humans. It wasn’t so much of a duel as it was pairs of Humans and aliens avoiding
being crushed by the other.
One Executor missed a swipe with his warhammer, and the Oyariah slammed the shield into him, forcing him to stagger back while a lighting strike with the alien’s flanged club slammed into the Executor’s knee, shattering the bone and while pinning the fallen Executor with the bottom of his shield. The Titan raised the club and slammed it down on the Lancer’s face until it wasn’t anything but mush inside.

Iron skin didn’t do much for blunt injuries it seemed.

In general the shields were giving the Oyariah a gross advantage. That they also outnumbered the Lancers, even slimly, was also another advantage. One on one, it was clear that the Oyariah held the upper hand. Iosif was unsurprisingly doing the best, although he was more surviving instead of actually fighting.

Two of the Titans were fighting him, and he was doing his best to block their attacks by well-placed psionic shields, dodging, and when possible, giving return strikes of his own. Although there was little he could really do against the shields which the Titans continued to try and slam into him. “We need some help here!” Iosif called.

Geist motioned to several of the Priests, who directed their abilities not towards the Mutons, who while not completely destroyed, were far fewer than before. The Oyariah were suddenly thrown back, tossed into the air, frozen, or had their weapons torn away.

“Order the Hussars to eliminate the Titans,” Geist ordered, as he created several more crushing prisons on the Mutons. “They are more dangerous than I anticipated.”

The Officers quickly communicated that order, and a few moments later heads of various Titans began snapping back. Some took nearly a half dozen shots, but they did go down, leaking golden fluid form their faces. The Titans held in stasis allowed the remaining Executors and Iosif to get in some strikes of their own.

The helmet of a Titan crumpled under a two-handed blow from Iosif, and a repeat blow seconds later penetrated the head itself, spraying blood all around it. Nuan looked around the defense lines, trying to see how much damage they had sustained beyond losing many of the Executors. There were multiple ADVENT corpses from the Muton fire, and that from the base, and others who were being dragged away to be fixed by the Medics.

The MDUs had suffered losses as well, being easy targets and exposed to sustained plasma fire from a distance. Nuan couldn’t tell what losses had been inflicted on the aliens, but she doubted that it was equal. She hoped it was, but realistically, that probably wasn’t the case.

There were more aliens coming out of the base now, and they appeared to be Vitakara that had been similarly modified like the Mutons. Very not good. They were accompanied by drones, and were carrying what looked like tools with hovercarts behind them. Engineers probably, and ones who were likely trying to establish a closer line.

“The current strategy is ineffective,” Geist said, swiping a hand towards the battlefield. “We need to reevaluate.” The purple barrier between the two armies reappeared and the plasma fire slowly stopped. Nuan glanced around again, noting that there were many of the Priests who had taken their helmets off, and looked exhausted or sick. For some of them, this might have been their first actual combat mission.

Now protected, the Medics were everywhere, and the soldiers, Officers, and Lancers were rushing ammo around, reloading, and frantically talking with each other. Engineers were working on repairing and reinforcing the defenses, while Geist was frantically talking with several Priests and
Officers.

The battle had now turned into a siege. Nuan supposed the plan now was to hold out until the main ADVENT army arrived. Air support was likely not going to happen until the main AA defenses were taken care of, and there were already dogfights in the skies.

Hopefully they could last until then.

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Near Washington D.C. – United States of America

11/21/2016 – 3:17 P.M.

There were certain expectations in war. Humans in particular expected certain things from their enemies. There were fights on certain fronts that were to be expected. Japan, Korea, America, ADVENT knew they were going to be attacked. There was some honesty there. Both sides accepted that the war was going to be fought along the forever changing lines.

Yet there were certain things they would be surprised by.

An attack on the capital of one of their biggest countries was likely among them.

“We are approaching the outer defenses,” the Battlemaster stated as they strode towards the city in the distance. “Prepare to open fire.”

He had wondered how best to send ADVENT a clear message without provoking Aegis to significant action. Perhaps he would miscalculate here, but he doubted it. There were certain figures that would prompt a response. Chancellor Vyandar was one, and he doubted he would be able to penetrate the ADVENT HQ as Switzerland was by all reports, a fortress.

The same could not be said for Washington D.C., or President Nicole Treduant. The landmarks of America would be razed to the ground today, and their President would join the numbers of the dead. No holding back; the goal today was a simple display of consequences.

If ADVENT wanted to make a statement, he would oblige them.

“Honored Battlemaster,” Senorium said by his side, the Warlock fully armored and ready for battle. “The Cleanser Ships are in position. ADVENT is likely aware now. They are requesting permission to open fire.”

“Granted,” the Battlemaster stated as they began approaching several of the outer trenches. While ADVENT maintained a garrison here, as well as some of the Flak Towers, there hadn’t been a sustained effort to make it the fortress Korea was right now. Likely because they had not expected an attack here.

He was aware of what would happen once he was spotted, and indeed it probably already had. The President would be evacuated, likely through the underground tunnels from the White House, and evacuate at the Anacostia Naval Support Facility. The Battlemaster was expecting several additional contingencies, since he wasn’t naïve enough to believe they would be so brazen as to make their actual evacuation plan publically available. How he had been able to find it with a simple Google search was baffling.

As such, the Cleanser ships weren’t just going to target the Support Facility; they were going to target every airport in the D.C. area. While one focused on the airports, the other would hit any
Flak Towers available. The protection fleet of Sectoid fighters would be sufficient assuming ADVENT could even reach them in the middling atmosphere.

The small strike force he had brought along were all chosen for specific purposes. Very few could fit in the Cultro, so he had to make do with what he had. The Warlock was an obvious choice, and would provide substantial psionic support. There were a dozen of Fectorian’s modified soldiers, six of his Muton Ravagers who specialized in explosives and destroying buildings, and six modified Zararch agents, primarily long-range snipers.

The only other units were the four Spectres. Black humanoid figures who occasionally rippled as the nanites continuously recalibrated, they mimicked Humans and Vitakarians in shape, including the five-fingered hands, although they held no weapons in them. The heads were akin to helmets, with a symmetrical green light strip running down the sides of their faces. From what the Battlemaster had seen, this color changed once they were in combat. They said no words, but would follow his orders without question.

A half dozen yellow streaks rained down from the sky and slammed into the facility. The Battlemaster couldn’t see it of course, but he could hear the muffled explosions in the distance. Another dozen streaks landed a short distance from that. The Battlemaster knew there was still a heavy civilian presence in the city, and thus many would likely die today, although he had taken several measures to mitigate that.

The airstrike on the main Reagan National Airport wouldn’t hit the facility proper, but it would target the airstrips themselves, as well as the planes, rendering escape impossible. Aside from that, there was another rule enforced for his strike team. “Remember,” he warned Senorium as the ADVENT soldiers in the distance began scrambling to get into the trenches. “Do not target civilians unless they attack.”

“Of course, Battlemaster,” Senorium planted his feet and drew upon the psionic energy as more airstrikes pounded in the distance. Encased in the swirling vortex of energy, he thrust a hand forward and hundreds of ghostly purple figures charged the defense lines. Scattered gauss fire and screams of panic greeted this, and the Battlemaster charged forward.

“Destroy your assigned targets!” He commanded, performing short staccato psionic dashes to make it more difficult for the Humans to target him. “Leave none in ADVENT alive today!”

The Spectres dissolved into a black swarm of nanites and joined the charge forward, as did Fectorian’s soldiers. There were four main targets, which would be led by one Spectre and four of Fectorian’s soldiers. The Warlock would continue waging a constant attack from the spot he was in now, continuously summoning more of his ghostly and disposable soldiers.

There were three targets the Spectre teams would attack: The Pentagon, the Anacostia Naval Facility, and from there, the underground tunnels, and finally a march through the city targeting the various monuments. At the same time, he and the remaining Spectres would march towards the White House and Capitol Building to destroy both of them. Once President Treduant was located, he would converge on her position and execute her.

The possibility of her escape was higher than he would like, but even if she was not killed, this would have a significant impact. The Battlemaster materialized in front of a trio of ADVENT soldiers rushing towards the trenches, and he decapitated them with one swipe, and sent another twelve around him flying with a telekinetic blast.

The Spectre materialized in the trenches and grabbed one soldier by the throat who began screaming as the Spectre infected him with nanites. At the same time it extended another hand
towards the soldiers behind it, almost invisible wisps of nanites flying towards them. The soldier in the front began clawing at himself, and was gradually covered with a thin layer of nanites, and a few moments later he was still.

The gauss fire against it was ineffective as the Spectre simply opened up holes in itself where the slugs were calculated to hit, and they passed right through with no damage whatsoever. The Spectre dematerialized and rejoined the Battlemaster as he continued advancing forward down the street into the still-bustling city.

Behind him, the first of the new Spectres emerged. For all intents and purposes, they were the same thing, except they retained the outline of the victim. The Battlemaster decided to wait several minutes for the new Spectre army to form, and soon enough, they emerged. Black forms of ADVENT soldiers, with the now-red lines running down the helmet.

The Battlemaster had seen them work, and knew there was unlikely to be anything left of the body, and even the ones the Spectre had killed quickly would eventually rise as another one. Every nanite had the programming to create more Spectres, no matter if it was one nanite, or one million.

The civilians had noticed him as he continued advancing, and while he didn’t attack, most broke down in an utter panic as he approached, swerving away and crashing, or getting out of their cars and fleeing on foot.

Inconsequential, not worth paying attention to.

However, they were making it difficult for the ADVENT soldiers to target him or the Spectres. Missed shots would almost certainly hit civilians, but he was not so hindered. While the soldiers yelled for the civilians to get down, he reached out with his two lower arms and telekinetically snapped the necks of the ADVENT soldiers in the area.

Normally he would spend some time fighting them, but today there wasn’t time.

The Spectres paused by the bodies as they marched by, implanting several nanites to begin the creation of more Spectres. No holding back today. Not anymore.

Even if XCOM decided to engage, he did not plan to toy with them. He had a mission to accomplish, and nothing was going to distract him this time.

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The Citadel, Situation Room – United States of America

11/21/2016 – 3:51 P.M.

The day had started out very well. To be fair, it was still holding steady through most of the day, but it was now starting to falter. The Commander had to admit he hadn’t expected this to happen. Where the Battlemaster would show up was a constant guessing game, and he had expected LA or Sacramento, if he showed up at all.

But definitely not Washington D.C.

The Citadel was not quite chaos at this point, but something very close to it as reports were scattered and contradictory over what exactly was happening. The Collective had actually used orbital bombardment and had targeted the airports and Flak Towers. There were Firestorms being sent up to fight, but the damage was already done.
Given that they had specifically bombarded the place where the President was supposed to evacuate, it was likely that Treduant was a target for the Battlemaster. They hadn’t received anything on her status, and the Commander assumed it would be a helicopter evacuation, although he didn’t know if there were any that would be able to get there in time.

He wouldn’t put it past the Battlemaster to blow up the whole White House if he learned there were helicopters going to it.

Tactically, this was a brilliant move, devastating as it was for ADVENT, and he was furious with himself that he hadn’t anticipated it. Such a surprise attack seemed atypical of the Battlemaster, something more akin to what Quisilia would do. Which was quite possibly what the Battlemaster had been relying on.

And the response was going to take time since the team responsible for fighting the Battlemaster was on the West Coast, and had to spend valuable time flying to the other side of the country.

On top of that, the Collective had launched additional attacks.

“We’re losing too much ground in Alaska,” Commander Christiaens said grimly, looking down at the holotable. “It’ll take a couple days to get support there, even if I can send several Russian Legions immediately. The Canadian Legions are preparing their own country, but they might not be enough. A lot of the Mexican Legion is also assisting us right now.”

“It’s luckily concentrated in a few cities,” the Commander noted. “Even if they sustain heavy damage, they can hold out for a couple days at least.”

She scowled. “Not if they decide to bombard us from space.”

That was a good point.

“Still no word from the President?” He asked, hoping it wasn’t rhetorical.

“None,” she shook her head. “And apparently the entire city is under attack. The Pentagon is saying they’re being attacked by cyborg aliens and some kind of nanite weapon. Others are reporting the same thing. Black humanoid things that dissolve and reform – and then replicate.”

“No video?” He asked.

“Nothing actually usable yet,” she said. “But we do have images of those psionic manifestations again. That Warlock is apparently with the Battlemaster, who is apparently not even giving us a chance to fight back. Apparently all those times before he was holding back.” She rubbed her forehead. “He snapped the necks of a dozen soldiers with a gesture. Fuck. Even if I get every available soldier there, it will be too late, and I can’t just bomb the city.”

While the Commander didn’t have any hesitation sacrificing civilians, he did agree there. It would accomplish nothing and likely not work. “At least he’s not targeting them,” he noted. “Which is… something.”

“It works to his advantage,” she said. “Makes us hesitate to open fire, and they get out of his way without him prompting. Win-win for him. Not to mention it doesn’t give us more fuel for propaganda.” She paused. “Although after this that’s not really going to save him.”

“Let’s focus on the other battles,” the Commander suggested. “We’ve both done what we can for D.C. Now it’s up to the soldiers.”
Despite that, he wasn’t confident in what the outcome would be.

Hopefully the XCOM team could handle him.

And even if that was successful…these apparent nanoweapons might be a bigger issue.

He shook his head. One problem at a time. The Battlemaster was the key to their military operation. Weapons could be destroyed eventually; Ethereals were not so easy.

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Los Angeles, California – United States of America

Operation: Sherman – Day 1

11/21/2016 – 2:10 P.M.

The battle had been proceeding relatively well; Patricia’s domination had successfully permeated thousands of aliens and already she had forced the destruction of multiple Gateways, although the Collective had wised up and began sending through mechanical units and Vanguards, who while they couldn’t resist her concentrated power, could protect themselves against the cursory commands she imposed on the more vulnerable aliens.

And then it had all been stopped, and she had been metaphorically kicked out into the real world with a burst of dizziness as the sights and sounds of the world rushed back to her. ADVENT Special Forces and soldiers were still rushing into the city, but she knew from briefly scanning the mood that it was a continuous hard fight.

Frowning, she closed her eyes and extended her reach yet again. The aliens she could still sense…but there was indeed something else there. She stiffened upon a cursory inspection, and felt the presence of something ancient. It wasn’t the Imperator, she was familiar enough with him that she couldn’t mistake his presence, which meant that there was only one logical explanation.

The Overmind.

She didn’t bother turning around as her hands clenched unconsciously. So this is how you will try and force my hand, Imperator? Cheat?

“I did nothing,” the Imperator stated walking forward, wearing the same form as before, although he didn’t exactly sound displeased. “I suspect the Battlemaster asked for his assistance. Be thankful he is restricting himself to defense.”

Patricia figured she’d might as well walk forward into the city itself, since her telepathy wasn’t useful right now. Then would you politely ask him to leave?

“And why would I do that?” The Imperator asked, his voice split between amusement and sincerity. “What do you expect would happen?” He raised a finger at Patricia. “You are dangerous. You are a threat. It should not be surprising that you would be dealt with as one.”

He paused briefly, then once more clasped his hands behind his back. “Nonetheless, my offer of help still stands. I know what the Overmind is doing, and how to combat it. There are more aliens coming in now, in numbers your soldiers will not be able to hold out against. Fectorian’s soldiers are only some of what you should be concerned about, and I doubt you want to lose today after what has happened.”
What are you talking about? Patricia mentally growled as she stormed around the street corner, ignoring the ADVENT soldiers snapping to attention as she passed them. The sounds of combat echoed in the distance, and she followed.

The Imperator kept pace beside her. “The Battlemaster has launched attacks across the coasts. South Korea is under siege, and the Battlemaster himself is attacking Washington D.C.”

Patricia spun to him. “What?” She demanded out loud. “How?”

“Confirm it with your superiors if you wish,” the Imperator dismissed with a wave. “I have no reason to lie to you, but I suspect that it raises the stakes for you. Now you cannot afford to lose. And why are you skeptical, Patricia? Is it because I am supposed to be your enemy that is holding you back?”

Just a little bit. She fumed, trying to consider the implications. And also because Aegis told me enough about what you can do. Letting you in my head is a bad idea.

“Debatable,” the Imperator mused, glancing around at the rushing soldiers. “What I am offering is information. Knowledge. Things that you are continuously seeking. If you have a noted flaw, Patricia, it is that you lack nuance. You are blunt and see the world in certain ways, whereas reality is not as straightforward. Aegis represents one such viewpoint. I represent another. Neither are necessarily right, nor absolute, yet you insist that one is more valid than the other.”

You are trying to confuse me, Patricia physically shook her head as she approached the frontal defense line. Plasma was flying in green waves toward the ADVENT and XCOM soldiers, as they besieged a carved-out tower which had likely been part of a greater block, and now was an alien command center. Surrounding it was a black alloy wall, with multiple barricades and cover placed in squarish formations around it.

Elites, Vanguards, Fectorian’s soldiers, even Cyberdisks were floating above. The purple of psionic attacks flared on both sides, and ADVENT soldiers were falling, succumbing to plasma fire or psionic attacks. The aliens were filling out their ranks with reinforcements presumably from the Gateway housed within the tower.

“You do not need to fail, Patricia,” the Imperator said. “Witness what I can do before passing judgement on my sincerity.” She watched as he stepped forward, observed the battle before him, raised a gauntleted hand and snapped the fingers of one hand. As one the entirety of the alien forces, minus the cyberdisks, fell to the ground.

“I have taken the liberty of ensuring the Gateway is deactivated from the inside,” the Imperator continued. “Consider this a lesson, Patricia, what I did you could have very easily done. Yet you are too quick to give up when faced with a roadblock, only returning when you have overwhelming strength to destroy it. Every psion has their weaknesses, and the Overmind is no exception. I can always give you what you want, but I am now curious what you can figure out for yourself.”

The sounds of ADVENT destroying the Cyberdisks, and a few Vitakarian soldiers who were somehow still alive, faded in the background as she appraised the Imperator. I suppose I should say thanks. Whatever your reasons. If you’re being so generous, might you kill the aliens elsewhere?

He smiled. “Not today, psion. But you should go for now. If I might offer some advice, take your position in the tower as the defenses are more entrenched further in. Goodbye for now, and I will be waiting should you accept my help.”

And with that he vanished once more. He always left her with a lot to think about, and maybe she
could do that once there was a lull. But right now they needed to take the tower and fortify it. “Secure the tower!” She demanded, marching forward, Creed rushing towards her. While ADVENT and several XCOM soldiers moved to help, he came up.

“Was that you?” He asked.

“No,” she answered honestly. “Not this time. There’s an Ethereal protecting them. Something was probably miscalculated. That’s... easier to do than you think. It doesn’t matter, we need to keep moving forward. It’s only going to get harder.”

Even through his helmet she could sense the questions swirling around. “Alright,” he finally said. “We need to get caught up on the larger situation. Some of the things I’ve heard are bad.”

“So I’ve heard,” she muttered, still somewhat in awe at the sheer gall of the Battlemaster. “Let’s get communications fully up.”

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Washington D.C. – United States of America

11/21/2016 – 4:39 P.M.

The area close to the White House had a large amount of military forces, and for what little good it did them, they put up a fight.

Unfortunately for them it was largely ineffective against the Warlock’s psionic manifestations, and absolutely worthless against the Spectres. The nanite figures had reached the point where they nearly outnumbered the ADVENT soldiers in the area, and were spreading like locusts throughout the city. The Battlemaster found them to be by far one of the most useful units in combat.

No one was immune to them. He dashed towards a team of Lancers and blasted several back with a telekinetic push, snapped the neck of one, and picked up the other by the helmet and tossed her directly towards a Spectre. The body passed through the Spectre and emerged on the other side, completely encased in nanites and thrashing on the ground as they began consuming her.

Explosions in the distance signaled the fall of monuments and buildings. The Capitol Building was burning and the Spectres were already inside, killing the ADVENT personnel within. The Battlemaster had made the distinction between civilian and ADVENT clear – anyone affiliated with ADVENT in a governmental and military capacity was a valid military target, the rest were not.

Ironically, considering how Humans despised their politicians, some might not consider it a great loss. But the destruction of the center of United States government would hinder them for weeks at least, and with the President dead or in hiding, it would take longer. Streaks of gold from the sky struck intermittently, likely targeting more Flak Towers.

Now he was at his primary target, the White House stood in front of him and the ADVENT forces were going to fight to the death to protect it from him. Admirable, but pointless when facing his army of Spectres, who bore the appearance of the soldiers they had killed. He paused as he heard the familiar roar of a Skyranger overhead.

XCOM. Expected, and today, he wasn’t going to waste time dealing with them.

Right on cue, three XCOM soldiers jumped out and two flew out, an odd combination. He recognized several of them. One wielded a warhammer encased in psionic energy. Chan Jin-Taek,
if he recalled the name. The latter soldier who had dropped out was a larger concern. Matthew Hawkins, one of the Furies.

Target one was now designated. The telekine posed the greatest threat and needed to be eliminated. All of the Templars were approaching him like they were expecting a standard duel. He wouldn’t resort to the Spectres, they did not fully deserve that level of refusal, but he was not interested in them slowing him down.

One psionic dash and slash later, aiming right for the neck of the Fury, and the headless corpse of Matthew fell to the ground before he could even make a motion. The Battlemaster lifted two of the Templars with a free hand and slammed them violently to the ground, while using his other free hand to grasp Chan telekinetically and pull him towards his grasp.

Another psionic dash forward, and the Battlemaster stabbed downwards into the skull of one of the Templars, a woman judging by the brief scream, and twisted the neck of the Templar in his grasp with surprising ease. It appeared he had not received the Iron Skin genetic modification, but nonetheless he was killed easily.

The other XCOM soldier, who he now saw wasn’t a Templar, but another psion, on the ground he lifted up, and squeezed the helmet; applying physical and psionic pressure until it shattered under his hand and the skull underneath was crushed. He dropped the body and leapt in the air towards the Archangels, one of whom was unable to get out of the reach of his greatsword, and cut easily through the engines, forcing the Archangel to crash to the ground.

While not dead, the Spectres were converging, and he would die to them. He reached up with a hand to telekinetically grab the other Archangel, and began crushing it. The delicate components could not withstand the psionic pressure, and with a thrown hand the soldier was slammed to the ground.

His back turned to the soon-to-be-dead soldiers, he resumed his march to the White House, seeing two more XCOM soldiers retreating in the distance. Snipers most likely, irrelevant. He had noted one had been wielding one of the electricity weapons, and felt some regret that he hadn’t been able to test out the armor properly, but there would be time for that later.

A dozen of the Spectres peeled off to follow him, and he simply pointed to the interior. “Locate President Treduant, do not kill her without my command.” His size made entering the White House an issue, but the Spectres would perform that task well enough, as well as kill anyone else inside. As far as he was concerned, the hard part was over.

While he waited, he observed the fires in the distance that permeated the air. The muffled booms of rockets signaled another relic of Human civilization falling. They would not see it that way, of course, but Humans placed a surprisingly amount of sentimentality and symbolism in their monuments and statues.

But that age of Humanity was over.

“President Treduant has been located,” the dead voice of the Spectre informed him. “White House roof. She has not attempted to escape.”

That was surprising. He would have expected at least an attempt. Regardless, he marched towards the White House itself and leapt upward, landing on the roof with a thud. President Nicole Treduant stood before him, closed a briefcase she held in her hand and calmly set it down to face him fully.
She didn’t look any different than how she was during her various public appearances. Calm, charismatic, and proud. Fearless too, judging from the way she faced him.

It was the body language of a woman who had accepted she was going to die, and was going to go out on her feet. Admirable. He had intended to kill her quickly to begin with, but she had gained some respect in his eyes.

“Battlemaster,” she finally greeted.

“Madam President,” he briefly inclined his head. “I suspect you know what happens next.”

She gave a sad smile. “I do.”

“I am surprised you did not try and leave.”

“We began,” she said, looking away in the distance. “Although the bombardment rendered the initial plan impossible. The chaos made a ground exit similarly difficult, and leaving by helicopter would be conspicuous and would likely be targeted by your ships. So I did what I could. All ADVENT forces were ordered to retreat and you get to kill me. Little more I can do except fight a battle I’ll likely lose.”

She reached for the pistol at her side, and the two Spectres moved forward before the Battlemaster waved them off. She didn’t pose a threat, not to him. “You are brave, Madam President. You will die well.”

She smiled unexpectedly. “As will you, I hope.”

“You cannot kill me. Nor can XCOM.”

“No,” she said. “I can’t. But I’m not going to just let your army of…” she looked behind her. “They are made of nanites right? Little machines?”

“Correct. A highly advanced weaponization of nanotechnology.”

“Good.” Her smile widened, and the Battlemaster took a step forward. “I didn’t want to make a mistake that big.”

“Nuclear launch detected!” The CODEX suddenly interjected.

Impossible.

He looked at the woman in disbelief. “You ordered a nuclear strike here?!”

“It seems you do have some way to know,” she lightly chuckled. “Not exactly. But you can’t outrun it now. You like talking I guess,” she lifted the briefcase. “Right before you came, I authorized a nuclear launch, and the rocket will detonate before you can escape.”

Not likely, the Cultro could probably pick him up in time. But he didn’t like the position he was being put in. “Killing me won’t make the Collective leave. And my ship will arrive before the blast hits.”

“Oh?” She asked. “Who said the nuclear blast was going to hit here?”

She looked down and the sky suddenly exploded in a blast of orange and white. He looked up to the sky and was wondering why she would bother launching a strike in the atmosphere when the ground below was hit with a noticeable shockwave. Then the Spectres began disintegrating; falling
to the ground like dust.

The ones around Treduant were the same way. The lights across the city suddenly flickered off; cars stopped moving; the city itself came to an abrupt, screeching halt. Only now did the Battlemaster remember that an effect that a nuclear weapon had when detonated at a certain range was a dispersed EMP effect.

All of his suit electronics were no longer working. No communication with the Collective; no HUD, even his new resistance against electricity was likely no longer effective. Not once had he been attacked with that kind of weapon, and as such had never thought to have the suit hardened.

That was probably what Fectorian had mentioned when discussing the flaws of the suit. He should have listened and followed his advice more closely.

The situation was now surprisingly precarious.

In the distance, the Battlemaster saw the Cultro fall from the sky and crash. “Well,” Treduant said coming to stand beside him. “It worked.”

All he could do was nod. “Well done. It did.”

Tricked again by a Human. They were certainly proving to be intelligent and worthy opponents. He couldn’t hate them for fighting for what they presumed was their own survival. “You didn’t target the civilians,” she said. “Noble for an alien.”

“No reason to.”

“Do you want to say anything else to me, or should we finish this?”

He turned to her, right as she raised the pistol, waiting for him to make a move. “No. Die well, Nicole Treduant. It is an honor to kill you.” Before she could even fire off a shot he lashed out with his sword and easily separated her head from her body in a spray of red.

The headless corpse tumbled over, the head a short distance away. The Battlemaster flourished his blade and considered the city before him. He had no communications, no support, and no direction. He was a target for ADVENT for miles around.

Unfortunately, he was nowhere near Collective territory, and he had no idea where the Warlock was, and it was likely ADVENT would be targeting him next. He would have to fight his way to safety, and that was going to be a long and bloody road.

With sword in hand, he jumped to the ground, and prepared for a long battle ahead.
Night had fallen some time ago, and the Battlemaster ducked into one of the many alleys in the city to pause and think.

The situation here was not ideal.

Treduant was dead, and Washington D.C. was coming apart, with fires spreading throughout the city and lighting up the night. The primary objective had, albeit with some difficulties, been accomplished. The issue was he was more or less stranded deep in enemy territory, and ADVENT was going to be closing on him with every soldier in the area.

Treduant’s last order had been tactically brilliant, and had placed him in what could be considered a dangerous situation.

The Spectres, which had been his largest advantage, were all dead; Fectorian’s soldiers were either damaged, or by this point, likely destroyed by the surviving ADVENT soldiers. Senorium was likely alive, but he’d seen no psionic manifestations or any indication he was in the area. While the Battlemaster didn’t believe he would just run, he was aware that the Warlock probably wouldn’t stay in the same place, nor did he have the energy to maintain an attack for hours.

By now ADVENT likely knew what was happening, and while it was risky to stay around the same general area, it was arguably more risky to just leave the city entirely.

He was not small. Stealth and subtlety were not his skills, and with his size, it was impossible. It was not a matter of if he would be found, but when. ADVENT was not going to negotiate or try anything other than killing him once and for all, and he suspected that they wouldn’t restrain themselves in the tools they used.

If he was caught far enough out, there was little stopping a nuclear strike from hitting his position and not only would he be ignorant of it being launched at all, he had no means of escape; no means to contact the Collective, and as an unfortunate result, staying near D.C was the safest place to be.

However, it would not take the Collective long to figure out where he was. The problem was going to be breaching what would soon be the heaviest concentration of ADVENT and XCOM forces in the country. At this point in time, he was vulnerable. That of course did not mean he was in danger, but he recognized that this was perhaps the best chance ADVENT would have to kill him.

He looked down at the red-stained sword. It had been decades since he’d been in a sustained fight. Bodily fluids wouldn’t affect the metal, though it was a different sight than what he had become accustomed to. But he did not train for mere show. He could fight for days at full strength, and he would receive help long before he began to tire.

He walked back out onto the street and continued forward, stepping around, between, and over the abandoned cars as the cracking fires burned around him. The city was eerily silent, and the silhouettes of the hundreds of corpses on the ground did little to change the feeling. All the civilians had fled some time ago, although the Battlemaster saw flickering shadows every so often.
Likely homeless Humans, not a concern for him. There might be some others staying in their homes, but they were not a danger to him.

The EMP had at least worked against ADVENT. Every soldier in the blast would have no communications, and their weapons would be incapable of firing. At least their gauss weapons; the Battlemaster had already encountered some soldiers who had reverted to pre-invasion ballistic weapons that, while laughably ineffective, did seem to still work.

But largely he had been left alone; left alone to wander the city as it burned around him. It was a curious sensation to see the aftermath of the conflict around him. Very rarely did he stay after a battle, leaving the cleanup and organization to his subordinates, but winding around now reminded him of the latter parts of the Synthesized War, when the core Imperial worlds had been attacked.

The first Siege of Etharia Prime reminded him of this. It had been one of the first worlds colonized by the Empire, and had eventually turned into one of its most culturally and historically important planets. It had been home to some of the most advanced labs, experimental architecture and archives supposedly dating back to the formation of the Empire.

Having such an important planet slowly be destroyed had almost been worse to witness than it simply being destroyed at once. There had been no way to retreat, and the rest of the fleets had been caught out of position, and at the time he’d known it would be days before they would get reinforcements, leaving him with only a few soldiers of the Division of Battlemasters, several of the Guardians, and several thousand civilians to work with.

Entire sections of the planet had to be sacrificed; entire records of Imperial history had been simply erased; homes, relics, and more were destroyed by the indiscriminate horde. The cities retained were consistently under siege, with it slowly crumbling around them as they desperately tried to hold the lines.

By the end, they had saved a world that was little more than rubble.

It had taught him a lesson about the uselessness of sentimentality. Strategically, the world had held little value to the Empire, and was simply considered such because of the emotional value assigned to it. And that had brought them nothing but thousands of dead Ethereals.

If he’d had to do it again, he would have abandoned the planet and had a Reaper destroy it, killing the dozen or so Director Flagships on it. At least the victory would be worth something, as they had barely managed to destroy half that number before help had arrived.

He did wonder what lesson the Humans would take from this. Looking up at the shattered Lincoln Memorial, with the Capitol Building collapsing in fire opposite it, he imagined the Humans would be furious. But he understood the effective psychological distress this would cause, because it had happened once before.

Oddly enough though, as he turned to walk down by the reflecting pool that led to the Washington Monument in the center, he did feel some regret. While this was a war, attacking symbols and monuments of history could be seen as dishonorable. Something that the Zar’Chon or Quisilia would have probably come up with, now that he thought about it.

He found himself unknowingly walking down a pre-determined path, one with a wall that had been directly targeted with missiles. There were some corpses on the path as well, which seemed to be leading to a circle ahead with some toppled flagpoles. Ironically, the United States flag was still flying below.
He looked at what the missiles had hit and noticed that the wall had originally seemed to be a large mural of sorts. Soot and cracks covered what was still left, but he could see what was likely originally supposed to be there. To the right there was a triangular field that held statues, and though most were melted, warped, and had clearly sustained some damage, their original forms were still recognizable.

The Humans depicted were equipped differently than modern ones were. The statues held rifles, which while clearly aged, were recognizable as guns. However the statues were also depicted as wearing some kind of poncho-jackets. Odd clothing, and it seemed more of a hindrance than anything else. There weren’t any Human females either, which seemed strange to him. Perhaps they had not been as involved in the past.

Times had clearly changed if that was the case.

A memorial of some kind, most likely. As he approached the center he saw the dust of the Spectres and multiple dead ADVENT soldiers around it. There was also some writing which likely explained what the purpose of this was. It didn’t appear to have been completely destroyed, so he spent a few moments reading it.

A memorial to something that was called the Korean War. One that, from the brief history written, did not appear to have gone well for anyone. With how many had died, he was surprised he hadn’t seen it covered as much in his rather brief search of Human history. There had only been a few conflicts that had seemed relevant at the time, namely the World Wars and the more recent War on Terror, since those were most equivalent to the tactics he would be facing.

In truth, the history itself was not as important as learning their military specifications and modern tactics. He had assumed that, while the wars in the past would certainly shape the future to an extent, modern warfare would take cursory inspiration at best. It would be different; evolve and improve. With how the current war had gone, and with the Humans clearly adapting tactics used in older wars, that was perhaps a mistake.

He shook his head at nothing. When planning the attack, the only place he had thought to really avoid was the Arlington Cemetery, as that was simply not an acceptable place for combat. It was disrespectful and an unnecessary target. However, he could have made the same justification for monuments like these. Regardless of their irrelevance to this war, he could respect those who fought and died in battle; to ignore that was disrespectful regardless of species.

He sighed to himself and turned to walk back to the Reflecting Pool, almost wanting to be attacked as it would be less distracting than thinking. It appeared he had likely made something of a mistake, not in the actual target, but by setting few restrictions on the targets. Military targets were acceptable, and his original mindset had been that anything aside from civilians was a fair target.

But it did raise the question of if it was necessary. In the end, Humanity would be conquered; in which case, was it really needed to have their relics and history attacked as well? If they were an actual threat, this would not be a debate, as the situation had changed, but this was far from a full war. The Humans were clever; far more so than he had initially given them credit for, but they would not win a war, that was simply impossible.

The Humans should be beaten militarily, and only that. This war did not need to be won through trickery or terror; that was not the right way it should be conducted, and something he had put to the side when attacking D.C. The message needed to be sent, but it could have been done just as effectively had he simply targeted the Pentagon, White House, and other military targets. Making the city itself a target had perhaps been a mistake.
The recent conflicts with the Humans had made him realize that the Collective Military itself was deeply flawed. While the Humans were not holding back, and advancing at a steady rate, the Collective had been stagnant for entire decades, not just the military. All of them were preparing to fight the same war again and had not been learning anything about how to improve.

There had been no drive. No reason to innovate. Advance.

If this was what a primitive, and the Battlemaster was no longer sure that word applied to Humans anymore, species could do against them, then what chance did they have against a more advanced species, much less the Synthesized?

Fectorian, Revelean; the Imperator had allowed both of them to work on their projects, but never allowed them to truly affect what was supposedly the organization his species was to lead. Perhaps Aegis was more justified in making a statement against the Imperator than he had originally assumed. While a traitor, perhaps there were more reasons than what the Imperator had said to him.

For an organization called the Ethereal Collective, he was wondering why he was the only one to actually have a public presence.

If they were supposed to be the leaders of such a Collective, why weren’t they?

Was that one reason why they were struggling to such an extent?

The Battlemaster stopped walking, wondering why exactly he was thinking about this now. He was not anywhere close to being out of danger, and this was something that required a safer environment to really consider the implications.

A battlefield was not that place.

Thumping in the distance reached his ears, signaling the sound of helicopters arriving in the distance. They were arriving.

He flourished the blade in his hand, and marched forward to fight ADVENT’s reinforcements.

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The Citadel, Situation Room – United States of America

11/21/2016 – 11:51 P.M.

“I have every nearby Garrison closing on D.C. now,” Laura updated the hologram of Saudia, as well as those of Weekes and Patricia. “The Battlemaster will not be able to get far before we locate him. He also won’t be able to call for reinforcements, and can’t be picked up without us noticing.”

Saudia looked understandably skeptical. When the nuke launched by Treduant had gone off, no one had initially known what to make of it. However, some of the communications equipment was EMP hardened and they had been able to piece together at least some of the situation. It appeared that the nanoweapon the Battlemaster had brought had been destroyed, and Fectorian’s soldiers had been damaged as well.

With that said, the city itself had reportedly sustained substantial damage and museums, monuments, and government buildings had been targeted. Civilians hadn’t, which was perhaps the only good news to come out of the situation.
Either way, this was not what anyone would consider ‘good’.

“Are you sure about that?” Saudia demanded. “Because I’m going to have to give an update, and I can’t exactly cover up the fact that there was a nuclear weapon detonated above D.C. As it is this is hard to portray as a positive, especially as Treduant is dead.”

“Then don’t.” The Commander interrupted flatly, raising a palm. “This was not just a military target, this was a psychological one. The only intent here was to pacify us and scare us into submission. Don’t hide what happened. Show it.” Laura nodded beside him as he continued. “This was an unprovoked attack on not just our government, but on the history and culture of America itself. We still don’t know what we lost, and we haven’t even mentioned the people who have been killed. Use it to make people angry. This was a direct statement that there are no places that are safe from attack. Perhaps we should respond directly in kind.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” Weekes demanded, his helmet on as he was still on the front lines. “It’s not like we can hit their own bases, otherwise I agree. We can’t let this go unanswered, and our offensives are already stalling. At best this is going to turn into a sustained siege.”

“Two options that I can see,” the Commander said. “There are areas that the Collective controls on Earth, primarily Australia and Japan. We detonate nukes over those countries and disrupt them at the very least. If we want to send a more permanent message, we hit them with nukes directly.”

“No,” Saudia shook her head, scowling. “I already don’t like that we are using nuclear weapons in the atmosphere. Using them on land is not something I will authorize.”

“Maybe not on land,” Laura interjected. “But the Commander has a point. I am not going to let this go unanswered. The aliens have escalated this conflict, and if they feel safe attacking our capital cities, than we need to respond in kind. Disrupting their hold on Earth will send that message, even if it won’t permanently destroy them.”

“If you do that, it needs to be done now,” Patricia added. “This will only work a few times before they figure out countermeasures. I doubt many aliens even knew about the EMP aspect of nukes. Now they will. Use it before they adapt.”

“It will take them time, even if they do,” Laura commented. “They can’t exactly overhaul their entire army overnight.”

“I’m in agreement with both commanders,” Weekes said. “Let’s exclude the attack on D.C. At least some of us are Americans, and we’re not exactly rational about it. The fact is that D.C. is… was a valid military target. The civilians weren’t harmed. I doubt the Battlemaster cared about anything beyond expressing how much he disliked us having the gall to attack his bases.” He finished that sentence with a snort.

His gaze swept around. “With that said, it doesn’t fucking matter where he attacked. That isn’t an escalation in my opinion. What is an escalation are those nanoweapons. Nanoweapons that are self-replicating. If we aren’t justified in responding appropriately to that, then whoever holds that opinion can go straight to hell. Black out Japan and Australia. Chancellor-“

“I can guess what you’re going to say,” Saudia interrupted, looking over at him. “And yes, research into nanotech is going to be accelerated. We don’t exactly have a choice now. Commander, does XCOM have anything to share on that front?”

“We’ve been conducting research,” the Commander said. “It is a relatively new area, but we will
share what we have learned to help you. But at the moment, we need to focus more on defending against nanotech than weapons of our own. Those will come later.”

“Agreed,” Laura nodded. “Chancellor, with your approval I will prepare our nuclear subs to launch EMP nuclear strikes over the discussed locations. After it has of course been approved by the appropriate divisions.”

Saudia was silent for a few moments. “Granted,” she said. “I will have Minister Kyong inform China of the impending strike over Japan so they don’t panic when they detect a nuclear launch.”

“Good idea,” the Commander said. “I’d add every nearby foreign nation to that list. No reason for everyone to suddenly panic.”

“If I may offer a suggestion,” Weekes interjected, raising a hand. “We don’t need to use our nuclear subs. India has land-based ICBM capabilities, correct? Why expose our nuclear subs unnecessarily?”

The Commander exchanged a glance with Laura. “Can India hit Australia? Japan is obviously in range.”

Laura pursed her lips, briefly looking down at her tablet and pressing buttons on it. “Yes,” she finally said. “India has the capability to reach Australia. In fact, North Korea’s nuclear arsenal would be best deployed over Japan. India will target Australia.”

“It’s settled then,” Saudia looked between Weekes and Laura. “However, keep several nuclear subs on standby if there are issues.”

“Certainly.” Laura nodded, setting her lips in a thin line. “But now we need to focus on how to proceed with Sherman.” A holographic map of North America appeared. “We have penetrated Collective territory, but they are holding steady at LA and Sacramento. Hawaii will soon be taken by us, but I don’t know if it’s a good idea to hold onto that if they aren’t driven off completely.”

“We’re not giving it up now,” Weekes practically growled. “And what exactly is the Collective going to do? Send another fleet to take it back?”

“I doubt it’s an actual concern for them,” the Commander interrupted. “The bigger issues are that Canada is coming under attack, as is Mexico.”

“Alaska is heating up first,” Laura corrected, pointing at the map. “Anchorage is already coming under attack. There are multiple cities that are also being struck. There aren’t enough soldiers to protect them all. Fairbanks is the only location aside from Anchorage with Gateway support. I’ve diverted several Garrisons who helped in California to there.”

“How long can they hold?” Saudia asked.

“Anchorage?” Laura paused. “Based on the size of the alien force, they can hold out for a few days, minimum. Fairbanks…that depends on how badly the aliens want it. Even a medium-sized force will probably take it. They aren’t prepared.”

“How are Vancouver and Guadalajara holding?” Saudia asked.

“Surprisingly well so far,” Laura updated. “The good news is that the aliens don’t seem to know how to handle trench warfare. Even with the defenses half-finished at best, they are holding out extremely well. The bad news is that they’re expanding to strike the less-defended areas. Seattle has just come under attack. Again.”
The sigh that went around the room was almost palpable. At this point there wasn’t much left of Seattle except empty buildings and damaged skyscrapers. There hadn’t been time to even dig the trenches fully yet, much less build Flak Towers. “Portland should prepare for another attack,” the Commander suggested, looking at the map. “It might be best to adapt our strategy in Seattle.”

“How?” Saudia asked.

The Commander looked to Weekes. “You mentioned one the SFD chiefs specialized in inter-city guerilla warfare tactics, right?”

Weekes snorted. “By ‘one of the SFD Chiefs” you mean Chief Ranta, yes?”

“Yes,” the Commander nodded. The Finnish Chief of Hussar Operations Niklas Ranta, formerly a sniper of the Utti Jaeger Regiment, and supposedly one of the best living snipers in the world. These days he had apparently had a more administrative and tactical role, which, combined with his skills, was likely why he’d been chosen to lead the Hussars.

He’d also apparently made himself specialize in urban guerilla tactics, and was a proponent of using more of them in the war, most of which had been temporarily denied. Now though, it was as good a time as any to see how useful they would be in this war. “Commander Christiaens, looking at the numbers, Seattle will not hold out against another sustained assault. Instead of wasting soldiers, we should at least attempt to experiment in weakening the Collective in other ways. Weekes, is he as good as he says?”

“Absolutely,” Weekes nodded. “Give him what he needs, and he’ll make Seattle hell for the aliens. Although he’ll likely destroy a lot of the city with it. But he’ll make sure there are dead aliens.”

“My only concern is that this may be out of his jurisdiction,” Laura warned. “We don’t have a guerilla division-“

“Then clear it with Chief Operator Schalit,” Weekes interrupted. “We’re the Special Forces Division for a reason. Asymmetrical warfare is what we do. I’m not going to let ‘jurisdiction’ of all things be a problem.”

“Your point is made, Chief,” Saudia interjected. “Laura, make sure Chief Ranta actually can do what we need before giving him resources. Otherwise, I’m in agreement. If we can’t hold Seattle, we should ensure the aliens die by the thousands to take it.”

“Patricia,” the Commander looked over to her. “Anything you want to add?”

“No,” Patricia shook her head. “Apologies, I’m distracted. The Overmind is directly supporting the aliens, and from what I’ve been able to tell, on every battlefield. I’ve been trying to figure out some way to subvert it, but it’s rendering any kind of offensive telepathy difficult.”

“Little we can do about that,” the Commander said grimly. “Let us hope he doesn’t turn his abilities against us.”

“In some good news, South Korea is holding steady,” Laura updated, giving a brief smile at that as she turned the map to the respective country. “I don’t know what the aliens were thinking here. They were clearly not expecting this level of defense, or even how to get through them. And they apparently have some kind of homicidal alien that’s shooting at, and I quote, “Whoever the fuck he wants’.”

“Funny.” The Commander honestly wasn’t as concerned with Korea. There were enough defenses there to possibly hold out for half a year against a Battlemaster-level threat, much less the
somewhat half-hearted attempt they’d seen so far. “How close are the Garrisons to D.C.?”

“How close are the Garrisons to D.C.?” Laura said. “The main army won’t be far behind. An hour or less.”

The Commander nodded, wondering if that would even be enough. Still, he was trapped behind enemy lines without a way to escape. Contacting Aegis was something that wasn’t exactly…easy to do here, but if there was anyone who might have an idea on how best to capture him, it would be their resident Ethereal.

“Excuse me for a moment,” the Commander said, stepping back. “Call from the Praesidium.”

Laura simply nodded and he stepped out into the hallway and after ensuring the call would be secured, put a call towards the Praesidium. “Commander?” Jackson asked. “What do you need?”

“Aegis,” the Commander answered. “I need to speak to him. Concerning the Battlemaster. I assume you’ve been following the developments?”

A pause. “Yes. We’re lucky Shen had the foresight to harden the more delicate systems of Aegis armor from EMP attacks. Operatives Nira and Tendai retreated, and are alive. They’re trying to locate the Battlemaster and provide location data.”

Some good news there. He wasn’t surprised he hadn’t been updated yet about their status, as this had happened such a short time ago. “We held Shinobi Cho back, correct? What is the status of Roaring Sky?”

Another pause. “Crashed. The skyranger was hit by the blast and Roaring Sky had to punch out. MEC Pilot Cho is alive though, and the Shinobi is largely functional, although all the healing nanites were disabled. She is currently protecting Roaring Sky, and is outside D.C at the moment. Should I order her to pursue the Battlemaster?”

The Commander shook his head. “Negative. Have her get Roaring Sky to safety and regroup with Nira and Tendai, as well as the ADVENT forces. Given how easily the Battlemaster took Knight Team apart, it would be suicide to attack.”

“Agreed,” she said. “I’ve got Aegis now.”

“Commander,” the voice of the Ethereal greeted. “I have been appraised of the situation. I would advise your remaining soldiers approach the Battlemaster peacefully. He can be reasoned with, if you are willing to accept his surrender.”

The Commander gave a humorless chuckle. “How serious are you now, Aegis? Do you really think he would surrender? And that we would do anything except execute him?”

“You of all people should understand the tactical usage of similar tactics, and have performed worse than the Battlemaster ever has,” Aegis answered flatly. “So yes, I expect you would. XCOM is not ADVENT. The Battlemaster is an enemy combatant, and if captured, he would be treated well and not turned over to ADVENT who would desire only to execute him.”

Aegis didn’t hold back. Fair enough. “And what is the problem with that?” The Commander asked. “If we win this war, I don’t see him surviving. I also don’t expect him to surrender.”

“If he did,” Aegis said slowly. “Would XCOM hold him as a prisoner of war, one treated well, until the war was decided one way or another and ultimately not turned over to ADVENT? You would also not be bound to inform them of his capture, if you wish to avoid the issue altogether.”
“What is your plan, Aegis?” The Commander demanded.

“Let me speak to him,” Aegis said. “We were friends. I know him better than you. I know that he can be convinced to surrender if he knows escape is impossible. Let me at least attempt this, as there might not be another opportunity. If I succeed, we retain a valuable asset in the coming war, and increase your chances of victory significantly. If I fail, ADVENT still has a chance to kill him.”

The Commander considered that for a moment. “Fine. Once my soldiers see an opportunity, they will put you in contact with him. However, if the Battlemaster just kills them, their deaths will be on you. And I won’t forget it if it happens. Do you understand?”

“If they approach peacefully, the Battlemaster will not attack,” Aegis assured him. “But they must follow my instructions. The Battlemaster will not be taking chances now.”

“Central, did you get that?” The Commander asked Jackson.

“Yes, Commander,” Jackson confirmed. “I’ll patch Aegis into their comms as soon as possible and give their orders. For the record Aegis, I’m not expecting this to work.”

“Truthfully, neither am I,” Aegis admitted. “But I will at least make the effort. He deserves that much. He is ultimately not your enemy here. He is only following the directive of the Imperator.”

“Directive or not, he’s still the enemy,” the Commander grunted. “But good luck, Aegis. Hopefully he’ll listen to you. Commander out.” He tapped his headset and ended the call, before turning to head back to the Situation Room.

Depending on how things went, this day could potentially get a lot more interesting.

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Mars Observation Station – Mars Orbit

11/22/2016 – 2:11 A.M.

This entire operation was not exactly going, as Ravarian would put it, well.

Not just because everyone seemed to be forgetting that he wasn’t an actual military leader. He was the Zar’Chon, but no one actually bothered to think if the head of the Collective’s Intelligence organization was actually qualified to make military decisions. He was certainly knowledgeable on the subject, and could offer certain insights from the perspective of an intelligence operative.

But he wasn’t the Battlemaster, nor from the Runianarch, Lurainian, or Federation Military for that matter. He was, unfortunately, the highest ranking Collective officer in the Solar System, and thus, he was having to make decisions outside his comfort zone.

And as such was the immediate target for being yelled at by, admittedly, justifiably furious commanders.

“What do you mean ‘you can’t do anything’?” Runi’callista’vitiary, the Collective Commander in charge of the Korea invasion demanded. “I am losing soldiers to some crazed traitor! Where is the Battlemaster?!”

“The Battlemaster is currently fighting,” Ravarian answered calmly, knowing there was little he could do to lessen the anger of the Borelian. And technically, it wasn’t a lie. He was very sure the Battlemaster was in combat. “I’ve attempted to pull the Hunter back, but he…ah…isn’t
responding.”

“You’re Zararch,” Callista growled, stepping forward. If she hadn’t been a hologram, Ravarian might have been concerned for his own safety. “If you can’t order him back, I want your snipers to kill him.”

From what little Ravarian knew of the Hunter, that was probably not going to work. “Do you have a location? Snipers aren’t good without targets.”

“No, I don’t,” Callista snapped. “So I’m stuck with a trigger happy traitor sniper? Is that what you’re saying?”

Ravarian paused briefly. “Unfortunately, yes. I’m overseeing and providing logistical support to a half-dozen major operations at this time. Every Ethereal I know is indisposed. I’m afraid I can’t help you now, I’m sorry.”

Callista raised one finger at him. “I’m keeping a list of every soldier that’s died because of your incompetence. And anyone else who put this traitor on this mission. If this problem isn’t solved soon, I will ensure that the Aui’Vitakar hear the full extent of your failure. And don’t even think of trying to cover this up, as I know you are.”

The hologram was abruptly shut off.

This was a problem.

He was honestly surprised the Hunter had actually been this much of an issue. He had easily been identified as insubordinate, but Ravarian would have never guessed him to be a traitor. Now he was directly threatening the peace on Vitakar. He sighed, activating the holodisplay in his hand, and quickly navigated to the list of Collective commanders.

This was a problem for the Battlemaster to solve, once he was recovered. Callista would calm down when he returned. But for now, a communications restriction was needed. For the remainder of this operation, she would not be able to communicate outside the Solar System, despite her threats. As much as Borelians were fearless, they were not always the most intelligent, especially in fits of anger.

However, her anger was justified so she wouldn’t be removed for now. It would be ironic, but helpful if she was in the Hunter’s sights at some point.

Actually no it wouldn’t. It would just be further evidence of the need to execute the Hunter, which there frankly didn’t need to be more of.

He did not like being so visible in the Collective. Quisilia was off in Australia, the Battlemaster was fighting somewhere in D.C. while they were still trying to determine his location, and both Guardians had left for unknown reasons. At least the Second Guardian had said she was going to assist in the operations in Canada. The First Guardian had just disappeared.

Typical.

Typical, frustrating, and annoying Ethereals who couldn’t be bothered to put a cohesive plan together. Oh no, each of them had to do their own thing and not tell anyone else about it, because each Ethereal was always on a top secret mission and didn’t have time to inform the mere Zar’Chon about where they’d be and what they’d be doing. No, that information was certainly useless to him.
Ethereals may be immortal gods wielding psionic energies to destroy entire armies, but they were exceptionally bad leaders. The only ones who seemed to have any sort of idea how to work with aliens were Quisilia and the Battlemaster. The others obviously could care less.

It was part of the reason he hadn’t contacted Caelior about possible assistance. There was a greater possibility that he’d get his neck snapped than the young, arrogant alien actually listening to what he had to say. He could imagine how the conversation would go:

“What? Has your incompetence put him in danger? I will not work with such a failure as you!”

And in a fit of juvenile rage, Caelior snapped the Zar’Chon’s neck.

Ravarian grimaced, feeling an overwhelming sense of frustration. The Sargon of all things was more helpful than any Ethereal. More polite too, for that matter. He was quite sure Quisilia would be reading his mind after this, and frankly, he didn’t care right now. If one thing had become apparent over this conflict, it was that most of the Ethereals, the Battlemaster and Quisilia excluded, had no idea how to run the Collective they supposedly led, much less interact with aliens they obviously saw as lesser.

It turned out that war revealed the nature of beings much better than words and propaganda ever could.

He doubted Quisilia would execute him. Maybe thinking this had crossed a line though. But was it really a crime to accuse Ethereals of (in his mind) incompetence if it was true?

While the Battlemaster had his faults, he was actually someone he could respect. Quisilia too. Not the absent Imperator or any other arrogant Ethereal. No, this was not something he was going to tolerate any longer. Once this conflict was resolved, he was going to make major revisions to the Zararch and how they interacted with the Collective.

If the Ethereals didn’t like it, they could kill him, but he was going to reexamine certain rules and guidelines given by the Ethereals and determine their merit. If they had a problem with it, they could speak to him in person.

He felt something rub up against his leg, and unconsciously bent down and picked up Cali’Zar’Chon, who had grown quite a bit over the past few months. It was nice to hold it while considering various tactics on holodisplays; a surprisingly good stress relief. A few of the analysts had given him some odd looks when he’d brought it out the first time, but everyone had gotten used to it.

Some of them had seemingly given jealous looks too. Over a cat of all things.

Maybe he should bring in several cats to wander around and provide moral support to his staff. The little furballs did have their uses, it turned out. Apparently dogs had a similar effect. Maybe he could run a secondary experiment on which one was better.

Something for later when he wasn’t as stressed.

“Zar’Chon,” Disciple-7 said into his earpiece. “We believe we have intercepted communications displaying the location of the Battlemaster. I am beginning to put together an extraction team.”

A competent subordinate that communicated things. Amazing. “Excellent,” he said, moving to
walk back to the main hub. “I’m on my way down to assist.”

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The Island of Hawai’i - Hawaii

Operation: Kamehameha – Day 2

11/22/2016 – 8:32 A.M.

Sleep was somewhat fleeting for Sierra, but now that several of the major islands, including Hawai’i were taken, they had gotten a little bit of downtime while the rest of ADVENT kept the pressure on the alien strongholds. So she’d gotten some food and a few hours of sleep, and right now was doing some socialization with several ADVENT soldiers before heading back out to battle.

“Did you see anything through that Gateway?” Peter Hale, one of the regular soldiers asked. He was about the same age as her, if a bit more chipper than she was. He’d said he was originally from California, which clearly gave him a more personal stake in what was happening.

“Nope, just purple,” Sierra answered, shaking her head and pushing around her morning rations before finally deciding to just eat it. ADVENT rations were definitely not as good as what XCOM had. At least for now she’d have to get used to more bland military food. At least it wasn’t bad.

None of them were wearing armor, obviously, the ADVENT soldiers were wearing their standard fatigues, and she and the other Archangel pilots had a more sleek undersuit as even normal clothing would be too bulky. There were some more regular clothes, but considering they would be leaving in…she glanced over to the clock…roughly a half-hour, she hadn’t thought it was worth it.

The price of that was that the suit was…rather tight and not exactly what Sierra would consider modest. It had been somewhat amusing to see some of guys being very unsubtle in checking her, and Anna for that matter, out, while the others kind of just tried to look everywhere but at her. However, being an Archangel came with certain expectations, and people kept their distance.

“So how are the suits piloted?” Dianne, a soldier from Florida asked, sipping from her plastic cup. “You just angle your body? You’re not handling levers I assume?”

“No, quite,” Sierra explained, setting down her food briefly and standing. “Yes, angles help and direct us. But how those are controlled is through a…kind of neural implant.” She reached back and pushed her hair off her neck and turned slightly to give them a look at the implant in it. “Don’t ask me how it works, but from my understanding it reads certain brain patterns associated with actions. Essentially this allows us to control propulsion, weapons, speed, all with our minds.”

“Wait…” Dianne frowned. “You’re plugged into the suit?”

She exchanged a glanced with Anna. “Yes…” Anna said after a pause. “I think that’s accurate.”

Some of the soldiers looked visibly uncomfortable. “Just through that one implant?” A soldier she didn’t recognize asked. “Or are there others?”

“A couple,“ Sierra recalled. “There are two that line the spine, and two more just above the joints of the arms and legs. Improves speed so I’m told. It doesn’t hurt either, if you’re curious.”

“These definitely were,” Ted chimed in from the corner, a smirk on his face. The psion had largely kept out of the conversation, and she could tell he was still tired. He had the arms of his undersuit
unzipped and was lightly spraying them with a Medkit as more of a preventative screen than to actually heal them.

Psionics really did take a major toll on their bodies. When he’d taken off the suit his arms had been literally ripped and it looked like an entire layer of skin was gone. How he’d still been walking around with not much more than a grimace was something she didn’t know. She knew that Offensive Psions did have the Biomuscular Regen modification, but that seemed to function more as a way to ensure that the psion wasn’t rendered useless after a few displays of power.

“Hey, don’t scare them,” Anna chided lightly. “They’re still getting used to psions.”

“Don’t worry,” Ted reassured them. “I can’t read your mind, just pick up on certain emotions.” He raised a hand. “I’m better at killing aliens.”

“All of you seem to be,” Peter noted. “Although since you’re from XCOM…”

Sierra chuckled, thinking of the ironic fact that they were housing quite a few aliens themselves. “You have no idea.”

“Are you all from America?” Another soldier asked, cocking her head their direction. “You don’t have accents.”

“Yep, born and raised in Florida,” Sierra said.

Ted shot her a suspicious look. “I would not have guessed that.”

Sierra rolled her eyes. “Contrary to popular belief, not everyone from the South has a so-called southern accent.”

“Montana for me,” Ted added. “Don’t have anything to add beyond that. No psychic powers as a kid either.”

“Anna?” Sierra prompted.

“I came with my family from Ukraine,” Anna shrugged. “Lived in Vermont once we settled. Nothing more interesting beyond that.”

Huh, she hadn’t known that about her. Sierra had just assumed she’d grown up American from birth. Despite what Anna said, there was probably some story there, but that was for later when the aliens were gone. Her earpiece buzzed, indicating that they needed to get ready. “Nice chatting with you all,” Sierra said, giving a little wave. “But duty calls. See you all out there.”

“If you die, can I get your suit?” Someone called, to several scattered chuckles.

“No!” Sierra called back, then paused. “Actually, sure! But only if you record your face when the suit skewers you where the implants are supposed to be.”

“Never mind then!”

Sierra smirked and followed the other Archangels out, getting her thoughts organized for the battle ahead.

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Washington D.C. – United States of America
The helicopters wasted no time in opening fire on him.

The Battlemaster had chosen to make the first battle along the Reflecting Pool, as it was an open space that would provide plenty of maneuverability. Gauss machine guns spat slugs from the air as they attempted to circle around him, in a vain attempt to keep him in one single place. There were six in the air currently.

Too many.

The Battlemaster lifted one fist into the air and enveloped himself in a telekinetic field that stopped all the projectiles instantly. With his free hands he reached towards two helicopters and clenched his fists, crumpling the rotors and blades that allowed the machines to levitate. But all things had their weaknesses, machines included.

Soldiers were marching in the distance, and guns were already being fired at him from the ground. The air turned purple as he transitioned into a charge and dashed forward as the helicopters began falling to the ground. With a free hand, the Battlemaster reached towards one turning to let its gun fire on him, and telekinetically grasped it.

He directed the machine into a nearby one, and although it was clumsy and required a brief amount of effort, he was successful and the two machines connected. Teams of ADVENT soldiers were now taking positions, especially gunners who were unloading their gauss autorifles into him. He simply transitioned into a psionic dash and performed several quick zig-zags towards the line.

“Hold him!” One of the soldiers screamed, and the Battlemaster belatedly noticed that there were the distinctive ADVENT Priests in the reinforcements.

So this might be a pleasant initial challenge.

He then paused as he suddenly realized that there was quite literally an army heading towards him. He was on the latter end of the reflecting pool, and everywhere from the Washington monument backwards had entire squads of ADVENT soldiers, with healthy mixes of Gunners, Snipers, Rocketeers, and Priests.

MDUs also dotted the army, and several of the ADVENT soldiers had the small SHIV machines. There were also the Lancers, and many ADVENT Special Forces units leading the charge behind the initial sacrifice.

This was potentially a problem. It was one thing to fight soldiers, but now that psions were involved, and the army more diverse, it was more difficult. No holding back today.

The Priests were extending hands his way, and he felt the iron grip of telekinesis wrap around his legs and quickly threw a hand forward, blowing back the soldiers immediately in front of him and transitioning into a psionic charge. While not lethal, it disrupted the hold on him and he was free. One swipe slaughtered a swath of soldiers, while his free hands were clenched fists that similarly found targets.

The armor of ADVENT did not protect fully against the steel of his armor, and soldiers went flying or stumbling backwards when hit by him. The Battlemaster twisted one lower hand violently and all soldiers within his hastily constructed telekinetic field were twisted around. Some bones snapped, some were bent in two; all were disrupted.

The Battlemaster slashed down at a Priest and cleaved through her armor with relative ease, the
force crumpling her body to the ground. Gauss fire became a melody to him as it flew around and
bounced off his armor. One hand slammed to the ground, sending a telekinetic shockwave that
unbalanced everyone around him.

He psionically dashed forward and spun in a complete circle within the blink of an eye killing all
the ADVENT soldiers around him; the now-headless corpses collapsing to the ground. Without
pausing he began cutting his way through the ADVENT soldiers as they desperately tried to
contain him, but they had never faced the unrelenting strength that was a Battlemaster unleashed.

Armor was punctured by metal; skin and bone were crushed under a telekinetic grip; time was a
commodity that was not allowed, as the Battlemaster moved too quickly, and targeted the vital
soldiers in the army to remove possible threats. The Priests he killed barely had time to shout
before their heads exploded, necks snapped, or they were thrown straight up into the air.

The soldiers within the range of his sword fared even worse. They were short enough to be like
fighting children with how little they could withstand his strikes. His free hands picked up and
threw, slammed, or mutilated them with ruthless abandon. The air around him became tainted with
the smell of blood and discharged weapons.

The MDUs and machines assisting them were turned on their own with simple applications of
telekinesis. The bipedal machines were compressed into balls of metal and thrown into more
soldiers, while the little SHIVs were stomped underfoot. The iron skin of the Lancers did little
good as they were drawn to his hand and slammed onto a knee or the hard concrete, leaving them
as broken wrecks.

Yet it was exhilarating.

Two Priests attempted to coordinate in the chaos, one shooting streams of psionic energy at him,
while another telekine attempted to hold him in place. The Battlemaster telekinetically raised the
second psion, crushed him and tossed the broken corpse away, before psionically dashing towards
the first psion and decapitating him with a single strike.

Three MDUs stood before him then, their laser weapons already lighting up and with an upwards
swipe one was destroyed, while his two lower hands grasped the machines and clenched them into
fists. The white bipeds crumpled into balls, and a stab into the center of the standing MDU shut the
machine off for good.

Time had essentially stopped for him, caught up as he was in the battle and seemingly massive
army he was caught in the middle of. Soldier after soldier died to him; none had time to even
escape his reach, much less strategize or prepare. Every strike was a deathblow. Every motion a
death sentence. Each motion; every move the Battlemaster made involved the death of another.

Even as he cut down a trio of ADVENT he was already taking in the immediate soldiers around
him; the next sword stroke, telekinetic grip, and psionic dash already being calculated.
Multitasking was one of the first things taught to potential Battlemasters; how to effectively
manage large groups of enemies in close proximity to each other.

He had to not only be cognizant of the threats themselves, but thinking three steps ahead every
second. It had been difficult to fully visualize at first, but with thousands of hours of training, the
War against the Synthesized, and countless more hours in the Prism, it was second nature to him,
but admittedly something he hadn’t allowed himself to be immersed in for a long time.

One soldier was slammed to the ground by his hand; a swipe of his sword killed another Priest; his
other two hands crushed an MDU and blasted back a squad of ADVENT soldiers. All
simultaneously; all within moments of each other; and already he was moving to the next targets.

A stab to kill an MDU. A SHIV crushed underfoot. The screams of ten soldiers lifted and then bent in two, then throwing their broken bodies at their comrades. Sprays of blood and bone adding red layers to his armor from each punch and sword slash. Over and over; on and on; a battle that seemed like there would be no end.

And then everything went silent.

The Battlemaster deliberately pulled himself out of the trance he’d fallen into and observed the carnage around him. Wrecked helicopters, faint sobbing and screams of the mortally wounded soldiers, and corpses covering the ground around the entire Reflection Pool, with some floating in the water itself.

MDU and SHIV wrecks sparked and smoked intermittently, and the ground was stained with blood, soot, and metal. The Battlemaster quickly reviewed his own status. His armor was coated and splattered with blood, the gauntlets were a deep red, as was his sword. His cloak was ripped, burned and torn, and even the armor had suffered small dents.

Still, the effort had tired him. He was fully capable of falling back into the trance, but he would eventually become sloppy, and those would not be the last soldiers ADVENT sent. He needed to keep moving, maybe go to somewhere they wouldn’t immediately expect. He had memorized the basic layout of the city, and knew a place he would have a brief reprieve.

With that decided, he began the march towards Arlington, knowing that if the Warlock was still around, he would most likely be in that area. Much as he had derided the Chosen as a tool, they would stand a better chance of surviving together than alone.

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Busan – South Korea
11/22/2016 – 5:18 P.M.

Duri had never even known that it was possible for an alien to talk as much as the Hunter did.

The battle had persisted for over twelve hours straight now, and the Hunter had essentially been providing live commentary throughout the entire thing. If he hadn’t been a terrifyingly effective sniper, making shots that no one could begin to guess at how they’d been pulled off, Duri would have found it hilarious.

Even more so since the Hunter had also not stopped the trend of shooting his own side.

“Sectopods,” the Hunter was musing now. “I’ve always wondered what the Sectoids were thinking when they made them. Not a bad idea, but far too easy to outmaneuver.”

“He is not seriously going to do what I think he is,” Beatriz said flatly, looking through her scope. “No fucking way.”

“Oh, but I am, ADVENT sniper number one-hundred and two, or whoever the fuck you are,” the Hunter chided mockingly, making Beatriz immediately duck under the firing slit as if she was afraid of a sniper bolt hitting her. That was another thing he’d been doing. He’d occasionally address soldiers at random. He didn’t seem to know the names thankfully, so he called them random numbers.
It was a bit unsettling though. No one knew how he was still in their network, although Miguel said he was probably spoofing their network with stolen ADVENT proxies. Whatever that meant. Duri wasn’t a computer guy, much less a network guy, so he’d taken the engineer at his word.

“You are not going to be able to make the shot,” Beatriz muttered. “I don’t care how bullshit your sniper rifle is.”

“Watch and learn, little human,” the Hunter chuckled. “And I don’t blame you. I’m much better than you’ll ever be.”

The curiosity apparently got the better of her, and Beatriz propped her sniper rifle back up and peered through it. The aliens had managed to erect some form of barricade in the no man’s land, but it was extremely far away as to be ineffective, and the area had already been besieged with artillery, although they had also deployed scattered Andromedon shields to provide some protection.

Behind the lines there were the clear outlines of Sectopods and Cyberdisks. Ironically, the latter had proven to be little more than floating targets as they didn’t have the range to actually move forward without being shot out of the sky. Not only did they have to worry about the hail of gauss fire from the ground, but also the Flak Towers which had shot down a few more additional spacecraft that had been foolish enough to get too close.

“Cara! Setting ammo behind you!” Miguel told her, tapping the elevated turret ground she was standing on. “Anyone else need reloads?”

“Three more mags and I’ll be set for a while!” A nearby soldier called out, and a few more voices added to that. Miguel made a hasty note on a pad and dashed off to get the ammo. All of them had adjusted to the trenches fairly well, more so than Duri had expected. Miguel kept all of them supplied with ammo, and Nobuatsu had kept them well-hydrated and fed.

Although right now he was assisting several soldiers who’d been shot nearby by stray Collective plasma. Even they had to hit something.

For his part, he’d felt somewhat useless, as he couldn’t really aim at anything with an acceptable degree of precision. Only Beatriz had any kind of accuracy, and Cara with her Browning could inflict damage reliably. He was mostly relegated to directing fire and keeping everyone in line. He’d instructed Mana and Aleksandra to hold their fire unless they could actually aim for something. Otherwise he’d occasionally had them relieve Nobuatsu and Miguel.

Beatriz had kept him updated on what the Collective was doing on their lines, and occasionally asking what she should be targeting. He really needed binoculars, and had requested some but they had yet to actually come. But she was doing a good job illustrating the battlefield, so he didn’t feel too hampered.

Cara meanwhile had seemed to be having far too much fun with her gun. She was exceptionally good with it, and had audibly taken great pleasure in ripping the initial alien charge apart, and more recently overwhelming Andromedon shielding and cutting through Cyberdisks.

The biggest threat they now faced were the Sectopods, which were visible monoliths in the distance that were growing ever-closer. They were at the alien line now, but it looked like they weren’t in range yet to actually begin firing. The Collective had also begun firing at them, but their aiming was just as bad as ADVENT’s own. If they had their own snipers, they had yet to show them.
“They’ve got the Andromedon shield back up,” Beatriz reported, and Duri saw a square of red light up in the distance. As it was still night, the line itself was rather hard to see.

“Enemy composition the same?”

“Mutons and Borelians,” Beatriz confirmed. “Sectopods behind them. They’ve got some kind of support soldiers helping their wounded.”

Tactically, it would probably have been a good idea to have her target the support soldiers. But there were some things that shouldn’t be done, and attacking medics was one of them. Maybe a bit old-fashioned for ADVENT, but he would prefer their own medics not be attacked, so he would allow them the same courtesy.

That didn’t apply to their tools though. “Hit the Borelians if you can,” he instructed. “Cara! The shield is back up!”

“I see it!” She yelled, chuckling as she began unloading onto the shield in the distance. “I’ll take it down again!”

If Duri recalled right, if she did it, it would be the third time so far that shield had been erected, and then overloaded. In general the Andromedon shielding only lasted until someone in the trenches noticed, realized that no one was firing on it, and then had their gunners focus-fire it. They clearly didn’t have the infrastructure to properly power any equipment they had.

“Sectopods are moving forward,” Beatriz updated in between shots. “Got one Borelian too.”

“Good shot,” he patted her shoulder and activated his squad channel. “Alright everyone! Ready positions! We’ve got Sectopods coming in!”

“About time I do something,” Aleksandra stated, coming up beside him and readying her rifle. “Boring combat otherwise.”

“Speak for yourself,” Mana chided as he took a similar position beside her. “Personally, I prefer battles where my chance of dying is low.”

“Focus!” Duri chided as the ground rocked as missiles suddenly shot from the two dozen Sectopods, right from the back of the primary ‘pod’. The streaks in the air looked intimidating and were angling down towards the ADVENT line, and it was at an angle that none of them had a good shot at it.

From behind him he heard the pounding of one of the THAAD and Flak Tower defense systems, and sniper fire from the Hussars accompanying it. At the same time, various points along the trenches were encased in a purple bubble, likely from the supporting Priests anticipating where the missile strikes would be.

Several of the missiles exploded in a burst of green fire, but many streaked down towards the ADVENT line and hit with explosions that shook the ground. Most of those hit the psionic shields created by the Priests, but several hit the lines themselves with the accompanying screams of pain. One directly hit a Flak Tower a short distance away, destroying most of the rooftop weaponry and setting it ablaze.

“Going to help,” Nobuatsu updated and dashed away. Duri simply nodded and began focusing on the advancing Sectopod in the distance.

“Wow, amazing, the supposedly superior side actually hit something,” the Hunter commented. “I
was beginning to wonder if they were all incompetent, or if I’m just stuck with an inferior bunch.”

A pause. “Alright, for what I’m going to be doing next, I’m going to require a few volunteers. Anyoe want to sacrifice themselves for the good of humanity?”

“Oh, that’s not good,” Duri breathed. “Everyone get down until he…does whatever he’s going to do!”

Because the alien lunatic was clearly planning to kill some number of them. “Clever, little Officer,” the Hunter chuckled as the soldier next to him suddenly slumped forward, most of his head gone and showering his nearby comrade with blood. “Just for that, I’m not going to shoot any of your squad. However, medics always annoyed me.” A few shots rang out. “Nothing more irritating than shooting something and an idiot medic saving them. Kill stealer.”

“He-he just shot the soldier I was patching up!” Nobuatsu stuttered, sounding completely shaken and terrified. “Right in front of me! The other one who survived is dead too!”

Duri scowled. “Coward,” he swore. “At least go after something that actually gives you a challenge.”

“Oh, shut up,” the Hunter drawled. “I’d argue that hitting those damn Humans without scratching your precious medics was challenging enough. Why do you care anyway, not like you knew them?”

He opened his mouth to spit something out, but felt Cara grip his arm and could easily image her shaking head. “Don’t let the alien goad you, Duri. Let’s blow up their little army.”

“Duri, then,” the Hunter chuckled. “Listen to your less intelligent friend. Blow up the Sectopods, be a good little soldier. Leave the moralizing to others.” Another series of shots, though these were towards the alien line. “Everyone is equally worthy to die out here today,” the Hunter continued. “And ultimately, none of you actually matter. The ones who do aren’t here. Die or not, the galaxy will continue on without you.”

“Get this alien out of comms,” Aleksandra spat. “Ignore. Kill Sectopods.”

And that was what ADVENT was not doing. White-orange streaks of gauss and Browning fire were fired towards the alien machines, which were seemingly able to take it all. The artillery booming behind them though signaled that was possibly going to change. Plasma guns popped out of the top of the Sectopod center pods, and began firing at the ADVENT line.

No-man’s land lit up with artillery shelling and rocket bombardment. Several Sectopods stepped on mines which blew apart their clawed feet, and sent one tumbling to the ground. Several stumbled and exploded as the shelling took out their more delicate systems. Others weren’t heavily affected and only suffered superficial damage.

The centers of the pods began opening up, revealing a glowing red center that was getting more intense. “Aim for the center!” Duri roared, aiming his own rifle as best he could at the machine. Then the Sectopod suddenly stuttered, and the pod exploded, blowing into nearby Sectopods and unbalancing them. Another explosion followed suit; then another.

“Now that’s what I call a finale,” the Hunter stated, humming a tune. “You’re welcome, Humans. I’ve wanted to blow up those things for ages.”

“He didn’t get all of them,” Beatriz said, even as ADVENT did manage to take out a few more of the Sectopods. However, a couple did manage to unleash their main laser cannon which was not aimed at the trenches, but at the Flak Towers and artillery behind. One tower exploded and began
falling apart; multiple pieces of artillery blew up in the distance as the red laser struck them.

Still, all in all, the majority had been destroyed.

But as useful as the Hunter was, Duri would have preferred he just not interfere at all instead of treating all of this as some kind of game.

There was enough to worry about without a mocking alien on top of it.

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Sydney Outskirts – Australia

11/21/2016 – 12:13 P.M.

The fight through Sydney had led to Abby seeing the sheer destructive power the Chronicler had at his disposal. His soldiers now stayed a fair ways back, although even they were being affected by his ever-growing fury at the aliens facing him. The very air cracked and splintered around the Chronicler, and his psionics had turned lighter, until there were flickers of blue in them.

Psionic energy enveloped the Chronicler, and no alien could stand against him.

Those that tried were blasted into pulp by purple circular blasts that threw the destroyed being back, or they were compressed into broken balls of bone and flesh. Despite being a medic and having a high tolerance for bodily damage, it was disturbing even to her. And now the Chronicler was taking random aliens and drawing out their deaths to presumably make a point.

“He roared, standing in the middle of a now-torn street, a dozen various kinds of Vitakarians lying on the ground, one of his hands raised over them as he methodically snapped their bones one by one. “I will rip this city apart, Elder!”

Abby was watching from a distance as usual, keeping to the rooftops. She pursed her lips and considered just killing the aliens as she suspected this wasn’t going to make Quisilia do anything. Pain for the sake of it was pointless, but she felt disrupting the Chronicler now was...dangerous. He wasn’t acting like he normally was.

“So uncivilized,” Quisilia chided from right behind her again. “Fine then puppet, let’s see if you really want to fight me.”

Before Abby could even turn, she caught a glimpse of the Ethereal as he vanished and reappeared down at the edge of the Chronicler’s force. He held some kind of blade in each of his hands and slashed and stabbed simultaneously, and within a few seconds a half-dozen of the Chronicler’s aliens were dead. The Chronicler immediately materialized next to the alien, a purple hissing blade of psionic energy in his hand, which slammed into a small psionic shield Quisilia had summoned.

“You made a mistake coming here, Elder One,” the Chronicler growled as his aliens began raising their weapons and he stabbed forward with another psionic blade which Quisilia also deflected. “You don’t want to challenge me.”

“Do I now?” Quisilia answered lightly, tossing some kind of grenades with his free hands towards the traitor aliens around him. Nanites spewed out of them and began filling the suits of the aliens. Abby also saw two black figures coming forward, red lines down their face. Some kind of mechanical unit she hadn’t seen before.

The Chronicler blew Quisilia back with a psionic blast, and the blades dissipated right before he
brought them forward to form a shockwave that straight-up collapsed the building behind Quisilia. It unfortunately didn’t hit the Ethereal, as he vanished from sight only to materialize behind the Chronicler who met him a reformed psionic blade.

“I’m curious,” Quisilia mused almost mockingly as they began dueling more conventionally. The nanites were eating through his alien force, and it turned out those figures were also made up of nanites who were engaging Harper and his soldiers. “You are quite weak for a puppet. Disappointing. No wonder you’ve done nothing for generations.”

“Enough!” The Chronicler pushed Quisilia away, and raised his left hand into a clenched fist, picking up the Ethereal and slamming him into a nearby building with enough force to crack the foundation. Except when the form of Quisilia fell to the ground it dissipated, and the Ethereal stepped out of this air.

“How very impressive,” he chided. “I would have thought a puppet would be able to tell the difference between an illusion and the real thing. But I suppose you are too blunt for that kind of—”

He was forced to vanish as the Chronicler sent a blue-tinged psionic wave at the Ethereal that tore right through the buildings and caused them to begin crumbling to pieces. Quisilia reappeared a few feet away from his original position. “Now, as I was saying—”

“Be silent, Elder One,” the Chronicler snarled, and Abby realized that his voice was no longer his own. It was like a groaning giant, slow, ancient, methodical; like a monster that had just been woken. The Chronicler was no longer surrounded by purple energy, but that which was a bright blue. The air felt charged with…something Abby couldn’t describe.

It felt as though something dangerous was now here; something old. Everything suddenly felt oppressive and like she was moving through molasses. Quisilia was suddenly trapped in a perfect cube and lifted into the air. While the Ethereal tapped on the blue wall, the Chronicler spoke.

“He warned you not to make him angry,” the thing speaking through the Chronicler said. “Now you will die, Elder One. Die as your brethren did to the Replicators.”

“Curious,” Quisilia didn’t seem particularly concerned, even as the walls were closing in on him. “That wasn’t what we called them.” Quisilia made a motion, and froze. The Chronicler chuckled.

“Did you really think I would let you simply step through a portal of your making?” He mocked, completing the reversal of fortune. “You are a child in this galaxy, as is your mastery of it.”

“And you are as arrogant as your brethren, Sovereign One,” Quisilia answered. Gesturing down and the Chronicler suddenly vanished into a shimmer in the ground, although he burst up again from another opening he had likely created. But it was enough to loosen his concentration and allow Quisilia to vanish from the cracked blue cage.

Abby didn’t see where he went, but the Chronicler turned his attention to the nanites that were slowly destroying his army. The air around his army suddenly charged with lighting-like blue strikes that hit the nanites themselves, while not hurting the soldiers. One of the black figures was suddenly alight in blue lightning and fell to dust.

Four Quisilias suddenly stepped out beside the Chronicler, their movements mirroring each other as he reached for another strange bladed weapon. “You are powerful, Sovereign One,” Quisilia chided as he struck down, only to be met with the Chronicler shielding himself in a blue psionic shell. “But that is all you have.”
The Chronicler squeezed a fist and the Quisilias were suddenly levitated into the air, and began to be compressed. Abby didn’t think he was actually there, but it was still mildly concerning to see a perfect replication of an Ethereal being crushed like a toy. “Who does your species serve?” The Chronicler hissed. “Lacesseran? The Black Fleet? Exspirant? The Bringer?” A sharp hiss. “The Leviathan?”

Abby didn’t know what he was possibly referring to, but she suddenly knew that whatever the Chronicler was caught up in, it was much, much larger than what they could imagine. Whatever was happening, it did not seem like a good idea to stay around. Maybe Quisilia knew what he was talking about, but she certainly didn’t, and she actually assumed that the armor she was wearing… that all of them were… it came from whoever was speaking now.

The Quisilias all dissipated, and another one stepped out in front of the Chronicler. “You’d like to know, wouldn’t you?” He asked. “Interesting. That narrows down the list of names.”

“You will answer the question,” the Chronicler stated, pointing a finger at the alien. “Or I will take you back with me and tear the knowledge from your mind. You cannot resist forever.”

“Then find me, Sovereign One!” Quisilia taunted, giving a wave before he vanished.

“Run, Elder One,” the Chronicler taunted back, lifting a hand and the air in the distance flickered with blue sparks and rifts. “I do not tire. I do not die. I will crush this city and drive you away or kill you. Run back to your master, puppet. This species is mine!”

Oh fuck.

Oh no.

The air in front of her became a blue charged maelstrom that roared more powerful than a hurricane and collapsed down on the buildings below it, shredding them into small chunks of rock within seconds. The Chronicler ceased the maelstrom a few seconds later, leaving a massive section of the city reduced to rubble.

Abby instinctively ducked down as the Chronicler and what remained of his army marched forward. But they thankfully didn’t seem to care about her anymore, which was a massive relief.

There was the slight problem of being stuck here, but she needed to at least stay and watch who would win. She wasn’t getting out of here right now, and the Commander needed to know what was happening here.

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Sacramento, California – United States of America

Operation: Sherman – Day 2

11/22/2016 – 5:17 A.M.

“Here,” Nuan said and handed Iosif a bottle of water. The disheveled Templar gratefully took the water and gulped it down.

“Thanks,” he told her earnestly. “Gonna need it since Geist will want me back maintaining the barricade in…” he paused for a moment. “Probably pretty soon.”

Nuan grimaced. “That barricade isn’t necessary. He’s going to kill our psions if he makes them
maintain it another day.”

“We’ll see, we’re still alive in the same blasted spot we were in before,” Iosif shrugged, looking exhausted. “Considering how outgunned and outnumbered we are, I’d say that’s not bad.”

Nuan had to admit that the only reason they were still here and not retreating was because of the iron will of Geist who had stated in no uncertain terms that they were not going to give up any ground whatsoever. To this end he had organized the available psions and effectively taken command of the several hundred man army.

It would be unfair to say it had been a unilateral takeover, as he had gathered up the ranking Lancer, Hussar, Cuirassier, Dragoon, and Protopriests, as well as the highest-ranking officers to form a makeshift strategy team of sorts. He’d apparently had a spat with the Chief Marshal of the operation, Theresa Lambert who had apparently been shocked that they had still held their position, which was presumably much deeper than any other one.

She’d ordered them to fall back for their own safety, and Geist had flatly refused. Chief Marshal Lambert had apparently been placated when several of the Officers had offered support for Geist, and once the plan was explained, she’d tentatively allowed it to move forward. That had been the last of her protests, and Geist had begun turning their position into an unbreakable fortress.

The most important aspect of this consisted of the massive psionic barrier between them and the aliens. It had sustained a relentless pounding, but Geist had every single Defense-oriented Priest taking part in forming the barricade and sustaining it. He’d then had the Officers have their Engineers begin erecting defenses.

Since the offensive-oriented psions were not in a good position to help, he’d ordered them to assist the Engineers in constructing the barricades by using their corrosive and destructive powers to weaken concrete, metal, and stone. The telekines had also similarly assisted, moving heavy debris out of the way, or creating temporary cover themselves.

The telepaths had been ordered to mentally sustain the psions erecting the barrier. Geist himself had gone into some kind of trance to, as he had explained, ‘keep everyone awake and alert’. Since Nuan had not once felt tired during the entire night, she figured that it had worked. However, this couldn’t go on forever.

“How are you holding up?” Iosif suddenly asked her.

“Well,” she answered noncommittally. “I don’t really have to worry about physical exhaustion anymore, although maybe that’s Geist’s trick.” She didn’t really know though, as her cybernetic limbs had allowed her to handle much heavier loads than she could have previously. Which she’d done a lot of to help ADVENT set up a line.

She eyed him suspiciously. “But I should be asking you that. You look like you’re going to collapse.”

“Hey, I might,” he admitted with a weak smile, as he held his helmet under his arm. “But I’ll get a boost from one of the psions. With any luck we’ll be getting actual reinforcements, and the barricades are probably good enough to reach even Geist’s absurdly high standards.”

Nuan glanced over to where the psion, helmet still foregone, stood speaking evenly to one of the Protopriests. If there was one thing she could say about him, it was that he knew how to command large groups of people. He knew what to do and didn’t waste time debating it. “A shame you’re not a telepath, otherwise I’d say you can transfer some of my focus into you.”
He raised an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t do that. No reason to weaken you.”

“Quiet,” she scowled. “I mean it. It’s not like I’m really doing anything right now anyway. Even now that the break is over.”

Iosif put on his helmet. “Thanks, Nuan. I appreciate the offer. Really.”

“Dying to exhaustion would be an idiotic way for you to die,” Nuan said as she copied him by putting on her own helmet. “In fact, I would say that for every way you could die. Otherwise I’ll be the one writing your tombstone.”

“Oh no,” he said in mock sarcasm. “Truly a grave threat. I’ll have to do my best to stay alive then.”

Nuan lightly chucked as they walked to the line of erected barricades. “If you’re going to collapse though, just stop. If Geist says no, I’ll punch him in his robot face. He probably wouldn’t feel it anyway, since he’s essentially a robot already.”

“I’d urge you not to test your luck,” Iosif gently warned. “I don’t think he understands humor.”

With that Iosif gave a quick salute to her and jogged to where one of the Priests was to relieve him.

Nuan instead walked to where Geist was standing, overlooking the barricade, barrier, and alien fortress before them.

“How am I needed, Overseer?” She asked, making sure to be polite now.

“Right here, currently,” he said in the same monotone as usual. “I’ve deployed Scout Man and Jin and several Hussars to determine what the aliens are holding. I am awaiting their return, and when they do, we will attack again.”

Nuan glanced over to him. “I assume the plan of attack will be different?”

“To an extent,” Geist said slowly, crossing his arms. “While I could request Archangel Hammarström to raze this to the ground, she and her Host are needed elsewhere. Our options are limited, and reinforcements are still hours out. I have estimated the strength of our psions, and we would be able to hold out perhaps another day; longer if we relied on our barricades.”

Nuan was waiting for him to get to the point. “We are going to take this without firing a shot.”


She was aware it was more of a statement than a question, but she didn’t see how that could possibly work.

Geist frowned. “Perhaps I misspoke. The aliens will doubtless send machines to help. Those will need to be destroyed, but I believe I know how to deal with their organic components.” He actually had a brief moment where pride lit up his face. “I have been experimenting with the aliens, testing the limits of this Overmind. Powerful to have so long a reach, but sloppy. Ineffective to someone with creativity.”

He shook his head. “My experiment during the night was a success, and now I simply need to apply it more aggressively.”

“What experiment?” She asked.

“Sustaining my forces telepathically,” he answered. “The effort would have exhausted me. However, as the majority was drawn from the aliens, this was not a concern. I simply need to
transfer this knowledge to the telepaths and make the aliens die from exhaustion. Even the ones with machines in their brains are still dominated by their organic component. And from that power, we will make our soldiers fresh."

He glanced down at her. “Your offer to Templar Bronis was noble, but unnecessary. The aliens themselves are an untapped resource, and we will sap them of it.”

“Stop reading my mind,” Nuan growled.

“And if you attack me, I will make you remember the moment your arms were severed from your body,” he added flatly. “While I understand humor, contrary to your belief, it has no place here and I am your superior officer. I know more than you here, and it is why we have advanced while ADVENT has fallen back. Do I make myself clear?”

She gulped. “Yes, Overseer.”

“Good, then prepare to take the fortress,” he said, turning his attention back forward. “When the time comes, you will know when to move forward.”

Nuan didn’t risk saying more, even if she knew he was probably reading her mind now, so she gave a salute, and dashed away from the psion as quickly as she could. Directly to Iosif in fact. If Iosif was the friendly psion; Geist was the one who everyone was scared of.

She felt it best not to interact with him too much more after that. Because at the moment, he scared her more than any alien.

Funnily enough, she wondered if the aliens felt the same about their Ethereal masters.

That would be suitably ironic.

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Los Angeles, California – United States of America

Operation: Sherman – Day 1

11/22/2016 – 12:01 A.M.

The alien fortress was easily overtaken with the majority of defenders dead, and the cybernetic enemies were quickly overpowered by the combined forces of ADVENT and XCOM. Right now the majority were taking a rest and fortifying their position in the fortress itself. There was a wealth of stored weapons and equipment within it as well, with what appeared to be alien rations of some kind as well. No one had been brave enough to test them yet.

What was interesting were some of the corpses they had found, particularly aliens that had appeared to be Vitakarians, but they hadn’t died when the Imperator had performed his little trick. It turned out that they were machines; replicas designed to apparently look like Vitakarians with uncanny accuracy. If not for the machine fluids and metal skeleton, she never would have guessed that the corpse in front of her wasn’t organic.

“No organic parts at all?” She asked Harkin who had been performing preliminary battlefield autopsies with several ADVENT medics and engineers. “So it’s not a cyborg.”

“No,” Harkin shook his head, looking distinctly uncomfortable. “No organic components at all. Honestly, with how much empty space is in this body, I’m not even sure it’s finished.”
Patricia furrowed her eyebrows. “How?”

“Based on how it’s designed,” Matt Freeman, one of the ADVENT Engineers answered, nodding to the wreck on the table. “It’s a skeleton in a near-literal sense. There is space that would normally hold organs. But there’s nothing there. The power cells are built into the spine, and the ‘brain’ of this machine isn’t complex or large enough to handle anything more than very simple commands.”

Sussan and Creed stood beside her, helmets off and clearly thinking hard. Sussan was definitely approaching this from a data standpoint and trying to figure out how many there were, and how to pick them out. Because they posed a distinct problem to telepaths in that these wouldn’t be able to be sensed in the first place.

Ideally, it made them excellent assassins and served as an anti-psion weapon.

Creed on the other hand was focused on a much simpler question. “Why bother with this in the first place?” He wondered out loud. “I assume that this was, or will be, used to create a Human variant for infiltration purposes. But the aliens don’t need that…?” He frowned. “There isn’t much of a reason to have this in the first place aside from a somewhat more durable soldier.”

“He has a point,” Sussan finally commented, biting her lower lip. “It would be one thing if they were being used like the Seekers. Assassins against us. But they weren’t. These were fighting on the front lines.”

“Maybe to cull division in the ranks?” A medic suggested with a shrug. “Do you know if that’s a problem?”

“No, they don’t work like that,” Patricia disputed. “Division in the ranks isn’t a problem, especially for Mutons.”

“Either way, the fact that they can make something like this is concerning,” Harkin interrupted. “And it potentially means that any civilians we encounter will be…” he nodded down. “Fake. We’ll need telepaths to verify each one.”

“I’ll be ready if needed,” Sussan said.

“As will I,” Patricia confirmed. “Get some rest everyone if you can, this is not going to end anytime soon.”

She departed the room and walked out onto the upper wall of the fortress, some distance away from where ADVENT were trying to set up plasma defenses built into the alien fortress. “I’m surprised you didn’t realize the reason such units were designed,” the Imperator said, appearing beside her, this time taking on the appearance of the Commander. “In fact, you were most likely the reason for them.”

Really, Patricia wondered. So would you enlighten me to the actual reason?

“This time I can,” the Imperator said with a mocking smile. “Machines are invisible to us. They are immune to our influence. Thus, they are something that is a threat, but also a means of defense against psions. Your display in Las Vegas was so successful because there was nothing to indicate that anything was wrong. That is an advantage of such a machine, to observe, report, and watch for possible psionic influence.”

When put like that, it did make sense. Interesting.

“Fectorian will be doing what you suspect,” the Imperator continued. “He would not overlook such
an opportunity. But it will not be as obvious as planting them in controlled cities. No, it will be a gradual insertion into Human society. Into ADVENT. Replicas that replace unknown citizens and function as sleeper agents much like EXALT did. So how will this be combated?”

Patricia sighed. *That is a problem for another time. Preferably when there is no battle being fought.*

“If you insist,” he said nonchalantly. “So I would focus on ending this battle then. Did you figure out what I did?”

Patricia crossed her arms. She had quite a few theories as to how the Imperator could have bypassed the Overmind, besides cheating and telling the Overmind to leave temporarily. It had to have been far beyond a surface-mental attack like she was used too. It was likely an attack on the deep biological components of the brain, much like how a computer functioned. She was used to attacking the high-level code of the brain, whereas the Imperator had focused on the machine code of the brain itself.

Clever if true, and she hadn’t truly experimented with the possibilities there. The alternative was that he had exploited some weakness in the Overmind’s command and protection of the minds. Since this presumably spanned over multiple battlefields and countless soldiers, it meant that each soldier couldn’t have the best protection imaginable.

So it was entirely possibly to have a wall that blocked out certain attacks completely, but let others slip by. Anything malicious would be blocked, but, for example, telling them to do something which would almost certainly-but not for sure-get them killed might be able to bypass the defense due to it not being inherently malicious.

“You make no sense. Patricia still couldn’t really believe they were having this conversation right now. *What exactly are you trying to gain by telling me how to beat the Overmind? Or you for that matter? Are you trying to lose?*

“No, I’m trying to make you think,” the Imperator stated, his voice deepening sharply. “Your perception of psionics is limiting. For you, ADVENT, and nearly everyone else, it is a way to levitate objects and control minds. You do not push what is actually possible. You discover the power, and as little can contest you, you maintain the status quo.”

His voice became slower. “I will tell you something, Patricia, *that* is why we ultimately lost the war with the Synthesized. We were comfortable with our own power and saw no reason to advance. We had no drive, we had no reason to do so. We were not challenged, and as a result we were unprepared for an enemy that had done nothing but improve.”

Patricia saw several explosions and heard the resounding booms in the distance. Another attack or something else it looked like. It barely registered because she was thinking about what the Imperator was saying. That didn’t sound quite like how Aegis had described the Synthesized, which she had equated to more of a horde than something that could critically think.

“Because that was a lie,” the Imperator stated, leaning on the wall. “Not from Aegis, he would not lie about something like this, but it was a lie that was all they were. Aegis participated in the entire
war, on the front lines in many cases. He only saw a fraction of what was happening near the wars end. They stuck with overwhelming numbers for the majority of it because they realized they didn’t need to adapt.”

He raised a hand and a shimmering figure appeared in front of her. It was a strange amalgamation of flesh and metal, with odd growths and bulges protruding out of it. The left hand was some kind of metal melee weapon, and the right was a misshapen hand. “This is a simple Synthesized ‘soldier’,” the Imperator began. “What inspired the name for them. Look at it and what do you see? Sloppiness; inelegance; brutality; you see something that can die easily.”

*Right.* Patricia nodded.

“Exactly,” the image vanished and in its place appeared something completely different. It was a bipedal figure, extremely thin, and the body was covered in a sheet of some black metal. Vine-like flesh-colored tentacle-things wrapped around the legs and up across the torso. But it wasn’t a mishmash of organ and machine, it was symmetrical and clean. The fingers of the alien were similarly closer to tentacles than jointed fingers.

More tentacles fell from the supposed ‘mouth’ of the alien, and the head itself had red-orbed eyes and obvious black cybernetic implants around the skull that seemed to drill right into the brain of this creature itself. It held no weapons from what she could see, but it looked like a near-perfect fusion of machine and flesh in an aesthetically pleasing way.

On the center of its chest, she saw what appeared to be a front-facing image of a Director Flagship, encased within a triangle outlined in red. “This is what killed four Imperators,” he said. “There was only one survivor, who managed to acquire the first glimpse of the true ingenuity of these Synthesized. However, I do not think it was designed in response to *us*, but it was activated because we began adapting to their initial tactics. I never learned what it could do, but as best I can tell these were the warriors of the Director Flagships themselves.”

*Aegis didn’t mention this.* Patricia recalled.

“Because he never fought against them,” the Imperator answered simply. “They were, as I recall, only deployed against Battlemasters, Reapers, or Imperators. And of course, whatever entered a Director Flagship. Quisilia would be able to tell you more, as he was one of the few to kill one.”

*The history lesson is interesting,* Patricia admitted. *But what is the point?*

The figure vanished and a new one appeared. This was again a bipedal figure, one that was also thin, but unlike the previous one, it was covered entirely in armor. It had double-jointed legs with small rounded feet. The limbs were almost normal, culminating in three-fingered hands. The head itself was also encased in armor, with an almost ovalish shape and slightly tinted red helmet receptors. The top of the head also appeared to take into account some kind of horns or growth.

The design was definitely of the Synthesized, and it also had the same Director Flagship symbol on the arms, also within a red-outlined triangle. *Another one?* She looked up to the Imperator. *Ones Quisilia fought?*

“No,” the Imperator smiled. “This is a Synthesized that exists in this very galaxy right now. The Synthesized never left the galaxy, not really. They are simply watching and waiting. For what, I have yet to determine, but I have my suspicions.”

*Does Aegis know?* Patricia demanded; the implications of this immediately dominating her mind.
“No.”

Why the hell not?

The Imperator lost his smile. “Because Aegis is, and has always been fixated on the obvious. He does not, nor does he wish to understand the higher level that the galaxy operates on. He thinks in simple terms of ‘ally’ and ‘enemy’ but not about the why. If he learned the Synthesized were already here, he would simply demand all plans be accelerated and potentially cause a civil war because he does not understand why they are here. All he would accomplish is ensuring that we die out.”

Will you please enlighten me as to the larger picture then? Patricia demanded.

“No, not here,” the Imperator said. “But considering certain events that are happening, I suspect you will begin to realize the situation sooner than you think. But the point this leads to, Patricia, about why I am helping you, it is because it ultimately benefits us.”

Patricia waited, and he continued. “I specifically chose the Ethereals with me now because they, in some way, broke the mold of the Empire,” the Imperator continued. “They were exceptional in their adaptability, power, ingenuity, or vision. I believed that would be enough. For some, it was. For many others, they were simply content to resume the status quo. They have no challenge. You cannot command or instill drive, not when nothing can challenge you.”

The Imperator smiled once again. “So that is why I tell you how to defeat my Overmind. That is why I help you when it makes little sense to do so. My species is arrogant, it is our greatest weakness, and I have allowed them to continue as such for too long. There is little point in coddling them any longer. Change will come to the Collective, Patricia, and should you listen to what I have to say, you will be a catalyst for it.”

He motioned to the city. “Now defeat my Overmind and take this city for your species. Perhaps he will realize what is happening, perhaps not, but you have what you need to beat him. I will be watching with great curiosity.”

And he vanished once more. Patricia stood silent for a moment, then closed her eyes, and began once more touching the minds of the aliens in the city, probing and testing the limits of what the Overmind had instilled.

It was odd, to actually want to prove the Imperator right.

But considering he was advocating against his own species, she supposed that was acceptable.

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Washington D.C. – United States of America

11/21/2016 – 11:02 P.M.

The darkness made it easier to hide despite his size. The blacked out city also certainly contributed to this detail, as the Battlemaster had walked across the bridge, and as a consequence got closer to Arlington, and the edge of the city proper, he came across more civilians. Most ran at the sight of the silhouetted giant walking down the street, but he barely paid attention to them as he walked.

He had been fortunate that there was a bridge almost directly to the area close by. There had been a small team of soldiers at the entrance, but he had killed them before they could actually do anything more than shout a warning. He felt that there were more coming soon, and the next
engagement would probably be fought differently.

How different was something he didn’t know yet.

But he would be ready to meet it.

Now that he was in Arlington, he was surprised to see that there were actually people hiding out there, or at least as much as they could. But there were others that were just sitting near the various memorials or on benches, almost as though they were expecting to die there. Most of them made themselves smaller, or ran away when they caught a glimpse of him, but he didn’t really notice them.

The cemetery itself was rather peaceful, if a somewhat oppressive air hanging over it. The Battlemaster knew little about it, save that it was the gravesite of American soldiers and important public figures. He’d specifically made sure to keep the fighting out of it, since fighting on the graves of soldiers, enemies or not, was something he would never willingly do.

As it was, he did not intend to fight here, it was simply a place he doubted ADVENT would expect him to go, and it would allow him some time to regroup and potentially allow Senorium to find him. He suspected ADVENT would be hesitant to fight here as well, but if pressed even they would just for an opportunity to kill him.

But he would prefer to avoid that. The cemetery itself was relatively untouched, and it was an almost haunting experience sightseeing the rows of white crosses, tombstones, and other symbols he presumed had religious connections, which he could only assume rested on graves.

While he would normally take the most direct route, for now he was staying on the designated paths to avoid going over the graveyards themselves. If ADVENT arrived, he would take a more direct route, but for now he was content to move briskly along the paths. Up ahead he saw a fairly large structure, an amphitheater of sorts it looked like.

Out of curiosity more than anything else, he walked towards it, thinking it was likely another memorial. Given the importance that seemed to be placed of it, it was likely important. As he got closer, he also saw something that made him grip his sword tighter. It did appear that it was actually under guard.

However, these soldiers were much different than standard ADVENT soldiers. In fact, there weren’t any at all. Their uniforms were clearly more ceremonial, with badges and pins on them, white gloves and old military caps he recognized from studying pre-ADVENT human militaries. In their hands they didn’t hold gauss weapons, but older traditional rifles with bayonets.

Not a threat then, not really.

He considered killing them, but in the context of where he was, and how little threat they actually posed, there wasn’t necessarily a reason to. It was likely they were guards tasked with protecting a monument or tomb of something important. But it depended on the soldiers, if they wouldn’t attack, neither would he.

But he was at least going to see what they were guarding.

The guards raised their weapons as he approached, but seemed smart enough to realize that he wasn’t planning on attacking them, not yet. He was impressed that they barely seemed perturbed by his approach, and their faces were complete stone as they aimed their unwavering rifles at him, for all the good it would do them.
The Battlemaster was aware he posed an intimidating figure, but if that affected the guards in front of him, they did not show it. He moved around the building until he saw what was probably the object they were guarding. There were no less than a dozen guards around it, and all of them had their weapons raised.

It appeared to be a large box, made out of some kind of white stone or marble. Perhaps it represented a tomb. There was clear inscription on it as well, and it was rather ornate indicating its importance. The Battlemaster carefully walked around the soldiers in front of the perimeter, who followed his every move with their rifles.

In front of it, he finally got a good look at what was inscribed on the monument itself: “Here rests in honored glory, an American soldier, known but to God”

Ah, this was the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. He’d seen mention of it, but had not known it was treated with such reverence. The concept was one he could admire, as he was aware of the number of those who would die and never be remembered again. Against the Synthesized it had not been uncommon, and in this war…it was again the same.

Even symbolically, it was a noble gesture.

He was curious if they would change the wording now that they were a part of ADVENT.

But that was ultimately not his concern. His curiosity had been sated and after looking at it for a few moments longer, he walked away, leaving the guards alone, even if they never lowered their rifles once. Dedication to a simple tomb. Respectable, even if it was something of a waste. But perhaps it mattered to the Humans more than him.

With that done, he kept walking to the far exit that would lead to the subdivisions and housing areas of the Arlington area. Staying near the Pentagon was not a good idea, and he knew ADVENT would be hesitant to nuke him so close to the city itself.

“Battlemaster!”

He immediately froze and swung to where the voice was coming from, sword at the ready, and saw something he was not expecting. It was one of the XCOM snipers that had retreated earlier, except that she had her hands up and was weaponless from what he could tell. This couldn’t be a surrender. He was the one at a disadvantage here, not her.

So she wanted to talk? About what?

“Do not come closer, XCOM,” he warned, pointing the bloody blade in her direction. “What do you want?”

“I have orders from the Commander,” she said, a bit gruffly. “An opportunity for you to surrender to XCOM. You would be treated well and kept from ADVENT who would likely execute you.”

The Battlemaster stared in disbelief. “No.”

“Not my job to convince you,” she said, slowly and deliberately reaching down to her waist and unlatching a device. “I’m just supposed to deliver this. You made a good decision coming here. ADVENT is looking in the wrong place, so you’ll have some time to talk. In the meantime, I’m ordered to lure them elsewhere temporarily. But you’ll have to make it fast.”

She tossed the device at him and he telekinetically caught it roughly halfway between them, keeping it suspended for several seconds in case it blew up. When it didn’t, he brought it forward
until it was in one of his lower hands. The XCOM soldier was already backing up and sprinting away from him, so he turned his attention to the communicator before him.

He pressed the button and a hologram of Aegis appeared before him. “Battlemaster,” Aegis greeted. “I wish this were under better circumstances.”

“As do I, traitor,” he answered, calmer than he felt. “I suppose it should be expected that you wish me to simply give up.”

“You cannot run forever,” Aegis warned. “ADVENT is ensuring that no reinforcements can come and save you. Yes, many will die, but that is what is considered acceptable for them. More of the Priests will come, and at some point even you will become tired.”

“Then I will die,” he stated flatly. “Unlike you, I don’t avoid what threaten me. But I will not surrender. Not to XCOM, and certainly not to a traitor.”

“I am not a traitor.” Aegis said. “I am performing what has to be done, which is preserving our species.”

“By allying with our enemies?” The Battlemaster demanded.

“The Imperator is no longer concerned about the Synthesized,” Aegis said. “The purpose he recruited us for has changed. He will go to war against the galaxy to restore the Empire as it was, without realizing that is how we’ll be destroyed for good.”

“And the best way to accomplish that was by betraying us?” The Battlemaster growled. “I do not know why you think the Imperator has abandoned our mission. I have seen nothing to suggest that.”

“If that is the case,” Aegis said, pointing a finger at him. “Then why are we on opposite sides? Why was this war fought in the first place? If the Imperator really wished to prepare for the Synthesized, then why do we fight our potential allies? What is different about the Humans as opposed to the Vitakara and Andromedons?”

Early on, the Battlemaster had wondered that.

However, he potentially had an answer.

“I am not the Imperator,” he admitted. “I cannot read his mind, nor would I have made the same decision. But I believe that it was to force us to change. We have been stagnant for hundreds of years, and yet we cannot win a war against a species confined to their homeworld. War brings refinement, and the Humans were chosen to be our catalyst.”

He paused, considering. “The Collective is flawed, Aegis, I am no longer blind to that. You might have had your reasons for leaving; ones I cannot say were invalid. But you ran instead of trying to fix them.”

“How do you really think I didn’t try?”

“No,” the Battlemaster shook his head. “Not really. If you had, I would have known about it. Sana would know about it. Nebulan, Sicarius, the Guardians…You left to make a statement and it was received. But if change was what you truly wanted, then you are a coward who ran in fear of the Imperator. He is our leader, but not our master.”

Another pause. “The Humans are not as I was expecting. Perhaps they didn’t deserve it. But their
fate was decided long ago. You have stayed out of it so far, Aegis, and if you wish to survive the end of this war, you will continue to do so. I will not surrender, traitor, and if I die today, so be it. But I will not take the easy way out of this. If you truly wish for this war to end, convince the Commander to surrender. Otherwise it will not be decided until ADVENT and XCOM are destroyed.”

He shut off the communicator and tossed it away. Unsurprising in retrospect that Aegis would wish to convince him to surrender, but it was always doomed to be futile. But now he had to focus on leaving; finding Senorium, and plotting a path where he survived.

Despite Aegis’s warning, he was confident he could survive.

If he had survived the war against the Synthesized, he could survive against ADVENT.

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Sacramento, California – United States of America

Operation: Sherman – Day 2

11/22/2016 – 8:16 A.M.

“Prepare to lower the barrier!” Geist commanded, as the respective soldiers readied themselves for the fight to truly begin. Oliver and David similarly readied their weapons. According to Geist, the main barrier would dissipate and the Priests would erect defensive cover similar to their initial push. They would assist and protect ADVENT Engineers as they constructed permanent defenses, and presumably continue forward until they reached the fortress.

Geist had also said that he would be applying ‘his own abilities’ to the push, although what those were he hadn’t specified. It was primarily telepathic, likely. Oliver wasn’t entirely sure now what the aliens were doing in the fortress, as they had stopped firing some time ago, and he had noticed the subtle changes to the guard.

“What do you think they have?” David asked as the Priests began shimmering in purple energy. “They have to know what they’re facing now.”

“Don’t know,” Oliver shrugged. “But it isn’t anything good. They’ve been replacing everything with those cybernetic Mutons.”

“Begin!” Geist ordered, and the purple barriers flickered and dissipated, as an unbroken line of cover appeared a short distance ahead, and that was their cue to begin. The aliens in the fortress began raining plasma down on them, most of which missed the initial push, but a few ADVENT soldiers succumbed to the rain of plasma.

However, most of the initial charge was successful in making it to the psionic barricade. Oliver slid into position, and noted that Iosif and Nuan had also made it successfully. Darego had also made it to his left, and all of them were returning fire at the alien fortress. Cracks from the gauss sniper rifles of the Winged Hussars in the back rang out and already there were a few aliens that stumbled back.

“Scoot over some!” One of the Engineers beside him demanded, laying a small rectangular bar on the ground which he knew was the first step in establishing permanent cover. A sheet of metal was pulled up, locked in place, and another Engineer beside her began passing metal pieces which she began welding in place.
Oliver looked back to see Geist still standing back at the initial line, one right hand extended to the fortress ahead and the opposite held behind his back; a posture of a man who had no fear of death whatsoever. Psionic energy shimmered around him, although it was less pronounced than in the Priests holding up the barricade.

“We’ve got hostiles on the ground!” One Officer shouted, and from the fortress Berserkers stormed out. These weren’t standard Berserkers, but something that had been similarly enhanced like the Mutons. These Berserkers were clad in black armor, were somehow bigger than regular ones, and twin alloy blades protruded from each of their hands that looked at minimum half the size of himself.

Behind them came out the largest Mutons that Oliver had ever seen. These stood far taller than the Elites, and were constructed out of the same black armor as the rest of these enhanced Mutons. But as they lumbered forward, Oliver saw the extensive array of rocket launchers on the wrists and shoulders, and the visibly thick armor.

The enhanced Berserkers were charging forward, and the other Mutons were moving forward as well. “Dragoons, target oncoming Berserkers,” Geist ordered calmly. “Hussars, target explosive dispensers on the armored Mutons. Priest Telekines and Offensive forces, lift and destroy oncoming Berserkers. Once Berserker threat is removed, Telekines prepare missile defense techniques. Goliath Beauvau, target the armored Mutons.”

It sounded good. The problem was that there were at least more than a dozen Berserkers charging forward, and at least a dozen of those armored Mutons. This wasn’t counting the fact that they were still under fire from the fortress itself and the forces within. The Goliath behind him fired its weapon, the crack of the massive railgun drowning out every other sound around it.

One of the armored Mutons stumbled back, but amazingly it appeared largely intact, only sporting a hole in the armor. It raised its weapons to the MEC and fired in retaliation. It was joined by several more of the Mutons. The Berserkers were also close to the line, surprisingly not making any noise except for the thumping when they ran.

Oliver fired at it, but all it seemed to do was irritate it slightly. They simply didn’t have enough firepower to take them out fast enough, and the front had obviously been designed for frontal charges. The Berserker charging them was suddenly lifted into the air by one of the Priests beside him, one hand extended.

“Shoot it now!” He yelled. Other Berserkers were suddenly lifted up, but not all of them. The Offensive-affinity Priests then unleashed their own powers. Streams of psionic energy flared and small maelstroms and purple flares erupted on the battlefield. Another Priest behind him screamed as she fired a stream of psionic energy at the raised Berserker, corroding and destroying its armor.

Everything suddenly seemed to become much…calmer. The sounds of the battlefield became less distracting, allowing him to concentrate more easily. He no longer really felt tired or weary, as he’d become over the past several hours once the telepathic sustenance had ended. But that appeared to be back now, and it seemed a simple matter to aim his rifle up to an obvious gap in the head and fire.

The gauss slugs splintered the corroded material and lodged deep into the brain of the alien. More psionic energy followed the slugs, destroying anything in its path. The corpse was slammed to the ground and it didn’t rise again. Across the line, more Berserkers were meeting the same fate. Several had broken the line, however, and were wreaking havoc on the ADVENT positions.

The enraged aliens stabbed, grabbed, and threw soldiers around them, immune to pain and tickled
by weapons. Iosif was currently trying to kite one of the Berserkers, slamming his mace down on
the armored hands of the aliens, while Nuan tossed several grenades at the feet of the alien, which
exploded in black goop.

Symbiote Grenades. Smart. The alien swung at her and instead of jumping out of the way, she used
her prosthetic to block the strike, and then grabbed the blade itself while she threw
another Symbiote Grenade at the face of the Berserker which exploded as it exploded in its face. Iosif
meanwhile was working on smashing the joints of the alien, bringing it to the ground and Nuan
finally let go and jumped back. Her entire right arm was sliced and damaged, but did seem to still
be functional.

He didn’t want to know what that would have looked like if she hadn’t had prosthetics.

Iosif was joined by several Executors who first slammed their weapons on the joints of the
Berserker, which took far longer than normal since the combination of metal and flesh was more
interconnected that even he’d anticipated. It took a few times smashing the head, but eventually the
alien was still.

On the battlefield itself, the Goliath was easily holding its own against the armored Mutons. Oliver
hadn’t known that the Goliath had a point-laser defense system, but it did and had effectively taken
out at least half of the missiles shot at it, and even though the others hit, it was designed to be a
tank and take extensive damage.

Four of the armored Mutons were destroyed now, and then, unexpectedly, all of the aliens
suddenly fell down. Oliver cocked his head as the fire abruptly ceased from the alien side. “The
hell?” David commented to no one in particular.

Oliver glanced behind him to see Geist walking forward towards them, the distorted psionic
energy surrounding him. “I’m going to guess this is because of Geist.”

“Wasn’t he being blocked by one of the Ethereals?”

Oliver shrugged. “Maybe he beat him?”

“Exploited, would be a more accurate word, Infantry Ilari,” Geist stated as he walked up. “A
theory, but one which has held up in practice. The enemy soldiers are not dead, I am preventing
that from happening. They have simply collapsed from exhaustion as I have pushed their minds to
that point. Their lower mental functions will keep them alive, but they will not pose a threat to us.”

He glanced over to them. “Well done, both of you. The line recovered quickly despite those
Berserkers breaching it. However, such was inevitable with our limited numbers.”

“So what’s the plan now?” Iosif asked, walking up with Nuan.

“We secure the fortress and prepare the alien captives for extradition to secure ADVENT facilities,
as well as taking some of the more interesting specimens for ourselves,” Geist explained,
motioning forward to the Officers who were advancing across the now-safe concrete field. “Killing
them, while satisfying, will not allow us to gain as much information as the alternative.”

“They’re not all dead!” Someone shouted, and all of them raised their weapons to see two black
figures walking out of the fortress. They appeared humanoid, and in some kind of armor with green
lights on their face.

Which then turned to red.
“Don’t open fire!” Geist called, raising a hand.

“Why not?” Nuan demanded.

Geist’s lips twitched. “I want to see how it works. Apparently DC has come under attack by these. I want to know if the reports are true.”

“Having also caught up on that,” Iosif interjected. “I don’t think I want to see how it works.”

Geist turned to one of the Priest behind him. “Protopriest Darrah?”

“Yes sir?” The Priest answered.

“Bring the defensive and offensive specialized Priests forward,” he said as the machines in the distance began moving on the fallen aliens, and seemingly shooting black dust into them. “If I understand how these machines work correctly, this should render them ineffective.”

“What are they?” Oliver asked as he saw the humanoids advancing forward, and now were apparently joined by the black ghosts of some of the armored Mutons.

“They are called Spectres,” Geist said, motioning the Priests to move forward, and began moving himself. “A nanoweapon that can be impossible to stop if handled incorrectly.”

“And you wanted to see how it works?” David demanded. “It seems pretty damn apparent!”

Geist furrowed his eyebrows. “Calm, Gunner Cannon, I know what I am doing.”

The Spectres were halfway across when one of them was suddenly encased in a psionic box. Two more found themselves in similar situations, and the Priests soon figured out what Geist was doing, and followed suit and before the now-four Spectres realized it, they were trapped in psionic cages.

They clearly didn’t know how to handle them, as one placed a hand on it, and the entire being rippled, as the nanites tried to eat through the psionic shield. It was unsuccessful, obviously, and several of the others dissipated into black dust and tried flying against the shield to brute-force a way out.

“Psions, burn the area inside the shields,” Geist commanded. “Be thorough.”

The psionic shields were suddenly alight with energy as the Priests created entire maelstroms in the prisons. Normally these would spread out, but contained within a psionic shield they essentially annihilated anything inside. At the same time, it extracted a toll from the psions maintaining the shields, but they held on.

A few seconds later the psionic storms ended, and there was nothing in the shields. “Maintain,” Geist commanded. “We cannot take chances with this kind of weapon.”

One of the Protopriests shouted a command Oliver didn’t hear, and the cages were again alight with a psionic storm. Maybe overkill in the literal sense, but with nanoweapons, Oliver didn’t think that kind of precaution was especially unreasonable. But once that finished, Geist and the Priests lowered the shields and nothing perceptible happened.

The effect on the Priests however, had been extensive. Most of them collapsed to the ground as the shield collapsed, and the offensive-talented Priests no longer had any armor on their arms, which were covered in blood and scars. Medics were rushing forward, and the rest of the army advanced as well.
“Good job,” Oliver told the psion who for once, looked actually pleased and not completely emotionless. He might not really like the guy on a personal level, but he had to admit he wasn’t sure even Patricia would have been as successful.

“Appreciated,” Geist acknowledged. “Now come with me and help find a more…organic alien. Once the captives are secure, I will need to attempt to interrogate it.”

“Won’t that be a problem?” David asked.

“I don’t need for it to be awake to extract what I need,” Geist explained as they walked forward. “If I understand the methods this Ethereal uses, it requires the alien to be cognizant. If it is not, it does not receive protection. However, it is difficult to locate unconscious minds and thus I need one in front of me.”

“Will do,” Oliver nodded as ADVENT took the alien fortress for themselves.

He wasn’t sure how the rest of the battle was going, but he was feeling a hell of a lot more optimistic now.

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Fairbanks, Alaska. – United States of America

11/22/2016 – 9:33 A.M.

Roman had never gone through a Gateway before, and now that he had...he found it slightly antici-

climactic. Once you got past the purple lights and strange psionic-like visuals, it was relatively uneventful. However, stepping out into a completely different area was a realization that left goosebumps on him. The difference between Redding, California, and Fairbanks, Alaska, was night and day.

After Redding had been taken, he and several other squads had been redirected to assist in the defenses on other cities that had come under attack. There sadly hadn’t been time to enjoy their victory, but the day had been good and they’d been able to get some brief rest.

Now they were marching down the street with the Chief Marshal beside him, Halli Cursan who sounded understandably tense. “The situation isn’t as good as where you likely came from,” she warned as gunfire in the distance reached his ears. “We don’t have trenches complete, nor do we have many Flak Towers. We have limited air support and a similar number of Priests and Special forces.”

That indeed did not sound good. “Enemy composition?”

“That’s the good news,” Halli nodded. “Seem to largely be Borelians and Mutons. We’re holding the perimeter for now, and they are being sent in numbers we can handle. Losses are fairly equal for both sides from what we’ve recorded.”

Roman looked around the area, noting that it was much less developed compared to other cities, with no building reaching higher than four stories that he could see. It was all downtown buildings and houses. Up ahead he saw two Flak Towers beside the main road, which dwarfed everything beside them.

In the distance he saw plasma fire heading towards the ADVENT line, from aliens that were taking cover behind trees, cars, and cover they had established themselves. It was definitely primarily Borelians, and they did seem to be employing some tactics in their attack. “Where are the other
attacks coming from?” Galina asked.

“The Airfield is one,” Halli said grimly. “The college has also come under attack, as has the airport. They are attacking us from all sides, and we can’t be everywhere.”

“We’ll assist here then,” Roman assured her, motioning his team to join the fight. “Request us if you need help elsewhere.”

“Good luck,” she said, and briskly turned to speak with one of the Cuirassiers that had walked up behind them.

 “[I’ll be activating my field,]” Roman told them as he got a good look at the ADVENT line so far. Just in front of it were the half-dug trenches, but the line itself looked solid. Black alloy barricades and rows of ADVENT soldiers, with a few Priests that were providing various psionic support, although it only appeared to be defense and telekinesis.

“[Copy,]” Elena confirmed as their weapons were raised. Roman activated his field and once the line was reached the plasma bolts fired from the Borelian forces were deflected to the sides. That gave the aliens clear pause, enough for Maksim to snipe one from the back as he moved to enter the leftmost Flak Tower.

Galina immediately began laying down fire, rallying the other ADVENT gunners to begin concentrating their fire at the main alien barricades. The Borelians were dressed slightly different than the standard Vitakarian soldiers he’d been fighting, these seemed more armored and designed for colder weather than others.

He clipped one in the shoulder and it fell back into cover, though Konstantin and Stanislav were more successful, the former catching one trying to move to closer cover and was immediately ripped apart by the autorifle. Stanislav also wounded another Borelian. “Field ending!” Roman warned. “It’s going to get hot again!”

Sure enough, the moment he shut off the field green plasma shot towards them, managing to hit some ADVENT soldiers who fell to the ground. The ones still alive were immediately tended to by Medics and protected by the Defensive Priest. The other Priest moved to the front line beside him. “Provide covering fire!” She yelled, beginning to become distorted with psionic energy.

Roman nodded and complied. Galina and Konstantin laid down suppressive fire on the alien forces, forcing them temporarily back into cover. However, that only proved to be their deaths as the Priest raised her hand, and the half-dozen Borelians closest to the ADVENT lines were lifted up into the air, and…compressed.

Roman glanced to the woman to see her using her other hand to clap together with the first one, in a crushing motion. The results were…unpleasant. From there they could hear the aliens screaming in pain as their limbs were twisted and bones splinted as they were quite literally ripped apart and forced into the psionic equivalent of a hydraulic press.

Yellow blood dripped from their corpses and destroyed bodies and they dropped to the ground. The Priest fell back down into cover, breathing heavily. “Nice work,” Anton complimented. “That should give them something to think about.”

Roman agreed, and it looked like the aliens had gotten the message as they didn’t seem eager to take control of the forward point again. More snipers confirmed kills, even as more aliens began arriving. “Andromedons,” Maksim reported from the Flak Tower. “And…some kind of armored figure.” A stunned pause. “Roman…I think the Battlemaster is here.”
He, and every other soldier nearby briefly froze at that. Roman felt his blood freeze and exchanged a quick look with Elena who was similarly paralyzed for a second. “Repeat that!” Halli demanded. “Did you say the Battlemaster was here? That can’t be, he’s still in D.C.”

“Well, if it’s not the Battlemaster, it looks pretty damn close,” Maksim insisted. “Getting a closer look now…uh…actually, I don’t think this is The Battlemaster. I think it’s another one.”

“Another one?” Konstantin growled. “They have another one?”

“It has some other aliens with it,” Maksim updated. “Some kind of Vitakarian it looks like. Snipers. The other Battlemaster is coming up now.”

“Hey!” One soldier called out. “They’ve stopped firing!”

Roman suddenly noticed that the battlefield had gone quiet. In the distance he saw the first glimpse of the oncoming Ethereal. He couldn’t fault Maksim mistaking the alien for the Battlemaster, as the Ethereal was as large as the Battlemaster himself. But there was something clearly different about this one; first was that this one wore some kind of hood and a cape, both of which were deep purple.

The next was that the helmet, as much as some of it was hidden under the hood, was different from the Battlemaster’s, not as ornate and looked like it just covered the entire face with little decoration. The armor also looked slightly shinier and more durable. But what was interesting was that this Ethereal didn’t have a weapon in its hands.

“Should we open fire?” Elena asked.

“It looks like it wants to talk,” Halli said slowly. “Let it come to the front alien line. No further. And be ready to retreat. We can’t defeat a Battlemaster.”

“Copy that,” Roman muttered as the alien got closer. The alien was massive, and even from a distance he knew it towered over all of them.

“ADVENT!” The Ethereal called out, with a distinctive female voice, despite the layering indicative of Ethereals. “By order of the Battlemaster of the Ethereal Collective, I have been allowed the freedom to allow your surrender. I will only make this offer once. Refuse, and your soldiers will die and citizens be taken captive.”

“This is Chief Marshal Halli of ADVENT,” she responded. “Considering what we know happens to captives, your offer is rather hollow. Who are you?”

“I am simply giving an offer,” the Ethereal said, taking an aggressive stance, one foot in front of the other. “How you answer is your decision.”

“We refuse.”

“Understood,” the Ethereal answered, and something flew to her upper hand. A cylinder of some kind flew into it. “If you must know who you will die to, it is the Second Guardian of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective, and in his name, you are marked for death. Fight well, Humans.” An orange-yellow beam sprang from the cylinder and extended to a length Roman suspected was as large as him.

“Fire!” Roman yelled, and gauss slugs and lasers from the MDUs flew towards the Ethereal Guardian who flourished her strange energy blade and thrust out a hand, stopping the projectiles in the air and at the same time jumped forward, pulling forward with the two lower hands and several
ADVENT soldiers were lifted and went flying towards her.

The hand holding the energy blade slashed twice, and the ADVENT soldiers fell to the ground in pieces. The Ethereal thrust out with a hand and the ADVENT soldiers in front of her went flying backwards and she leapt forward and stabbed into one of the MDUs, then slashed up, and pushed the machine back with a telekinetic push.

The blade apparently could cut through anything, and now that the Ethereal was at the line, the soldiers were retreated. “Fall back!” Roman called to his team as the Ethereal cut through two more soldiers easily.

“Stay!” The Ethereal called out, and all the soldiers around her froze, including Roman, who while he could aim and think freely, couldn’t move. The rest of his team was frozen as well, and Roman watched in horror as the Ethereal decapitated Galina and followed up by stabbing Stanislav through the heart.

Elena shouted something Roman didn’t quite hear, but the Ethereal briefly stumbled as something hit it in the head. The sniper fire only seemed to barely distract her as she continued cutting through the soldiers with bloody and brutal ease. Upon closer inspection, Roman saw that it couldn’t have been an energy blade the Ethereal wielded in her hand.

The bodies, while clearly cut, weren’t cauterized and bled profusely. Now Roman could also hear a strange electronic buzz from the weapon, one which rose and fell in intensity whenever the Ethereal swung it. One arm reached towards him, and mimed a pull and Roman found his, Elena’s, and Konstantin’s weapons pulled out of their hands.

The Ethereal sliced her blade through the air and executed several more soldiers caught by her mental trap, and followed up with a stab towards another MDU, and Roman saw the beam of the weapon narrow and lengthen as it moved, until it was long enough to reach the MDU and stab it in the center. The blade retracted until it was the original length a second later, and the Guardian’s lower hands reached towards them and mimed lifting them up.

Roman barely had time to scream as he saw Elena crushed in a telekinetic grip and Konstantin’s neck snap before the Guardian lunged forward with her blade towards his neck. The last thing he felt was a searing warmth with his last thought hoping that Maksim would get out in time.

Then there was nothing.

Only black.

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Washington D.C. – United States of America

11/22/2016 – 2:01 A.M.

The Battlemaster heard the discharging of gauss weapons in the distance, and saw ADVENT soldiers rushing towards them as well, a surprise considering he was supposedly the primary target. But for now they were distanced with something else. The Battlemaster broke into a run towards the commotion, opening with a psionic dash that pulverized an ADVENT soldier and decapitated another.

They were in the Arlington subdivision, where apartments and housing complexes dominated the landscape. From what the Battlemaster could tell, they were seemingly empty but he figured there were at least some civilians staying in them. The area he was in now had clearly seen recent
combat, as many of the houses had bullet holes, scorching, or had entire chunks blown out of it.

Once the Battlemaster turned the street, he saw a fairly welcome sight: Senorium.

The Warlock had clearly been in a fight, if not for his life, something that was pretty close. ADVENT soldiers were strewn around the area, most of which had sustained heavy damage indicative of psionics. Senorium’s armor was bloody, marred, and missing entire pieces. His helmet had been discarded or too damaged to provide any use, and as a result the Battlemaster could clearly see the rage that enveloped the alien’s face.

ADVENT had the Warlock surrounded, and were keeping their distance while firing gauss weapons. Blood spurted from his wounds, but the Creator had somehow enabled them to survive seemingly fatal injuries. The Warlock roared and extended his hands to one of the groups, shooting gouts of corrosive energy towards a group, while gesturing to another squad who stopped firing and dropped their weapons before collapsing to the ground in apparent pain.

However, the purple flare, size, and the Warlock’s more sluggish reactions indicated that his consistent usage of psionic was taking its toll. Much like a Battlemaster, the Chosen could not avoid becoming tired. He suspected that the alien could hold out for a while longer, but the issue was that Senorium didn’t seem to know how to pace himself, and if he wasn’t careful, he might quite literally burn out and allow ADVENT a perfect opportunity to kill him while he was paralyzed on the ground.

Something to watch for.

But there were more coming. Priests were in the mix as well, telekines and defensive psions it appeared, who were likely responsible for anchoring him to the ground, leaving him an easy target. Time to change that.

The Battlemaster thrust out an arm and the soldiers in front of him were thrown back several feet, while the ones closest to Senorium simply stumbled. With another clenched fist he collapsed their helmets into their heads, mixing brains with bone and metal. He killed one of the Priests with a simple decapitating strike, and the other he simply pulled into his hand and slammed the body onto the concrete where he followed up by smashing the face with his armored boot.

The Warlock gave a bloody grin as he saw the Battlemaster fighting towards him, and redoubled his attacks on the ADVENT soldiers, who began backing off once they saw the Battlemaster in the distance. A psionic maelstrom appeared on one of the ADVENT-controlled streets, cutting through the ADVENT soldiers and destroying the nearby houses many of the soldiers were using for cover.

“Battlemaster!” Senorium roared as the armored Ethereal joined him, flourishing his blade as he saw the ADVENT forces frantically communicating with each other in confusion and terror. “I’m pleased to see you survived.”

“I assume you have been kept busy,” the Battlemaster answered, declining to return the pleasure. “You’ve held out long.”

Senorium’s mouth formed into a sneer. “The Humans have attempted to kill me, all have failed. As one Chosen by the Creator herself, I cannot die to mere flying chunks of metal. I have held this position to give you a chance to find me, as I am certain you came to ensure my survival.”

The Battlemaster gestured to twin MDUs that were marching up, weapons raised and lifted them into the air before crushing them into steel balls. “We have a better chance of escape together.”
“That we do, Battlemaster,” the Warlock grinned, empowered further by the aura the Battlemaster commanded. More corrosive energy spat from him arms, hitting one of the ADVENT Gunners. “I am certain our extraction is coming. ADVENT knows we are here, and they will attempt to kill both of us. But we cannot be killed!”

Even in the middle of battle, he was tempted to let out a sigh at the idiotic fanaticism of the Warlock. Only idiots believed they couldn’t be killed. The chances of them dying were low, true, but those went up if they decided to stay in the exact same place. “No,” the Battlemaster interjected, walking forward. “We keep moving. Staying in one place is a trap. We cut a path through ADVENT. Follow my lead or you will die, no matter what you believe.”

He brandished his blade and began moving towards the street ADVENT was concentrated on. Senorium seemed briefly taken aback, but hastily dashed to his side. “Of course, Battlemaster, an Elder’s wisdom is far greater than my own.”

The Battlemaster didn’t bother to respond, and instead charged the ADVENT line and commenced the battle anew.

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*Sydney Outskirts – Australia*

11/21/2016 – 4:28 P.M.

It turned out that a fight between an Ethereal, and a being possessed by some kind of entity was a highly destructive fight.

Aliens weren’t even attempting to slow down the Chronicler anymore, they were fleeing either out of fear or Quisilia’s orders, both of which made perfect sense. Anything that stayed even close to the Chronicler was atomized and leveled. One thrust out hand sent out a shockwave that splintered concrete buildings and turned anything inside into blood and gore.

Abby herself was staying far away, observing through her armor which she felt trapped in at this point. Harper and the others were similarly pursuing the aliens, and even they seemed charged under some unnatural force. They gestured and aliens just melted into goop, surrounded first by black ripples and tears.

Particle beams still fired from their hands, but they ultimately served as the background to the Chronicler’s path of destruction. Abby was no longer a participant in this fight, but an observer who simply hoped she’d survive with her mind and body intact.

Both of which had yet to be determined.

Quisilia had reappeared several times, largely by illusions she’d believed, not really taunting so much as commenting on what was happening. No one had been in the mood to listen and after the Chronicler had leveled an entire subdivision in the event he was hiding there, he’d not appeared since. The Chronicler clearly intended to make good on his promise to level the city, or at least the entity within him did.

And now Quisilia appeared on the street before him, surrounded by rubble where buildings had stood as the Chronicler had leveled them once he realized aliens had been inside. “Is this all you can do?” Quisilia asked, a blade twirling in his hand. “Destroy? Kill? I had honestly expected something with a bit more thought. You really think that you can kill someone by just blowing up buildings?” He wagged a finger at the Chronicler, and two more Quisilias appeared beside him.
“No, that just doesn’t work.”

The Chronicler appraised him for a moment. “No, Elder One. But it does put you at ease, and then you become vulnerable.” He suddenly reached behind him without looking and Quisilia, presumably the real Quisilia, became visible and encased in blue energy, hovering behind the Chronicler, hand raised in a fist. “I have seen more than you can possibly imagine, Elder One. I am no spymaster, but I understand the nuances of power; of visible and invisible influence.”

“No well enough, it seems,” Quisilia said, and that was when Abby noticed that Quisilia was holding something in his hand that exploded into a black mist that began flying towards the Chronicler. She also saw that similar mists had also appeared around Harper and his soldiers who were desperately backing off and trying to get the nanites off of them.

“Insolent!” The Chronicler roared as he flared with bright blue energy, and turned his attention to his soldiers. It was enough for the bonds to weaken and Quisilia vanished, only to appear behind one of Harper’s soldiers and stab up through the chin, presumably killing her. He vanished again just as quickly, then reappeared behind another of Harper’s soldiers and pushed him forward into a shimmering portal that had just been created.

Just as quickly, he attempted to vanish except that the air around him became charged with something that even Abby could feel it. Quisilia glanced upwards, and realized that the Chronicler was blocking his teleporting again. Abby looked back to the Chronicler, who had one hand raised towards the air, and another towards Harper’s soldiers. Blue fire flared and killed the nanites, while Quisilia slowly backed up.

“You fight well, Elder One,” the Chronicler complimented, almost grudgingly. “But you are no warrior. You cannot fight me and win. You cannot kill me. You can only try and slow me down.”

“I want you to think for a moment,” Quisilia said, in the same light tone, although Abby could definitely tell he was faking it. “You kill me here. Or capture me. What exactly do you think happens next?”

“Whoever your master is, they will receive the message to leave this world,” the Chronicler stated, slowly walking forward. “You mean nothing in this War, Elder One. You do not belong in this galaxy any longer. Your time is past, and the time for the new species to rise has come. Your interference is at an end.”

“I believe I disagree,” Quisilia disputed. “Just because we didn’t die when we were supposed to, doesn’t mean there isn’t a place for us.” He raised a black blade towards the Chronicler. “And all you’ve said simply reaffirms what the Imperator has learned. Even if you kill me, you will make a powerful enemy.”

The Chronicler laughed.

He gestured with one hand and Quisilia went flying, slamming into a building all the way at the end of the street. He teleported directly in front of the Ethereal pinned to the wall, who had hit it with enough force to crack it. Abby had to sprint forward to even catch what they were saying.

“You have no idea of what you speak,” the Chronicler said quietly, mockingly. “Your kind are the same as all Elder species. Believing they are superior simply because they live. Because they survive. And think they will be the ones to end the War. Freed from ‘tyranny’; from ‘control’. No... you do not care about that. You simply want to rule this galaxy undisputed.”

He chuckled. “Not that I can blame you. But your delusion will die. Starting with-“
The world suddenly became brighter than the sun and it felt like an earthquake struck the ground around her. Abby was thrown to the ground and glanced to the sky to see a sight she had not thought to see in person.

The mushroom cloud of a nuclear blast.

The other soldiers had fallen to the ground as well, and even the Chronicler found his monologue cut short as he stumbled and glanced up at the sky. “What?” Quisilia suddenly vanished as the Chronicler’s concentration, and likely vision, was broken since he wore no helmet and his senses were overwhelmed.

Quisilia then reappeared behind the Chronicler and pushed him forward into another shimmering portal and this time, the Chronicler didn’t immediately come out. He subsequently appeared behind Harper and each of his remaining soldiers and tossed them all into created portals to locations Abby didn’t have any idea of.

Then everything went quiet.

That was honestly not how she expected things to go.

“Towards the end, I did suspect the same,” Quisilia commented, appearing behind her, sheathing his blade on a slot on his chest. “Ironic. Saved by ADVENT in a likely attempt to cripple us.”

Abby had her weapon raised, but if Quisilia could beat the Chronicler of all people…granted, this had been more luck than skill, she really didn’t have much of a chance. Not how she had expected, or really wanted to go out. Still, at least it required an Ethereal to kill her, not some stray plasma bolt.

“Please,” Quisilia seemed to snort. “I can think of at least five times where I could have killed you. I wasn’t keeping you alive to taunt you at the end right before I kill you like some sadist. No,” he sniffed. “That’s too boring and predictable. There was a very specific reason I’ve left you alive.”

Abby chuckled mirthlessly. “You’re going to let me live. Really.” It wasn’t a question, more a statement of disbelief.

“Oh, it’s not because you’re not my enemy,” Quisilia quickly corrected. “However, I gain more from letting you live than die. I suspect you will soon anyway, so it will all work out in the end. But I am curious, what did you make of this Chronicler’s little benefactor?” He nodded towards her. “Who I suspect provided you with what you wear now.”

Abby thought for a minute. “Why does every alien species have some interest in controlling us?”

“Ah, I can answer that,” Quisilia said lightly. “You are independent. That is rarer than you might expect, but nonetheless something that others simply cannot allow. Independence in this galaxy is a rare and exceptional treasure. All species eventually succumb to one master or another.”

Abby smirked under her helmet. “We seem to be doing alright. And I assume you are the special ones who are free?”

“Mmm, a complicated question,” Quisilia said, looking up as a kind of drone floated down. “I’m fortunate I had the foresight to make this thing impossible to shut down.” The machine ejected something, and Quisilia tossed it to her, which she caught. A thumb drive.

“I suspect the Commander will be interested in this,” Quisilia said. “And make sure Aegis sees that as well. Perhaps it will enlighten him to what the Imperator’s concerns are. He is under the
impression that our supposed allies are…benevolent…which I’m sure even you can call into question.”

Abby narrowed her eyes. There had to be another angle to this; Quisilia was letting her go with this information for a reason, and she doubted it had anything to do with what had happened. Either it was to cause division, or more likely, create a distraction.

“None of those, but I don’t particularly care,” Quisilia reached into a pocket on his suit and pulled out a phone. “Cheap piece of junk. Of course it wouldn’t work here. Shame.” He looked up at her. “Ah, right, you’re stuck here. I supposed I’ll have to change that.”

“Wait!” Abby said. “Where did you actually send the Chronicler?”

“An unspecified point in space,” Quisilia said absentmindedly, as he tapped his phone again. “The same with his other minions. I have no idea where they are, and I’m fairly certainly I didn’t kill them. But he’ll be forced to spend time coming back to Earth, and for now he’s out of the picture. I suspect he’ll be back, and then I’ll be…well…more prepared than I was.”

He casually tossed the phone away and gestured at her. “In the meantime, I can’t teleport you back to your base, since your memories are too imprecise, but I do have a location where you can probably help out your human allies. Until next time, Agent.”

She wanted to say something else, but the air shimmered around her and she was suddenly in the middle of…some kind of military base? An ADVENT one judging by the soldiers running around. Some of them stumbled back as they saw her, and she couldn’t blame them. Gunfire and artillery shelling was in the distance, and she turned towards it.

“Hey!” A man, an ADVENT Officer called to her. “Who are you?”

“Abigail Gertrude,” she answered, thinking it was a good idea to take off her helmet. “XCOM Intelligence.”

He cocked his head. “We didn’t know we were getting XCOM support. They’re all busy in America. We won’t turn it down though, I’ll take you to the front lines.”

“Wait,” Abby interrupted. “I need to contact my superiors. You have a communication station?”

“Why?” He demanded. “We honestly need you now. We’re putting together a strike team to deal with a particularly nasty sniper. We could use you.”

Oh boy, how could she begin to explain this? “Classified,” she relented. “Look, I’ll help you but this takes priority. Let me speak to them, and I’ll join your strike team.”

She could hear the exasperation in his voice. “Fine,” he said. “But make it quick. I’ll take you to it right now.”

Abby considered asking where she actually was, but that would raise more questions than answers. She’d have to figure it out on her own.

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Washington D.C. – United States of America

11/22/2016 – 2:48 A.M.
They were becoming more and more outnumbered, and ADVENT had begun finally using their soldiers far more effectively than they had before. They had quite rightly observed Senorium to be the weaker of the two, and as a result he was under constant assault by sniper fire. Golden ichor spewed out of his throat, face, and now eye even as his regenerative body began healing.

The Battlemaster couldn’t stay beside him either, as he was ensuring the front line of ADVENT died to his slices and telekinetic grabs. But on a narrow street, he was limited in what he could do. ADVENT was behind him as well now, the front line being Gunners who sent torrents of gauss projectiles towards Senorium, seemingly calculating that there was a better chance of them hitting the aliens than one of their own.

One punch pulverized an ADVENT Officer, and he slammed the blade of his sword down on another two, severing their shoulders and driving them to the ground. The Battlemaster suddenly found himself being lifted up by two Priests from the rooftops of a house, accompanied by other Priests who extended their arms and shot corrosive psionic torrents at him.

They were getting better.

Not good enough, sadly. His armor could withstand additional punishment yet, and he gripped the offensive psions in a choking grip, before sending them flying back. The other two he simply snapped their limbs and the moment that happened he dropped back down to the ground, readying his lower hand to slam a shockwave to destabilize the soldiers around him.

He risked a quick look behind him to see Senorium getting bombarded not just with bullets, but now rockets from one of the new rocket ADVENT soldiers. They were identified as Dragoons from the initial reports, and Senorium took one rocket directly to the chest, then another, and a third one blew it apart, forcing him to the ground, yellow coating the Chosen.

The Warlock roared and attempted to stand, one arm extended to the soldiers he was facing. The front line immediately started running away, but his telepathic command did not extend to the back row. Sniper fire continued ripping into the wounded alien. The other eye was shot out. The Battlemaster thought he saw a finger become shortened.

A dilemma. He didn’t particularly care about the survival of Senorium, but at the same time, if he was killed he was now in a much more difficult position. An executive decision needed to be made, at least until he could regenerate enough to become useful. His initial plan of ‘fight through ADVENT’ was becoming more and more difficult as he knew that no matter where they went, ADVENT would be waiting.

The Battlemaster sent a telekinetic wave towards the ADVENT soldiers he’d been fighting, then psionically dashed to where the Warlock was struggling to rise. The Battlemaster jammed his sword into a corpse, and leapt briefly up into the air to perform a repulsion attack, a weaker variant, but one that was useful when completely surrounded.

He hovered briefly in the air, crossing his arms as he gathered his power, then thrust them out in an expulsive wave that leveled the nearby houses and left a large crack on the ground beneath him. As the energy was directed primarily to the sides, Senorium managed to not be as seriously affected, but it knocked the wind out of his destroyed chest.

The Battlemaster dropped to the ground, and readied his sword once again. Two hands raised, he erected two telekinetic barriers. “How fast will it take you to heal?” He demanded.

“Momentarily,” the Warlock gurgled, spitting blood. “I cannot die, Battlemaster. Even if the Humans send a thousand more, we will defeat them as you just did now!”
“I slowed them,” the Battlemaster retorted, turning to the Warlock just in time to see the flesh over his chest reform. “They are not defeated, not yet. You cannot hold out forever, even now you are tiring.”

“A momentary weakness,” Senorium tried to assure him, now looking slightly worried. “A limitation I can easily overcome.”

The Battlemaster didn’t have time to explain the concept of pacing himself in sustained combat, and ADVENT was reforming their front line. “You will stay close to me,” the Battlemaster said. “Do not stop and fight the-“

He stopped speaking as Senorium’s face slowly morphed into one of absolute terror. A UFO suddenly roared overhead and began landing in the ruins of one of the destroyed houses. The sounds of battle continued, but it was no longer directed at them, but inexplicably at each other. A madness had taken over the ADVENT ranks, with some shooting allies, and others just falling to the ground screaming and gibbering.

Of all the ones to extract him, the Battlemaster would not have suspected Isomnum.

The black UFO’s entrance barrier slid back, revealing a brightly lit interior, almost pure white emanating from it. Out first stepped the Dread Lord himself, and beside him were his soldiers, who before today the Battlemaster had only heard of. They were a mix of all alien races, even Muton and Sectoid.

Some of them wore a kind of black armor, mostly the Mutons, and others wore clothing that would normally be seen in science labs or ancient Human religions, with sleek uniforms and robes. The Vitakarians carried unhilted black blades of sorts, coated in a colorless liquid, while others of Isomnum’s soldiers carried black weapons of a design the Battlemaster had not seen before.

Even the Sectoid stood straight, no longer the little grey creature but something that had been infected with black cybernetics and-

The Battlemaster stiffened as he saw the little creature more closely. He had only seen that kind of technology from the Synthesized.

What was Isomnum doing with it here?

The soldiers seemed to act on unspoken orders from Isomnum himself, and began slowly walking to the ADVENT line. From what the Battlemaster observed, the most noticeable thing about the soldiers was not necessarily the wide array of species, but that all of them were apparently blinded. All of them wore some kind of blindfold, and none of them covered their faces.

“Lord Isomnum,” Senorium said meekly, falling to one knee, practically shaking. “It is an-“

“Leave, Chosen,” Isomnum commanded, the voice speaking only made the screaming in the background intensify. “Retain your sanity if you wish. You are no longer needed.”

“Yes-yes of course Lord Isomnum,” the Warlock said, standing and creating a visible distortion that acted as a portal. Once he stepped through, he vanished. Isomnum was flanked by two of his soldiers, a Vitakarian and a Sectoid. The Battlemaster could not read the Sectoid, but the Vitakarian was emotionless, somehow unaffected by the madness Isomnum exerted.

“Your assistance is appreciated, Isomnum,” the Battlemaster said, inclining his head. “We may depart immediately.”
“We will leave momentarily,” Isomnum stated, looking around and walking towards where several ADVENT soldiers lay. “I have seen your reasoning for this attack. You have failed.”

“President Treduant is dead, and we have shown ADVENT is vulnerable,” the Battlemaster answered. “Her attack was a surprise, but the objective was succeeded.”

“If you leave now, you will not leave them with fear, but with hope,” Isomnum practically spat. “You were outwitted by a Human. Again. Your honor has done nothing but waste resources and time. The coddling of this species must end. They cannot think to attack what we have with impunity.”

A Muton dragged a screaming ADVENT soldier in front of the Ethereal, and Isomnum telekinetically lifted the helmet off to reveal the distraught woman before him. “Humans, Battlemaster, cannot be defeated without taking measures,” he said, gripping the woman’s chin with his finger. “The goal should not be victory on the battlefield, but to plant terror in the heart of every Human who dares oppose us. Terror leads to distraction, distraction to mistakes, and their mistakes lead us to victory.”

The Battlemaster had known of the reputation of the Dread Lord, and now he was beginning to understand why Isomnum had been deemed too extreme even for the Overminds. “Fears, these can be simple and complex. Some are situations, others are as simple as a fear of insects. Push too much; create this image in their mind…and it will inevitably shatter.”

He looked to the Sectoid. “Go. Bring me the Venomorph and the eggs.”

The Sectoid chittered and walked off. “What are you doing?” The Battlemaster demanded. “We need to leave.”

Isomnum ignored him temporarily, looking towards his soldiers who appeared to be picking Humans at random from the paralyzed mass of soldiers. “Bring those marked to the ship.” The Battlemaster saw a couple more soldiers walk off and began binding and carrying Humans to Isomnum’s UFO.

“So he was recruiting Humans for his army. Or a more accurate word was abducting. He didn’t know if he should stop it, but this was one area where the Imperator might override him, and this was not the time to fight, not when he still considered them to be in mild danger.

The Sectoid returned, chittering and holding up a clear vase, which had a small creature inside it. Behind the Sectoid was a Muton carrying a black box. “To answer your question,” Isomnum said, taking the vase gently and telekinetically lifting the little squirming insect out of it, before looking down at the woman. “I am completing your mission. Revelean was kind enough to loan me a prototype of his Venomorph.”

The Battlemaster only remembered a few details from the project, as he hadn’t checked it in months, or even heard about it from Revelean since. “A parasite?”

“One which grows in the host, consuming until it controls their body,” Isomnum confirmed. “And once its brain supersedes the host, it will kill and maim all around it.” He lowered it towards the woman’s mouth. “Be still, Human, you will forget this happened soon—“
He never finished as the Battlemaster severed the woman’s head from her body. “No.” The Battlemaster stated flatly. “The mission was accomplished. We. Are. Leaving.” He looked towards the box and telekinetically opened it. “Chryssalid eggs,” he spat, glaring at the Dread Lord. “Do you think so little of our species that we must resort to terror to win?”

“You instructed me to assist your efforts,” Isomnum stated. “I have done so. The Humans will treat this as a victory; we can yet turn it into their nightmare.”

The Battlemaster clenched a fist and the case crumpled and the delicate balls containing the Chryssalid eggs shattered. “Your suggestion is denied. We are leaving.”

Isomnum looked up at him; as impossible as it was to read under the helmet, he suspected the Ethereal was furious, disgusted, or both at him. Not that he particularly cared. “You are weak, Battlemaster, you are why we lost before. I will be speaking to the Imperator to ensure that we do not lose a second time.”

He motioned to his soldiers, and they wordlessly began walking back towards the UFO, with the Battlemaster following him. Unfortunate that the UFO was so small, as it would be difficult to avoid the Ethereal furious at him, but it couldn’t be helped.

In the end, Isomnum was here under his request, and under his command. Even if his threat to inform the Imperator was not a bluff, the Battlemaster would not pay it any weight. It was not as though the Imperator would actually supersede his military authority.

In the end though, he was out of danger.

Now he had to figure out how to salvage this entire operation and retain what territory they had.

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**ADVENT HQ – Switzerland**

*11/22/2016 – 6:00 A.M.*

It had been a while since Saudia had stayed up all night, but in this case the adrenaline from managing the ongoing media news cycle, attacks on multiple fronts, and the uproar of foreign countries offering support and condolences, had made it somewhat easier. She literally had no time to be tired, much less devote to thinking about it.

The Battlemaster had escaped, which was a loss, but considering the circumstances, it could have been worse. Had that other Ethereal not arrived, perhaps they would have killed him and that Warlock.

But putting the Battlemaster in a situation where he’d needed extraction at all had been a minor victory. It at least showed he could be trapped and eventually worn down. The attacks in California were proceeding well…but it was becoming more of a stalemate, and reports of another Ethereal in Alaska had explained why cities were suddenly falling there.

Seattle had been temporarily abandoned, again, to put into motion a new kind of guerilla warfare, which had been approved by Commander Christiaens and Weekes, so it was likely a reasonable strategic maneuver. Still, she wasn’t happy to lose it so soon after gaining it. At least South Korea was going as well as could be expected, and they would probably be able to hold out indefinitely assuming no Ethereal showed up.

The nuclear strikes over Japan and Australia had gone off successfully, and she idly wondered how
they were handling that. She suspected that the Battlemaster would be working to negate this in the future, so it might as well be taken advantage of now.

She debated taking a short nap before the press conference today, where there would doubtless be more questions from the media about the attacks. Already foreign media was jabbering about the blast over Japan, and the state of the conflict in the US. For once though, they were all unilaterally focused on the alien threat, and not whatever aspect about ADVENT they chose to attack that week.

It was a refreshing change, and the attack on D.C. had been a catalyst for that. Almost every European country had either condemned the attack, or offered support, most of which amounted to little more than words…but she did wonder if it would make some of them think. England in particular had responded to the attack strongly, with the Prime Minister declaring it an ‘inconceivable and cowardly attack’. More aggressive than she’d expected.

“Chancellor,” her secretary said, speaking through the intercom in her office. “You…have a call incoming.”

She furrowed her eyebrows. The amount of people who were allowed to disturb her were very few. Either something had gone very bad, or very good. “Who?”

“Best you see for yourself, Chancellor. Security reasons.”

Which further reduced the options of who it could be. That reason was only given if absolutely no one could risk even knowing the following conversation existed. She wondered if it was the aliens, calling to either insult or congratulate her. “Put it through then,” she said, standing up. “Holoprojector or screen?”

“Holoprojector,” he answered. “Putting it through now.”

Alien then. No one else had holotech. She moved to the holoprojector which flashed red as it booted up and displayed the figure before her.

Who, it turned out, was perhaps the last person she had expected to speak to.

“Greetings, Chancellor Vyandar,” Chinese President Qin Yijun greeted. “I felt it was past time we properly spoke in person, or as close as can be expected from a woman of your position.”

Well, this was an interesting turn of events.

President Qin Yijun of the Communist Party of China was dressed similar to all Chinese politicians of the country, which amounted to a simple business suit, although the red hologram distorted whatever colors it had. He was relatively young, thirty-nine and from pictures she remembered he had black hair, darker skin than normal for a Chinese man, with full Chinese facial features.

“President Qin,” she inclined her head. “I was not expecting this.”

President Qin gave a slight smile. “While we could go through the normal diplomatic channels, I believe the current situation emphasizes speed above all else. It is time we make decisions together, not through our respective diplomatic branches.”

“I am not opposed to that,” Saudia said. “Yet I somehow doubt you’re calling to say that China is joining ADVENT.”

“No,” President Qin said lightly, but firmly. “We have every intent of retaining our independence.
With that said, you are not our enemy, and the aliens are on our own doorstep. Their ships have been seen flying over our waters, and it is no longer in our interests to hold our forces in reserve. What I propose is simple, Chancellor, a military alliance between our governments against the Ethereal Collective.”

While it wasn’t exactly the best outcome of this conversation, even having China at the table was a major step forward, especially in the Asian theatre. “I’m glad to hear you understand the threat, Mr. President, however, I do not want you to have the wrong idea of what such an alliance would entail. We have no intention of sharing our technology with you.”

“As anticipated,” President Qin nodded. “We do not expect you to do so, and the decision shall be mutual. This would be fairly simple initially. From what we understand of the current conflict in Korea, you are holding out but unable to push them back completely. We can provide you with enough reinforcements to crush the aliens in Korea, and send reinforcements to America if needed.” He paused. “It was courteous of you to inform us of your surgical nuclear strike over Japan. It is also an opportunity. You have given an opening for a counter-invasion of the island. Your forces are occupied. Mine are not.”

Retaking Japan.

That was not something she had considered as a possibility, but before then, she hadn’t had several extra million soldiers to take it over. Still, she wondered what the catch was. “In the event such an undertaking is started…” she began slowly. “The liberated territory will be returned to the surviving Japanese government and citizens, and become a full member of ADVENT. This is not an opportunity to expand your territory, Mr. President.”

“Considering what ADVENT is capable of,” he answered. “It would be foolish to make an enemy of you. Should a liberation of Japan be successful, it will, of course, be returned to the Japanese.”

Saudia gave a single nod. “And what of your soldiers and weaponry? It is not as ours is, I suspect. We will, of course, be willing to provide support from our special forces.”

“While we are certainly nowhere as advanced as your army,” President Qin admitted. “We have made significant advances, and despite the…attempted intervention of XCOM to deny us the alien Dreadnought, it has allowed us to progress significantly. Do not underestimate my soldiers, Chancellor, they can fight just as hard as yours.”

Saudia considered for a few moments. “I feel that we should discuss this in more detail. ADVENT, President Qin, would certainly be open to an alliance against the Ethereal Collective. However, this warrants an announcement in person. Would you be willing to meet in person so our branches can coordinate more effectively?”

He gave a light chuckle. “I suspect you would not stoop to such trickery as to abduct me, and it will perhaps send the needed message that, feelings towards your government aside, this war will affect the world and our species. I will come. Ensure that your staff are ready to coordinate. I will order my forces to prepare to deploy.”

“Excellent,” Saudia smiled. “I look forward to your arrival.”

He returned the smile, one full of confidence and cold fury. “As do I, Chancellor. We will speak shortly.”

The hologram dissipated, and Saudia was left alone. She quickly walked to her desk and opened a line to Diplomat Hassan. “Chief, get everyone you can assembled and prepare for a foreign
delegation.”

A pause. “Now? I can, but who is it?”

“President Qin,” Saudia said with a grim smile. “I think the Chinese are willing to ally with us.”
If he had not been rather pleased to be out of ADVENT territory, he would have likely found Sana’s reaction to him stepping into her Blacksite to be highly amusing. It had been brief, but he’d felt she had become legitimately afraid he was almost dead once he stepped in front of her. He didn’t exactly look like the ideal healthy Ethereal, especially with the amount of blood and gore on his armor.

His appearance had been extremely unsettling to the few patients she had in her presence, and not even her calming aura was enough to fully override that. He’d simply nodded to her and she’d busied herself with wrapping up…whatever she was doing. He didn’t know, nor did he particularly care right now. It took some time to get fully out of his armor, but he was out of it in time for her when she came in.

“What happened?” She’d asked.

“A miscalculation.” No reason to lie to her. “The Humans were cleverer than I’d anticipated. Trapped me in their territory for some time. It was not easy to escape.”

She’d begun examining him, still glancing over to him. “How did you? And why are you here?”

That was a fair question. Normally, he wouldn’t have bothered coming to be checked up on since he knew he wasn’t seriously injured, but he had for a couple reasons. One was that he hadn’t fought like that in some time, and wanted to ensure he was in good condition. The other was slightly…embarrassing…but Sana, nor most Ethereals, would really judge him. “Isomnum was the one who extracted me. The brief flight back was not ideal. I’d have preferred more pleasant company.”

“Ah.” Was all she’d said. “I see.”

It was all she needed to say. The Battlemaster was well aware that the only person who Sana legitimately hated more was the Creator. Her and Isomnum were the only exception for the normally gentle Ethereal. Even Revelean and Fectorian she disagreed with on a professional level, though still respected them.

That opinion would not change if he told her of Isomnum’s original plan for the city.

But he wouldn’t unless asked. It had not happened, and would only widen the divides that existed within the Collective. He realized belatedly that ADVENT soldiers all had cameras on them. Which meant that not only would they know of the original plan, but they would also know who and what Isomnum is, and also that there were indeed disagreements and schisms in the Collective.

XCOM had likely been aware of this because of Aegis, but seeing as how ADVENT hadn’t seemed like they’d had secret intelligence, he doubted they had shared all of it, or any to begin with. Of course it was a moot point. There wouldn’t have been time to smash all of the cameras, but it was only going to be used as more, and he had to admit-legitimate, propaganda against them.
“Done,” Sana said as she finished. “Minor bruising, but otherwise you’re physically healthy. You are fatigued though, and your body clearly hasn’t been through an ordeal like that in a while. I would advise rest for at least the next week. No returning to the battlefield.”

He shook his head. “That is not up to me. If I feel it is necessary, I will go.”

Sana had apparently predicted that, and was also predictably disapproving. “Of course you will. The very least you should do is have Fectorian repair your suit.”

“That I will do,” the Battlemaster promised. “I won’t return until that is fixed. Too risky otherwise.” He picked up a datapad and began the likely unpleasant task of figuring out how to sort out the mess these attacks had caused.

“Battlemaster,” a familiar voice greeted, and the Ethereal looked up to see the Zar’Chon walking in, professional as always, even if he was greeted with the sight of an unarmored Battlemaster, which he had almost certainly never seen before.

“Zar’Chon,” he answered in return, setting down the datapad. “I presume you mean to update me on the current situation.”

“On what I can,” the Zar’Chon answered, raising his hand and a holographic list began scrolling on his palm. It was going too fast for even the Battlemaster to see, but he supposed that was what the implants were for. “The short version is that our situation is not what I would consider ‘good’.”

“Then clarify,” the Battlemaster ordered.

“Of course,” the Zar’Chon nodded. “There is some good news. The Second Guardian has reported that her advances into Alaska and Canada have been successful. Vancouver is still holding out, but I have requested additional Spectres to take it. Seattle has been largely reclaimed as well. And Quisilia has returned alive, so the incursion in Australia is handled.”

The Battlemaster fixed the Zar’Chon with stare. With all that had happened, he had almost forgotten about that incident. “You sound almost surprised by that. What was learned? Did ADVENT attack there as well?”

“No,” the Vitakarian scowled. “It wasn’t ADVENT. Quisilia confirmed that to me. We didn’t know who they were. They were definitely wielding more advanced weaponry than even XCOM. When Quisilia returned he was oddly reluctant to discuss it. He said it was imperative the two of you speak. But the situation there is contained for the moment.”

That raised many questions, not the least of which being that if it wasn’t the Humans, than who could it possibly be? He was aware of the inner galactic species, but highly doubted that they had more advanced technology, or had a presence on Earth at all. They would have detected it well before now. He would definitely need to figure out what was going on in Australia. If Quisilia didn’t want to discuss it with the Zar’Chon, then…

An ugly thought entered his mind. There were only a few topics Quisilia would not share with his spymaster; that which related to internal Ethereal matters, the Synthesized, or the Sovereign Ones. Since there were no other Ethereals alive that would be fighting them, and the Sovereign Ones weren’t on Earth, then could the Synthesized have possibly arisen?

They had found remnants of their technology in hidden places in the galaxy. It was not inconceivable that the Humans…or Collective, for that matter, had accidentally activated it. No matter what the explanation was, it was highly concerning. “Noted. What else has happened?”
“We are in danger of losing California, should the situation continue to deteriorate,” the Zar’Chon finally said. “The initial train bombings destroyed much of our garrisons, even if they took the infrastructure with them. We suspect Patricia is in Los Angeles and Sacramento is also being spearheaded by another XCOM team with unexpected aggression.”

As would be expected…except. “How is that possible?” He asked. “Aren’t our soldiers being telepathically shielded?” While the Zar’Chon didn’t know the full details, he was aware that there was an Ethereal who was providing telepathic assistance on the ground to negate threats like Patricia.

“Either he is distracted or he has been subverted,” the Zar’Chon answered tactfully. “Either way, telepathy is still resulting in casualties in LA. Even in Sacramento we are receiving reports of telepathic attacks. It seems to be working against the telepath Priests, but most are transitioning to support roles, which are seemingly not affected.”

The Overmind had either become much weaker or lazier if he was allowing Humans to be able to subvert him so easily. The entire reason he had requested such assistance was to be an answer to telepaths like Patricia. However, it appeared that wasn’t the case. “And where else?”

“The Mexico offensive is…not going well,” the Vitakarian admitted, pursing his lips. “The deployment of the Creator’s Assassin was less effective than we’d hoped. Against ordinary soldiers in close quarters she is excellent, so the reports say, but the problem is that she is now fighting psions and is largely behind enemy lines. We are having difficulty breaking their trench lines. The Assassin has sustained heavy damage and is recovering now.”

Disappointing news, but not entirely surprising. One psion, no matter how skilled, against other psions of a similar or greater power level would almost always lose against them. The problem was that she was quite clearly built for smaller and more surgical operations, not as an attachment on the battlefield.

He would have to make appropriate adjustments.

“Battlemaster, I would also request you recall the Hunter immediately,” the Zar’Chon continued, now looking slightly irritated. “While the Creator’s…soldiers…are powerful, I did not expect one to be a literal traitor.”

“Explain.”

“I will send you the recording,” the Zar’Chon explained, looking at his holographic list, presumably to find it. “But upon the initial encounter, he essentially said he was ‘going to kill whoever the fuck he wanted’ as following orders was ‘boring and predictable’. I am paraphrasing, but the point is that for the entire attack, he has been shooting at both allied and enemy targets. He’s cost us dearly in resources in soldiers and turned the offensive in Busan into a mess.”

The Battlemaster was silent for a moment. Another bad miscalculation, but he could not have anticipated that the insubordinate Hunter would be such a catastrophic traitor. Although perhaps that was the wrong word, but it was producing the same results. The Hunter would have to be punished severely for this. Possibly executed.

The Creator would not like that, of course, but he didn’t especially care what she thought. If her pets disrupted his military operations, they weren’t exempted from consequences. For all the faults of the Warlock, his fanaticism at least ensured he was loyal. “Now that you’re back,” the Zar’Chon continued. “We need to decide how to respond to this.”
Indeed.

“The First Guardian will be sent to Sacramento,” the Battlemaster said after some thought. “He will kill the XCOM squad currently causing issues. The Canadian and Alaskan offensive will receive reinforcements. The Mexico forces will be pulled back temporarily as well. If needed, we will take additional measures to ensure we don’t lose California.”

“And South Korea?”

“We will maintain the offensive for now,” the Battlemaster said. “I will deal with the Hunter.”

“And Patricia?”

“I will deal with Trask myself,” the Battlemaster said, standing. “She cannot affect me.”

“What additional measures do you mean?” The Zar’Chon suddenly asked. “More Spectres?”

“Initially, yes,” the Battlemaster nodded. “And if those prove insufficient…request for enough Cleanser Ships to level their ground army. ADVENT has decided to escalate this conflict with psions and nuclear weapons, and in this case, we may respond in kind.”

“Acknowledged,” the Zar’Chon confirmed. “I would also suggest support and repair teams to Australia and Japan due to…ah, I forgot to mention that. ADVENT detonated two additional nuclear weapons above Japan and Australia. Our forces are completely disrupted.”

Attempting to take advantage of their vulnerabilities before he made efforts to correct them. The Humans understood warfare exceptionally well. In the span of a few days they had crippled or attacked nearly all of the Collective’s main installations on Earth. Impressive, and he couldn’t bring himself to feel much anger towards them. They were simply fighting intelligently and competently.

However, they were not the only ones, and if they felt confident enough to escalate the war to this degree, he would happily oblige.

“Do that,” he ordered. “How long is it estimated to repair everything?”

“Everything?” He frowned. “Critical systems within days. Military equipment and defenses, perhaps a week. Everything else likely two, and this is if we have as large a team as possible. ADVENT did this to disrupt us, so we can take our time in repairing it. They won’t be attacking Japan, let alone Australia during this time.”

“So order the teams to take their time and do it right,” the Battlemaster confirmed with a nod. “In the meantime, we will end these attacks by ADVENT.” He stood. “Dismissed, Zar’Chon, I will speak to you shortly. Now I need to speak to the Creator.”

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ADVENT Secure Diplomatic Site – Switzerland

11/23/2016 – 1:42 P.M.

Both China and ADVENT had agreed that, for the moment, it was best that the media and public not be aware of any potential alliance between the parties in the event that they couldn’t come to an agreement. Saudia personally considered that unlikely; that China was willing to talk at all meant that they were planning to work on some level, though how much that would be was yet to be
In the meantime, they were holding the talks in ADVENT’s Secure Diplomatic Site, specially designed, isolated, and constructed to be out of the way and impossible to penetrate by any outside power, where high-level or extraordinarily sensitive diplomatic issues could be discussed without fear of exposure.

It was well stocked, furnished, and definitely the same quality as any building in the ADVENT HQ. The only difference was the far tighter security. The road itself was guarded by the Peacekeepers, and snipers watched the roads; ready and willing to kill stragglers or investigators who came too close. There had been several attempts by the media to investigate, but they had backed off when snipers had shot the expensive gear they were carrying.

No one was brave enough to go back, and they had correctly been smart enough not to actually report on it.

On top of the layers of physical security, it was also regularly swept for listening devices, electronic jammers, and dangerous substances. SHIVs patrolled on pre-determined routes and the basement not only contained a fully stocked armory, but a dozen MDUs to deploy in the event of an emergency.

It was also one of the first buildings to have a room specially designed for a Gateway, which would be essential for evacuation or reinforcements in such an event. It was a massive power draw, even with elerium cores, but it was what allowed the important figures in ADVENT to join in such sensitive diplomatic talks on such short notice.

Saudia had received a list of the people President Qin was bringing with him, which unsurprisingly contained his second in command in the Chinese Central Military Commission, who was effectively the leader of the military even if Qin was the Commander-in-chief, as well as his Minister of Defense and Chief of Joint Staff.

What was unsurprising was the presence of the Foreign Minister on the list, as such a diplomatic mission would need all the expertise he could gather. The final name had been a mild surprise, and somewhat amusing to her. Qin apparently felt comfortable bringing the Minister of State Security along as well. Perhaps there was a reason the head of Chinese intelligence was coming, but it seemed more of a move to unsettle her.

China had become used to having a large amount of influence in the old world. Such a move would have definitely been either a warning or threat, but China no longer had such power. Not truly. Which then begged the question of why they would even try such mind games. In any event, she could play at that game easily enough.

For herself, she had decided to have Commander Christiaens participate, as was the obvious choice, as well as Chief Diplomat Hassan. In addition to them, she’d also asked the Commander to participate, as XCOM needed to be involved in these talks, and Elizabeth as well. If he brought his own spymaster, she could certainly bring her own.

The final member she was including was the Prime Minister Sakata, or more accurately the Prime Minister in exile, of Japan. As this was his country, at least some members of the surviving government needed to be aware of the situation here. Given the history between Japan and China, this situation was darkly amusing.

But she needed to focus, as the Chinese delegation was now filing into the main meeting room where the negotiations were to take place. First came President Qin Yijung, who looked as
composed as he had in their initial meeting, who was followed closely by General Cheng Zhen, Vice Chairman of the CNC, who was much older than the President himself with grey streaks in his blackened hair.

However, Yan An, the Minister of National Defense was clearly the oldest in the room. Saudia recalled his age to be sixty-two, and he certainly looked the part. The Chief of Joint Staff, Kong Qigang followed, not appearing to be especially pleased with the whole situation, but kept a firm face regardless.

Han Jie, the Minister of State Security himself followed, and of the group he stood out due to his lack of any hair, which Saudia found rather ironic for a spymaster. He clearly wasn’t going to be easily forgotten, but he did have that same calculating look in his eyes she recognized in Elizabeth, and she noted him taking stock of everyone in the room.

Finally, Foreign Minister Xuan Wuying entered, looking as every diplomat should; friendly and like he wanted to be there. She didn’t know how true that was, but this was the situation every diplomat wished for, even if it simultaneously frightened them. “Chancellor,” President Qin greeted, extending a hand. “A pleasure to meet you in person.”

“The feeling is mutual, Mr. President,” Saudia replied evenly, taking the firm grip. “I hope our discussions are productive.”

“Quite,” he agreed, looking around at the other guests. Foreign Minister Xuan had already gone to greet Prime Minister Sakata and already the groups were forming around the respective mutual positions. Elizabeth was already chatting with the MSS Director, and both generals were conversing with Laura.

She figured it couldn’t hurt to let everyone mingle some, as few as they were, before getting down to business. “Ah,” Qin suddenly said, pursing his lips. “Commander. A…pleasure to meet you in person.”

The Commander looked almost smug, but simply inclined his head. “I’m pleased China is considering rejoining the effort against the aliens.”

“We haven’t forgotten the true threat,” Qin said evenly. “On that I can assure you.”

“And I haven’t forgotten that you like stunts like pulling out of the only anti-alien organization fighting because you didn’t get your way,” the Commander answered, just as evenly. “But I suppose all of us have our regrets.”

That was not how she wanted this to go.

“The differences between XCOM and China, no matter how grievous at the time,” she interrupted. “Do not matter now. China was hardly the only one who had issues with XCOM, Commander, as I’m sure you know.”

“Indeed,” the Commander gave a thin smile. “I do have to admire you following through on your word, disagree with it as I may. A government with a spine was somewhat rare.”

“In retrospect, it might have been handled differently,” Qin finally said. “The issue, Commander, was never your methods nor past, distasteful as some may find it, but your lack of willingness to communicate important information. Had we been aware of EXALT operations in our country, we would have happily assisted in destroying them.”

The Commander’s lip twitched. “To a certain degree, I agree. However, we had no way to know if
your government was compromised by EXALT. Had we warned you, any moles you had would have sent warnings and we would have accomplished nothing.”

“It is the actions of a rogue organization,” Qin said slowly. “One which, at the time, answered to a higher authority. If not us directly, perhaps someone on the Council who you could trust. But as the Chancellor said, it is in the past. We are willing to overlook this incident if you are.”

The Commander gave a smile. “I don’t hold a grudge, as long as you’re willing to assist us now. But our raid was certainly justified, even if you continue to disagree. I suspect that had I not done it, we may not be speaking right now.”

Saudia kept her face completely neutral at that little jab. Funny, Commander, very funny.

“I believe we should get started,” she said, as everyone began moving to their seats. “There is an operation still going on and time is of the essence.” All of them were soon seated on the ornate glossy wood table, ADVENT representatives on one side, and Chinese on the other. She sat at the end, with the President seated right beside her left, and the Commander on her right.

“We’re all aware of why we are here,” Saudia began. “Right now there are soldiers dying to retake America. Commander Christiaens and the Commander of XCOM believe this important enough to focus their attention on instead of the battles raging now. Mr. President, please state the reason for this meeting.”

“Certainly, Chancellor,” he nodded towards her. “Your soldiers are to be commended, Commander Christiaens, as are any who fight against the alien threat. We have kept to ourselves for a variety of reasons, but ultimately, this is a war even we cannot stay out of. The Communist Party does not believe it is beneficial for either China or ADVENT to have an adversarial relationship with the other. We are different, yet that does not mean we are unwilling to work together.”

“Indeed,” Foreign Minister Xuan echoed. “We admire what ADVENT has been able to accomplish over the past months, and while we are not, nor will we have an interest in joining, there is little reason to sever diplomatic relations entirely. This is why China is willing to form an initial military alliance with ADVENT, and XCOM of course.” He nodded to the Commander. “To fight against the alien threat. Should that prove beneficial, we could extend that to other sectors as well.”

“It is important for you to realize that we understand the threat that this world faces,” Qin continued again. “Too many countries now are refusing to assist either out of fear of ADVENT, or in some vain hope that will save them. They will never act until they are, or have been directly harmed in this fight. Much of Europe is insulated from the threat, which I suspect plays a large role in their neutrality.”

“We have also been left alone,” General Chang added. “Initially, we were relieved. However, it has quickly become apparent that this is by the aliens plans. To them, we are not a threat. They are relying on us retaining our neutrality even as we prepare to fight them. But eventually, they will turn their focus towards us, and if ADVENT is destroyed, there is no hope for China, much less our species.”

“And this is the catalyst for this meeting,” Qin finished. “The time for neutrality has passed. China will not be remembered as a nation of cowards who did nothing while aliens fought our species. It is time to enter this war, and as ADVENT is the only force willing to fight, it is prudent to ally to defeat our enemy.”

Fine words from the Chinese. Saudia also suspected this was also partially to ensure that China remained relevant, and probably more likely, a means to acquire more alien materials they almost
desperately needed if they wished to advance. Ideological reasons were nice, and they likely believed such words to an extent, but the Chinese were a practical people.

They saw the writing on the wall. If ADVENT died, so did they.

They were running low on materials. Such materials could be acquired through combat.

They saw Europe, Africa, and parts of South America refusing to get involved. This was their chance to emerge as the last remaining world power with some semblance of influence.

It all boiled down to politics. But that was what the world revolved around. Who could be the most convincing and offer the most reward. She could work with that. “We echo your sentiment,” she finally said. “A military alliance, while not the greatest move of unity that China could do, is nonetheless a powerful statement, one I believe the aliens will not know how to handle.”

“There is a reason China is referred to as a sleeping dragon,” Minister Han said with a slight smile. “It takes much to fully awaken us, but when enraged, little can stop us.”

“Then let’s get into details,” Laura said, leaning forward. “Words are nice, but if you really are intending to fight the aliens, we need to know if you actually know what that means. It’s one thing to read reports, another to witness it in person. Are your weapons even powerful enough to hurt the aliens? Can your soldiers survive against even one plasma blast? How does the PLA measure to the aliens?”

“We have broken through gauss weaponry, and have been producing it ever since designs have been finalized,” General Yan answered. “Our weapons are, at minimum, perfectly capable of hurting the aliens. Alien alloys are difficult to acquire, so we’ve had to improvise by simply working with reinforced Kevlar and experimental body armor. Little compared to yours, but is nonetheless an improvement over the original.”

“Our strength is in numbers,” Cheng stated. “At this moment our military is over two and a half million soldiers. We have much of our civilian populations working to fortify cities and produce more equipment. We have the capability to boost our numbers to over five million nearly overnight, should it be required.”

“And gain a multitude of inexperienced and undertrained soldiers,” the Commander noted. “A draft is useful for numbers, but numbers alone will not win this war.”

“Ultimately, you are likely correct,” Cheng answered. “But for now, numbers will be enough to end the fight in South Korea and storm Japan. Our support from our warships and air forces will additionally supplement our forces. As well as any ADVENT forces you wish to deploy.”

The news of the Chinese armaments was not surprising. Saudia would have been more surprised if they were only using conventional arms. Everyone was making improvements, and the Chinese were no exception. However, from the wording, these were likely the quite literal Chinese knockoff gauss weapons. Cheap and easily produced, but sub-par in most ways.

Given their history, she would not have been surprised if they’d stolen a gauss weapon, reverse-engineered it, and made a worse version so they could mass produce it. They weren’t above stealing designs when they needed to.

Or maybe they hadn’t. That would have been a good way to get annexed, and China probably didn’t want that risk.

“That is not necessarily an advantage, at least in a proposed liberation of Japan,” the Commander
continued. “This is almost certainly going to draw the attention of an Ethereal. I don’t know which one, but all of them are far beyond ordinary soldiers.”

“Indeed,” General Chang nodded. “Which is why we need to have contingencies for each one known. Even we have identified these aliens as the leaders, and the death of one is worth any number of soldiers. I believe they can be beaten, provided we are smart enough to figure it out.”

“On that I agree,” the Commander nodded. “They most certainly can be beaten. It is a matter of planning and preparation. But you understand that many will die to see this accomplished. Your soldiers are not ADVENT. Against an Ethereal, they are on a suicide mission.”

“That is completely understood,” Chang said. “But to die for one’s species and country is not something to be overlooked.”

“Good,” the Commander nodded grimly. “As long as you understand what you are proposing.”

“Now there is another question that needs to be raised,” Qin said after a moment. “We will be doing the majority of fighting in Japan. It is fair that we receive the same majority of resources gathered.”

Saudia shared a look with Laura, who nodded. “That is fair,” Saudia agreed. “We would not expect you to fight and not receive some of the materials which remain. However, there are certain things we will not allow to fall into foreign hands.”

Qin’s brow furrowed. “Such as?”

“Anything psionic,” Saudia began. “As well as any unidentified technology or aliens. Live prisoners we will also take into custody, as well as any Ethereal or Sectoid bodies.”

“I can understand Ethereals,” Xuan said slowly. “They are, after all, rare and unique. But simple Sectoids?”

“Yes, any psionic species is under our purview,” Saudia answered firmly. “Intact computers we will also have a priority on, although China will not be excluded from them. Anything else recovered we are willing to allow China to have.”

“How generous,” General Kong said dryly. “Allow us to have the common spoils while you gather what really matters.”

“This is true,” Qin also noted. “While I can certainly understand your…reluctance…to allow anyone other than yourselves to use psionics, this is not conductive to diplomacy, and ultimately, all it will do is inspire an arms race that might backfire. Even if we do not develop psionics, there are still criminal elements in this world that will eventually learn it. And they do not respect agreements or treaties.”

“It is not quite so simple,” Hassan pointed out. “The truth is, I do not believe that you quite understand the extent of psionic powers. This is not something that you can just weaponize without consequences. It is as much for your own protection as controlling the usage of psionics.”

Cheng snorted. “How patronizing. If ADVENT can manage it, I’m certain we can as well.”

Hassan gave a knowing look to the Chinese delegation. “ADVENT is a…special case. It was designed to have multiple redundancies and legislation regarding psionics was in place before the first Priest was deployed. Those with power have a healthy respect for this power, and understand the implications of it. I am not certain you do though.”
He nodded towards Kong. “You may, ironically, bring about your own downfall. While you give the illusion of unity to the world, you are aware of the factions and power plays in China. Perhaps some even in this room now. Have you considered what would happen if one or more people hostile to the government acquired psionic powers? How many of your soldiers are truly loyal, or just putting up a facade so they aren’t punished?"

Qin furrowed his brow. “We would, of course, take precautions, much like you have, I presume. This power would obviously be shared carefully.”

“With respect, I am skeptical,” Elizabeth interjected. “You may be able to keep it out of the hands of civilians, or even soldiers. But I am…acutely aware of the fact that not everyone in your government is on the same side. Including a not-insignificant portion who supports ADVENT integration.”

Han smiled. “Your agents serve you well, spymaster. But you are not the only one who can disseminate misinformation.”

Elizabeth maintained her own smile. “Certainly not, but my point is that psionics is a time bomb for you. You are not united as we are, and you know too little to implement appropriate precautions.”

Saudia nodded. “This is ultimately not up for discussion now. There are certain pieces of equipment and bodies that we cannot afford to let fall into foreign hands. This is, as we have explained, for your sake as much as ours, as we cannot afford additional threats. Simply put, we do not have enough of a strong relationship to trust you with such a power. If my some miracle, psionics didn’t cause an implosion of your government, you would now be an issue for us.”

“And if we had a stronger relationship?” Xuan asked slowly.

“Then all I can promise is that we would perhaps consider a limited program, overseen by us, of course,” Saudia answered slowly. “But we are not there yet, and will not be for a long while.”

“Still, in doing this now, you are effectively ensuring that China will forever be behind you if we do not follow your demands,” General Kong said, some anger in his voice. “That is not acceptable.”

“Then join ADVENT,” the Commander interjected. “Because that is the only way you will have what you wish.”

“The Commander is correct,” Saudia nodded. “I will be perfectly honest with you: China, or any foreign power, will not, nor ever, reach a point where they directly threaten us. I fully plan on uniting this world under ADVENT, Mr. President, preferably diplomatically, but that is not my only option. Those who resist will, as a result, eventually find themselves falling behind. We are willing to ally with other nations, but we are under no obligation to assist your own efforts. In the end, ADVENT is the only voice of Humanity that matters, and that cannot compromised.”

There was some silence at that. “While harsh, Chancellor, you are at least honest on where you stand,” Qin said with some dark amusement. “And lesser materials is better than none at all. But we will not be bullied into joining ADVENT, even if that means we are hindered at every turn.”

“That is acceptable,” Saudia nodded. “In which case, if you are still willing, we should discuss the finer details of the liberation of Japan.”

“Indeed,” Qin laced his fingers together. “Let us begin.”
She’d apparently traded one battle for another.

As far as Abby had been aware, South Korea hadn’t been under attack before Australia, but considering the current status of the war in North America, this had likely been in retaliation for such an attack. Made sense, and by all accounts ADVENT had been holding pretty well, disregarding the taunting alien sniper.

The question now was how the hell she was going to explain what had happened to her without ADVENT getting suspicious. It was unlikely, but she didn’t especially think ADVENT should be aware of what happened quite yet. This was something for the Commander to deal with. Which meant no transferring the video on the flash drive Quisilia had given her.

She’d checked it out on her own to make sure it was real, and surprisingly enough, it seemed to be. Had she not been there, and thus, couldn’t exactly be amused by what happened, the HD footage of Quisilia getting blown into a wall would have made her smile.

Still, even with psionics existing, some things were unbelievable.

Yes, see the person I was working with is apparently working with some entity that can blow Ethereals around like pinballs and has blue psionics. He also apparently wants to control our species as well. So when he was distracted by a nuclear explosion overhead, an Ethereal memelord pushed him into a portal which opens up somewhere in space, gives me this video, and teleports me here.

What? No I’m not crazy!

Abby shook her head. Aegis would probably know more about this than her, or at minimum at least the Commander would be able to make sense of it. She was in the base communications room, which while somewhat basic, was more than sufficient for her, and she could easily connect to the Praesidium from here.

It took a few minutes, but it was beginning to connect. She supposed the battle might have some effect on signal speed. She was in her armor still, minus the helmet. For one, it was comfortable enough that she didn’t feel the need to really take it off, and two, she was in a warzone and didn’t want to die here of all places.

“This is Central Officer Jackson,” a voice greeted. “Agent Gertrude, glad to hear from you. Though…I thought you were in Australia? What is the status there?”

Abby sighed. “Complicated. I need to speak to Zhang immediately. Be sure this is encrypted. Even then I really need to give this report in person.”

“Copy, where are you now?”

“Busan, South Korea.”

A pause on the other end. “Alright, transferring you now. This sounds like a story.”

“I’ll tell you later if you really want it,” Abby smiled grimly. “Although it isn’t a very happy one.”
There was a click, and Zhang’s gruff voice answered. “Agent Gertrude. Report. There have been… many developments. Was the Australian operation successful?”

Oh, boy. “Not…exactly. Sydney sustained heavy damage, but the Chronicler, and most of his army, are gone. Quisilia was there and was the one who survived his attack and prevented the city from being destroyed.”

“I see,” Zhang sounded suspicious. “How did you escape?”

Abby winced. “The short version is that our mutual Twitter memelord teleported me out.”

The silence was either in disbelief or Zhang was just stunned. “While I am glad you are alive… please explain why Quisilia would do that?”

“He said he had more to gain from me being alive than killing me,” Abby explained. “And the Chronicler was not who he appeared to be. He was apparently acting as an avatar of sorts for some kind of entity. Quisilia seemed to know what it was. Do you know what a Sovereign One is? You might want to ask Aegis.”

“A Sovereign One?” Zhang’s voice became more intense. “Are you certain those were the words?”

“Certain,” Abby nodded. “Quisilia was also kind enough to give me a recording of the entire fight. I’ve verified that it’s legitimate. I don’t know what he wants, but I need to get this back.”

“And this Sovereign One, it was against Quisilia?” Zhang demanded.

“Yes,” Abby said. “I wouldn’t get too excited though. It doesn’t seem exactly…benevolent to our own species. It warned the Ethereals away specifically because it wants us…well, I have the recording.”

“Strange.” Zhang said after a few moments. “You need to return to the Praesidium as soon as possible.”

“I will,” Abby nodded. “However, ADVENT is having an issue with an enemy sniper here. I’ve agreed to assist them. Once that is taken care of, I’ll return.”

“You cannot afford to die now,” Zhang stated. “What you know raises serious questions. No matter what, that cannot be risked.”

“I’ll make arrangements to have the drive transferred to XCOM should I die,” Abby said. “But I’m not leaving until this is done. I already said I would help, and that’s what I will do. If Quisilia wanted me to escape, I’m not going to squander that. Taking out a few elite Collective snipers would be sufficient repayment.” She looked down at her armor. “And the armor and weapon I have from the Chronicler are…well beyond what even XCOM has. I think I’m fairly safe.”

“Fine,” Zhang said with clear annoyance. “There is too much happening to debate this with you. I will be sending a skyranger to extract you and when it arrives, you are ordered to board it, whether you’ve done your part or not. Is that understood?”

“How much time is that?”

“Six hours, minimum.”

“It’ll have to be,” Abby nodded to herself. “I’ll speak to you soon then.”
“Good luck agent,” he said. “And do your best to stay alive.”

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*Mars Observation Station, Communications Center – Mars Orbit*

11/24/2016 – 10:16 A.M.

The Battlemaster was not wearing his full battle suit, but his original one that he would use until Fectorian finished repairing the new suit. Visually they looked so similar he doubted most beings would notice one way or another. But now it was time to make the Creator reign in her pet, since he’d been unable to actually contact the Hunter despite sending multiple calls.

It was highly likely that the Hunter had destroyed it, since it didn’t even allow an opportunity to leave a message. If he thought that would be enough plausible deniability to save him, he was sorely mistaken.

So the Creator would have to deal with him for now, although he certainly intended to punish the Hunter afterwards. Though to what extent he still hadn’t decided. That largely depended on what the Creator did. She would likely not be pleased with his antics, and he might consider that punishment enough.

The hologram before him materialized into a shape he didn’t expect. Instead of the Creator, there was instead a figure cloaked in an open black robe, hood down, with black light garments underneath. Strapped to the waist of this being was a dagger of some kind, but aside from that there were no other weapons.

The figure itself was otherwise what most would consider disturbing. It was a Vitakarian…or so the Battlemaster assumed, even as it looked very irregular to standard ones. The flesh, instead of being a shade of grey, had deteriorated to a chalky white. The body itself looked somewhat shriveled and gaunt, and yet the eyes seemed to glow a brighter blue than normal.

There were odd markings on the skin too; brands of some kind it looked like. The Battlemaster could clearly see them, especially the prominent ones on the forehead and cheeks, but he couldn’t even begin to figure out where they were from, which was…odd. While he was no linguist, he could usually identify from what species such runes, languages, or markings were from.

But he had never seen anything like this. More oddly, all the markings were interconnected and when he looked, seemed to form some kind of outline on the face of the Vitakarian. He didn’t even now if they were words or symbols. He had not expected the Creator to be branding her subjects of all things, or resort to such gibberish, for that had to have been what this was.

The figure just stared at him. He supposed it awaited a response. “I need to speak to the Creator,” he stated. “Inform her I am waiting.”

“*The Creator is busy,*” the figure responded in a raspy voice that somehow had undercurrents of authority underneath it. “*You may leave your request with me.*”

The Battlemaster was somewhat surprised. It was rare that any alien outright refused him, let alone one that looked half-dead. “This is a time-sensitive matter. I will speak to the Creator *now.*”

“You will speak to her when she is available,” the being repeated flatly. “*No sooner. No later.*”

The Battlemaster paused. “Are you aware who I am?”
The Vitakarian cocked his head, appraising him with blazing eyes. “You are the Battlemaster of the Ethereal Collective. This is known to us.”

“Then consider this an order,” he repeated. “I will speak to her now.”

“She cannot be disturbed,” the Vitakarian repeated. “It is imperative she maintain her full.”

“Let me be clear,” the Battlemaster interrupted, lowering his voice and speaking very slowly. It appeared the difficulty the Hunter was posing was not a fluke. What was the Creator doing that she thought ordering her thralls to refuse an Ethereal was a good idea? “I do not have time to debate with you. I will speak to the Creator, or I will arrive at the Blacksite itself and kill everyone inside and destroy whatever project your Creator is working on. You have thirty seconds to comply, and I will not ask again.”

He was almost hoping the creature would continue to be stubborn. It would allow him some opportunity to relax and he had wanted to stamp the Creator down for some time now. This was simply more evidence of her delusions, and the Imperator had given her entirely too much freedom and not enough oversight.

The Vitakarian was silent for a few moments, head cocked at the same angle, as if listening to something only he could hear. Then he suddenly straightened. “Please wait, Battlemaster, I will return shortly.”

How nice that the decaying Vitakarian was cooperating now. This was not what he needed to deal with; not when there was still an entire military operation to sort out. The good news was that the Creator knew he didn’t make idle threats, and thus he was expecting her to arrive relatively soon, regardless of how ‘important’ her project was or not.

Sure enough, several short minutes later the Creator appeared before him. Upon seeing her, he realized that it had been an extremely long time since he’d actually bothered communicating beyond reading reports. She looked very different, and it wasn’t surprising since it had been years even seeing each other in person. It wasn’t atypical for her, as she had become more and more isolated as of late.

Doing what, he could only guess at. But if even some of the rumors of her Blacksite were true, it was nearly as sickening as the crimes of Isomnum’s past. Yet the Imperator had decreed she be allowed to work in peace, and he had decided to respect that. But now, he was quite sure that might have been a mistake.

The Creator was clad in grey underclothing similar to that worn by Macula, and in fact had the pockets and linings filled with various vials, cutting utensils, and other micro-tools for precise genetic sculpting. Over that, however, she wore an open variant of an Overmind’s robe, one which was pure white. More curiously, the Battlemaster also saw the strange markings all over her robe and clothing. Not on the skin though, which he was halfway surprised at.

Yet it did raise questions. Just from that, he knew that something had been going on for some time and that he didn’t have the faintest idea of what it could be was a bad sign. Another problem of the Collective to solve later, all he needed now was for her to assist him. The Creator jabbed one of her gloved fingers at him. “I do not expect you to understand what you interrupted, Battlemaster, but I will not tolerate it-“

“Enough,” he growled, raising a fist. “Your projects and opinions do not come before the needs to the Collective. I. Do. Not. Care. You would also do well to instruct your assistants to be more respectful-“
“They did exactly as I ordered!” She retaliated angrily. “I do not appreciate threats, Battlemaster, no more than you appreciate them to your underlings. I will be speaking to the Imperator about your gross misuse of your-“

“Your test subjects are in no way comparable,” the Battlemaster stated flatly. “And you are less important to this Collective than I am, and as of right now, one of your pets is disrupting a major military operation. Your Hunter. Recall him immediately and deal with him as you see fit. Once you finish, send him to me.”

The Creator stared at him for a few moments. “Is that it? Did you dare interrupt me and threaten my work for that!?”

“Yes.” The Battlemaster did not like her genuinely infuriated tone. She had truly become more unstable. “Recall him now. This is not a request.”

“And what is he doing?” She demanded. “Is he simply not being a good little soldier?”

“He is disobeying orders and firing on Collective soldiers,” the Battlemaster said. “If you really wish for details, I will inform you later. But this must be done now.”

She chuckled. “In that case, I am afraid I cannot help you. I could, of course, send my own to extract him, but I do not see the need. Certainly not for a few unenlightened aliens. If he wishes to return, it will be of his own prerogative or if the Humans…” she paused. “Or the Collective, stop him.”

The Battlemaster didn’t believe that. “You would never set something like him loose without a means of restraining him.”

“And if I did, I would certainly not use it to satisfy you,” she growled. “You have wasted my time, Battlemaster. Do not presume to trouble me again or there will be consequences.”

She disconnected.

He was, quite legitimately, shocked at the sheer disrespect and arrogance she had displayed. Not even Isomnum was so dismissive or unhelpful. There had been a major mistake in letting her work unchecked and now she believed she was untouchable. That she was above the concerns of the Collective.

In which case, there was only one thing he could really do. He opened a channel to the Zar’Chon. “Yes, Battlemaster?”

“Recall the Assassin to the Observation Station and give her a new target,” the Battlemaster commanded, looking onto the projections of space where Earth was still spinning. “She is to kill or capture the Hunter. Give her whatever support she needs.”

“It will be done,” the Zar’Chon assured him. “In the event that she captures him, what should be done?”

“Bring him to me, if I am here. Imprison him if I am not,” the Battlemaster ordered. “If he speaks too much, cut out his tongue and repeat that as many times as necessary.”

“Understood, Battlemaster.”

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Busan – South Korea

11/23/2016 – 6:32 A.M.

There was good and bad news that Duri could visibly observe as the battle kept going forward. The good was that, aside from the persistent and taunting Hunter, the aliens had largely been unable to actually do anything to them. Every minor advance they made was pushed back my storms of gauss slugs and artillery, and snipers were continuing to decimate their back ranks and more delicate equipment.

As a result, it was almost inevitable that it would lead into the bad news, which was that the aliens were retreating to a point outside effective fighting range. Even Beatriz was saying it was difficult to get a solid target, although the retreating aliens did have to expose themselves as they retreated, giving ADVENT some briefly vulnerable targets.

“Question,” Cara said after she fired another burst from her M2. “If they get out of our artillery range, can’t we just bomb them?”

“Probably,” Duri answered, dusting off his rifle. “Although they probably would get shot down. I don’t think we know if they have AA defenses up.”

Beatriz snorted. “Do they look like they have any?”

Duri gave a wan smile under his helmet. “Good point.”

“That’s a good suggestion,” the Hunter suddenly interjected. “ADVENT, please send bombers out there to blow these disappointing aliens away. I’ll be sure to leave a few to do the job.”

He could hear the scowl in Aleksandra’s voice. “Found alien air defense.”

Duri almost rolled his eyes. The Hunter, for whatever reason, had apparently liked to listen in on his squad, as well as rotating through other squads. He wasn’t exactly flattered by the attention, since he suspected the Hunter was going to end this by killing one of them.

“Aww, I’ve never been called that before,” the Hunter gave a raspy chuckle. “I like you. You’ll live today.”

“Go fuck you, чуждый отброс.”

All that was returned was an ugly chuckle. Duri didn’t have a good feeling about what would come next. “Aleksandra-“

She suddenly lurched forward, dropping her rifle as her left hand seemed to burst into fragments of bone and bloody chunks. The normally stoic Russian screamed in agony and slumped to the wall, clutching the bleeding stump of her hand. “Nobuatsu!” Duri shouted to the medic as he and Beatriz immediately rushed to help her.

Duri lowered her to the ground while Beatriz helped remove her helmet as she was breathing heavily, all the color having drained from her already pale face. “Cheeky Human,” the Hunter chuckled. “Just because I find you amusing doesn’t mean I can’t make you hurt a little. Be a little more careful or next time, I might take off something a bit more vital.”

“This’ll only take a moment,” Nobuatsu told Aleksandra as he began spraying the stump with a medkit. “We’re getting something to carry you out of this.”
“He’s behind our line!” Beatriz snarled in revelation. “That’s how he’s able to shoot us!”

“At least for now,” Cara interjected. “We should probably let someone know about that.”

More ADVENT medics arrived, along with another soldier that didn’t seem to be wearing anything standard-issue. It looked more stone-like than what Duri had seen before. Either a new kind of unit, or maybe…XCOM? He didn’t know right now. “Not needed,” Aleksandra managed, standing up with Duri’s help, as she saw the stretcher. “I walk.”

Nobuatsu seemed to take a few moments to see if it was worth the trouble to argue it, then shrugged and motioned for the medics to follow them. “Fine, but if you collapse, you’re getting on there whether you like it or not.” He put a supportive hand on her shoulder and they quickly walked off to the better medical facilities behind the front lines.

“Take off your helmet,” the figure wearing the strange armor ordered, a woman it turned out. “He’s listening on the channels.”

Duri nodded silently and complied, and the woman did the same thing. She looked fairly young, short blonde hair, and attractive Caucasian features. American or European, clearly. However, her eyes were the hardened ones of a veteran, looks he’d only seen on the ones of his superiors or people who’d experienced tragic events. It looked wrong on someone so young.

“Who are you?” He asked.

“Abigail Gertrude,” she answered. “XCOM Intelligence.”

He raised an eyebrow. What exactly was XCOM Intelligence doing here, and as far as he could tell, she wasn’t especially blending in. And why would XCOM send an intelligence agent to a warzone? That wasn’t their forte, if he remembered right. Still, any XCOM soldiers were better than none. “How can I help?”

“I just need some information,” she nodded to the now-bloodstained area which Aleksandra had occupied. “I’m working with some ADVENT personnel to remove this Hunter. The shot came from behind, correct?”

“It appears so,” Duri nodded. “Her hand was below the firing slit,” he motioned to the stained alloy trench defenses. “The only way he could hit that is from behind, or to the side. Of the two, one seems much more likely.”

Her lips moved to a humorless smile. “Excellent. Thank you, Officer. Should all go well, you won’t have to worry about him for much longer.”

Duri gave a single nod. “I hope so. Make it painful.”

Some amusement sparked in her eyes. “If I can, it won’t be an easy death.”

She put her helmet back on, and marched away. Duri turned back to the largely quiet battlefield that was interspersed with staccato gauss bursts. The Hunter had gone silent, and hopefully he was moving back to the alien line where he belonged. However, he doubted that he was going to go down so easily.

If there was one thing he’d proven, it was that he was brazen enough to believe he could shoot behind enemy lines without consequences.

Duri hoped that XCOM agent would prove him very, very wrong.
The final offensive on Hawaii had finally begun. The aliens, at least from what Sierra had seemed to observe, were pretty much running scared when they realized just how much ADVENT was committing to this attack. The aliens were seemingly retreating and only leaving a skeleton army to put up a token defense for the more valuable units to retreat.

Didn’t stop her from killing every single one she’d seen.

However, it did look like they were going to make Honolulu one which forced a concentrated effort from ADVENT. On one of the carriers, with Ted and Anna behind her, Sierra observed the final obstacle standing in their way of reclaiming Hawaii: The Honolulu fortress.

Not only were their AA defenses installed into the various buildings, and a short alloy wall with the remaining Mutons, interspersed with some new kind of augmented Mutons, which from experience, Sierra could say were much more difficult to kill than standard ones. There were also Cyberdisks floating and already firing at them, as well as Sectopods on the streets.

“Bad news,” Ted said. “There is at least one Gatekeeper there. Even I can sense it.”

“Well, Sierra suspected that those numbers would going to be culled after the first volley from the warships. Carmelita, and most of the ADVENT forces were holding back until the initial barrage was over, and now that ADVENT had air superiority, when the artillery hit, there wasn’t going to be anything to stop them from having air support.

“And here it comes,” Anna said gleefully as the weapons of the ships turned to the city. They fired with thunderclaps and bangs; dozens of ships firing in unison at the alien fortress, without fear of collateral damage or missing. The effect was immediate, and Sierra saw buildings begin crumbling, aliens dying, and explosions in the city itself.

This continued for some time, and the aliens seemed helpless to stop the barrage, and ADVENT seemed content to keep firing until the front line of alien defenses was nothing but scrap metal and rubble. “Gatekeeper is still there,” Ted updated, stepping forward. “Probably hiding if it’s smart.”

“With great pleasure,” Anna said, raising her rifle. “Seraph?”

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She activated her jets, angled herself towards the island, and blasted forward. On the way she did one final check that everything was working. Probably not needed, but she had nothing else to really focus on as the majority of initial defenses had been destroyed by the barrage. “Cyberdisks on approach,” Anna said, as Sierra saw the flying disks in the distance. They almost seemed
confused, not sure where to target first as the list of targets approaching was overwhelming. “I want to try something.”

“Off you go,” Sierra acknowledged as Anna boosted forward towards one of the Cyberdisks, while she readied her flamethrower for the other ones. Ted’s arms glowed with purple energy as he also prepared to fight whatever was left. Anna pulled a turn that the Cyberdisk couldn’t follow and was close enough to grab one of the barrels of the machine.

She thrust upward and tossed a grenade into its innards, then boosted off. It exploded in a ball of white and orange, while Sierra unleashed her flamethrower on the other floating Cyberdisks. It was somewhat ironic that something so simple as fire was the largest weakness of this armored enemy. The aliens would have to fireproof these if they ever wanted to fight an Archangel in the future, and live.

Ted was continuing his own barrage of psionic energy against the Cyberdisks, and as it turned out, psionics had a similar effect to fire in that it destroyed all the vital components that were foolishly exposed when the Cyberdisk was open. Sierra didn’t know how long it took, as they literally flew circles around the Cyberdisks, and the alien forces on the ground were already occupied with the invading ADVENT and XCOM forces.

As the last Cyberdisk fell, Sierra quickly looked down at the city to see ADVENT forces swarming over it like a black horde, and near Pearl Harbor was Carmelita and her squad. Fitting that the stronghold of the aliens was destroyed by XCOM. But her job was only to assist where needed, and now they had free reign to attack wherever they wanted.

“Pick your targets,” she ordered as they swooped down closer to the battlefield itself. “Save important resources for high-priority objectives.”

“Copy that,” Anna confirmed, right before she briefly landed in front of a trio of Mutons, executed them with her autorifle before they were aware she was there, then blasted back up into the sky. Ted disintegrated another team of Mutons, the psionic energy eating into the aliens until there was nothing left but scraps of flesh and armor.

Sierra preferred taking a more direct hand in helping, by flying towards ADVENT positions and then landing behind the alien lines before either shooting them in the back or roasting them with a flamethrower burst. It made her smile to hear the cheers and whoops when she showed up, because they knew that the aliens facing them were dead.

And she made absolutely certain of that.

How long they fought like this, she didn’t particularly know. A couple hours most likely, and with their kill counts reaching levels she had never really thought she would attain. That was, of course, before she had an armored suit that could fly. And a few partners to help her out. “Archangels,” Carmelita suddenly interjected. “We could use your assistance now. We’ve found the Gatekeepers.”

Plural. That was not good. “We’re on our way,” Sierra confirmed, redirecting towards where Carmelita was. “Anna! Ted! Behind me!”

Her two Archangels quickly formed up behind her, and a few minutes later they were over where the battle against the Gatekeepers was taking place. The two hybrids of flesh and armor were supported by some of the augmented Mutons, and luckily the Gatekeepers were in their shells, and content to fire their yellow lasers.
The XCOM soldiers were backed up by several dozen ADVENT soldiers and Priests, and the combined fire seemed to be keeping the Gatekeepers from getting closer. The XCOM psions were continuing to use their abilities as much as they could, but as Ted could attest to, the closer a psion was to a Gatekeeper, the more difficult it was to concentrate enough to use them.

Carmelita was firing her alloy cannon behind cover, although she seemed to be looking for an excuse to charge forward, but was held back by the danger that the Gatekeepers posed. However, the Archangels did not need to have that problem. But first the Mutons had to be dealt with.

Anna pulled out several Thermite Grenades and tossed them towards the augmented Mutons, while Sierra and Ted continued firing at them from above. The Mutons didn’t make any noise or signal pain as the thermite ate into them, but it was enough for the combined firepower of the two of them to take several more down.

“We’ve got Purifiers coming up,” Carmelita updated. “Keep them distracted a little longer!”

More ADVENT soldiers died to another beam from the Gatekeepers, and one of the white spheres decided to charge forward, only to be stopped by one of the telekine Templars, Pall, if Sierra remembered correctly. All of them focused their firepower on the Gatekeeper, and when Pall was finally unable to maintain the hold, it retreated; smoking, dented, and blackened from the firepower of the Humans.

Sierra winced as one of the plasma shots from the Mutons clipped her shoulder, but it was only a scratch, and she could withstand several more shots there. “Here they are,” Ted motioned to the four Purifiers who were walking up, orange fire within their weapons almost begging to be released. The aliens seemed to realize they were dead the moment the Purifiers raised their weapons.

They attempted to fall back, but it was futile.

Within moments the entire airfield area the aliens had occupied was engulfed in the fiery embrace of Chlorine-Triflouride. The Mutons fell to the ground, the metal that was apparently keeping them together melting and fusing to the ground. Although maybe it was simpler than that, as their flesh melted off them as well.

The Gatekeepers emanated some kind of scream that even Sierra could hear, before they exploded from the fire that seeped through the cracks of their segmented covering. Although it was more accurate to say that one exploded, and one just fell to the ground, shell mostly intact as it leaked grey fluid.

The Purifiers swept their flamethrowers over the area a couple times, before ceasing the torrent and stepping back. All of ADVENT seemed to stand and watch the flames crackle and spread, further consuming the alien body parts that remained. “I wish I had a camera now,” Anna said wistfully beside her. “These kind of memories are worth preserving.”

“Take some stills from our armor cams,” Ted suggested. “I think we have a few days worth of usable material here.”

Anna chuckled. “All we need to do now is start our own XCOM card line.”

Sierra only smiled at their banter. And with that, it seemed, the final obstacle was destroyed. Hawaii would soon belong back to ADVENT. And she was going to be there when they raised the flag once more.
"He’s on this side somewhere," Abby told the leader of their small strike team. Kwok Yeong-Gi had two other Lancers accompanying him, Tae-Hyun and Eun-Won, as well as two Winged Hussars from North Korea, Hin-Sang and Soo-Hyun. However, his main weapons were the Priest trio, all of whom were fairly powerful, and now that they knew the general area the Hunter was operating out of, they could likely begin working.

“I will need protection,” Myo Young-Ja, the Magus Protopriest Telepath ordered. “Once I touch his mind…he might realize we are coming after him. He will likely try to stop us.”

“Then begin,” Na Yong-Chol nodded, raising a hand and all of them were suddenly under a psionic dome. The telepath extended one hand forward, his eyes likely closed under his helmet as a slight distortion surrounded his figure. The Winged Hussars had also fallen to one knee, looking through their scopes for any sign of the alien.

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” Min Eun, the final Priest in the triumvirate noted, nodding to her particle weapon. “It doesn’t even look XCOM.”

Abby looked down at the grey stone-like weapon. “It technically isn’t. Let’s say that this is…very experimental.”

Min tapped her own chest. “What’s the figure supposed to be? I can’t really make it out?”

Abby knew she was talking about the strange symbol on her armor, which she’d also noted on all of the Chronicler’s soldiers as well. She hadn’t figured it out either, and she was debating it being a hieroglyphic of some kind, or a depiction of some kind of creature. “It’s alien,” she finally said. “We’re…not completely sure what it means yet.”

“Ah.”

“So once we locate him, what do we do?” Tae asked Yeong. “If he detects Myo, I doubt he’s going to stay in one place.”

“Unlikely,” Yeong agreed slowly, pressing a button on his wrist. “However, I have three artillery teams standing by once we have his location. He doesn’t need to stay long. Just enough for us to level the building he’s residing in.”

“And what if it’s a hospital or destroying it hurts us?” Eun questioned.

“Then we do this the hard way,” Yeong said. “Snipers don’t do well under pressure. Whoever he is, I doubt he can withstand a telepath for long.” He motioned behind him. “And we have two more to keep him under control.”

“Capture or kill?”

“Capture if we can, kill if it’s not possible.”

“Copy.”

They waited for a few minutes. “I have located the mind,” the layered voice of Myo stated.
“Subtler than I was expecting. He is definitely a psion, and I have avoided direct contact.”

Yeong nodded. “Can you break through? And how powerful is he?”

“I can likely occupy him,” Myo answered. “He does not appear to be powerful. I cannot determine his species, but it is not an Ethereal or Sectoid.”

“Wait…” Abby furrowed her eyebrows. “It’s a psion…but supposedly not from an actual psionic species? It isn’t a Human, you’re sure?”

“Positive,” Myo assured her, hand lowering to his side. “And yes, he is definitely not a Sectoid or Ethereal.”

“This is probably one of those isolated psionic aliens,” Abby said. “You’ve seen or heard of the Warlock, right? That isn’t the only one. I’ve fought another one in Australia, an assassin of some kind with similar abilities.” She looked towards the buildings. “This sounds like another one. We can’t underestimate it. These things seem to be impossible to kill.”

“Then this will be the first,” Yeong stated, giving her an approving nod. “I appreciate the information. Myo, where is he?”

The telepath pointed towards a rather nondescript building some ways behind the ADVENT line, a small five-storied building that didn’t seem to be containing anything useful. “I don’t see anything,” Soo-Hyun said, looking through her scope.

“He probably has cloaking, and I doubt he’s on the roof,” Abby guessed. “But that doesn’t look important.”

“No, I don’t believe it is,” Yeong said, turning to Myo as he was tapping on his wristpad. “Myo, lock down his mind on my command. Keep him in place until the artillery hits.”

“I’m ready when you are,” he nodded, nearly imperceptible barriers surrounding him once more.

Yeong simply nodded, and after a few tense minutes, he finally turned to the telepath.

“Do it now.”

The moment he spoke that, missiles streaked towards the building and it lit up in a series of spectacular explosions. The ground rumbled as the building collapsed and rubble fell to the ground. “Move forward!” Yeong ordered, and the soldiers began dashing towards the collapsed building. Myo stayed in place, still presumably assaulitng the Hunter.

“He’s stronger than I assumed,” Myo grunted. “But it seems all he knows is defense. I can’t get much from him, but he’s still alive and he can’t move far.”

The rest of the ADVENT forces had cleared out as they approached the dusty rubble, the streets clear of any distractions of equipment, as ADVENT had made sure to have as swift of access as possible throughout the city. Abby saw something on the roof of a nearby building, almost seeming to mirror their motions. She glanced up and her blood froze.

The figure vanished into thin air and then reappeared on the ground, a short distance in front of them. “Look out!” Abby warned, raising her weapon as all of them skidded to a stop. “It’s another one of them!”

The Assassin suddenly looked in their direction, almost as if she hadn’t seen them there until now. Her blade was suddenly in the hand of the lithe figure, and raised in a mock approximation of what
Abby had seen the Battlemaster perform before combat. The Assassin wore the same armor as before, and appeared to be none the worse for wear despite her encounter with the Chronicler.

“You are here to kill my brother, yes?” the Assassin rasped.

Yeong stepped forward cautiously. “We are. And you as well if you threaten us.”

A low rumble emanated from the Assassin. “You would die. The XCOM soldier can attest to this. I was not expecting her here…and not wearing that.”

“The feeling is mutual,” Abby said, also stepping forward, weapon pointed at her. “What are you doing here, Assassin?”

“The same thing as you, I presume,” she answered, not wavering in her stance. “The Battlemaster is displeased with the idiotic actions of my brother, and I am to return him to the Collective.”

“We’d prefer to kill him,” Yeong suggested. “I don’t suppose treason is punishable by death?”

“You cannot kill him anymore than me,” the Assassin stated flatly. “My mission is not you. You can either help me here, and I leave, or you fight me and I kill all of you before completing my mission.”

“How can we trust you?” Tae demanded.

She was suddenly blasted back, and Abby saw a good chunk of her head simply…gone, presumably from a headshot. Their weapons turned towards the source of the gunshot, and they saw their first glimpse of the Hunter.

The figure was of similar size to the Assassin, although not quite as thin. The grey armor he wore was also similar, some kind of alloy plating over another alloy underweave. The symbol present on the Assassin’s chest was also engraved on his own. Unlike the Assassin though, a hood covered his head, and underneath it was a mask that was designed in such a way as to almost be smiling. The eye slits were lit with a bright blue underneath, but the helmet didn’t seem to be that heavy.

In his hands was the largest sniper rifle Abby had ever seen, which looked like it could easily be her height. At his side were strapped several pistols and a blade of some kind. He stood over the rubble of the building, but it didn’t look like he’d been particularly hurt by the artillery.

“My dear sister, consorting with Humans,” the Hunter tsked, chuckling as he appeared to reload his rifle. A psionic shield suddenly appeared in front of them once it turned their way. “And yet I’m the bad guy.” Another chuckle. “I’ve wanted to do that for a long time.”

The Hussars locked their own rifles on him, although the psionic barrier made it impossible to fire them yet. “So, Humans, you really think that you can actually fight me? Your telepath is annoying, but he’s…let us say he doesn’t know who he’s fighting. My mind is my own, and it will not be violated by a mere Human. Find me if you can.”

The Hunter suddenly vanished from sight. “Myo, where is he?” Yeong ordered, even as the psionic barriers stayed in place. “Forget breaking in, we just need to know where he is.”

“Just as well,” Myo answered. “I can’t break in. He shouldn’t be this strong. Give me a moment.”

A growl caught their attention, and the Assassin stood back up, a chunk of her helmet missing. “Traitorous sibling,” she spat. “You will pay dearly for your insolence, brother.”
“How the fuck…” Yong-Chol said quietly.

“Like I said,” Abby sighed. “They seem impossible to kill.”

The Assassin suddenly teleported a few feet over just as another shot hit the ground she’d been standing. “Stay down, sister!” The Hunter demanded, as he materialized on the third story of a nearby building. “I don’t like being interrupted.”

She blinked from their sight, and materialized in front of the Hunter and swung her blade towards him. He jumped back with surprisingly nimbleness and fired two rounds point-blank into her armor, one shattering the armor and the second going straight through her. “Fire!” Abby yelled to them. “Shoot him now!”

Abby fired her particle rifle and the Hunter slid to the side as the blue beam hit where he’d been. Shots from the Hussars did manage to hit him, and he stumbled back, just as the Assassin materialized behind him. Almost as if he predicted the move, he slammed the butt of his rifle behind him, knocking her off-balance before dropping the rifle and pulling out one of his pistols and firing several shots behind him without looking.

With his other hand he reached for his other pistol and fired down at them. “Ah!” Jin-Sang fell backward, blood seeping from shots from his throat. Abby didn’t know how he could pull off such a shot with a pistol, but he had done it easily, and was returning to the wounded Assassin who was struggling to recover.

He scooped his rifle up again, just as Min yelled and yanked backwards, and the Hunter went flying out towards them. A shout of anger reached her ears, and the Hunter somehow then used that momentum to control his fall and the moment he landed, he fired at Min and her head exploded into shards of armor and flesh.

“Do you really think I’ve never fought a psion before?” He chuckled in malevolent glee, reloading his weapon even as the rest of the soldiers fired. He leapt to the right and Abby saw that she needed to do something, so she did the last thing he would expect – she charged.

That got the Hunter’s attention, and he pulled out one of his pistols while holding his rifle by the barrel. She kept firing her own particle rifle, and when it hit, it easily tore through the armor and he negated that by continuing to move and fire at her. But unlike the other soldiers, her armor stood strong against the projectiles of the Hunter.

She felt the impacts, they made her stumble and came close to knocking the wind out of her several times, especially those to her head and chest, but she was still standing and closing in on the alien. “The fuck is this?” He demanded, as much in admiration as frustration. “Now that just isn’t fair.”

The Assassin materialized beside him and sliced down, and the Hunter, assuming she was aiming for a vital organ, moved back but she had anticipated that, and instead she sliced off his right arm. The limb holding the sniper rifle flopped to the ground, and the Hunter snarled in pain and fury. “Cheap shot, bitch.”

The Hunter suddenly tossed something towards the Assassin which she swung to deflect, but instead it exploded into a swarm of nanites that began coating her. “Tell the Battlemaster to come himself if he’s really displeased,” the Hunter snarled, punching more holes into his estranged sibling. “You’re clever, sister, but you’re no Battlemaster.” He sneered as the alien screamed as the nanites kept eating into her. “I’m guessing since you’re here your little mission to Mexico didn’t go as planned. You’re just another one of the bitch’s unthinking tools.”
A direct shot to his head sent him stumbling back, and Abby followed up with firing her particle rifle at it. She missed, but the slug from the Winged Hussar had apparently penetrated the helmet, and directly into the eye of the Hunter. “Gah!” He scowled, aiming his pistol at them. “Good shot! Serves me right for monologuing. But like my lovely sister…I can’t die.” Abby could easily imagine the smirk under his mask. “Sorry to disappoint. But I’ve put up with your distractions long enough.”

He began firing at the soldiers, but was blocked by a psionic barrier. “Cheaters,” he condemned lightly. “Not to worry,” he turned to Abby. “You’re an interesting one. I think bringing you back with me might make the Battlemaster a little less angry.”

“I don’t think so—“ Abby began, before the Hunter lowered his pistol and shot her leg, and this time she felt the projectile tear through her skin. She collapsed to the ground, pain shooting from her kneecap.

“ Took me a few shots,” the Hunter said, slowly walking up to her. “But there isn’t an armor I can’t pierce. Everything has gaps, even yours. So don’t put up a fight, and I won’t blow out your other kneecap.” He holstered his pistol, and reached down with his only arm to reach for her particle rifle. “And this—“

Abby gave a weak smile as the wires interjected themselves into him the moment he picked it up. The Chronicler had warned that no one but her could use it, though he hadn’t specified why. But that became readily apparent as the weapon exploded in his hand, blowing him back into the street, his entire arm and part of his side simply gone.

The Hunter groaned, and struggled to get up, though that wasn’t easy with no arms. And now another figure stumbled toward him. The Assassin had recovered, even if the nanites had reduced her armor to scraps and exposed her facial features as those resembling something oddly like an Andromedon.

“You will wish that this is the worst pain you can feel,” the Assassin hissed, as she planted her blade in the Hunter’s chest, or what was left of it, while she pulled out a small curved knife. “Because once the Battlemaster finishes with you, you will be judged the Creator.”

“Heh,” the Hunter gurgled, spitting some blood at her. “Let them. I will not die today, or ever—“

The Assassin grabbed him by the chin and made two quick cuts at the corners of his mouth, before prying his mouth wide open. Abby winced, but didn’t look away as the Assassin worked the blade in his mouth before finally tossing aside a tongue before hoisted the armless alien over her shoulder.

“Your assistance is noted, Humans,” she said, walking away. “We will meet again, but it is unlikely to be as allies.” With that the air simmered around her and she vanished, leaving them alone. Abby heard one of the soldiers rushing to her side once it was gone.

“We’ll get you medical help,” she heard Yeong assure her. “Don’t know where you got that weapon, but I think that’s the only reason we’re still alive.”

“Probably,” Abby winced, knowing that now they wouldn’t get a chance to research it. “I guess it’s a good thing only one of those aliens was against us.”

“Yeah,” he spared a look to where the furious battle had taken place. “I’ve never seen anything like that. Invincible beings. It was unnatural.”
“You probably won’t believe me,” Abby said as she let herself be hoisted up and hopped on one leg. “But I think that was the second-most dangerous recent experience.”

Yeong shook his head as he helped her walk. “I had thought it would be interesting to be part of XCOM. If what you do is like that, I think I’m quite happy where I am.”

“You’re smart.” Abby gave a pained chuckle. “I think you should try and stay that way. Smart and alive.” She glanced behind her and her eyes widened as she saw the Hunter’s sniper rifle lying on the ground, in the hand of the severed arm.

“Hey,” she said. “Can someone bag the rifle and body parts? I think XCOM R&D would like to take a look at that.” Yeong nodded, and motioned for the rifle and body parts to be picked up. Well, even if she didn’t bring back a particle rifle, the insanely destructive sniper rifle of the Hunter was probably a suitable alternative.

And likely one they would be able to actually replicate. And Vahlen would find the limbs of these aliens useful as well.

All things considered, it could have turned out much worse.

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Los Angeles, California – United States of America

Operation: Sherman – Day 3

11/23/2016 – 11:01 A.M.

It just wasn’t working.

Patricia had tried nearly every single technique she could think of to put what the Imperator had revealed into tangible action. But it was a problem of visualization. It was a problem of actually putting such commands into such a small, yet understandable format. She just couldn’t think on such a small scale.

It was like trying to think about things from the perspective of a cell. It just wasn’t comprehensible for rational minds. Ironically, an insane person might actually be able to do this better, since they didn’t see the world in a rational, logical manner. And that was frustrating to her, not because it was impossible, but because it just tantalizingly, infuriatingly, just out of her reach.

She knew she was close to figuring it out.

But time was running out. She couldn’t just stay up here forever hitting the same roadblock over and over again. People were counting on her. People were dying while she played the psionic manipulator.

She furrowed her eyebrows as she looked into the city. Not as much progress as ADVENT would have liked had been made. The aliens were fortifying their positions deep within the city, and had been using newer units such as the Replicas and Fectorian’s enhanced soldiers. Even some Spectres had been deployed, though techniques and methods from other groups, specifically from Geist, had at least managed to turn substantial losses into some kind of tradeoff.

Still, the Spectres killed more than they didn’t, and the aliens were being smart and giving their dead to the nanoweapons, and essentially turning one Spectre into four hundred. The good news was that they were being designated as priority targets, and Purifiers and Priests immediately
focused on them whenever they showed up.

Yet it was only a matter of time before they became overwhelmed.

And she just didn’t have what was needed today. If she could affect the living, they could win. But she couldn’t, no matter how much she tried.

In fact, she was now wondering if this was simply a means of the Imperator distracting her. The technique was sound, but perhaps only Ethereals could do it, and for everyone else it was a waste of time. That would be infuriatingly smart, and would explain why he kept bothering her.

“No, you can certainly perform it,” the Imperator answered her unspoken question, materializing beside her. “I am not petty enough to waste your time on an impossible claim.”

“Welcome back,” she said with some mockery, as he had basically disappeared for most of a day, and only now had decided to reappear. While it was nice not to have his voice in her ear, she had, for some reason, almost missed his company. Maybe it was that the mystique of such a powerful being was slowly undone the more they spoke.

The Imperator, despite being their enemy, did not seem evil. Or at least no evil than anyone else. Just on the opposite side. And even now he was more of a spectator than anyone actually invested. She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to feel about that. There was a piece, a motivation here, that she was just missing.

The Imperator seemed to be using everyone in this conflict, ally and enemy. One was put up against the other; both were tested and pushed to their limits. Vital knowledge was given to any side, either to prove a point to others, or simply to see if it could be done. The Imperator did have some goal besides idle chatter, but nothing Patricia could think of completely fit.

“You are getting closer,” the Imperator said, gesturing out to the city. “I suspect you would eventually understand it. Knowing what to strive for is a major part of any ability of this magnitude, yet I fear that your time is running short. The Battlemaster is planning to end this attack, and kill you in particular. You, nor any soldier, can stand against him. Not yet.”

“We almost killed him once,” Patricia reminded the form of her doppelgänger. “We almost killed him again in D.C. Of all your Ethereals, he is most certainly not the invincible one.”

“And with that attitude, you will be another of his victims,” the Imperator mused, stepping forward, hands clasped behind the back. “There is no such thing as almost killing a Battlemaster. All you have done is made him stronger. For each weakness you expose, he will fix it. Every flaw is one that he will mend if exploited. You cannot keep almost killing him, for all you will do is inevitably make him invincible.”

Patricia sniffed. “That’s a long time. And I doubt he’ll stand against a nuke.”

The doppelgänger turned to her with a smile. “And tell me Patricia, are you willing to nuke this city to kill him?”

She was silent. “I do not blame you,” he continued. “Yet he can be driven back. But you must act now. I can give you what you want. I can give you the perspective you need. My offer has not changed. It is a simple exchange of knowledge, nothing more or less. On that you have my word.”

“And how do I actually know that?” She repeated, the same objection coming to her as before. “You are more skilled than me. I’m not sure I’d notice if you put something in my head you shouldn’t have.”
“You certainly think highly of yourself,” the Imperator commented, the smile maintained. “And how, exactly, do you know that I haven’t been doing that this entire time?” He swept a hand out in front of him. “Patricia Trask, as I’ve explained before, I have little interest in turning you into an unthinking pawn. Manipulating your mind in such a way I find insinuates that my words and reasons are inadequate, and ultimately, wrong. One should not have to resort to mind tricks and such…” he paused, searching for an appropriately descriptive word. “Cheating, to make a point or change a mind. Some do not bother, of course, but I am not one of them.”

He extended a palm to her. “I am offering to help you. Assume your rightful role in this galaxy. All organic life is subject to the will of beings like us. It is time for a Human to join those ranks.”

It all came down to a question: Did she trust the Imperator to be telling the truth?

The answer was surprisingly clear.

She reached out and took the offered hand. The Imperator smiled. “This will only take a moment.”

There was no noise, no sudden flash; very rarely was reality so dramatic, she was finding out. But it was, in its own way, just as momentous. It was as if the puzzle pieces, guesswork, and experimentation suddenly fell into place and she understood. She knew now where she’d been going wrong.

It was indeed a problem of perspective. She’d been so tied to her own viewpoint and perspective that envisioning anything on a higher or lower scale was extraordinarily difficult for her to do. She was rigid in her thought patterns and perspective, and now that barrier was just gone.

She closed her eyes and extended her mind outwards into she found the first alien mind she could. One protected by the Overmind on the surface, but she simply looked deeper; simpler; clearer than she ever had before. Gone were the easily translated words and images, and replaced with pulses and simple binary commands that the brain processed millions of times every second.

The sheer volume of work the brain was capable of was one she could have spent hours marveling at, yet such a simple realm was now her own. She grabbed and observed the pulses, seeing where they were directed and what information they contained. It took time, it could have been minutes or hours, but she eventually began to map out the functions that the brain controlled.

Breathing. Pumping blood. The heart. The nerves. Even the deepest biological functions she had access to. Now all that remained was to exercise her power over it. And now her old methods could be applied in a different way. She simply changed the pulses to contain a different command.

In this case, it was simply to shut the brain itself off.

The moment the command was given, she was back into the present, with the Imperator looking at her knowingly. “And that, Patricia, is only a fraction of what you can do. You have the knowledge. Now use it to dominate them.”

Patricia gave him a grim smile. “You will likely regret this.”

“I don’t think so,” the Imperator returned the knowing grin. “I have done exactly what I needed to do. The rest…that is up to you.”

Patricia returned her focus to the battlefield in front of her, putting thoughts of the Imperator to the side as she began to do as he apparently wished. The aliens alive now were at her mercy, and she was no longer going to hold back. The Imperator was right about one thing.
There was no reason to be apologetic about using her power.

If it resulted in the unsavory deaths of aliens, then that was simply an unfortunate price to pay in this war. But there would be no mercy today.

The aliens would die. All of them.

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Sacramento, California – United States of America

Operation: Sherman – Day 3

11/23/2016 – 12:42 A.M.

The good news was that they were still alive, and in fairly good condition. The bad news was that they weren’t making much progress.

Despite finally getting reinforcements from ADVENT, the aliens were finally employing enough defensive tactics to hold ADVENT back. That, and they’d been far more liberal in their usage of the Spectres. Multiple offensives have been slowed to a halt once one showed up, and even with Geist sharing his tactics, they didn’t always fully work.

The aliens had also been sending a much higher ratio of aliens to their now-commandeered fortress, which had been under constant assault for…the past day? Nuan didn’t really remember, only that she had fallen into the pattern of moving, shooting, reloading, and repeating that. There were more Spectres, but those were immediately targeted by Geist before they could get very far.

The alien captives had been taken away, luckily, so there was no chance of those being lost. ADVENT had some, but Geist had ensured that XCOM took the ones he deemed the most important. Nuan didn’t know what they meant, since she hadn’t been involved in that deal, but it really seemed like the aliens wanted their fortress back now.

There were more of those mechanical Muton Elites, and even with the Goliath firing at them, the mass of enhanced and standard units was reaching critical levels. Nuan scowled as she took down one of the augmented Vitakarians, and then ducked down as a hail of green plasma shot her way, and continued unabated until a purple barrier appeared between her and the aliens.

“Thanks,” she called to Iosif who just nodded before erecting another barrier in front of some other ADVENT soldiers. She dashed to another place along the wall, and found herself on one of the corners, which did have some plasma turrets which ADVENT had repurposed. They were manual emplacements and given that Nuan had seen a concentrated barrage destroy a Sectopod, XCOM really needed to get working on plasma tech.

It was also the corner where the heaviest fighting was taking place, and thus, Geist was in the center of it. The man would never admit it, but even Nuan could tell he was getting tired and his concentration was stretched to the absolute limit. Now the man looked rather annoyed, even as he maintained three different barriers in front of hunkering soldiers.

“Need help?” She asked, reloading her weapon.

“Quite likely,” Geist said, sounding more of an admission than anything. “It appears the Overmind, or whatever Ethereal was protecting the soldiers, discovered what I was doing. Unfortunate, but it was unlikely to last forever.”
“What’s your plan?”

Geist eyed the mass of approaching aliens, a group of no fewer than twenty Spectres leading them. “Unfortunately, I think we’re going to need to call for help.”

Nuan glanced over at him. “Who?”

“The Archangels have been causing trouble for the aliens across the city,” Geist answered, pressing a button on his wrist. “And right now, we need a destructive Leviathan right here.”

There was only one Archangel Nuan could think of that fit that description. “Hammarström?”

“Hammarström,” he confirmed, raising the wrist to his mouth. “Seraph Hammarström, I request your assistance at my position. We have a severe alien overpopulation issue.”

“Wow, it must be bad if you’re calling, Geist,” Viktoria Hammarström answered. “On my way now. So what’s the situation?”

Geist walked to the edge, one barrier maintained in front of him as he appraised the situation. “I would estimate two hundred total enemies, with a minimum of twenty Spectres. They largely have the northern positions, and we are holding everything below that. I suspect more are in, or behind the buildings.”

“You care a lot about the buildings?”

“No. Raze them to the ground.”

“Got it. Hope ADVENT doesn’t mind the mess.”

Geist raised one eyebrow at that. “They would rather have a captured damaged city than retreating from an intact one.”

“That was a joke, Geist,” she snorted. “Seriously, you’re going to kill someone over a misunderstanding one day.”

Geist did not look amused. “Please do your job, Seraph.”

All he got in return was a laugh before she clicked off. It sounded like they’d spoken before, although Nuan didn’t know when that would have-

“In the Training Arena,” Geist answered her mental inquiry. “As a Leviathan, she provides an excellent means of testing my own abilities. She is trustworthy and is capable of doing as I requested.”

Well, so apparently Geist had people on a scale of trustworthiness. Lovely. She somehow doubted she was high on that list. “You are correct,” Geist nodded again. “As a Chinese operative, your split loyalties do not contribute well to an organization like XCOM where our loyalty should only be to our species. The Chinese have not proven-“

“Oh, shut up,” Nuan growled, really, really wanting to punch him in his smug face. “Do you really think that we don’t care about our species?”

“You are an appeasement to the Commander,” Geist said coldly. “Or rather, a peace offering. You are not a spy, but your loyalty is ultimately not with XCOM. That makes you untrustworthy from a practical standpoint.”
“We’ll see what the Commander has to say about that,” Nuan growled, turning away and ready to shoot some more aliens. “I’ve put up with your garbage for long enough. You’re no leader, and certainly not someone who should be a squad overseer. Have some respect for your soldiers.”

Geist fixed her with an icy stare. “You don’t need to tell the Commander anything. We have more important issues to focus on.”

It took a second, but she had to admit he was probably right. Any issues she had could be figured out after the battle was over, and maybe she was making things seem worse in the heat of battle. “You’re right,” she said almost automatically. “We have more important issues to focus on.”

The ghost of a smile flickered across his face. “I’m glad to hear it.” A roar overhead reached her ears, and Nuan looked up to see an Archangel streak overhead. “And it appears Viktoria has arrived.”

The Archangel hovered in the air, purple energy consolidated around her, and after a bright purple pulse, she extended a hand downwards to the alien line, and the entire battlefield exploded. It looked to Nuan as though a storm composed of nothing but purple lighting had descended upon the aliens. It was a blanket that covered it so completely and densely that she could barely see into it.

The Archangel swept her free hand in a semi-circle and the storm expanded further back. The buildings caught in the maelstrom first didn’t do anything but blacken, and the more delicate aspects of them were torn to pieces. Cloth was disintegrated, cars fell apart, glass shattered, and stone blackened and cracked.

The storm suddenly rose higher, until it engulfed not just the ground, but the very air that rested in the territory controlled by the aliens. The buildings were similarly engulfed, and after a few minutes of the purple storm, they fell apart as if only held together by poorly-glued stones. One fell, than another, then one by one, and the storm extended far enough that Nuan was almost sure it was a mile or more. At least five or six blocks.

Then as if a switch had been flicked, Viktoria let the psionic fire fade and the maelstrom almost died immediately. Nuan looked in amazement at the aftermath. The storm had essentially eaten away at several inches of the ground, no alien corpses were anywhere to be seen, the ground was blackened and the buildings were now reduced to small scattered stones.

An entire section of the city had just been completely razed. Geist hadn’t been exaggerating.

The psion looked towards the Archangel. “Well done, Seraph Hammarström.”

The Archangel gave a mock salute before speeding off, presumably to destroy something else. The battlefield was eerily quiet for once. The first it had been in some time. “We have a reprieve,” Geist stated. “Get some rest, everyone. They’ll be back. And if they aren’t, we will advance forward. Even if we destroy half this city, we will take it for ADVENT.”

His words were met with some cheers and whoops. Nuan also couldn’t help but feel emboldened by what she had witnessed. But she did wonder just how far they could push the aliens before they felt the need to hit back twice as hard.

She had a feeling they were going to find out what that meant.

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Los Angeles, California – United States of America
The Battlemaster did not like waiting so long to actually respond to threats, but Fectorian repairing his armor had forced it. In the meantime, he’d brought in enough Cleanser Ships to drive ADVENT back, and attempt to mitigate the ground damage as much as possible. The Hunter had been brought back and was currently regenerating in a very secure cell.

He would be dealt with after the battle was over.

However, now he had to figure out exactly how the Overmind was being subverted by not one, but two Humans. Patricia was obviously one of them, but he was not aware of the other. The First Guardian would likely deal with whoever it was though, and the Overmind appeared to have learned about the interference as the telepath wasn’t affecting his forces much.

Although that flying Archangel psion was another problem that was almost as bad.

Not his concern, currently, as the situation in Los Angeles had somehow gotten stranger. The Replicas seeded throughout the lines noted that the soldiers seemed to be suffering strange biological ailments. Some began throwing up, some suffocated to death. Others keeled over, and preliminary reports showed that their hearts or brains had just…stopped.

And it didn’t necessarily kill either. Some just collapsed bonelessly to the ground, and the medics hadn’t been able to figure out how, except for a far-out theory that all their nerves and muscles had just stopped working. No one knew what was going on, except that as a result, ADVENT was getting dangerously close to taking the city.

And now he needed to put a stop to it.

“I have located the primary center of XCOM forces,” the voice of a Replica updated as he stepped through a gateway. “GOLIATH-class MEC trooper. Accompanied by two XCOM soldiers. Sending coordinates and directions.”

The Battlemaster received the information, and immediately transmitted it to the Cleanser Ships.

“Begin orbital bombardment of all ADVENT forces outside this position. I will handle the ones remaining.”

“Acknowledged, Battlemaster,” one of the Andromedons answered. “Bombardment will begin momentarily. Transmitting target coordinates for reference.”

The Battlemaster flourished his blade and began dashing towards the center of XCOM activity. Along the way he passed dozens of Collective soldiers who had died without having a shot fired at them. He had only seen something like this…centuries ago, back in the War. This was a technique that he had only heard of Overminds performing.

While not a telepath, and such powers were useless against him, he had been required to know how it worked and the capabilities such a psion posed militarily. And this was a technique that, if he recalled correctly, hit lower brain functions and targeted the physiology of the targets themselves, effectively bypassing standard psionic defenses and supposedly extremely difficult to actually prevent.

What he didn’t understand was how a Human had been able to figure this out. The technique was so difficult, he presumed, because a psion had to not only figure out how to send commands on that level, but also conceptualize and envision something on as close to cellular as could likely be imagined.
Many Ethereals, if they were not master telepaths, couldn’t even begin to master that, although admittedly, actual investigation into such a usage of psionics had only really developed during the war, so perhaps that would have changed. But for a Human to learn it so quickly…it was unsettling. He felt there was something else going on that he wasn’t aware of.

However, if all went well, Patricia would die today, along with any XCOM soldiers accompanying her.

He encountered a group of ADVENT soldiers engaged with several Cyberdisks, and immediately dashed forward, slashing with his sword and decapitating half of them, before telekinetically grasping the other ones and snapping their spines. He barely glanced over to the corpses, since more soldiers faced him; surprised shouts and backpeddling punctuating their movements.

The ground suddenly began shaking as yellow streaks rained down from the skies and the Cleanser Ships began their bombardment. Unlike D.C. though, it was not just one or two volleys, but now a continuous barrage into the designated areas. Explosions punctuated by screams of pain in the distance indicated the bombardment was having the intended effect.

In the meantime, the Battlemaster continued his bloody path forward. As with D.C., he did not bother taking his time killing the soldiers, and focused only on the most effective attacks. Most of the time they didn’t know they were being attacked before he killed them. Instantaneous deaths were preferable, and he distributed them liberally.

He did not know how much time had passed until the Goliath came into view, but during that time the bombardment had not ceased, although it was now moving to other parts of the city. They were fighting a Sectopod and more Cyberdisks, although the Goliath was proving to be more than enough to handle even them.

However, the Goliath had never faced a Battlemaster before, and it never would again.

He was faced with the interesting prospect of fighting something that was actually larger than him, but it wasn’t insurmountable by any means. One of the XCOM soldiers shouted a warning as he dashed forward, though didn’t get another word out before the Battlemaster telekinetically snapped his neck.

Another hand thrust out and sent another XCOM soldier and nearby ADVENT soldiers flying back before the Battlemaster turned his full attention to the Goliath who had now moved to face him. The MEC began firing at him with the railgun weapon, while slots opened up on the shoulder that immediately shot missiles his direction.

The Battlemaster had two options: Dodge or catch.

He skidded to a stop, planted his feet and created a telekinetic field to catch all the rockets and projectiles; once all were caught, he sent them back towards the Goliath with a gesture. The MEC was too slow to fully get out of the way, and took several direct hits to its torso. The ones that missed went randomly into ADVENT soldiers behind it, causing more damage.

The Battlemaster dashed forward and stabbed forward into a gap in the Goliath’s waist, one of the clearest vulnerabilities. The blade easily cut deep, and the Battlemaster pushed it close to the hilt, while lifting a hand to telekinetically catch the metal fist coming to punch him. A squeezed fist crushed the hand, and another grasp removed the weapon from the MEC and made it useless.

The Battlemaster pulled out his blade, and leapt upwards and buried it in the head of the MEC, the force of his attack forcing it to fall backwards. On the ground, he looked towards the chest where
the more vital equipment most likely was, and where the pilot probably would be. He used to hands to telekinetically pull the gaps wider apart, and followed up by stabbing downwards into the suit.

When he pulled up his blade, it was stained with fresh blood, so he presumed the pilot was dead.

He looked out towards the ADVENT soldiers, who were falling back in a furious retreat as they saw the MEC fall, as well as the steady bombardment all around them. The Battlemaster decided to take his time from that point onwards, as the ultimate goal was to drive ADVENT back now. If Patricia died, that was a bonus, and he would also like to learn exactly how she had learned this ability, but if he didn’t, he would simply keep attacking whenever she appeared.

He would kill her one day. It was only a matter of time.

“Battlemaster,” the Andromedon gunner updated. “We report that ADVENT forces have suffered severe casualties and appear to be in retreat in all sectors. Shall we continue bombardment?”

“Continue it,” the Battlemaster commanded as he killed three more soldiers. “Do not cease until they are out of range.”

“Understood. Maintaining bombardment.”

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Sacramento, California – United States of America

Operation: Sherman – Day 3

11/24/2016 – 2:18 P.M.

And the assault had been going so well.

Oliver supposed that the Collective deciding to shoot them from orbit was inevitable. The aliens wouldn’t want to lose their only hold on the United States, even if this would be considered ‘cheating’, at least by the standards of the Battlemaster. The bombardment hadn’t come down on their position yet for some reason, but Oliver and most everyone else chalked that up to the ships just not getting to them yet.

Although it wasn’t as large of a problem for them, since they were a moderately smaller, spread out group unlike the clustered soldiers at the taken fortress and the large groups of ADVENT reinforcements. He supposed it was lucky they’d decided to keep pushing forward otherwise they might have been targeted.

But now they were in the heart of the city, and they needed to make a decision about where to go next. Continuing the attack seemed to be, for most everyone, a bad idea. While they likely could continue forward and destroy the majority of the alien forces, and their proximity might deter orbital bombardment on their position, there was the slight problem of having absolutely no support.

ADVENT was beginning to pull back to some of the now-captured towns and small cities, a smart move at least to Oliver, but the consequence of that was they would only hold onto Sacramento, and probably the other larger cities. If they stayed, they would almost certainly be surrounded, and even Geist had to know they couldn’t hold out forever without rest or backup.

Not to mention the aliens, once ADVENT was driven firmly away, would be able to completely surround them and outnumber their dwindling numbers. It appeared Geist had come to the same
conclusion. “We will fall back to what the established regrouping point will be,” he said after they
had destroyed several Cyberdisks. “If orbital bombardment becomes a more likely threat, we have
enough Priests to provide some protection.”

“Probably a good plan,” the leading Protopriest agreed, nodding her head. “At least the way back is
cleared.”

“Yes,” Geist pursed his lips. “Unfortunate the Ethereals resorted to bombardment when their lack
of competence was apparent. This issue will have to be rectified shortly. Move out!”

Oliver did like how utterly dismissive of the Ethereals Geist was. He suspected even Quisilia might
be slightly hurt by his words. Although it would probably make one half furious, and the other half
probably wouldn’t be able to pick up on the subtle jabs. Too bad, it was at least one amusing part
of this whole situation.

They jogged back up the roads they had come from, bypassing the hundreds of corpses and wrecks
they had destroyed. Their casualties had also been extremely low in comparison, and at least Oliver
could be certain that they had caused a lot more damage for the aliens than they had received…
prior to the bombardment at least.

The tremors caused by it were becoming more apparent, and the yellow streaks from the sky
seemed much closer than before. Geist was organizing the defensive Priests in a sort of circle
around the soldiers, probably to create a kind of ‘bubble’ to protect them if needed. When they
were all close together, Oliver did have to admit that they were now an obvious target.

A good portion of them were XCOM, special forces, or Priests, but if they ran into an especially
dangerous enemy force, that might not be enough. They were now reaching what Oliver thought
would be one of the riskiest parts – the desolate area that Viktoria had razed to the ground. But it
appeared they weren’t going that way, since Geist redirected them around.

Smart move. It would take longer going around, but it was better to have some cover from the
buildings than being completely exposed. Oliver was surprised they hadn’t encountered any aliens
during their entire run-

“Hold,” Geist commanded, raising a fist as Oliver immediately had to retract that assessment.

In the middle of the street was something that was unquestionably an Ethereal. It almost
looked like the Battlemaster, but the helmet was wrong and the figure lacked the sword or the cape. It did,
however, retain the massive height and size of the Battlemaster. “Fuck,” he muttered to himself.
This was going to get bad.

“Who is that?” Nuan asked. “I don’t recognize that one.”

“The First Guardian, if I recall,” Geist said, narrowing his eyes. “Very dangerous. Interesting that
they are appearing here. I thought they were simply bodyguards of the Imperator. Which means
they must be here on his order. Curious.”

“Be curious about it later,” Oliver said as the Ethereal began marching towards them. Something
flew into its hand from the waist. A long cylinder of some kind. Oliver could see another one
hanging from the waist as well. “I think we need to do something.”

“We aren’t in a position to fight an Ethereal,” Geist said slowly. “So we need to distract him while
the soldiers escape. Guardians are telepaths. I will telepathically attack him while the Lancers and
Templar we have attack, and we will fire from the back. Everyone else go around and don’t look
back.”

An orange-yellow beam of some kind extended from the object the First Guardian was holding, the length of which looked disturbingly long, almost his own size. “Here we go,” Iosif muttered as he and the Lancers began marching out to meet the Ethereal. Geist extended one hand as well, the air once more beginning to distort around him.

As the regular soldiers quickly moved away, Oliver decided he might as well try and be useful and began lining up shots against the Ethereal. The First Guardian apparently decided he was tired of the slow approach forward and leapt forward, slashing down at one of the Lancers. She raised her weapon to parry, but once it hit it was apparent both that the saber the Guardian was using was slowly cutting through the weapon, and that he was much stronger than she was.

He grasped another Lancer telekinetically and threw him into a building, before another of those weapons appeared in his lower hand and stabbed directly into the first Lancer’s heart, killing her. He switched the lower saber to the opposite hand, and now they were facing a dual-wielding Ethereal.

Not good.

Oliver decided to begin firing, and the Ethereal didn’t seem to be fazed by him in the slightest as he began attacking the other Lancers and Iosif. The Templar had a psionic shield around him and employed them liberally as he attacked, which did seem to be able to resist the cutting power of the buzzing sabers.

It also became apparent that, despite outnumbering the Ethereal six to one, he was very, very good at fighting multiple enemies. Two weapons, and two lower arms for telekinetic blasts back made for very effective defense as he moved from attacking one opponent to another in a span of seconds. “Hold him!” Geist commanded, and the three Telekine Priests began anchoring the Ethereal in place.

That, as it turned out, was a bad idea.

The Ethereal thrust all of his arms out in opposing directions, effectively sending all his opponents flying backwards. He drew back one of his sabers as he seemingly prepared to throw it, and another blade appeared out of the lower end. So the weapons were double-bladed as well. The First Guardian threw it towards the telekines, and the spinning yellow blade easily decapitated them, as well as Moriai and a few other soldiers.

The other side of his remaining weapon was also activated, and the First Guardian began re-engaging the close opponents with a renewed zeal. The fighting style changed completely. The weapons were no longer exclusively in the hands of the Ethereal, but he used them as telekinetic buzzsaws, sending the spinning blades out short distances towards an opponent, cutting them apart before swinging them around to a different enemy.

Three Lancers were killed within ten seconds of each other, and Iosif was barely able to keep up with the barrage of attacks coming from all sides. The Ethereal extended two arms towards the Lancers and snapped their necks to concentrate fully on the Templar. The ranged weapons were doing absolutely nothing to him, and Oliver didn’t really know how they could beat him at this point.

Then the Guardian was suddenly frozen in a stasis field, a thin purple film surrounding his body. “We can’t beat him here,” Geist called. “Get back, I’ll maintain this as long as I can.”
Iosif disengaged and retreated to the remaining Humans as they began following the path the first retreating group had left. “What about you?” Oliver demanded.

“I’ll be with you,” Geist said, face beaded with sweat and an intense look of concentration on his face. “I just may be slower. I don’t have to be here to maintain the field. The psion is powerful, and thus, easy to locate. I will be slower, however, and his telepathic attacks will become more intense since he can’t move.”

“Fine! Fine!” Oliver said, as they all began running away from the Ethereal. “Then let’s get out of here.”

Geist nodded, and slowly returned his extended hand to his side, clenched in a fist. At a nod, he joined the rest of them in retreating. The orbital bombardment now seemed like the least of their worries when they had an Ethereal chasing after them.

Such things certainly gave him perspective on just how bad it could go.

And orbital bombardment was definitely preferable to this.

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ADVENT Military Command – Switzerland

11/25/2016

Over the past couple of days the security at ADVENT’s main military command center had, to the Commander’s subjective eye, at minimum tripled. It was completely necessary due to the presence of Chinese military officials, and the coordination between ADVENT and China that had taken place non-stop since the negotiations had been finished.

ADVENT and China had both agreed that they would not announce any alliance until the operation to retake Japan was well underway. He did quite like that the name they had proposed for it was Dǎotái, which roughly translated to Downfall. Operation Downfall. Knowing China, he suspected that the fact that it shared the same name as the proposed invasion of Japan back during World War II was not a coincidence.

The Chinese liked their symbolism. So did he, for that matter, and Operation Downfall it had become.

If it went well, it could very well herald a shift in the war, or at least more than what was already done. It was clear that the war would be different once the fighting died down, but this would ramp up the escalation to levels he honestly wasn’t sure they were prepared for. But it was ultimately inevitable. Escalation would come, and he preferred that they dictated the pace of this war, not the Collective.

It was unfortunate that Operation Sherman hadn’t been able to achieve its goal, but that had, in his estimation, accomplished the absolute most it could do. If they had actually managed to push the Collective out of America entirely, it would have been a miracle. But as it stood, they had pushed them back to deep California, Seattle, and unfortunately a growing part of Canada and Alaska.

That had always been a risk, but even now there were solutions being put into practice. He expected Saudia to approve them shortly.

In the meantime, he’d drawn back his XCOM soldiers to the Citadel for a brief recovery. Days of straight fighting took their toll, and ADVENT could corner the Collective in California without
their help, and Japan was going to be the operation he needed everyone to be on. South Korea was still holding strong, especially with that sniper taken out of the picture, although Agent Gertrude had been wounded. Zhang had given him a brief explanation of why she was there, and the immediate implications were extremely unsettling.

On one hand, whoever the Chronicler represented was no friend of the Collective. On the other, it meant that Aegis had lied to him, or didn’t know as much about the Sovereign Ones as he claimed. He was betting more on that latter. That was an issue to figure out when the operation was ended. China had proposed several strategies for dealing with the Ethereals that showed up, which largely consisted of throwing absurd amounts of soldiers and explosives at them, which the Commander felt was perhaps the most ineffective solution possible.

It was one thing if they were on equal or greater technological levels, and even then, he wasn’t a proponent of the ‘send soldiers on suicide missions’ doctrine. It was wasteful, lowered morale, and implied that whoever was in charge wasn’t creative enough to develop an actual solution. Granted, against Ethereals there really were no good solutions, but he didn’t approve of sending soldiers to die for the sake of it.

China was also definitely holding something back. The first clue to that had been their request to have several hundred terabytes of video footage of both the Ethereals and Collective. Reasonable, although he didn’t know what they would do with it in time for the invasion, which would take place in one or two days. The second had been that their commanding general for the invasion hadn’t specifically been chosen. There were clear advisors, but no main commander from what he’d understood. That seemed odd to him, but they hadn’t acted like that was even something worth bringing up. Perhaps they had decided that ahead of time, but it was still odd. The third had been the Chinese armor designs themselves. They were more based on the original Israeli prototypes, with smoother armor and rounded helmets. They were, of course, colored grey with red and gold tints. The aesthetic wasn’t the interesting part, it was what was in the armor. Because it appeared that China had made their suits resistant against EMP and given every single one extensive wireless capability.

It was arguably better than ADVENT’s, since the parts used could allow the wearer to communicate with someone thousands of miles away. It wasn’t the shorter comm ranges in typical ADVENT armor. Foresight or was there something else going on?

The Commander didn’t know, and he supposed he would have to see it in action. Soon everyone’s cards would be on the table, including his own. Now that he was in his private room, which he’d made sure to scan for bugs and listening devices, he pulled out one of the newer holocommunicators XCOM had begun developing. This one a direct line to Aegis. The Ethereal appeared in his hand, the ghostly blue figure appraising him. “Commander, you have need of me?”

He smirked at that. Not really a better opening line from him. “Yes, Aegis, this time I do. The operation will be starting within days. It is…highly likely that the Collective will send an Ethereal in retaliation, yes?”
“Almost certainly,” Aegis agreed. “I suspect Caelior. This is a situation where Battlemaster would be willing to unleash him. Perhaps Isomnum as there is no civilian presence. But given the choice, I would assume Caelior would be willing and able to fulfill the Battlemaster’s retribution.”

“Right,” well, here went nothing. “Which is why you’re going to ensure that China—and my soldiers—don’t get massacred in Japan.”

Aegis was silent a few moments. “I believe we have discussed that it is not time for me to—“

“Yes, we did,” the Commander interrupted firmly. “And that was before we were facing nanoweapons, our capital cities being attacked, and sustained orbital bombardment. It was also before we were using nukes as EMP weapons, having armies of psions, six Ethereals taking part in the war, and launching operations to kick the aliens out of our countries.”

He paused. “The war has escalated without your intervention. It is not going to go down. You’ve been an observer long enough. Your assistance with our science and psionic teams is appreciated, but it’s time you do more than that if you want to stay with us. Pick a side, Aegis. Refusing to help will not be tolerated any longer.”

The Commander wasn’t quite sure how he could realistically back that up, but at minimum it would force Aegis to either attack them, or leave. While having an Ethereal ally was an advantage, he had already provided them with everything he could. He was a useful psionic trainer, but they could eventually do that themselves.

There was little point having an Ethereal ally if they ultimately didn’t do anything beyond giving advice. He’d allowed that long enough.

“And what happens if that prompts the Imperator to respond?” Aegis said calmly. “What if he decides there is no point prolonging this war? You are thinking in the short term here, Commander. Yes, I could assist you, but there are consequences I cannot accurately predict, and ones you certainly cannot.”

“Then we deal with them,” the Commander said bluntly. “Aegis, what point is acceptable for you? Is it when Saudia dies? Is it when the Collective decides to wipe out a continent? Because of the danger that the Collective can just end the war? That isn’t going away. What you are doing, is being a coward.”

Aegis stiffened. “I beg your pardon?”

“Yes,” the Commander repeated. “You are being a coward. See, this might not be as serious for you as it is for us. You left the Collective because you disagreed with them. Fine. I can’t argue with that. But you also don’t want to commit to one side or another. You’re not doing anything, not because of some fear of escalation, but because if we lose...you want an out. You want to claim that you never fought against them, and everything you did was to make a point to the Imperator. That’s a bit harder to claim if you actually take a stand for one side or another.”

He narrowed his eyes. “For us, Aegis, this isn’t a disagreement, this is a matter of survival. You should know better than anyone the fear of our species being exterminated or enslaved. You don’t have to worry about that, as I doubt the Imperator would execute you, even if you did assist us, but we do. This is a war that your species caused, an unjust and cowardly war if I may add, and if you actually mean anything you said; if you actually want to show you are on our side...prove it.”

The Commander took a single short breath. “This is technically a request, but this is where you need to make a decision this time. Help us, and show you are on our side beyond your word, or
leave. There is no place for apathy for those in XCOM anymore. Help us or leave. That choice is yours.”

Aegis was silent against that for a few moments. “ADVENT will not like that you hid this.”

“I will handle ADVENT,” the Commander said. “And we had reasons. You stayed quiet in the assumption that the Collective would not escalate the conflict. This has changed, and there is no reason to hide yourself any longer. You should not be concerned about the Human reaction of all things.”

“There would be fallout,” Aegis noted. “But you likely know that already.”

“Of course.”

“This is curious,” Aegis mused, sounding oddly thoughtful. “You are the second one to accuse me of cowardice in recent days. The Battlemaster said something similar. I have never considered myself as such, but I hadn’t looked at it from those points of view. There is a self-preservation instinct I have, which is to deflect problems instead of solve them…and that is one place I can improve over time.”

He looked to the Commander. “Very well, Commander. I will once more take the field of battle. I can only hope that both of us are prepared for the consequences.”
Nuan flexed her mechanical fingers to make sure everything was working correctly. By the end of the operation in Sacramento, the damage her prosthetics had sustained was more extensive than she’d realized. The small patches and fixes had only been temporary measures, and by the end, whole fingers weren’t working correctly.

Not an ideal situation.

Still, even though they’d had to retreat, she was relieved to have something of a reprieve from the non-stop combat. She had never experienced anything like that in her life, and for that being her first time, she thought she’d held up well for the most part. Few casualties, and she’d been rather surprised when she’d seen her recorded kill count. She’d kept track early on, but it had become a blur rather fast.

What she wasn’t sure about was what they were going to do now. The battle had died down significantly in the US, and it appeared the Collective was content to hold onto their major cities while ADVENT secured the outskirts. Seattle was technically lost, but the Commander had told them that was a strategic decision, and there were teams working to sabotage, trap, and otherwise make their attempts to secure the city difficult at best.

Alaska was being steadily taken over by the Collective though. While the Commander had said there were plans in place, it didn’t exactly sound like a good situation, especially with Canada being threatened at the same time. Korea was still under attack, but that seemed to be going well.

But the Commander had been very tight-lipped about what was going to be coming next, which even she could tell was unlike him. He’d probably told Patricia, and knowing Geist, he’d probably read his mind to get the information, but she was uncharacteristically not sharing anything. Something was going to happen, and she was wondering how long it would be before it was revealed.

In the meantime, she was getting a tour of the Citadel by Iosif since she’d joined XCOM after the infamous attack. Although perhaps infamous was the wrong word, since she’d never heard of the incident until after joining. What was obvious was that the Citadel was extremely different to the Praesidium, and quite clearly constructed by Humans, whereas the latter was definitely repurposed alien architecture.

Still though, she did have to admit she’d gotten used to the silvery walls and rounded design of the Sectoid architecture, and that the sharp angles and utilitarian aesthetic of the Citadel definitely seemed subpar in comparison. With that said, she did have several questions, since the place was clearly in good shape and serviceable. “Why did you leave at all?” She asked. “I don’t see any lasting damage.”

“Ohly the Internal Council was really given the reason,” Iosif admitted as they walked the halls. “It was likely because the aliens knew where the base was, and there wasn’t anything stopping them from just trying again.” A pause. “We’re very lucky the Ethereals sent one of their own who was
relatively weak. I don’t think we’d be here if the Battlemaster had decided to lead the charge.”

Nuan furrowed her eyebrows and stopped walking. “So instead you moved to an alien base? One that they definitely knew about?” She crossed her arms, looking up at him expectantly.

Iosif scratched his head sheepishly. “I think the Internal Council was…counting on it being so brazen the aliens would never suspect it. And I know we extensively scanned it for bugs and the like.”

Nuan smirked. “A bold move. I’m rather surprised they haven’t done anything yet. They have to know where we are by now.”

“Most likely,” Iosif shrugged as they kept walking. “But they won’t do anything with Aegis there. He’s a good insurance policy.”

An insurance policy that seemed to have an aversion to actually contributing, but one nonetheless. She supposed having an Ethereal sort-of on their side was better than not having one at all. But still…she didn’t know the full details about why the Ethereal was only providing advice, but it was annoying to see these other Ethereals demonstrating how powerful they were, and Aegis was powerful, Iosif had said as much, but he still held back.

Why?

“And this was the old Mission Control,” Iosif said, continuing their modest tour, and stepping through the soundless automatic doors. “Which has apparently been restored to its old glory.”

The old Mission Control was actually fairly similar to the new one. It had the more angular aesthetic of Human design, with the steel floor and grey metal of the walls, but the core concepts were essentially the same. In the center was a massive holoprojector, and surrounding it were rows of computers and chairs for analysts, and there were platforms above acting as a second story.

Even if it wasn’t as aesthetically pleasing as the new Mission Control, the giant hologlobe was one she’d never get tired of seeing. “Seems to do the same thing as the new one,” she commented. “Some things just don’t change.”

“Indeed,” Iosif nodded solemnly. “Though not quite the same anymore.”

The legions of ADVENT personnel around certainly contributed to that feeling. She supposed she couldn’t really understand from the perspective of an outsider. But this was a defining part of XCOM’s short, but memorable history, and she was glad she was getting to see it at least once.

“This is where the former Central Officer and Van Doorn died, yes?”

Iosif gave another nod. “It is. Bradford and Van Doorn. Some of the first to actually fight an Ethereal. Good men. I didn’t know them well, but they’d always conducted themselves well and proved their dedication to XCOM with their deaths. It’s unfortunate they fell; we really could use their help.”

“Central Officer Jackson seems to be doing a good job,” Nuan noted as several spots on the hologlobe lit up. “I don’t know what position Van Doorn had, but I assume the Commander had a good replacement.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that,” Iosif corrected. “The Commander doesn’t pick bad candidates, and Jackson has done a good job as far as I know. But to be honest, she isn’t Bradford. She doesn’t have his experience or connections. I don’t think many people knew just how well-connected Bradford was. You’d never guess, but there was a reason XCOM ran so smoothly in the beginning
when faced with the...tense situation between the Commander and the Council.”

He paused. “I don’t know if Van Doorn has really been ‘replaced’ either. Maybe Patricia is supposed to fill that role, but while she’s a good psion, she’s no Van Doorn. He was...irreplaceable from an experience perspective.”

Nuan didn’t know that much about Van Doorn, but she knew his basic reputation, and even her superiors had held some respect for him. China had not participated much during the War on Terror, and that was where General Van Doorn had become more widely known. Ever since he had been indisputably the most respected military official in the world.

She supposed a loss like him was irreplaceable.

“All things considered,” Iosif commented. “Things could have gone a lot worse. If only all Ethereals could be beaten by a few telepaths.”

“Some can be,” the Commander commented, walking up behind them and making her stiffen at his voice. “Unfortunately, the ones we’re likely to fight aren’t. From what Aegis said, the Ravaged One was a...special case.”

The Commander paused. “But that isn’t important right now. Come with me.”

Iosif and her exchanged a look, and followed him out of the room and back into the hallways. “You’ve not been here, Nuan,” the Commander said without looking back to her. “Your impressions on our humble beginnings?”

Nuan cocked her head. “If you’d shown me this first, I would be highly impressed. China didn’t have anything like this. Although I will say the Praesidium is an improvement.”

The Commander seemed to find that amusing. “I can’t disagree, but I have good memories here...” he sounded wistful at that, before turning to them. “However, I’m afraid your tour will have to be cut short. Suit up and prepare for deployment.”

“What’s the mission?” Iosif asked.

“We are going to assist in retaking Japan.” Was the answer.

Nuan was dumbfounded. It was enough of a surprise that ADVENT was going to try and retake America, but attacking Japan at the same time? Was that even a good idea? Could they even do that without...well, she would say Chinese help, but that seemed unlikely. “Japan,” she repeated. “That seems...risky.”

“Oh, it will be,” the Commander surprisingly agreed with a nod. “However, we have a few factors in our favor. Namely that the Collective will not be expecting an attack like this, they are already damaged from the EMP’s, and in addition, we have some help.”

“I suppose the Japanese want some revenge,” Iosif said, though Nuan had the distinct feeling he didn’t mean them.

“Oh, they do, but the difference is that this will not be a primarily ADVENT operation,” the Commander looked to her. “It appears that your constant insistence on the benefits of an ADVENT-Chinese alliance have had a role in their decision to reach out.”

Nuan’s eyes widened. Was it really happening? “You’re saying...”
“Yes,” the Commander smiled at her. “China and ADVENT are at this moment, in a military alliance. It will be announced within several hours, and has been negotiated for roughly a week. They will spearhead the liberation of Japan, with our assistance. In return, of course, they will acquire the majority of the salvage and afterwards, we can iron out the details of a firmer alliance.”

Nuan knew she probably had a stupid smile on her face, but she couldn’t help it. This was exactly what she’d been hoping for, and it reinforced her trust in her superiors that she now realized had been deteriorating dangerously. But that was all gone now; they’d finally come around and she knew it was at least partially to do with her.

She really hoped she wasn’t dreaming, but if she was, this was going to last as long as she could make it. If China was going to take the step of working with ADVENT, it might set off a chain of events where the other countries began also working in earnest to kick the aliens off their planet. That was the best case scenario, and it probably hinged on the upcoming battle.

“Thank you, Commander,” she said. “For the opportunity here.”

“In this case, you’re more to thank than I am,” he answered, inclining his head. “But get suited up now. You deploy in one hour.”

“Yes, Commander!” She performed a hasty salute in her excitement, grabbed Iosif by the arm, a bit firmer than she intended and quickly began marching back to the barracks to prepare for what was possibly the most important battle of the war yet.

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Busan – South Korea

11/27/2016 – 10:11 A.M.

“Do you think they’ll ever retreat?”

“Doubt it,” Duri sighed, trying once more to line up an impossible shot at one of the barely visible aliens in the distance. Unlike Beatriz, who was still happily chipping away at them. If he’d realized that trench warfare was going to largely be him not shooting at aliens, interspersed with long stretches of absolutely nothing happening, he would have requisitioned a sniper rifle himself. He was definitely going to diversify after this.

“You want to try?” He glanced up to see Beatriz looking at him curiously, her sniper rifle slightly extended to him.

“How did you know?” He asked. “You a telepath and didn’t tell me?”

“I wish,” she sniffed. “No, but after seeing you act incredibly bored for the past hour and looking at my rifle, I figured you wanted to do something besides make sure all of us have ammo we’re not using.”

“Well, if you insist,” Duri grinned as she handed it over and brought himself up to a firing position. It was definitely much different than an assault rifle, but it wasn’t the first time he’d held one of these. He peered through the scope, actually happy to have some idea of where the aliens actually were instead of faint outlines on the horizon.

They did seem to be trying to mitigate ADVENT’s advantage over them, at least their barricades were kind of completed. Above ground, and technically worse than their own, but it was far, far
better than what they’d had before (which was nothing).

“Hey,” Beatriz chided. “I didn’t give it to you to use as a telescope. Kill some aliens, would you?”

“Easy,” Duri chuckled. “I need to find them first. Here we go…”

He knew he was going to miss before he even fired the gun. He was a fairly good shot with a rifle, but he wasn’t trained for long-range combat. He’d be lucky if he actually hit the alien barricade itself. Nonetheless, he fired at one of the Vitakarian soldiers in the distance. He saw the alien duck into cover, so he’d probably hit…somewhere close by…but it was definitely a miss.

“Ugh, shot wide,” he muttered, still looking through the scope.

“You’re not taking enough time,” Beatriz suggested. “At this range you can take minutes to set up shots, especially against humanoid figures. I could hit a Cyberdisk or Sectopod in my sleep—normally because those are closer, but I digress—but the small aliens need time. But you’re new, so I guess keep practicing.” He heard a pause. “This isn’t against the rules, right?”

“Technically, probably,” Duri shrugged. “But don’t worry, as your superior officer, you are just following orders. Doubt ADVENT is going to care all that much.”

“Hey, check above!” Miguel called from the back of the trench. “Looks like we have a skyranger incoming!”

Duri glanced behind him to see the sight of the skyranger flying towards the battlefield from the city. He’d seen the pictures, but he was fairly certain that this was the first time he’d seen a skyranger in person. They were smaller than he was expecting, but then again, they only had to fit in…what, eight soldiers.

“What is XCOM doing here?” Cara asked from her gunner position, sounding confused. “Yeah, it’s nice, but they don’t show up unless we really need the help.”

“Or they’re coming to end the attack,” Mana commented. “I suspect ADVENT doesn’t want this to drag out too long.”

Duri frowned. “XCOM is good…but they’re not that good. It’s going to take more than eight soldiers to end this battle here, much less the rest of the country.”

“I don’t know,” Beatriz said slowly, looking up at the encroaching skyranger. “I’ve heard the stories about their psions. Supposedly one of them turned Vegas into a tomb. Killed all the living enemies inside and ADVENT mopped up the mechanical ones.”

“Trask,” Mana nodded. “Yes. One of the most powerful they have. If she’s here, the aliens better run. If half the stuff about her is true, they’ll wish they had been killed by us.”

Duri didn’t feel the need to add too much to the conversation. If XCOM was going to help, good for them, and if they had something else planned, then that was also fine. But to his surprise, while the skyranger was getting closer to the ground, it was still flying over the trench line itself, and finally stopped, hovering a few dozen feet past the front line.

“I really hope XCOM isn’t stupid enough to do a charge forward,” Cara muttered. “Because that worked so well for the aliens.”

The first clue that something was off was that several of the alien soldiers began firing at the Skyranger, with as little accuracy as Duri expected. However, there were a few stray plasma bolts
that came perilously close, and the aircraft was suddenly enveloped in a psionic shield which instantly negated the green plasma.

The Skyranger door then opened, and Duri felt his body become paralyzed in terror. For the being that jumped from the skyranger to the ground below was not any number of XCOM soldiers.

But an Ethereal.

He’d never actually seen one in person, and this was not one of the ones that had been fought before. It was just as surreal as he had imagined. The alien was massive, at least three meters tall, but this one had a different kind of helmet. This one was more ornate and had some kind of open rectangle maw where the mouth probably was. It almost looked like it was screaming.

The Ethereal itself wore what at first glance looked like armor, and it did seem to be armor, but almost more ceremonial than anything. It clearly wasn’t thick, nor was full plate like the Battlemaster or even ADVENT armor. Instead it was more similar to…lighter types. Only parts of the body were covered, the chest, legs, and arms, and underneath was a kind of blue material.

The armor itself was masterfully engraved with alien patterns and…words, maybe? Duri didn’t know why he was focusing on the pretty armor when it belonged to an Ethereal. Also like the Battlemaster, a blue cape with gold embroidery fell from his shoulders.

Cara decided to speak for all of them. “That’s a fucking Ethereal!”

He could forgive her for stating the obvious this time. The skyranger flew off, and the Ethereal stood alone, not facing ADVENT, but the alien lines themselves. The entire battlefield had become silent; collective breaths held as they waited for something to happen. “Orders?” Mana asked breathlessly. “Shoot it?”

Duri couldn’t believe he was saying it, but the Ethereal, for whatever reason, wasn’t attacking them. “Hold on…let’s see what he does…he hasn’t attacked yet.”

They waited a few more seconds, and then the Ethereal began walking towards the alien line, purple energy beginning to coalesce around him. The aliens had stopped firing, but a quick glance through the scope confirmed they were just standing there in shock, still enough he probably could have shot them, even with his lack of experience.

The Ethereal was about a quarter of the way through no-man’s land when it raised one purple-enshrined hand, and slammed it down violently. A sheet of psionic energy materialized above part of the alien line and slammed down, crushing the barricade and any aliens unfortunate enough to be caught under it. More similar shields appeared and began falling down on the aliens.

Several of the Sectopods held back found themselves encased in purple boxes which collapsed in on them, crushing the machines instantly. The Ethereal was continuing to walk forward, all four of his arms moving in mesmerizing unison. The alien line was now littered with rapidly shifting, appearing, and disappearing psionic shields of various sizes of kinds.

That had apparently been enough to get the aliens to start attacking, though it was as close to a futile effort as ADVENT had had fighting Ethereals themselves. The Ethereal had erected a personal shield around him, and the ones that shot him found themselves bisected by shields that appeared to materialize inside them, or have limbs shattered when a low-form shield appeared to undercut them.

Cyberdisks shimmered in barely tangible prisons before becoming crushed. The barricades that
were capable of withstanding artillery fire were destroyed as if they were clay. Aliens soon forgot their mission, and with no Hunter to shoot them, fled as the aliens sent some UFOs, somehow believing that they would do the job.

Eight of the fighters fired at the alien from the skies, and all the Ethereal did was motion at them once and they found themselves encased in a form-fitting purple shield. Unlike the other ones, they were not crushed, but instead they fell from the sky like rocks as the shield likely prevented propulsion or any other way they used to stay aloft.

The alien was now three-quarters of the way across, and already he had broken the alien line and shown no signs of slowing down. Duri watched through the scope as massive Mutons were crushed into paste, and large groups of Vitakara were running forward, hands up and trying to convince the alien to spare them.

“What the fuck is going on?” Cara asked numbly. “Am I dreaming?”

“I don’t know,” Duri said equal awe in his voice. “But if I had to guess, I think that Ethereal really doesn’t like his brethren.”

“Uh…this is Chief Marshal Kong to all ADVENT forces,” the Chief Marshal said, sounding as shocked as they all felt. “Don’t, ah, don’t fire on the Ethereal…he’s apparently on our side.”

“Wow, I can see why he was put in charge,” Cara muttered as they saw the Ethereal down another wave of fighters.

“Quiet,” Duri muttered. Now was not the time for sarcasm.

“We have more information incoming,” Kong updated, still audibly shaken. “XCOM…apparently wanted to keep this a surprise. But everyone’s fine up here, the situation is normal. How are you?” A brief pause. “Please disregard that and prepare to advance forward.”

“I should ask him what his operating number is,” Cara snickered, jumping down from her gunner position. “Well, guess XCOM had more going for them than we thought.”

Duri grinned. “Well, you heard the Chief. Get ready to move out! We’re kicking the aliens off the country today!” That was met with cheers or acknowledgement as they prepared to do what they’d been hoping for since the battle had started.

Win.

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ADVENT Media Center – Switzerland

11/27/2018 – 1:02 P.M.

This was going to be something historians would talk about for decades afterwards, assuming they actually had a history to discuss in the future. It didn’t seem so long ago that she was up here, announcing Operation Sherman, and in truth, it had only been a week. It certainly felt longer than that, but this turn of events had given her some energy back.

Today the world would be forever altered, and the war would never be the same.

Not that it had been before.
The media room was absolutely packed. They’d been endlessly speculating on the rumors of the various people she’d been meeting. The good news was that they didn’t exactly know who they were in contact with. Most seemed to believe it was with the EU (who had denied to comment), the SAS (who had flatly denied it), or China (who had also declined to comment). It had been interesting seeing the speculation about what the effects would be if there was something announced with any of the suspected parties.

However, there had been zero discussion about another possible attack.

She allowed herself a smile at that.

The Commander was here with her, and had asked to make his own statement, which she had immediately allowed. If for no other reason than it was good for the public to hear from XCOM every once in a while. However, there was definitely something off about what he was presenting. Not only was Patricia Trask and Shaojie Zhang with him, the former in full armor, but the Commander himself was in his own distinctive silver armor.

She didn’t know what he was planning. Perhaps that XCOM was going to be assisting in the defense of Vancouver or South Korea? More likely he was wearing it for the psychological factor. That he had his sniper rifle attached to his back armor and the pistol in plain view, that was a more than likely reason.

The Chinese delegation, which would consist of President Qin and Generals Zhen and Kong would be arriving…any moment now. She was quite looking forward to the looks on their faces when they realized that the Chinese government was going to make a surprise appearance. Not that she could blame them. After this, she was going to be taking a short trip to China for a similar media event.

She wondered how this was going to go over with the Chinese people.

At a signal from one of the door guards, she stepped up to the podium and right on cue the doors behind her opened to let the Chinese delegation begin filing in. There was a burst of gasps, muttering, and the inevitable clicks of cameras going off by the dozens. Saudia kept her face controlled, as did President Qin as he took a place beside her.

Saudia rested her hands on the sides of the podium. “Thank you all for coming today, and as you likely expected, we have some major announcements to make. These will be primarily on the state of the war and the future plans moving forward, both militarily and diplomatically. There will be no questions today, but I will of course be speaking at length over the following days.”

She let her gaze sweep over the enraptured crowd. “The first announcement, is that ADVENT is officially forming a military alliance with China.” She paused intentionally to let the press do their work reporting and transcribing. That alone was headline news, but she felt that would be less important than the later announcement.

“Negotiations have been taking place over the past week,” Saudia continued. “Under normal circumstances, such an event would not be kept secret, but this was a special case as when the Chinese government, and in particular, President Qin approached us, they had a very specific goal in mind for this initial alliance. Mr. President?”

She stepped off to the side as President Qin took the center podium to the clicks of cameras. “Thank you, Chancellor. It has been a pleasure to work with you, and I hope our relationship will continue to be fruitful in the days to come.” The Chinese President looked around the room as she had before.
“This was a decision that was not taken lightly, but times have changed, even since the formation of ADVENT itself,” he began. “It has become clear, both to me and my advisors, that the time for neutrality is over. This is a larger concern than either of our governments; it is one that concerns our entire species. It is one thing to disagree professionally, it is another to have one fight battles for you.”

He nodded to Saudia. “The Chancellor and I know where we stand. We disagree on much, but in one area we are bound, and that is the defeat of the Ethereal Collective. ADVENT, for as much as they are criticized, is doing something that no one else is even attempting – they are fighting back. They have done so since the beginning, while others have stayed behind, either out of fear or malice – it ultimately doesn’t matter.”

Saudia couldn’t help but notice that he was making a lot of eye contact with European media as he spoke. “That will end today. China will not allow another to fight its battles, and this battle cannot have any on the sidelines. The aliens are the enemy. They will come to capture, kill, or experiment on your people, and that will not change regardless of if ADVENT fights back or not.”

His speech was far harsher than Saudia had anticipated, but she couldn’t argue with it. He was putting a challenge to the world: If China can work with ADVENT, so can everyone else.

“If countries are so foolish as to believe that the aliens will simply ignore them, they are willingly blind to the threat they face,” Qin continued. “They do not discriminate between Chinese, American, or English. They do not care for your homeland, only its people. It is time to put aside our differences between countries, and unite to fight and conquer this alien threat. China will fight beside ADVENT to accomplish this task.”

Another pause. “And to conclude this, I do not say these words as empty promises, but a harbinger of what is happening now. Chinese forces are moving towards Japan at this moment to liberate it from alien control, and return it to the Japanese.”

There was a predictable, though muted outburst from the press. No one bothered trying to hush themselves as Qin let them digest this. Saudia took the center once more. “As per our negotiations, China will take primary point on this operation, with limited ADVENT and XCOM support. This is what I hope to be the first of many victories between ADVENT and the People’s Republic of China.”

She motioned to the Commander to step forward. “Our offices will be updating the press on the current status of the operation in Japan, but it will be several hours yet. However, before this meeting is adjourned today, the Commander of XCOM will be making some additional comments on the status of their own operations and this recent diplomatic victory.”

She stepped down and the Commander walked up, hands clasped behind his back and looking suspiciously pleased with himself. While she was as pleased with this turn of events as he probably was, he didn’t exactly seem happy about that. It was a look that he was going to do something that would somehow overshadow what had just taken place.

She really didn’t know how that could be possible though.

_Just what are you up to, Commander?_

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Saudia was definitely suspecting something. To be fair, it was rather difficult to hide and he didn’t really have the desire, nor inclination to do so. He was allowed to have some fun with this.
Normally, he didn’t think there would be bigger news than this, but that was before the announcement that there was an Ethereal working for XCOM.

The press was going to have a heart attack today.

“Thank you, Chancellor,” the Commander began, once more nodding to Saudia. “I would first like to express my thanks for the leadership of both China and ADVENT coming together. This is a war than we cannot win unless we are fully united, and I am pleased to say that President Qin has taken the first step, and hope that many more will follow in the coming days.”

He decided to give them some more praise. It couldn’t hurt. “China has had a working relationship with us for some time, and the soldiers they have provided us with have more than done their part in defending humanity. XCOM I believe is the ultimate expression of unity; it is of people from all different backgrounds and nationalities coming together for the greater good.”

“While I do understand that such decisions on the scale of nations are more difficult than a paramilitary organization, I believe that we are seeing the first stages of such unity today.” He nodded to Qin. “As Chancellor Vyandar stated, I also hope that this is the first of many victories we share. I will be personally assisting in the liberation of Japan, as will the best of my XCOM operatives, including Overseer Trask.”

Patricia raised a hand behind him. Right, that part done. Now for the good part.

“However, today I do not want to simply focus on this, but about our enemy, though not necessarily in the way you are thinking,” he paused. “I have been in a privileged position these past few months, and have seen and worked to acquire knowledge about our enemy, for there is much that you, and even ADVENT, are not aware of.”

He paused. “But I am.”

The press looked confused, and he even sensed some confusion from those behind him, wondering where he was going with this. “There is much speculation on the nature of the aliens; their society; their government; their culture. Perhaps not in military circles, but certainly academic ones, and it is often ignored despite the prevailing saying that to defeat an enemy, you must know them.”

He tapped a finger on the podium. “Most do not, nor care to. Understandable, as information is hard to come by and often our survival is placed above the acquisition of trivial knowledge. However, I believe the time for that should be ended. There is much that should be known about the Ethereal Collective, much of which their own soldiers do not know.”

He rested one hand on the podium. “The Collective is much more fragile than you have been led to believe. They are commanded by an apathetic Imperator, a leader who allows the species to plot and plan on their own. The Ethereals have no loyalty to the species they command, but simply view them as a means to an end.”

Now he had the rapt attention of everyone in the room. “The Vitakara government is held hostage by the Ethereals and their people watched endlessly by the Zararch, killing or silencing anyone who has the audacity to ask questions. Even today there are those on their homeworld who resist the commands of the Ethereals, and each day more and more die.”

He paused. “Both President Qin and Chancellor Vyandar are correct. This war is bigger than any one country, but it also fails to state the scale of what is truly at stake. This is bigger than just one species. This war has disputed the fragile peace that once existed within the Ethereal Collective, and every day becomes more tenuous the more we resist.”
“All eyes are watching us now, those within the Andromedon Federation, and those of the Sectoid Hive Commanders. The Andromedons have been on the edge of civil war for years, and this conflict has only exacerbated the inevitable outcome. They are only held together by the threat of the Sectoids, and tensions between the species have been rising for years—and this war may force it to a breaking point.”

A pause. “The Sectoids themselves have been manipulated by the Ethereals from the beginning; the Ethereal Overmind bent their minds to listen to the Ethereals instead of rejecting them, and ever since they have obeyed as subservient pawns in the Imperator’s game of galactic control.” Some of the people looked slightly overwhelmed by what was being said, but he pressed forward. There would be plenty of time to digest it later.

“The point I wish to make here,” the Commander said. “Is that this is not only a war for the survival of our species, but one against the Ethereals. They have dominated and controlled all they encounter—except us. We resisted, and as a result, we are now what others undoubtedly look towards for inspiration. They fear what we are capable of, of what we have already set in motion.”

He allowed some time to think about that. “The question you all no doubt have right now is how I could know any of this. We have certainly extracted such information via our telepaths and interrogations, but it is not our greatest source. Not even the Ethereals are immune to the divide that exists within their Collective…” He trailed off.

“The time has now come to reveal that XCOM has been working with an Ethereal defector since the first invasion of Australia.”

The Commander allowed himself a smile as the room burst into chaos with everyone shouting questions and trying to be heard, and destroying any semblance of order. He glanced back at the entourage to see Saudia, for once, completely in shock. The blood from Qin’s face had drained and his generals looked especially stunned.

The Commander crossed his arms, waiting for it to calm down, but to his surprise, it wasn’t. He motioned to Patricia. “Silence!” She commanded, her eyes flaring purple, and within a few seconds the crowd quieted down and waited for him to continue.

“This Ethereal, whose name is Aegis, defected after he saw how our species had been treated by them. His reservations have existed for some time, and this was his chance to do something about it,” the Commander explained. “You will of course wonder why his involvement was kept a secret, and what we have done with the knowledge provided.”

He motioned to Patricia and Zhang. “We have pioneered technology used in ADVENT today, and even now are working on technology beyond even that of the Ethereals. We have provided ADVENT with crucial information about the aliens themselves, though not enough to implicate Aegis himself.

“But the question of why we have been silent? His reason was that his open involvement would escalate this conflict, and force us into an unwinnable situation. That,” the Commander punctuated with a fist to the podium. “Has not deterred the Ethereals. It has not stopped them from escalating this conflict. Nanoweapons; bombardment; terrorizing our cities and people. The Collective has escalated this war, and there is no turning back. They will not stop, regardless of his involvement or not.”

“But now,” he lowered his voice. “The time for hiding is over. As we speak, he is moving to destroy the Collective forces in Korea. Today, I can promise that the battle there will end. The Collective has feared his involvement, and now they will remember why they fear the power of an
Aegis.” The Commander looked towards one of the cameras.

“This is for the Battlemaster, and a message from Aegis himself. This is your final warning to withdraw your forces from this planet, or there will be consequences.” The Commander paused. “That is all. We will provide additional details once the current situation has stabilized.”

The Commander stepped down as the press rose up again, demanding answers, which he promptly ignored as he walked out of the room.

That had certainly been entertaining.

Although Saudia…he glanced over to see Saudia storming his way.

Saudia was going to have some questions.

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Command Room, Mars Observation Station – Mars Orbit

11/27/2016 – 10:33 A.M.

Quisilia put his skill with words to excellent use.

“This is not good.”

The Battlemaster had to agree. Now they were in the exact position he wanted to have avoided, with Aegis now indisputably taking the side of the Humans. He didn’t know whether to be furious at Aegis doing something so damaging as that, or slightly relieved that Aegis was, for once, actually taking a firm stand for something. That at least he could respect.

Going against the Imperator was not done lightly, and regardless of his reasons, Aegis had now proven that his little stunt had not been a means of making a point, but something he felt strong enough to fight his kind for. But at the same time, it severely complicated things. The entire war effort, which had already had its fatal flaws exposed, was utterly useless against an Ethereal of Aegis’s caliber.

Human psions had already thrown a wrench into this plan, especially with them being completed sooner than anticipated, but they were nothing compared to an Ethereal. No, the entire Collective military was going to have to be reworked to take this development into account. He was now going to have to prepare for Ethereal-level threats, not just moderately powerful Humans.

Aegis knew his involvement would escalate the war. There was little reason to hold back against the Humans now. The Imperator might not like it, but that was too bad. The Humans, with Aegis, were now a threat. Perhaps not compared to the remaining Ethereals, but against the Collective forces. The entire strategy needed to be reworked and overhauled.

“I assume the plan has changed?” Quisilia asked.

To make matters worse, Japan was now under attack by not ADVENT, but the Chinese. An influential power of the old power structure of Earth, but one he hadn’t really bothered to consider in any serious capacity. And for that, he was paying the price. The Japanese defenses were already damaged by the previous nuclear EMP attacks, with only limited communication and Gateway support established.

Not even all the soldiers were armed. There were no mechanical units. Even with a technologically
inferior foe in the Chinese, against a neutered Collective, he was not happy with his odds, especially with the Chinese seeming to send a large portion of their army to invade. Worse, they were far more coordinated and organized than should be possible.

They, with inferior weapons, armor, and tech, were somehow managing to outflank, outshoot, and destabilize their defenses and he was somehow at a loss as to how that could be. Not even **ADVENT** was this tactically good, at least not with the speed the Chinese were performing. Already they were invading along the *entire* southern coast of Japan, and seemed to plan to surround the whole island.

A problem.

“Yes. The plan has changed,” the Battlemaster finally said. “Our strategy has proven to be ineffective. Collective forces have had their flaws revealed. I’m ordering a full retreat and full lockdown of the countries we do control with direct Ethereal and Cleanser Ship support. Our offensives in Korea will be abandoned, as will Japan-“

He was suddenly thrown against the wall, only managing to twist in the air, to face a visibly furious Caelior. The air was distorted around him, and the entire room was vibrating. Quisilia had one hand holding a blade, and was ready to spring into action. But Caelior did not seem to care. “Coward,” he spat. “And I thought you were actually one of our greatest champions. But no, at the moment you see the traitor reveal himself you run away!”

The Battlemaster *really* did not have time for this. “We are not pre-“

“No!” Caelior roared. “You are not prepared. You are weak. You are scared of defeat. You are the reason our Empire fell, because when faced with an adversary, you run. You flee like a scavenger. You are no Ethereal, much less worthy of the title of Battlemaster. You are an only fool who would be beaten by primitives!”

“Choose your words carefully, Little Storm,” Quisilia said, his voice noticeably humorous. The Battlemaster knew that he was fully prepared to attack if Caelior became more violent. “As the Battlemaster can attest, running into battle for the sake of it-“

One of Caelior’s hands clenched into a fist and Quisilia was suddenly lifted into the air and thrown back, though he vanished and reappeared right behind the irate Ethereal. Caelior did not seem perturbed, jabbing a finger at him. “And you are a bigger coward than he is. You hide in shadows and believe that you are powerful. You have been corrupted by the Humans, believe them worthy of our attention and preservation.” His voice turned to a sneer. “I feel like you would prefer them over your own kind.”

“At this moment, I certainly do, Little Storm,” Quisilia said. “Do you have a reason for your tantrum? It’s highly unprofessional.”

“And what are you going to do, Shadow?” Caelior growled. “Kill me? No, the Imperator will not allow it. I was chosen for a reason, and I am certainly more important to our fight than you will ever be. Far more than *him.*” He spat towards the Battlemaster.

Caelior spun towards the window. “You can have our useless soldiers flee from Aegis in Korea. But I will not let Japan fall to a mass of technologically inferior primitives. That you would even consider such a measure is disgusting.”

“There is a reason for that,” the Battlemaster stated, resisting the urge to unsheathe his sword. “When Aegis finishes with Korea, just *where* do you think he is coming next? Especially if you
“Let him come,” Caelior stated firmly. “I will do what you will not and kill the traitor and present his corpse to the Imperator. He does not intimidate me.”

The Battlemaster hesitated. “You really believe you can kill him?”

“It is not a question that needs to be asked,” Caelior sneered. “You could not. Quisilia could not. But I am more powerful than either of you, and one Aegis is nothing compared to the power I wield.”

“I do recall the Imperator wishing Aegis be kept alive,” Quisilia mused.

“That was before Aegis joined the Humans fully,” Caelior dismissed. “The circumstances have changed. I will not allow such an insult to go unpunished. One who has turned their back on our own can no longer be trusted.”

The young Ethereal turned towards the Battlemaster. “I initially believed that I could learn something from you, but that is clearly false. You are clearly of inferior stock, and why you were preserved is something I cannot understand. But I will not tolerate it any longer. When I return, I will take control of this military operation and you can go back to the Imperator like the failure you are.”

Coming from anyone else, the words would have been somewhat hurtful. However, from Caelior, they only sounded as powerless as the Ethereal himself was. Quisilia simply started laughing, but paused when the Battlemaster raised a hand. “Very well. On the condition that Aegis dies. Do that, and I will relinquish command to you.”

“As if I need your approval to do such a thing,” Caelior sniffed. “But it is certainly something that can be done. Make preparations for the transition of authority. That includes the Zar’Chon, Quisilia, as you’ll be under me when I return.”

“Oh, of course, Little Storm,” Quisilia said with clear mockery. “I, of course, live to serve your every command. Although, once you return, of course.”

“And you will address me properly,” Caelior stated, stepping towards Quisilia. “No more mockery. No more names. I will be in command, and I expect you to comply, else I will inform the Imperator of your insubordination.”

Caelior was truly lost if he didn’t realize that Quisilia only answered to the Imperator, not the Battlemaster. Quisilia was usually willing to listen to him, and offered his own advice, but unlike the other Ethereals involved, he was technically not under the Battlemaster. But he allowed Quisilia to have his fun.

“I suppose you should prepare your attack,” the Battlemaster said. “My-“

“Strategies, tactics, plans,” Caelior growled with a dismissive sweep of his arm. “We are not common primitives, Battlemaster, we are Ethereals. We do not outplan our enemies, we crush them. The only plan needed is how painful I will make their deaths. You have forgotten much from the Empire, Battlemaster. We are the masters of this galaxy, and we will not stoop to the level of our enemies.”

“Go then.” Was all the Battlemaster said. “Kill Aegis. Do it.”

“We will speak shortly,” Caelior said, and spun on a heel and marched away through the doors.
Quisilia walked up to him, twirling the blade in his hand. “I would say it’s a shame he’s going to die, but really, I would be lying. I’m surprised you let him go so easily, it’s not like you were in any danger.”

“Caelior is not fit to hold a position in the Collective,” the Battlemaster shook his head. “He has become a liability, and I have seen enough to know he will not change. He will die against Aegis, and we will be better off for it.”

“Still,” Quisilia mused. “He would have been useful.”

“No,” the Battlemaster dismissed. “He would not. That is why I allowed him to leave. He has no use to us anymore, and when he dies, it will only emphasize the need for change.”

“The defection of Aegis will be a large blow to morale,” Quisilia pointed out. “And the very public death of an Ethereal will not assuage that, no matter how necessary it may be.”

“I cannot kill one of our own for the crime of stupidity,” the Battlemaster said, looking out the window into space. “But I can have them die to it. The Collective will recover, as will our species.”

“Very well,” Quisilia sighed. “I will inform the Imperator of this. Although I suspect he will not object.”

“That,” the Battlemaster said. “Is very unlikely.”

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Kumamoto – Japan

11/27/2016 – 2:17 P.M.

The Commander stepped outside the skyranger onto the shores of the now-captured Sapporo beachhead, as the Chinese forces deployed in square formations beside him and were already sweeping the streets of the city itself. The initial attacks had gone…almost suspiciously well, even with the massive advantage they had with the disrupted aliens and Chinese numbers.

“Geist, take Shun, Nuan, and Iosif towards the fighting,” the Commander stated, and the three dashed off towards the sounds of fighting in the center of the city. Patricia stepped up beside him, Creed and Carmelita close behind her. “Patricia, do your thing. We don’t need prisoners today.”

“Yes, Commander,” she nodded, and presumably began exerting her telepathic influence. The Commander then turned to see one of the Chinese squads walking forward to greet him.

“Commander,” the lead soldier greeted, voice heavily accented. “A pleasure. We have made excellent progress and we will likely have control of this city within the day. Similar offensives are already taking place across the country.”

“Yes, Commander,” she nodded, and presumably began exerting her telepathic influence. The Commander then turned to see one of the Chinese squads walking forward to greet him.

“Commander,” the lead soldier greeted, voice heavily accented. “A pleasure. We have made excellent progress and we will likely have control of this city within the day. Similar offensives are already taking place across the country.”

“Good,” the Commander said approvingly. “Estimated enemy defenses?”

“Their main weapon emplacements were taken offline by the EMP blast,” was the answer. “I estimate that they were not prioritized in the reconstruction process. They did not expect us to attack, and focused instead on basic power and living conditions.”

“Unlikely,” he agreed. “So what is the plan of attack moving forward?”

The soldier exchanged a look with one of his subordinates. “We will need for you to be connected
to the Tiāngōng Artificial Intelligence. From there you will receive further directions.”

The Commander blinked, and Creed stepped forward. “You have an AI?”

“Correct,” the soldier answered. “I am not aware of the specifications. You will need to speak to General Kong or President Qin if you wish further details. However, to be at your most effective, I highly recommend connection to the AI.”

Well, the suits weren’t sophisticated enough where there was a large amount of information within them. It was…likely safe to connect. But he would have to ensure that the suit wasn’t compromised when he returned to the Praesidium. The question of exactly how China had managed to develop an AI was one he would have to answer later.

“Alright, do it,” the Commander nodded. The process of setting it up was a short one, and rather anticlimactic aside from the voice in his helmet.

“Nationality identified: American. Ethnicity identified: Caucasian. Position identified: Commander of XCOM. Estimated spoken language: English – If this is correct, please state yes or no.” The voice was flat and bland, and didn’t have personality, but it was still neat to hear working.

“Yes,” the Commander said.

“Confirmed. Loading current objectives based on your current position. Based on previous combat data, you fight at long range with a sniper rifle and have unknown genetic modifications that improve mobility. Please confirm – yes or no.”

“Yes.”

“Objectives set.” The voice really was monotone. He couldn’t detect any kind of accent in it. It sounded purely like a computer, and he wondered if it sounded different in Chinese. “For your own safety, it is recommended that you follow all instructions. Failure to do so will lead to your death or equivalent disciplinary action by People’s Republic of China.”

The Commander smirked. “I’m not with China. I’m just helping out.”

“Noted. Documentation and systems updated.”

Huh, well it seemed it was more than a machine intelligence, which he had first assumed. He still wasn’t sure if this was an actual AI, or a machine intelligence. It seemed to be a highly sophisticated version of the latter, but not what he would define as a true AI quite yet. Maybe this would change. His HUD blinked and he saw the location he was being ‘sent’.

“Alright, I’ve got coordinates,” the Commander said to Carmelita and Creed. “Follow me.”

“I don’t think it wants us to follow you,” Carmelita said with a chuckle. “I think it actually has individual orders for each soldier.”

“The processing power must be absurd,” the Commander muttered. “Well, it’ll have to make do. Tell it to recalculate or something. Follow me. And be careful what you say, you could face disciplinary action by the Chinese.”

“Note: This policy no longer applies to members of XCOM.”

“Creepy,” Creed muttered. “I already don’t like it.”
“That is unfortunate. If you have issues with my performance, please inform your nearest captain.”

“Just…don’t distract me,” Creed sighed as he moved to follow the Commander. “I really hope this thing isn’t going to be an annoying GPS.”

The Commander almost hoped the AI would respond with a snarky comment, but it seemed its programming had limits. A shame. Hopefully JULIAN would have some more personality when he advanced enough. Shen was just going to love this new development.

With the AI watching them, they advanced forward into the city to test out its full capabilities.

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**Kumamoto – Japan**

11/27/2016 – 2:42 P.M.


The aliens were disorganized and fleeing. The ones that were still alive anyway.

There was no Overmind to protect them here, although for what reason she couldn’t determine, nor really had a desire to question. It made her job easier, and she figured it was just better to accept some convenient gifts for once. Sacramento had been an excellent time of experimentation, and thanks to the Imperator…expanding her horizons, so to speak, she was getting better at the micro aspects of telepathy.

That China had some kind of machine intelligence was…surprising…but it was something they would fix later. As of now she was more than content to kneel on the ground and simply concentrate. An artificial intelligence could not truly predict psionics, and she had elected not to allow the machine in her suit.

The Chinese hadn’t really pressed her on that. They presumably knew her reputation, and were quite happily keeping their distance. Right now she was in…an experimental state. She knew she was most effective when her eyes were closed, removing the possibility of visual distractions; she could ignore noises fairly easily by now, but she wanted to get better.

A master of telepathy would not need to have their eyes closed, but simply be able to perceive the world immediately around them, and what was far beyond them. This was as good a time as any to practice that, and so here she was. The result was that her vision was…out of focus; almost blurry but not quite. Sound was muted as usual, and her telepathic range was noticeably smaller.

But she would be able to overcome that. Eventually.

“I am impressed they managed to convert the CODEX for their own purposes,” the Imperator said, materializing out of nowhere as before. Unlike the rest of her vision, he was in clear focus, and this time taking the form of President Qin, and standing before several blurry Chinese soldiers as if expecting them. “Such a feat is worthy of praise, especially with such limited experience.”

Patricia knew now she couldn’t speak openly, but he was no doubt listening in her mind now. He’d vanished for several days, but she had expected him to debut once more here. Where did they get one?

“From the Dreadnought fragment,” the Imperator answered thoughtfully, scratching his chin with
one hand. “In your rush to harvest as many resources as you could, XCOM failed to find the primary CODEX module, and when the Chinese acquired it, they immediately began working on it.”

Patricia felt a surge of annoyance. And they never actually thought that we could use it? They were still in the Council, and had an obligation to turn over something of that magnitude to us! Nationalist scum.

“Mhmm,” the Imperator turned to her, smiling. “The Chinese do have much to answer for here, but I suspect now is not the time to force amends. If you truly must do something, simply extract the information from their minds. There are those here who know more about this modified CODEX than they let on. They are needed in case something happens. Not all of them are common soldiers.”

And you know who they are.

“Of course I do,” the Imperator confirmed easily. “And in the interest of maintaining our…working relationship, you may have them. I have no reason to protect the Chinese. They have stolen as much from my species as XCOM. Do with them what you will.”

The names suddenly appeared in her head, along with the general area of where their minds were. They were close enough that she could easily reach into their minds and extract the secrets that rightfully belonged to XCOM. However, she didn’t know if this was the right time. This was a battle, and her efforts were unfortunately better spent against the aliens.

Then again…why artificially limit herself? She knew what she needed to do, and all that was required was the strength to do it. But she was going to improve during this round, and made herself stand, while maintaining her psionic focus. The first thing she did was locate the alien minds in her immediate vicinity.

Easy targets. Ones that were trivial to her now. Primarily Muton and Vitakara, they stood out with their practically screaming minds; filled with the white noise of fear. A much larger percentage were non-combat services, probably engineers and technicians to repair the damage caused by the EMP.

Now, this time she wanted to be slightly more strategic in her telepathic efforts. XCOM could use more alien specialists, especially with China having control of a modified CODEX. She smiled to herself as she made herself walk forward, almost absentmindedly. It was strange, almost like she was not in full control of her body, but just propelling it forward by willpower alone, as if she was an avatar in a video game; an outsider of her own body.

In a way, she supposed she was.

She knew where things were when she walked around; barricades, cables, rubble, things she wasn’t necessarily seeing in her current dream-like state, but that she was nonetheless aware of. And right now, that was unimportant as she worked. She first isolated the minds of the alien soldiers, and gave them a very simple command: Prepare the specialist aliens for transfer. Subdue, but avoid hurting them. Upon completion, eliminate each other.

Simple enough, and it would instill the desired effect in the soon-to-be captives. The good news for her was that they were clustered, and she simply sent out a sleep command, and stopped walking briefly to acquire a more basic command of their minds. She slowed their beating hearts and made them physically feel more at ease.
Everything is fine. Do not worry.

She hadn’t noticed it, but she realized that she had something of a guard around her now, and at the same time realized that she’d somehow slaved their minds to hers, and were at the moment connected to her own. Interesting; she hadn’t meant to do that, but it seemed to happen so… naturally.

“You are getting more skilled,” the Imperator complimented, stepping beside her. “The telepaths of the Empire were as you are now; in full awareness of the battlefield and those around them. These men and women do retain their minds in your presence, but they are now connected to your own. Utilize them as you would your soldiers, no speech necessary.”

Patricia found herself nodding at that, and out of curiosity decided to try some more experimentation. She wanted them to take cover at an upcoming intersection that had several alien barricades, and the moment the thought existed, they were already moving in that direction. Towards, she noticed, a half dozen Muton soldiers who were coming their way.

A near-oversight, but one she would easily rectify. Without ceasing her walk, she narrowed her focus on the bodily functions of the aliens charging forward. There were so many ways to kill, as she was finding out the more she experimented and thought about the gift she had been given. But sometimes the simplest ones were the most effective.

Stopping their hearts was such a motion, accompanied by one of her hands slowly clenching into a fist. No more blood pumped through their veins, and within seconds they were falling to the ground, clutching their chests and moaning in pain as she walked by. Well, they would have been moaning had she been able to hear them.

As it was right now, they were just corpses on the ground; their minds flickering out like candles one by one. More Chinese soldiers around her followed her march deeper into the city, and she decided to check on the status of her captives. Most of them were dead. Good, that meant that their primary objective had been completed.

She motioned towards the general direction of where their prisoners were, and a dozen Chinese soldiers wordlessly ran off to accomplish her unspoken directive. And as she had something of a reprieve, she figured she might as well take advantage of the information the Imperator had given her, and located the minds of the Chinese operators.

There was no psion to protect them, and their minds were easily taken over, and she didn’t waste time poking around heads any more than she had to. She was only there for the information XCOM was owed. Luckily their minds were easily navigable, and she finally found the information on their machine intelligence.

She smiled to herself, even as they were “ambushed” by a team of Borelians. A raised hand in their direction and the simple command of die immediately took care of that problem; it was so easy she barely was distracted from her previous work. It was a simple command, which was highly open to interpretation. Most simply killed themselves, others rushed in suicidal charges, other times their bodies just shut down.

One command; many outcomes.

Ah, there we go.

The Tiāngōng AI, China’s purported only hope of retaining any semblance of independence. Unfortunately the men were not engineers, so there were no technical details memorized, but there
was a great deal about what it was capable of, what the usage of it was, and where exactly it was housed.

Interesting that they knew where it was, but then again, it needed supercomputers to truly run, even if China had also managed to fully restore the power source of the Dreadnought. Keeping this thing secret from *everyone* was near-impossible, and many actually knew, even if they didn’t know what it was for.

The location was known. XCOM Intelligence could investigate later.

It seemed the Tiāngōng AI had two main purposes; to give China a tactical advantage over any foe, Human or alien, by tapping into terabytes of video, satellite, and personal data and allowing that to dictate their battle strategies. The AI was supposedly powerful enough to provide *each* soldier with personal objectives and real-time support, such as falling back, advancing, or anything in between. This was in conjunction with every other soldier, and such a level of coordination would be impossible for anything other than a computer.

XCOM could certainly use this for the JULIAN Project.

The second purpose was to have some kind of leverage over ADVENT. It was an insurance policy of sorts, one area where they were more advanced than ADVENT. Of course, this wouldn’t last, but China would leverage this to get more from ADVENT than they might normally. AI technology was useful, and useful enough to potentially gain psionic technology.

China, planning for the future as usual.

Both the Commander and Saudia were going to be interested to hear about that.

With that acquired, she relinquished their minds and returned on her warpath, the soldiers around her waiting for her unspoken commands. “You would do well to prepare,” the Imperator suddenly said. “The Commander convinced Aegis to intervene. Caelior is at this moment preparing to attack.”

Patricia looked at the sharply detailed figure amidst the blur. *And you are telling me this because? It is appreciated, and we will prepare.*

“I tell you this because he is coming alone,” the Imperator continued. “He has no support, no backup. He has unfortunately proven himself a liability to my plans, and it is in the best interests of both our species that he is disposed of. Aegis will certainly assist, but this is your opportunity to face an Ethereal – and win.”

Patricia cocked her head. *I doubt he’s left himself vulnerable.*

“The Little Storm is an arrogant child who failed me,” the Imperator stated emotionlessly. “You know what can defeat him. I am curious to see how you do it.” He vanished.

The Imperator was a continuous puzzle. But if nothing else, she knew that he wouldn’t interfere.

She stopped, and adjusted her helmet to contact the Commander. This was one thing he needed to know about.

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*Kumamoto – Japan*
“[Two enemies located, recommend firing on leftmost alien. Species unable to be identified.]”

Nuan followed the instructions of the AI and fired at the alien specified. Unlike the intelligence, she could very easily see that it was a Muton, although its armor was not a pristine green and was covered in soot and dust. Not surprising that the AI had some kinks to work out, but Nuan knew that wouldn’t be a massive problem at least now.

Her euphoria over the whole situation was still strong, and the knowledge that China actually had been working on such a tool had only exuberated that feeling. Not even XCOM had something like this, and while it obviously wasn’t perfect, it was already proving to be exceptionally useful. She fired several shots into the Muton when it popped back out of cover, and combined with supportive fire from Shun, brought it down.

The other alien, a Cobrarian soldier, hissed as Iosif charged it swinging his mace towards its head. It slithered back and into a defensive barrier created by Iosif, with two more materializing to pin it in place. In desperation it tried wrapping its serpentine body around his, although all it achieved was getting itself shot, as the AI instructed her to provide supportive fire.

One strike on the head disoriented it, and as the body wriggled on the ground, Iosif pinned it in place with his foot before bringing the mace once more down on its head and crushing it into the pavement. The Chinese soldiers advanced forward down the street, past the corpses of the aliens they had already killed.

The AI itself had truly shown itself to be far superior to a standard commander. Much as she now respected the Commander, there was no way that he could have orchestrated such a thorough and meticulous invasion that even now was cutting through the disorganized alien line even with more limited weaponry than ADVENT or XCOM.

Geist had held back, refusing to allow the AI into his suit, and deciding to focus on providing telepathic support. Where that was, Nuan didn’t know, but for once she just wanted to enjoy the feeling of actually being in the position of power. Iosif was similarly enjoying the shift of the power dynamics, and Shun was like her, impressed with the Chinese Tiāngōng Program.

A good name too. She felt it was appropriate.

“[Immediate threats in the vicinity clear.]” it said. It did need a better voice. It reminded her of a GPS, only with less expression in the tone. “[Recalculating.]”

“Guess we keep moving until then,” Iosif said, joining her as they advanced down another street. The grey buildings around them seemed to have been largely untouched by the aliens during their occupation. Unsurprising, given the sheer number of them. They had converted some into bases or storage areas, but the majority were just abandoned.

“I’m surprised they are this disorganized,” Shun noted as she briefly knelt down by one of the Vitakarian corpses. “This is unlike the Collective.”

“That’s easy,” Iosif shrugged. “They weren’t prepared. This is close to their equivalent of D.C. coming under attack. Yes, they have a defense force, but they aren’t actually prepared.”

“A nuke did go off overhead,” Nuan reminded him.

A pause. “Fair point.”
“But they weren’t expecting us,” Nuan conceded. “Honestly didn’t think China would enter for some time yet. They’re cautious about entering this kind of situation.”

“Neither did I,” Shun agreed quietly. “But I am glad they did.”

They heard gunfire ahead of them as they got closer to the city center, and the AI immediately began giving her a short rundown of the situation. “[Soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army are currently engaged in combat with alien forces. Currently there are fifteen aliens alive, with one identified Muton and fourteen unidentified aliens. Engagement recommended. Please confirm yes or no.]”

She said yes of course, and was immediately directed towards cover behind several alien crates. There was a noticeable lack of cars or vehicles, or any sort of clutter on the streets, which Nuan figured was the result of the aliens clearing the cities out. But they had compensated with it by leaving clutter of their own in the form of barricades and supply crates which had been adapted as a kind of form of portable cover.

“[Target center-left unidentified alien,]” the AI ordered, helpfully flashing where it was located, and Nuan complied. It was a Borelian hiding behind several stacked crates, and her gauss burst forced it back into cover, although it didn’t do much to save itself as one of the Chinese soldiers tossed a grenade towards the alien, and it detonated right beside it.

Iosif charged two of the Mutons, swiftly lashing out and crushing their knees before finishing off with bashing their heads in. Yellow blood splattered from the caved-in skulls and Iosif was moving onto the other aliens even as the bodies were crumpling to the ground. As a result of his charge, the aliens near him were now in the unenviable position of getting out of there, and exposing themselves, or staying and almost certainly dying.

That was a choice she could get behind.

Nothing like the warm feeling of teamwork as she shot a fleeing Vitakarian in the back as Iosif closed in on the small group of aliens. They certainly worked well together, and for once, the aliens didn’t seem to be able to stop them.

However, she couldn’t quite ignore the fact that they were probably not going to like what had happened here. The alien response would be coming, and she was somewhat nervous as to what that would entail. This was a response that could not be taken lightly.

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Zar’Chon’s Chambers, Mars Observation Station – Mars Orbit

11/27/2016 – 3:22 P.M.

No matter which way this ended, Ravarian felt like they would never really recover from the damage this day had caused. When he’d heard that one of the reasons for the limited invasion was because they didn’t want to ‘provoke’ Aegis, he had assumed there was something more. That may be the case, but as it turned out, that had been a very good reason to do so.

The Andromedons and Sectoids were not the Vitakara. Their people were not quite as sheltered and controlled. Even the Aui’Vitakar would be outraged by this…not to mention the entirety of the Runianarch and Lurainian. Even the majority of the Zararch were not privy to such knowledge, and right now…well, right now many of them were in shock that this was actually happening.

The Elders were supposed to be united, invincible, and to be obeyed above all else. How could you
feasibly react when seeing such a being fighting against you? Ravarian was more worried about just how badly this was going to shake the units on Earth. He was fearing sudden and mass defections once the news of this spread.

And this wasn’t something that he could just make disappear. He was going to have to deal with this very real and ugly truth. Unfortunately, he still wasn’t sure the best way to handle it. The Vitakara were going to have to be treated with some delicacy, and trying to cover it up simply wasn’t going to work in this case.

The hologram display on his palm flashed again, and he sighed as he saw yet another message from the Aui’Vitakar, and he sent his pre-written reply which was the equivalent of ‘We will discuss this later’, the same thing he’d sent to representatives from the Runianarch and Lurainian.

This was as close to a disaster as he had ever experienced in the Collective.

South Korea was done for. He’d seen Elders fight before, but it was clearly apparent that Aegis was one of the most powerful they had had. Anyone who could single-handedly defeat an army was one not to be trifled with. What was worse was that he already had reports of Vitakara turning on their brethren once they’d heard what was happening, Mutons refusing to fire at an Elder, and even Andromedons immediately surrendering and then shooting anyone who didn’t comply.

He didn’t know how ADVENT would handle that, but that, he felt was going to only escalate the growing divisions within the Collective. The Ethereals couldn’t just sit this one out like they had been doing; for once they would need to exercise some diplomacy if they wanted to retain some measure of stability in the Collective.

The Andromedons were already furious with the development of the Spectres, and the news that the defection of an Ethereal had been kept from them was not going to help. The Federation itself was formally demanding an answer from the Imperator himself, and some of the smaller Unions were openly suggesting that the Ethereals were no longer worth following.

That alone was troubling since the smaller Unions very often worked as mouthpieces for the major Unions to say what they usually wouldn’t. But what worried him about this was that it wasn’t just the obvious suspects saying this through their Union puppets, like Viarior or Apear, but the ones who were known supporters of the Ethereals like Stuirah and Jamoiar.

That was bad.

Very, very bad.

This entire situation could be summed up as bad.

And then there were the Sectoids.

Who were now preparing to hold one of the exceptionally rare conferences of the Hive Commanders, put forth by none other than 001 himself, as if it would be anyone else. And Ravarian suspected it was going to be due to the Commander’s little speech where he alluded to the suggestion that the Hive Commanders had been initially controlled by the Ethereals.

If that were true, he couldn’t really say. Quisilia hadn’t shared that with him, but he honestly wouldn’t be surprised at that. And having an Ethereal on his side suddenly gave his word a lot more weight.

The greatest threat Aegis posed, Ravarian was starting to suspect, wasn’t necessarily his power.
It was what he knew.

He very likely knew what the Imperator had planned. He knew the secrets of the Ethereals. He knew what they had done and what they were planning. He knew about the Blacksites and the stains of the species such as Isomnum and the Creator. And he had no reason to keep that a secret any longer.

Ravarian was curious now: What exactly had pushed him to not only leave, but willingly fight against his brethren?

Quisilia had a lot of explaining to do.

No, the Ethereals had a lot of explaining to do. And this time, he wasn’t going to accept dancing around the question. This entire situation was the result of at least one or more Ethereals fucking up, and while he would have been more understanding if they had…well, largely interacted with the collective they had made, they hadn’t, with only a couple exceptions. They would have to fix this themselves or watch it fall apart around them.

The reveal of Aegis had effectively changed how this war was interpreted now. It was no longer against a single species, but now against an Ethereal. No matter how much the Humans would deny it, that was what it had turned into. And said Ethereal now had an entire species backing him; one filled with psions and an ever-improving military.

Yes. This was very bad.

And of course Caelior was going to make it worse. Ravarian did not honestly know what he was thinking with his decision to go down and actually fight the Humans. Now was not the time for revenge, much as he would wish. The Collective itself needed to be stabilized before the focus could return to Earth. Ravarian was not entirely unconvinced that the only reason the Battlemaster was letting him go down was to die, especially since he had given orders to ignore any commands Caelior might send. The only thing he had allowed was moving Cleanser Ships into position over Japan.

Well, the Ethereal was heading down there now. Ravarian did not expect the young Ethereal to win, especially not now, but as much as he didn’t like the Little Storm, he still felt he was more valuable alive than dead.

He just needed to be taken down a notch. Hopefully a defeat would accomplish that.

In the meantime, he had to figure out how to put out the fire that was brewing in the Collective. He couldn’t ignore that forever.

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Kumamoto – Japan

11/27/2016 – 5:00 P.M.

“Bring them in,” the Commander ordered Burning Sky as the AI updated him on the arrival of a UFO that had the same signatures as Caelior’s UFO. Thanks to Patricia’s…atypical warning, he’d figured that now was the time to bring in the XCOM squad specifically designed to bring him down. With Aegis also en route, after having pretty much demolished any kind of Collective attack in Korea, this plan suddenly became much more feasible.

Caelior’s greatest advantage was his power. Unfortunately for him he had the tendency to treat it
like a hammer or blunt instrument. He had very little interest in individual targeting, and would instead just destroy the entire building they resided in to kill them. His telekinetic manipulation also essentially granted immunity to physical projectiles.

But not energy weapons.

Jayhawk Team, the original squad for dealing with Caelior, was just such a squad for him. They would be interspersed throughout the battlefield so in the event that Caelior decided to target one, he wouldn’t take all of them out with one single attack. In addition, they would be planted far enough back where he couldn’t reach them immediately.

Then there was the Archangel team which would operate along the same concept. All armed with sniper rifles, they would maintain the height advantage from behind and far above the Ethereal himself. If all went well, the Ethereal would be under sustained laser assault, and the Commander trusted that his snipers would be able to hit even a moving target such as Caelior.

And since it appeared that the Overmind had given up protection of the Collective forces, the Commander was reasonably sure that if he had a strong enough group of telepaths, it might be possible for him to be defeated that way. That the Imperator himself had apparently told Patricia this made him suspicious, however.

Caelior was not popular in the Collective. Yet at the same time, it didn’t make sense for him to really be sacrificed for…well, that was the issue. Aside from being an internal problem, the Commander could genuinely not see any reason for deliberately giving them, and even encouraging them to kill any Ethereal.

Perhaps it was a test? Maybe the Imperator didn’t care about the preservation of his species as much as he assumed?

Something didn’t add up.

It would almost be better to attempt to capture Caelior, instead of killing him, but that came with its own set of problems, not the least of which was that they didn’t have the capability to hold an Ethereal for any long-term period of time. It was simply impossible, and aside from constantly keeping him sedated with psionics, one mistake would have him wake up and kill everyone.

Too risky, and the information Caelior could provide was unlikely to be more than what Aegis had already. Were the Manchurian Restraints fully complete, he would genuinely consider it a fitting punishment for the Ethereal, but alas, they were not. There was some merit in keeping an Ethereal for more extensive testing purposes, which he couldn’t do to Aegis, but Caelior would suffice.

But again, it came back to the lack of appropriate restraints. How, exactly, could they prevent an Ethereal from using psionics at any point? There was a reason they weren’t experimenting on psionically awakened test subjects.

It was safer just to kill him.

Aegis wouldn’t like it, but he knew that the possibility was likely when he defected. Granted, capturing him would have perhaps a more detrimental effect on the Collective, but ultimately, that was useless unless he could be contained.

“I sense him coming,” Patricia updated. “Geist, Fatima, you occupy him psionically. Don’t think you’ll break in, but he won’t be able to resist what I can do to him.”

“Affirmative, Psion,” Geist stated. “He will be occupied.”
Patricia had also developed some new kind of telepathy very recently. She had only given him the very basic overview, but it turned out that by attacking the lower brain, she could essentially manipulate entire bodily functions. He was impressed by that revelation, as it honestly sounded like something that Geist would have figured out first.

But then again, Patricia had a lot more experience. And it was difficult enough that even explaining the concept to Geist, or Fatima for that matter, hadn’t really led them to figure it out for themselves. Perhaps that could be solved with an information transfer, but that was something to figure out later.

“Coming up with our resident Ethereal,” Big Sky updated smugly. “He asked to be dropped off nearby.”

“Good timing,” the Commander said, spotting the UFO in the distance through his scope. “We’ve got Caelior incoming. Let’s see how this machine handles it.”

“Processing new information,” the machine intelligence said in the typical monotone. “Making adjustments based on previously acquired data.”

The skyranger roared overhead and Aegis dropped from it onto a nearby skyscraper. Without wasting any time, the Ethereal straightened and was already enshrined in psionic energy. Until recently the Commander hadn’t known Aegis even had a battle suit, but he supposed he shouldn’t be surprised by it.

It made a lot more sense than wearing the equivalent of a robe into battle.

“Heads up, he’s on his way,” the Commander stated as he saw Caelior deploy from under his UFO, with a new and fully repaired hoverboard-like device, and in the same battle equipment he’d seen before. “Jayhawk team, are you in position.”

“Affirmative, Commander,” Seraph Jim Cuban answered. “Preparing to ascend and split. We’ll let him get a little closer before opening fire. Or on your command.”

“Wait for my command, or Aegis’,” he advised. “Everyone else on the ground have lines of sight?”

There was a chorus of affirmations, and the Commander looked over to where Aegis was. “Do you think they’ll bombard us?”

“Quite possible,” Aegis confirmed, lifting one hand up. “But they will not be able to penetrate a psionic barrier.” As he finished, the sky itself was suddenly tinted with a very visible purple barrier that reminded the Commander of what being inside a deployable transparent bubble shield would be like. He briefly looked around and saw that the barrier seemed to extend as far as he could see.

Well, that problem was solved.

“Traitor!” The voice of Caelior roared and reverberated through the city. It must have been enhanced with psionics for it to actually reach his ears. Caelior himself was now speeding towards them, his body also wrapped in clear psionic energy. “You will die for this, Aegis! As will every Human here. Your attempt to challenge us will end!”

“Fire.”

Nine beams of sizzling red energy shot out from the city and above, including his own. Most hit his torso which sizzled the fabric away, though failed to actually penetrate the body. A couple
shots hit the helmet but also didn’t penetrate, and the remaining ones hit the hoverboard, causing it to spark and shudder.

Caelior disengaged and kicked the board away just before it exploded. “Die, Humans!” And with a wave of his hand, the front line of skyscrapers were shattered. The structures of metal, concrete, and wood were splintered as easily as glass. The unfortunate soldiers caught in the wave suffered mercifully little as the wave liquefied them before they had a chance to comprehend what was happening.

The hovering Ethereal didn’t stop as he motioned with another hand towards another large skyscraper, and clenched a fist, crushing it easily and letting the rubble fall to the ground, while he shot another telekinetic blast down a street, which also liquefied the soldiers as well as take out the bases of the buildings across that street.

The good news was that there were thankfully not large clusters of soldiers just waiting to be obvious targets. The Chinese soldiers were obviously firing at the Ethereal, but from what the Commander could tell, in very interspersed ways. Perhaps it had learned something; not clumping all soldiers together was probably the best possible scenario here.

Aegis had also apparently had enough and the city in front of Caelior was suddenly guarded by skyscraper-sized barricades before the buildings that were still standing. “Leave now, Caelior. This species is under my protection. I do not wish even you to die today.”

“Words from a traitor and fool!” Caelior sneered, settling himself on the ground. “You do not intimidate me. You are a broken remnant of what you were.”

“We still need lines of sight,” the Commander told Aegis, because as useful as the barriers were, as a consequence it blocked their lines of sight, with the exception of the Archangels.

The red beams still came down from sky, and with each hit, they distracted Caelior enough to where he turned to look to the sky…just as two more massive beams from the sea fired. Chinese vessels, using primitive laser tech. One hit Caelior directly in the back, spinning him around while the other collided into one of Aegis’s barriers.

“I will suffer this no longer,” Caelior growled, extending two hands to the ground, and one to the vessels out on the sea. The Commander watched with amazement as the ships in the distance crumpled as easily as toys and the destroyed wrecks simply sank deep into the ocean.

“Patricia, what’s your status,” the Commander said, as the ground began shaking. “We need him taken down now!”

“She’s busy,” Geist interjected as the shaking became more intense. “He is…stronger than even I anticipated. He is furious, and that ironically gives him more focus than he would otherwise. It is difficult to break his concentration, and he also appears to be simulating an earthquake right now.”

It certainly felt that way, and the shaking was becoming intense enough that it was impossible to actually hold his weapon steady. “Aegis!” He called to the other Ethereal. “Can you handle him?”

“I can.” The elder Ethereal waved a hand and a shimmering horizontal barrier materialized a short distance away from Caelior and slammed into him with enough force to send him flying backwards until he was almost in the water. Two more barriers materialized to the sides of him, but Caelior was more aware now, and leapt upwards just in time to avoid them.
He landed running towards the city, clapping two of his hands forward and sending a shockwave towards Aegis’s barriers, which did noticeably rattle them, and followed that by thrusting a hand down and creating another severe tremor in the ground. A box of psionic defenses suddenly appeared around the Ethereal, effectively trapping him inside.

“You think this will hold me!?” He yelled. “I cannot be contained by this!”

As a presumed response to that, he spread his hands all around him, and all of the rubble from the previously destroyed structures, corpses of Humans and aliens alike, as well as everything else rose into the air and at a gesture was flung upwards at an angle that would presumably bypass Aegis’s barrier and rain down on those behind it.

Aegis simply responded by extending the barrier upwards, angled in such a way that when the debris hit, they would just slide back down the psionic barrier to the ground. The Commander hoped that Aegis could keep this up a bit longer, but also saw from a glance above that the shield Aegis had erected for deterring bombardments was sustaining fire.

“Clever…” the young Ethereal rasped, seeming to take a moment to pause. “[Why did you leave us?]”

The Commander didn’t know if they’d been speaking the Ethereal language this whole time and he’d only realized at this point, or this was the first time. It appeared the knowledge Aegis shared was still good. A bit strange to know something he had never formally learned, but interesting nonetheless.

Aegis waited a moment before answering. “[Because there was no other way. The Imperator is no longer interested in our original mission. His efforts have been corrupted by something else.]”

 “[You are deluded if you actually believe that.]” Caelior snarled, clenching one of his fists. “[We will destroy the Synthesized as we intend. The plan for that has not changed, Aegis.]”

 “[And if that is the case, then why are we here?]” Aegis shot back. “[Earth! The Humans! Why are we fighting them? Why would we do so if we need allies and soldiers?]”

 “[Because...]” Caelior paused suddenly. “[The Imperator has his reasons, even if he does not share them with me. They pose a threat only he can see, or otherwise are a piece of a puzzle.]”

 “Good work, Aegis,” Geist said. “He is no longer focused.”

 “[That is what he wants you to think!]” Aegis insisted. “[I had made my concerns about our direction known to him, and as a result, he silenced me from it reaching others! If you ask him questions, you will receive the same treatment I did.]” To the Commander’s surprise, the barriers suddenly disappeared, including the ones around Caelior. “[Even if you kill me today, that will not change. All you will ensure is that our direction is irreversible and doom our species once and for all.]”

Aegis, what the hell are you doing? He was certainly good at putting the young Ethereal off balance, but he better be ready to throw up those barriers again. He couldn’t be fool enough to actually trust him, so it was probably a gambit.

 “[That’s...ah,]” Caelior suddenly stumbled forward, he gingerly put one hand on his helmet. “[You...what are you doing to me?]”

 “Thank you, Aegis,” Patricia suddenly said, and he saw the psion enveloped in purple walking out towards the Ethereal who had fallen to one knee. “I'll take it from here.”
While Geist and Fatima were focused on his higher brain functions, she attempted to puzzle out what went on beneath his surface thoughts. While he technically wasn’t protected by an innate telepathic defense, his other psionic abilities were making it more difficult for her to get her bearings on exactly what worked.

“This would be easier if you had spent time in an Ethereal mind before now,” the Imperator commented from behind her. “It usually is in this case. Rarely does one start with the base of the mind and work up.”

“Shut up and let me concentrate,” Patricia muttered, only superficially aware of the destruction going on around her. She was mildly surprised the Imperator was sticking around. If there was ever a time where he was going to backstab her and help Caelior, it would be now.

Yet for some reason, she doubted it. He had the attitude of one more interested in the spectacle than one who actually wished to take part in it.

She ignored him, and worked more to burrow deeper into the mind of the Ethereal and try and figure out how this actually worked. His brain was, as much as she could tell, highly energized at the moment. What passed for his heart was pumping rapidly and there was definitely something that was getting sent to his brain, a hormone or something like that.

“Correct,” the Imperator nodded approvingly. “Chemical impulses. Not the same as Humans, or any alien species for that matter, but they can be manipulated just like any other part of the body. These generally accompany feelings of anger and judgement.”

Caelior was shouting words now, and she only heard parts of them as she tried to figure out some way to…at least halt the impulses, if not change them. She knew there was some kind of impulse that would calm him down, but right now cutting the source of the problem at the moment would, at least, make him less volatile.

And…there.

Stop.

And there it went. Well, she’d done it and allowed herself to become slightly more aware of the real world. Aegis and him were exchanging words in their tongue, which she didn’t understand. The Commander did, but to her it was more of an oddly rhythmic harmonic exchange between the two beings.

“What are they saying?” Patricia asked.

“Aegis is trying to distract him,” the Imperator answered with a smirk on his face. “Appeal to his better nature or some other foolish gesture. I suspect it is purely for your benefit. Be prepared to
“Awfully callous of you,” Patricia grunted as she returned her attention to the lower mind of the Ethereal, one which was becoming easier to infiltrate and manipulate. “You certainly want him dead.”

“That he is succumbing to you is proof enough of his ineptitude,” the Imperator stated coldly. “I allowed him a chance to live, learn, and grow from the false prodigy he was. He has proven incapable of such. He no longer is worth my consideration. His purpose will be better served like this.”

“Good work, Aegis,” Geist suddenly interjected. “He is no longer focused.”

The world flickered around her and she became fully immersed in the brain of the alien. Each flickering line led somewhere different, and it was becoming a matter of plucking the strings to get a response. So she did, and she felt terror suddenly envelop the alien. “You caused his heart to skip a beat,” the Imperator explained. “Good.”

Alright, so that was what that did. Let’s see what happened if she plucked the string a little longer…

Her eyes saw the Ethereal fall to one knee, saying something in his language she didn’t need to know, as it was likely along the lines of “What are you doing to me?”

“I am going to kill you,” she said, lips curling into a grin, fingers twitching as she eased on the string that controlled his heart, allowing it to function briefly. She turned on her helmet mic to the rest of them as she began walking towards the fallen Ethereal. “Thank you, Aegis,” she said. “I’ll take it from here.”

She had broken the barriers, and now she had something she had once thought was a far-fetched notion – control of the mind of an Ethereal. Granted, it wasn’t necessarily in the traditional way, but it was control nonetheless, and this was something that the majority could not fully defend against. It appeared that telepathy was not as well understood by some of them as they would like to believe.

Patricia let the world briefly fade as she returned to the mind of Caelior more clearly, and saw the map of his brain clearly again, like working piping or an interconnected map. Nerves also fit this picture, and…well, she had access to them in their most basic form. No more simple commands that the brain would interpret.

No, this time the pain that would be felt would not be able to be described.

She extended one hand, palm vertical to the ground and simply commanded the nerves to briefly overload. Caelior suddenly howled in excruciating pain, and fully collapsed to the ground, shaking and yelling. That had not even been a second, and it had rendered the proud Ethereal a shaking wreck on the ground.

“You!” He shouted at the approaching Patricia. “What did you-“

“You are a test,” she answered, voice deeper than normal, indicating the depths of her psionic usage. She gestured with a finger and sent another microsecond of agony against him. He screamed again, convulsing on the ground. “I will acquire what I need from you, and then I will kill you.”

“I…I will not die like this!” He spat, trying to rise. Patricia narrowed her eyes, and decided to try another piece of his mind she hadn’t experimented with. She clenched her hand into a fist, and the
Ethereal began choking a few seconds later as his lungs refused to pump oxygen any longer. She let it continue for close to half a minute before she allowed him to breathe.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “You will die. It is only a matter of how long and how painful. You have killed many people. Today you’ve killed more. There will be justice for this, and it will be at my hand.”

“No!” Caelior insisted. “Aegis! He will not let me die! The Imperator! He will not let me die, not to you. Not to a Human.”

Patricia smiled under her helmet. “Is that right?” She knelt down closer to the Ethereal. “Then call for him, he will not answer you. You failed your mission, and you failed him. And Aegis…” she glanced behind her to see the other Ethereal and the Commander walking forwards. “Aegis will not kill you, no. But he will not stop me.”

“Patricia!” Aegis called. “Wait!”

Caelior chuckled. “Are you sure of that?”

She responded by letting him experience unfathomable pain for three full seconds, pulling back her fingers into a single fist as Aegis walked up to visibly demonstrate the control she had over him. “What?”

“You have beaten him,” Aegis said simply. “There is no need to torture him.”

“I am experimenting,” she answered, turning back to the Ethereal on the ground. “And since I have limited opportunities, I have to take what I can get. You would not be a viable…candidate, Aegis, and he does not deserve comfort, nor mercy.”

“And you plan to kill him,” Aegis interrupted. “Look at him! Does he pose a threat?”

Patricia looked back towards Aegis, and raised a fist as she once more cut off the airflow of the alien. “Not anymore,” she answered softly as the Ethereal choked behind her. “This is not up to you, Aegis, you knew what the consequences of this war were. Dead Ethereals. If you cannot accept that, then you should not have joined us.”

The Commander crossed his arms. “She has a point, Aegis. We’re not ending this war without a lot more dead Ethereals. I know you…don’t like it, but-“

“That isn’t the point here!” Aegis interrupted, pointing to Caelior as Patricia reluctantly let him breathe again. “You heard what he said! The Imperator was using him just as he does everyone! Think! The Imperator would not just sacrifice one with his power unless there was something to be gained from it. He wants him dead!”

Patricia could imagine the frown under his helmet as the Commander spoke. “You also make a good point. But from what we know about Caelior and his…actions.” He gave a dismissive glance towards the shaking Ethereal. “It could be simpler. Caelior was a loose cannon, a liability, and ultimately someone not worth keeping. While I wouldn’t sacrifice him, I can see why the Imperator would.”

The Imperator chuckled, appearing behind Caelior. “So unfortunate the Commander is on the opposite side. While predictable, he has a grasp of the choices one must make to achieve the ultimate goal.”

He was still invisible to the others, it seemed.
“Does it actually matter?” Patricia demanded, absently toying with the mind of her Ethereal captive, seeing what certain manipulations caused. “Even if the Imperator gains from this, so do we.” Caelior suddenly spat golden blood from his helmet. Hm, so that was what happened. She’d have to try that again. “And why should we spare him, Aegis? Really, why? He’s killed thousands and is not in any way remorseful.”

“I could say the same for you, me, or any of us,” Aegis countered. “And considering how much enjoyment you derive from your abilities, I hardly think you are in a position to judge Caelior.”

“That does not mean he should live,” she spat. “You just want to keep one of your kind alive!”

“And I do not support your method of execution!” Aegis countered, stepping forward, now notably agitated. “It is one thing to kill him, it is another to draw it out.”

“Then leave,” Patricia growled, sending another wave of agony to Caelior. “No one is making you watch. I will not waste this opportunity for the sake of my conscience. Too much is riding on what I can do, and this is one who deserves it.”

“Patricia!” The Commander interrupted, stepping forward. “Much as I would prefer to see him dead, Aegis does make another point.” He pointed at Caelior. “We do not needlessly torture our captives. You beat him. You won. We kill him or take him captive. Unnecessarily prolonging it is beneath us, do I make myself clear?”

Patricia stared at him for a few seconds, thoughts swirling around her. She almost wished that the Imperator would interject something. She wasn’t in the right state of mind to really be thinking this through. Every instinct in her screamed to kill the alien before her in as painful a method as possible, yet the Commander was her superior.

“Then what are your orders?” She finally said, the psionic power diminished enough that her voice was normal.

The Commander looked at the defeated Ethereal for a moment. “I heard the conversation, Aegis. Do you think he could be useful?”

“Possibly,” Aegis said immediately. “I do not wish to make promises, but he was a pawn of the Imperator. If he realizes that…”

“Not good enough,” the Commander shook his head. “I’m not betting on that. We need a way to secure him long-term, until this could be sorted out. The problem is that I don’t know how.”

“Patricia,” Aegis said, looking to her. “Could you keep him…sedated? Or kept unconscious?”

She took a few moments to look into the tangle that composed the mind of the alien. She pursed her lips. “Yes. I’m unfamiliar with how his mind fully works, so there might be complications…but nothing that would kill him. I could likely keep him in an unconscious state as long as it was intermittently maintained.”

“And by ‘intermittently’, you mean?”

“Don’t know,” Patricia admitted. “I’ve never done this before. Every few hours. Maybe longer once I get more experienced.”

“That would solve the short-term storage problem,” the Commander said slowly. “But keeping you as his personal psionic ward isn’t going to happen.”
“There are additional options beyond simply killing him,” Aegis pointed out. “There are the stasis pods. And there are drugs which are powerful enough to keep us sedated for long periods of time. Non-lethal solutions are not out of the realm of possibility. And…” he looked down. “He is beaten. He poses no more threat to us.”

“And what if it doesn’t work?” Patricia demanded. “You don’t know the risk he poses!”

“Patricia has a point,” the Commander admitted. “Caelior as it stands is still a danger. He’s unstable, even when he is supposedly an ally. I don’t see this improving with him being captured.”

“There…is a possible solution…” Aegis said slowly. “A procedure done to Ethereals who had broken our laws, but were not deemed worthy of execution. It would likely render him…tranquil, although destroy both his personality and mind in the process.”

“Really?” The Commander looked to Aegis. “And that’s better than killing him?”

Aegis looked almost sadly down at the Ethereal. “A blank slate is preferable to…this. Or to death. He could still learn. He would be more valuable to you alive this way. But there is no reason that must be the solution. He can be restrained without such permanent measures.”

“A shame the Manchurian Restraints aren’t ready,” the Commander mused. “He would be an excellent candidate. But if what you suggest is possible, this could suffice. If either the procedure fails, or he becomes too high a risk, we can kill him later.”

He nodded to Patricia. “We’ll take him captive. For now.” He shot a glance at Aegis.

She nodded and focused on the defeated Ethereal. It took several minutes to figure out how it would go…but she eventually found it, and unlike before, gradually manipulated it to send the Ethereal into a coma-like state where he would pose no danger.

You got off easy. You should be dead.

She stood, not feeling like this was the right decision, but knowing her place, and that was following her Commander. She only hoped he knew what he was doing, and this wasn’t going to end up being a Trojan horse.

“I can’t blame you,” the Imperator said, looking at her from behind the silent body of Caelior. “But you followed the orders of your Commander. I can understand and respect that. It is good you can restrain yourself when needed. Do not worry, I am sure the time will come for you to avenge the deaths he has caused. The figures behind this war are more than Caelior.”

She heard the skyranger overhead, and glanced up to see it landing near them. When she looked back, the figure of the Imperator was gone. A mild surprise, but right now she was ready to welcome only one voice into her head – her own.

“Guess we should get him ready for transport,” the Commander said as several XCOM soldiers walked over with restraints. “Let’s hope Vahlen is up for this.”

“What are you going to tell Saudia?” Patricia asked.

“That we’ve taken care of the problem,” the Commander answered. “I suspect she won’t like it, but Ethereals are our purview. Not ADVENT’s or China’s.”

“Does she know that?”
“I doubt it,” the Commander admitted whimsically. “But she will now. She probably would have killed him too, if you were wondering.”

Patricia sighed. “I really hope you know what you’re doing. He should be dead.”

“Maybe,” the Commander glanced to Aegis. “But we’ve made it this far by taking some risks. If this turns out to gift us an Ethereal weapon, I think it was worth it. But make no mistake…” he looked at the soldiers carrying the body into the skyranger. “If he becomes a threat, I will let you kill him yourself.”
This, Volk thought, had certainly been a very interesting couple of weeks. Quite a lot had happened after ADVENT had decided to launch attacks to reclaim America. That alone would have been interesting, but what made it very interesting was China suddenly coming into the fold, and launching an invasion to retake Japan.

That had been a surprise, but he had to admire them taking that kind of chance knowing that it was going to basically paint a giant target on their backs. He had personally never liked China; they were one of the worst kind of governments to exist in the world, and even compared to ADVENT they weren’t much better. He wasn’t opposed to them getting their due retaliation in time.

He did feel somewhat bad for the millions of Chinese people who were likely being drafted into service.

There had also been that one little detail that Asaru had somehow forgotten to mention to him. Namely that there was a fucking Ethereal working with XCOM.

Suddenly, quite a few things became clear.

He was, however, quite enjoying watching the media frenzy over the whole situation, not counting the fact that the other Ethereal had been taken prisoner by XCOM, but they were largely focused – or obsessed – with the Ethereal called Aegis. There was a whole range of theories being discussed from him manipulating XCOM, to this war not actually being against Humans, but him.

Volk took a sip of vodka from his glass. It was a bit early to drink, but he was quite looking forward to hearing how Asaru would spin this. The good news was that the command center was essentially completed, and he did have to admit that it was a major step up from his makeshift house. Moving all his things into the silver room was a bit strange, but he’d gotten used to it quickly.

Now he had his old TV before the far wall, with him sitting in his recliner while Asaru, in the form of a Vitakarian woman, and Joreal sat on the couch angled just beside his own. It was pretty small for Joreal, but Asaru seemed fine. He still hadn’t been able to really figure out just what the relationship between the two of them was. Asaru was very comfortable with him, resting her head on him, and he would have normally assumed them to be involved, were it not for the fact that Asaru was quite literally, not real.

It was weird.

Elena stood off to the side, leaning against a counter and seemed almost more interested watching them than the news footage. Volk, on the other hand, was more eager to actually see what they had to say. Considering how little convincing it had taken to get her here, he imagined she knew
exactly what they needed to discuss.

But he’d decided to illustrate his point by first showing the very public news footage.

He sat up, closing the leg rest and clasping his hands together. To his credit, Joreal didn’t really look comfortable and Volk figured he could be a little smug. “So, was this something that just slipped your mind?”

Joreal pursed his lips. “While I cannot speak for Asaru, I had no knowledge of this. It is… concerning.”

“As of course I knew about it,” Asaru stood up and looked down at Volk. Elena already had a hand on her pistol, although while her eyes were on the Ethereal projection, her body was angled towards Joreal in the event Asaru did something. Smart woman, but he doubted that would be necessary. “Something like this isn’t kept from me.”

“Wonderful,” Volk answered sarcastically, scratching his beard. “Now then, don’t you think this might have been some good information to share? In the interest of our alliance and all.”

Asaru tapped her chin. “For what it’s worth, I would have told you. However, I had my orders. The Battlemaster wanted this kept under wraps for obvious reasons, and I can only assume the Imperator agreed. You’re used to doing whatever you want, but that isn’t how things are done by the majority of beings in this galaxy. There are hierarchies, rules, and guidelines. And I have respect for the chain of command, even if it is rarely applicable to me.”

She finished with a smile. The supposed leader of the Ethereals had never really been mentioned much in the time she’d been here. It was always the Battlemaster who was the leader. From what Volk had learned, very few outside of the Ethereals actually knew anything about the Imperator himself.

Odd for a leader. Even Saudia was at least a public figure, even if her background was suspect. He didn’t quite like the idea of a supposed leader who seemed not to do anything, but Ethereals weren’t Humans. They probably did some things differently.

As for what she said, he was not exactly convinced of her honesty. It was plausible, but it would depend on how she took some further questions. “Well, in that case, why did the Battlemaster want it kept suppressed?”

One of her eyes widened, which was what he’d interpreted as a raised eyebrow. Or would, if Vitakarians had those. “Is that an actual question? If this got out, it would be…damaging for the Collective, to say the least. And would possibly inspire some unsavory and treasonous individuals to make some questionable decisions.”

“Yes, that makes sense,” Volk smirked. “But see, I’m not part of the Collective, remember? And on Earth, I need to know what I’m dealing with. How, exactly, do you think Argentina is going to react to this news? They might become spooked enough to report us to ADVENT or plain refuse to talk to us. If you’d have actually told me, I might have been able to at least get a pre-emptive start on damage control. Or maybe make them feel more inclined to trust you by giving up such important information.”

That did seem to make Asaru stop whatever she was going to say. “You’re rather bold, Volikov, but I suppose that is the point. And in this case, you are not wrong. However, this was a blanket command, and there were no exemptions.”
“Whatever,” Volk dismissed with a wave of his hand and a sigh. “But this is not happening again if you want this to continue, and if you have any, ah, ‘orders’, please get that cleared up immediately.”

“And what do you want, Volk?” Joreal asked. “An apology?”

“I already got an acknowledgement, which is fine for me,” Volk answered flatly. “But I want some answers now. Are there any other Ethereals or major aliens who are against you?”

“Not any worth worrying about,” Asaru answered, going back to sit on the couch. “However, in the interest of some transparency, there is a traitor Zararch agent we have been monitoring in the Collective. He is under control, however.”

That wasn’t really relevant, so Volk dismissed it. Better than nothing. “And how bad is it that Aegis is now openly against you?”

“Aegis,” Asaru said slowly. “Is very dangerous. In short, it is quite a problem. It is one reason the Battlemaster didn’t reveal the situation. He wanted Aegis to keep his anonymity in exchange for him being…uninvolved personally. Needless to say our operations have become a lot more dangerous. He is one of the most powerful Ethereals, and the capture of Caelior is…troubling.”

Well, some progress on that front. He was inclined to believe her here. “I suppose the more important question is if he can be beaten?”

“Anyone can be beaten,” Asaru snorted. “But yes, eventually. It will…not be easy.”

“So,” Volk crossed his arms. “Do you want me to kill him?”

Joreal laughed. “No offense, Volk, but you’re not…well, you would die.”

“Really,” was all he said. “Asaru, are Ethereals immune to poison? Can they hold against nanotech?”

“Our immune systems are excellent,” Asaru answered. “However, there are a few toxins and combinations which can be lethal to us in large doses or long incubation periods. And nanotech…mmm…I quite like your implication.”

“Good,” Volk nodded. “Now, do you want to stop toying around with ADVENT and actually get something done? Because I have ideas and if Aegis is as big of a threat as you say, there shouldn’t be any more holding back. Your army is, quite honestly, disappointing for a collective that is far more advanced.”

“The Battlemaster has realized the same thing,” Asaru nodded. “And now I am curious. What do you have in mind?”

Volk sat back down, lazily resting his head on one hand. “We need to be able to prove to Argentina that they can be protected. Right now your allies are failing miserably.”

“And how do you propose that be fixed?” Joreal asked.

“Start small,” Volk said. “Take some initiative. Argentina is our ally right now, but they are fickle and will fold if they feel threatened. Like most of this continent, they are more concerned about themselves than anyone else. Identify someone there first. An ally of sorts who is the kind of leader we can support. Protect him or her. Remove their opponents.”
“A coup then,” Joreal noted.

“Only if you’re an idiot about it,” Volk shrugged. “And while you’re doing that, I would suggest some very public figures in ADVENT start suffering accidents. I’m under the impression your Sectoids are good with bioweapons, right? Maybe wipe out the soldier population. Make ADVENT weakened in this part of the world. Something to show you can actually protect them against Aegis and ADVENT.”

“ADVENT will notice this,” Asaru said thoughtfully.

Volk sighed. “You have no idea what a proxy is? That’s what we are for. Human terrorists who can take the brunt of the blame. That’s the point. Yes, ADVENT will respond, but it won’t be as large of a response as if aliens just started appearing. And for as powerful as you are, you aren’t as subtle as you think. I’m Human. I know what they’ll focus on. I can make attacks look like they came from terrorists, not aliens.”

Asaru smiled. “I like you, Volk. Tell me then, what exactly will you need?”

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 Alien Containment Chamber, the Praesidium – Classified Location
11/28/2016 – 1:11 A.M.

At least one amusing thing had come out of this situation. Vahlen’s response had been rather hilarious.

“Vahlen, we’re heading back,” he’d said. “Ready the alien containment chamber. I hope you’re ready to analyze an Ethereal.”

“Excellent!” She’d answered, before pausing. “Wait. Alien containment…did you…?”

“Yes, we’re bringing Caelior in. Alive,” he’d confirmed. “Aegis believes we can hold him. At the very least, he can be analyzed by you. Assuming you’re up for it?”

There had been some shocked silence. “I…I’ll get everything ready. A live Ethereal! I mean another one! One I can test more freely.”

Now he, Patricia, Aegis and the rest of the Internal Council were standing outside the containment chamber where Vahlen and her team were running a series of tests and taking samples on Caelior himself. Patricia was still in her armor and her eyes were closed, as she kept the Ethereal in a sedated state.

“I really hope this doesn’t backfire,” the Commander muttered, and he pressed a button which asked for permission to speak to Vahlen and her team, all of whom were in full sealed surgical gear. Interrupting them out of nowhere would have been a bad idea.

Vahlen pressed a button on her suit to communicate with them as the Commander asked the first question. “What’s your status on him?”

“Physical scans are complete, and we’ve been exploring ways to try and make him less…dangerous,” she answered, walking over to the glass and stripping the gloves from her hands and moved a screen showing a highlighted representation of the Ethereals body. “While I have extremely limited experience with Ethereal anatomy, at least in performing surgery, thanks to Aegis we do have some options in how we handle him.”
“I don’t suppose we could send him into a coma?” Jackson asked hopefully.

“Not with what we have right now,” Vahlen shook her head, glancing back at her team. “I mean, theoretically I could try and accomplish something like that, but it might kill him. Which I’m assuming we don’t want.”

“Preferably not,” Aegis agreed. “Dr. Vahlen, I presume you have mapped out his nervous system?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “I think we have the same idea. The largest threat Caelior poses to us is his telekinesis. This is something that is traditionally accompanied by gestures.”

“Not necessarily,” the Commander reminded her.

“It makes it easier,” she amended. “Much easier. Take those away, and even if Caelior wakes up and wants to kill us…he won’t be able to do it well unless he concentrates.”

“And Caelior cannot concentrate easily,” Aegis sighed. “He lacks the discipline, and disrupted as he is, taking away his movement would cripple him immensely.”

“Well, good I guess,” Jackson said slowly. “So what, we cut off his arms?”

“No,” Vahlen shook her head. “We paralyze him.”

Hm. That was a good idea. “Can you do that?” The Commander asked. “More importantly, can it be reversed?”

“Yes, and yes,” Vahlen confirmed, pointing at the screen. “It’s a matter of severing specific nerves, which can later be reattached. It would, of course, take him time to adjust, but until then he would be completely paralyzed.”

“How easily could he be put into a coma?” Zhang asked.

“If we had the right materials, easily,” Vahlen said slowly, looking to Aegis. “I did receive the list of drugs you used in the Empire for surgery on Ethereals. The problem is that for some, they are materials that simply don’t exist on Earth, or will take days to synthesize…assuming we get them right the first time. We still have the issue of long-term storage.”

“In that capacity,” Aegis corrected. “There are still many unused containment pods here. Some are large enough to fit him.”

“‘Fit’ is a stretch,” Vahlen disputed slowly. “They...could work. Barely. But they weren’t designed to hold an Ethereal and we haven’t used them since we stuck some of the old German government in them. And those were already prepared for Humans. Ethereal physiology is different. It’s not exactly a one-size-fits-all pod.”

“I can assist with that,” Aegis said. “However, before such an action is taken, I want to speak with him at least once so he is aware of what is going on.” He looked to the Commander. “That is acceptable, yes? Assuming safeguards are in place, there should not be a reason to not inform your captive of his immediate fate.”

The Commander thought about it briefly. “Fine. Only once Vahlen has ensured that he is wired with neural explosives, has paralyzed him, and we have multiple telepaths in his mind. I don’t think the procedure you suggested will be necessary if he cooperates.”

“To be completely safe, I would suggest that none of us be in the room when we speak to him,”
Zhang stated bluntly, eyeing the surgery taking place. “If it goes badly, there is little to stop him from at least killing those around him. At minimum, Commander, you should participate at a distance.”

“I would be able to protect you,” Aegis insisted. “In the condition Caelior will be in, his offensive ability is severely stunted. He will be more open to speaking to someone present, not through microphones.”

“I will repeat once more that he should not be here,” Zhang directed icily towards Aegis, turning his eyes towards him. “He is a severe security risk, no matter the precautions. Without the Manchurian Restraints, we can never safely have any Ethereal held here.”

“As long as he is mentally dominated, this isn’t an issue,” the Commander defused, raising a hand. “However, Zhang has a point. This highlights an issue with how this was conducted. We need a proper and dedicated facility for this kind of storage and experimentation. Housing it all under the Praesidium is putting everything in one basket. If something goes wrong, everything is crippled.”

“That is something to be discussed later,” Shen agreed. “But at the very least, we have options until the Restraints are complete, crude as they may be.”

“Well, he is contained for now,” the Commander said, rubbing his forehead. “We’ll meet later to figure out the finer details of this situation. But we’ve all done exceptionally today, even if it had a strange ending. You’re all dismissed if you want. I’ll probably be here all night.”

“I think we’ve all got things to do,” Jackson yawned. “I’m guessing I’m going to be getting a few calls from Saudia asking what the fuck we’re doing. Can’t wait to deal with that. Probably stuff about Aegis too, ugh.”

“Sleep is for the weak,” Zhang said gruffly, looking around. “Or so I’ve heard.”

They all tiredly chuckled. “We’ll all get some sleep eventually,” the Commander said, returning his gaze towards the surgery. “But unfortunately not quite yet.”

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Westminster, London – England

11/29/2016 – 2:01 P.M.

There were quite a few immediate ramifications after XCOM had, for some reason, taken Caelior captive. Saudia had personally been surprised to hear that, and immediately suspicious as to what they were planning. She didn’t believe that Aegis had some kind of telepathic influence over the Commander, but he definitely had enough leverage to make suggestions to him.

Ultimately, it was one in a very long list of things that needed to be addressed, along with China and their battlefield intelligence, and speaking to Aegis himself. The revelation of an Ethereal working with XCOM had sent shockwaves throughout the world, even more so than…well, anything she could probably do.

Japan was still being cleared out by China and ADVENT’s own special forces, but there was practically nothing left to really challenge them anymore. The revelation of Aegis, and the capture of another Ethereal had seemed to shatter the will to fight for the aliens. Indeed, she had multiple reports of aliens all across the world surrendering because of Aegis.

A surprise for sure. But one she wasn’t going to complain about.
On top of *that* it appeared that President Qin’s aggressive speech towards the neutral nations was already bearing results. One of them was that Prime Minister Killian Bennett of the United Kingdom had invited her to speak with him immediately. Given how close this was to that event, Saudia was suspecting that the topic of conversation would be rather…focused, and also implied that this had been in the works for some time, and only now were they going through with it.

What would be interesting was if Bennett was wanting to form an alliance like China, or to join ADVENT completely. Given that the UK was one of the last primary powers of the EU, and forming an alliance independent of the EU was not likely, she believed the latter was more likely.

Which would hopefully kill the EU for good.

Westminster was unsurprisingly packed with media and a few protesters which Saudia barely paid attention to. The media shouted a series of questions that, for once, weren’t all accusations or innately hostile. But about Aegis, the state of the war, Caelior, and XCOM. Reasonable for once, but there were scheduled press conferences, and they would be able to ask those later.

Provided they weren’t already answered when Laura or herself gave another update. She really wanted a break from the conferences, but it was her job to keep people informed. Hopefully now there would be something of a lull. Plenty of time to regroup, expand, and improve. If there was ever a time to put some of the later-stage plans into action, it was now.

Their guide led them through the Palace, and it was suitably impressive. Saudia had never actually been inside it, although she’d seen pictures. They weren’t going to meet the Queen, but Saudia really didn’t care about that to begin with. Under ADVENT such positions would be abolished regardless, so she didn’t feel the need to devote any more energy to it than was necessary.

Still, she could definitely appreciate the aesthetic and luxurious surroundings. It reminded her of the Bastion in ways. A shame they’d had to leave it, but the fears that the aliens would attack it seemed somewhat unfounded, as the skeleton crew guarding it hadn’t reported anything unusual. Maybe there could be a better use for it.

Their guide opened another door, and allowed Saudia to step inside another ornate dining room, of which the only occupant was the Prime Minister himself. Killian Bennett, one of the most contentious politicians ever to grace the country. A former SAS operative who had retired surprisingly early to enter the political sphere, he had quickly established himself as a blunt and unapologetic man who had led to some controversial actions.

He was, for one, a sharp critic of the United Nations (before their destruction), Russia, and China, and a proclaimed Euroskeptic, though he had never done anything beyond trying to limit the relationship the UK had with the EU. Simply leaving, as he had said, would cause more problems than it was worth.

His other actions were that he had something of a hatred towards all religion, and he had been one of the first to lead the banning of Islam as an allowed religion, and had also drafted legislation limiting churches of all religions and establishing registries for all those practicing. Most people would wonder how such a contentious man, who was disliked by England’s main political parties, even if he ran as a Tory, could be appointed to such a position.

Ironically, Saudia knew quite a bit about the *how* because it had been EXALT who had initially propelled him to power. She had approved that particular op largely due to his anti-religion and anti-EU tendencies, and being a former special forces member, he had the correct mindset to make harder decisions in the future.
Putting him in charge had been simple. There was no shortage of blackmail in Parliament, and with a few exchanges of information, and helping Bennett forge some valuable connections, he was soon Prime Minister. He was actually rather good friends with Elizabeth, and the two had communicated regularly, he of course being unaware of her true loyalty.

Unfortunately some of his ideology was going to heavily conflict with ADVENT. But he might be able to overlook that in the name of security against the aliens. The man retained a good portion of his strength, and was likely physically stronger than her, even hidden by his business suit. His cunning eyes followed her as she entered, light reflecting off his bald scalp.

“Chancellor Saudia Vyandar of ADVENT,” the guide introduced. “Chancellor, Prime Minister Killian Bennett.”

“A pleasure,” Saudia answered, nodding her head.

“Appreciated,” Bennett answered, flicking a hand. “Leave us.”

Once the door closed, he gestured towards a chair at the end of the ornate table. “Please sit, Chancellor, we have much to discuss.”

“Certainly,” Saudia sat down on the red-padded chair. “I admit, I was not expecting this so… quickly.”

“I had been considering this for some time,” he answered with a grimace, sitting to the side of her. “But there is something about being called out by the Chinese that is intolerable. Much as I dislike them, they are correct for once. I have personally grown tired of sitting and waiting, while the politicians bicker and fight over the ‘ethics’ and ‘morals’ of ADVENT. It is irritating.”

“I can imagine,” Saudia rested a hand on the table. “So let us not waste more time. What is it you wish from us?”

“I want the UK to join ADVENT,” he stated bluntly. “Unlike China, I am under no illusions as to the direction this world is going. I have no intention of being a world power, and ADVENT will be. There is no need to take a symbolic alliance when joining would be better for both of us.” His brow furrowed. “While I don’t agree with every ADVENT supports, it is far better than the vast majority of authoritarian pretenders who believe power for the sake of it is good governance.”

Saudia smiled humorlessly. “If that was really their goal, they never cared about governance in the first place.”

He smiled and nodded. “Touché, Chancellor. I am not concerned with the media storm that will occur over this. I have been called every name in the book. No, the issue will be the politicians. As much as I wish it, I cannot simply force the UK to join ADVENT.”

Saudia crossed her legs. “And what do you have to subvert that? I can provide my support, and I believe the majority of the public support action.”

“Yes, they do,” he said knowingly, lacing his fingers together. “Parliament is composed of elitist snobs, partisan hacks, and the occasionally unscrupulous politician. I’m sure you’re aware I’m friends with your Intelligence Director. We go way back.”

Saudia kept a straight face. “She’s mentioned it.”

“I could force a vote, and likely get some use out of them one last time,” he continued. “But the thing is, I feel like such an action would be illegal under ADVENT, and knowing Stein…well, I
doubt she’d really care and send me to prison anyway.”

Technically, Saudia wouldn’t have had a problem with it. Treduant had done something similar to force Congress to cooperate, and then had the offending politicians promptly arrested once ADVENT had been established. When working in a corrupt system, some rules had to be bent. If it was for the greater good, Saudia could justify it. But she was interested in what else he had to counter this.

“So what is the alternative?” She asked.

“I can call for a referendum,” he answered. “A public vote with a simple question: Should the UK join ADVENT? I have the authority to do that, and Parliament would…well, they wouldn’t necessarily be forced to follow it, but refusing would be political suicide.”

“You’ll face opposition,” Saudia noted. “The EU will not like it, and neither will the media.”

He smirked. “Do I look like the kind of person who cares what they think? They don’t matter, and both of us know it. But what I want to do before I announce this is I want everything in place. I want the transition to be as smooth as possible. I want ADVENT Peacekeepers ready to round up the criminals in my government and take them far away. I want our military fully upgraded within two weeks. I want every aspect of the UK to be ready to transition. And I want to present this publically so the people know the plan and can have confidence in it.”

He smirked. “Only an idiot would call for something like this and not have a concrete plan of action.”

“That can certainly be done,” Saudia nodded. “I believe French and German representatives could also be useful, as they have also gone through this process. They can paint a more accurate picture of life in ADVENT than the other media can.”

“Certainly,” Bennett agreed. “And I would ask for some…tech demos as well. For our police and military. See what they can get out of this.”

“This is all well and good,” Saudia cautioned. “However, what if it fails?”

“Then it fails and I’m surrounded by shortsighted idiots,” he sighed. “But I don’t think it will. The people are fed up with the stalemate. The EU won’t do anything. Parliament won’t do anything. I can only do so much. I am confident that the UK will join ADVENT once the referendum is in place.”

“From the numbers I’ve seen, your country is not in an uncommon position,” Saudia nodded. “Now, you do need to be aware that your country will have to conform to ADVENT law. That means no more royalty, no more banned religions, and you’re going to be watched a lot more closely. You are aware of this, right?”

“I don’t have anything to hide,” he sniffed dismissively. “Not anymore. And as for religion…well, maybe that can be negotiated. There is no reason for Islam to exist, let alone be supported by the government.”

“I agree,” Saudia nodded. “However, based on history, every time someone has tried to kill a religion, it keeps coming back. Islam will fully die one day, as will all religions, but it will be a natural death. If the practice is peaceful, then the people are allowed that freedom. And all of them will be on registries of course. Religious violence is dealt with quickly and swiftly.”

“At least you have some ways of curtailing it,” he sighed, rubbing his forehead. “Very well. It’s not
worth causing a fight over. As for the Queen, she doesn’t have any power anyway, not really.”

“I should clarify,” Saudia shifted in her seat. “The monarchy will no longer be supported at all by ADVENT. The royal family after joining will simply be a rich family with an interesting past. If they wish to preserve that heritage, that is their right, but their importance will fade over time. The government will not pay for them any longer.”

“Come now, Chancellor,” he chided. “While I personally think the Royal Family thinks a bit too much of themselves, they are part of our culture. It’s something worth keeping around, even symbolically.”

“And they can keep that symbolism,” Saudia nodded. “But they will not be supported or recognized by ADVENT. We are past the times of kings and queens; of the monarchy. It will remain as part of history, but as with the Japanese Emperor, such positions will no longer be treated with any form of recognition. Besides, I’m certain the Royal Family is rich enough to keep themselves going without government assistance.”

Bennett pursed his lips. “I do not exactly support that, Chancellor. Nor will many people, I suspect. But I suppose there are costs to world unification. This issue is not one worth risking the world for. I do appreciate you reminding me of these things,” he smirked. “I admit, I have not been this enthused about working for some time. It is good to work with someone competent.”

“That is one of the core values of ADVENT,” Saudia agreed. “I’m glad we see eye to eye on this. Now, if you’re willing, we can begin working on how your country will be integrated into ADVENT.”

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Alien Containment, the Praesidium – Classified Location

11/28/2016 – 5:22 A.M.

Keeping Caelior down was something that didn’t take too much effort once she got the hang of it. It was enough that she no longer had to have a constant hold on his mind, but could set it to stay unconscious for a certain amount of time. It was only roughly a half hour or something like that, but it did allow her a mental reprieve.

Patricia really wanted to get out of her suit, but knew she had to stay ready until he was dealt with one way or another. He still should have been killed, but if the Commander was set on keeping him alive, he wasn’t going to be a problem on her watch.

“He’s been speaking to you, hasn’t he.”

Patricia looked up at Aegis, who was still watching Vahlen and her team finish up the surgery. “Sorry?” She didn’t know if she’d misheard or not, since her concentration and lucidity had been slipping as the hours passed. It wouldn’t be out of the realm of possibility for her to hear Aegis say something he hadn’t.

“The Imperator,” Aegis repeated. “He’s been speaking to you.”

The way it was phrased did not make it sound like a question.

Patricia pursed her lips. This was certainly awkward, because she knew that Aegis was going to jump to conclusions that weren’t true. “Yes. Though he’s just as vague as ever.”
“You should not be speaking to him.” Aegis stated. “It is dangerous.”

Patricia rubbed her forehead. “See, I would be more inclined to believe you if he’d…well, actually done something to me. But he hasn’t. He’s been more of a help than an actual enemy.”

“I suspected as much,” Aegis said, his voice weary. “One does not simply learn how to manipulate the lower brain in a matter of days. He gave you the knowledge himself.”

“The basics,” Patricia shrugged. “As far as I know, there isn’t some hidden command that turns me into his servant.”

“He is playing you, Patricia,” Aegis said, finally turning to her. “As much as you don’t think he is manipulating you, the Imperator is one who does not do something without a reason.”

“Fine,” Patricia stood, crossing her arms. “So tell me, what is that reason? I can’t figure it out, but I can’t say it’s actually bad. He’s also not tried to convince me to betray XCOM, if you’re curious.”

“He is normalizing himself,” Aegis insisted. “You are becoming comfortable around him. More open to his suggestions. That is all he wants. He is deliberately not acting like the being you are expecting. He knows what to say to you, what to do to direct you down a certain path.” His voice became darker. “And your failure to see that is a problem.”

“You still haven’t answered by question,” Patricia reminded him. “Why would he bother to do this? He knows I won’t betray my species. And if that were the case, why isn’t he doing it to the Commander, or Geist, or any other psion?”

“Because the two you mentioned know better than to speak to him alone!” Came the heated answer, one which was causing some heads nearby to turn. “That is how the Imperator works. Beings do what he wants, and believe they alone came to that conclusion when in reality they were always following the path the Imperator created for them.”

Aegis paused. “He is a gifted speaker and his charisma is unmatched. Yet he is extremely dangerous. You have changed and you do not even realize it. You have become more comfortable with your abilities, more distant from the ones you cared about; you were willing to kill a defenseless Ethereal to practice. You were not always like this.”

Patricia glared at him. “No, Aegis, no I was not. I’m not the same person I was months ago, and the woman I was back then is not recognizable compared to the one at the beginning of this war. People change, which I guess isn’t common for Ethereals, but on Earth that happens. And that ‘defenseless’ Ethereal you want preserved was capable of destroying entire fleets.”

“He was no threat,” Aegis repeated. “Thanks to you, ironically.”

“He was our enemy,” Patricia stated, eyes flashing. “As are all the aliens that attack us. If I am going to use my powers, I am going to cause the most damage with them. And that extends beyond telepathy.” She tapped her head. “Perhaps you’re right. The Imperator did encourage me to not feel as guilty about what I was doing. That does not mean he was wrong.”

“You admit he has directly changed your own values,” Aegis said incredulously. “How can you not see an issue with that?”

“Because he pointed me in the direction, I ultimately made the choice,” Patricia answered. “And why should I have an issue with it any more than if you were responsible? The Commander himself has made me reevaluate what I believe. Yet I don’t see you having a problem with that.”
“But this is-“

“The Imperator, I know,” Patricia interrupted. “And no, that isn’t a problem. Not really. If he was going to do something to me, he would have done it by now.”

“He already has,” Aegis said. “And he is succeeding.”

“Succeeding at what?” She demanded angrily, her sleep-deprived mind wanting this to be over. “Tell me what!” The last word was a shout, one which had been psionically amplified. She shook her head, trying to stop the instinctive psionic usage. “He probably has a plan. Maybe. I don’t know anymore. But I’m aware of the possibility. But unless you can tell me why I should avoid him, then I don’t see a reason to do so just because you don’t like him.”

There was a pause between them. “Besides,” Patricia said wearily. “If there were an actual problem, the Commander would have probably brought it up with me.”

“The Commander has too much trust in you,” Aegis said, turning to look back through the glass. “He isn’t blind, but he trusts you to handle it. I will advise him to talk to you, but he cannot grasp the Imperator. You cannot either without witnessing him in person.” He looked down. “I cannot give you answers, Patricia, only warnings. Ones I suggest you heed unless you want to become the enemy you are fighting against. Perhaps that is his goal for you.”

“Your input is noted, Aegis,” Patricia said after a few minutes. “But I can make my own decisions. I can think for myself.”

Aegis didn’t sound surprised, but she could sense his disappointment. “I sincerely hope that is true, Psion. For all our sakes.”

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Busan – South Korea

11/28/2016 – 5:55 P.M.

There was definitely a party going on somewhere. In fact, there were quite a few taking place across the base. This was one of the cases where Duri felt that some celebration was in order, but really, after seeing one single Ethereal single-handedly end the battle he felt a more appropriate reaction would be a strong drink.

If he drank, that is.

He wasn’t exactly the partying type; that was for kids and extroverts, of which he was neither. Not to mention that Officers actually had things to do and look over in the unlikely event something came up. Then there was the whole situation with China, which had been the second-most surprising thing to happen that day.

Strange days indeed.

Even more strange was that they had actual alien captives now.

“They’re big,” Beatriz noted as they looked over the aliens sitting alone in an improvised jail cell. She’d volunteered to come with him when he said he was going to look over the prisoners, and since everyone else was out celebrating, he’d said he’d like the company. “Bigger than in the scope, anyway.”
They definitely were. All of these aliens were Vitakarians, four to be precise. They really were big, the smallest was over two meters, and the bigger ones getting uncomfortably close to two and a half meters. Even sitting down they were close to eye level. It was strange, and made him very aware that he really hadn’t seen them this close when alive before.

“It’s definitely brighter when they’re alive,” Beatriz noted, after looking them over for a few seconds.

“What is?” Duri asked, glanced towards her. Both of them were in their armor, though she’d forgone the helmet as it wasn’t a combat situation. He noticed she had a tendency to bite her lower lip when she was thinking about something.

“Their eyes,” she nodded towards them. “They’re brighter when they’re alive. I’ve only seen them up close when dead. They still glow, but it’s definitely not as strong.”

“Huh, neat.” Fun fact of the day brought to him by Beatriz.

“Checking up on our xeno friends?” A voice interjected, and Duri turned to see the Officer he assumed was overseeing this area. “Officer Roe, Alien Containment Officer.”

Duri saluted him, more as a gesture of courtesy. “Officer Duri, Carolus Squad. I didn’t know we had that designation.”

Roe chuckled, his voice rumbling. “A fairly recent addition. Promotion for me. I had some history as a lawyer, and worked as an interrogator for a time; thus, I was pegged as a candidate for this position if it was needed. Aliens surrender, and boom, ‘promotion’. Still,” he glanced to the aliens. “They haven’t given me much trouble, and there aren’t many in this area.”

“When you say ‘not many’…?”

“Approximately two hundred and four for Busan,” Roe clarified. “Not all kept in the same place, and there’s more down the coast. I think there are some in America who actually surrendered. Crazy what’s happening. That Ethereal showing up changed everything.”

“So what do you know about these ones?” Beatriz asked, motioning to the aliens in the cell.

“Runianarch soldiers,” Roe answered. “I have it segregated by race and species. We even have a few Andromedons we’re looking after. But this group is all Vitakarians. A couple rooms down are a few Borelians, and you get the picture. This group is three females and one male, not really much to say, honestly.”

“A high number of females,” Duri noted with a raised eyebrow. “That normal or just coincidence?”

Officer Roe pulled out his tablet and began tapping on it. “That sort of varies depending on race. For Vitakarians, its pretty split, with it tipped towards a male majority. Dath’Haram, all four of them, are evenly split. I have yet to see a single male Borelian or Cobrarian.” Duri could imagine the amused smirk under his helmet. “Never let it be said that the aliens are misogynist.”

“Huh,” Beatriz said, sounding fairly interested. “That’s interesting. I wonder if it’s a cultural thing.”

“You know, we can hear you,” one of the female Vitakarians said from the cell. “And honestly, the fact that most of you Humans were actively discouraging half your population from participating in military operations until recently is utterly baffling.”
“Well, well, you can understand me,” Roe was definitely smiling underneath. “And here I thought you couldn’t understand me, with your whole silent routine.” He glanced up at Duri, switching to Korean. “[English seems to be the only Human language they know. I normally speak that around them. Sometimes takes them a while to respond.]”

Duri furrowed his eyebrows. “[How many of them speak English?]”

Roe turned towards the aliens. “[Likely a lot more than they let on. I’ll know more once I get a Priest in here to help. I’ve got one coming soon.]”

The female Vitakarian narrowed her eyes to blue slits. “What are you saying?”

“Don’t ask me,” Beatriz shrugged. “I don’t speak Korean.”

“That I’m going to be getting a telepath soon so I can determine exactly who cannot speak and who is faking it,” Roe said, taking off his helmet and smiling. “It’d save us both a lot of time if you would have said something at the beginning.”

“Maybe.” She stood to her full height, easily towering over them. “But I did not know what to expect. How you treat aliens is unknown to us.”

“Well good, you trust us enough to speak,” Roe said, walking over to her. Duri joined them in taking off his helmet as well. “Now, are there any more of you who can understand us?”

“Velonion knows bits and pieces,” she said, motioning to the male Vitakarian. “I’ve been trying to teach him when I can. The others don’t know any, unless they’ve not mentioned it.” She broke off and spoke something in their language. The other Vitakarian females responded in the same way. It actually didn’t sound…alien. Just like another language, like French or German. Incomprehensible to him, but not something he would raise his eye at.

“No, they only know a few words,” the Vitakarian confirmed. “Essentials. ‘Yes’ ‘No’ and the like.” A pause. “‘Die’ and ‘Kill’ as well.”

“Good, good,” Roe made notes on his tablet. “Now, I don’t believe I know your name. Want to share?”

“What’s going to happen to us?” She said instead. “We want to see the Ethereal.”

Roe pursed his lips, looking thoughtfully at them. “See, this is the situation. Believe it or not, ADVENT wasn’t aware there was an Ethereal working with XCOM until you were. And while I’m sure the Ethereal would be happy to meet you, he is currently with XCOM and presumably handling important work there.”

Duri was half-surprised that he felt bad for the alien when her face visibly deflated at Roe’s words. “Right now, you are a prisoner of war,” the Officer continued. “You surrendered, so already you’re in good standing with us. Right now things are somewhat confined, but once we have appropriate facilities, you will be moved there. Until then, you’ll be fed, clothed, and treated well, provided you don’t cause trouble for us.”

The Vitakarian considered that for a moment. “And if we…do cause trouble? And what does that actually mean?”

Roe’s smile didn’t waver. “It’s fairly simple. Follow orders of ADVENT personnel, don’t attack us, and very important – don’t lie. We’ll know if you do. You don’t have to have important intel to survive, but…let’s say that sudden lapses in memory will reflect poorly.” He tapped once on the
tablet. “And if you cause too much trouble? You’ll be executed or sent to our scientists to experiment on. They’re always needing live specimens.”

She blinked rapidly several times. Maybe the way they conveyed fear? “I understand,” she finally said after a brief pause. “I will make sure they do as well.”

“Excellent!” Roe set the tablet to the side. “Now, we do know that the Ethereal was the primary reason you decided to surrender. We are looking into perhaps transferring you to XCOM custody…provided certain criteria are met.”

“And what are those?” Was the immediate demand.

“I’m afraid I can’t say,” Roe said apologetically. “We can’t have people attempting to cheat, so to speak. I’m sure you can understand that we can’t send everyone to XCOM. But follow the rules, answer our questions honestly, and your chances will improve.”

“And what happens in the meantime?” She asked. “Do we just stay in a building and do nothing?”

“Of course not,” Roe dismissed. “Nor do we necessarily need you for manual labor, we have criminals for that now. No, you can…treat this as an opportunity to learn. Despite what your Collective propaganda likely tells you, we are not something to be feared…well, unless you are our enemy.”

The Vitakarian seemed to attempt to smile. “They did not even give us that. We knew nothing about your species except how to kill you. Any additional research was done of our own volition.”

“Interesting,” Roe made a note. “Aside from occupying yourselves, we have many human academic professionals who would certainly be interested in your species. Humans, as you should understand, don’t necessarily have a positive view of aliens. You will have some opportunities to dispute that, unless you wish to be difficult.”

“And I suppose you don’t hate us?” She glanced to Duri and Beatriz. “Or you two either?”

Roe’s smile didn’t waver, but his eyes grew harder, as did his tone. “Let us say that I don’t hate most aliens. I reserve that for a very specific few, namely the ones behind this invasion. You are just soldiers. You follow your orders. You have no say in how the war is run. I don’t hate you for doing your job.”

“Nor do I,” Duri added. “But honestly, I wish you had never come here.”

“I don’t hate you personally,” Beatriz said slowly, crossing her arms. “But I don’t like you. Your kind have killed us for no reason. You won’t, and should not be welcome on our planet, regardless of if you were following your orders or not.”

The Vitakarian just nodded at Beatriz. “I understand that.”

“And there you have it,” Roe said, lowering his tablet. “Now, I don’t believe I got your name?”

“Runi’cairu’inth’a.”

“You go by your middle names, correct?” Roe asked, looking up. “Cairu?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent,” he made some final notes. “You won’t have to stay in that cell too much longer.
You’ll all be moved shortly. We’ll have more questions later, but your cooperation has been noticed, and ADVENT thanks you for it.”

“How very nice of them.” Duri almost blinked at that. Was she really being sarcastic?

Roe just laughed, and Duri was almost hoping nothing too bad happened to her. He doubted it was going to be as fair as Roe was promising, but if they cooperated, he didn’t see a reason to mistreat them. That was what the aliens would do to them.

ADVENT was better than that.

At least he hoped it was.

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Alien Containment Chamber, the Praesidium – Classified Location

11/28/2016 – 11:59 A.M.

“I am concerned about Patricia,” Aegis said. “She still does not fully understand the danger communicating with the Imperator poses.”

While waiting for Caelior to become conscious, Aegis had decided to inform the Commander over an apparent recent conversation. Truth be told the Commander had suspected something like that was going on given how deflective Patricia had been in response to some of his questions. However, from what it sounded like the Imperator was deliberately avoiding giving a sensible motivation for his actions.

The Commander did agree with Aegis that it was not safe, but at the same time, he trusted that Patricia would be able to handle it. “She’ll be fine. If the Imperator wants to communicate with her, that isn’t something we can really stop.”

“Unfortunately not,” Aegis exhaled, with some resignation. “But you should discourage her from such interactions. She will listen to you more than me, and even you must be becoming concerned about her state of mind. She has become more violent.”

Indeed he had, and that was something he could justifiably come down on her for. To an extent he could tolerate some experimentation, but drawing it out for the sake of it wasn’t professional nor efficient. At the very least, she needed to become better at letting him know exactly what these training sessions would entail. He didn’t care much about how aliens felt, but more about his own people trying to emulate Ethereals like Isomnum.

The Imperator may be pushing her this direction, but the Commander wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d begun doing it anyway. She was like that, once an idea got into her head she would try every logical way to make it work. The source of the idea could have been anyone, and in this case it so happened to be the Imperator. Considering the things Geist had done, it could have easily come from him.

Mhmm, Geist. He was going to need to deal with him for his actions. Patricia at least had some rules about how she respected the minds of her soldiers. She still had her own ethics, even if Aegis didn’t seem to think so right now. Geist, on the other hand, did not.

Still, that was not the main issue with Aegis’s suggestion. “You still don’t really get how Humans work,” he sighed. “Telling someone ‘don’t do this’ and not giving them a sufficient explanation doesn’t work with most people. They just do it without telling you, and it’s not like Patricia is
actively seeking him out.”

“And how long until she does?” Aegis inquired.

“That would depend on her reasons,” he answered evenly. “The Imperator has been rather free with his information. That would be an acceptable reason. If it’s more malicious than that, then we’ll have problems. But that doesn’t address my point. How, exactly, would I make sure they didn’t communicate?”

“At this point in time there is nothing,” Aegis admitted. “However, the Manchurian Restraints—”

“Will not be used that way,” the Commander interrupted. “Nor is that necessary. My soldiers are not children, Aegis. They can think for themselves, and I’ll respect that. I trust Patricia until she gives me a reason not to. She’s been here since the beginning. She’s not going to go running off just because the Imperator was nice to her.”

“I still do not believe that is his goal,” Aegis said, as Vahlen signaled that Caelior was waking up. “He is trying to change her; not convert her. That is arguably just as dangerous.”

“We’ll continue this later,” the Commander said as they both stepped into the Containment Chamber where Caelior was strapped to the operating table, with all his arms tied behind his back. The table had been oriented vertically so he could face them upright when he awoke. Without his helmet or armor, he didn’t look nearly as intimidating.

Ethereals really did look different under their armor and robes. They didn’t really have necks, but just one elongated head. The mouth was definitely not in the original species, as it seemed a noticeably thin and alien addition; lipless and small, as well as placed fairly far down the ‘face’.

Honestly, all these restraints were probably unnecessary since Vahlen had said the procedure was successful and Caelior was completely paralyzed from the neck down. Hopefully he wouldn’t be too violent upon waking up. “He should be fully conscious shortly,” Vahlen said, walking up to them, back in her standard science uniform. “Everyone ready?”

“Yes,” the Commander confirmed. “Patricia, Geist, and Sussan are monitoring him. They will inform me if anything is wrong.” He tapped his earpiece, opening up a channel. “Everyone set?”

“Yes, Commander,” Patricia confirmed.

Caelior suddenly moved his head, his voice making a groaning sound. The glowing orange eyes of the Ethereal opened, blinking even in the dimmed light. “XCOM…” he noted groggily, likely seeing him and Vahlen, he moved his head. “Aegis.”

“Caelior,” Aegis inclined his helmet. “Do not be alarmed. They do not intend to hurt you.”

Technically correct, but they wouldn’t hesitate to kill him. “I can’t move,” he said, voice growing louder, realizing the paralysis. “I can’t feel anything! What did you do to me?!”

“A precautionary measure,” Vahlen explained calmly trying to keep him from panicking, as she stepped forward. “You have been medicinally paralyzed from the neck down. Considering your abilities and previously hostile intentions towards us, we couldn’t take the risk. This is reversible, and if you cooperate, we could allow you to move again.”

The golden eyes narrowed, and the Commander raised a hand. “I would caution against attempting to use any of your…abilities.” He motioned to Vahlen. “This was not the only precaution. You have been fitted with neural bombs. These aren’t powerful, but are more than sufficient to kill you.
They can be detonated manually, or they will go off if it detects you have reached a certain threshold of psionic usage.” He gave a grim smile. “I would not push this boundary.”

Technically, it wasn’t actually connected to a sensor. While Vahlen had conceptualized the idea, there hadn’t been time to fully fit him with it. However, his brain was hooked up to computers which monitored his psionic usage, and sending the data both to Vahlen and Geist. If it reached a certain threshold, they would manually detonate the explosive.

But Caelior didn’t need to know that.

“Why didn’t you just kill me?” Caelior said wearily, looking to Aegis. “To gloat? To torture me like this? Trapped in my own body?”

“Because you do not deserve to die, Caelior,” Aegis said.

“I came to kill you,” Caelior spat. “I have disgraced the Imperator, I failed him. I suppose that is why he didn’t intervene. Death is better than living as your captive.”

“No,” Aegis shook his head. “You were sent down to die. No one believed you would win; not the Battlemaster, not the Imperator. You were sacrificed. You were supposed to die, Caelior, but I have convinced the Commander to change your determined fate.”

“Impossible,” Caelior disputed. “I would not be sacrificed like some pawn. I am one of the greatest weapons against the threat we face. I would not simply be... discarded.” Despite his words, he did seem to be slightly unsure.

“Were you aware that the Imperator has been communicating with Patricia?” The Commander said. “Helping her? Encouraging her? He was the one who informed her, and through her, us, that you were coming.”

If Caelior could have stiffened, he would have. “No. He would not do that. Why would he do that? He is no traitor to us.”

“Because the Imperator does not care about you, or any of us,” Aegis explained. “Everything is a tool or pawn to him; something to use and discard when needed. Every action is used to enact his nebulous agenda. The Imperator has abandoned our original goal for years, Caelior, it was ultimately why I left. He is too focused on the inner galaxy and Sovereign Ones. The Synthesized are not his primary concern.”

“That can’t be,” Caelior said slowly. “If that were the case I would have heard about it. Someone would know. Why didn’t you say anything if this was true?”

“Even you must have noticed how things were changing,” Aegis took a step towards the young Ethereal. “The Imperator slowly and quietly cut off my access to information. I was no longer informed of Collective developments. There was only one way to fully defy him, and that was leaving. There were other reasons.”

“Like what?”

Aegis hesitated, then continued. “He never told you the truth about how you were used. None of us did. Lies among the few of us that were left became less and less acceptable to me, but it was important for the Imperator that the lies be maintained.”

“What are you talking about?” Caelior demanded.
“You are no legend, Caelior,” Aegis said sadly. “You have been and were a propaganda tool of the Empire. Your legend was one of an artificial making, conceptualized by the Division of the Battlemasters, Shadows, and Overminds. The Ethereals needed hope, and the story of an Ethereal prodigy single-handedly challenging the Synthesized was the answer.”

He paused. “But it was just that: A story. Your victories were not of your own making. You believe you single-handedly changed the tide of battles, when you had been conditioned to ignore the influence of Overminds who assisted you from afar. You were sent into battle against Synthesized already weakened and scattered. Your true victories existed, but were far outnumbered by those engineered to grow the legend of Caelior.”

“No…” Caelior shook his head, voice in denial. “I’ve used my power. I remember the battles! I made the decisions! It can’t…it can’t have been fake.”

“You thought you did,” Aegis said. “But you are no telepath, Caelior. Your mind was not trained to resist the influence of the Shadows. Your power, Caelior, is real. Very real. But your accomplishments are not. They never were.”

Caelior was silent for a few minutes, head looking towards the ground. The Commander almost felt sorry for him. He didn’t really know what the appropriate reaction was when you were told that your life was an engineered lie, but this seemed to be fitting. If Ethereals could cry, the Commander would not have been surprised to see him shed some tears.

It is difficult for him to show it. Vahlen telepathically communicated. But he truly is shaken. He’s thinking now; about everything he’s gone through. He can sense Aegis is telling the truth, and that is scaring him.

“Then…why?” Caelior finally asked. “Why even bring me?”

“Because you are powerful,” Aegis answered. “The Imperator wanted you as a weapon, a tool, nothing more. But you were consumed by your legend; you believed yourself special and superior to others and those who knew the truth simply played into it as a source of amusement. You were not considered highly, Caelior, because of your attitude and words. But while you bear some of the blame, it is the result of the lies of others. For that, I am sorry.”

“And I fell right into it,” he said bitterly. “Why did…no one ever tell me? Did they believe I could not handle it?”

“I do not know,” Aegis admitted. “But I doubt many of them cared enough about you to even think that was important. You were not a friendly personality; you drove people away with your arrogance and superiority. I suspect your actions led to the Battlemaster deciding you were a liability to him.”

“I…think so,” Caelior said slowly. “I did threaten him. Quisilia mocked me for it, but I didn’t consider him worth paying attention to. He promised that if I killed you, I could assume control of the military.” A pause. “I was a fool.”

Yes, he most definitely was. The Battlemaster had definitely allowed him to die. Or would have, had they not changed the script. It seemed that for the first time in his life, Caelior was actually trying to think about something.

“What is going to happen to me?” Caelior didn’t sound angry, violent, or defiant, just defeated. “Do you intend to torture me? Experiment on me? Extract everything I know? I am aware of how XCOM operates.”
“That,” the Commander said. “Depends on your cooperation. You are too much of a risk to hold indefinitely, as it stands now. Even bombs won’t render you harmless. However, there is something under development that could allow you to live more…freely. But until then, we will ask some questions, either from Aegis, myself, or Zhang. Vahlen will run some tests on you and take samples. Then you will be placed in a Stasis Chamber until the Manchurian Restraints are completed.”

“And even if these…Restraints are developed, then what?” Caelior asked. “You would not wake me up if there was no plan for me?”

The Commander and Aegis exchanged a look. “Commander, do you believe he would have a place with us….with appropriate precautions, of course?”

The Commander appraised the Ethereal. He’d seen Caelior’s power; Aegis wanted for him to join XCOM. He wasn’t sure that was a good idea, but he was too powerful to really ignore as a weapon. Yet at the same time, he likely had as little tolerance for incompetence and childishness as the Battlemaster had.

Then again, that wouldn’t be a problem with the Manchurian Restraints.

“That depends,” he said slowly. “Aegis gave me a detailed dossier on you. You are an Ethereal supremacist, are overly emotional, and became enough of a liability that the Battlemaster deemed you better dead than alive. I have no place for someone like that. The question that should be asked is first, is that even something you would want, and second, if you are willing to change.”

“I…do not know,” Caelior admitted. “I do not know what I want. Everything I was is…not real. I don’t know what to do.”

“You can decide that when the time comes,” Aegis said. “In the meantime, you can stay here; think over what you learned, ask questions, grow. You can be what you thought you were, Caelior, but it must be your own decision.”

“First I need to know if you will cooperate with us,” the Commander said. “Everything else is contingent on that.”

“I have little choice,” Caelior answered. “But…yes. You will not have to force me. I do not like feeling trapped in my body, so I would ask you place me in stasis soon. This feeling of helplessness is…disconcerting.”

“It will not take more than a few days,” Vahlen promised. “And when you awaken, you will have feeling back. It may take some time for your body to readjust, but by then the Restraints will be applied and your mobility will be permitted.”

The Ethereal sighed. “Very well. Begin asking your questions.”

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Abuja – Nigeria

11/29/2016 – 2:12 P.M.

The recent developments had definitely changed things up, to put it mildly.

Betos felt like she was running on empty for the vast majority of the time, between trying to manage the military effectively and safely, trying to curtail the more outrageous demands of the
SAS leadership, and on top of that work with Macula to try and establish the SAS as an alien-enhanced power without ADVENT noticing for a while.

Luckily, Macula had already come through on at least securing Abuja. He had brought in a very small number of his own alien forces, and placed enough sensors, scouts and some kind of holographic technology which would ensure that ADVENT was not going to be able to know what actually was going on in her little corner of Africa.

Her soldiers were somewhat apprehensive of even the limited number of aliens wandering around, but there wasn’t too much interaction with them, although some of the Borelians were helping train her soldiers to more effectively use their own advanced weaponry, namely the plasma rifles, railguns, and camo-tech.

It was all very impressive, and her soldiers were already as, or more, advanced than ADVENT on a technological level. The trick would be to apply this to the SAS as a whole, which was going to be a lot more difficult to do without attracting suspicion.

But right now, she didn’t care about that.

One Ethereal was now captured by XCOM, and one was working with them.

He had failed to mention several things to her.

The building Macula was staying in was a renovated house, which looked normal enough on the outside until you realized it was a holographic front, with a full alien cube-like structure underneath. It was fairly small and open, with the first ‘floor’ only consisting of his holographic devices, haptics, and computers. The space above that room was presumably where he slept.

The moment she stepped through Kellani stepped forward, one hand already moving towards his Titan Hammer. The Oyariah, Mac’kellani’hegemon, was more intimidating to her than the Ethereal. He seemed to fulfill the role of a bodyguard, but he was definitely not just some muscle. He towered over her, standing at least three meters high, but was surprisingly articulate which had been strange to hear from the stony alien.

“State your business, Lady Betos,” he said, having adopted her unofficial title given by Macula. Why he’d chosen that she didn’t know, as she would have preferred her military title of Marshal. But of all the things to complain about, that really wasn’t something she could make herself care too much about.

“Aegis,” she said. “Please move aside.”

“Yes, you may step aside,” Macula said walking over to her. “Lady Betos no doubt has some questions.”

Kellani stepped back, his hand falling to his side. “As you decree, Elder Macula.”

“Right,” Betos crossed his arms. “So were you ever going to mention this to me? I think it might have been important.”

“Unlikely,” Macula answered. “The main reason is that Aegis was not relevant, nor was his unfortunate defection. His influence would have been limited, though now that he has appeared, that has clearly changed.”

Betos sniffed. “Clearly.”
“That, Lady Betos, is not our goal,” Macula continued, raising a finger. “Right now we need to improve the SAS and ensure that ADVENT does not become too aware of our presence. Aegis does not have an impact on that, and I also say that may serve as a distraction for our own operations. They will be too focused on him.”

Macula did have a point there. ADVENT had a lot to focus on. “There is also the issue of China, and their repurposing of the Dreadnought Fragment CODEX,” Kellani rumbled. “Tensions between China and XCOM may become a focal issue.”

“But what about Chinese attack on Japan?” Betos asked.

“While I agree with Elder Macula that it is outside our focus,” Kellani said. “She raises an important point. It is a country that we cannot really afford to lose.”

“It will be reclaimed eventually,” Macula said. “It was…surprising, but this is a simple setback. Our work here is more important.”

“But that Ethereal was captured,” Betos pointed out. “That…can’t have been planned.”

“Yes, Caelior,” Macula paused, almost thoughtfully. “While his capture is unfortunate, nothing much of value was lost. I suspect the Battlemaster determined he was a liability and had the moron kill himself against Aegis. He was never much for thinking through his actions. His loss is not a detriment.”

Kellani didn’t say anything, which was somewhat telling. Normally he would repeat something Macula said, or agree with him. That he didn’t indicated that Kellani took the event a little harder than Macula, although it could be due to how the Oyariah apparently saw the Ethereals as gods, and having one captured was difficult to comprehend.

“Fine,” Betos sighed, rubbing her forehead. “But ADVENT is going to capitalize on this. An Ethereal is going to be used as incentive for them to recruit.”

“But they will target Europe first,” Kellani interjected.

“But they also won’t turn down African nations if they ask,” Betos responded. “We need to expand out further, and that’s not happening while the SAS tries different flavors of dictator.” She scowled. “I can’t keep them in check forever and they’ll only focus on Boko Haram and other terrorists for so long.”

“In that case,” Macula stepped forward with a flourish. “Perhaps it’s time I am formally introduced to the SAS leadership. I would quite enjoy such a diversion.” He motioned to her. “You are the only one that matters here. If the SAS is not conforming to your…well, desires, then that can be changed. Their armies cannot challenge me, nor can their minds.”

Betos felt that there was a double meaning with the latter statement. But she couldn’t disagree. The SAS would be alien-supported, so it made sense that the leadership knew of their benefactors. Macula for certain. “How soon should this be done?”

“When the world is focused on something else,” Macula said mildly. “Like an Ethereal speaking publicly. Once Aegis is properly introduced to the world…well, less focus will be on us. Even if ADVENT will never break their so-called watch, they have priorities. One of which would be watching a supposedly friendly Ethereal.”

“Alright.” Betos was already figuring out logistics. She didn’t trust this not to leak, and was going to have to take some precautions. But it could be done, and once everyone was on the same page,
then maybe something could finally move forward. “Let’s prepare for that.”

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Beijing – China

11/30/2016 – 1:22 P.M.

The Commander had to admit that Beijing was much different when he wasn’t assaulting an EXALT facility. It was a massive and expansive city, one of the biggest in China, and while he could admire it, he was really only interested in getting in, having his meeting with the Chinese, and leaving. He was certain they were being watched, although that was likely the extent of it.

But their Intelligence was most certainly cataloging everything they were doing to analyze later.

This was going to be interesting.

In one of the skyscrapers, he, Patricia, and Zhang were directed towards the room President Qin had decided to meet them in to discuss the repurposed CODEX. They had agreed very quickly, so he assumed that they accurately understood the gravity of the situation. Which was good; there was a much better chance that something would be accomplished here.

He didn’t really want to make the Chinese an enemy again, but he wasn’t going to let this go.

The standard business office with windows allowing a smoggy view of the Beijing skyline behind them was fairly simple for such a meeting, but the Commander didn’t really mind. The less attention, the better. “Commander,” President Qin greeted. “Welcome. Again.”

He had to smile at that. “It’s much more impressive in the day, I have to admit.”

Qin didn’t react, but motioned him to sit down. “I know what you wish to discuss. All I have invited today is the lead for the Tiāngōng Intelligence, Peng Lei.” The other person, an older Chinese man stood and inclined his head.

“Commander, Director Zhang, and Patricia Trask,” he greeted. “A pleasure.”

All of them sat down as the Commander decided to get straight to the point. “The capabilities of your program are impressive, to say the least. How exactly was it developed?”

“It would be wise to be truthful as well,” Patricia added with a smile. “Just a suggestion.”

Lei adjusted his glasses, and at a nod from Qin, answered. “In going through the wreckage of the Dreadnought, there was much of it that was damaged or corroded beyond repair. However, we did manage to extract some vital components. One of them was what I can only assume was an information monitoring system. Not quite an AI, but with very similar theoretical capabilities.”

“The aliens call them CODEX systems,” the Commander nodded. “Very advanced, very versatile.”

“Indeed,” Lei agreed. “The system apparently recognized us as the new owners, and began assisting us in figuring out certain questions regarding their technology. It lacked much information on the aliens themselves, but it helped us understand their code and methodology. From what it provided, we were able to eventually modify it to the Tiāngōng Project.”

“All very fascinating,” the Commander deadpanned, looking to Qin. “And correct me if I am wrong, but China was part of the Council at this time, correct?”
A pause. “Correct,” Qin said.

“I’m glad we’re on the same page,” the Commander said with only slight mockery. “Now, don’t you think that this rather advanced technology might have been somewhat useful to XCOM? Indeed, wasn’t it stated fairly often that all major alien developments fell to us?”

“Commander, if you also recall, you delayed us acquiring the wreckage for months because of your vendetta,” Qin answered. “You never showed a respect for our country. You wanted everything to yourself.”

“And we were completely justified, knowing what we know now,” Zhang stated harshly. “We were concerned you would hold something back if you found it. We were clearly correct.”

Qin’s face wrinkled in disgust. “You are lucky you are allowed to wander here, Triad. You are still a criminal here.”

The Commander rapped his mechanical fingers on the desk. “Zhang has done more for humanity than you have so far, Mr. President. I would advise you keep comments threatening my advisors to a minimum. Especially when he is correct.”

“And let us also not forget that you have also been against us from the start,” Qin continued. “You have deliberately tried to curtail the influence of China. As an American, I can understand you were threatened, but do not believe this is something that excuses you.”

“Yes, I am very loyal to a country that betrayed me and imprisoned me for years,” the Commander answered sarcastically. “However, if I recall, China refused to support me back when the Council was still around. Australia, China, every country that stood as a roadblock to protecting our species. Why wouldn’t I have tried to reduce your influence? You only cared about the aliens when it directly threatened you.” He paused. “You did show some spine pulling out. I can’t fault you for that.”

“Do not forget I know who you are,” Qin reminded him. “Even in ADVENT, your name is not welcome.”

“Really.” The Commander smiled. “Patricia?”

“He is bluffing,” she said. “He has no intention of revealing your identity. He knows you would ensure China joins ADVENT. And he would probably end up dead.”

“Tell your psion to stop reading my mind!” He hissed, color draining from his face. Lei looked concerned as well, shooting Patricia intermittent glances.

“Then don’t threaten my Commander,” she answered flatly.

“Enough,” the Commander raised his hand. “The past cannot be changed. China made a mistake here, that is not in dispute. I would prefer that we take this opportunity to start anew. Allies are better than enemies, but there are certain things that must be done to atone.” He looked to Qin. “This is not a negotiation, Mr. President.” He nodded to Zhang.

“XCOM will have full access to the Tiāngōng Intelligence,” Zhang began listing. “We are allowed to question any and all personnel affiliated with it. XCOM will also acquire full schematics of the housing structure, and the full source code of the program. In addition, we will also seize all original assets housing the CODEX system. We will also be allowed to conduct inspections and withdraw data acquired by the Tiāngōng Intelligence.”
“Do you really think you can just come here and make demands like that?” Qin demanded. “It is one thing coming from ADVENT. It is another from a small paramilitary organization, even one such as yours.”

The Commander exchanged a glance with Patricia. “Yes,” he answered simply. “I can do that. You will be able to retain the Tiāngōng Intelligence, but we will have everything needed to make our own. I suspect ADVENT will back me if you force this.” He paused, leaning forward. “But I would advise you not fight this, Mr. President. It will end badly for any plans you have to keep China independent.”

He motioned to the Beijing skyline. “This is all you have. The Tiāngōng Intelligence is your only insurance policy. It would be a shame if something were to happen to it.”

“The Tiāngōng Housing is under heavily military guard,” Lei shook his head. “I…understand you are upset, but nothing short of an army will breach it.”

“Patricia,” the Commander said after a few moments of thought. “Can you have General Kong give President Qin a call?”

“Certainly,” she answered, closing her eyes. “It will just take a few moments.”

“Armies, are unneeded,” the Commander continued as they waited. “You have no protection, no countermeasures. And you underestimate what would really be required. It could be a simple phone call to move soldiers around, or the power to suddenly go out, or something else miniscule.”

There was a tense silence after that, broken shortly by Qin reaching into his pocket and pulling out a phone. Not breaking eye contact with the Commander he answered it. A few seconds later he put it down again, face still as stone. Lei looked similarly shaken. “You have made your point, Commander,” he said quietly. “You will have what you need.”

“Excellent, that’s all I wanted,” the Commander said. “Contrary to what you like to believe, I don’t want you as an enemy. There are more important things to focus on, but I will not have one country hoarding valuable tech because of a vendetta or a misguided selfishness.”

“My people will be arriving tomorrow,” Zhang added, addressing Qin. “I expect there to not be any problems. I have formal agreements for your people to sign.”

“I will see they are handled,” Qin sighed as Zhang pulled out the documents. “I hope this is the last conversation of this nature we will have, Commander.”

“As do I,” he nodded. “But that, Mr. President, will largely be up to you.”

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Alien Containment, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/1/2016 – 10:22 A.M.

The Commander stood with Jackson and Aegis in front of the one-way looking glass at the newest member of the containment cells. “This is…interesting. Jackson, would you care to fill me in on why, exactly, there is an Oyariah here.”

“I can do that easily enough,” Jackson looked down at her tablet. “The short version is that he was one of the aliens who defected. He’s been cooperative, but essentially said he wanted to speak to Aegis. ADVENT inquired if we wanted him, since the Priests determined that he was telling the
truth, and I accepted.” She lowered the tablet. “Couldn’t hurt, and worst case we get a live Oyariah to experiment on. We benefit either way.”

“Acceptable,” the Commander nodded, clasping his hands behind his back as he appraised the Oyariah before him. Like the others of his species, his black stony skin covered his body, only breaking at gaps for the joints. If the Commander wasn’t aware of how Oyariah biology worked, he would have assumed the Oyariah was still wearing some kind of armor.

He was seated on the bench in the back of the cell, waiting calmly for someone to make an appearance. The Oyariah’s faceplates weren’t ornate or complex, but simply just formed something akin to a skullcap over his head while leaving the grey-skinned face exposed. The black-pupiled eyes just stared ahead; seemingly sightless.

“The question is what to do with him if he is cooperative,” the Commander noted. “Oyariah are not really known for their scientific or engineering expertise.”

“You would be surprised,” Aegis said. “Many hold that opinion because they live underground, but few recall that their cities are on an equal level of sophistication to others on Vitakar.” A pause. “However, I suspect this one does not fit that category.”

“No point delaying,” the Commander said, moving to psionically unlock the cell door, which slid to the side. He walked inside the room with the alien, with Aegis behind him.

The Oyariah immediately fell to one knee upon the entrance of the Ethereal. “Elder Aegis, you honor me with your presence.”

Aegis seemed to see what was needed and fell into the role immediately. “You may rise.”

The Oyariah did so, and rose to a height that was close to eight feet, if not slightly higher. “What is your name, Dweller of the Stone?”

Well, he was being fancy. But he was handling it well. “Rava’xarian’hegemon, Elder Aegis, formerly within the Guard of the Ravager.”

The Ravager of the Hegemony. The Commander looked at him with new interest. That was the closest thing the Oyariah had to a military leader, and if Xarian had been one of her guards, this was one of the highest-ranking defections. Aegis apparently had the same thought. “You abandoned your duty to the Ravager. Why?”

“Because of your appearance, Elder,” Xarian answered. “I have heard the stories of the Aegis within the Black Library. Your feats, your victories, all of which were shared by Elder Cogitian and immortalized by the One Encased.” He trailed off briefly. “My faith in the Elders has been… weakened for some time. They have become silent, less forthcoming to their disciples, I did not know the reason. But your revelation has made that clear. They have lied to us; hidden your departure out of shame or malice, I do not know which.”

The Oyariah shook his head in apparent disgust. “One does not lie to us and expect to be trusted. I did not know what to make of this initially, but then I remembered the legends, the ones where you fought the God-Machines time and time again. If there is a war brewing between the Elders, I will not fight for the side who hides the truth from our people. I have come to pledge myself to your service and fight against your enemies until your will is accomplished.”

Huh. The Commander had to admit the Oyariah had given them quite a lot of useful information, even if it wasn’t intentional.
Such as the fact that the Ethereals had definitely been sharing information with the Oyariah, including knowledge about the Synthesized.

Well then.

*His motivations are true,* Aegis communicated. *He is not deceiving us.*

“I am honored by your faith in me, and impressed with your conviction,” Aegis finally said. “Yet even I understand that not all who are opposed to me are deserving of death. My conflict is against the Imperator, not the Elders as a whole. I sense that you have this same understanding.”

“Yes, I do,” Xarian admitted. “Yet you are one who has never deceived my people, not truly. I believe that when you faced the same choice as Elders Sana’Ligna and Battlemaster in lying to my people, you refused and left. And if you oppose the Dread Lord, then it is only further proof that your side is the correct one.”

The Commander was now *very* interested in what, exactly, the Oyariah knew about the Ethereals. Directly referencing Isomnum’s name of legend made him wonder what stories they knew of the Guardians or even Caelior. “Do you know who I am?” He finally asked, speaking for the first time.

“You are the Commander, one of the Godkillers and Slayer of the Ravaged One,” Xarian answered. “Your face and name are enshrined in the Halls of Stone, as are those of the Godkillers Patricia Trask, Moira Vahlen, and Franklin West. You are the only mortal to have faced the wrath of an Elder and live.”

Godkiller, huh. He quite liked the sound of that. “I don’t suppose I’m liked there then?”

“Any who are strong enough to kill an Elder are worthy of respect,” Xarian disputed with a shake of his head. “And whoever is the one to slay you, and the other Godkillers will be generously rewarded by the Elders themselves. Or so we have believed. Perhaps the False Elders have lied about even that.”

“Unlikely,” Aegis sighed. “They would reward any who slew one who killed our own.”

“And what do you believe about me?” The Commander asked. “You understand that, if this is permitted, you would be fighting on the side of a Godkiller?”

“The Ravaged One was reduced and diminished by the Machine-Gods and endured in this painful reality,” Xarian answered. “The legends show his power and tragedy. When he accepted the pain of a world, the Elder died that day. I am of the belief that you provided him a mercy, and if he was one of the Imperator’s kind, then your reasons are forgivable.”

“You didn’t quite answer my question.”

“Do you fight for the Elder Aegis?”

“I fight *with* him,” the Commander corrected. “Not for him. We don’t view the Elders the same way as you do.”

“It is a perspective that is only truly gifted to my kind,” the Oyariah nodded. “Yet I am satisfied. The Elders are not to be limited, but seen and understood by all. If your species fights alongside Elder Aegis, than that is all I care about.”

“I am again honored by this,” Aegis said. “Yet I fear few of your brethren feel the same.”
“They follow the will of the Stalker, Ravager, and Messenger,” Xarian replied. “And many are not on this planet. I was on orders of the Ravager. Such a decision cannot be undertaken easily, and few are as versed with the legends of the Elders as I am.”

“If I may ask a question,” the Commander interjected, raising an eyebrow. “Why are you? What is your interest in the Ethereals?”

“I was one of the Guard of the Ravager,” he answered, almost surprised that was asked. “To not be versed in such teachings and stories would be disgraceful. Yet I have spoken with them as well, my belief has been strong for decades and I consistently wished to strengthen it. What better way than to learn their histories and legends?”

“Fair point,” the Commander acknowledged.

“The Triumvirate of the Hegemony may come to the conclusion I have,” Xarian admitted. “They are even more familiar with the lore of the Black Library. But that is why it is important that one such as I publicly be seen in your service. Many of my brethren are simply confused and lost. They do not understand what is at stake, and seeing one of their own who fights at your side will convince those wavering to abandon the False Elders and take their rightful place at the side of an Elder in battle.”

“And you are willing to fight your own kind?” The Commander asked.

“In the service of Elder Aegis, I will do what I must,” Xarian inclined his head towards the Ethereal. “I will take no pleasure, but I will not fight against what I believe. I will not take the side of the liar and deceivers, even if I must turn my back on my brethren. They will understand, even if they cannot muster the courage to do the same.”

If there was one thing the Commander was certain of, it was that this was not an act. Even if he wasn’t as experienced in reading aliens as Humans, Xarian was not putting on a show. He truly seemed to believe this, and if that were the case, he could be a very valuable ally and recruiting tool. He was somewhat apprehensive of putting him in XCOM squads…but there was a first time for everything.

Maybe have a few test cases. See how he worked with other Humans.

Such a move was risky without the Manchurian Restraints, but for once, the Commander didn’t really believe those were needed here. “Jackson,” he said. “Did he come with any armor or weaponry?”

“Yes, it was shipped with him.”

“Good,” he looked at the Oyariah. “I’ve heard enough. If you’re willing to fight against the Imperator, I believe you could help us. If Aegis wishes to allow you into his service, I will permit it.”

Aegis looked to Xarian. “Do you desire this?”

“Of course, Elder Aegis.” Xarian said, falling once more to one knee.

“Then you will be the first of my personal guard,” Aegis said. “Aegis’xarian’hegemon, you will execute my will, fight in my name, and assist in restoring order to the Collective and this galaxy. Rise and take your place.”

The renamed Oyariah stood, and from what little skill the Commander had in telepathy, Xarian
seemed genuinely happy. Aegis was very good at playing the role of a deity, ironically enough. “Your equipment will be returned to you shortly,” the Commander said. “And I’ll have some living quarters prepared and ensure that the soldiers are made aware. Just…learn some basics about Humans before you interact with us too much. Not all of them have the highest view of aliens.”

“Of course, Commander of Aegis,” Xarian nodded. “I will ensure I am familiar with your kind before extensive interaction.”

Oyariah liked their titles. The Commander had a feeling things were going to get interesting with him around. And he hadn’t even been told of Caelior yet. Granted, he was in a pod now, but he wouldn’t be there forever.

Hopefully the soldiers would take it well.

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XCOM Intelligence Control, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/1/2016 – 1:03 P.M.

Abby hoped that the scientists were continuing to be nice to her armor. She had very strongly advised Vahlen not to even touch it, and given what happened to her rifle, Vahlen was inclined to agree. Instead she had settled for taking detailed scans which they were presumably going over now. Her leg was healing rapidly, thanks to XCOM medical equipment which was now a combination of alien equipment, nanotech, and maybe some Sovereign Tech, she wasn’t sure.

Once she was healed sufficiently, Abby was going to be doing some more tests wearing the suit, but right now there was the matter of the debriefing. Namely, watching Quisilia get thrown back into a wall. She really just wanted to watch that beautiful moment on repeat. It was so satisfying.

Zhang was not the only one in the room. For the first time, she was being introduced to the Ethereal himself. Aegis was very cordial towards her, and she returned the favor. There was something about being around him that made her feel more at ease. Probably something to do with his psionics, but she surprisingly didn’t feel uncomfortable around him, despite him towering over her.

The video finished and clicked off. “Aegis?” Zhang asked, turning towards him. “What do you make of this?”

“This is unexpected,” he answered slowly, carefully. “I was not aware there were rogue Sovereign Ones…as this…vessel….seemed to imply.”

That reminded Abby of something. “What, exactly, is a Sovereign One? I feel it’s something I should know about.”

“Something very old,” Zhang began curtly, looking at her intently. “What we discuss here doesn’t leave this room. Suffice to say you’ve stumbled upon a mystery even the Ethereals haven’t figured out. Aegis, care to fill her in?”

“Certainly,” Aegis said. “I will be brief.”

And so he proceeded to give the very short history about how the Ethereals fell, which it turned out they had come up against some kind of machine-organic hybrid, if the word “Synthesized” was to be believed. The Imperator had frozen a select few in stasis with the intention to awaken later and
take revenge. When they had woken up, they had been contacted by other survivors called Sovereign Ones who provided them with highly advanced technology.

No, there was definitely nothing suspicious about that.

Abby saw quite a lot of holes in the Imperator’s so-called plan. Holes so large that there was no way that he was ignorant of them. The idea that the Ethereals, all…ten of them? All of them would conquer the galaxy and prepare for an enemy they weren’t sure was even coming back?

There had to be another reason.

But she picked up the main point Aegis was trying to make. “So they never mentioned there was a rogue Sovereign One.”


“I have never heard of them before,” Aegis shook his head. “I was not the primary communicator between the Imperator and the Sovereign Ones.”

“And who was?” Abby asked.

“An Ethereal who the Imperator chose to be the Voice of the Sovereign,” Aegis answered. “She volunteered to be the vessel of communication, and as far as I know, she is who Revelean, Fectorian, and the Imperator go to when they wish to speak. I know the Imperator has spoken with them himself on occasion.”

“And you?” Zhang asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Once,” Aegis said. “It was an…interesting experience. They were capable of shattering even my strongest defenses. I was somewhere else for a time, underwater I think, but I could breathe and move as easily as I do now. The Sovereign One took the form of an alien I didn’t recognize. Blue-skinned, very similar to humans actually, feminine is the word. The head seemed composed of strange ridges.”

“I’m sensing a theme,” Abby muttered. These Sovereign Ones seemed to like water and aquatics. She doubted it was a coincidence. “The Chronicler’s little hiding place has a lot of water, and a chamber with one of these orbs. Something he warned me not to touch.”

“I know what you speak of,” Aegis nodded. “I believe they are some kind of link to Sovereign Ones. The Voice carries one with her at all times.”

“Well, it seems they lied about some things,” Zhang noted, looking back to the video. “Or at minimum left out some key bits of information. This Chronicler almost killed Quisilia and would have if not for freak timing. And you said he isn’t dead?”

“Quisilia didn’t seem to think so,” Abby shook her head. “However, Quisilia definitely made a powerful enemy if that is the case.”

“Agreed,” Zhang nodded. “If this Chronicler returns, I would suggest we seek him out. He could be a powerful ally.”

“Did you not hear ‘this species is mine’?” Abby demanded. “Is that really a good idea?”

Zhang pursed his lips. “That is a good point. By this point he has to realize the sides of the war.
Turning him down might be dangerous for us. Dealing with Ethereals is hard enough; we don’t need another powerful entity angry at us.”

“I would also caution against this Sovereign One, if it is truly one,” Aegis added. “This does not match with what we know of the Sovereign Ones. I cannot help but wonder if they have realized that the Imperator is no longer interested in fighting the Synthesized and are seeking…other opportunities. We should proceed cautiously.”

“You say ‘what we know’,” Zhang said pointedly. “But be honest: How much do we really know about them?”

“That they are also allies against the Synthesized,” Aegis answered. “Ones who are willing to share their gifts with us and are united in this cause. They have never shown hostile intentions towards us.”

“So they have all this advanced technology,” Abby said slowly. “And yet they haven’t managed to kill the Synthesized. And you know this because….why? They told you?”

“Admittedly, yes,” Aegis sighed. “It is…difficult to explain properly. Even sharing the memory would not be the same. These beings are older than we are. Far older. I cannot imagine many are left. They need us; perhaps we’re next in a long line, but in the end, our goals align. Should we be successful…I suppose we’ll proceed from there.”

“I’ll state right here that I don’t trust anything like that,” Abby shook her head. “Not after what I saw. That isn’t normal, and anything that can throw around an Ethereal isn’t something to take lightly. Let the Commander make that call.”

“He will,” Zhang assured her, scratching his chin. “Despite how everything ended up, you’ve done well here. Once Vahlen finishes running her tests, we’ll send you out. In the meantime, take a rest. You’ve earned it.”

Abby nodded. “Thank you, Director.” She yawned. “A few days of rest will be welcome.”

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Office of the Commander, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/2/2016 - 4:12 P.M.

Internal Council meetings were unfortunately rarer in recent days, although they had the admittedly acceptable excuse of having so much work to do, not to mention little conflicts in America, Korea, and Japan. But the recent battles had highlighted the issues that needed to be addressed, and that was something they were going to discuss right now.

“Overall, I believe we came out on top here,” the Commander opened as they stood in front of his desk, Aegis included. “We’ve regained significant ground in America, Japan is close to fully reclaimed, and we have held South Korea. Overall, I’d say we held our own.”

“Barring Washington and Alaska being attacked,” Shen added. “But I agree. We…did well.”

“Far better than I had feared,” Aegis nodded. “The ADVENT Priests were instrumental in the defense. The Collective has been set back, and while we should not become complacent, the Battlemaster will consider this a loss. Now that I am…active…he will not attack until he has some way to negate my abilities.”
“So we’re likely to enter a lull in the war,” the Commander nodded. “Good. ADVENT will likely focus on expansion, and in the meantime, we will focus on projects of our own. There are a few things I would like to bring up. Zhang?”

“The footage of the supposed Sovereign One avatar,” Zhang stepped forward. “Given the words of both Quisilia and the Chronicler, this Sovereign One has likely developed some interest in our species. Should he return, we should make an effort to at least determine what the ultimate goals and motivations for it are. We can’t let something like that wander around unchecked.”

“At least it’s not friendly with the aliens,” Vahlen noted. “Sovereign technology is still so far beyond us. A living one would be a valuable ally.”

“Except we know very little about them,” the Commander shot Aegis a look. “While they are supposedly against the Synthesized, the other names mentioned make me think that this is more complicated than what they presented to the Ethereals. In any event, we should at least attempt contact.”

“And if it becomes hostile?” Zhang asked.

“Then we deal with it,” the Commander sighed. “Although I don’t fancy our chances, not against something like that. Vahlen, tell them what you got from that armor Abby brought back.”

“I’ll tell what little I can,” Vahlen brushed back her hair and cleared her throat. “The armor itself is made out of some kind of substance that is most certainly not from Earth, or at minimum is an artificial combination of multiple elements. The texture is similar to stone, but it is actually manipulable to an extent. More importantly, tests done with Agent Gertrude reveal that it can harden itself upon an object hitting it, essentially lessening the impact.”

“How?” Zhang demanded.

“That,” Vahlen said slowly. “Revolves around very little. Comprehensive 3D scans show that there is some kind of…power source. We couldn’t get to it without cutting into the armor itself, but it was definitely a sphere of some kind. Given that spheres seem to be a trademark of these Sovereign Ones, perhaps these are used for more than communication.”


“And the direct interface it has with the user requires a level of precision that would not be possible without a computer with AI levels of computational power,” Vahlen added. “Abigail did not describe the insertions of these wires as painful, but given that she received a substantial boost to her stamina and strength, it is also highly possible they are injecting enhancing chemicals.”

“How?” Shen asked. “Is it just making that stuff?”

“We don’t know,” Vahlen shook her head. “Very little of the armor makes sense, and she was very insistent no one else try it due to her rifle exploding when the Hunter tried picking it up. I would normally not be apprehensive…but this is one area where caution is prudent.”

“Speaking of that,” the Commander looked to Shen. “The Chosen weapons. What have you learned about them?”

“Those at least follow some logic,” Shen answered, stepping forward. “For obvious reasons I’ve made sure no one has fired it, but imaging shows it to essentially be a miniaturized railgun. Very slow reload speeds, and it can only fire three shots, but nothing really comes close to it in sheer kinetic power. At least for firearms.”
The Commander rested his hands on his desk, thinking. “Can we replicate it?”

“Not immediately,” Shen shook his head. “But it will serve well in improving our gauss tech. We’ve gotten all we can from scans. The only thing left is to actually try firing it.”

“But he trapped it?” The Commander guessed.

“Yes, he did.” Shen nodded. “However, he also set it to unlock on a combination of his DNA and fingerprint. That would normally be a problem…except Agent Gertrude was able to recover his intact limbs. We will use those to unlock the rifle.”

“Excellent,” the Commander smiled. “Now, we need to shift our focus towards two issues that have arisen recently: Nanotech and the Manchurian Restraints.”

Vahlen coughed. “I would also like to say that Project Innsmouth has been proceeding faster than I anticipated. Given the increased deployment of…certain…Ethereals, this is something we should continue.”

“The fuck is Project Innsmouth?” Jackson asked, shooting Vahlen a glance.

The Commander and Vahlen exchanged a knowing look. While he wasn’t fully caught up on her progress, what she’d told him about it was enough to be more than useful. “An Ethereal hunter,” he explained simply. “Something not susceptible to mind control and with a taste for aliens.”

“It is a truly disturbing project.” Aegis added.

“Project Innsmouth can continue as usual,” the Commander redirected, not wanting to get off topic. “Let’s focus on these issues here. We need protection from nanotech, and to preferably deploy some of our own.”

“EMP weapons are the first weapons we should invest in,” Shen began. “WHEEEE cannons will be useful, but we need wide-range EMP weapons to destroy things like Spectres. Periodic EMP emitters would also be useful to protect certain areas. The catch is that it requires us to harden everything against EMPs.”

“Nanotech isn’t going away,” the Commander shook his head. “It might take time, but we should work to completely harden ourselves against EMP. I know ADVENT will likely do the same to some effect. Vahlen, is there any progress on controllable nanites by soldiers?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “It is only in highly limited quantities, but Operated MELD, as I have designated it, is now proven to be possible. In theory, this would allow the user to completely control how the MELD performs, be it attack by working similar to the Spectres, or in a defensive manner such as repair, creating structures, or acting as armor. I have also begun the investigation into…integrated MELD.”

“Which is?” Jackson asked.

“Incorporating nanotech itself more extensively into the Human body,” Vahlen clarified. “Not in the same way as gene mods, but…well, acting both as a secondary immune system and protective skin. It’s relatively new, but initial results are promising.”

“I’ll check on that later,” the Commander nodded. “Other kinds of nanoweapons such as warheads and grenades should also be developed. Shen?”

“Already started on that.” Shen didn’t seem to really approve, as his face was set in a frown. “I
figured you’d want something like that. As far as nanotech goes, it is one of the simpler applications.”

“Glad to hear it.” Now the Commander transitioned to what was likely the more important topic. “Now, the Manchurian Program. I want to resume dedicated research on it. We’ve had too many instances where it would have been useful, and with the PRIEST Program in full swing, I want it deployed before there is an incident.”

“It’s only a matter of time,” Patricia agreed. “No matter how careful ADVENT is, someone will abuse it, if it hasn’t happened already.”

“That is the primary concern, yes,” the Commander nodded. “And we need it for our alien guests here.” He glanced up at Aegis. “All of them. While I do genuinely believe our resident aliens will not betray us, that is not a chance we can afford. And our own psions need to have restrictions placed on them before something happens.”

“I have the feeling you’re referring to a very specific scenario,” Patricia noted dryly.

“Not you, not this time,” he answered shaking his head. “Our friend Geist. Who, I am almost convinced of, briefly mind controlled Engineer Kun in response to her criticism of his leadership.”

“You’re certain?” Vahlen asked.

“Very,” the Commander said neutrally. “I do not believe Geist knows that I watch combat logs, especially ones who I know have known issues interacting with people. I’m half-tempted to execute him for that, but this is Geist, who isn’t exactly sensitive to other people, and who is our most powerful Human psion. I don’t believe he intended it maliciously, but I’ll leave that decision to someone else.” He looked to Patricia. “Determine if he did it or not. If he did, make sure he doesn’t do it again. If he lies to you, or refuses, kill him. I won’t have someone like that leading my soldiers, regardless of his power.”

Patricia’s lips were set in a razor line. “Gladly. He won’t give you more trouble.”

“The point is that we need to keep all psions in check,” the Commander said. “There are not going to be exceptions to this; not me, or you, Aegis. Not for any aliens, and also not for any of us.” He looked around the room. “We are all in a position where we cannot afford to take any risks. We can’t afford betrayal, either via psionics or discussion. Patricia, even though the Imperator has not actually tried to make you defect, I don’t trust him not to make that decision eventually. And I also expect him to try for everyone else. It is a simple precaution, but we cannot be risked like this.”

“Is there a line?” Shen asked rhetorically. “Why not do the same to all our soldiers if that’s your justification.”

The Commander fixed Shen with a stare. “I am considering just that.”

There definitely seemed to be some conflict on that. “I’m not sure that’s necessary,” Jackson said slowly. “It’s one thing to subject psions to this, but regular soldiers? Analysts? The maintenance crews? That borders on paranoia, not to mention it would destroy the goodwill you’ve created here.”

“No to mention a massive security risk should the aliens acquire the means to control us,” Shen added. “Psions I have to agree with. Even us. But not the soldiers. They have not done anything to deserve it.”

“It’s not a matter of deserving it,” the Commander sighed. “Most psions don’t deserve it either. But
we’re in a war where the mind is easily turned and manipulated. Like it or not, we need to consider all possible safeguards.” He lifted a hand. “I’ve not made a decision either way, but you should know I’m considering it.”

There was some brief silence. “Is there anything else that needs to be addressed?”

They all shook their heads. “Good. Dismissed.”

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Quarters of Overseer Trask, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/2/2016 - 6:00 P.M.

Sometimes Patricia wondered if she was slowly and insidiously going insane. Really, she had all the symptoms for diagnosis. She regularly saw an imaginary person, appeared to talk to herself a lot, and everyone else told her not to interact with the imaginary person. If she actually didn’t know better, she would have called herself crazy.

Unfortunately, the Imperator was very much still real, and still leaning against the wall as she waited for Geist to come. “I don’t even know why you’re here,” she finally said. “Are you really going to be following me around my entire life doing my job?”

“Unlikely your entire life,” he answered, in the form of the Commander, although with the addition of black orbs for eyes. “You will die long before I will.”

Patricia cocked her head towards him. “You’re certainly confident. Things haven’t been going too well for you. Although, part of that is your fault.”

“The Battlemaster is handling the issues Aegis has caused in the Collective,” the Imperator dismissed with a wave of his hand. “But do tell me why I should be concerned?”

Patricia sighed, rubbing her forehead. “If you were a little easier to figure out, maybe I can tell you why. But I don’t really know even what you want. I would rather know why you are focusing on me of all people? Why not the Commander, or Aegis, or even Geist? It’s not like I’m the only powerful psion on Earth.”

The Imperator smiled, looking thoughtfully up in the air. “Because of all the people you mentioned, very few would be interested in simply conversing with me. They are too suspicious, too oriented to being my intrinsic enemy. Aegis could simply block my communication, and neither the Commander or Geist would be interested in speaking.”

He inclined his head towards her. “While you are rather deriding sometimes, you are more…open. Willing to take some risks; willing to orient your position based on what you have experienced; willing to logically change your position based on evidence.” He nodded. “Aegis cannot seem to grasp that I have no intention of mind controlling you.”

“But you are trying to make me see something,” Patricia noted, looking at him neutrally. “This isn’t, and has never been, just innocent chit-chat.”

“Of course I am,” the Imperator answered emphatically. “But as for what, you will have to come to that decision on your own. It is something I cannot force. But you don’t have all the information yet; there are still questions you need answers to. Information that will allow you to grasp the…scale of what we all are a part of.”
“And is there a reason you’re not telling me this?” She asked wearily.

“Now?” He raised an eyebrow. “Not the time or place, especially with Geist set to arrive shortly. But that time is coming soon. There are no more tests left for you, only decisions.”

“Really.” She wasn’t completely surprised to hear that. “Tests.”

“Ones you passed, do not concern yourself with them,” he explained. “Someday I’ll elaborate, but if you did not have the potential nor right mindset, then we would not be speaking. I do not waste my time with impossible tasks.”

“You’re not exactly making yourself sound trustworthy,” Patricia noted. “I really do not like being manipulated, or treated as a…’task’.”

“You know better than to assume the most malicious interpretation,” the Imperator answered knowingly. “Anything can be a task; and I suspect you are no different. No one intelligent devotes time to something that they know will fail. And if I was truly intending to use you, I wouldn’t have mentioned anything, would I?”

“Maybe you’re arrogant enough to try,” she guessed, although he had a good point. Barring some large questions, namely his motivations, the Imperator had and continued to be strangely honest. She really did not know how best to deal with him. Cutting him off seemed rather pointless, since he could likely bypass anything she did, and honestly somewhat mean. He had been rather helpful to her, and it seemed wrong to cut him off for no actual legitimate reason.

“Mhmm, I suppose I’ll find out soon enough,” he said, looking to the door. “Geist is approaching. I suggest you prepare. We will speak again.”

He vanished once more, leaving her to deal with the troublesome psion.

She sighed.

Geist was a hell of a lot easier to deal with than the Imperator. She legitimately did not know what he’d been thinking openly manipulating Nuan’s mind so brazenly. Even if she hadn’t seen the footage and asked some questions of Nuan, it would have been so blatantly obvious that no one would really struggle to come to the conclusion.

Knowing Geist, he probably legitimately believed he was in the right. For being relatively new to XCOM and psionics in general, he was rather full of himself and always attempting to maintain his superiority over…well, everyone. He was the kind of person who couldn’t have someone else be in charge.

Someone had to teach him consequences. And she was more than willing to do so.

The door slid open and Geist walked inside, giving an unimpressed look around her room. “Overseer Trask, you wished to speak to me?” He felt very calm and confident, although there was some confusion lurking beneath.

“Yes, on the orders of the Commander,” she answered neutrally. “There have been some issues with your conduct with your soldiers.”

“Ah, complaints,” he nodded, relaxing further. “I’m certain I can straighten that out. I am aware my own personal commanding style is different compared to yours or the Commander’s, but it has certainly led to acceptable results.”
“Which is certainly why Sacramento is still in the hands of the aliens,” she answered dryly. “But no. While I do not personally approve of your command style, that is subjective to a degree. This is much more serious.”

He frowned. “If not that, then what?”

“Engineer Kun,” she explained. “Did you telepathically influence or manipulate her?”

He blinked several times, surprise washing over him. “I have telepathically influenced multiple soldiers, both in ADVENT and XCOM. I assisted in sustaining—”

He suddenly trailed off as a bolt of light pain shot from him. Geist was a powerful telepath, but he didn’t know how to defend against lower-brain telepathy, where she had gotten much better over the past few days. “Please don’t avoid the question,” Patricia said quietly, knowing her brief draw on psionics was giving her eyes a purple tinge. “Both of us know what I’m talking about.”

“How would you even acquire the information needed to make that accusation?” He asked.

“Because the Commander watches combat footage,” Patricia answered. “And likes to focus on more prominent or troublesome individuals. You were not exactly subtle, and questioning of Engineer Kun has confirmed this. Be very careful about what you say next.”

One eyebrow was raised. “And what exactly would you do to me?”

“That depends,” she answered, turning away from him briefly in thought. “This kind of manipulation is very serious and reflects exceptionally poorly on a psion’s ability to respect the minds of allies, and indicates a lack of psionic maturity. I have been tolerant of you, Geist, even if you have a tendency to read people’s minds without their consent. But that is going to stop now.”

She turned back to him. “The Commander has authorized me to execute you if I feel you are a danger. The only reason he didn’t was because there is a disturbingly high chance that you didn’t realize what you did was actually wrong.”

For one of the first times, Geist actually seemed to be nervous. His eyes darted towards her, and he took a brief step back as she moved towards him. “In retrospect, such an action was probably unwise. However, Engineer Kun was becoming more focused on me and less on the mission. I simply redirected her focus where it mattered.”

Patricia just stared at him, took a few seconds, and waited. Geist didn’t seem to realize something was wrong at first, then his eyes widened as it dawned on him that he couldn’t breathe. “That, Von Theil, is unacceptable,” Patricia stated as an expression of panic settled across his face. “That is not a justification. The only circumstances where manipulating the mind of an ally is allowed is to help them, not to hide from criticism, and certainly not because you could.”

Geist fell to one knee, one hand on his throat. “You made…ah, your point,” he gasped. “What are…doing?”

“Your lungs have stopped working,” she answered, deliberately pausing. “Temporarily. You seem to be under the impression you are indispensable just because you are powerful,” She knelt down by him. “So let me be very clear. The next time I hear something like this happening, or witness it myself, I will kill you and not think twice about it. People like us have been gifted something extraordinary, and I will not let it be abused like this.”

She relaxed her mental control of his lungs and allowed them to function again, and he gasped as he sucked in air. “You are the type of person who makes the Manchurian Restraints a necessity,”
she said grimly. “You lack any kind of restraint or sensitivity. Psions like you will give the rest of us a bad name. This is a rare chance in Human history where we have an opportunity to make those who would normally fear us, instead trust us. Actions like yours do not accomplish that goal.”

Patricia narrowed her eyes at the man who was still gathering himself, before shakily standing. “Do you understand? I don’t care if you think I’m wrong, or if you disagree; this is going to be the standard you are held to. No more mind reading. No more altering the minds of our soldiers. Otherwise you die.”

“You have made your point,” Geist breathed slowly. “This…will not happen again.”

“Good.” She waved at him. “Dismissed. And if you actually want to make some amends, apologize to Nuan.”

“I…will consider that,” he said, before turning to leave.

Patricia wasn’t exactly keen on receiving the planned Manchurian Restraints, but if it meant that people like Geist were kept under control, then that was an acceptable tradeoff.

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ADVENT HQ – Switzerland

12/4/2016 – 11:55 A.M.

Truth be told, Saudia was not entirely sure what to expect when meeting Aegis. XCOM had provided quite a bit of information on him, but Saudia was personally sort of skeptical on how accurate it really could be. She had no doubt that XCOM had made it to the best of their ability, but the truth was that being able to even begin to figure out the mindset of a telepathic alien that was thousands of years old was not something she figured was quite as easy as XCOM might think.

Furthermore, hearing his actual reasons, namely that there was something else out there that had been powerful enough to wipe out an entire empire of Ethereals was not reassuring. That to her seemed like a much more likely goal. Aegis didn’t like the way the Imperator was handling this event, and was taking matters into his own hands.

She was not working on the assumption that he actually cared about Humans, but saw them as a means to an end. Granted, it was sort of reciprocated. Aegis on their side was also a means to an end, but what made her question his commitment was that it didn’t seem likely that he wanted to actually destroy the Collective.

This was primarily against the Imperator. He had Humans, the Imperator had the Collective. From one perspective it could be viewed as a light proxy war, and she disliked the concept. She didn’t know how much influence he had with XCOM, but she was not going to let the Ethereal dictate how ADVENT ran this war. They’d been doing well enough without his help so far.

In fact, everyone was making the calculated assumption that the Collective was not going to make any major moves for some time. This was a loss for them; they needed time to recover, reevaluate, and from the sounds of it, they were going to have to deal with several of the other species demanding answers.

That would tie them up for some time, hopefully.

They weren’t completely lowering their guard, if the Collective attacked once more they would be ready to mobilize, but now they had an opportunity to focus on other matters. The expansion of
ADVENT was a priority, and Saudia wanted to fully bring Europe into the fold sooner than later; the UK would be the start, and in the meantime she’d make an aggressive diplomatic push for some of the nations on the tipping point.

It would also be wise to strengthen relations with China. While she was sure they would eventually join, as an ally, they deserved some additional consideration. A few joint ADVENT-China projects would not be unwelcome, and they had rather surprisingly said they would be interested in working on further refining of the Tiāngōng Intelligence, as well as allowing ADVENT to research it on their own.

She suspected that XCOM had something to do with their willingness to openly share such an important development, but that was something she should reward. Joint ADVENT-Chinese military exercises were also in the works between Laura, Weekes, and the Chinese Generals. Overall she saw a much brighter future for China and ADVENT ahead.

South America and Africa would be problems solved in the future. They were ultimately not important in the grand scheme of things, even if her homeland happened to reside in the latter. Although, perhaps it couldn’t hurt to at least gauge what effect the SAS was having on the region. So far they’d largely kept to themselves.

But on the front of technological and military progress, there was much to be done. XCOM was reinvesting heavily in the Manchurian Restraints, Elerium was now figured out, and nanotechnology was on the rise. ADVENT needed to be able to utilize and counter these dangers. And also think ahead for the future.

The war would, inevitably, move to space. They needed a fleet.

The question was where to build one that would both be easy to defend, and able to be hidden from prying eyes. The solution to that was somewhat…unorthodox, but she had been insured it was possible. It would require a massive initial cost, the development of newer safe technology, and the exploration of one of the last unknown parts of the planet, but it could be done.

She’d given her approval, and the near-unlimited amount of resources had been approved by Congress. The project was already proceeding at full speed.

If it worked well, the Collective would never see it coming.

The recent events had made her also realize that ADVENT, if it was going to last, was going to need to have some kind of future-proofing to avoid potential issues in the event that they were victorious. While the alien problem was one that was easy to leave behind as a non-issue, the fact was that at the end of this, there were still going to be aliens. There were probably even more they’d never encountered.

So they would have to figure out a means of peacefully interacting with them. The alien defectors were thankfully something they could handle, and served as a warning to them to actually figure out some way to…deal with them. What the questioned boiled down to was if aliens should be allowed to fully integrate into ADVENT as actual citizens.

ADVENT was and always would be a body that put Human interests first. That did not necessarily mean that aliens needed to be excluded if they shared those same goals. It was not unreasonable to assume that some aliens would find ADVENT more appealing than their own species, and if that was the case, what logical basis was there to deny them aside from xenophobia.

It was a good way to unite a population; by giving them an enemy to hate, they would generally
fall in line, especially given that the threat was enslavement or extinction. It worked well in the short term, but assuming they won, it would ultimately lead to more problems. Knowing what she knew about the aliens thanks to XCOM, Saudia did not necessarily believe that the majority of aliens were unreasonable, nor necessarily impossible to coexist with.

The Ethereals should never be allowed to hold any sort of power again; that was exceptionally clear. Everything that had happened was their fault, and it showed the dangers of an organization dominated by psions. Few could oppose them else it would lead to them dying or being mind controlled. The Ethereals had their chance, and they had failed. A more responsible species needed to take their place.

The Sectoid Hive Commanders were also a species she held in little regard. They were like the Ethereals to a lesser extent, dominated by psions and had full control over every aspect of their species. Abhorrent, dangerous, and the least understandable of all the aliens. Saudia saw no reason to allow them to continue to exist. In many areas, the Hive Commanders were no better than the Ethereals.

The Vitakara and Andromedons were different. The former was essentially tricked by the Ethereals, and Saudia suspected the latter only allied out of convenience rather than actual loyalty. But from what she’d gathered on the Aui’Vitakar, the entire race was not especially violent and more inclined towards a peaceful cooperation. She wondered how the Ethereals had convinced them to send their armies to invade Earth.

The Andromedons seemed to be held together by a tenuous peace at best. If given the opportunity, Saudia did not think it impossible to convince several of the Unions that they were a suitable alternative to the Ethereals. From the information she had, exploiting previous tensions within the Unions themselves was certainly possible, and the entire species was a powder keg that just needed an appropriate spark to ignite it.

Both the Sectoids and Ethereals might serve as that spark.

The point was that ADVENT needed to decide how it was going to treat aliens in the future. Saudia had no intention of ADVENT being isolationist. They would serve the interests of Humans first and foremost, but there was a certain fact that was becoming clearer and clearer with each passing day. The Commander had no doubt seen it, and even her military advisors knew the same thing, even if they were reluctant to voice it.

They would not win this war without alien help.

If not for Aegis, XCOM would be significantly behind. They would not know any of this. If XCOM didn’t have a double agent working for them, they wouldn’t be able to sabotage the Collective from the inside. It was an ugly truth, but the fact was that there was no chance they could take on the Collective – and win – without having alien allies. One Ethereal was a massive boost to their legitimacy, and with how many aliens were already defecting…more would probably join them.

And that was a resource that Saudia did not want to throw away, not only because it would boost their own numbers, but also because it was an opportunity to send a very clear message to the Collective in how they treated aliens. Humans were treated by the Collective as expendable test subjects and chattel; aliens were treated well by them, and were actually given opportunities if they wished it.

It would make more good propaganda, at any rate. It might get some of the aliens thinking.
“He’s here, Chancellor,” Ethan informed her through her intercom. “He’s...big.”

“I’ll be waiting,” she answered, and settled in for what was likely to be an interesting conversation. A few minutes later the Ethereal himself walked through the door to her office, having to duck under the door. Human architecture was definitely not suited for aliens that were a good three or so feet higher than the average.

“Aegis,” Saudia greeted, standing and looking up at him. “Welcome, I’m glad we finally get to meet.”

“The feeling is mutual, Chancellor,” he answered, his voice deep and with a layered quality to it. She’d heard psions speak like that, but only when using their abilities. It seemed Ethereals did it naturally. She’d been warned that being around Aegis would affect her mind, make her feel more confident, secure, and safe than she might normally be.

From how she felt now, that seemed to be true. She wanted to experience it at least once and then take that and determine if she’d want protection next time. Oddly enough she didn’t feel too different, but she also noted that she should at least be feeling somewhat uneasy being so close to an Ethereal.

“Well, take a seat,” she said, moving her own chair to the middle of the room where the oversized one Aegis would use was set up. The Ethereal complied, and the resulting image did look somewhat ridiculous, but Saudia ignored that and decided to get right into it. “I admit, I didn’t think this would actually happen.”

“An understandable assumption,” Aegis said through his helmet; she wondered why he seemed to wear it everywhere he went. “This is...unusual. My kind have been united for millennia. I am the first to...rebel...if you wish to ascribe a word to it.”

“No matter how you describe it, you have certainly made an impact,” Saudia nodded. “You’ve told the Commander your reasons. He has shared them with me. The Synthesized; the ones who wiped out your Empire. Your goal is to fight them, correct?”

“A long-term goal, correct,” Aegis confirmed. “There is no higher one right now. What matters is improving, uniting, and preparing. The Ethereal Collective was supposed to be that solution, but the Imperator has abandoned this goal. It is little more than a loose collection of species who rarely interact on a meaningful level.”

“Right,” Saudia crossed her legs. “Your goal is understandable. But I do wonder where you now fit into this plan. Or for that matter, how you see us in this plan. Are we a means to an end for you to eventually assume control of the Collective and then reform it?”

“By the end of this,” Aegis said heavily. “I suspect the Ethereal Collective will not exist, at least not in the form we know today. Something new needs to be created, a truly united collection of species, and with your species presumably the victors, you will assume this role. The time of the Ethereals is...past. It would take thousands of years to rebuild our numbers, even with thousands of Ethereal cloning chambers. A new species must arise to take its place. Humanity can fulfill that role, and I will ensure that the same mistakes are not made.”

That was...surprisingly reasonable. “You don’t wish for a position of authority?”

“I have no need of recognition by your people,” the Ethereal shook his head. “I am content in XCOM. I will endure long after you are dead and gone. Titles and authority should go to ones who will not retain it indefinitely. And I suspect you would not want an alien influencing your
government.” A pause. “At least not an Ethereal.”

“I will say I’m glad to hear it,” Saudia said. “We have enough aliens trying to take control of my species. But that does bring up the fact that Ethereals will die before this war ends. You convinced the Commander to spare Caelior, but it will not be the same for all of them.”

“I am aware,” Aegis exhaled, resting his two lower arms on his lap. “Caelior did not deserve to die. He was young and manipulated since birth. There are Ethereals that deserve to live besides him. Not all should be punished for serving the Imperator; every Ethereal killed is one that cannot be replaced in the upcoming war. That needs to be taken into account.”

“But that should not be your decision,” Saudia noted firmly, resting her hands on her lap. “Some Ethereals are too dangerous to be left alive. Isomnum; the Imperator; the Overmind. They pose too great a threat to ever allow to live, and of course, ADVENT will not let the one who ordered the invasion of our world to live.”

“Yet there are ways of keeping them…reduced,” Aegis pointed out. “The Manchurian Restraints are proof of this.”

“No.” Saudia stated flatly. “There is no redemption for some. ADVENT will make an example out of anyone who dares to attack us without provocation. Should we win, the Imperator will be executed. I would ask you resign yourself to that fact.”

“I suppose it is too much for you to overlook,” Aegis sighed. “Yet even now, I do not believe he is malicious. Just…on the wrong path. I do not know what led him to take these actions, but he must be stopped now.”

“I’m glad we agree there,” Saudia took a moment to let him think. “Now, there was something I specifically wanted to discuss with you. I have been appraised of a number of alien defections. Vitakara and Andromedons primarily.”

“That is good news,” Aegis congratulated.

“They all had one thing in common,” she said pointedly. “You.”

“I am not surprised,” Aegis agreed. “My kind were…exalted in the Collective. We are figures larger than life to many of them. My appearance has no doubt shaken their loyalty to the apathetic Imperator. The Battlemaster can only retain so much influence.”

“And as a result, we have something of an issue,” Saudia continued. “ADVENT was designed with the goal of Human defense and enhancement. Yet it is apparent that having a plan for dealing with alien prisoners is also a necessity…as well as working with defectors.”

“ADVENT would certainly benefit from a structured plan for such aliens,” the Ethereal said. “And if you are bringing this up, I suspect you have something already in mind.”

“We will face a crossroads in the future,” Saudia explained. “I suspect some of the defectors will wish to fully join ADVENT. That is not something we are prepared for, nor will it be popular. However, I believe it is the best course of action. Having aliens remain either POWs or second-class citizens benefits no one and breeds xenophobia. Considering we are working together, I think it should be avoided.”

“As do I,” Aegis said wearily. “It did not ultimately work for the Empire, and it will not work for your species. It is an admirable goal; one which I am impressed you have the foresight to plan for.”
Saudia stood and walked over to her desk. “In the past few days I’ve begun the preliminary development of a department for this specific purpose. As an alien who is familiar with Collective species, your input would be welcome.” She handed the tablet to the Ethereal.

He read it for a few moments. “The Alien Emissarial and General Integration Service.” He looked up, voice almost amused. “AEGIS.”

“Considering their common motivation is you, I felt it was appropriate,” Saudia said, smiling. “That, Aegis, will handle our alien captives, both defectors and POWs, as well as diplomacy with other alien governments. The ultimate goal is to successfully integrate interested aliens into ADVENT, successfully extract information from POWs and eventually convince them of the error of their ways, and to facilitate communication between ADVENT and…interested alien parties.”

She nodded towards him. “There are a certain percentage of aliens who wish to fight directly for you. We are evaluating and marking ones we feel you would get more…use out of. If you wish, we can send them to you and you could form your own little militia. They would feel better fighting for an Ethereal than a Human, and the soldiers are not ready to fight alongside aliens yet.”

“The Commander may not enjoy so many aliens taking residence in the Praesidium,” Aegis said, lowering the tablet. “But I am certain we could come to some kind of agreement. We both agree that having willing combatants turned away is a waste.”

“Yes,” Saudia nodded. “While you do primarily work with XCOM, I would ask that you assist us in at least the development of this service, and it might do some good to visit our alien defectors. Make them know you are aware of their existence. It would make things easier for us.”

“That can be arranged,” Aegis confirmed. “I believe we will work together well, Chancellor.”

“Glad to hear it,” she answered. “I think that with you helping us, our chances have improved significantly.”

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Officer of the Commander, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/10/2016 – 6:12 P.M.

There was still no public response from the Collective, nor military activity of any kind.

The Commander certainly wasn’t complaining about the lack of response from the Collective, and that indicated to him that the lull would probably continue for some time yet. He imagined that the Collective would want to make sure everything was in order before making their next move. In the meantime they hadn’t been idle.

Vahlen, Shen, and everyone else was busy working on projects. ADVENT was working on expansion and other projects of their own. Aegis was making something of a media tour, and getting quite a bit of interest from across the world. The newer aliens in XCOM were integrating fairly well, and overall, the future was looking fairly stable.

His intercom beeped. “Yes?”

“Commander?” Jackson answered. “We’ve got a…well, situation.”

That lull now just might be ending. Wonderful, but it had to be sometime. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, since Jackson sounded more puzzled than concerned. “Describe it.”
“Message from ADVENT,” Jackson answered. “There is a UFO that just landed in Montana. Sectoids. They apparently are being detained and want to talk to Aegis.”

The Commander sat bolt upright. Now *that* was a development he wasn’t expecting. In fact, he was extremely skeptical. “Is there a Hive Commander? Are you sure this isn’t a trap?”

“Sending images,” Jackson said, and they popped up on the Commander’s screen. “They’ve got Priests on site, so they aren’t under psionic control. It isn’t a Hive Commander either, but twelve Sectoids, four of them Vanguards. I guess they’re smarter than we thought.”

The Commander looked through the images. The Vanguards were unarmed, and ADVENT Forces were indeed on site. It looked to be a Fighter-class UFO, big enough that that number of Sectoids could easily fit in it. Well then. “They want to talk to Aegis? Did they say anything else?”

“One of them mentioned Hive Commander 088,” Jackson said. “I checked it with our own records. No mention. But considering we only have information on a few Hive Commanders, I’m not surprised. Guess Aegis is even making waves in the GHC. Should I say we’re sending a team?”

“Do it,” the Commander said, moving to open another channel. “I’ll instruct Patricia to put together a team to extract them. Send our thanks.”

“Will do. Jackson out.”

The Commander opened a channel. “Patricia, I need you to put together a squad. VIP Extraction; apparently ADVENT has some Sectoids that want to talk to Aegis.”

“You’re serious?” She sounded incredulous and he couldn’t blame her. “Wow. Alright, a team will be ready shortly. Patricia out.”

The Commander soon received confirmation of the squad, which wasn’t exactly the elite, but did include Creed and Carmelita in the event the Sectoids, for whatever reason, tried something. The rest were newer soldiers. This seriously felt too good to be true, it *had* to be a trap somehow. But at the same time…maybe it wasn’t.

Maybe Aegis was having a much larger impact in the Collective than even they had assumed. The Sectoids wouldn’t attempt this for no reason. Something major was happening in the Collective to force this kind of event. Hopefully they would have some answers.

A short time later he received the acknowledgement that Big Sky had departed. Good. Hopefully they’d be back in a few hours with some little grey friends. They had every other alien species, but Sectoids…those were going to be interesting to figure out. The non-Vanguards would probably not be very functional, but he realized that they really didn’t know how independent Vanguards could be.

Clearly more than assumed, otherwise this Hive Commander would not have sent them. There was no chance that this was all done by independent Vanguards. No Hive Commander would allow that amount of autonomy.

His intercom beeped. Jackson. “Yes, Central?”

“Commander?” She answered. “Hey, is there something I should be aware of? Big Sky just requested authorization to depart on your orders. There some mission I’m not aware of? I cleared it, just so you know, but I should be kept in the loop.”

He frowned. “What are you talking about? The one with the Sectoids. ADVENT contacted you,
remember.” He paused. “This was only about an hour ago. You can’t have forgotten.”

“Commander,” Jackson said slowly. “I have no idea what you’re taking about. We haven’t got anything from ADVENT, much less anything with Sectoids.”

The Commander felt ice spreading across his chest as he clicked on his computer, looking for the images Jackson had sent. Nothing. There wasn’t even anything she had sent; no indication that what he’d seen had even existed. “Jackson, recall Big Sky immediately. I think we’re under a telepathic attack.”

“Will do.” He waited anxiously for Jackson to report back. “He’s not responding,” she finally said. “It’s going through, but he isn’t answering. I don’t know what to do.”

The Commander thought quickly; it had indeed turned out to be a trap. And one that some of his best soldiers were flying right towards. He didn’t know if sending more after them was the best solution. This had to be the Overmind or Imperator, and there was a good chance that they weren’t going to let any reinforcements interfere…with whatever they had planned.

Well, there was potentially one. “Jackson,” he ordered urgently. “Get in contact with Aegis and send him to the coordinates of the Skyranger.”

There was a brief pause at the other end. “I’m sorry Commander, I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

Fuck.

He could repeat himself, but it was apparent that this was not going to work. They were still under psionic attack, and for all he knew, he was already influenced as well. Only one way to find out. He had the capability to call Aegis, but it would take some time. He moved his hand to begin the process…

And…his hand wouldn’t move.

“Not this time, Commander.” He looked up to see a copy of himself leaning against the wall of his office. The only difference was that the eyes were pools of black, and the voice was not his. It was the first time he had heard the Imperator speak; a rich, deep baritone that commanded complete respect. The doppelganger smiled at him. “You’ve caused some difficulty for me. I believe this time I will return the favor.”

“What are you doing?” He demanded, frustratingly able to move but not actually put his hand close to the computer. He didn’t even feel the Imperator in his mind.

“I am going to make Patricia an offer,” he stated, still smiling. “It is time she knew some things. Don’t worry, I don’t plan to force an extended visit. Depending on how things go, you will see her shortly. But you have so far managed to acquire two Ethereals who used to work with me. I only think it fair that I offer some of your soldiers the same opportunity.”

“She won’t join you,” the Commander said, knowing what he was implying. “You’ll have to force her. And even then she will resist.”

“We shall see, Commander,” the Imperator gave a wave. “I am quite looking forward to seeing which of us is right.”

And he vanished, leaving the Commander alone and helpless.

***
Something seemed wrong about this. The UFO she saw ahead, but otherwise there was nothing. She sensed...something ahead, something powerful. Definitely a psion, but there were no ADVENT soldiers around, nor any Sectoids for that matter. She didn’t see any physical evidence that there had been any in the first place.

No tire marks, gasoline smell, or any indication that this place had once been occupied.

“This is definitely a trap,” Creed stated without any ambiguity. “The UFO is here...but literally nothing else.”

“There’s also a psion ahead,” Patricia pointed, trying to extend her psionic reach and hitting the equivalent of a brick wall. “Gah, a powerful one too.” She paused. “We don’t know what we’re dealing with. It might be a good idea to retreat until we know. We should ask the Commander.”

She froze as she felt the barrel of a gun pointing into her back. “Please move forward, Psion Trask,” Carmelita said, her voice more monotone than usual. She turned around to see that the entire squad was either pointing weapons at each other...or themselves. Creed had his pistol placed under his chin, looking directly at her.

Fear clawed over her as she realized what was going on. And who was likely to be inside that UFO. She swallowed, and walked forward, the entourage of mind-controlled soldiers following behind her. Yet she felt exactly nothing directed at her, and she hadn’t even noticed that an attack was even happening.

That shouldn’t have been possible.

They walked forward on the grasslands until they were directly in front of the UFO. The entrance shimmered and the protective field dissipated before them. Out stepped an Ethereal in a single flowing orange robe; arms hidden within and the face obscured, the only thing visible being two bright orange orbs.

Patricia Trask.

The voice appeared in her mind, scratchy and rasping as if it hadn’t spoken in years.

“Overmind,” she answered, feeling it was her only acceptable response. “Why are you here?”

I am here on the orders of the Imperator. I am here to give you a choice.

“A choice?” She looked around at her mind controlled soldiers; who had ended pointing their weapons at each other and were prepared to commit suicide if the command came. Some held grenades up, others had pistols to their heads. “I don’t see one here.”

There is no choice without stakes. A choice is not real without equally valid choices. There is no false choice here, Patricia Trask. You will decide who will live or die this day. You will chose who will go free or who will be sacrificed.

One hand extended from the robe and motioned to the soldiers. Your first choice: You surrender to me, and your soldiers will live. Your friends will live. Your lover will live. You will come with me before the Imperator where you will make your second choice, of which I am not aware of the details.
Another hand appeared, with a spindly finger pointing to her. *Or you refuse. Everyone around you will die. But you will be free. Free to return to the Commander. Free to return to Aegis. The Imperator will not speak to you again, nor provide assistance. You will never face this choice again.*

Patricia swallowed. Of course the Imperator would give a choice like this.

And of course, she absolutely believed him.

Ironic. She could actually be free of him, and all it would cost her were eight soldiers. She looked back to Carmelita and Creed.

One of which happened to be her friend. The other her lover. And five other well-trained and meaningful soldiers. Innocents who didn’t deserve to be caught up in the mess she had placed them into. All of this was her fault, if she hadn’t listened to the Imperator, maybe this wouldn’t be happening. Could she really justify killing even the ones she wasn’t attached to just to be free of the Imperator?

Much less the ones she was?

Yet if she surrendered…she didn’t know what would happen. The Imperator’s plan for her…whatever that was…it would either fail or succeed. Either way, she got the feeling that if she surrendered to the Overmind, she would never be coming back.

“And what if I just stay here, doing nothing?” She asked.

*Your body will fail eventually. You will sleep. I will not.*

Concise and to the point. And all this time she imagined that they were using their telepathy to keep help far, far away. And while the Overmind hadn’t mentioned killing soldiers to make a point, she knew that was also likely.

*Have you made your choice?*

Her shoulders slumped. It was a choice. But one where she knew she was condemning herself. She looked at Creed. “I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “But I won’t let you die for my mistakes. None of you.”

In the end, this was her fault. Her responsibility. She deserved to face whatever the consequences were, even if this was likely what the Imperator wanted. She looked to the Overmind. “I surrender to you.”

The Ethereal gestured and all the soldiers crumpled to the ground. *They are unconscious. They will be recovered by your brethren. Follow me.* He turned and entered the UFO. Patricia slowly and robotically followed, everything seeming surreal as she stepped inside the shining UFO.

_Sleep now, Patricia Trask._ The Overmind communicated as he stepped up to the piloting controls. *And do not fear. You will not be harmed.*

She didn’t fear pain. She feared something worse.

But before she could think about what that could be, she drifted into a deep and dreamless sleep.

***
And half a million words later I finally wrap up Act II. Sorry about the cliffhanger, really, but you'll see her again in five or so chapters where it'll be explained what happens with her. Hope you understand.

Nah, I'd hate anyone who does that. Next chapter will pick up right after this with a (probably) long-awaited meeting between Patricia and the Imperator. It will be an illuminating one, I think. The good news is that it's actually all written and is going through the editing process now. It's short (For me), so I am hoping it will be ready to post within the week. No guarantees though, fair warning.

As for some of what Act III is going to entail, it's going to not be quite as action-packed as the previous two. This is a lull in the conflict where all sides are going to reform, improve, and expand. There will be more focus on what Volk is doing, the SAS, and internal Collective affairs. That isn't to say there won't be any action, but it won't really be the battles I've done so far. And after a 4-chapter long battle, I think it's good to have a somewhat slower pace. This is one of the acts that will have the most major ramifications so far, so keep that in mind.

Aside from that, I did also want to mention that this series does have a Tvtropes page, which is unfortunately extremely out of date. Any additions that could be made to it would be greatly appreciated. The last thing to mention is that as I'm graduating college very soon, I'll probably be going through some kind of transitional period over the later months. This may or may not affect writing speed/posting, but it is something to keep in mind.

Thank you for all the reviews, messages, and feedback. I will do my best to keep improving at a quality all of you expect.

- Xabiar
Unknown Location

Unknown Time

It was the low humming; just residing on the edges of her hearing that awakened her.

Her mind was initially groggy – until she remembered everything that had happened.

Adrenaline shot through her body and Patricia bolted upright, frantically looking around and telepathically probing the area around her. She stayed that way for a few moments, her chest rising and falling as she worked to calm herself. This was still real; it hadn’t been something in her mind. The Overmind; the UFO; her surrender; it was still real.

Fuck.

She rubbed her eyes, and swung her legs over the edge of the bed to rest her feet on metal floor that felt oddly warm under her soles. The room she was in was almost a perfect square, with the bed she was laying on being against one of the sides; opposite her was an opening currently protected by one of the alien multicolored shields. Peering closer at it, she also saw that there was indeed a solid door between the room and whatever was outside.

So she either had privacy, or she was a prisoner.

She stood and cautiously walked over to the door, and a black interface built into the wall formed into a purple hologram with the Ethereal glyph for ‘close’ on it. Or at least she was fairly sure that it was; she hadn’t picked up as much on Ethereal Script as the Commander, though he’d had that knowledge burned into his mind. She placed a hand over it, and allowed some psionic energy to be released. The glyph changed and the door slid up soundlessly.

So she technically wasn’t trapped. It was something, she supposed.

Quickly reversing it, she took a moment to look around at the rest of the room. The walls looked exceptionally odd to her; black, but almost transparent in a way. They seemed to be segmented into the wall; squares, circles, and other shapes’ just faint outlines adorning them. Furrowing her eyebrows, she walked over to one of the walls to take a closer look.

Notably, it actually seemed to be glass, or some other transparent material that overlaid the black metal walls. That would explain it, though it didn’t explain why it was even there in the first place. Some of the shapes didn’t seem to be flush, especially with odder shapes, so she tried prying it with one of her fingers.

To her surprise, the piece popped out with ease and she stood with a small cube in her palm. She brought it up to her eye, trying to see if there was something special about it, but she couldn’t see anything other than a small transparent cube. She slowly moved the piece back over to where it had been attached, and sure enough, once it was close, it was pulled back into its original place,
like a magnet.

Hmm. Was it supposed to be some kind of Ethereal art? She couldn’t see any other practical purpose for that kind of design. It extended as far as she could see; every wall and even the ceilings were designed in that way. The ceiling itself was high and sloped, but definitely not angular. She also realized at that point there was no obvious light source, but everything could be seen clearly.

There was a slight purple tint to everything, so perhaps there was a kind of psionic lighting that was worked into the room in some way? It ultimately wasn’t important; what she needed to do now was figure out what to do next. Unfortunately, she suspected her options were going to be limited. Someone was going to check on her soon, and she doubted escape was going to be possible.

As she thought that, she looked around for any cameras or security devices. Nothing was spotted along the smooth walls. Of course not. They didn’t need to resort to that when she was a powerful psion, and they could likely manufacture nanotech that she couldn’t see with the naked eye. They wouldn’t have painfully obvious security cameras.

Speaking of her having a powerful psionic signature, she was definitely not the only one. There were at least four, and another which dwarfed all of them. She felt it even without trying. The Imperator, it had to be.

With her survey of the walls complete, she looked at the rest of what resided in the room. On the wall to the right of her bed there appeared to be a…sink of some kind, and the corner had very specific tiling on it. She walked over towards the corner, and another psionic switch appeared, this time with a glyph she didn’t recognize instinctively, but had seen in conjunction with other glyphs. It was either wet or water.

She flicked it on and started as transparent fields appeared around and within the corner. Water also fell from openings in the ceiling and she watched as the water began circulating through what she supposed were anti-grav fields of some kind. Their version of a shower? She cautiously stuck her hand in it, and felt no resistance as warm water soon ran over it before landing on the ground in slow motion.

Neat.

She didn’t have the urge to take a shower right now, especially when there was a good chance that someone was watching her. Given that the Imperator had presumably watched her and Creed have sex, she wouldn’t have put it past him to watch her take a shower.

Sadness washed over her at that. Creed…he wasn’t going to take what had happened well. He was alive, but both of them knew that they probably wouldn’t see each other again. She did take some solace in the fact that he was probably already planning a rescue, because that was about all he could do right now.

She was going to have to be very careful if she wanted to get out of this alive.

Out of curiosity she went to the sink to see if it worked the same way. The same symbol from the shower appeared once more and she flicked it on. The black metal shaped into a bowl hummed and the rim of it shimmered in an anti-grav field. A small but steady stream of water shot into the bowl and acted much like the shower had; slowly falling into the drain. She stuck her hands in, and had to admit that the sensation was strange, but not unpleasant.

She could manipulate that globs of water around, and it didn’t so much splash as mold to her hand
when it hit. It was almost fun to reach for a stream of water that was falling and literally lift it back up before it fell back down. As she withdrew her hands from the field, she noticed that they were completely dry when she pulled them out. The field must not have let any excess water leave.

It was rather fancy for such a mundane purpose, but maybe it was normal for Ethereals.

Patricia decided to now turn to what she was probably supposed to have gone to first, and that was the table that held some clothing on it, and on the one right next to it lay her armor. While she was at it, she stepped in front of the nearby mirror to see how she looked.

All things considered, it could have been worse.

She was in a short-sleeve grey shirt-like clothing, with matching pants and nothing on her feet. The material at least felt nice, and her hair and skin looked…normal. Which meant that at some point they’d probably stuck her in one of those showers to get cleaned up. She grimaced at that, but that was honestly not too unexpected. For all she knew it could have been weeks since she was taken.

Patricia turned towards the tables and first moved to inspect her armor. She wasn’t sure if it was a taunt or not, since they wouldn’t offer this unless it would be of no use to her. But from what she could tell, it was definitely her armor, scratches and all. It had definitely been cleaned up, since there was no dirt or mud on the boots or leg armor, and the pieces had a dull sheen to them.

The undersuit had also clearly been washed, and laid alongside the armor pieces. Everything seemed present and intact, including her helmet. Even the XCOM symbol was still displayed on the chest, as well as the flag of Britain. It was nice of them to leave it intact for her, so she had to give them some credit.

She moved over to the second table which had attire that was probably more appropriate for the situation. The closest thing she could compare it to was a dress uniform. All the pieces were white, with complex gold embroidery throughout it weaved into some objectively beautiful patterns. She picked up the main piece, a long-sleeved garment with the gold embroidery leading to the golden outline of an Ethereal – almost comparable to a stick figure.

The material was exceptionally soft, more so than anything she had ever felt before. She unfortunately couldn’t begin to guess what it was, but she at least wanted to wear it at some point. Accompanying the main torso piece were pants, socks, a pair of similarly white and low boots, and gloves.

The other final part was a cape-like piece of material that was designed in such a way that she would have to place her arms through the respective openings, and then hook it into the main torso piece. The color scheme was inverse of the main uniform; golden with white embroidery that simply formed a larger Ethereal symbol like the one on the chest.

She really did not know what the point of it was. It was more akin to something like what royalty would wear, not military leaders or people going into combat. True, it certainly looked impressive, but it still seemed too ornate for casually wearing around.

With that said, she did have to at least see how it felt.

It took her a few minutes to take off what she was currently wearing, and then get into the white uniform provided. Even as she was putting it on she had to admit that she definitely hadn’t worn anything more comfortable. She didn’t feel warmer than usual either, and her hands didn’t feel sweaty in the gloves yet, which was a welcome surprise.
The cape thing wasn’t hard to put on either, and after walking around some, it actually didn’t seem to really interfere in her movement. It reached down to just above her boots, slightly below her knees. Fairly standard, but she doubted she would notice it was there unless she was moving very fast, and even then she would want to be sure.

She stepped in front of the mirror to see how she looked.

Honestly, she thought it fit her very well. She looked like she stepped off the set of a Disney movie, but that was certainly not a bad comparison. While unnecessarily ornate, it did look good on her. If she could lose the quite blatant Ethereal symbol in the chest, she might actually consider wearing it like the Imperator clearly wanted her to.

Sadly, she wasn’t a princess. She was a soldier, and when she met the Imperator it would be in her armor.

She then, with some regret, stripped out of the uniform and fell back into the familiar process of donning her armor. It was more difficult without help, but doable. It wasn’t like she was pressed for time. At least in her armor she felt some sense of protection and durability. That uniform was comfortable, but soft.

Once donned, she flipped the helmet in her hands, wondering what to do next. It could be hours until she received someone, or they might show in a few minutes. She obviously had the ability to leave her room, so was she expected to just start wandering around?

That did not seem like a good idea. If the Imperator wanted to speak to her, she wasn’t going to waste her time possibly wandering to her death. Not that she felt that was an actual concern; the Imperator had probably issued standing orders to not harm her. And with at least some very powerful psions nearby, she could probably be subdued if she decided to be unruly.

She didn’t really plan to be that way. Violence was going to do nothing except worsen her situation.

Patricia waited there for some time, just thinking about her situation and all the possible ways this could go. The Imperator was almost certainly going to try and convince her of something, and she didn’t necessarily believe it was going to be as simple as “Join me or die.” That wouldn’t fit with how he’d operated so far. Going so far as to abduct her was surprising, and did indicate that something had happened to make him take such a drastic step.

It was probably going to come down to a choice, or series of choices. He seemed to like that. Even something as simple as choosing what she was going to wear was definitely some kind of choice, though maybe one with meanings not as obvious as it seemed. Context changed, and logical arguments could be used for wearing whatever she wanted.

Maybe she was overthinking it.

A knock distracted her. She glanced up to the door and narrowed her eyes. There was a psion on the other side; a powerful one, judging from the light probing she’d just done. No penetration, and they had extremely powerful defenses. “Come in.” She didn’t know if the door could even be opened from the other side, but figured that they would have overrides anyway.

She was expecting an Ethereal to walk through, probably one of the Guardians or if she was unlucky, the Overmind.

The shield dissipated and door slid aside, and to her surprise a Human walked through.
Patricia blinked in shock as she took in the man before her. Although ‘man’ may have been generous because the Human before her looked…young. He couldn’t have been any older than twenty, if that. His Hispanic features narrowed down where he could be from, but she knew that looking at the eyes would give her more than his young features would. And the brown eyes of this man were…weary. An odd look for someone like him.

He still gave a brief smile; he likely knew what was going through her head. “Not what you expected?”

The man was wearing a uniform that was very similar to the one she had just rejected. The differences were that this one was black with silver lining, and there were far fewer complex patterns. His cape had no pattern, and also seemed to include a hood that was currently put down. A knife was also strapped to his waist that didn’t seem to fit with the rest of his outfit.

“I wasn’t expecting another Human,” she said, standing. “Much less one who appears to be…free.”

He seemed amused at that, and based on his thicker accent assumed that he was from Mexico and not the United States. “Depends on what you define that as. I can wander around here without problems, but I’m not fool enough to try and leave without letting one of the Ethereals know.”

“Right.” Patricia cocked her head. “And just where are we?”

“I can’t give you the exact position,” the man answered. “The Imperator likes to keep it moving. But you are now on the Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective.”

Aegis had spoken of the Temple Ship, but not many details aside from that it was where the Imperator resided. “I see.”

“I doubt it,” he shrugged. “I didn’t get the name either. But it makes sense to them. It would be more accurate to call it a Shrine or Reflection. You’ll see when you walk through the ship.”

“Who are you?”

“Ah, right,” he nodded, smiling in self-deprecation. “Sorry about that. Nico Murillo, current…” he paused. “…Resident of the Temple Ship. Maybe Ward is a better word.”

She didn’t recognize the name, but honestly had not expected to. “And were you paid a visit by the Overmind?”

He grew more somber at that. “No, I came of my own volition. An offer was made, and I took it.”

Patricia wasn’t quite sure what to make of that. “You abandoned Earth? Willingly?”

He sighed at that. “Miss Trask, if you really want to you can hear my life story later. Suffice to say that there is nothing left on Earth for me. And when I say that, I mean it literally. ADVENT was responsible for destroying my family, and the cartels finished the job. I’d prefer not to focus on that right now.”

That…would probably do it. She just gave a nod. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Everyone is,” he dismissed with a wave. “But that isn’t why you’re here at this moment.”

“You either,” she pointed out. “Did the Imperator send you to get me?”

“Sicarius did,” he clarified. “I imagine the Imperator told her, yes. I assume they felt it would be
better for you to be greeted by me than the Guardians. Under the assumption that you won’t do anything foolish, of course.”

“No point in it,” Patricia agreed. “I don’t suppose you know why the Imperator wants me?”

“No,” Nico shook his head. “But I do know that you are an important part of his plans. There were debates on when to bring you to him, and I presume that…recent events made him take action. Aegis very nearly caused a rebellion in the Collective, and even now the Battlemaster is trying to repair the damage.”

“And has my capture been revealed?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Nico answered. “Nothing official from ADVENT or XCOM. I doubt they’d want news that their most public psion had been abducted to be spread.”

Not surprising. Patricia set her lips in a thin line. “Very well. No point wasting time, I suppose. Let’s go talk to the Imperator.”

Nico turned on his heel and motioned her to follow. “This way.”

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_Crew Quarters - The Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective_

_Unknown Time_

They stepped outside her doorway and Patricia once again started in surprise. Directly outside her room were two Mutons. These were surprisingly small, barely taller than her, and there were some clear physical differences between them and standard Mutons. The most obvious was that they were much smaller and slimmer.

They wore pitch black heavy armor, segmented and seemingly powered by an armored elerium core on the upper back. Their wrists held additional weapons; one had what looked like a wrist-mounted plasma weapon, and the other had what looked like a retractable blade. In their hands they held what she presumed were plasma weapons, but were made from black alloys and had no exposed cores. White Plasma weapons, perhaps? They were used by the Phantom Division, and she doubted the Imperator would skimp on the equipment of his own personal army.

Their helmets were extremely similar to the ones she’d seen on the Muton Centurions they had encountered several times; an armored helmet that covered the entirety of the head, with the eyes lit a purple color. But what stood out to her a few moments after starting at them was that…she couldn’t touch their minds. At all.

To be more specific…she could locate their minds, but actually attempting to penetrate them was a nigh-impossible task. It was as if someone had encrypted their minds; making them impossible to comprehend, and as a result, manipulate. Nico noticed her looked at them. “Miss Trask, may I introduce you to the Praetorian Guard of the Imperator.”

“Welcome, honored guest of the Imperator,” the leftmost Praetorian stated, nodding his head towards her. “It is good that you are awake.”

She blinked. “You talk?” She knew the Sargons were capable of complex speech, and their voices sounded fairly normal, if deep, but she’d never heard of any other type being able to independently talk.
“Yes, we have an increased mental capacity compared to our lesser brethren,” the second Praetorian explained without malice. “We expect this is a surprise. Our kind are not like the others of our species; we are their future under the Imperator.”

“I don’t know the full details,” Nico said, walking up to her. “But the Praetorian Guard is known to most of the Collective. However, most believe that they are the result of the Sargon and Elite units, or at least a more powerful Elite. That, from what I understand, isn’t true.” He waved a gloved hand to the Mutons. “The Praetorians were the first. The Sargons and Elites were offshoots of the Praetorian project. The Ethereals have mastered the Muton genome; anything you hear that indicates otherwise is either disinformation or propaganda.”

That was actually major news. But if that were true… “Then why is he using downgrades?” She wondered out loud. “Why not just use Praetorians exclusively? Hell, even Elites or Sargons would be fine.”

Nico began walking down the hallway and she joined him, while the two Praetorians followed a short distance behind them. “I’ve wondered that myself,” Nico admitted. “I suspect it has to do with time and cost. Praetorians are not cheap or easy to grow. Still, the Ethereals are not strapped for resources. Perhaps you can ask him that.”

“I’ll do that,” she muttered, glancing behind them. “From what Aegis said, I thought they’d be taller.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Nico grinned. “You haven’t seen the big ones yet. Revelean specifically made their size modifiable, largely because, while a massive Battlemaster-size unit is intimidating and powerful, it is not useful in small or confined spaces. Versatility is key in the Praetorian Guard.”

Already she was working out how this was going to affect the war. These appeared to be the future the Imperator was moving towards, and Mutons with the intellectual capabilities of a Sargon were something Humanity was not prepared for. They would adapt, as they always did, but this would be a more difficult challenge to overcome.

“What’s wrong with their minds?” She asked. “I mean, you are-“

“A telepath, yes,” he acknowledged. “I don’t know, honestly. I think it’s a kind of mental conditioning. I don’t know for sure though, I’ve never felt anything like their minds. Neither have you, I guess.”

“No,” she shook her head. “It’s like the brain was encrypted.”

“That…is a better analogy than what I always compared it to,” Nico said slowly.

“And what was that?”

He gave an embarrassed shrug. “A pile of shredded paper.”

Patricia almost chuckled at that. Nico motioned ahead. “Here we are; the next room has the reason why they call this the Temple Ship.” They stepped into a rectangular room filled with holographic terminals, stands, and pedestals filled with various things. But what immediately caught her attention was the walls and ceiling.

“Wow.”

The entire room was a cross between a mural and stained glass art. She now knew what the transparent cubes on the ships walls were for. Depicted on the walls was some kind of battle, with
two sides. One half of the room was a battle on the grounds of some planet, and the other side was depicting the battle in space.

In the center of the ceiling, where both sides met, was an ornate Ethereal that she presumed was the Imperator. He was larger than everything else, and outlined in purple and white as an almost god-like figure. The arms were stretched to the enemies depicted; Director Flagships in space and the hordes of Synthesized on the ground, all of whom were either destroyed or dying.

The entire piece of art was stunning. “Impressive, isn’t it?” Nico nodded. “And this isn’t the only one on this ship. Right now you are also standing in the Archives of History, one of the many areas of the Temple Ship maintained by-“ He blinked. “Well, I suppose he is here now.”

Patricia turned to see an Ethereal she didn’t recognize approach. Compared to most Ethereals he dressed deceptively simple. All he wore was a grey robe with orange highlights, almost directly comparable to the Overmind’s. However, he had no hood and didn’t bother to obscure his face at all. His glowing orange eyes seemed brighter compared to the admittedly few Ethereals she’d seen unmasked.

“Miss Trask, this is Archivist Cogitian, of the Ethereal Collective,” Nico introduced. “And responsible for the art you see before you.”

“The First of the Awakened Humans,” he said in near awe, his voice sounding more energetic than most Ethereals she listened to, who seemed to prefer more methodical speech patterns. “It is a pleasure to meet you. Putting the unfortunate circumstances to the side, I am pleased you are here with us now.”

Patricia crossed her arms while narrowing her eyes. “I don’t plan on staying, if I can help it. No offense.”

“I suppose you cannot be blamed for that.” Cogitian tapped a spindly finger to his neck. “Regardless, should you leave I would wish the opportunity to speak to you. Our records on your species would not be fully complete without the input of the first Human Psion.”

“Maybe,” she said noncommittally. “So…you’re the record keeper?”

She sensed some exasperation coming from the Ethereal at that. “If you want to use such a… limiting term. I am a record keeper, historian, storyteller, and artist all at the same time. I record the stories of the Andromedons, Sectoids, Vitakara, Mutons, Ethereals, and even your own species. No matter what the galaxy has in store, it will be a lesser place if the stories of these species were to never be observed, recorded, and completed.”

His goals sounded similar to those of EXALT’s Chronicler, though now that they knew he was working for a Sovereign One, that wasn’t too comforting. As far as Ethereals went, he seemed more…benign, which was largely how Aegis had described him. Cogitian fulfilled a specific purpose for the Imperator, even if he didn’t necessarily agree.

He was apparently one of the older Ethereals as well, not nearly as old as the Overmind, but maybe second in age. While she was here, she might as well see what his answer to one of her questions was. “Why is this called the Temple Ship? As far as I know Ethereals aren’t religious.”

Cogitian actually laughed. “Oh, they most certainly were.” He paused. “Well, not as you Humans define religion, but any Ethereal who insists that we completely rejected the concept of higher powers is either ignorant, or wishes to fit history to their views. It is a long and complicated subject, suffice to say that-“
He looked towards them. “Right, the Temple Ship. That is the closest translation to your own language. One thing for you to understand about the Temple Ships is that they were not used primarily for…combat.” He said the word with some disgust. “Yes, they were in the War, but they were ships of prestige and command, only given to the most acclaimed of the Empire. They are monuments to their lives and achievements.” He pointed with one hand above. “And so I continue the tradition in my own way. I tell the story and life of the Imperator, and will continue to do so until the end of time, or he perishes.”

He glanced around the room. “However, this particular Temple Ship has needed to adapt for the times. It holds more than the story of the Imperator, but the last remaining histories of the Ethereal Empire and the Synthesized War. There is much that is irreplaceable here…ah, if you wish I could certainly share, but I suspect that you need to move on. The Imperator certainly wishes to speak to you, after all.”

Nico gave a short bow. “Your time is appreciated, Archivist. I hope both of us will be able to speak again soon.”

“Good luck,” Patricia simply said. “I hope you preserve this knowledge. Regardless of which side we fall on, forgetting it benefits no one.”

“Indeed,” Cogitian agreed. “A sadly controversial topic among some circles.”

With that, Patricia followed Nico into another hallway, with their Praetorian guards following close behind. “Interesting alien,” Patricia commented. “Aegis seemed to be right about him.”

“He definitely is,” Nico said wistfully. “Talking to him is like…having every secret of the galaxy just readily available. The Temple Ship is the only place where there are no secrets, no classifications, just knowledge. Some of what Sicarius has pointed out to me is…disturbing in its implications.” He shook his head. “The galaxy is inherently bent towards war. Everything I have seen shows that. And I thought Humans were violent…” he gave a sad chuckle.

Patricia felt he was trying to make a point, but she wasn’t sure what it could be. “Violence is sometimes that quickest path to results. It’s a part of life. I’d be surprised if other species didn’t have violent streaks.”

“Mmm,” Nico seemed like he was going to say more, but then motioned ahead. “Well, something to discuss later. Assuming you’re still around. You wanted to see one of the bigger Praetorians, right? There are a couple stationed in the Grand Commons.”

They stepped into one of the largest parts of the Temple Ship so far; a massive area with an arched ceiling that reminded her of an arena. Interspersed throughout the area were tables and benches, with some alien plant life spread around. Stairs led to an upper floor, and at the top of the stairs were the largest Mutons she had ever seen.

They were at least as tall as the Battlemaster, and much, much thicker. Their armor was probably thicker than some tanks, and their weapons would be hard to fit on aircraft. Appearance-wise they looked identical to their smaller Praetorian brothers, just scaled up to an absurd size. These made Elites look small by comparison.

XCOM would have trouble taking that down, and a quick probe confirmed their minds were similarly scrambled.

“Are they smart too?” She asked.
“Yes,” Nico confirmed, scratching his chin. “Arguably more so since their brains are bigger. The Imperator has envisioned them as the commanders in a ground force because of this. They are also the ones who speak most to Cogitian, make of that what you will.”

The thought of a Muton of any kind holding a meaningful conversation with anyone was an utterly alien concept. There were so many questions as to what the Imperator, or Ethereals in general, were really thinking. They weren’t idiots, that much was clear, but they seemed to have very little clue how to actually make decisions that made sense, leverage their advantages, or provide any kind of leadership.

How could a species so advanced be so incredibly mismanaged?

Or was it intentional and part of a plan she couldn’t see?

“Patricia Trask.”

She turned around to see both of the Guardians walking towards her. While they didn’t look like they were about to attack her, she didn’t fail to notice that at least one of their hands were resting on their Sabers. They were prepared if she did anything, and could imagine why they were here at all. “Hello,” she sighed. “I want you to know I’m not here because I want to be.”

“Your circumstances are known to us,” the First Guardian stated. “We are not concerned about you. You have no power in the Temple Ship of the Imperator.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Really.”

She was moderately tempted to test that, but figured that wouldn’t go over well. Instead, she crossed her arms. “Don’t worry, I don’t plan to cause trouble. I doubt I would be able to do anything anyway. Besides, dying is not something I plan on doing here.”

The Second Guardian seemed to appraise her. “You are calm for one in the seat of the most powerful being in the Collective.”

“And what good is fear going to do me?” She asked, sighing. “Think. If the Imperator wanted to kill me, I wouldn’t be here, would I? And since he wanted to talk, and seems to like talking with me anyway, he’s probably more interested in getting my cooperation than coercing me through… well, anything else. Take your pick.”

Nico frowned. “Wait, you’ve spoken with the Imperator? Before this?”

“Oh yeah,” she glanced over at him. “I’m guessing he didn’t tell you this?”

“Oh yeah,” she glanced over at him. “I’m guessing he didn’t tell you this?”

“Not to me,” Nico said slowly. “In which case…some things make sense.”

“You are dismissed, Human of Sicarius,” the First Guardian stated towards Nico, stepping forward. “We will escort Patricia to the Imperator.”

Nico rolled his eyes. “I really wish you wouldn’t call me that. I’m not her slave.”

Patricia did have to admire the nerve of doing that in front of any Ethereal, much less the Guardians. “I would prefer he accompany us,” she said. “He’s been a useful guide.”

“You do not have authority to make such a decision,” the Seconds Guardian said slowly. “You tread thinly. As do you, Human of Sicarius.”
“And what are you going to do?” Nico asked. “Kill me? Or her?” He nodded towards Patricia. “Accompany-” He suddenly stopped speaking, moving a gloved hand to his throat as he realized what was happening. Patricia wasn’t sure if she should intervene or not. Not that she necessarily wanted to choose a side, but at least Nico had been cordial to her.

She narrowed her eyes and concentrated towards the Second Guardian and sent the equivalent of a tidal wave of telepathic attacks towards her. They didn’t penetrate, but they did disrupt her. “You will regret this, Trask,” she growled as the orange-yellow of her Saber appeared, while Nico collapsed to the ground. “The Imperator will understand if your wings are clipped.”

Patricia stepped back, though noticed the First Guardian not making any move. “Enough,” he said. “This bickering is beneath us. You should not have done that.” Patricia sensed that the words were not directed to her, but the Second Guardian.

The Guardian Saber flew out of her hand, deactivating and landed in the outstretched palm of another Ethereal that Patricia had only heard of. “You are dismissed in the name of the Imperator,” Sicarius stated, her voice melodical, but flat and lacking the layers of Ethereal speech. The thing that stood out about Sicarius was that she was much smaller than the average Ethereal, barely over six feet. Her featureless orb of a helmet was also eye-catching.

She knelt down and helped a recovering Nico rise to his feet. “He is disappointed with you, Second Guardian,” Sicarius growled, flicking the Saber back to the Guardian. “Should you touch him again, there will be consequences. Go.”

The Guardians quickly departed, with the Second Guardian clearly embarrassed at the incident. Not knowing what else to do, she walked over to the pair. “You attempted to help him,” Sicarius said, turning her eyeless helm to her own face. “Why?”

“What she did was not deserved,” Patricia shrugged. “He has been helpful to me, and as pleasant as you can be here. What the Second Guardian did was an abuse of her power.”

“I didn’t expect she’d do that,” Nico wheezed. “I knew she didn’t really like me, but that’s new. But thanks, Miss Trask.”

“Just Patricia,” she said, looking to the small Ethereal. “I guess you’ll be the one taking me to the Imperator? I do think it’d be best to get this done before I end up in the middle of another fight.”

“Yes, I will take you to him,” Sicarius confirmed, checking to make sure Nico was alright. “Are you recovered, Nico?”

“Well enough,” he said, coughing. “Let’s go.”

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The Throne Room of the Imperator – The Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

Unknown Time

Patricia felt the Imperator the closer they got to him. It was an intense rapture that seemed to make everything crisper, charged; it was an aura that was both empowering and terrifying in its intensity. She actually had to strengthen her telepathic barriers to prevent herself from just stopping and basking in the feeling, which would likely make her look like an idiot.

“You get used to it eventually,” Nico commented without looking at her. “But it never becomes stale, if you know what I mean.”
She just nodded, as they reached a flight of stairs that led to an oversized door that was at least twenty feet tall. “He is within the Throne Room,” Sicarius said quietly. “Go forth. He will speak to you in there. We are not required.”

Patricia looked at the foreboding door ahead and steeled herself for whatever was going to happen. “Alright then.” She glanced behind her. “Thank you, Nico. In case I don’t see you again.” He gave her an acknowledging nod, and she began moving up the stairs until she was in front of the door, which slid aside the closer she got.

She couldn’t see too well what was inside, but the moment she stepped through, the door closed behind her. Patricia stood there for a few moments to take in the so-called “Throne Room”. To her, it immediately struck her as a flat, empty room. The floors were the same obsidian metal and extended incredibly far. The entire room seemed to be about the size of a stadium.

She looked up to see the ceiling which extended far above her, showing the stars. She could tell that it was a video projection and not glass, given the various unnatural angles on it, but it was still a striking sight, and then she also noticed that it extended down the walls as well. Almost as if she was standing in space itself.

Ethereals knew how to design ships that left an impression, she couldn’t deny that.

“Welcome, Patricia Trask.”

The voice was that of the Imperator, but with the full power and authority behind it that telepathic projections could simply not convey accurately. In the distance she saw an elevated platform with stairs all around it, supporting a chair that a massive Ethereal was sitting on. Yet the voice seemed to come from all around her; each syllable an unconscious telepathic command that was already pushing against her defenses. It was deep, haunting, commanding, and impossible to forget.

She walked forward.

The closer she got, the clearer the Ethereal became. Once she reached a certain distance, the Imperator raised a hand, and she unconsciously stopped. The Imperator then rose from his throne, and slowly descended down the massive steps. Once on the ground opposite her, she got her first true look at the Imperator.

Everything about him was tailored to maximize his command and awe. His size dwarfed that of the Battlemaster; he must have been close to fifteen feet high, forcing her to crane her neck to look up at him. He wore glistening silver armor, with golden patterns and ornate glyphs sculpted into the armor itself. His helm took a more upside-down triangular design, with the thin eye slits giving off a warm orange glow. A golden cape fell from his shoulders, just falling to the ankles of his armored boots.

His lower two hands were clasped behind his back, while the upper two were hanging idly by his sides. He appeared to have no weapons attached to his belt, but with how powerful he was, she didn’t think he needed any. She tried taking a closer look at the patterns on his armor, and was quite surprised to see what looked like a Director Flagship, and almost a perfect replica of the emblem Abby had described on the Chronicler’s armor.

They looked disturbingly similar.

Why would he have both of those symbols?

“Greetings, Imperator,” she said, her voice sounding flat and empty compared to his. “Not exactly
how I imagined we’d meet in person, but I suppose you wanted to avoid a fight.”

“There is a very limited number of those who could challenge me and live,” the Imperator rumbled. “Humans are not one of them.”

“I suspect we’ll find out one way or another eventually,” Patricia crossed her arms. “I suppose you have a good reason for abducting me?”

“Indeed,” the Imperator said, motioning with one of his hands to follow him. “Come with me. I want to show you something.” Patricia followed him as they climbed the steps to his throne, each step nearly coming up to her knees. At the top Patricia could see nearly the entire room, and it was a nice view. “I do not have this for show,” the Imperator continued, sitting down. “I designed it for a purpose.”

He pushed something on his throne and the room flashed as holograms formed throughout the room, coalescing into a rough approximation of the Milky Way. “The scale of the galaxy is difficult to comprehend in the abstract,” the Imperator said, motioning outward. “Even this only slightly rectified the problem, but it serves as an important means of visualization. It allows planning, exploration, and observation.

The mass of stars dissipated, only to reform into a much smaller section of the galaxy, a few hundred stars it looked like, and it was broken into various chunks, outlined by yellow, white, and blue. “This is the current territory of the Ethereal Collective,” he explained. “With the respective control that the Andromedon Federation, Greater Hive Commanders, and Aui’Vitakar have. Even now it continues to expand, slowly but surely.”

He looked down imposingly at her. “And yet, it is not enough. It is little compared to the threats posed in this galaxy. And in the end, territory does not equal power. It is a tool in the unseen war all species are a part of.”

“I suppose you’re going to explain that?” She asked.

“Of course,” he confirmed. “But I would like to know what Aegis has said about me. Why he… defected.”

She grunted. “I would have thought you’d read my mind to get that answer.”

“To what end?” He asked. “I find little enjoyment in learning of the mundane details of lives. Most are inclined to distrust you if they know you will violate their minds. I see little point in doing so unless there is a greater purpose.”

A policy Patricia had to agree with, since it was fairly similar to her own. “He says that you’ve changed from their original goal. That you’re no longer interested in fighting the Synthesized; that you’ve become obsessed with the Sovereign Ones and seem to be planning to turn on them.”

“I see.” The Imperator stood and walked down the steps to the ground floor, with Patricia following him. “A vast oversimplification, but not entirely inaccurate. Since awakening… I have learned much about this galaxy. I spent a decade simply reviewing the Synthesized War, I planned for decades more how to fight them. I accepted the help of the Sovereign Ones at first, initially pleased we were not the only survivors. But the more I learned, the more things have changed.”

“How?”

“The Synthesized are not an unthinking horde; they manipulated the Empire into fighting exactly how they wished us to,” the Imperator explained. “They sent hordes of poorly made constructs to
fight on our planets, and we sent our legions to fight them. We killed billions. They killed thousands. An acceptable trade, as every Ethereal that fell could not be easily replaced. They do not care about time or speed. They knew how we would respond, and they drained our Empire of our soldiers over a war of centuries.”

“Couldn’t it have been luck?” Patricia asked. “Even if their tactics were simple, that doesn’t mean they were intentional.”

“Most believed that initially,” the Imperator said, beginning to pace around her. “But the creation of the Imperators changed that. We assumed control of the Empire; we saw the pointlessness of fighting the hordes, and began targeting the only things that mattered – the Flagships. We didn’t waste time on unthinking masses; we sacrificed planets to kill even a few of the Flagships. We brought the Empire back from a sure defeat. And that was when we learned how much the Synthesized had been holding back.”

Patricia furrowed her eyebrows. “I feel Aegis would have mentioned something like this.”

“He never participated in galactic strategy. He never saw the larger plan, nor do I think he could truly comprehend or accept that the Empire had been tricked by machines.” He motioned to himself. “Imperators are not like other Ethereals. We did not think like traditional Ethereals. We grew up without the traditions, stigmas and drawbacks of the Empire.”

Patricia nodded. “So what happened?”

“The front line of the war became the Imperators,” he answered. “The Synthesized began targeting us much like we had targeted the Flagships. They reduced their useless husks, and began deploying soldiers that were beyond our own in terms of power and intellect. Imperators began dying from assassinations, ambushes, and freak accidents. They were predicting everything we could do; our psionics stopped working against their most powerful soldiers.”

He paused. “Within two years a quarter of the living Imperators had died. That was when I determined the war was lost. Perhaps if we had been at the beginning, we would emerge victorious, but it was too late. The Empire had condemned itself long before we had arrived, and nothing could be done to change it.”

There was some silence for a few moments. “If that’s the case, then why would you not want to prepare?”

“There is a difference between preparing and prioritizing,” the Imperator answered, stopping and looking directly down at her. “One question that few ask is where the Synthesized came from. They are not natural, that is clear. But even if they are, no one has an answer. But I am certain I have, and they are merely the symptom of a much more prevalent threat.”

Patricia swallowed. “And what is that?”

“That the ones who created the Synthesized still exist, and they are the Sovereign Ones.”

She had suspected he was leading to this. “Perhaps it was a mistake?” She asked after a few moments. “I doubt they…intended this.”

The Imperator rumbled, likely an approximation of a chuckle or laugh. “Patricia, the creation of the Synthesized is something that makes perfect sense when you understand the context the Sovereign Ones have operated in since the beginning of their existence. The Synthesized operate exactly how
their creator intended."

“Right.” Patricia said slowly. “So since you know…what are the Sovereign Ones? What is their story?”

“A long and violent one,” the Imperator said wistfully. “I have pieced this together from observation, interaction, and looking at history itself. The Sovereign Ones, as they contacted us soon after we awakened, were and continue to be helpful. But they have lied to me. They do not answer about the Synthesized, only that they are an enemy. They say they are many, but I am quite certain that there is only one Sovereign One assisting the Collective.”

“Just one?”

“Yes,” the Imperator sounded almost sad. “In a calculated risk, I allowed one of my Ethereals to become a dedicated voice. She is now…linked to the Sovereign One. He shares secrets with her; reveals things in their communications. I listen to them, I learn, I know there is only one Sovereign One, and his plans are far beyond that of the Synthesized.” The Imperator trailed off.

“I initially wanted to sever any kind of contact, but making an enemy this potentially powerful was not something to risk. So instead I began exploring, gathering information. Going to places the Sovereign One had warned us away from, or only partially following suggestions.”

Patricia thought. “Has it told you its name?”

“Only once, as Mosrimor,” the Imperator answered. “Sovereign Ones do not have long names, and sometimes they seem to take titles instead. Do you wonder, Patricia, why I have kept to the edge of the galaxy and not moved further in?”

“Power consolidation,” she guessed. “And they are more powerful than you are.”

“One reason,” he acknowledged. “But because of what I uncovered in the initial exploration of the inner galaxy. Many of the species are under the influence of Sovereigns; they use them as a proxy to explore, expand, and wage war. We are all pawns on their galactic game of conquest. Mosrimor does not intend for the Ethereal Collective to fight the Synthesized; he plans for us to conquer the puppet species and kill their Sovereign masters.”

At that moment Patricia felt she was now extremely in over her head. The implications of that were…staggering. “So…the Sovereign Ones are fighting each other?”

“I have seen much in support, and little to disprove it,” the Imperator nodded. “The galaxy is a battleground that takes place over millennia. Species are shaped, rise, and fall; they adapt, evolve, and advance at the hands of a Sovereign master. They fight in proxy wars in a never-ending conflict of dominance in this galaxy. I can only speculate the role the Synthesized play in this, but I believe it is a timer of sorts. Something which comes to set everything back to the beginning. Perhaps there is another Sovereign One behind it, perhaps it is from another galaxy; but it is no accident or natural development.”

There was something that didn’t make sense. “Even if that’s true, why would they not just fight the Synthesized together and then go back to killing each other?”

“Because you seem to think that they actually care about the Synthesized,” the Imperator said, audibly amused. “The only threat they ultimately posed was to their pawn species. The Sovereign Ones are cowards who hide and manipulate from afar. They are content to wage endless war; time has no meaning to them.”
He paused. “However, I believe there is a better explanation. If they were to band together, it would mean that one of them might actually win. The conclusion of their conflict is the rule of one Sovereign One in this galaxy. The Synthesized act as a…reset button. One which they usually do not contest, as their proxies are so weakened by conflict with each other that they are crushed by the Synthesized…” he trailed off. “This is speculation on my part, as I have limited first-hand knowledge, but it is an educated guess.”

“I suppose the next question is…was your species a proxy?” She asked. “Aegis said there were almost no major conflicts.”

“I do not know.” He answered heavily. “There was always the question of who engineered us. That was unquestionably a Sovereign One…but I do not know why there was not a more direct hand taken. Perhaps we were an experiment. Perhaps the Sovereign who created us was killed. Perhaps we were manipulated in other ways. Our isolationism. Our superiority. Perhaps they were weaknesses that the Sovereign Ones exploited by never forcing us to advance. It will likely remain an unsolved mystery.”

“So that was when you started changing the direction of the Collective,” Patricia realized, and honestly it made some sense. “But why didn’t you tell the others? Aegis would have likely understood.”

“Two reasons,” the Imperator raised a finger. “Too many who knew would have possibly turned Mosrimor against us, and we would have fought a destructive war we might not have won. And second…because some would not believe it is necessary. They would still wish to treat a Sovereign One as an ally, a means to an end. That, if I have learned anything, does not work. That, is what they want us to think. They seed us with technology, make us reliant on them, they slowly and subtly indoctrinate us with communication, until we are willing pawns.” The hand closed to a fist. “I will not allow my species to be turned into a puppet for such a being.”

“That is…understandable,” she nodded slowly. “That certainly puts the Chronicler in a different light.”

“Indeed, and I will get to that,” the Imperator nodded. “But I have used this knowledge. I have sought out uncorrupted species. Ones who were independent and free of the control of the Sovereign ones. The Sectoids, Andromedons, Vitakara, and Mutons were all free of the influence, and I have kept a careful watch on all Sovereign tech to ensure that it doesn’t influence us unknowingly.”

“Hasn’t Mosrimor figured out what you’re doing…” Patricia paused. “And speaking of that, what do you plan to do for him?”

“He is arrogant, like all Sovereign Ones,” the Imperator said. “They do not measure time like we do. Barely a moment has passed for him; mere decades. He does not care. Yet. He could never conceive of an alien turning on him, and my appeasements have made him lax. But as for my plans…well, he is not the only one I have found.”

“Another?” Patricia asked. “Isn’t that…dangerous? Especially since they like to fight each other?”

“This is a slightly different situation,” the Imperator explained. “The Creator was…contacted by something from what you call the Psionosphere. Something that should be impossible, but nonetheless exists. I do not know the details, except that this being is extremely powerful, a former Sovereign One, and trapped.”

She imagined a smile under his helmet. “At this moment, the Creator is working to allow him to…
cross over. Unfortunately for him, I have also informed Mosrimor about this, and he has been extraordinarily helpful in infecting her Blacksite with specially designed nanotech; a specialty of his, I presume. He has fought the “Bringer,” as he was known before, and knows how to subdue him. The nanotech will slave him to the owner, and he believes I have given him control over him.”

“But you have the control,” Patricia noted slowly.

“Correct,” the Imperator nodded. “And when the Bringer crosses over, I will send him to kill Mosrimor, and he will serve as an excellent tool against the other Sovereign Ones, and when the Synthesized are defeated, he will be sent to the center of the galaxy to die in the black holes that inhabit it.”

“Assuming it goes according to plan,” Patricia noted.

“I have taken appropriate precautions,” the Imperator said. “And if it doesn’t work…I have contingencies. I always assume that something will go wrong, and what can be done to prevent it. Pitting Sovereign Ones against each other is risky, but risks are needed when the stakes are the galaxy itself.”

He paused, looking at her for a few moments. “You are such a risk now. Your species is. But it is one worth taking. You want to know, don’t you. Why we are attacking you; why we have taken such steps.”

“Yes.”

“There are several reasons I am interested in your species,” he began. “You are one of the few who can use the Gift, or psionics. More than that, you are capable of great power with it, far more than the Sectoids ever could be. Your species also has a large portion who are sensitive, and you have already realized the power that gives your military. But that is not the main reason, or even a largely important one.”

“Then what is?”

“Consider the species in the Collective,” the Imperator said. “Each one serves a purpose, yet they also have drawbacks. I initially believed that these weaknesses could be phased out or mitigated but that has so far been…inaccurate. The Sectoids, they were the first…failure, I suppose. They are brilliant scientists, with a mastery over genetics that one day could rival our own.”

His hand lowered to the side. “Yet they are cold, empty; they cannot comprehend the concepts of empathy or friendship. They are a frail species who are cowards when faced with events outside what they plan for. This has made them…cruel, and ultimately of limited use to me. They are a tool, but they cannot ever be more than such.”

“But have you actually made efforts to change them?” Patricia asked. “Or simply allowed them to develop?”

“I am hesitant to change the nature of a sapient species now,” the Imperator explained. “If I take such a step, we are no better than the Sovereign Ones. I am not interested in puppets, Patricia. I want allies, I want unity, and I want for each species to be responsible for their own achievements. Yet you are correct in that I have been too lax. My kind has been lax in our responsibility in guiding and leading.”

“And why is that?” She asked.
“Ethereals, by our nature, are not leaders,” the Imperator made a noise very similar to a sigh. “We cannot usually bring ourselves to care about those under us; their concerns rarely seem important. This translates to arrogance and superiority, when in reality it could simply be apathy. There are exceptions. The Battlemaster is one. Quisilia as well. Imperators also lack this limitation, but there is a reason I have been…absent.”

Patricia nodded. “Which is?”

“I wanted to see if we would change, or if such would have to be forced,” he answered. “I wanted the Ethereals to willingly take a leadership role in the Collective. But I soon saw that we are simply not suited for it, regardless of how much we try. Although I have the capability, I cannot be the leader this Collective ultimately needs.”

He shook his head. “The Vitakara could have perhaps worked in our stead. They are intelligent and loyal to us; a rare combination. But the problem is that they are too passive; they cannot use psionics, and they have little ambition. The Andromedons are too focused on the past; of their petty rivalries and wars. They are methodical and brilliant engineers, but they will betray you once they find a better alternative.”

He chuckled. “And the Mutons are nothing more than an easily controlled breed. Dangerous in strength and size, but lacking in intellect; the vast majority only suited to fight and die in the name of those who command them. They are naturally incapable of brilliance or independence, and while we can cheat nature, their purpose will never change for us.”

A finger pointed at her. “And now that brings us to your species – Humans. The Collective…lacks certain qualities. It is as it sounds – a collection of species unified under the leadership of the Ethereals, but in reality it is three factions constantly spying, undermining, and expanding on their own, while little true leadership is done. The Battlemaster can only do so much.”

He paused. “I believe that Humans could serve as the leaders of the Collective. Your kind are intelligent, charismatic, ruthless when needed and understand the more nuanced emotions Andromedons and Sectoids do not. You have proven you can adapt and advanced despite the odds being against you. Your species will be what holds the Collective together, and we will advise when requested. That is the future I see for your species. You will not win the war, but I have no intention of wasting your potential.”

Patricia knew it sounded good, but if that was the case… “Then why did you invade us in the first place? Any chance you would have had to bring us in peacefully is gone. ADVENT isn’t going to fall or surrender peacefully.”

He laughed again. “Now, when did I say I wanted ADVENT to fail?”

She blinked. “Because with ADVENT, Humanity will never become part of the Collective. You don’t have a choice.”

“But?” He was amused. “ADVENT is performing exactly how I wished it too. Why do you think they have been allowed to expand so quickly? Why I have not taken opportunities to lessen their reach? Why I have simply not ordered Saudia be assassinated? I ignored Canada for a reason; just as I ignored the Middle East. The attack on France drove more countries into ADVENT. The attacks on Korea and D.C. will do the same. No, Patricia, I do not want ADVENT to fail, I want it to succeed.”

Patricia was dumbfounded. “But…why?”
“I have researched your history,” he explained, beginning to pace again. “Unification is a dream your species has sought, but never attained. There have always been dissidents, traitors, and fools who sabotage this. I have little interest in assimilating your species and facing dozens of terrorists or rebel groups. Fortunately, ADVENT does not either. They will fully unite your species and crush those who oppose them.”

His voice turned thoughtful. “There was a reason that many in ADVENT in positions of power are…driven. Stein; Watkins; Falka; all who would be considered extreme, but fit the mold of ADVENT perfectly. It is a simple matter of making the right people obvious; moving a name further up a list, having someone mention a name in conversation; little details that push specific people forward.”

“You controlled them,” Patricia said in a mix of awe and horror.

“No,” he dismissed. “I simply changed what was seen. In the end, the decisions were made by Saudia, and the Commander; I simply helped choose what they were going to see. It was necessary to ensure the success of ADVENT.”

“Even if that’s true, you haven’t explained how that benefits you,” Patricia pointed out. “ADVENT isn’t exactly going to be open to that idea, no matter if you subtly ‘assisted’ them or not.”

“I will leave that detail for when the time comes,” was all he said. “Suffice that I am confident in it. But you are right in one aspect – why I bothered to invade at all. That you might be able to guess, but first I will go back long before we stepped foot on your planet. In fact, I am the reason your species wasn’t wiped out.”

Patricia arched an eyebrow. “Explain.”

“Mosrimor gave me your world, and suggested that the species could become dangerous and should be removed,” he revealed. “This confused me, and by then I had only partially pieced together the story of the Sovereign Ones. I instead sent scouting crafts; many of your UFO abduction stories are based on those expeditions. I saw nothing of interest, nor any reason to kill or stay your species. So for a time I dismissed you – until I was more knowledgeable about the Sovereign Ones. I knew Mosrimor would not have given me that suggestion without a reason. So I decided to find out what that reason was.”

He motioned with a lower arm. “I ordered a limited incursion, I wanted to see how your species would react. You formed XCOM and began fighting back; an interesting development, but not the answer I was after. I learned of EXALT and began leveraging them, but I also failed to receive the answer. It was only recently that I obtained it – in the form of the Chronicler.”

The Imperator paused. “That is the purpose of the invasion, Patricia. To determine if your species was under the influence of a Sovereign One. I knew that they would be familiar with the tactic if it was true, and they would react swiftly. When this did not happen, I wondered if it would be more subtle; from behind the scenes, hence EXALT. But I saw no influence there, even with what I know of the Chronicler now.”

“He is awakened now, and he will likely try and use your species. I do not intend for that to happen. The objective now is to kill or neutralize the Sovereign One on Earth. ADVENT will continue to fight us, but they are no longer my largest
concern.”

“But why keep this a secret?” Patricia demanded. “This changes everything!”

“Because we are all in a very dangerous game,” the Imperator said, almost sadly. “When pitting multiple beings of god-like power against each other, risks cannot be taken. The war provides a useful cover. The world will fall under the control of the Battlemaster, or ADVENT. In the meantime I will hunt and kill the Sovereign One, by leveraging what I can against it. More importantly, if I was to simply reveal the nature of the galaxy, it would escalate to the point where everything would collapse. The Collective would be destroyed, ADVENT would be under a Sovereign One, and everyone else dead or scattered.”

“And what happens if the Battlemaster wins?” Patricia asked.

“Then so be it,” the Imperator said nonchalantly. “It will not change your role in the Collective. It will simply be the system of government that is different. Every move that is made now is a risk, Patricia, with a misstep ending all I have built. But this is a cycle that has likely gone on for billions of years, and I am going to make an effort to break it.”

There was some silence between them.

“So why am I here?” She finally asked.

“Because I want you to help me,” he answered. “You are one who can adapt and change based on what you know. You can sense I am not lying. You can see what I intend, and can deduce why I have taken this path. Your purpose is greater than in XCOM; you have the opportunity to help shape a galactic civilization and begin breaking an unfathomably long war.”

He lifted a hand. “However, I will not make this decision. You will. If you wish, you can leave. You may return to XCOM and no one will stop you. You can, of course, attempt to warn them of this; spread what I intend. Perhaps they will believe you, perhaps they won’t. I cannot see the future, but there was a reason I chose you out of others. Most cannot see past their own problems; others will be like Aegis and believe Sovereign Ones can safely be allies; still more will never forgive the Collective, justified or not.”

He lowered the hand. “Or you can stay and assist me in achieving this goal. I have obviously said this to convince you of the necessity and logic of my plans, but I have no interest in an unthinking pawn or puppet. I am not a Sovereign One. Choices are what shape us, and to deny choice is to remove free will. So this is your choice, Patricia Trask, but know that if you leave, this will never be offered again. The next time we will meet, you will die.”

Thoughts swirled around in her head. This wasn’t a simple yes or no answer anymore; what the Imperator had said changed everything. Would the Commander listen to her? Aegis probably wouldn’t, but the Commander...he would say the Imperator was likely lying. Trying to manipulate her. But she could sense everything he was saying was what he believed.

Could she not trust herself?

“You do not have to decide now,” the Imperator said. “Stay. Wander. Talk with those around you. Gather information; details if you wish. I am not interested in a snap decision; think on this. You will have to make a choice one day, but for now you can simply consider what I said. And if you still wish to leave, you will be able to do so.”

He walked back over to his throne and sat down upon it. “I will be here. You may speak to me
when you wish. I have instructed the Guardians and the Praetorian Guard to give you free reign of the ship."

Patricia turned away, too absorbed in thought to even say goodbye. With conflict raging inside her, she settled for simply trying to get some sleep on it.

Maybe when she woke up next time, the right decision would be clearer.

Because right now, she truly did not know.
It was past time that this conversation was had.

It was also past time that they begin making use of this surprisingly intact base which Cogitian had finally gotten around to cataloging. As the Battlemaster had suspected, it was undoubtedly one of the Disprium bases. Out of the ruins they had found in their exploration of the galaxy, theirs were often the most intact and usually possessed some form of useful information.

They had yet to find out exactly what had happened to them, but the Battlemaster already suspected they had befallen a similar fate to the Empire. As far as he knew, there was only one power which could take down one as expansive as the Disprium had controlled. Cogitian was still unsure if that was the correct translation, or if it was even the name of their species, or merely what they called their form of government.

At the moment, however, it was irrelevant.

No matter what they had called themselves, they had fallen into the same trap as the Empire and utilized the tainted element. There had been extensive amounts of it stored in the deeper vaults of the base, and after it had been safely packaged, it was moved to Revelean’s Blacksite. There had been far more of it than previous bases, and given the contents of the archives, the Battlemaster could easily figure out why.

Originally, he had suspected it was an observation post to watch the Humans, but the archives were filled with various kinds of weapons. Not merely bombs and ranged rifles, but ones designed to kill planets and systems. Another curious thing that Cogitian had noticed was that a good portion of the weaponry had involved some measure of Sovereign technology.

That had not been encouraging.

It served as proof that the Sovereign Ones had likely been around when the Synthesized were attacking other species, and yet it seemed that even their extensive technology hadn’t been enough. Then again, too much of it relied on the tainted element, so perhaps there was some hope to be taken in that. Although they would need to begin utilizing what they had right now, sooner than later.

The archives themselves had been moved to the Temple Ship, and the room itself had been converted into his own briefing center. While the Observation Station was useful, there was no reason not to make use of the established base. On his orders, the restoration had already begun and would firmly establish the Collective within the Solar System.

And now it was time to do the same to the rest of the Collective.

Hence why Revelean, Fectorian, Quisilia, and Sana’Ligna were with him right now. He had considered involving the Zar’Chon, but he would have a role to play in the future. This was a conversation which could only be had by the Ethereals.
Although a quick glance at Quisilia slightly disputed that.

Fine then. Ethereals and a cat.

All of them stood in a circle around the similarly shaped holographic table. “It is time to reevaluate our approach,” he said slowly. “Not just concerning the Humans, but the Collective itself. Even without the assistance of Aegis until recently, the Humans have managed to hold their own, and in doing so, have exposed critical weaknesses in the Collective that cannot be ignored any longer.”

“Or to put it more accurately,” Quisilia interjected, placing the action figure of an XCOM soldier on the holotable. “This represents the Humans,” he put the action figure of a Sectoid in front of the soldier. “This represents the Collective. And this represents what they are currently doing to us.” He then made the soldier punch the Sectoid, and it fell over.

The Battlemaster was no longer surprised to see Quisilia playing with action figures. While a juvenile way of illustrating the problem, it was not completely inaccurate. “That is one way of showing it.”

“On that, we agree,” Fectorian said, crossing his upper arms as he turned the conversation more serious. “It is quite concerning that they are managing to not only hold against our forces, but also win.”

“Our technological and military stagnation is only one aspect,” the Battlemaster pointed out, looking around to each of them. “The other is that the Collective itself is not united, and it is quite obvious that it has never truly been. What exists now is merely a convenient alliance of species. It is not under a unified power.”

“Debatable,” Revelean said. “That is what our role is, and that of the Imperator. We allow the species…autonomy…and in return they follow our commands.”

“Yes, because you and Fectorian have certainly been fine examples of leaders of the Collective,” Quisilia said dryly. “I can certainly see why they would continue following us. I can’t think of a single reason for why the Federation is threatening to withdraw, or the Hive Commanders and Aui’Vitakar are suitably angry.”

“You are one to talk,” Revelean hissed. “Your point is made. And the Battlemaster has admittedly done this better than any of us.”

“Yes and no,” Quisilia said, eyeing Revelean. “While I certainly keep my work…out of the public, I at least assist in the general affairs of the Collective. I don’t spend my time exclusively in my Blacksite pursuing fruitless projects; blind to the outside galaxy.”

“I am a scientist, not a diplomat,” Revelean scoffed. “Of course I do not do this.”

“Enough.” The Battlemaster raised a fist. “We, as a species, have failed to do what was expected of us. We are supposed to be the leaders of the Collective, and we have failed as such. That will change.”

“Is the Imperator aware of this?” Fectorian asked. “Knowing you, I suspect you will be making some…reforms. It might be wise to inform him of this.”

“The Imperator has not led the Collective,” the Battlemaster replied flatly. “While I cannot claim the same, I have been involved more than he has. He will be informed, but this will proceed with or without his approval.”
“Hm,” Quisilia stroked his cat, which purred loudly. “Battlemaster, while the Imperator certainly could have done better, I would advise not taking extensive liberties. Despite how it has seemed, he has been watching the Collective, though he has been…preoccupied.”

Since Quisilia did interact with the Imperator more often, the Battlemaster suspected he was telling the truth. “If that is the case, he should make that clear. And refrain from keeping secrets. That is part of the reason this situation has deteriorated. There are too many who are pursuing their own goals and failing to properly inform those they work with. We are all guilty of this.”

“Battlemaster,” Sana interrupted, raising her hand; her melodic voice cutting through the others. “You have stated the need for reform. I am pleased you have realized it. But what are you specifically planning? It is why you have asked us here, yes?”

“Correct,” he nodded. “Each of you will have a part in this. The rest are occupied or otherwise incompatible with what is needed. Macula and Nebulan are on Earth, and those on the Temple Ship are too occupied with what the Imperator is doing.”

“Such a shame,” Quisilia mocked. “Inviting the Creator and Isomnum would have certainly made this more interesting.”

Sana shot him a disapproving look. “The ones you mentioned should be brought under tighter control. If not confined entirely. I have yet to hear a suitable reason for why Isomnum is allowed to roam freely. The Imperator may have forgotten what he has done, but I certainly have not.”

“The illustrious Dread Lord has his flaws,” Quisilia admitted, tapping them off on his lower hands. “Child experimentation, torture, and a questionable fascination with fear; but the thing is that even the Synthesized became terrified of him. He has a role to play, despite being such an…unsavory individual.”

“As for the Creator, she will be dealt with in due time,” the Battlemaster rumbled. “Her pets have caused trouble. I do not know what she is working on, but that will change shortly. I agree that she has been allowed far too much freedom.”

“Ah, about that,” Quisilia raised a hand. “That is directly being overseen by the Imperator. That, Battlemaster, is outside your jurisdiction.”

“Then tell him to get the Creator under control,” was the response. “If he does not, I will.”

Quisilia just sighed. “He will not like that.”

“Then he should be doing a better job.”

The cat meowed.

“There are three aspects which need to be addressed,” the Battlemaster said after a few moments, looking around at each of them. “Our military and technology, Ethereal leadership within the Collective, and this Sovereign One which appears to be hiding on Earth.”

“That is a problem,” Fectorian noted, looking up thoughtfully. “It raises certain questions. But it doesn’t appear to have directly allied with the Humans yet, although since Quisilia threw the puppet into space, I doubt it will be friendly. A dangerous enemy to have.”

“Indeed,” the Battlemaster said. “Which I will use to segue into the first aspect. Our military is not properly prepared or equipped to fight on Earth. Our primarily infantry military does not hold against their kinds of warfare, and there are severe issues in regards to soldier training and
stability.”

“I can attest to this,” Sana said with a sigh. “Too many of the Vitakara cannot handle the stresses of war. Many cannot psychologically handle it, through no fault of their own. They are just not innately capable of violence.”

“With the exception of Oyariah and Borelians,” Revelean corrected.

“That is true.”

“The Vitakara are an issue,” the Battlemaster agreed. “The entry requirements are too lax. And their paranoia regarding genetic modification is a hindrance and outdated notion.”

“It almost killed their species,” Sana reminded them. “I hardly think it to be unreasonable.”

“Which we cured, if you recall,” Revelean reminded her. “Modern modification is perfectly safe and effective.”

“The point is that we have used Vitakara too broadly,” the Battlemaster continued. “Not all are suitable for combat, and the ones that are cannot hope to effectively fight against many of the standard ADVENT soldiers, much less ADVENT Special Forces or XCOM. We need to provide similar advantages. We have the capability; and now we need to utilize it.”

“Forcing genetic modification will not endear them to us,” Sana cautioned. “Do you understand what you are asking them?”

“If they are part of the military, then they are subject to our regulations,” the Battlemaster answered. “And that is why you and Revelean are going to help convince them.”

“Excuse me?” Revelean asked.

“Yes,” the Battlemaster repeated. “You, Revelean, are going to be a lead geneticist on the Collective Enhancement Initiative. You have stayed in your Blacksite for too long; it is time for you to show the galaxy what you can do. You will decide how our infantry forces will be enhanced and improved, and you will do this in conjunction with the Hive Commanders, and those from the Federation and Vitakara who wish to participate.”

“You want me to work with aliens,” Revelean said, not so much in anger as in surprise. “You want to give them direct access to the most advanced techniques in this galaxy?”

“Yes.” Was the answer. “Your immediate dismissal of aliens is one of the reasons we are in this situation. You will work with them, and I suspect they will surprise you. If you do not think you can do this, I will find someone who can.”

“I can certainly do it,” Revelean said quickly. “Though I am skeptical, nor particularly appreciate this being forced upon me.”

The Battlemaster wasn’t particularly offended. “We all do what we must for the Collective, like it or not.”

He turned to Fectorian. “You will have a similar role, Fectorian. I am sure you can agree that our vehicles in the Collective are…lacking. You will come up with better ones, and you will do it in conjunction with the Federation and those from the Hive Commanders and Vitakara who wish to participate.”
“Excellent,” Fectorian said eagerly. “It has certainly taken long enough. I have many designs that will serve well against the Humans. And if the aliens can provide assistance, then they will be welcome. I assume the previous projects should be continued?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He nodded. “I look forward to it.”

“And I will be spending my time reorganizing the Collective military itself,” the Battlemaster continued. “Quisilia, you will work with the Zar’Chon to refine and improve the Zararch. Be sure to listen to him.”

“Certainly,” Quisilia nodded. “I will say he will greatly appreciate these reforms.”

“And now we should focus on smoothing over the issues caused by Aegis,” the Battlemaster continued. “Every species is on some level demanding answers. We will have to provide those as best we can. Revelean, you will accompany me to speak with the Hive Commanders. Fectorian will go with the Zar’Chon to speak to the Federation, and I have already mentioned our visit to Vitakar. Combined with initiatives which will be led by Revelean and Fectorian, it should help to begin fostering some unity within the Collective, instead of the species only looking out for themselves.”

“The Federation is demanding the Imperator himself explain the situation,” Quisilia reminded him.

“I’m working on the assumption that the Imperator will not follow that request,” the Battlemaster said. “However, that would be ideal and I will inquire about this. I would ask you do the same.”

“If we wish to maintain the cooperation of the species, we will need to continue this,” Sana said. “We cannot simply show up when we are facing criticism. That is too reactive, and will not build trust.”

“Which is why you will be in charge of maintaining our diplomatic ties between the various species,” the Battlemaster said. “I suspect your feelings on the Humans are unchanged, but I do not need you for that. I need you to keep the peace and demonstrate Ethereal leadership and cooperation.”

“While I am more than happy to do this,” Sana said slowly. “You have raised the question of why we must continue this war. Would it not make more sense to attempt to broker a peace between us and ADVENT? They have Caelior, and Aegis is allied with them. More fighting could lead to more of us dying or being captured.”

“It is too late for that,” the Battlemaster shook his head. “The Humans will not willingly be confined to their own world. They will treat peace as a means to keep advancing. They will wage war again one day; we cannot rely on them for that. The fault for this war is ours, but there is little that can be done about it now except finishing it.”

“Aside from that, allowing a Sovereign One free reign will backfire,” Quisilia added. “We would be fools to let that kind of being loose on a highly vengeful species. Aegis is bad enough, but a living Sovereign One is far worse. We cannot leave now.”

“This Sovereign One will be a problem,” Revelean agreed. “The question is how involved it plans to be. While it is certainly not our friend, if it was an ally to the Humans, it would have been clear.”

“There are two things that need to be done,” the Battlemaster said. “The first is to determine if there is a Sovereign One physically on Earth. If there is, it will almost certainly be in the deep oceans of Earth. We will need to transition part of our military to underwater combat.”
“The Sar’Manda?” Sana asked.

“The Andromedon Aquatic Forces are better,” the Battlemaster said. “The Sar’Manda would be more trouble than they’re worth to corral them into following Collective orders. Transitioning part of the Vitakara and Andromedons will serve just as well. Fectorian, you will also provide assistance on this.”

“Of course.”

“We should also consult with the Sovereign Ones about how best to handle this one,” he continued. “I would be surprised if this was the first time it had happened. The Voice should be informed of the situation. If anyone will know how to kill or subdue one, it will be her.”

“Agreed,” Fectorian said. “And I believe this is the perfect opportunity to begin the implementation of Sovereign Tech far more extensively. I can understand not using it on the Humans, but a Sovereign One, even a rogue one, is not one to take chances with.”

“I was going to say that,” the Battlemaster nodded. “It is time we take advantage of this gift and master it. Knowledge is useless without application. The Imperator’s mandate regarding the technology is suppressed until further notice. Utilize it as you see fit.”

Quisilia set his cat down, his voice not having any humor in it for once. “While I do think the Imperator will not take issue with the reforms you are proposing, that is something he will not approve of. Sovereign technology is something we do not fully understand-“

“Which is why we need to study it. The knowledge will not suddenly appear to us.”

“Sovereign technology should not be utilized unless absolutely necessary.” Quisilia insisted. “Neither I, nor the Imperator consider it the pinnacle of all things. We cannot become reliant on it; there is something we do not understand about it. Think about where we stand; what we found here. All the Sovereign weapons in the galaxy didn’t ultimately help them, now, did it?”

“They used the tainted element.”

Quisilia sighed. “Just consider this a warning. I do not fully trust the Sovereign Ones; certainly not those who offer technology to warp the galaxy freely.”

“Warning acknowledged,” the Battlemaster humored before dismissing it from his mind. The paranoia of the Imperator was not something he considered a major factor into his decision. The fact was that they were going to be facing this level of technology eventually, and they needed to match it. It certainly would not replace what already existed, but it would augment it.

“I will be sending out more specific details shortly,” the Battlemaster said, looking around at all of them. “We all have our directives and plans. It is time to put them into action. Dismissed.”

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Operation Command, Zararch Wing – Mars Collective Base

12/2/2016 – 1:12 P.M.

It was only a matter of time until the Battlemaster was forced to actually do something. Granted, Ravarian would have preferred he did it some time ago, but better late than never. The Battlemaster was one of the few Ethereals he’d seen who would actually change his tactics if pressed, and it seemed that point had been reached.
The transition from the Observation Station to the alien base below had been a welcome change. He actually quite liked the layout, even if he had never stepped foot into a similar base before. He did know it was from the same species as other ruins he’d seen, but this was by far the most intact.

The downside to the Battlemaster reworking nearly everything was that he was now tasked, along with Quisilia, with reorganizing the Zararch, shoring up weaknesses, and coming up with an actual plan for dealing with the Humans. Of course, ‘downside’ was relative. It was more work, but he felt like he was able to properly do his job for the first time in a while.

“Our intelligence gathering capabilities need to be expanded,” he told Quisilia. “We’ve seen the consequences of not understanding this. The personnel are not the problem per-se, but their equipment and protocols.”

Quisilia paced around the room, with his cat trailing not too far behind. Although the Zar’Chon’s own pet was intermittently meowing at him for attention, so he’d decided to just hold the blasted cat so it would stop pestering him. “We can certainly make better cloaking and sensor equipment, but the problem is infiltrating the cities themselves. While I certainly can do this, I am not the average Zararch agent.”

“No, I’ve decided that is not an effective strategy,” Ravarian interrupted, raising a hand as he looked down at the holomap. “We need eyes in the city. Human eyes and ears; ones who can pass the blood tests. Ethereal bioscience can’t fully overhaul circulatory systems, and Nartha was a special case we can’t replicate on a large scale.”

“Oh, you have a proposal?” Quisilia asked.

Ravarian took a breath. That he did, but it was fairly radical. “Yes. If we are going through the trouble of reorganizing the Zararch, it might as well expand to include the rest of the Collective races; Sectoids and Andromedons included. The Special Operators in particular should be working for us, not the Federation.”

Radical is an understatement, the thought immediately appeared, even as Quisilia stopped.

Interesting. I presume you would use standard agents to capture Humans, then use Sectoids to tailor them to our needed spies?

“One usage, yes,” Ravarian nodded. “While it is certainly a risk with ADVENT Priests, it will force them to always be distrusting of the population. It could serve for raising tensions.” His palm flashed as holographic text began scrolling as he refreshed himself with additional details. “It does not even need to be so complex. Psionically-induced terrorism or sabotage will have the needed effect of damaging ADVENT, and destroying trust in psionics. ADVENT is attempting to make psions socially acceptable – we should try and minimize that.”

“That-“ Quisilia said, raising a finger. “Is not how you accomplish this goal. Having a bunch of ordinary Humans going around committing crimes does little, unless it is directly attributed to psionic influence. While I can’t say I’d be opposed to having random Humans doing unpredictable things, like shooting up an armory or changing the stored names of all leaders to ‘Quisilia’, all you will do is make ADVENT crack down harder.”

He took the critique in stride. “And what else do you propose.”

“ADVENT, in their attempt to minimize giving psionics to people who shouldn’t have them, has created a weak point we can exploit,” he answered thoughtfully. “Poison the well, so to speak. Manipulate their data to allow candidates that fail their tests go through, and those who pass to fail. A calculated risk, but it is more likely to have the effect you want.”
Ravarian nodded to himself. That was a good plan, although it relied on some degree of penetration, which they really did not have right now. “I’ll begin an operational plan to implement that. We should also utilize the Zararch to…eliminate the issues being caused in our captured cities.”

“I assume you refer to Seattle,” Quisilia mused. “Problematic, yes. Interesting that they’re sabotaging their own city to whittle our forces down.”

“It’s frustrating,” Ravarian sighed. “They’re not numerous enough to be a standard army, smart enough not to get caught, and only attack when they have the advantage. It doesn’t help that they’re creating choke points and cutting off entire units from each other. And sending in more forces has not helped. This is a guerilla force; we need intelligence operatives to destroy it.”

“On that you have my agreement,” Quisilia said. “Do what you must to solve this.”

“And we need to discuss Nartha,” Ravarian also said after a few moments. “I believe we’ve gotten what we need from him. Letting him run around is an unnecessary risk.”

“I disagree with that assessment,” Quisilia answered as his cat jumped into his arms. “Nartha is providing an excellent service. As one of the few known dissidents he is most certainly going to find additional sympathizers. Thanks to him we have the network of Muton smugglers mapped out, certain cells of the Nulorian known, and with the current situations in the Collective, I suspect there are going to be those more open to dissent. Send him to the Andromedons. Once he has done what he can, we can revisit this discussion.”

He knew the Ethereal’s mind was made up then. Well, as far as risks went, Nartha was one they could at least control to a degree. “Very well. And speaking of the Andromedons, I am not sure how well they will respond to the head of the Zararch, and an Ethereal they have likely never heard of.”

“Andromedons are dispassionate engineers,” Quisilia answered. “They respond well to logic, calculation, and reasonable explanations. Fectorian is ideally suited since he was the designer of the Spectres, which the Andromedons have taken issue with. You will be there to present the facts and solutions the Collective will be implementing. I trust you will be able to do this well.”

The Zar’Chon pursed his lips. “They will not be happy the Imperator is not there.”

“He may be,” Quisilia said. “But the Imperator is focused on other matters. The Federation can make all the threats they wish, but they are empty.”

Ravarian wasn’t convinced. “I am not certain about that. The Imperator has not been in the Collective. He does not know them as well as he thinks. Andromedons in the past would have gone to war for less.”

“I’ll mention that,” Quisilia sounded amused. “Do not take his lack of intervention for ignorance.”

“Then he should formally hand the Collective over to someone who will actually oversee it,” Ravarian kept his voice neutral, but he disliked the continuous insinuation that the Imperator somehow knew everything, but chose instead to be lazy. “It is fine if he has more important matters, but he should not claim to be something he is not.”

Quisilia was silent for a few moments. Ravarian doubted anything would happen, but it was the first time he had verbally questioned the Imperator’s authority. But he wasn’t saying anything Quisilia hadn’t already glimpsed from his mind. “Good answer!” Quisilia finally said with a brief
laugh. “Perhaps you can tell him that.”

Ravarian immediately stiffened. “The Imperator is coming here?”

“Here? No,” Quisilia shook his head. “But he will be speaking to you at some point. He has… come to some similar conclusions. There is a reason he is not standing in the way of the Battlemaster even if he could. While I can’t share the exact reasons he has been…absent…there are changes coming.”

He was both relieved to hear that, and mildly concerned about the Imperator taking a direct interest in him. He preferred his involvement with Ethereals to be kept to as few as possible. Beings of that power had to be treated carefully and clearly were above those like him. Having their most powerful focused on him was not exactly an honor or blessing.

But that he would not vocalize. “In that case, I look forward to their implementation.”

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Holding Cell 3, Holding Cells – Mars Collective Base

12/2/2016 – 1:16 P.M.

There were two kinds of holding cells the Disprium seemed to repeatedly employ.

The first were standard cells which seemed to lack even basic necessities, and were seemingly just large metal boxes. Considering that they were literally stored in racks, and each one had an oxygen supply, they were likely treated as a kind of resource or at best a form of isolated confinement. The Zar’Chon was looking into using them as a form of psychological interrogation.

The second kind of cells were somehow worse. From what Cogitian had been able to determine, there were two stages: The first involved the victim being taken to a room with a glass-like box in it. Once inside, they would be secured by the ankles, knees, waist, and upper chest. The restraints would be connected to another computer and be turned on, activating a stasis field around the victim.

Then IV tubes were threaded through the restraints and into the prisoner, and it was completed by fitting them with some kind of helmet which directly interfaced with the brain. It was theoretically supposed to keep them awake and active without requiring sleep. Cogitian hadn’t been able to confirm this, but was working on replicating it out of academic curiosity.

The second stage simply involved sticking the body in a coffin-like case, which also had an oxygen supply, and storing them in the vaults below the base. It was estimated that at the prime of this base, it could hold nearly five hundred prisoners stored like this.

Fortunately for the Hunter, the Collective had yet to recreate this form of imprisonment, and he had instead been thrown in one of the regular cells. The Battlemaster punched in the appropriate code and the cell door slid open, revealing the Hunter inside.

He appeared to be mostly recovered. He was bound at the wrists, ankles, and his head was secured to the wall via the neck. The Battlemaster clenched a fist and the restraints snapped. The Hunter smiled and slowly rose. “Battlemaster. Glad you decided to visit.”

“I have still not decided if I am going to kill you or not,” was the even reply. “Were you anyone else, the answer would be clear. But your connection to the Creator hinders this.”
“Ah, right,” the alien nodded sagely. “Assuming the Imperator doesn’t want the Creator distracted from her little projects. Trying to kill me would get her attention; much as we both despise each other.”

“The Imperator can make his recommendation,” the Battlemaster said, unclasping his sword and letting it hang by his side. “But I will make the final judgement.”

The Hunter did not seem overly concerned, simply throwing a sidelong glance at the silver weapon. “Oh no, death threats. Wow. Very convincing,” he heaved dramatically. “Battlemaster, what exactly are you going to do? Stab me? Cut off my limbs? You can’t kill me, and at this point I’m used to pain.” He gave a ghoulish smirk. “And you can’t do worse than what the bitch did when she was trying to figure out my limits.”

The cocky alien was suddenly lifted slightly into the air and pulled forward to be impaled on the pointed blade of the Battlemaster. Anchoring him in place with telekinesis, the Battlemaster slowly drove the blade deep into his chest until it reached the hilt. “Perhaps I can’t kill you this way,” he said quietly. “But you don’t like it. You still feel everything.”

“And you wonder how I could possibly start shooting the mindless soldiers you order around,” he hissed, as the blood spread and dripped to the ground. “This isn’t exactly what inspires loyalty.”

“Everything you experience is a consequence of your actions,” the Battlemaster answered, turning the blade causing the Hunter to hiss. “You are a traitor, and I would prefer you were dealt with as one.”

“But you can’t do that, can you,” the Hunter taunted, breathing heavily. “You can’t risk making the bitch angry.”

If the Battlemaster was in the mood, he would have smiled. Instead he placed a free hand on the Hunter’s head, and began to apply pressure, while also telekinetically cracking his ribs to make it easier to remove the impaled sword. “Tell me, Hunter, if I were to crush your head, would you still come back?”

“Oh, I certainly will,” he rasped. “It’s not that easy. And it would be nicer than what you’re doing right now.”

It was almost a taunt. Perhaps a bluff. He was quite curious how badly the Hunter wanted him to avoid this outcome. “Curious. You would be exactly as you are, yes? Or would you…change?” He tightened his grip on the head. “I suspect that such a traumatic brain injury would change even you. That is an acceptable compromise, I believe.”


That was all he needed. Keeping the Hunter anchored in place he sliced his sword outward and released him, letting the Hunter fall into the pool of his own blood. “No,” the Battlemaster said. “No apology would be sincere from you. But if you ever participate in any action which undermines Collective operations, then I will ensure that your brain is smashed beyond recognition. If such actions fail, I will condemn you to the Dead World. You have no warnings or chances. Leave now. You are not permitted to return without my express permission.”

“Believe me,” the Hunter coughed, still on the ground. “I never want to see you again.”

“And when you return to the Creator, give her a message,” the Battlemaster said, turning away. “If
a similar incident happens again, I will hold her personally responsible.”

All he received in return was a gurgled laugh. “I’ll make sure she gets the message.”

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Tactical Briefing Room, Solar System Command Center – Mars Collective Base

12/2/2016 – 3:19 P.M.

Having a firm presence on Mars was the first important step to take. The Battlemaster was expecting ADVENT would pursue space travel more aggressively at some point, and it was obviously not going to take much to drive the Collective out of the system if the only major installation they possessed was the Observation Station.

No, they needed to expand. There wasn’t a need to focus on Mercury or Venus, he could see very little of worth there, but definitely Mars, and establishing defenses before the Asteroid Belt and the edge of the system would be adequate. The conversion of Earth’s moon to an industrial hangar was proceeding well, and perhapsestablishing a base on Pluto would also be advisable. The defenses didn’t need to be too extensive, but not everything could rest on the observation station.

A hologram of the system itself was before him. The problem with maintaining control over a solar system was that it was so big. It was extremely difficult to fully secure, and in the event that Humans achieved an interstellar navy, he was not convinced that the defenses were completely sound.

Perhaps he should authorize the construction of larger Gateways. Even if Humans were unlikely to field Dreadnoughts, it would pulverize any fleet they did develop.

Aegis once more threw a massive wrench into this. Any fleet Humanity wielded would be nearly invincible under his protection. In which case, the obvious counter was Deusian, though he hoped that the need for the Reaper would be unnecessary.

However, the Humans had a way of surprising him.

“Your plans are ambitious, but similar to what I had expected.”

The Battlemaster looked up in surprise as the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective stood in front of him, towering even over him.

“Imperator,” he greeted, inclining his head. In previous years he would have been more elaborate in his greeting, going so far as to fall to a knee in respect, as was traditional due for an Imperator or the Grandmaster. But times had changed, and the Imperator had made it clear he had little interest in that.

“Battlemaster,” was the answer, as the Imperator looked around, before focusing on the hologram of the Solar System. “You have been busy.”

“It is necessary,” he answered. “Considering both Aegis and the rapid advancements of the Humans, it is imperative that we take the needed steps to prepare for the worst.” He allowed a pause. “I presume you are here for a reason. You have not left the Temple Ship in…some time.”

“Yes,” the Imperator paced to the side, sounding thoughtful. “I have been focused on the Inner Galaxy, as well as those who inhabit it. However, it appears that I should begin returning to the Collective. It has not performed as hoped.”
“The reasons for such have been identified and are being fixed,” the Battlemaster replied tactfully. “I will restore stability to the Collective-”

“There is little need to mince words,” the Imperator lifted one of his ornately detailed gauntlets. “You are displeased with my leadership. While I cannot read your mind or emotions, I understand how you think, and Quisilia is diligent in reporting your words. In this case, it is perhaps deserved.”

That was refreshing to hear. The Imperator was no fool, which was why the Battlemaster had become more frustrated with him in recent months. The Imperator was smarter than he was, yet seemed to often make questionable or simply wrong decisions. “I am pleased to hear that. But both of us are in agreement that words are nothing without action.”

“Indeed.” The Imperator turned to him. “The presence of a Sovereign One Earth is now your priority. Maintain the war with the Humans, but that is the true danger on Earth.”

“The Sovereign One should be dealt with after the Humans are taken care of,” the Battlemaster disputed. “By directly attacking him we will likely force him to ally more openly with the Humans. That is not an ideal outcome.”

The Imperator was silent for a few moments. “Very well. I will have another coordinate the strategy for the Sovereign One. I also believe it is time you are aware of some of what I have done and am planning.”

“It would be appreciated.”

“I will be removing Patricia Trask from the equation in the immediate future,” the Imperator said. “She will be returned to the Temple Ship, and I will speak to her. I am confident I can convince her to be cooperative.”

The Battlemaster stared at the Imperator in disbelief. “Imperator, what exactly are you thinking?”

“I am thinking in the long term,” he answered. “It makes little sense to discard Trask. Not when I know she can be turned to us.”

“And what happens if she can’t?” He demanded. “And you know this will invite retaliation from XCOM.”

“Then she will be released and the next time she appears, she will die,” the Imperator answered. “But I am confident that she will be more useful to us alive than dead. Having one such as her openly allied with us will break the morale of the Humans and hasten their defeat.”

“No,” the Battlemaster shook his head. “You would not take such a risk for such a questionable reason. And you will certainly not let her go if she refuses to… work with us.”

“Yes, I will,” the Imperator stated, looking directly at him. “When I give my word, Battlemaster, I mean it. You would be, of course, free to kill her later. But it will not be until she safely returns to XCOM.” A pause. “Revelean has made significant progress on the Avatar Project. Patricia Trask will be important to see it completed. That time is approaching.”

Having made himself familiar with the details of the Avatar Project some time ago, he knew exactly what the Imperator was suggesting. “You are not serious.”

“I am completely serious,” the Imperator answered flatly. “And I think you agree.”
“Her?”

“Yes.”

The Battlemaster was not sure what to say at that moment. Even for the Imperator his implication was nigh-unfathomable. But then again…the Imperator was rather open-minded as far as Ethereals went. As much as it would take some getting used to, he had to concede that that the Avatar Project would only be successful with Humans.

Which meant that the Imperator had also likely found others. “She is not the only one, is she?”

“I see you are aware of the implication,” the Imperator nodded approvingly. “No, she was not. Sicarius has also found one, as have the Overmind and Deusian.”

That was surprising. “How did Deusian manage to do that?”

“With help.”

The Imperator was being extremely helpful here. He would have to speak to her. From what he understood of the Avatar Project, it was not something that was lightly undertaken. “I have also taken the liberty of assisting for your own.”

“No.” The Battlemaster flatly disputed. “I have no interest in participating in the Avatar Project, nor would it work for me.”

“Revealan disagrees,” the Imperator countered. “But even if you discount that aspect, I believe it would be a benefit towards some larger Human integration. The future for our species and the Humans will be close, and it does not hurt to begin that relationship early.”

His immediate reaction was to dismiss the Imperator’s words. But at the same time, he had a point, and he would not bring this up without some kind of desired outcome. “Fine,” he relented. “Who have you found? What is his name?”

“Not ‘his’ name. Hers.”

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Training Arena – Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

12/3/2016 – 12:00 P.M.

He was here.

The presence of the Imperator was the equivalent of a sun to a psion. She could only imagine what it was like for a telepath.

Interesting. He hadn’t actually shown up to see her fight for some time. And honestly, she didn’t really use these training sessions for anything more than a means of refinement and a way to relax. The days where she actually felt challenged by them were long-since passed, especially now that she had some help.

“The arena forces you will face today will likely be a mixture of Mutons, Berserkers, and a high probability of one to two compromised Zararch agents.”

Yang Shuren, current resident of the Temple Ship, crossed her arms as she briefly considered what her Praetorian friend said. “And when you say ‘high probability’ that means…?”
“Between sixty and ninety percent probability,"

“And you base this on?”

“Zararch logs indicate four agents have recently been compromised by the Nulorian and other factors. Two have been fully interrogated and are awaiting execution. The remaining two are in various stages of interrogation.”

At times she forgot she was talking to what was widely considered the most idiotic species in the Collective. Then again, 042 was not an ordinary Muton. It was like…comparing modern Humans to Neanderthals. Or apes. The difference was so vast they might as well be completely different species. “Thanks 042. Expected numbers?”

“You have requested the highest available setting. Expect between fifteen to twenty.”

She nodded to herself. Reasonable numbers, and the arena was only so large. “If there are Zararch, what races?”

“Those being held are three Vitakarians and one Dath’Haram. They are unlikely to have been genetically enhanced.”

She snorted. Even if they were, she could easily kill them. The trouble with any kind of non-Muton was that they typically fought smarter and with more intensity. Still, she disliked killing them. They reminded her too much of Humans.

“Are you prepared to begin?”

“One more thing,” she said, not really expecting a straight answer as she walked into the center of the area. “Why is the Imperator here?”

There was a noticeable pause. “The Imperator has not made himself known to me. Previous encounters suggest he will allow you to complete your challenge before speaking. There is a moderate probability he will provide assistance to opposing forces.”

Damn it. She did not really want to play the Imperator’s mind games at the moment. Or maybe it was simpler and he just wanted to watch her kill something. Initially she’d assumed he’d wanted her to be some kind of psionic weapon, but she wasn’t really convinced of that any longer. Not that she would have had much of a problem with it, but she’d figured out that he wasn’t the type to invest in something so…mundane.

He wanted a tactician. Someone to perhaps compliment the Battlemaster.

That realization had certainly illuminated why she’d managed to get his attention over the others.

She was looking forward to seeing President Qin’s face as she told him who she was, right before killing him.

Such was the way of life.

“I must call into question your lack of proper protection,” 042 interjected. “When facing this many opponents, one shot could severely hurt you.”

Yang smiled as she rubbed her bare forearms. “042, how much does this lower my chances of surviving?”
“Four percent.”

“Exactly. Start it.”

The arena was fairly large, with four solid gate openings at opposite ends of each other. It was comparable to one of the American Football fields, although those were rectangular, not circular. The metal was just a drab grey, but the overhead ceiling caught the attention of most who saw it for the first time. From what she understood, it depicted a space battle for some world, battling an enemy the Imperator called the Synthesized.

It was rather beautiful, in a stained-glass sort of way. Very distracting initially, but she was used to it by now.

“(Come on,)” she said quietly to herself as she drew upon the power. “(Let’s give a show.)”

The gates slowly rose and Yang raised her hands in preparation. Knowing the standard tactics of Berserkers…if such a word could be applied to them, meant that…ah, here it was. One of the red-armored beasts charged forward, metallic blades gleaming in the light. Three of them. Unusual, and all coming from different gates.

Immediately multiple counters came to her mind, but she first settled on the easiest ones. She twisted both her wrists and was rewarded with the sound of the legs snapping of the two Berserkers to the side, and with a motion she caught the oncoming Berserker in a telekinetic grab, then lifted it into the air.

They just never learned.

The standard Mutons were coming out now, plasma rifles raised, and she thrust her left hand out and yanked, ripping the rifles from the hands of four of the aliens, while squeezing her right hand into a fist, compressing the hovering Berserker. That complete, she tossed the mangled heap of metal and flesh towards a trio of Mutons.

“There are three enemies behind you taking aim.”

Without looking, Yang sent a telekinetic blast behind her and dashed towards the unarmed Mutons, sending more flying back with telekinesis. Green plasma flashed behind her, and in retaliation she picked up one of the hapless Mutons and threw them with terminal force towards their offending brethren.

She summoned one of the rifles to her hands, executed two of the Mutons on the ground before discarding it, and snapped the neck of one of the still-surviving berserkers. How many were still alive? Six? No Vitakara either yet, though they might have been biding their time.

Well, she might as well have some fun since they were proving to be even easier than expected. Walking slowly towards the group of Mutons she had previously blasted back, she encased them in her telekinetic grip, though decided to focus the pressure on their heads. She clearly misjudged her strength as instead of a slow compression, they simply turned to yellow explosions.

Disappointed, she tossed their corpses towards the other few Mutons still alive. She was about to turn away when she heard something on the edge of her perception, and 042 confirmed it immediately. “Hostile behind you.”

She jumped forward, twisting as she sent out a telekinetic blast behind her, and it just barely missed a Dath’Haram who also leapt out of the way. In his hand was a thin red-coated blade. A trained Bladedancer then, and if he was from the Zararch, a *real* one. She smiled. Time to see what
he could do.

“Do you really think you can win?” She asked smugly, gesturing to the pile of corpses around her as the Dath’Haram began circling her, eyeing her with a predatory gaze. To punctuate the point she snapped the neck of the last living Berserker, and threw the corpse towards the Vitakara. He slid under it and dashed towards her with surprising speed.

She could see where he was aiming, and as he leapt towards her, she lifted a hand and he froze; suspended as she looked to where the poisoned blade would have landed. “Almost there,” she chided quietly, as the look in his eyes turned to terror as she stepped so close that the blade almost touched the chest it had been aimed for. “The heart. Vital. Important. But see, that only works when your opponent can’t throw you around with her mind.”

Yang tapped her head with a smile. “You should have aimed for the head.”

With that she telekinetically ripped the blade from his hands and stabbed the alien through the eye, then released him as he dropped to the floor with a thud. Placing a boot on the corpse, she withdrew the blade and flourished it briefly as she set out to kill what few were still alive. She’d always liked swords, and while the Dath’Haram were usually a bunch of idiot pacifists, they sure made exceptional weapons.

“All enemies are confirmed dead,” 042 confirmed as she executed the last wounded Muton. “Elapsed time was four minutes and fifty-two seconds. It is your sixth-fastest run on these parameters, out of a total of twelve.”

“Thank you,” she said sarcastically. While 042 was helpful, he and all of his kind always felt the need to constantly state statistics and records as if she really cared about that. What she really cared about was refining her own abilities, and that just wasn’t shown in the data 042 liked to reference so much.

But he either hadn’t picked up on her sarcasm, or, more likely, he was aware she found it grating and did it anyway. Cheeky grunt.

“You have improved much,” the Imperator’s voice immediately attracted her attention, as it always did. She turned to see him standing a few feet from her. Teleported most likely. The sensation was almost overwhelming, even if she’d gotten better at controlling herself. But it was near-impossible to overcome the warm and adoring feeling that washed over her, leaving her a sightless puppet.

While it had felt great at the time, she hated how it felt later.

With effort, she shook her head to focus. “Thanks. Almost thought you’d forgotten me here. We haven’t talked in some time.”

“I’ve been…occupied,” the Imperator answered, beginning to pace. “This is no longer challenging to you.” It was not a question.

“Not especially.”

“Good. You were not supposed to stay here forever. I see you have made a…friend in Praetorian 042.”

She shrugged. “He has been helpful, surprising as that is.”

“And you have taken a growing interest in war games, if Cogitian is to be believed.”
“Are you getting to a point?”

“Your patience needs improvement,” he said, raising a finger. “But yes, I am. The Battlemaster will be arriving at a point in the near future. Given your unique background and skills, I believe you would be an ideal…partner…to him. However, I will say he is not entirely convinced of the merit of such. You will need to show him.”

Partner?

She raised an eyebrow. “That is…more than I was expecting. I figured you’d want me to fight on Earth, not, ah, work with the Battlemaster of all Ethereals. Given what Cogitian has said about him, he doesn’t really do the apprentice-slash-partner thing.”

“You have not seen it, but he has taken on such in the past,” the Imperator said. “Disciples they were called. Both are long dead. I suspect the notion has not even entered his mind, but even he looks at his options from the perspective of one of the Empire. The times have changed, and we must look outside our species for worthy partners in our goals.”

Yang crossed her arms. “And you want me to essentially be a surrogate Ethereal. Taking a role your kind would have had.”

“A crude analogy, but not necessarily incorrect,” was the answer. “But I suppose the question is if you believe you can achieve this, or if you want it in the first place.”

“I can certainly do it,” she stated with confidence. “I was just…surprised this was your end goal.”

“I do not need a simple weapon, Miss Shuren,” the Imperator said with a dismissive wave. “You can be more than that. Your potential is one I won’t throw away.”

Yang could never really figure out how the Imperator really saw her. He always sounded like he cared, even when he often referred to her in terms of a resource. But for someone who thought in that scale…she supposed it could be worse. “Then I guess I’d better prepare. He’s going to challenge me to fight, isn’t he.”

The Imperator considered that. “Most likely, and you will lose. All you must do is fight intelligently, and that will be enough for him.”

Which translated to “You’re going to lose, but at least try not to die in a few seconds.”

Fair enough.

“Alright,” she looked at the discarded Dath’Haram blade and recalled it to her hand. “I have a lot of studying to do.”

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Grand Chambers, Hive 001 – Helion-7

12/6/2016 – 1:11 P.M.

And he was back here once again. The Hive Commanders, although not quite as…vocal about the recent developments as the Andromedons or Vitakara, had their own means of expressing their displeasure. Namely summoning the most influential and dangerous Hive Commanders at the Hive of 001.
It was for all intents and purposes, a trial, if not sentencing.

001 was certainly going to be hostile, but it was not necessarily a guarantee that the situation would go badly. The Sectoids had released few questions, but had insisted repeatedly on having Ethereals answer them. Curiously they had not requested the Imperator, though given the allegations about the tampering presumably ordered by him, it might be a subtle way of indicating he was not welcome.

It worked for him. The Battlemaster was not a diplomat, but neither were the Sectoids. The reason Revelean was at his side now was because out of them all, the geneticist was the one who could most relate to the species. If all went well, there would hopefully be a more firm scientific relationship established.

“The aliens are probing me,” Revelean commented with some amusement as they walked down the gleaming white halls to the main chambers, even as they attracted the looks of the various drones and armored Vanguards who were quietly following them. “Poor technique. They are fortunate I do not wish conflict today.”

“No fighting today,” the Battlemaster agreed quietly as they approached the entrance. “They pose little threat to us, regardless.”

They both stepped into the Grand Chambers of Hive Commander 001, which was a massive amphitheater-like room, with a domed white roof which was no surprise as this was at the top of the Hive. However, it did actually appear that the room was indeed filled to capacity with Hive Commanders and Vanguard bodyguards.

It wasn’t the entirety of the Hive Commanders, but far more than he had anticipated.

Hundreds of pairs of golden bulbous eyes glared down upon both of them, and what made it more unnerving was that Hive Commanders looked very similar. Unlike the lesser Sectoids there was some variance in them, slight differences in height, girth, and cybernetics, but in a mass of orange and black, that distinction was harder to make.

The center of the room contained six elevated stands, inhabited by other Hive Commanders who were likely the limited few who were speaking to them. Fortunately they had their designations displayed on holographic projections before themselves. Unsurprisingly 001 was at the forefront, or at least who they were facing.

To his left was 029, and he was unsurprised to see the diplomat Hive Commander make an appearance. To the right was Hive Commander 666, which was interesting considering he was one of the few non-Helion-7 Hive Commanders, and primarily focused on terraforming and ship production on Olganar-2.

Continuing from 666, there were Hive Commanders 007, the closest thing the Hive Commanders had to an information collector and intelligence keeper; 100, a Hive Commander focused on cybernetic augmentation of Sectoids; and 099, who primarily specialized in experiments on psionically-sensitive aliens.

Not to mention there were hundreds of other Hive Commanders watching them. The only time the Battlemaster could recall this many in one place was the initial meeting between the Ethereals and Hive Commanders.

Once they reached the center of the circle, all six of the Hive Commander questioners rose. Ethereals Revelean and Battlemaster, 029 began, the telepathic voice sounding more intense than
usual. Probably to reach the entirety of the room. You have been summoned to answer in regards to
the information produced by Ethereal Aegis, as well as your failure to properly inform the Greater
Hive Commanders about the reality of the situation on Earth.

We have expended significant resources on your war, 001 said, voice dangerously calm. Resources
which were used in the service of a lie. There must be consequences.

“They were not expended in a lie,” the Battlemaster stated. “The objective has always been the
capture of Earth.”

You knew of the Ethereal Aegis, 001 said, his voice close to the equivalent of a Sectoid growl. Your
mission was to draw him out and kill him. The goals are irrelevant. You failed to inform us of the
situation. Explain to us now why.

“A matter of not escalating the situation,” the Battlemaster explained carefully. “As you have
seen…Aegis is skilled and dangerous. He had not revealed himself and seemed to have resigned
himself to providing verbal assistance and support. He is no tactician, and has likely convinced the
Humans to take a less-escalatory approach.”

“It is important to understand, honored Hive Commanders,” Revelean continued, stepping forward.
“That Aegis, for all his power, is a mere novice in the art of war, and ultimately did not desire this
conflict. Had we revealed his existence, many would have simply wished to destroy Earth from
orbit in terror. The Federation in particular would have demanded extensive military action, and as
a consequence, Aegis would have been far more involved than he is now. By taking the
unfortunate step of withholding this information, we have ensured that we have a foothold on Earth
uncompromised by the less civilized aspects of the Collective who do not take into account the
consequences of such actions.”

The Battlemaster resisted the urge to look towards Revelean in surprise. He was a…surprisingly
diplomatic speaker. “This is correct, Hive Commanders. It was a tactical move which allowed us to
gauge Human defenses, tactics, and establish our own presence on Earth. The escalation that would
have no doubt followed had we revealed this might have denied us even these victories.”

This answer I find acceptable, 007 said, ‘speaking’ for the first time. However, such actions should
be reconsidered in the future. Information of this magnitude is rarely justifiable to keep from the
Greater Hive Commanders. As the first of the Ethereal Collective, we are entitled to such
information, even if you must hide it from the Federation or Aui’Vitakar.

“Both the Imperator and I agree that such information will not be hidden in the future,” the
Battlemaster said. “However, withholding information from some, but not others is not possible.”

“Consider, honored Hive Commanders, the ramifications of such a proposal,” Revelean stepped
forward. “As the leaders of the Ethereal Collective, showing favoritism to one side or another
would be counter to the goals of unity we have for all the species within it. While we can privately
agree that some may handle certain information better, what is the case if another finds out? It
could lead to a schism of the Collective as a whole, and lead to countless deaths. You must also
consider if we withhold information from your own kind? Would you truly understand?”

“We have been deliberately neutral with your quiet feud with the Federation,” the Battlemaster
said. “It is for this very reason. Both the Greater Hive Commanders and Andromedon Federation
are focusing on what is not important.”

No. 001 stated flatly and angrily. The Federation desires our eradication. They spy and threaten us.
They have become a noted threat to the Greater Hive Commanders. If you wish to broach this
subject, we will do it. The Ethereals must put the Andromedon Federation in check, and ensure they do not threaten our expansion, production, or experimentation again.”

“The Andromedon Federation will not attack the Greater Hive Commanders,” the Battlemaster promised. “On that you have my word. None of us desire such a conflict.”

Words. 001 said with a wave. Promises. Neither I, nor any here, have forgotten the accusations Aegis revealed to the world. That you supposedly dared to twist our minds to serve you. There is only one way to answer such actions. You will bring the Overmind here, and let us look into his memories to determine the truth of this. We will not be manipulated against our will, and if it is true, we demand you will allow us to execute him.

If you do not follow these demands, 029 said slowly. I am afraid that the Greater Hive Commanders will formally leave the Ethereal Collective. I am sure you can understand the necessity of such demands, and the ease of which they can be proven false.

This was what he was afraid of. He was not sure how well the Hive Commanders would take him saying he would ‘have to speak to the Imperator’. He was quite aware the Overmind would be mildly amused at such a proposal, and never follow through. It was something of a conundrum right now. Revelean stepped forward, surprisingly raising a hand, though his voice was somehow amused.

“Honored Hive Commanders, we can of course agree to these reasonable requests,” he said. “Though first please consider the claims which Aegis puts forward. He has stated – in no uncertain terms – that our Overmind managed to not affect the minds of Hive Commander 001, 029, and the others he initially spoke too, but every single Hive Commander in the Collective. And this went unnoticed by all.”

Revelean shook his head. “We are under no illusions as to the strength and skill of the Greater Hive Commanders. You were powerful when we met, and have only improved yourself, with a skill in genetic manipulation which rivals our own. Indulge my own curiosity – do you truly believe such a claim is possible?”

That was…an interesting twisting of the question. Flat out lying to the Collective was not something he had really considered. But Revelean had clearly had a plan coming in, and it made the Battlemaster somewhat suspicious. But now it was on the Hive Commanders to answer.

I have seen all manner of psionic specimens, 099 mused. Your kind are more powerful than we are. But to the extent Aegis has proposed is…questionable. It is one proposal to dominate the minds of a lesser planet, but to do so in the presence of all Hive Commanders does not seem feasible without at least one detecting the manipulation.

Then examining his memories will show that, 001 said bluntly. This changes nothing.

In that instance, 099 said, directly addressing 001. If we are truly dealing with a psion of such power and skill, there is little to prevent us from succumbing to a repeat.

“The question that needs to be asked,” Revelean said. “Is how much you believe the word of one who has turned his back on his own kind in favor of protecting aliens. If you wish to continue this line of proof, then we will oblige, but it suggests to us that your own skills are…lesser than we have anticipated.”

I have little desire for an answer, 666 interjected. We have benefitted from our alliance with the Ethereals, and arguing about the past is pointless. Even if such claims were true, we are no longer
under such manipulation. I am more concerned about how the Ethereals will address the Federation, and their true plans for the Humans.

At least this was a situation he could properly address. “You are concerned with being replaced.”

You are expending far more energy on this species than any other before, 001 pointed out. You have clear plans for them. We demand to know what they are.

“They are requiring more resources because they are fighting,” the Battlemaster answered slowly. “And unlike previous species in this situation, they are intelligent, resourceful, psionically sensitive, and have the support of an Ethereal traitor. There are many reasons why they require more direct attention.”

Answer the question.

“I can certainly confirm we are not planning to replace the Greater Hive Commanders,” the Battlemaster said. “Your species provides the Collective with ships, soldiers, and resources. While such an action would not only cause a conflict, it is a logistical impossibility. We intend for humanity to be integrated into the Collective as previous species have been, a task which will be far easier once Earth is secure. We would not, and never have planned to simply discard a cooperative species of the Ethereal Collective.”

As should be expected, 029 nodded. Such a proposal should be considered paranoia. Yet I believe all parties could agree that the…involvement of the Ethereals has been lacking. While you have made efforts, Battlemaster, I believe those should be expanded beyond the military.

“One reason I have accompanied the Battlemaster today,” Revelean said. “The Greater Hive Commanders have some of the finest scientists in this galaxy, and it is past time the Collective has a dedicated centralization of such experiments and knowledge. I have been gifted the privilege of overseeing such work, which will of course not interfere in your personal projects, but provide all in the Collective the opportunity to work together to improve it, regardless of species or specialization.”

An effort which can be supported. 099 looked to the other Hive Commanders. The Ethereals have made mistakes. However, they appear to make efforts to repair the damage they have caused. I propose we allow them to work to achieve this.

As do I, 029 interjected. The words of a traitor Ethereal should not collapse such a long-standing alliance.

001 glared down at the Ethereals. Very well. We shall see if your actions follow your words. This gathering is adjourned.

All of the Hive Commanders sat back down.

That had gone much better than he expected.

And because of that, he was suspicious. Glancing to the noticeably smug Revelean, he would definitely have some questions for the Imperator later. But for now, the Hive Commanders were placated. That would have to do.

***

Union Chambers, Federation Command – Andromeda Prime
The amount of times Ravarian could say that he had actually been in Federation Space could be counted on one hand. The amount of times he had actually visited the capital world of the Federation was approximately twice, the first to establish some kind of relationship with the Federation itself, and the second time to acquaint himself with intelligence gathered on the city.

Andromeda Prime was the closest thing to a homeworld the Andromedons had. For a homeworld though, it was surprisingly sparse. There was one major city, which was formally Federation land, and then there were small installations distributed all across the planet managed by the various Unions. Federation Command managed land distribution, but otherwise there was no formal ‘law’ the Unions had to abide by. There were implied suggestions and consequences, but hard and firm law within the Federation was exceptionally rare.

The ones that were implanted were simple and straightforward:

The creation of Special Operators was illegal.

Any and all Union disputes were to be brought before Federation Command.

Any action taken against the Federation would result in the offending individuals and Unions being completely destroyed.

Ravarian had always found it interesting that Special Operators were banned, but the Federation maintained the program regardless. Probably as a final failsafe to take action against Unions that threatened stability. And the Ethereals certainly had some hand in the project – although the details he was somewhat murky on.

The only thing he knew for certain was that the Special Operators fell within Union Omega, which was completely unknown to everyone but Chief Overseer Chernior. For a fairly mild Andromedon, Ravarian was surprised he seemed to continually be expanding it every year. Curious, but given the growing tensions between the Federation and Hive Commanders, perhaps it was as simple as it looked.

Still, he would have thought that the Andromedons would at least have some appreciation for aesthetics. Federation Command was one of the most utilitarian and dull worlds he had visited. The species had an obsession with cubes and based pretty much everything off them. Buildings were straight rectangles, sharp angles dominated what little aesthetics they bothered with, and it was so symmetrically designed it was disturbing.

Andromedon cities were designed on square patches, and they built in the inverse. The outer layers would typically be defenses of some kind, then there would be a ring of houses, perhaps intermixed with an even number of shops (Which sold the exact same things), another ring of defenses, and so on until it reached the centerpiece, which was the only unique non-copied thing in the city itself.

From what Ravarian knew about Andromedon culture, for acquiring different resources, foods, and so on, you had to go to the appropriate Union’s territory. The layout would generally be the same, but what was inside it would be different. There really was no all-purpose shop, as Federation Command only had basic necessities. For weapons, clothing, or even fuel, he would have to go to another Union’s territory.

He was quite thankful he didn’t actually live here.

Not just because he couldn’t breathe the air.
The full-body suit he had to wear wasn’t especially uncomfortable, but the HUD wasn’t that great at seeing that far into the yellow mist that permeated the city. He could see a short distance ahead, but not much further. Going inside buildings was better, but they still pumped it inside them so there was always a yellow-tinged view.

However, this was one of the places where one could see Andromedons in their natural habitat, without the suits. The species itself was fairly unremarkable, and ironically resembled Sectoids in many ways. Their skin was a deep grey, their physiology was fairly weak, and they almost never wore actual clothes.

With that said, there were obvious differences. The average Andromedon stood nearly as tall as a Vitakarian, their diamond-shaped heads were proportional to their bodies, and every single one of them walked on two legs, not scampering around on all fours. Their thin mouths also set them apart, and they certainly sounded less deep without their suits.

With that said, it wasn’t uncommon to see Andromedons lumber around in their suits. It seemed to typically be military that kept them on, and the civilians who went without.

Fectorian seemed to find the city fascinating though, and had been verbally making what Ravarian could only assume was random comments. The Ethereal was certainly… different than many he had spoken to. He didn’t seem to particularly care much about the Collective per-se, but was especially eager to be apparently let off the chain to do things.

Having been shown some of his work, Ravarian was wondering just where the hell he had been for this entire situation. The Ethereal was brilliant, and did have a very… excitable personality when it came to subjects he was passionate about. He was no diplomat, but that was likely what the Battlemaster had sent him for.

“You’ve never been here before,” Ravarian commented as Fectorian took a look at one of the general electronic part shops, with the Andromedon overseeing the store watching in disbelief.

“Andromeda Prime? Never,” Fectorian swiftly turned away and kept walking to the Union Chamber. “Little time; I have been very occupied with other projects. They are an intelligent species, and I have always intended to see their cities. Efficient and clean, I approve.”

The Andromedons in front of the Union Chambers moved in front of the door upon their approach. These were in their suits and towered over him, and were at least equal to Fectorian in size. “State your authorization.” Ravarian suspected that the only reason they were being difficult was because the Federation didn’t especially like the Ethereals at the moment.

He wasn’t looking forward to explaining why they were here, and not the Imperator.

“Zar’Chon’ravarian’vitiary of the Zararch, and Engineer Fectorian of the Ethereals,” Ravarian answered. “And we both know that this is not a surprise.”

The Andromedon didn’t say anything, but stepped aside as the door slid open. Fectorian took the initiative and began walking further, Ravarian following close behind as the door closed behind them. Given that there was only one long, bare hallway, he assumed it would lead directly to the central chamber.

Once they stepped into the shining white light, Ravarian could see he was correct. The design was just as utilitarian as the rest of Andromedon architecture, which was a small square depression where they would presumably stand, and there was a higher row which went around the perimeter, with sections for each Union leader to inhabit.
This ascended for five rows, with the yellow mist making it difficult to see the upper levels. But in the grand scheme, the only Unions that mattered were the ones in the first row. Some of them were wearing their suits, while others were not. On the second row there was a brief extension which housed the Chief Overseer of the Andromedon Federation, Chernior, who was wearing his suit.

There were no guards or automated systems Ravarian could see, but he knew they existed thanks to Zararch reports, and there were plenty of suited and unsuited Andromedons who held some kind of plasma or laser weapon. Starting a fight was certainly not advised, and there were likely Federation soldiers just waiting to be deployed.

Here went nothing.

“Zar’Chon, Ethereal Fectorian,” Chernior’s voice boomed through the Chambers. “You stand before the assembled Unions of the Andromedon Federation. You are to provide answers to any member of this body; the Federation is fully prepared to divest itself from the Ethereal Collective if the answers received are not satisfactory. Is this understood?”

“Yes, Chief Overseer,” Ravarian answered. “We will answer them to the best of our ability.”

“The Unions may begin presenting questions,” Chernior stated. “A’Intellior, of Union Apear.”

An Andromedon with what appeared to be a cybernetic left arm rose, and further inspection noted that there were clear implants around his head. “The development of the Spectre unit has raised significant concerns. Not only with how the unit operates, but also because none in the Federation were informed such a project existed, let alone was near deployment. On behalf of the Federation we demand that you provide an answer to why we were not informed, and an independent examination of the Spectre itself.”

“As the one who created the Spectre, I can certainly assure you that there are appropriate failsafes to prevent uncontrolled spread,” Fectorian said, lifting a hand. “Prior to deployment, Spectres are programmed with very specific parameters, which they cannot override under any circumstances. At any time all Spectres can be disabled remotely by an owner, and will automatically self-destruct if they detect they are acting outside their parameters. There is no risk of Spectres being hacked or turned against the Collective.”

“We will also allow specific members of the Andromedon Federation to examine the schematics themselves, as well as request demonstrations,” Ravarian added. “The Federation must submit a list of qualified individuals and it will be processed as soon as possible. Is this acceptable?”

“It is a start,” A’Intellior said. “And what of failing to inform us?”

“Just as your Unions do not inform the Collective as to every single project, neither do I,” Fectorian stated. “I designed a weapon and thought little more of it when the Battlemaster wished to deploy it. However, I am now more cognizant of your need to be informed on more dangerous projects, and steps will be taken to ensure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Indeed,” Ravarian nodded. “Ethereal Fectorian will, after the conclusion of this gathering, be officially initiating a centralized Collective Engineering and Development branch. All major projects of the Collective will no longer be done by individual species, but as a collaborative effort overseen by Fectorian himself. This is to prevent such situations from arising again, and to allow concerns and feedback to be given during development.”

There was some muttering and rasps of filters as the Andromedons discussed that among themselves. Ravarian hadn’t thought they would be getting to this immediately, but it certainly
couldn’t make things worse. As far as questions went, this was one they were able to handle easily.

A very plain Andromedon stood. “It is one thing to say this will not happen again for weapons
projects. But you also kept the knowledge of an Ethereal defector from us. This is important
information to know. If such is kept from us, then how can we trust there is not more you have
neglected to tell us?”

“I can assure you that there are no more traitor Ethereals,” Ravarian began. “It was a complicated
matter-“

“I want to hear it from the Ethereal,” J’Vailan interrupted. “Not you.”

“Aegis disagreed with the direction of the war,” Fectorian sounded highly disinterested. “I am not
aware of the details, but he was growing disillusioned with the Imperator, and in a drastic move,
even for him, left. We have not considered it more than him making the equivalent of a statement
to us. His actual appearance in the war was not expected.”

“You were a fool to believe that, Ethereal,” J’Vailan said. “That does not explain why you did not
immediately inform the Federation so we could account for this.”

“Because there isn’t a reason you would be satisfied with,” Fectorian crossed his arms. “I suspect it
had to do with placating Aegis. If we forced him out, the situation would be worse. We did not
want to provoke him unnecessarily. This was an internal matter the Imperator did not want to
become public unless necessary, and if that sounds unreasonable, I suspect that you do not inform
the Federation of every internal Union dispute.”

“Your kind are not comparable,” J’Vailan insisted. “Ethereals are not like us. Your kind have
highly destructive and dangerous powers. This is in no way comparable to an internal Union
problem, especially when it involves other species.”

“This was a mistake we learned from,” Fectorian shrugged. “We can avoid it in the future. But
suggesting that the logic is not able to be followed is absurd and does not reflect well on your
reasoning capabilities.”

“You would do well not to insult us, Ethereal.”

“It is only an insult if you believe it to be so. Your species is intelligent, which is why I know you
can understand the reasoning of the Imperator, even if you do not agree with it.”

J’Vailan did not appear to be happy with that, but didn’t immediately respond for a few moments.
“Is the Imperator deliberately holding information of this level of magnitude?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Fectorian said.

“But you do not know.”

“No,” Fectorian said. “I am not always included in the Imperator’s inner circle. He may be keeping
his secrets, and most assuredly is. However, neither I nor the Zar’Chon or Battlemaster are aware
of such.”

“This is why we requested the Imperator.” J’Vailan said, looking to address the other Union
members. “We will not get satisfactory answers regarding this from an underling. Your kind have
failed to do as you promised. The only one who has even made an attempt has been the
Battlemaster, but I fail to see why the Federation should acquiesce to the will of the Ethereals when
your leader does not bother to show himself.”

Fectorian considered that. “Such a move would not be wise.”

“The situation is frustrating, we all agree,” Ravarian quickly interjected before anyone could respond to Fectorian’s *highly questionable* comment. “However, the Ethereals are realizing that more direct leadership is needed. It is why they are taking a more involved role, along with the Battlemaster, to put forth a more united and strong Collective.”

“Then prove it,” J’Vailan essentially spat. “Not I, nor many of the other Unions, are interested in dedicating resources to your spat with a traitor Ethereal. If you actually consider this an ‘internal matter’, then you clearly do not need Federation support. Furthermore, your incompetence on Earth has not gone unnoticed. Ethereal or not, you have been recently and constantly beaten by a species who is inexplicably advancing *faster* than you are.”

“The strategy towards dealing with the Humans is being reworked-“ Ravarian began.

“No.” The suited figure of S’Starina stood. “You have treated the Humans with far too much leniency. It is only a matter of time before they master space travel and begin their expansion. Your soldiers are ill-disciplined, idiotic, and easily broken. Your machines are little more than targets for the Humans. Your tactics are simple enough that a child could counter them. I will not support a Collective which does not treat war as a serious matter. I will not send my soldiers to fight for your Ethereals, not when led by such incompetent leaders.”

“Yes, because your soldiers would certainly do better,” Fectorian answered back, surprisingly sarcastic. “The Collective military is quite flawed, any reasonable being agrees, and is in the process of reformation. But to suggest your people would fare as well or better is equally questionable. You, like we have, underestimate the Humans. That was our mistake, and it will be yours as well.”

Fectorian clasped his lower hands together as he held a holoprojector in his right upper one. “But that will change. We adapt, as we always have. There are projects in place which will demonstrate the superiority of the Collective,” the holoprojector flashed through several different projects. Ravarian only recognized the Executor, Archon, and Custodian models, but there were a few he didn’t recognize. “There is no more playing nice with the Humans,” Fectorian finished. “But if you wish to hide while this is done, your Union is certainly welcome.”

“Then you will be fighting with the intent to win?” S’Starina asked.

“I can confirm that is the case,” Ravarian said. “Any restrictions that the Imperator wished are gone. Whatever he wished to learn from the Humans, he did. It is our job to bring Earth under the control of the Ethereal Collective.”

“And why-“

Anything the Andromedon was going to say was cut off as Ravarian tangibly felt the atmosphere of the room change. He felt stronger; his purpose clearer. He had been around enough Ethereals to know what was going on, but this was a completely different experience that he could only think of one it could belong to.

The air in the middle of the chamber shimmered and out stepped the largest Ethereal that Ravarian had ever seen. Clad in gleaming and ornate armor, with a billowing golden cape, and an upside-down triangular helmet, he was tall enough to be eye level with the second row. Ravarian immediately fell to one knee in an immediate sign of submission. With the arrival of the Imperator,
there could be no risks taken.

Several of the Andromedons had their weapons aimed, though lowered them once they saw who it was. “Andromedons of the Federation,” the Imperator said, his rich voice easily reaching even the highest of rows. “You have requested my presence. While you might be under the impression that I am ignorant to the state of the Collective, this is not the case. There are answers you wish for, and I can directly provide them.”

“Welcome, Imperator,” Chief Overseer Chernior said slowly. “We were not informed—“

“No,” the Imperator raised a hand. “You were not. I previously did not plan to indulge your demands. However, considering recent events, the Federation needs a goal. It needs purpose to continue as an effective part of the Collective. You have failed to find that on your own. I will provide one to you. One you may be able to better understand than most.”

“Then continue.”

The Imperator stepped forward, as Fectorian and Ravarian moved out of the way. “I will tell you why you have reason to care about Earth. This is more than an internal matter. Why we continue to fight is because the Humans are in danger of being dominated by an extremely dangerous species—known to us as a Sovereign One.”

“There are the few, but powerful, aliens who wander the galaxy in pursuit of unimaginable goals. They find planets, they watch and wait, they fall into deep slumbers and rest, and when they awaken, they fight. They manipulate the aliens they can, and kill all who oppose them.”

He gestured around him. “There is one such of these aliens on Earth, and now he is awake. I am familiar with how they operate. The purpose of such tactics was to determine if there was one and I have confirmed there is. As for how they operate…” he motioned and a deep blue sphere, with visible and moving distortions on it, appeared and floated before him. “They use these. I know several have seen them before. They are the means by which Sovereign Ones exert their influence. They are dangerous. And more of them are appearing on Earth.”

The Imperator made eye—or helmet—contact with various Andromedons. “You fear what my kind can do. But we cannot individually match a Sovereign One. Not yet. If Humanity is not pacified, and the most useful tool of this Sovereign is allowed to flourish, then it is not only the Collective who will be threatened, but the Federation as well. That is why this is more than an internal matter for my species. This concerns all who reside in this little pocket of the galaxy.”

In his Imperator-fueled haze, Ravarian was pondering the ramifications of what was being said. Even if he suspected the Imperator was twisting the truth, these Sovereign Ones did very much appear to be real. If that was the case…there were aspects and decisions that made a lot more sense.

“And do you have more proof besides a floating orb?” One unknown Andromedon demanded.

The Imperator pulled out a data cube and telekinetically passed it to the Chief Overseer. “Watch what is on there. That is an Avatar of a Sovereign One fighting one of my most powerful Ethereals. See the proof with your own eyes.”

“Why wait to tell us this?” Another Andromedon demanded.
“Because the galaxy is not prepared for the knowledge of Sovereign Ones,” the Imperator answered. “And this is not the only one. These are aliens beyond even our comprehension. They see our species as primitive; as children. And the more that know, the more dangerous they become. By sharing this with you, I have provided context for my actions – but you are also now targets. That is the price, but you wished to know. But you will not share this with anyone else outside this room.”

He turned to face the Andromedons behind him, as well as Fectorian and Ravarian. “The Ethereals have been negligent in their actions. I have watched for long enough. Change to the Collective is coming, and the age of Ethereal apathy will die. The initiatives of the Battlemaster are the beginning, and I will ensure they are maintained. Humanity will be subjected under the might of the Collective, augmented with the soldiers and engineers of the Andromedon Federation. You species has proven their worth to us, now it is our turn to maintain what we have built.”

He turned back to the Chief Overseer. “Is what I have said satisfactory?”

Chernior pressed several buttons on his podium. “We shall put this to a vote concerning re-institating military support for the Ethereal Collective.”

There was a few minutes of Andromedons pressing buttons on their podiums. “By vote of sixty-two to thirty-seven, the motion passes. Due to the closeness of the vote, we will begin a limited restoration of military support for the Ethereal Collective, and will discuss full restoration in approximately three weeks.”

That was admittedly better than nothing, though it was still a bit too close for comfort. But it was definitely a start, and the Andromedons respected results. If the reforms continued, there was little reason for the Federation to continue to oppose military support. They definitely should not push the issue.

“Your support is appreciated,” the Imperator said. “The actions of the Collective will reaffirm our words, and I can assure you that while the war for Earth will be difficult, it is one we will win. The time of Ethereal apathy has ended, and it is time to raise the Collective to that of a power to challenge any in the galaxy.”

“Your clarifications are appreciated, Imperator,” Chernior said. “All of the Federation will be watching to see your promises come to fruition.”

“Then that is all,” the Imperator motioned and the air in front of them rippled. The concept of teleportation was not one that Ravarian was entirely comfortable with, but it appeared that he was going to have to go through it anyway.

Resigned, he closed his eyes.

The Federation seemed to be placated for now.

But the actual ramifications of what had been said were a different matter entirely.

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*Desolan Orbital Station 3 – Desolan Orbit*

*12/10/2016 – 10:11 A.M.*

*An Ethereal.*
An actual *Ethereal* had been working for XCOM.

Nartha was positive this had happened after he had left. There was no chance that XCOM could – or would – have kept that a secret from him. There was no better recruiting weapon than this. The divisions between the Ethereals must have been much worse than he had, in his most optimistic projections, suspected.

Aegis. Interesting. He’d never heard of that one.

Well, it was going to make his life a lot easier. All he needed to do was point to the Ethereal and say “That’s their ally!” Taking Caelior into captivity was also a major incentive. Nartha was fairly sure this would cause the Imperator to actually do something, and everything would eventually be under control – but in the meantime…the seeds were planted.

He was very curious as to what would happen next.

As for himself, he needed to figure out how to handle the Muton situation. The Nulorian had received his message, and were working on ‘handling it’, but at the same time he knew he needed to have something for the Zar’Chon. The good news was that recent events had completely taken up the Zar’Chon’s time and interest.

Sitting alone in his quarters on one of the orbital stations, sipping some water, he pondered the dilemma. He had enough names to completely dismantle the Muton smuggling ring, but doing so would severely hurt their chances of getting some kind of usable army. Even revealing part of it would likely lead loyal Zararch agents to compromising the entire thing, since these Muton smugglers had no idea how to properly combat an organization like the Zararch.

However, revealing part of it would give the Nulorian more time, and he had informed them of the possible necessity of such actions. If nothing else, the Nulorian were pragmatic and understood the need to sacrifice pieces for a greater gain.

Still, a one-man resistance was proving to be tiring. He really wished there was some means of communication with XCOM. The Nulorian were a means to an end, and the ones on Desolan were useful pawns. He didn’t really have any partner to help with this, and he could admit that it would be a lot easier with one.

Because if he died, it was over. And the Zar’Chon was not an idiot. Worst case scenario there was an Ethereal watching him. That would be bad. If that were the case, anything he did was doomed from the start.

Could Ethereals manage that?

Well…psionics. Telepathy.

He frowned.

A more paranoid person might wonder if the only reason he hadn’t actually been caught was because he was being used. The Zar’Chon was certainly one who would vastly prefer letting a traitor run around and find every single traitor in the Collective, and then killing them all in one fell swoop. The damages he caused would be nothing compared to any hope of the Collective falling being crushed forever.

He set his cup on the metal table, pondering that. It might not be a bad idea to begin thinking of contingencies in that case. A decentralized network might be preferable, but to do that properly, he needed allies. And the problem was he had none, and if he was ever targeted…it didn’t really
matter, because through him they would know everything.

As much as he hated to admit it, the Sectoids would likely be his best option. If anyone could
detect if he was under some kind of…observation…it would be them. They certainly had the
technological capabilities. The problem was that, of all the species in the Collective, the Greater
Hive Commanders would *never* even consider such action against the Ethereals. They were as
homogenous as a species could get, and he couldn’t see any of them giving that up to actually
rebel. Not that they would care about the word of a Vitakarian anyway. Xenophobic bastards.

So, a problem.

He knew he was running on a ticking clock, only he didn’t know how much time was left. He was
going to be discovered eventually, the Zar’Chon would put the pieces together at some point, it
was a matter of what he could accomplish beforehand. Knowing how the Zar’Chon operated was
useful, as he was sure that at the beginning he wouldn’t notice anything. Once he had fulfilled
whatever purpose the Zar’Chon wanted, he would most likely be killed without him ever seeing it
coming.

How could he possibly prevent that without help?

Now he was in a completely different conundrum.

By actively creating a resistance within the Collective, he might actually doom it. The more people
he met, the more were marked for death. Then again, what was the choice? Do nothing?

“Sitting there is certainly not going to help your situation.”

Nartha instantly had a pistol in his hand and aimed at the voice from the corner of the dimly lit
quarters. He had brought almost nothing with him, and short of a small pack at the foot of his bed,
the room was completely bare. The chances of someone being able to *hide* in his room were
completely impossible, and *remaining* unnoticed even more so.

Yet inexplicably, there was someone in the corner of his room. Had he not known better, he would
have guessed it was XCOM. But upon closer inspection, it definitely wasn’t one of the soldiers.
The armor was almost stony, grey, and had a strange symbol on the chest. However, the figure was
somehow a *Human*.

“Put that down,” the man said, his voice stronger than his aged features implied. Nartha was
confused as to *how* there was an elderly Human standing in front of him. “You can’t kill me with
that anyway.”

Nartha narrowed his eyes, pistol unwavering. He was not unconvinced he was dreaming, as there
were no *Humans* here of all places. He had been tired, and having dreams was not uncommon.
They were usually never this vivid or strange, though. Still, he could try and play along. “Who are
you, and how did you get *here*?”

The old man smiled and waved a hand. Nartha saw the air briefly shimmer and the man
disappeared only to reappear on the other side of the room. His pistol followed. “A psionic trick,”
the man said dismissively. “Not easy to perform for most, but I’ve gotten *exceptionally* better at it
recently.” He looked at the bare room. “As for who I am, you may call me the Chronicler.”

Nartha was less sure he was dreaming. It was a stretch but… “I don’t suppose you know XCOM?”
As far as he’d known, there had been no Chronicler. He’d never heard of the name before now,
which was why he doubted this odd Human psion was connected.
“Oh, I certainly do,” he nodded. “I’m not…part of them, but instead represent another party. One who the Ethereals have…questionably…decided to make an enemy of.” He tapped the side of his head. “The Imperator has quite curious plans. Ambitious, but he has very little idea of what he is toying with. Making the one I represent an enemy will not end well for him. Hence why I’m here now. XCOM informed me of certain things, including your mission. Admirable, but it is only a matter of time until your capture without contact with XCOM. This is assuming you haven’t been compromised already.”

Nartha pursed his lips, and lowered his pistol. Even if this Chronicler was lying, he knew that a psion of that power would easily kill him. Although he certainly didn’t understand a lot of what was being referred to. “I don’t suppose you can determine that?”

“Unfortunately no,” the Chronicler shook his head, eyeing him curiously. “However, I can help prevent something like that from happening in the future.” He pulled something from a pouch on his belt and walked over to Nartha, placing it in his hand. It was a small black-blue orb no bigger than a marble. It almost seemed to be rippling the more he looked at it; hypnotic in a way.

“Keep this on you at all times,” the Chronicler said. “Don’t ask how it works, but it will prevent anyone from unknowingly influencing you.”

The little orb was shockingly cold, but he placed it in his pocket. “Thank you,” he said, looking at the Chronicler carefully. “I suspect you want something as well. If you aren’t with XCOM-“

“The only thing at this point I am working towards is the destruction of the Ethereal Collective,” the Chronicler interrupted with a surprisingly flat voice as his face went still. “Your work will assist in achieving this. I do not care what happens afterward, but the Ethereals and their…ally…they will die. To that end, I, and several others, will provide assistance where applicable. He pointed to the ground. “My people have moved the entirety of the Mutons to another remote world. We left behind a skeleton crew for you to tip off to the Zar’Chon. Collapse the network, it serves no purpose and the Nulorian are working to establish another one with our assistance.” The hand moved up to his side again. “We will be initiating contact within the coming days with XCOM. When the time comes, I can take you to speak to them, and then return you.”

Nartha blinked. “You…can do that?”

The Chronicler gave a razor-thin smile. “There is very little that cannot be done. The Imperator has decided to reveal his intentions towards us. That invites retaliation.” He held out a hand and the air above his hand simmered and out came another of the orbs, although this one was much larger – the size of a Human basketball.

“Take this with you,” he said. “Place it on your ship. This will prevent your actions from being watched by the Imperator and…certain other parties,” he face wrinkled at that. “I am rather surprised at the risks the Imperator has taken. But as I said, he has very little idea what he is involved in.”

Nartha took the orb, which was similarly freezing and carefully set it on the bed. He had questions, but wasn’t sure if they should be spoken. Yet he needed to know something. “Who are you actually working for?”

The Chronicler seemed to consider that. “Do you know what a Sovereign One is?”

“No.”
“Well,” he mused. “I…work with one, although that is a poor description of my role. But he is very old, and has only recently been fully awakened by the actions of the Ethereals.” He eyed Nartha pointedly. “He also does not like to answer many questions, not to you, not yet. Do your work well and you will learn more.”

He stepped back. “I will be in contact soon. Give your report to the Zararch, and do not let the orbs be discovered.”

“And what if they are?”

The Chronicler chuckled, a dangerous glint in his eyes. “Then the rebellion may be kickstarted ahead of schedule.” With that the air shimmered around him and with a step back, he vanished, leaving Nartha alone with the mysterious artifacts.

This day had suddenly gotten a lot more interesting.

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Tactical Briefing Room, Solar System Command Center – Mars Collective Base

12/11/2016 – 12:09 P.M.

It was not ideal to reform the majority of the Collective military, but in light of the recent performances, it was something which was necessary.

The Battlemaster stood alone in the Command Center, over a dark holotable as he pondered the issue. He had outlines of what to do, and he would be appointing those who he knew could help achieve this change. But for now he was alone and needed to think through it once more. Much of what he was considering was close to shattering conventions and norms that had existed from the days of the Empire.

And that was the problem.

They were no longer in the Empire. They were in a new, dangerous, galaxy. They needed to be open to changes to meet new threats. Privately, the Battlemaster wondered if they’d be in this situation if the Empire hadn’t been the galactic power it had been. None had been able or willing to challenge them, and as a result they had never had reason to improve. The first true war they had faced had been the Synthesized…and it had ended badly.

The Collective as it stood was far too reliant on infantry. This was extremely apparent, and something the Humans had been capitalizing on. With the developments of psionics, heavy weapons, armored vehicles, and the incorporation of the trench lines and melee units, they were easily answering the superior numbers of the Collective.

That was the first priority to be addressed. The lack of useful vehicles. The Cyberdisks were practically useless now, and the Humans knew how to deal with them easily. The Sectopods were powerful, but too slow, unwieldy, too large a target. The designs were not inherently bad, and he knew that Fectorian and his new division of engineers were looking to improve all current designs.

But there were completely new designs that he had also drawn up. Not an absurd amount, but it would allow them to answer the siege tactics of the Humans, and withstand even their brutal punishments. However, the simulations and projects might not necessarily work as well in reality.

He had also come to the grim conclusion that no matter what they did, they were likely going to help the Humans in some way. XCOM had come this far by managing to reverse engineer their
technology and research their corpses. They had taken the strengths of the Collective and made them their own. That was most likely not going to change unless they immediately won.

Well, while reverse-engineering their more primitive technology would not yield much that was useful, he could take pointers from their tactics and strategies.

There was going to have to be a massive revision of water tactics. That was one area the Humans were dominant in. Their undersea net of submarines needed to be purged, and for that he would need the Andromedon Aquatic Forces. He was considering the Sar'Manda, but not until the Vitakara were calmed down.

The Vitakara.

Yes, there would need to be changes. Some races, such as the Borelians and Oyariah, they would not need much change. They were experienced and competent. They did not generally break, and were at minimum equal to the standard ADVENT soldier. However, standard was not good enough. They needed to be better.

The Vitakara aversion to genetic modification needed to end. He did not personally care what the civilians did; if they wished to cling to their outdated beliefs on the subject, he would not impose such on them. But in the military, that would no longer be acceptable. They had the resources and capability to turn their soldiers into the equal of an XCOM soldier.

That is what he would do.

However, that was only solving part of the problem. The other aspect being the ugly truth that most Vitakara were not suited for war. They were too passive; too affected by what they heard and saw. There were too many who were facing mental issues from even a brief time on Earth. That was not acceptable.

There would need to be stricter screening, or at worst, perhaps a less-radical version of the procedure Zararch agents underwent. Some could perhaps be retained as a support team, but the soldiers could no longer be any who wished to join. It was also time to directly involve the races themselves in the conflict. The Vitakarian Republic, Borelian Authoritative Council, and Oyariah Hegemony would all be useful in such a pursuit.

Something to discuss when he arrived on Vitakar.

The Andromedons he felt needed little improvement. Out of all the Collective forces they were the most experienced, intelligent, and useful. They were being hindered by strategies, politics, and poor leadership. Should those be fixed, they would be able to realize their true capabilities. But aside from external reasons, the Andromedons he felt no need to change significantly.

He could not say the same about the Mutons.

They were now a billion-unit problem.

They would be phased out…eventually. But until then, they were essentially walking cannon fodder. While Revelean was working on a better template, it would not change the billions that still existed. He couldn’t throw them all out, so the best that could happen was they were chipped or conditioned against psionic interference, but he had ordered the production of Muton soldiers ceased until further notice.

It wasn’t as though they would be running out anytime soon.
The Sectoids were in a difficult spot as well. Their Vanguards worked…to an extent. However, against psions they were useless. The Hive Commanders would need to do better, and that essentially amounted to a more powerful and independent unit. They had little choice here. The basic Sectoids had been filtered out long ago, but perhaps the Vanguards could serve as a base template.

Aside from reforming those aspects, there was the matter of contingencies. While he never intended to let it reach the point where the Humans left Earth, it never hurt to be prepared. The Solar System was ripe for fortification. Mars was already underway, and establishing defenses, outposts, and forces at certain points would give a fallback plan should the unthinkable happen.

On that note, Fectorian needed to improve the Gateways. The entire Gateway network needed to be secured so that Aegis and XCOM couldn’t suddenly storm Gateways on Vitakar or Desolan, and the size restrictions hampered the Collective ability to properly respond to certain threats. While he knew it would take time, he was certain it could be done.

There was, of course, the eventual integration of the Avatar Project to consider.

One he was still uncertain of; including the Imperator already determining a candidate for him.

Yang Shuren. He would have to see her in motion to make an accurate judgement, but he could not fault the Imperator from taking the initiative. She had a natural tactical mindset thanks to her upbringing, weapon training and martial skills, thanks to her family connections with the Chinese military, and a reason to fight her own kind.

Yang Fen was, on paper, retired. In practice he was the equivalent of an exile too prominent to openly kill, and for reasons the Battlemaster didn’t know, had been shipped to Australia to live out his days under constant Chinese watch. An unfortunate victim of the cutthroat military politics of China, although what exactly Yang Fen had done was knowledge he was not privy to.

Fortunate that the exile of him and his family had led to them being some of the first captured during the initial invasion of Australia. How the Imperator had managed to pick her out of the thousands was not something he had shared, but he was not surprised. The Imperator had a skill for picking out certain people, and Humans were no exception.

It appeared Yang Shuren had been given a similar offer the Imperator was going to make to Patricia. She was psionically sensitive, and seemed to have equal intellectual capabilities. Too useful to throw away, but the Imperator liked giving choices. And thanks to them, Yang Fen and his family were now living in Taiwan with no memory of being captured, but knowing Shuren was safe.

On her request, it seemed. Curious how she had only ensured the safety of her family and none else. Based on her psychological report it wasn’t surprising. Yang Shuren didn’t necessarily dislike Humans, she disliked Humans in authority. She had a very tainted view of every single government institution, and especially hated the Chinese government, and the Chinese people for continuing to enable them.

She certainly seemed incapable of caring about ordinary Humans though, civilians or otherwise. Or at least she didn’t lose sleep over how many were no doubt dead; ones she had likely been with as a captive.

However, she seemed somewhat competent. If the Imperator wished him to…work…with her, he could likely do something. If she was to keep a place by him, she would have to earn it.
And his current plan for that was not going to be pleasant for her.

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Zararch Solar System Command, Solar System Command Center – Mars Collective Base

12/11/2016 – 4:12 P.M.

It was certainly an interesting group he had put together. As he was considering how best to improve and reform the Zararch, having separate divisions per species seemed like a reasonable first step. A Zararch Command Circle, as it would have been known. Such a formation had only happened once, upon the creation of the Aui’Vitakar as it was still unknown if the other races were hostile or not.

After seeing that such was unneeded, the Command Circle was eventually retired and command was placed exclusively on the Zar’Chon, whose power was continuously limited as the Vitakara saw little use for an intelligence service, even if his predecessor had made several arguments for the need, especially concerning the Borelians, Oyariah, and Sar’Manda.

All of which had been ignored, but in the end it had turned out alright.

The Ethereals understood the usefulness of such services, and one of the first things they had done was expanded the Zararch significantly, mostly leaving it up to him, although Quisilia had provided some help. However, it was clear he hadn’t done it entirely correctly, but that was simply a mistake. One he was correcting now.

There were two major additions, that of the Sectoids and Andromedons in the Zararch. He was satisfied with the quality of Vitakara agents, and didn’t see reasons to change them much. Their issue was how to use them, not if they were competent or not. But the Sectoids provided much-needed psionic utility, and the Andromedon Special Operators would answer directly to the Zararch now, and by extension, the Ethereals.

Finding a Hive Commander who would fill the role was fairly easy, as the Zararch had conducted several investigations on the various Hive Commanders, and Hive Commander 007 seemed to be the natural fit. His Hive largely consisted of various data centers, genetic vaults, and every single important document of the history and plans of the Greater Hive Commanders.

007 also had many connections through the Hives, and it would likely be easy to have him leverage them for the needs of the Zararch. 007 was certainly interested, and didn’t necessarily seem opposed to working with aliens, especially as he would be working with the Zararch in turn. Although, even standing on his legs, the ruddy orange alien was easily the shortest, only coming up to his waist.

The Andromedon was none other than Union Omega Project Director Rilianor. A complete unknown to the vast majority of the Federation, he oversaw the Union that did not exist – Omega. Having now been granted access to that little secret, Ravarian was impressed that the Federation had the foresight to put together such a group and keep it under wraps.

Union Omega was, of course, the source of the unknown Andromedon Special Operators. Rilianor was the one who oversaw their creation, deployment, and reported anything relevant to the Chief Overseer. No other Andromedon in the Federation was aware, and it would be a simple matter to keep it that way.

With that said, Rilianor had been less than enthused about bringing Union Omega into the Zararch,
but given how much the Ethereals were also involved in Omega, there was little choice. Ravarian was still not sure of the extent of Ethereal influence, but it was clearly more significant than just authorization.

And to round out their little group was Quisilia. Now all clustered around the holotable, it was time to get down to business. “The capabilities of the Zararch have previous been blunted,” he began. “Both due to a failure to properly adapt to the Humans and restrictions placed upon the Zararch concerning operational parameters. With the latter lifted, we can plan more freely.”

“Penetration of ADVENT is a priority,” Rilianor stated, his voice more echoey than most Andromedons for some reason. “However, with their spreading use of psionics and counter-intelligence methods, there are more limited options.”

“Any alien will stand out,” Ravarian agreed. “And while those operations can be conducted, there is a far higher risk of failure.”

“The Special Operators can easily perform surveillance work, and are more than capable of killing anything ADVENT can throw at them,” Rilianor stated. “However, it will make future operations more difficult if such missions turn violent.”

“Which is why we need to take a more methodical approach,” Ravarian motioned to 007. “Which is where the Hive Commanders come in. 007, you have said the Vanguard template can be modified.”

With ease, 007 projected into their minds. It is a matter of what you wish. I would not recommend Sectoids for any kind of complex work. But conditioning, psionic aptitude, and physical characteristics can be shaped.

“Excellent,” Ravarian said, inclining his head. “We cannot plant agents in ADVENT conventionally. None of our own will pass a blood test, and the amount of psions embedded in their sensitive organizations will also make long-term operations difficult, if not impossible. I see the Sectoids performing two distinct services.”

He held up a finger. “The first as passive observation. If you wish specifics, there will be Sectoids transported into cities through civilian agents, and they will telepathically observe the area around them and report back if they learn anything of interest. Much of what they hear will be useless, but through it we can gauge important information such as citizen morale, political stability, as well as a host of sensitive personal information we can use to leverage the population against them.”

Another finger joined the first. “The second involves psionic psychological modification, both in the field and in a controlled environment. We have a large number of Human captives, and it is time we put them to further use than as fodder for Revelean and whatever the Creator does. We need to convert these Humans to sleeper agents and embed them back into ADVENT. The same tactic would apply in the field; a Human will be briefly abducted, modified, and returned to their original position until we need them.”

007 blinked, the Sectoid equivalent of thought. It is doable, he finally said. The brains will need to be inclined towards telepathy, and I would recommend lowering their size slightly to maintain a lower profile. However, they can be made to do exactly what you ask.

“Is the psionic conditioning in addition to traditional conditioning?” Rilianor asked.

“Correct,” Ravarian confirmed. “Traditional conditioning will ensure the subject does what we need, when we need it. Psionic conditioning will prevent undue panic, nervousness, or other
emotions which might tip off an ADVENT psion. It might also be easier to simply wipe the mind of the target of the incident, as the standard conditioning is what is important.”

Yes, 007 mused, the raspy voice almost gleeful. *You will need our scientists to apply the standard conditioning. They need not be specialized; our scientists can be easily trained for such.*

“How long would you expect the application to take?” Ravarian asked.

_Such conditioning depends on the complexity and quality requested,* 007 answered. *For what you require, no fewer than twelve hours. I would recommend a full day to ensure the conditioning is in place correctly and does not malfunction._

“This is all very fascinating,” Quisilia finally looked up, and Ravarian almost sighed as it seemed that Quisilia had spent the past few minutes scrolling on his phone. Wonderful. “Inserting Humans into ADVENT is an excellent idea. I am not convinced on these passive observation Sectoids. All it takes is for one psion to be caught and ADVENT Intelligence is locking the place down.”

_There are solutions,* 007 addressed the Ethereal directly. _We can condition these observers to die should a psion detect them, preventing any chance of them learning damaging information. With the advancements in nanotechnology, they could be reduced to nothing to make even a body impossible to find._

“And then we are down a Sectoid,” Rilianor rumbled. “Considering how many seem to be embedded in ADVENT, we will be losing too many to be worth it.”

_These units are useful pawns and easily replaced,* 007 made a dismissive motion, eyelids narrowing as he looked at the Andromedon. *It is unlikely that it would be as frequent as you suggest. The saturation of psions is a weakness. They do not know if such a presence is Human or not, if they bother feeling it in the first place. It is a simple enough matter to prevent these Sectoids from attempting to read any kind of psion. Your concern is misplaced._

“Oh you can use them to play ADVENT,” Quisilia added, now looking back down at his phone. “At some point ADVENT will suspect there are hostile cells. In which case, one of these units could accidentally tip off one of the Priests, and bring ADVENT down on a cell of Zararch – which so happens to have ten or so Sectoids. ADVENT believes they have won, and their guard will be lessen. In the meantime, we have lost very little.”

“Agreed,” Ravarian nodded. “That I believe will be our strategy for infiltrating ADVENT. XCOM is impossible with Aegis, and we should not waste resources attempting such.”

“What of the non-ADVENT nations?” Rilianor asked.

“South America and Africa are under the purview of Nebulan and Macula,” Ravarian said. “However, I would avoid antagonizing the European Union. Meddling too heavily will spur them to join ADVENT. We should limit our efforts to simple observation.”

“And China?”

Ravarian curled his lips. “They are a problem, and we should take appropriate action. The Chinese do not pose a threat to us like ADVENT. They have no interest in ADVENT, but they are an enemy. I will have you prepare your Special Operators to recover or destroy their intelligence, and at the same time we will begin culling their population.”

He looked towards 007. “The Hive Commanders have identified a potential weakness, correct?”
We have, 007 said. Based on an extensive overview of Human diseases and plagues, as well as contrasting with potential synthesized ones, I believe there is a useful candidate to cull the Chinese in a way ADVENT will not immediately pin towards us. The disease of smallpox.

“And why is this useful?” Rilianor asked.

“It is a highly contagious and lethal disease,” Ravarian answered. “Given how tightly the Chinese are packed into cities, anything introduced would spread quickly. The Humans managed to almost entirely eradicate this disease through vaccinations, but have largely stopped doing such in recent years. Should it be reintroduced, they will be unable to stop it immediately.”

There is the issue of recreation, 007 added. While we can attempt to synthesize it, working with an original sample is advised. However, the number of original samples are…limited. There is speculation that they are potentially under guard in Russia or United States Blacksites. As devastating as such a disease is, the Humans have not used it against each other.

“Hm,” Quisilia looked up again. “Don’t concern yourself with an operation to find this, I’ll handle it myself. I don’t believe I’ve visited Russia yet. It would be an educational trip.”

However it is acquired, it would likely be easy to replicate in larger quantities, 007 said. Then China will be crippled for their defiance.

“Why target China?” Rilianor asked, the question clear in his voice. “While their defiance cannot be tolerated, ADVENT is the larger threat. Why show our hand in this?”

“Because ADVENT is more useful to us,” Quisilia answered. “We should not be killing off their populations unless necessary. China is irrelevant and overpopulated. Their preservation is not important, and they will serve as an example of what happens to nations who believe themselves capable of challenging us.” Quisilia looked up thoughtfully. “And I wouldn’t worry. I am sure that ADVENT will face their share of biowarfare shortly.”

“To conclude with China,” Ravarian steered them back on topic. “We will identify all prominent Chinese politicians and either assassinate, poison, or abduct some of their family. While we shouldn’t remove all our leverage, killing a spouse or child will serve as an appropriate punishment.”

“The Battlemaster will not like that,” Quisilia warned. “While yes, unleashing a disease is going to kill a lot of Humans, it’s retaliatory. The Battlemaster is not going to like that either, but it is indiscriminate to a degree. Deliberately targeting associates of actual targets might get you executed. Especially if you kill kids.”

Ravarian pursed his lips. “It serves a purpose-“

“Take my advice,” Quisilia said. “If you absolutely must order someone assassinated, kill the politicians themselves. Or just threaten their families. But don’t touch them.” The Ethereal shrugged. “Now, I don’t necessarily care. But the Battlemaster does. Up to all of you how much you want to risk.”

Ravarian rubbed his forehead. The Battlemaster and his damn code of conduct. “Change parameters. We don’t want to throw the government into disarray, otherwise ADVENT will step in.”

“Then make their lives miserable,” Rilianor suggested. “Sabotage their electricity, water, and internet. Cripple them. Turn their country into a nightmare, and it will not take long for a diseased
population to start fighting. The world will watch as the aspiring superpower falls to pieces and becomes a disease-ridden nation.”

Ravarian heard a *click* and turned to see Quisilia had just taken a picture with his smartphone. “Well said!”

He resisted the urge to facepalm, and instead shook his head. “007, begin design and production of these units. Rilianor, prepare the Special Operators for action against China. That will be all for today, dismissed.” Once they left, he shot Quisilia a look, then activated the holoprojector in his palm and navigated to Twitter.

Sure enough, Quisilia was posting pictures of their *highly classified* meeting for the entire world to see.

**Quisilia @TheGreatQ - Dec 11, 2016**

In a very important meeting where we’re discussing the #future of the Zararch! Very exciting plans ahead! Looking forward to seeing the reaction :) #planning #zararch #xcom #vaccines #cooperation #china

And of course there was a picture attached which showed him, Rilianor, and 007 standing around a holotable looking like they were having a serious conversation. Which they were, until Quisilia decided to…be Quisilia. With some trepidation he realized he hadn’t checked some of Quisilia’s recent posts.

Mentally steeling himself, he scrolled up and was both extremely disappointed, and extremely unsurprised, not the least of which was because two of them were pictures of him, definitely taken without him knowing. The first was a picture of him looking at something on a datapad, as serious as he always was.

**Quisilia @TheGreatQ – Dec 6, 2016**

Give some support for my good old friend, he’s going through some difficult times. #support #friendshipismagic #depression #zar’chon #mentalhealthawareness

Ravarian would have almost found that touching, had it not been laced with sarcasm and the picture itself had the caption *“MFW I realize that I’m losing to a bunch of primitive aliens and can’t figure out why.”*

Ha ha. So funny. And of course the damn tweet had several hundred thousand likes. The next one was just as inane.

**Quisilia @TheGreatQ - Sep 6, 2016**

We all have these days, don’t we. #longday #reform #cats #zar’chon

This time the picture Quisilia had so helpfully attached was one of him standing and looking contemplatively out of the window of the Mars Observation Station, and also holding his cat. Great. Now the world had this image of the leader of the Zararch holding a cat in his arms.

The caption didn’t help either: *“When I have to conquer an alien species, but all I really want to do is hold my cat.”*

Ravarian didn’t really want to look at any more and just shut it off, looking up at Quisilia as he did so. “I am amazed that no one has ever killed you.”
“Oh believe me, many certainly wanted to,” Quisilia gave a light laugh. “But sadly, I’m a bit too important, and more importantly, smarter than they are.” He put his phone away. “Now, I think I have to track down an eradicated disease. Wish me luck!”

“Good luck,” he said flatly, before turning away. Sure enough, Quisilia was gone when he glanced around. Well, all things considered, everything that needed to be done was being done. Plans were being set in motion, and the shackles were gone.

He allowed himself a smile as he thought about what was coming to China.

They would wish they had just stayed out of it.

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**The Hall of Steel, Blacksite 05 – Unknown**

12/12/2016 – 8:22 P.M.

“You want to create an AI.”

Fectorian practically sniffed at that as he led the Battlemaster down one of the grey hallways. “No, I do not. However, the Chinese Humans have shown the benefits of a battlefield intelligence, and I am planning to adapt the CODEX system to such. Working in conjunction with Sargons, local commanders, and yourself, I estimate it will greatly improve our efficiency.”

The concept still sounded dangerously close, but if there was one who could make such a system, the Battlemaster had to admit it would be Fectorian. “That will take time to overhaul our communications network. As well as establish protocols.”

“Yes, yes,” Fectorian pressed a button to the door of a room, which slid open. “However, since I am now working with the illustrious species of the Collective, such implementation should not take as much time. However, I have applied that to another project I have been working on for some time.”

Both of them stepped inside a large square room, which was brightly lit and filled with motionless humanoid figures. They were roughly the size of a tall Vitakarian, with no visible eyes, sensors, or other things indicating their likely mechanical nature. However, closer inspection could show that the bodily proportions were too small for it to be a soldier wearing armor, even if there were no obvious lines indicating mechanics.

The faceplates were black, along with the rest of their body, and the overall design was extremely sleek and streamlined. The chest had silver patterns on it which culminated in a symbol of the Ethereals on the chest. “I showed the initial workings of the REPLICA project to several Andromedon and Vitakara engineers,” Fectorian said. “Based on those conversations, the Custodian Project was born. Am ultimate soldier, without equal.”

He pressed a button on his wrist and two of the figures stepped forward. “These were designed to be able to withstand Lancers in strength and melee combat,” Fectorian said, as the machine soldiers ejected nearly-invisible blades from their wrists. “Single-use nanoblades to penetrate their Iron Skin modifications, and CQC programming.”

“Durable as well, I suspect,” the Battlemaster noted. “How extensively have they been tested?”

“They have performed exceptionally in damage tests,” Fectorian motioned another armed Custodian forward, holding a heavy plasma weapon with ease. “Observe.” The Custodian
unleashed a green barrage of plasma into the chest of the other motionless Custodian. Once it stopped, the chest was very much damaged and it was several layers deep into the unit itself. However, a few seconds later the sections began reforming until it was fully repaired. The aesthetic lines and symbol were sadly not preserved, but protection had been restored.

“While they are unlikely to hold up against an artillery strike, they are more than capable of sustaining damage,” Fectorian said. “This was designed for two reasons – the first to provide a unit that cannot be dominated by psions. The second is to take advantage of the Battlefield CODEX. These units will be managed and maintained by the respective CODEX in combat.”

The Battlemaster eyed the units. “And what happens if the CODEX is not available?”

“They will proceed with standard battlefield programming,” Fectorian answered, as they began walking through the lines. “Which essentially is the elimination of enemy personnel until further notice. The authority of the CODEX can also be superseded by yourself, or whoever you designate.”

The Battlemaster nodded, finding himself more open to the idea of expanding the CODEX capabilities. Up ahead he saw one of the Custodians, standing before five seemingly unmodified Mutons. “I have given some thought to the Muton issue,” Fectorian said. “I believe I have a solution. We cannot simply discard them, but we can utilize them as simple tools. In pursuit of this, these Mutons are chipped and slaved to a Custodian.”

“Why?”

“The Custodian is a tool of the CODEX,” Fectorian explained. “And the CODEX knows optimal deployments and strategies. It also is aware of how psionic manipulation operates. If Mutons are psionically compromised it can have the Custodian secure a certain number before they can be used against us. Alternatively, it will allow the Custodians to effectively micromanage small numbers of Mutons while allowing command to focus on overall strategy.”

“Is that your proposal?” The Battlemaster turned to the engineer. “Chip and slave our remaining Mutons to these Custodians?”

“Exactly,” Fectorian nodded. “I cannot find a better solution. Even if Mutons are ultimately restrained by biology, machines are more efficient, coordinated, and decisive than the mind can ever hope to be, and are far more durable. While it cannot emulate complex strategies effectively, it can certainly put the Mutons to better use than an organic commander.”

The Battlemaster considered that. “We will test that in combat. I will not convert the entirety of the Mutons until this has been shown to be effective.”

“Reasonable,” Fectorian lifted a holoprojector in his hand, and another image appeared. This one looked like a scaled-up Custodian, but with far bulkier arms and legs. “We have already begun designs on a larger-model Custodian. This is intended to fill the same roles of psionic deterrence and command, as well as counter ADVENT MDUs, and XCOM MECs. Prototypes are being designed at this moment.”

“What of the ARCHON Project?” The Battlemaster asked.

“That,” Fectorian said with some smugness. “Is something that I wish to be a surprise for the time being. Suffice to say that the prototypes are being refined and will be shown shortly. I believe you will be pleased.”
That Battlemaster decided to tolerate that for now. He had done good work so far. “And anything else of note?”

“Ah, yes.” The hologram changed to show a vehicle the Battlemaster had read the concepts for. The Herald, as it was being called. As Fectorian had initially described it, it was an answer to the armored tanks many Human nations employed. The base of the Herald appeared at first glance to be inspired by the Sectopod center chassis, but had been elongated and had armor ‘fins’ sloping towards the ground on the sides of the main chassis. “The Herald is being prepared for prototype testing. I believe it should perform exceptionally well.”

Given the specifications, the Battlemaster agreed. The biggest flaw he could see was the limited mobility in terms of speed, but since it employed hover engines, it made up for that by being multi-directional. Plasma and railgun weapons, point-laser defenses, grenade launchers, short-term engine boosts to avoid missiles, limited Andromedon kinetic barriers, and an improved Sectopod beam on the front. Easily a match for any Human armor unit.

“Considering the cost, I should hope so,” the Battlemaster said. “I assume these will be also slaved to the Battlefield CODEX?”

“I am undecided,” Fectorian said thoughtfully. “I had designed such functionality into it, but there are several Andromedons who wish to incorporate a tailored machine intelligence into it instead. I will likely have multiple trial runs to determine what is most effective.”

“Good.” The Battlemaster liked it, and was pleased that it was far enough along where prototypes were being planned. “However, this will be of limited use against the cities. The trenches must be bypassed first.”

“Luckily, I have designed a solution to that,” Fectorian changed the hologram to something the Battlemaster had only seen the code name of. “The Executor, designed to break the trenches and end sieges.”

The size was estimated to be massive, at least four times the size of a standard Sectopod. However, the design was almost nothing like the preceding unit. Instead of two legs, it had six which supported a much larger chassis. On the top was a massive railgun, and right next to it was the hatch for the blaster launcher.

Massive plasma and coilgun cannons were attached to the sides, and below the chassis, and the Battlemaster also recalled that the legs had Andromedon barriers built into them to mitigate that weakness. “This will be refined more,” Fectorian said. “But the Executor will be more than capable of firing at ADVENT from a safe distance. As with the Herald, how it will be run is undecided. Given that this unit is not even out of the design phase, it will be some time before it is deployed.”

“You will have it,” the Battlemaster nodded. “This is promising. Excellent work. Is there more?”

“Yes, actually,” Fectorian said, turning to him. “Turn around.”

The Battlemaster did and found himself facing one of the floating Seekers. But this was not a standard Seeker. It was at least twice as big, and appeared to be more heavily armored with a long-barreled rifle poking out from the mouth. It unnervingly made no sound at all. “I have also improved the Seeker unit,” Fectorian continued. “You are seeing the one that will be deployed on the battlefield. They were designed for close and long range priority target elimination, capable of being connected to a CODEX network, and retain their cloaking capabilities. Their weapon loadouts can vary between plasma, physical, and nanoweaponry. Quite useful, if I do say so
“Indeed,” the Battlemaster mused as he looked at the unit. “Extremely. I believe the Humans will not be able to easily defend against your creations.”

“I almost hope they manage it,” Fectorian said wistfully as he pressed several buttons, as the Seeker disappeared from view. “Having a challenge is exciting. However, I do agree that no matter what they attempt, my work will always exceed theirs.”

“Continue your work,” the Battlemaster said as he turned around. “You will receive additional instructions shortly on production numbers.”

“Yes, Battlemaster.”

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Aui’Vitakar Assembly Chambers – Vitakar

12/14/2016 – 11:23 A.M.

It had been quite a long time since Ravarian had actually set foot in the Aui’Vitakar Assembly Chambers. The entire organization had been one he had slowly and gradually excised from his mind in levels of importance. They were a necessary government body, but one who had little authority or purpose outside of providing the Vitakara a sense of safety and freedom.

However, when they became angry, they could cause problems.

Thus, steps needed to be taken. Which was why he led the trio of Ethereals through the white streets to the Assembly Chambers. The Battlemaster, Revelean, and Sana’Ligna made an interesting group, and had attracted the attention of pretty much every single Vitakara in the vicinity. He’d had the Zararch lock off their route, but had designed it in such a way that the majority of Vitakara in the city would see them.

He had initially thought that it would restore some faith in the Ethereals, seeing three of them at once, but in the end it had largely turned out to take much, much longer than he had anticipated thanks to him deciding to go past the main medical ward. Sana had taken it upon herself to stop at it, saying she could ‘catch up later’.

None of them really liked that, and so all of them had made a stop at Vitiary’s Medical Ward. Ravarian actually didn’t believe Sana had intended it as a PR stunt, but if nothing else it was going to restore trust in the Ethereals. Revelean had offered to take a look at some of their medicines and limited genetic research and had (while making various amused noises) improved, fixed, or replaced these entirely.

While Revelean was doing that, Ravarian and the Battlemaster had stood around rather awkwardly. The Battlemaster had finally decided to speak to some of the wounded soldiers, what few of them there were here, and Ravarian had watched Sana work.

It was a decidedly unnerving experience.

It was not normal that she could somehow place one hand on the forehead of an ill Vitakarian and they would stand up, cured, in a matter of a few minutes. It was not normal that he literally watched the skin of all three Vitakara who had been in a small crash heal in real time, simultaneously. If he didn’t know better, it would look to the passive observer like magic.
Truthfully, he had no idea how she was doing it. Nanotech was a possibility…but that didn’t seem to really match with how she carried herself. He didn’t know how this was possible psionically…if that was even remotely related. The mysterious Sovereign technology was a possibility, but one he could not really prove.

So while the patients cried and thanked the Ethereal healer, he watched in a mix of fascination and concern.

Even for an Ethereal, she was not normal. Even Isomnum seemed more easily understood. As distasteful as the Dread Lord was, there was a clear source of his powers. There were clear and obvious answers. For Sana, whatever she did raised more questions.

It wasn’t her strange abilities, her very persona was so different from every other Ethereal it was difficult to believe she was even of the same species. She was too…nice, caring, and gentle. You felt good just being around her, yet she was absurdly humble in anything she did.

But it didn’t feel right or natural.

Perhaps he was being too cynical, but Sana seemed to inhabit a dimension of reality separate from the rest of them.

In the end, it had eventually been finished, and while the Aui’Vitakar were understanding in what the Elders had been doing, he knew that many were short on patience. Preparing for this gathering, Ravarian had identified it was the Dath’Haram and Borelians who would have the most questions. Perhaps the Vitakarians as well, and maybe the Sar’Manda if they bothered to show up. The Cobrarians were under enough threat from the Zararch that they would probably hold their tongues.

Now inside the center of the gleaming amphitheater, it was time to see what would happen. The Assembly was divided into sixths, one bloc per race. Surprisingly, all representatives – including the Sar’Manda – were present. Extending from each section was a small platform, where the chosen speaker of the race would make a motion or ask a question. All six species had one of their own ready to ask questions, and in the center was another elevated platform where the Overseer of the Assembly ran the proceedings.

"Honored Elders Revelean, Sana’Ligna, and the Battlemaster, we welcome you," the Overseer began, inclining his head towards the trio. "We are thankful you have chosen to come and address this body, and are optimistic that the Collective and the Elders will provide clear and satisfactory answers concerning recent events."

Ravarian did not fail to notice he had been excluded. Fair. The Aui’Vitakar had never especially liked the Zararch, and the feeling was mutual. He had decided that, with three Ethereals here, he would keep his own additions limited. They were not interested in the words of the Zar’Chon, but of the Elders.

"We are honored to be here," Sana took the lead, her layered and melodic voice easily echoing through the Chambers. "And on behalf of the Imperator, we wish to commend the Aui’Vitakar for wisely and carefully leading the Vitakara to prosperity." There were some nods and brief applause at that. Such was fairly normal, and expected, even if he noticed the Borelians were completely still.

"I will begin this Assembly with recognizing the designated representative from the Vitakarian Republic," the Overseer said. "Aui’charalla’vitiary, please step forward."

The Vitakarian male was the expected representative. Neutral in most matters, he tended to focus
more on Vitakar and not external or interspecies politics. As a result he maintained good relations with the races, even the Sar’Manda, even if he wasn’t looked on as a radical or charismatic leader. He was also one who didn’t ask dangerous or provocative questions. If the Republic was choosing him, then this was more of a formality than anything.

“Honored Elders, welcome,” he began. “I believe I speak for the Aui’Vitakar when I ask for an explanation regarding the documented fact that the Elder, who has been identified as Aegis, is seemingly working against the Collective.”

None of them were considering that a hostile question. It was fair and expected, even from the friendliest of Vitakara. “I can confirm this is accurate,” the Battlemaster stepped forward. “There were reasons why this was kept for the Collective. The first was that the first appearance of Aegis was the first we had seen since his departure. We suspected he was aiding XCOM, but it was in miniscule ways. As you are aware, if it was shared that there was an Ethereal who defected, it would cause panic. We wanted to keep this contained unless necessary. We did not expect this.”

“I see,” Charalla said neutrally. “And what do you plan to do to handle this traitor Ethereal?”

“Capture him if possible, and return him to the Imperator,” the Battlemaster answered. “But he is dangerous. If necessary he will be killed. There are few chances to be taken with one such as him.”

“Then you do not have a plan,” the Vitakarian said evenly. “Just a goal. Based on our limited knowledge, it does not appear that a non-psion can challenge him. As a second Ethereal was captured as well, are you certain your own kind can protect our soldiers and even yourselves?”

“Yes,” the Battlemaster’s voice was absolute. “I know Aegis’ strengths and weaknesses. I know how he thinks. Caelior did not. The reforms currently being implemented through the military will help mitigate the damage he can cause. In principle, Aegis is not a violent Ethereal. But if pressed, he can be. However, if you wish for specifics, it would likely involve a combination of telepathic assaults, kinetic bombardment and multiple armies converging on him, along with supporting psions.”

“Very well,” Charalla said. “This will be my last question posed. While your reasons for withholding this information can be seen, it is quite clear that even if we were notified of the danger, much of this could not be prevented. Even if you are acting in our best interests, it does little to build or maintain trust between our people. It appears the Humans have exploited this weakness in an attempt to weaken the bonds of our alliance. One which has worked to some capacity. Does the Imperator plan to change the policies regarding the sharing of such information?”

“Yes,” the Battlemaster said, making a wide gesture with one of his arms. “In the future, such information will be disseminated to respective government and military officials to avoid such incidents. The interconnectivity of the Collective itself is also being addressed, as many of you have likely discovered. I can confirm that there are no similar pieces of information to share.”

“Thank you, Battlemaster,” the Vitakarian said. “The Vitakarian Republic has no further questions.”

“We shall move to the Oyariah Hegemony,” the Overseer said, motioning to an Oyariah whose stone skin was more elaborate and thinner than most. “Representative Aui’farrai’hegemon.”

“Honored Elders,” the Oyariah began, a female judging by the lighter voice – the genders were nearly impossible to differentiate without speech. “The Hegemony is satisfied with the answers provided in response to the questions posed by the representative from the Republic. The
Hegemony has no further questions.”

Not unexpected. The Hegemony had no reason to cause issues, especially since they shared the closest relationship with the Ethereals out of all the races. No one else seemed surprised either. The Overseer looked to the delegation of Sar’Manda. “We shall move to the Sar’Manda Empire. Representative Aui’sariah’manda.”

There were times where Ravarian felt slightly bad for the fish. They had to constantly wear their silver suits above water, which constantly circulated water through them. The suits themselves were actually fairly decorative, incorporating silvers and blues, etched with lettering that seemed random, but the Zararch had been trying to determine for years.

However, the suits suppressed their fins, and the helmets were shaded since bright light made them uncomfortable. It also didn’t help that the Sar’Manda had a significant language barrier that they’d never attempted to overcome. Very little of the Sar’Manda language involved speech, but a complicated series of facial motions, physical gestures, and movements.

All Sar’Manda were accompanied by interpreter devices, which allowed some level of communication, although if any Sar’Manda spent a reasonable amount of time above water, they could usually understand and learn the standard languages. But there was always an air of annoyance around them when speaking, as if constantly irritated.

In this case, the Sar’Manda representative simply pressed a button and the translator device spoke, in a heavily synthesized tone. “The Sar’Manda Empire has no questions this day. We would inform the Overseer of the Assembly to only mandate our presence in the event that Vitakar faces imminent danger. Do not presume to summon the Empire again without due cause. So is the command of the Manda’sarthoria.”

At the conclusion of the device’s speech, the entire Sar’Manda delegation rose and immediately filed out without a word, leaving the rest of the Assembly in various stages of outrage, shock, or amusement. Ravarian widened an eye in mild surprise. Well, it explained why the entire delegation had been here. Making a statement here was interesting, but it only reinforced the fact that the Sar’Manda genuinely did not care about any but themselves.

However, the fact that this had come from the Manda’sarthoria himself was interesting. The reclusive leader of the Sar’Manda Empire had never been seen above the water, but on the rare times the Sar’Manda actually did something, it always on his orders.

“We will now move to the Borelian Authoritative Council,” the Overseer said, clearly wanting to restore normalcy to the room. “Representative Aui’luraian’borelia.”

That was definitely an indication of where things were headed. Luraian was one of the closest friends of the entire Authoritative Council, and the mate to the Sector Commander of the Borelian Military. As the entire Authoritative Council had expressed dissatisfaction with the Collective, this was likely not going to be taken as well as the Vitakarians.

“Elders, welcome;” he began cordially. “I first request a complete status update on the state of the war on Earth. We have been assured – multiple times – that this would be a short-lived conflict, but has so far left thousands without family, provoked an Ethereal to treason, and led to the situation we are in now. The Collective has been directly lying to us, and we are owed the truth. State it before this body now.”

Well, this was somewhat expected, but still slightly irritating. “The Humans are more resourceful than we originally anticipated,” the Battlemaster answered. “We have been unable to handle them
correctly, and are currently reevaluating our tactics and plans. They are enhanced by their ability to use psionics, and have embraced genetic modification. With Aegis now firmly on their side, they have become an entrenched threat.”

“Acceptable,” Luraian folded his arms. “That was easy, was it not? Why was none of this shared with the Authoritative Council? Or even the Aui’Vitakar? If our soldiers are fighting in your wars, we are owed an explanation as to why.”

“Because of a tendency for the less-upstanding of all species to upset the order of things,” Ravarian spoke for the first time. “Representative, you are aware that the Nulorian enjoy operating in Borelia. They are no amateurs, and would easily engage in disinformation should they find information to exploit. There have been victories and losses on Earth, but few remember the victories when the losses are in the mix. It is a price to pay for the stability of Vitakar, which all here have enjoyed.”

“I did not ask your opinion, Zar’Chon,” Luraian growled. “I wish to hear it from the Elders themselves.”

“I agree,” the Battlemaster said, causing some surprise murmurings. “That previous policy is outdated and inefficient. It was put in place because of traditional separation of the various governments and the Collective military, and I simply never bothered to change it. This will no longer be the case. All governments who have citizens in the Runianarch and Lurainian will have a direct line and representation in the Collective Military moving forward.”

That seemed to somewhat placate the Borelian. “Then you will not oppose the Authoritative Council sending independent investigators to Earth?”

“No.”

“Very well.” The Borelian stepped back. “The Authoritative Council is satisfied for now. Our representatives will be in contact shortly.”

“We will now move to the Cobrarian Hierarchy,” the Overseer said, gesturing to the Cobrarian at the podium. “Representative Aui’hissariah’dassi.”

“The Cobrarian Hierarchy is satisfied with the answers which have been provided,” she hissed. “The Hierarchy has no further questions at this time.”

That was quick. Good, one less thing to worry about.

“We will conclude with the Council of Dath’Haram,” the Overseer said, motioning to the robed alien as he eyed the Ethereals with clear suspicion. “Representative Aui’trudian’Dathaira.”

“Elders,” the Dath’Haram said with forced neutrality. “You have spoken at great length over your wish to improve the transparency of the Ethereals. Is this correct?”

“It is,” Sana said. “We can recognize the need to improve.”

“Good.” Trudian narrowed his eyes. “Then like the Authoritative Council, we would request to send our own investigative units to places of our choosing.”

“We can certainly accommodate another unit on Earth,” the Battlemaster said. “However, you are entering a war. It will not be pleasant.”

“Earth is one area, yes,” the Dath’Haram said. “The other will be sent to Desolan.”
Ravarian kept his face still. That...was not expected. At all. “What relevance does Desolan have here?” He asked.

“This is not simply about the war,” the representative said. “But about the conduct of the Collective and Elders themselves. Information has come to us in regards to the atrocities committed on that world, which were and are shielded from us. I suspect you understand what I am referring to, Zar’Chon.”

This was something of a conundrum. It appeared that the Dath’Haram needed to be handled appropriately, although not before determining just how they might have acquired such knowledge. “The Muton species, and Desolan is under the command of the Ethereal Collective military,” the Battlemaster stated, stepping forward. “Operations conducted on the planet are not authorized to be shared to civilians.”

“That does not matter,” Trudian answered firmly. “This body has the right to know the truth. If necessary I will share it myself, or have you accept our investigators.”

The Battlemaster hesitated, and Revelean stepped forward. “They will be allowed,” he said slowly. “We will let the Aui’Vitakar determine how to interpret the results.”

A simple solution. Given what he knew about the planet, and how he would deal with the Dath’Haram, that subject would be killed over time. “Now, there is also a question none of my colleagues have asked. You have started this war against a pre-spaceflight species, but you have not provided a reason as to why. Did you even attempt diplomatic communication, or did you simply wish to conquer an innocent and unknown species?”

Ravarian pursed his lips. The damn Dath’Haram were surprisingly growing a spine and asking some fairly troublesome questions. “Humans captured and interrogated our initial scouting teams,” Revelean said. “Before any sort of diplomatic channels could be established, XCOM had effectively strong-armed the majority of Humans to fight any aliens who entered Earth and declared war on us. The one we sent to negotiate with them was brutally killed by XCOM. The death of an Elder was one we cannot tolerate, and we resolved to end this conflict, even if it is not our fault. This is not an innocent species, representative, otherwise we would not be at war, would we?”

Revelean could lie quite easily it seemed. Were circumstances different, Ravarian would have had a good laugh at the thought of the Ravaged One being a negotiator. Let alone one interested in peace. The Dath’Haram still looked skeptical, but he didn’t contest the point. “And the same question for Aegis – why did he defect?”

“Aegis is...an idealist,” Sana said sadly. “He, like you feel now, prefers to view the best in people and species. He did not agree with our actions and left as a statement to the Imperator. His reasons are not complicated, even if they are mired in idealism rather than practicality.”

Sana calling anyone idealistic seemed rather ironic. No, Aegis had left for other reasons. Perhaps those included what she mentioned, but he did know that Aegis was far more practical than Sana could ever be.

“I will conclude with this,” Trudian said. “Both the Runianarch and Lurainian should be officially returned to us. The Collective may maintain control of the Zararch, but we are entitled to dictating our own military. Your words may have blinded the others at the time, but it is clear now that it has made us toothless against you. If you truly desire to reform, allow us this once more.”

Well, the Dath’Haram were certainly being combative today. He had not expected this level of
The Battlemaster considered the Oyariah facing him, unable to determine if she was going to maintain the defensive posture or launch into another attack. The Ravager of the Hegemony was known to be the most dangerous alive, only rivaled by the Stalker himself, and the Battlemaster had been forced to put some effort into fighting her.

While he maintained the height advantage, the Oyariah in question was by no means small. And the fact that she could carry the sculpted shield and warhammer with very little effort allowed her a certain quickness he could not naturally match.

When coming down to the Hegemony, he had originally only intended to speak to the Stalker and Ravager, but when the latter expressed a desire to face him in combat, he had felt like obliing as he knew they would consider it an honor. It appeared that they really only considered a few as having the qualifications to challenge him, as no additional Oyariah had expressed similar interest.

The arena was rather small, with a black stone floor and poorly lit, like most Oyariah cities. It proved to be a minor handicap, as the Ravager had no issue with the poor lighting. Around the arena were the stands, packed with Oyariah eager to see the famed Battlemaster in a duel with their champion. Stalker Heg'tretiga'hegemon also sat in one of the upper rows, flanked by his six advisors, all of which were watching in rapt attention.
Out of respect, he was refraining from using psionics in this fight. While the Oyariah would likely not care, it was an advantage he would not exploit. The Ravager dashed forward, swinging her warhammer in a swift arc while thrusting her shield towards him in a bash. He redirected her swing to the ground, and used two of his hands to grab the shield, and followed up by kicking her backwards.

She was forced to let go of the shield as she was thrown backwards, which he immediately tossed aside and began his own offensive. Both Ethereal and Oyariah traded strikes with each other, the Ravager opting in favor of pure strength and resistance than dodging. All of his strikes were met with a firm parry, although applying a considerable amount of pressure did force her arms to move.

Her strength was impressive, and she was fast enough to take most of his strikes. Granted, he was not necessarily trying his hardest, but it was far more than most he dueled. A shame that the Oyariah were not psionically sensitive, for she would make an excellent Avatar candidate. Still, he had business to take care of and he had allowed the fight to go on long enough.

Using his strength he lashed out with his blade and once she caught it, forced her to a knee, where he used his free hands to grab the warhammer itself, and lifted her into the air while applying selective punches to the face and arms until she was forced to let go. The Battlemaster threw aside the weapon, grabbed the Oyariah by the arm and slammed her into the nearby wall.

Flourishing his blade, he prepared to continue, but instead raised a hand. “I conclude this battle.”

The Oyariah equivalent of yielding. The Battlemaster nodded as the crowd cheered at the statement, which lasted for several minutes as the Ravager collected her weapons and both departed into the smaller arenas outside, which were clear for them. “You fought well,” he told her. “Your rank is well-earned.”

“The privilege is mine, honored Battlemaster,” she said, her head inclined low in respect. “I am simply pleased you accepted. All would have understood if you had not, for all know they cannot be your equal.”

“That does not mean they cannot strive for such,” the Battlemaster said as he saw the Stalker and his entourage approaching. “None improve without challenging those who are their superior.”

She looked up at him, black eyes glittering in the blue light. “If I may ask, honored Battlemaster, do you still find those who can provide such to you?”

“Yes and no,” was the answer. “I have no equal in combat. It is the battles of mind which I face today. I will conquer such eventually, but it will be many years.”

The Ravager appeared to be considering a response, but closed her mouth as the Stalker himself approached, with his advisors waiting some distance behind. Ever since the Ethereals had arrived, the Stalker of the Hegemony had been Tretiga, one of the most steadfast allies of the Ethereal Collective. Standing as tall as the Ravager, with the ceremonial crimson cape which hung off his left shoulder, and the traditional stone sword strapped to his back.

Oyariah rarely felt the need to wear armor, but there were a few that made exceptions. The Stalker was one, though aside from there being no obvious cracks where the joints would be, most would usually not know it due to the lack of any obvious markings. Both the sword and shoulder cape were enough.

The faceplates were more elaborate than most Oyariah as well. The plates visibly covered the top and back of his skull, cheeks, and there were a few plate extensions that gave the illusion of
wearing a helmet than it being a connected part of his body. “Well fought, honored Battlemaster,” he stated. “The Hegemony will not forget the privilege you have bestowed upon us.”

“It was an experience I hope to repeat someday,” the Battlemaster said. “However, there were reasons I wished to speak to you.”

“Of course,” he said. “Is this between us or may the Ravager stay as well.”

“She will stay,” the Battlemaster said, glancing to the second Oyariah. “This concerns her as well.”

“Then what do you wish?” Tretiga asked.

“I want to integrate the Hegemony Titans and leadership into the Collective military,” he said. “The Oyariah have been loyal to the Ethereals, and the Hegemony deserves more representation in the Collective. Your ambitions may not have led to this goal, but the Oyariah can do more than reside in your cities forever.”

Both Oyariah seemed somewhat surprised at that, both exchanging a look. “You honor us with such a proposal,” Tretiga said slowly. “If I may inquire, the Hegemony itself would be retained but we would have a presence beyond it?”

“Correct,” the Battlemaster confirmed. “I am assembling the best of the Collective as I reorganize the military. The Titans would be fully integrated into the Collective, and either you or the Ravager would have a place on the War Council of the Collective.”

“I assume we would fight in conflicts as well,” the Ravager said. “You are not one to command from afar.”

“When appropriate,” the Battlemaster said. “I have little interested in leaders who do not participate. Having the Stalker or Ravager of the Hegemony would be sure to inspire allies and make enemies hesitate.”

“That can be arranged,” the Stalker sounded grimly happy. “I would not hesitate to test myself against the Humans and traitors. None have dared test me for decades, even if the infernal Sar’Manda have come close.”

“Their actions were highly disrespectful,” the Ravager agreed grimly. “I am surprised they were simply allowed to leave for such a grave insult.”

The Battlemaster raised a hand. “The Sar’Manda do not matter. In time they will be forgotten in their oceans while the Oyariah expand to the stars as the champions of the Elders. Do not focus on the irrelevant actions of a few in light of what is required. I presume such a proposition is acceptable to you?”

“I will consult with my advisors, and the One Encased,” the Stalker said. “But it will be little more than a formality. On behalf of the Hegemony, we are once more honored by this offer.”

“I look forward to the integration,” the Battlemaster said. “But do not become overconfident. Our enemies are dangerous and intelligent, and we need to be better in order to overcome them. That is the standard that must be held to, but I believe your race can achieve it.”

“On that, honored Battlemaster,” the Ravager said with an inclined head. “You have my word.”

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Yang held out the sword in front of her, completely vertical to the ground. Drawing upon her power, she focused her telekinetic grip around the weapon itself, and then slowly released her hand, letting the blade hang in the air. She then slowly walked around it, seeing if there were any dips or slips in her control.

She twisted her wrist and the short sword flew back towards her hand, landing squarely in her palm.

Well, at least she had that down.

She personally didn’t see much use in melee weapons, as they would always be inferior to psionics, but the Battlemaster was likely going to expect such a skill. Or maybe he wouldn’t, and would be more impressed. Looking at the footage of his skills, Yang was quite certain that whenever he actually met her, she would be utterly destroyed.

In which case, she could at least try and be a little creative with her fighting style. One of the historical documents regarding the Battlemasters had focused on the various fighting styles, and one that had caught her eye was one Battlemaster who had interwoven telekinesis into his fighting style, resulting in him being able to fight off or harass opponents from a relatively safe distance.

It had been regarded as one of the most difficult to actually learn and perform, as well as an increased risk of friendly fire. And if the psion ever lost control, they were usually left weaponless. Still, it was something to investigate and she had decided to try it out.

As she had found out, it was somehow harder than she had anticipated.

One slip of the mind and the grip was loosened and lost. One penetrating distraction and she might be dead. She had just needed to acquaint her mind to always maintaining a passive grip on something, and then not letting anything disrupt it. On that front, she believed she had almost gotten it. She could perform all kinds of physical feats while not losing control.

Of course, this was just keeping the sword in one place. The next hurdle was actually manipulating it.

Holding the blade horizontally, she sent it back out several meters and froze it by making her palm flat. Damn, she shouldn’t be doing that. The document had specifically stated that physical gestures should only accompany the manipulation of the object if absolutely necessary. Physical limbs were a limitation, and one she had to avoid falling into.

She took a breath, and let her arm fall to the side. Focusing intently on the weapon, she thought of what to try first. Probably a few swipes and swings. The blade began to move and she consciously gripped her own arm to prevent herself from making the motion. As a result, the blade slammed into the ground, though quickly bounced up since her grip was maintained.

Alright, it was a start.

Yang was now eternally thankful that Battlemaster Quiarma had the foresight to actually write down his techniques and perform them properly. The documents had said that the Ethereal could, when focused, wield up to twelve regular-sized weapons simultaneously. She didn’t know if she could surpass that, but she was certainly going to try.
The swipes were severely overcompensating, slow, and otherwise mockeries of the real thing, but she persevered nonetheless. She barely noticed the temperature rising and her panting breath as she struggled to maintain her mental grip on the weapon. But it eventually slipped, and on a swing she sneezed and the blade went clattering to the ground.

Yang grimaced, and instinctively reached out, then stopped and kept her arm at her side. Instead she took another deep breath and mentally directed her telekinetic grip towards the weapon. It took a few minutes, but it rose and floated towards her. Once close enough, she grabbed it, pommel up and flipped it upright.

“I have to admit,” Nico said from the entrance of the training area. “I didn’t take you for a sword person.”

Yang eyed him with no small amount of suspicion. The cheeky teen had an unsettling habit of showing up out of nowhere and otherwise acting like a spy. Given how she was very adept at knowing if she was being watched, someone who could manage to surprise her was unwelcome. However, she suspected Sicarius was training him, as well as talking to him so much.

Still, she couldn’t really stay irritated at him. If there was one person who had drawn an even shorter straw in life, it was him. Her own issues seemed smaller compared to what he had gone through. Her family was still alive, mostly, but he had no one.

The Ethereals certainly had a knack for finding damaged people. She wasn’t exactly ignorant as to why that was. Soldiers fought better when they were motivated, even if it was manipulative. However, she didn’t care and she doubted Nico did either. Humanity was too violent, selfish, greedy, and stupid to do anything more than eventually blow themselves up.

If the Collective was better was up for debate, but it couldn’t really be worse. And while some considered ADVENT as the turning point for the species, they were far from it. ADVENT was exceptionally good at propaganda, but the truth was there were still Humans in charge of it. They were a more competent and dangerous China, only concerned with world subjugation before all else.

They were not the good guys. The Imperator had quite openly revealed the lengths ADVENT and XCOM had taken to assume power. Anyone who believed they were any better than the so-called ‘brutal’ aliens was either lying, stupid, or a victim of either of those. It wasn’t as though the aliens were much better, the Sectoids certainly showed that, but that was just how the galaxy worked.

No black and white, only varying shades of grey. As far as she was concerned, ADVENT and the aliens were at roughly the same place.

She realized Nico was awaiting an answer. “Didn’t think I was,” she shrugged. “But the Battlemaster likely has expectations. Best to try and meet them.”

Nico nodded. “Ah, he still hasn’t come?”

“She’s busy fixing the mess that is the Collective,” Yang said, telekinetically summoning a water bottle. “I’m definitely not on his priority list. I doubt he really wants to deal with me either. Works for me, more time means I might actually survive a few seconds before he beats me to a pulp.”

Nico smirked. “You’ll last longer than that.”

Yang looked at him incredulously. “Maybe if he’s feeling generous. Did you see how quickly he took apart that XCOM squad in DC?”
The young man winced at the memory. “Fair point.”

“Yeah,” Yang took another gulp. “Anyway, what are you doing here? Sicarius want something?”

“Not today,” he said, shaking his head. “Just curious what you think of the newest resident of the Temple Ship.”

Yang shot him a look. “The Imperator found another one?”

“Well, that was extremely interesting. She’d only heard she was a candidate for an “Avatar Project”, but didn’t know any details. It was clear that there were different candidates per Ethereal. Nico was obviously one for Sicarius, and she suspected she would be one for the Battlemaster. There were probably others as well, but the Imperator seemed to have not chosen one for himself yet.

“Huh,” she said thoughtfully. “You know who she is?”

A retrospectively stupid question. Of course Nico would know her fucking name. He had likely been the guide the first time she’d arrived. “Oh yeah,” Nico sounded rather amused. “And you’ll never guess who it is.”

The Chinese woman narrowed her ice-blue eyes. “Just tell me, I really don’t care about playing a guessing game right now.”

“Alright, alright,” he smiled. “Patricia Trask.”

Her eyes widened in shock and the water bottle in her hand crumpled. “I’m sorry,” she said slowly. “Who did you say?”

“You heard me right,” Nico said, getting far too much amusement out of this. “Patricia Trask. The Patricia Trask.”

“From XCOM?!”

“The one and only.”

Yang took a deep breath. “I don’t suppose you’d…” she paused, thinking about how best to articulate what she wanted to say. “…know just what the fuck the Imperator is thinking?”

“But she was with XCOM,” Yang finished. “Not exactly prime ally material. Much less for whatever the hell this Avatar Project is.”

“I’m going with the assumption he knows what he is doing,” Nico shrugged. “If he can somehow make Patricia Trask an ally, then I’m not going to question it.”

Oh, she most certainly was going to question it. But when she was calmer, and with more time to think. Why did the Collective keep making such idiotic decisions? Without saying goodbye, she walked back out into the arena and threw her sword in front of her, freezing it in place once again.

At least this had given her some energy. She wished there was a dummy somewhere. Preferably one with Patricia’s face on it. That would be cathartic.
"I have received your report," the hologram of the Zar’Chon said. "Good work. The network was much more extensive than we imagined, although there were surprisingly few Mutons we were able to recover."

“Not really,” Nartha shook his head in mock disgust, and didn’t fail to note the Zar’Chon’s grudging approval. “I detailed such in the report. They played it safe above all else, and only took a few. They occasionally had to dump some of them to avoid detection. There were many, but their skill was limited.”

"Regardless, your actions have ended a constant annoyance on Desolan,” the Zar’Chon commended. “We will take appropriate precautions to ensure this does not happen again.”

Hopefully the Chronicler and Nulorian would be able to deal with that. “I’m glad to hear it. What is my next assignment?”

The Zar’Chon pursed his lips as he looked at something from his holoprojector prosthetic. “The Andromedon Federation has recently moved to resume combat operations. However, it was not unanimous with several major and minor Unions rejecting such a proposal. Considering your recent successes, you are best suited for investigating the largest culprit.”

The Andromedons. Perfect. The Zar’Chon was sending him exactly where he needed to be. “Which Union?”

“Union Viarior,” the Zar’Chon answered. “You might have heard of them.”

He had, although his knowledge was extremely limited. The Zararch had conducted a report on the major Unions years ago, which was still being updated as new information emerged. “The financial Union,” he recalled. “Not really the power they used to be, but still maintain tight bonds with every major Union and are the main suppliers?”

“An acceptable overview,” the Zar’Chon said grimly. “Many of the larger Unions are attempting to become more self-sufficient, but Union Viarior still maintains a resource lock on nearly every minor Union, and still supplies basic resources to the larger ones. They managed to survive the Union Wars relatively unscathed because of this. That they are flagrantly resisting is… concerning.”

Concerning for the Ethereals, excellent news for him. “I’ll depart soon,” he said. “Any direct orders?”

“No,” the Zar’Chon gave a thin smile. “They cannot openly kill a Zararch agent. If they refuse to give you what you wish, report it. I doubt they will, but be prepared to have an escape plan.”

“And what evidence do you want?” He asked. “Their word will not be enough.”

“If you discover suspicious or incriminating data, save it immediately and return,” the Zar’Chon paused. “If you find nothing obvious, acquire a copy of their databases and return. The analysts will go through it to be sure.”

Easy enough. “Understood.”
Good work again, Agent," the Zar’Chon gave a brief nod. “I await your results.”

The holoprojector blinked off, leaving him alone…well…

He glanced around to see if there was anyone who had snuck in. No, he really was alone.

Nice of the Zar’Chon to provide such a clear roadmap. This was likely going to be much easier and straightforward than Desolan, and he felt that was deserved. Convincing an entire Union wouldn’t be the easiest thing, but he could be persuasive when he needed.

And with such an influential Union behind them, this entire resistance might be gradually forming into a threat. They were still some ways off from that, but at last, the endgame was in sight.

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The Prism Command Center, Blacksite 009 – Unknown Location

12/19/2016 – 1:11 P.M.

The newly reformed Collective War Council was ultimately much better than his previous attempt at such. All of those he’d chosen were skilled, intelligent, and were capable of thinking for themselves. They would also have far more responsibility than before, as he had decided to begin the delegation of certain aspects of the Collective Military.

The Ravager of the Hegemony was the first, who could be substituted with the Stalker himself when he wished, and she was primarily in charge of managing and coordinating close-ranged units, city conquests, and determining training regimes and tactics of the Collective. She also directly managed all Oyariah forces and was responsible for establishing, then maintaining, lines of communication between the Hegemony and Collective.

Lur’galitai’borelia was one of the highest-ranked Borelians in the Lurainian, and until recently on the Borelian Authoritative Council as a consultant and trainer. Older for a Borelian, with some of her fur beginning to turn silver, she was still in peak physical form. She would be in charge of all aspects of the Lurainian, and have a similar role to the Ravager in terms of setting up lines of communication between the Council and Collective.

Her responsibilities also included managing the Borelians in the military, and was the primary authority on special forces strikes and general battlefield command if needed. He was confident she could handle it, even if it was a far larger workload than she had experienced before.

Then there was Zar’vacialla’inth, the representative from the Zararch, who could be substituted for the Zar’Chon if needed. As expected, her role was to provide combat intelligence on any defenses, targets, and personnel they would face. The Vitakarian would also oversee sabotage and target prioritization, as well as ensure unit morale was within acceptable limits.

The Zar’Chon had assured him she was capable, and he expected such.

Sci’darolo’vititay was another Vitakarian, a scientist who would oversee the genetic modification programs, applications, and recruiting efforts. He had some authority over the Vitakarians in the military, but only if others were not available. He was not a soldier, but he was one of the more open-minded when it came to self-improvement. Having a direct connection to both the Republic and Revelean’s science team was also an added benefit.

There was J’Loran, who had command of Andromedon forces now, and served as the primary link to both the Collective and Fectorian’s engineering teams. Disciple-7 had similarly retained his role
and was tentatively overseeing Muton deployment, training, and improvement, as well as serving as a tactical consultant.

The final member was somewhat controversial, and it was Hive Commander 801, the one whose Hive was the primary designer for all Sectoid spacecraft. While usually an architect and designer, 801 was also knowledgeable about space combat and would serve as both the naval coordinator, and link to the Hive Commanders themselves. While some were not thrilled, it was important that all species have at least some representation here.

“Custodian integration will take some time,” J’Loran said, as they were finishing discussing Fectorian’s improvements. “There is the question of how we handle such integration, especially in regards to publicity. These are not sentient machines.”

“There is little point in keeping it a secret,” the Ravager said. “It will not take ADVENT or XCOM long to notice what is happening.”

“Agreed,” Vacialla said thoughtfully. “It is important the soldiers know what they are working with, and the contingencies in place in the event of psionic interference.”

“There is no reason to keep this secret,” the Battlemaster said. “Allow the soldiers this knowledge, unless there are objections.”

There were none, so he moved on. “Concerning the genetic enhancement, it is something which needs to be refined, as well as ensuring the soldiers are psychologically able to properly fight.”

“This will take time,” Darolo said slowly. “Even working with the Hive Commanders and Revelean, it will take some time to prepare the appropriate modifications, as there are multiple species. Progress is being made, but it will take longer to actually fully improve what is left of the Runianarch and Lurainian. Keep in mind that there are many Vitakara who have an aversion of genetic modification, and it is better to slowly introduce this idea.”

“The amount of soldiers which are needed on Earth are small in comparison to the greater Collective,” Disciple-7 stated. “There is no need to rush, and the enhanced Mutons and Custodians will provide the needed infantry power. Upon the deployment of the Herald and Executor, this needed number will further decrease.”

_The modifications will likely take less time than expected, 801 interjected. With the full capabilities of the Hive Commanders behind it, there is more than enough time to enhance an army for Earth._

“Regardless of that, there is still the issue of what to do with the Vitakara not cleared for combat,” Darolo added. “It would be a waste to return them to Vitakar, but they are not suited for the battlefield.”

“Two options present themselves,” Disciple-7 said. “Either as support, medical duty, or suppliers for standard operations, or colony and homeworld defense. It will provide the colonies with additional support, as well as give Vitakar an armed presence besides the Zararch. Perhaps this can be what the Aui’Vitakar establish.”

Darolo rubbed his forehead. “It will take…a significant amount of time to cover the entirety of the Runianarch.”

“We have time,” the Battlemaster said. “We control the pace of this war, and I will not have us rush into it hastily again. When we strike next, it will result in a victory. Anything else will be a failure.” At the nods and affirmations around him, he looked down to the holotable and activated...
“The Prism will now be used as the main simulation, which I expect to be used frequently. But to do that, all of you need to be briefed on its capabilities.”

As he explained it to them, he was fairly confident that they were once more moving in the right direction. He wouldn’t know for sure until he stepped foot on Earth again, but it was promising.

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Patricia’s Quarters – The Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

12/19/2018 – 11:12 A.M.

Patricia sat on her bed, oblivious to the world around her as she finally decided to accept what she had been avoiding the past couple of days. She knew what she should do. She should flatly refuse the Imperator’s offer, do whatever it took to return to Earth, even if it meant her death. But she didn’t even think the Imperator was lying to her about that.

She could return to XCOM and…she didn’t think much would change.

And things had to change. With what she’d learned from the Imperator, things couldn’t be the same. The war on Earth didn’t seem as important in comparison, nor the Imperator an unreasonable Ethereal. But she didn’t know if she could actually convince the Commander, let alone Aegis about even considering hearing the Imperator out, or herself for that matter.

If she left, and failed to convince them, she would likely die for nothing or see Humanity fall under the influence of a Sovereign One. And with the Commander’s desire to implement the Manchurian Restraints, it would kill any attempt to stop his plans. What had seemed a responsible means to ensuring psions didn’t turn on Humanity might very well be their downfall.

Ironic how her views on that had completely changed. But it wasn’t for the reasons like most would say. It had nothing to do with freedom, liberty, or ethics, but instead because it would make them incapable to following a path not dictated by the Commander or ADVENT. They were leading humanity down a misguided path, but one they simply didn’t know about.

They thought, she had thought, they were in the right. And from their perspective, they were. But the Imperator had filled in the gaps, and she couldn’t easily dispute his words. Was there different ways he could have accomplished this goal? Likely, but he was treading a fine and dangerous line with being of such power.

She would go back to XCOM, but not now.

For now she would stay here, learn everything she could. Find enough to definitively prove that the Imperator was correct in what he said, then return and present it to the Commander. He was not unreasonable, but even so she feared that he would be too blinded by what had already happened to consider that the Imperator might not be the enemy.

So that was her plan for now.

What she did not know was if it was the right one.

But knowing what the Imperator had told her, there seemed no other acceptable path.
A funeral was never something he enjoyed attending, which he supposed was a good thing, but it wasn’t even that simple for him. The Commander believed funerals should be held to honor and remember the dead by their close friends and family. Funerals were supposed to be personal and private.

He could understand to an extent the thousands at the funeral of Nicole Treduant, finally being held now that D.C. was in an appropriate state, but at the same time turning this into a kind of public, televised event, was not something he supported. Very few of these people had ever known her, and even he wasn’t sure he was supposed to be here since it wasn’t as though he knew her all that well either.

Yet out of everyone in XCOM, he was the most qualified. And anyone who stood against the Battlemaster and died for it deserved to be remembered.

He gave no speeches or calls to action. Others had done that. Her husband, then the now-President Harry Goldbloom, even Saudia had given a short speech. All had extolled her as a model leader and example of Humanity. All had called for her death not to be forgotten. He had not been ignorant of the glances sent his way, but all he did was sit at his designated seat and listen politely.

He was sad she had died, but he did not mourn. He didn’t know her well enough for that, and he doubted she would want them too. Paying his own silent tribute, he simply listened and followed the procession until she was lowered into Arlington Cemetery. Nicole Treduant, the second President to find themselves on an active battlefield, and the first to die in combat.

At the end there was a small memorial where those invited could place mementos, flowers, or other trinkets. Most left exactly those, and he had brought one of his own. It was a small ribbonless medallion shaped into the familiar XCOM emblem. Grey and colorless, the only identifying marks were some short words inscribed on the back of the medallion.

To Nicole Treduant, 45th President of the United States, who gave her life to halt the alien threat. Vigilo Confido.

Generic, he felt, but it summarized what she had done well enough on the limited space. At least she deserved all the attention she was receiving now, and she also probably would approve of becoming a rallying point for ADVENT, and America specifically. She had been an exceptionally popular president and her death had fully secured America as an ADVENT supporter.

To suggest otherwise was nigh-traitorous. American nationalism was finally becoming somewhat useful, as long as it was directed against the aliens, anyway. There were already plans to erect a statue in her honor on the lawn of the White House. ADVENT was going to use her status for all it was worth.

In another time it probably would have been seen in bad taste, but in war they needed every advantage they could.
“At least it didn’t rain,” Saudia sounded subdued as she walked up. “One thing to be thankful for I suppose.”

He grunted, but didn’t smile. Saudia looked exactly the same as she always did; so did he, mostly. The natural black of ADVENT and XCOM made for natural funeral attire. Neither of them were armed, though her personal guard were standing just out of earshot and keeping harassers away.

“You’re quiet,” she finally said, clasping her hands in front of her. “Something I should be aware of? You’re not the sentimental type, even if you did respect her.”

He pursed his lips, glancing over at her. To say that there was ‘something to be aware of’ was something of an understatement that all of them were still trying to puzzle out. “Yes,” he finally said as the people began filing out. “But not here. It isn’t good though.”

She took it in stride with a single nod. “How bad?”

“The Imperator has become more involved.”

Saudia grimaced. “I suppose that is to be expected. Aegis, and now you took Caelior…” she furrowed her eyebrows. “What ended up happening to him anyway?”

“He’s under control. Currently locked away where he isn’t a danger.”

“Well, the point is the Imperator would become involved at some point,” Saudia continued. “I would be more suspicious if he did nothing.”

The Commander debated trying to argue the point that the Imperator doing anything meant that it was going to be very, very bad for them. However, she’d learn that soon enough. Nonetheless, she had a point. The Imperator did have some restraint in waiting as long as he did, but it didn’t make his actions any easier to tolerate. “You need to prepare the PRIEST Program,” he said slowly. “The Restraints are nearly complete.”

“A relief,” Saudia said, crossing her arms. “Some good news then. I’ll be sure to let them know. How soon?”

“Within three weeks.”

“Understood,” she turned once more to face him. “ADVENT has a lot of work to do. I suspect XCOM is taking advantage of this lull as well. I’ll be speaking to you later, Commander. Good luck.”

He gave a wry smile. “Appreciated, Chancellor.”

Saudia walked off, leaving him standing beside a bunch of empty chairs as everyone in the cemetery began leaving the premises. And he really had no reason to stick around either, since he had no meeting plans here. Those weren’t typical for him at funerals. And he had plenty of work to do back at the Praesidium.

However, that didn’t seem to stop one particular woman from coming up to him out of the corner of his eye. She stood, appraising him for a brief moment. He raised an eyebrow and turned to her inquisitively. “Are you looking for someone?”

The woman was certainly…unique. Just under six feet, shoulder-length white hair, green eyes, and a scar running vertical over her left eye, and a fairly confrontational pose. She was dressed in something closer to military fatigues than formal dress wear, though certainly none he’d ever really
seen. Although after some time, black fatigues all started to look the same.

“You’re the Commander of XCOM,” she glanced around. “No personal escort? Would have thought you would have one.”

He gave a humorless smile. “Unnecessary. I can handle myself just fine.”

“So I’ve heard,” she glanced around again, making him wonder who she was. The British accent mostly nailed down where she was from, but she definitely didn’t seem to belong here.

“Who are you?” He asked finally. “Most people don’t talk to me unless they have a purpose.”


The Commander cocked his head. “You’re a survivor of Australia?” He asked, knowing there were two very different possibilities here, one significantly more dangerous than the other. “And I don’t remember Agent Gertrude mentioning you.”

“Friend of a friend,” Fiona repeated. “I was one of Mr. Harper’s people.”

“When you say that…”

“I mean to say that he would like to let you know he made it out of that dangerous situation,” Fiona said carefully, unsubtly glancing around again. “And that he’ll be re-establishing contact as soon as he can.”

Well, that was certainly interesting news. “Tell him I look forward to it,” the Commander said with a nod. “And you need to work on being inconspicuous. ADVENT is definitely watching you.”

She blinked. “Say again?”

He sighed. “Just make sure you aren’t followed when you leave.”

She smiled at that and backed away in farewell. “Don’t worry about that. No one can follow me where I go. See you, Commander.” She spun on a heel and walked away doing everything someone who wanted to remain inconspicuous did not. Going off on her own, not sticking to crowds, not wearing proper attire, and seeming far too focused and chipper for a funeral.

What an odd woman. Perhaps it was to be expected that a Sovereign One wouldn’t pick people who care about that, but there was still room for improvement. For better or worse though, it appeared he was going to have a meeting with the illustrious Sovereign One soon enough.

Hopefully it wouldn’t be for some time. There was a lot of work to do.

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Situation Room, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/14/2016 – 8:10 P.M.

“Any plans you have to bring her back should be dismissed,” Aegis said flatly. “She is gone.”

“For now,” the Commander wasn’t quite ready to write off Patricia, even if Aegis seemed to be more than willing. “She’s smart and tough.”
“She is with the Imperator now,” Aegis repeated, sounding frustrated. “She is lost.”

“Do you really think he’s going to try and turn her?” The Commander demanded, beginning to pace. “Does he think that would work?”

Aegis sharply inhaled. “That is exactly what he intends. Why do you think he was trying to communicate with her so much?”

“And you said that he doesn’t directly mind control people he finds interesting,” Vahlen pointed out, speaking up for the first time. “Patricia would not be easily swayed. Would he torture her?”

“Unlikely,” Aegis shook his head. “He would consider it a waste of time, and a failure on his part. But it isn’t as simple. People change when they stay around the Imperator for too long. She cannot protect herself forever.”

“And following his logic,” the Commander continued. “He would know the effect he causes and not abuse it.”

If Ethereals could make faces of frustration, the Commander knew it would be on his face. Even if he could, his helmet hid it completely. “The point, Commander, is that we cannot expect Patricia to be alive or the same if we see her. We need to move on.”

“On that I think we can all agree,” Zhang stated, his face set in stone. The entire event had definitely shaken all of them, but Zhang had especially found it disturbing. “She is out of our reach for now. There is no question of it.”

“What we need to figure out is how we will respond,” Jackson stepped forward. “The public is going to want to know what happened to her, and they will notice her absence. More importantly… this can’t go unpunished. They kidnapped one of our own.”

“And we now have Caelior,” Aegis said with a shrug of his shoulders. “The Imperator likely saw that as a fair trade, if he even considered such things when deciding on this course of action.”

“Except we beat Caelior ourselves,” Jackson’s eyes flashed. “This isn’t anywhere close to the same situation. It’s one thing to lose and her be taken captive. It’s another to cheat with telepathy.”

Zhang sniffed. “And what gave you the impression that the Imperator cares about fairness?”

Jackson scowled, but didn’t really have an answer for that.

“You raise a good point,” the Commander said after a few moments, stepping forward to the holotable. “This is yet another escalation, and we will respond in kind. There is no more holding back when we fight their kind.” After pressing a few buttons, the hologram of a nuclear warhead appeared. “Normally I would be against indiscriminate nuking of alien positions. At least on Earth. But the aliens have helpfully established Gateways in their territory connecting to their military bases within their space.” He tapped the table. “The policy regarding Gateway capture has changed. Prior to separation we will send through a salted nuclear warhead and sever the connection.”

It was, admittedly, a provocative step, but the Commander didn’t necessarily care what the Collective felt. They had kidnapped one of his soldiers, and there would be retribution. It was why he had chosen salted nukes instead of standard ones. Denying their base, and poisoning the land for generations would send a suitable message and destroy a base in the process.

“Risky,” Zhang pointed out. “We don’t know if they get reinforcements from Earth. We might
“Unlikely,” the Commander shook his head. “Gateways display their coordinate planes. If it is within a certain number we can determine if it’s on Earth. Then we’ll just send in something more conventional.”

“If I may,” Shen interrupted, looking mildly concerned. “Where, ah, are we acquiring these weapons? ADVENT?”

“No,” the Commander gave a thin smile, pressing some more buttons. “We’re making our own. Thanks to your construction efforts, Shen, we now have three satellite bases.” The world map came up, with red dots highlighting the bases Shen had virtually overseen as they were constructed. Most in XCOM didn’t know about them yet, but he’d felt it was important to diversify. He pointed at one. “Manhattan Base will handle the construction of all heavy ordinance, which will include nuclear weapons.”

“I’ll make the necessary arrangements,” Shen sighed. “I suppose it was only a matter of time until we reached this point.”

“Since we’re on this topic,” Jackson said. “Have you decided what the other bases are for?”

“Yes,” the Commander highlighted the next one. “Since ADVENT has so helpfully decided to send certain useful alien defectors to us, they should have their own lodge. I don’t want to intermix them with our soldiers immediately. Paperclip Base will primarily house our alien defectors, including Aegis if he wishes.”

“Separating them does not seem advisable,” Aegis warned. “Not if your goal is integration.”

“I said house,” the Commander repeated. “All Gateways will connect to the Praesidium, which will serve as a central hub. Nothing prevents Humans or aliens from interacting with each other. But the aliens should have a space they have some control over, and with some oversight, it will give them some assumed freedoms.”

“Speaking with various aliens reinforces this,” Vahlen interjected. “In fact, some have expressed how they prefer Human architecture over this as they find Sectoid architecture disquieting. And most are not used to large amounts of Humans, especially those who were until recently their enemies. It is better for the mental health of all that they have a separate place of residence.”

“Then I will oversee them, if you do not mind,” Aegis said.

“That would be acceptable,” the Commander nodded. “They will prefer having you enforce guidelines than a Human.”

“Right,” Jackson stepped forward, looking towards the last base. “And this one?”

“Ah, yes,” the Commander nodded towards Vahlen. “Prometheus Base. The new Science Division of XCOM overseen by Dr. Vahlen. Due to the constraints imposed by current projects, the research team needs greater resources and room.”

Jackson gave a wan smirk. “Poor Shen.”

“I will remind you I also am overseeing a nuclear weapons research and production facility,” the elderly engineer reminded her. “And the Commander has also informed me that once the Science teams depart, the spaces they formerly occupied would be replaced by the Cybernetic and AI teams. I am not receiving the short end here.”
“Oh,” Jackson said, looking slightly mollified.

“And Shen just covered everything else,” the Commander motioned towards him, while looking back towards the holotable. “More soldiers will be coming soon as we expand. ADVENT is also expanding their Gateway networks, and soon every major base will have immediate reinforcement capabilities. However, we need to focus on ways to mitigate telepathy. We’ve seen the danger it poses now, and until we can protect ourselves from it…we cannot win this war.”

“The Manchurian Restraints will keep our psions under control,” Zhang mused. “But as a defense against telepathy it is a crude one at best.”

“If I may, Commander,” Shen said slowly. “This is a subject both Vahlen and I have been discussing at length. We have several possible solutions to show you very soon.”

“Right,” he briefly glanced at her. “You did mention this at one point.” He looked up at the Ethereal. “Until then, will you be able to sense if the Imperator tries to take control again?”

“I will likely be able to detect it,” Aegis answered. “Stopping it…I do not know. Perhaps for myself, but certainly not for everyone.”

“We’ll have to make do,” the Commander sighed. “Continue with the projects and operations. Dismissed.”

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Commander’s Quarters, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/15/2016 12:05 A.M.

It was definitely harder to get to sleep the past few days.

Though it didn’t really seem to be affecting Vahlen too much. Then again, she hadn’t really been aware of what had been happening and the Imperator had likely ignored her. In fact, he’d likely intentionally ignored her because she was a fairly powerful telepath in her own right.

Regardless, he’d never really thought much about what it felt like to be on the receiving end of being mind controlled, and now that he had, he never wanted to feel it again. Knowing what he wanted to do, yet being unable to no matter how much he tried. And there was no mental hurdle to overcome when his mind was no longer his to begin with.

This was something they should have been trying to solve long ago.

The end of the war wasn’t going to be determined by weapons, numbers, or bombs, but by which side used psionics the most effectively. It might also come down to Sovereign technology as well. One which they were still learning about, but would never be as powerful as an Ethereal, and the other they were struggling to comprehend at all.

If they couldn’t reach the heights of the Ethereals, then they could keep trying to negate them.

Hampering their telepathy was imperative. It was no longer a matter of debate.

The Commander slowly got into bed beside Vahlen, careful so as not to wake her, and finally rested against her while closing his eyes. She must have been exhausted if he hadn’t woken her there, since she almost always did, no matter how much he tried. Well, given recent events, he could understand that.
Although it did remind him about something which had fallen by the wayside. Christmas was coming up. He was torn between making that a no-work day for everyone with a substantial bonus, or treating it as normal and doubling that bonus. It was at the stage where he didn’t know if they could afford to take off a day.

Yes, everyone deserved one day off, but that one day could be crucial…

Well, maybe he was being a bit hyperbolic. But the other slight issue was that the holidays were to be spent with family, as well as friends. Most people here had at least some family outside XCOM, and while he could probably have one day with no work, he couldn’t very well risk losing any personnel on short vacations (In addition to taking up time, the Zararch might be watching).

Although that did tie back to another vulnerability that could come up in the future. If the Collective figured out who was in XCOM, their families might become targets. That was not an acceptable risk, especially since the conflict already made them stressed about the safety of their family.

There was one solution. Another base be built which would house the families of XCOM personnel. It might not be as comfortable as some of them were used too, but they would be safe and see their loved ones regularly.

Shen would have to figure out appropriate dimensions. This wouldn’t be an easy undertaking, assuming the Internal Council agreed to its necessity in the first place.

Something to keep in mind. That was a problem for another day.

Although he should probably get Vahlen something. Something she’d like. He had a few days, something could be done.

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Templar Training Arena, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/15/2016 – 10:31 A.M.

Nuan really wished that they could just have a victory with no drawbacks for once. They’d captured an Ethereal, resecured Japan, and China and ADVENT were working together to an extent. Everything was actually going very well, until the aliens had managed to kidnap Patricia. The rumors she’s heard about how that happened were terrifying.

None of those involved were talking about it, though had, and still looked unnerved wherever they went. Most of them were dealing with it by beating stuff up or exhausting themselves. Carmelita was currently trying to take down an icy Iosif who was casually deflecting her strikes with psionic shields, to a small crowd of onlookers.

One of whom was an Oyariah.

Who was now staring at her.

She did not like that.

Oh great, he’s coming towards me. Trying not to look too nervous, she looked up at the three-meter hunk of chiseled stone. They might have that as their skin, but to her it definitely looked like hardened stone. Technically the alien was probably naked right now, but thankfully not that naked. “You,” he rumbled. “You are not one of the Templars. I have not seen you before.”
“I’m not,” she answered casually, or as casually as she could. “I’m…watching.” She nodded towards the dueling soldiers. “Iosif, mostly. You know who he is, I assume?”

“Ah, yes,” the big alien nodded, voice lightening in recognition. “An admirable Human. I did not realize he had a mate.”

If Nuan had been drinking water, she would have spat it and instead made some sort of hacking sound before responding. “I am not his mate, alien!”

She didn’t fail to notice one of the other soldiers snickering at the exchange, who she didn’t recognize so she narrowed her eyes when shooting him a quick glance before returning to deal with the alien. “What gave you that idea?”

“Hm, unfortunate,” the Oyariah incredulously didn’t back down, instead appraising her. “Although perhaps it’s for the best. You’re too small for him.”

“Small,” she sputtered. “Why does that actually matter?”

The Oyariah looked at her, with an unreadable expression, but she suspected it was incredulity. “Because any little Human offspring you bear will be limited. This is an accepted standard, I would expect Humans to follow similar principles.”

Nuan looked at him, then looked down at her gleaming fists. She was sorely tempted to hit this smug and idiotic alien in the face and see how he liked small. “You have no idea how women work, do you?”

“Of course I do,” he said. “And you are also not an adequate choice because your children might be born with metal arms. A tragic deficiency.”

“You…” she paused. “Was that a joke?”

The Oyariah rumbled, which she assumed was laughter. “Most of it, yes, I am glad some found it amusing.”

Nuan briefly turned to the soldier who had been snickering at her, along with his friend, and glared at him until he went away. “Funny,” she said. “I didn’t know you could make jokes.”

“It sometimes is useful to play into the stereotype Humans expect for us,” the Oyariah answered. “Elder Aegis has been exceptionally helpful in educating us about certain details of your species. Humor is especially prevalent, though seems to be highly subjective depending on the individual.”

“Yeah.” She glanced over to see the duel was wrapping up, with Iosif just deciding to trap Carmelita in a stasis field, before selectively leaving her head unprotected. With her glaring murder at him, he smiled and gently tapped her on the forehead with a finger mouthing “Dead”.

Nuan smirked. “My first question was not entirely a joke,” the Oyariah said. “But why are you here? I have observed few spectators.”

She thought for a moment. “I like watching it. And Iosif’s one of my few friends here.” She shrugged. “Not too complicated, at least to me.”

“I am sure he appreciates it,” the alien said. “He has mentioned as much. Unfortunate you are not trained in melee, as you are suited for it with your arms.”

“Sure,” Nuan flexed them in reflex. “But I prefer to stay away from the danger. I’ve seen what the
Titans can do up close. I’d prefer not to be crushed. I got close enough when that Berserker almost killed me, thank you very much.”

The alien reached behind him and unhooked one of the black warhammers she’d seen the Titans use. “I am pleased that we are respected by your kind. I will in turn prove my worth on the field of battle, one reason I am here today.”

“Oh?” She was actually surprised at that. “The Commander is letting you actually fight?”

“Aegis has allowed it, provided we follow the established guidelines,” the Oyariah said. “Though I suspect not immediately. Some will likely doubt me.”

Nuan couldn’t disagree, although for an alien, he was easier to talk to than she was expecting. “What’s your name? And don’t give me the long Vitakara version, just the short one.”

“Xarian, formerly of the Guard of the Ravager,” he said with pride. “Now within the service of Elder Aegis.”

“Right,” she nodded. “And…who is the Ravager?”

Xarian grew somewhat serious at that. “The Ravager is the…Commander…of the Titans. The finest of our warriors, her skill perhaps surpassing that of the Stalker himself. To be chosen for her Guard was a high honor, but one that pales in comparison to an Elder.”

“Hello, what do we have here?” Iosif raised an eyebrow as he walked over. “I see you’re both getting along. Good.”

“I will allow you to rest and then test you shortly,” Xarian said, resting his weapon on his shoulder. “I suspect you wish to speak to the one who is not your mate.” With that he walked off, sounding far too satisfied with the conclusion.

Iosif’s face though was a mixture of surprise and embarrassment, which was odd enough to make her snort. “Ah,” he coughed. “Did I miss something?”

“His idea of a joke,” Nuan smirked. “He apparently assumed I was your mate, and if I wasn’t, it was a good thing because my children would be small and have metal arms.” She glanced behind her at the soldiers getting ready to train. “Certain people found the exchange…amusing.”


Nuan decided to let the matter drop, although for a joke, Iosif did not seem to be taking it as one. Or more like he was not brushing it off right away, let alone dismissing it as ridiculous. To be fair, she was doing the same thing.

Yeah, best to drop it for now. “How’s she doing?” Nuan nodded to Carmelita.

“Still rattled,” Iosif shook his head. “What happened was bad. Creed described it to me, and asked me not to share. Letting her beat up on me is good for her. But they’ll all be fine.”

“Will Creed though?” Nuan pursed her lips. “I know they were together.”

“He could have reacted two ways,” Iosif said slowly. “It could have sent him in a downward spiral, or it would make him angry. He has gone the latter route. The good news is that he knows Patricia can take care of herself, and so at the first available opportunity, he’s going to rescue her. He’s
apparently going to Aegis to figure out how best to kill an Ethereal.”

Nuan looked up at his tired face skeptically. “He doesn’t stand a chance against an Ethereal.”

“Alone?” Iosif snorted. “Definitely not. But he won’t be taking an operation like that alone. And at the end, I’ll let him kill any Ethereals we come across. Better for him to be angry and focused than depressed. He’s furious by what happened, but it luckily didn’t break him.”

“So…” Nuan paused. “She had a spot on the Council, right? Who’s taking over?”

“Unknown,” Iosif shrugged. “Heard some names being thrown around. Problem is there aren’t a lot of senior psions left, aside from me and the last two Furies, and the latter are not really trained for leadership roles. Current speculation is between myself and…Geist.”

“Fuck Geist,” she spat. “He doesn’t deserve the position. Especially not compared to you.”

“Oh believe me,” Iosif gave a wan smile. “Not many of us are fans of the idea. But despite being a jerk and person of questionable character, he is smart, not to mention skilled and powerful. Probably more than me, if we’re being honest.”

“No.” Nuan could state that firmly. “Power doesn’t dictate everything, and you’re a far better leader and man than Geist could ever hope to be. The Commander will see that.”

“Can’t say I’m not hoping for that,” Iosif sighed, rubbing his forehead. “But he’s also practical. I’m a very…traditional choice…for lack of a better word. I’m military. I’m a standard psion. I’ve been with XCOM for a while, I know how things work. Geist does offer a different and unique perspective, like it or not.”


“But…” Iosif raised a finger. “If I do so happen to be selected, I do think a celebration would be in order. Want to join me? And you can give some more details about how your little meeting with the Chinese went.”

Nuan crossed her arms. “Well, what isn’t classified, of course. And what if you aren’t?”

“Well, we still get together, but also make jokes about our new Director of Psionic Operations,” Iosif said. “Sound good?”

“I think so,” Nuan smiled. “And if you aren’t picked, then I’ll be sure to criticize that choice in my next letter to my superiors.”

Iosif chuckled. “I hope you do, and I get to read the redaction.”

They both shared a laugh at that. Things could definitely be a lot bleaker than they were. Best to enjoy them while they lasted.

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Situation Room, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/16/2016 – 11:49 A.M.

The Commander did not expect this meeting to take long, but before making the final decision he needed to get the approval of the Internal Council. In the end, it had been a fairly easy decision. Shen looked up and gave an approving nod. “A good choice. He will serve well as a replacement
for Patricia in her absence.”

“Agreed,” Vahlen nodded. “While he isn’t the most powerful, he is the most qualified for the position.”

Shen grimaced. “With the added bonus of having some basic respect for the people around him.”

He wasn’t surprised at those two. He glanced to Zhang. “Thoughts, Director?”

“I cannot find a reason to disqualify him,” Zhang said slowly, putting the tablet he was holding down. “But I am not convinced that Templar Bronis is the best choice. While he is skilled, Geist has quantifiably surpassed him.”

“So is Hammarström,” Shen pointed out. “Should we award positions based on their Trask Level?”

“Agreed on that point,” Jackson leaned against the wall. “Geist is powerful and skilled. But he isn’t well-liked or even cares to make changes to himself. Not a person I want to work with here.”

“There is also the small fact that he manipulated one of my soldiers,” the Commander added. “Someone who does that to those under their command is not one I will appoint to this Council without exceptional reason. Geist can serve the same purpose just as well on his own.”

“Your point stands,” Zhang nodded. “I won’t contest it. But he will likely feel slighted.”

The Commander raised an incredulous eyebrow. “And…just why should that be concerning…at all? If he feels so slighted, he can come ask and I’ll tell him exactly why he failed to be chosen.”

“He shouldn’t be,” Zhang clarified. “But his psychological profile indicates that he may feel so regardless. Just so you are aware of the possibility.”

“I think we’re also overlooking the fact that this position comes with administrative work,” Shen reminded them. “As we are all well aware. Iosif has some experience in this, while I am sure Geist would not feel it is important enough to devote his time to doing it.”

Jackson rolled her eyes. “Geist is the kind of guy who would hire a bunch of secretaries to do that for him while he plays with psionics all day.”

“We shouldn’t sell Iosif short here,” the Commander said. “He’s one of the longest-serving soldiers in XCOM, a good leader, a trained and skilled psion, and most importantly for someone in this position – he respects the power he wields and the consequences of misuse. I do not want a psionic supremacist on this Council, nor one who believes in their unrestrained use.” He looked around the room. “Are there any objections?”

“None noted, Commander,” Jackson said as they all shook their heads or gave negatives. “You want to give him the news or should I?”

“I’ll give it to him,” the Commander said. “Tell him to meet in my office within the hour.”

“Yes, Commander,” Jackson made a note on her tablet. “We have anything else we need to discuss?”

“There is,” the Commander rested his hands on the holotable. “I believe we should consider the addition of two more positions on this Council. The first would be in the vein of Van Doorn’s position of Tactical Advisor, but they would be drawn from our soldiers. A Ground Commander, more familiar with the operations in the field, which I normally am not. They would ideally have a
better understanding of the soldiers and armaments than the rest of us.”

“Carmelita Alba and Anius Creed stand out as candidates,” Jackson said. “I’ll check the roster, but I can likely find one or two more. Archangels Hammarström and Morrow have both shown to be capable leaders and soldiers.”

“We’re not deciding candidates today,” the Commander quickly clarified, raising a hand. “Just deciding if we want to extend the Council in the first place.”

“To do that we need to know the other position,” Shen said.

Here it went. “Since ADVENT has decided that we get all of the aliens who are willing to fight, it would not be a bad idea to have an alien representative on this Council as well. One who, like the proposed Ground Commander, knows the aliens better than us.”

Vahlen furrowed her eyebrows. “Is that not what Aegis provides?”

“Aegis is a special case,” Zhang pointed out. “And not a good representative for the average alien soldier. He is also an…advisor, not directly on the Council, which this proposed position would entail.”

“I suppose you’re intending to deploy aliens in combat?” Shen said. “Last I heard you hadn’t decided.”

“With the Manchurian Restraints, loyalty won’t be a concern,” the Commander said. “The aliens are useful assets, but if we’re going to use them, they need their own representative here.”

“I’m not opposed to the concept,” Jackson said slowly, biting her lip as she thought. “The issue is that it’ll be difficult to find an alien I can definitively say is on our side. These are defectors. They haven’t really done anything for us yet.”

“I am in agreement on that,” Zhang said. “Let us see how the aliens perform in combat before allowing them access to the secrets of XCOM. I do not trust all of them, and none of them to hold a seat here. They would need to renounce their species for the good of Humanity.”

“At minimum I want potential candidates,” the Commander told Jackson, before looking to Zhang. “But you have a point. They need to earn their place here. But they should be aware this is a possibility…if they perform well.”

The light glinted off Zhang’s scar as he gave a brief nod. “That is acceptable. We should revisit this matter once we have deployed aliens into the field. I do support the addition of a Ground Commander position within the Council.”

“As do I,” Jackson confirmed. “Objections to anything Zhang said?”

At the silence, the Central Officer made a brief note. “Alright, settled then. You’ll have your list, Commander. When do you want to appoint a Ground Commander.”

“Within a week.”

“You’ll have a list from me tomorrow,” she promised. “And I’ll have Yates begin conducting interviews among the aliens. I’ll also pick out subjects of note.”

“Excellent, Central,” the Commander looked around at all of them. “That’s all for now. Dismissed.”
Engineering Bay, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/17/2016 – 9:11 A.M.

Anna only had one thing to say as they looked upon one of the newest inventions of the XCOM Engineering team. “Cool.”

“Cool,” Sierra echoed. “I like the name too.”

“The Valkyrie,” Anna read the name painted on the ‘wings’ of the aerial MEC. “Yep. Don’t think there’s a more fitting one for it. Almost makes me want to get the implants to fly one of those.”

“No, you really don’t,” Sierra said, shaking her head. “You won’t have enough of yourself left to enjoy it. But both of us can just admire it from afar.”

“Is that still a thing?” Anna questioned, as they turned away and began walking through the busy workshop. “By now I’d think they’d have figured out how to remove that problem.”

“I don’t really know,” Sierra admitted with a shrug as she scooted past some engineers. “Just assuming. In any event, I’m not really thrilled with the prospect of cutting off my limbs. So that idea’s out for me.”

“You can’t get hurt then,” Anna reminded her. “I’m pretty sure they overhaul what’s left of your organic parts too. Could be nice.”

“Yeah, you haven’t talked with our more loyal Chinese resident then,” Sierra snorted. “You can’t feel pain, but you really can’t feel anything else. Nuan definitely wishes she had her weaker flesh arms back.”

The young woman grimaced. “Fair enough…” she trailed off. “Is that Geist?”

Sierra narrowed her eyes and looked to where Anna was pointing. From this distance it certainly seemed to be. The figure was standing with an almost mechanical posture as he looked down on a table that held…something. There were two other engineers nearby, both of whom seemed to be helping him.

“Looks like it,” Sierra said, moving forwards. “Let’s see what he’s doing.”

They only made it a few steps away before Geist raised a hand, not turning to them. “If you must know, I have acquired the assistance of several engineers to gather some data on the Sectoid Vanguard weapons.”

Oh right, he apparently liked reading their minds. She heard a loud sigh. “It’s not as simple as choosing not to, Archangel. I have as much choice in not reading your screaming minds as breathing and hearing. It is simply another sense I take advantage of.”

Anna snorted. “Patricia seemed to manage fine.”

“Psion Trask prioritized the handicapping of her abilities,” Geist said, still turned away from them as he began tinkering with the Vanguard Gauntlet on the table. “She developed her psionics in a way where that was feasible. I did not, and therefore must live with it.”

“I do wonder,” Sierra crossed her arms as she looked around the area. “If you ever tried in the first
“No, I did not,” Geist stated flatly. “Knowing what people are thinking has saved me countless wasted hours of inane small talk and questions. This is an advantage I do not see a need to willingly deprive myself of.”

Anna almost seemed to giggle. “Alright then. Keep paying attention.”

“Anyway, in regards to your oncoming inquiries,” Geist continued. “The reason I am interested in this is because the Sectoids created technology capable of tapping into psionic power using psions as conduits. They have applied it to blades and shields. I wish to explore the possibility of applying it into other areas. Once I have sufficient data to take to Dr. Vahlen, she can hopefully begin work.” He gestured around. “I am not an engineer, thus I requested assistants from Shen who also agreed at the need for this to be explored. This is done with his approval, so you are aware.”

There were times when she really didn’t know what to think about Geist. As a person he was… perhaps not bad, but way too undiplomatic and combative. She supposed he was honest, which was admittedly better than some people. But he had no sense of tact or consideration for others. He was no Patricia, but he clearly never wanted to be.

It was probably her imagination, but she could swear he nodded. Eavesdropping jerk.

But he was frustratingly smart and driven. Despite his growing, and rather infamous reputation, everyone did have to admit he knew what he was doing. He was not someone who took no for an answer and only a few really seemed to be able to dare challenge him. Of course, all of those were of a higher rank, so it made sense.

“Archangel Pavlova,” Geist said slowly, turning around. “Please stop doing that.”

Anna just smiled, while Geist stared at her. “Your current line of thought. Think about something else if you must.”

“Why?” Anna asked brightly. “There something you don’t like about it?”

“It is a juvenile attempt to break my concentration,” Geist narrowed his eyes. “Which definitely does not work, and is the equivalent of a mosquito buzzing which is too inconsequential to deal with.”

“Did you always talk like this?” Sierra had a good idea of what Anna was doing, and it was hilarious. “I’m surprised anyone takes you seriously.”

Geist opened his mouth, before closing it. A few moments later, and he gave a dismissive wave. “Your assistance is appreciated, Archangels, I have now seemed to learn how to ignore very specific minds in the immediate vicinity. Your…annoyances will not bother me. Stand there if you wish to gawk.” With that he turned around and continued working.

Sierra raised a hand and Anna reciprocated the high-five. “Amazing,” she commented as they walked away. “You managed to teach Geist something. So what was it?”

“Oh, nothing much,” Anna smirked. “Just him in a compromising position with his mother. I don’t think he found it amusing.”

Sierra snorted. “Tell everyone we’ve found the solution to Geist mind-reading anyone he wants.”

“Oh, believe me,” Anna gave a sinister smile. “I’m definitely going to be sharing this little
Today was the day when Vahlen and Shen were going to unveil some of their larger breakthroughs. The Commander had of course been briefed on the projects they were working on, and in particular for Vahlen, the results of Project Innsmouth were ready to be unveiled, with significant advancements in the Operated MELD applications, which had been bundled into Project Achilles some time ago.

Achilles was something both Shen and Vahlen had been working on; which had started as research into injecting MELD nanites directly into an individual, and had apparently turned into something different; combining multiple projects into one. In any case, he was quite eager to see what both of them had for him.

The labs were as clean and sterile as ever, and even more packed since Vahlen had over the past months greatly expanded her teams to include the finest geneticists, and biologists, both terrestrial and marine. With the transition to her new base, there was additional traffic, though few in-progress projects were being touched.

The scientists quickly moved out of the way, and it didn’t take him long to find Vahlen who was standing within a sealed room in front of a clean table devoid of everything except a stack of cubes, a skull-cap thing he hadn’t seen before, and two tablets. She was likely starting out with the smaller things, since Innsmouth was housed in the Genetic Labs.

The sealed room hissed as he opened, and Vahlen turned with a smile at his arrival. “I’ve been looking forward to this day for some time, Commander. I’m glad to say that all progress has been exceptional, and the aliens have also assisted in providing experience with much of what we’ve struggled over for some time. Months of research has been saved as a result.”

“Excellent,” he nodded to the table. “So what do we have?”

“Shen will be giving you a demonstration of the plasma weapons later,” Vahlen picked up one of the tablets. “And that made me realize that we will currently have no weapons research. So I first want to suggest two avenues to pursue. The second tablet is for you.” He obliged and picked up the free tablet, on it showed a...peculiar weapon. It looked bulky, boxy, and had a multitude of exposed wires and tubes.

“Several of the research teams, including myself, believe we should look to more distinct forms of weaponry,” Vahlen continued. “This was conceptualized as one of the first weapons to do this. It is currently classified as the High Output Microwave Emitter Rifle, and specifically designed to kill armored aliens like the Battlemaster, as it has the potential to bypass armor and fry electronics.”

“Microwaves,” the Commander mused. “I assume this is slightly more powerful than what we use to cook our food?”

“If we so desire,” Vahlen chuckled. “But if you want to see the damage microwaves can cause, go to the next screen.” The Commander did, and was faced with a host of unpleasant and gory images. “Skin degradation, blisters, and ultimately necrosis,” Vahlen continued. “An extremely painful way to die, which cannot be blocked without sealed armor or psionics.”
“Interesting,” the Commander flipped to the next screen, showing a similar weapon with a different description. “Gamma rays as well?”

“That is what we’re unsure on,” Vahlen said. “A Gamma equivalent of this weapon would be far deadlier, and turn any target into an irradiated hazard regardless of armor. However, there is a high potential for friendly fire, both to nearby soldiers and the user itself. But it could still be highly useful against Ethereals. But Gamma research is not well-developed, and we wouldn’t know without devoting resources towards it.”

The Commander nodded, thinking. “Work on developing the Microwave variant, and you have my authorization to begin Gamma research. I believe that weapon could be more suited to our MECs than ordinary soldiers.”

“Wonderful,” Vahlen gestured for him to continue. “Now, the other path of research is harnessing psionic power into more…specific uses. The Sectoids proved they can do this, and Geist has helpfully completed some initial data-gathering which would allow us to get a concrete start.”

“How would this work, exactly?” He asked. “I assume non-psions wouldn’t be able to use it?”

“Highly unlikely,” Vahlen confirmed. “The truth is we don’t know what the limits for this are. Perhaps psionic energy could be stored for later use, or it can be specifically directed to do certain things. Telekinesis, telepathy, all outside the traditional specialization or training. Our psions could be more powerful than they already are.”

“Could it protect them telepathically?”

“Possibly. Again, we’re not sure of the limits of this line of research. But we can’t afford to pass it up.”

“Do it,” he said, setting the tablet down. “If you need people, I’ll get in contact with the PRIEST Division. Their research division is growing, and I’m sure some of them would love to work for XCOM.”

She brushed her hair back. “You know, I have the feeling that I could just start all of these and you likely wouldn’t care.”

He smiled back. “Oh, I would care. I want to know what’s going on, even if I usually approve your projects. You have a good sense of what should be prioritized, but that doesn’t mean you get out of asking first.”

“Fair point, Commander.”

As she set the tablet down and began moving towards the other device, he asked. “What is the status of the Manchurian Project?”

“Not ready to be shown, but very close,” she answered. “I am hoping it will be within the next couple of weeks. We’ve lost some time in preparing everything for today. Such as this.” She picked up the device so he could get a closer look. It looked like it should go over the head, but was very small, with an extremely delicate layer of wires and alloy mesh.

“And what is this?”

“This,” Vahlen said proudly. “Is the most important aspect of Project Achilles. Both Shen and I worked on this, and in more…simple terms, it is a Neural Regulator.”
He raised an eyebrow. “Explain.”

“Shen originally conceptualized it as a way to protect against telepathy,” Vahlen began. “You are aware that the brain has two hemispheres, which can be separated and still function on their own. Generally this results in adverse side effects, specifically in communication. This device would supplement the existing connection of the Corpus Callosum with an automated alternative – one which could detect if there is psionic tampering.”

The Commander frowned. “Is that possible?”

“Detecting psionics? Yes,” Vahlen gently set down the device. “The brain noticeably changes if under the influence of psionics. This has been documented multiple times. It is a matter of taking this data and putting it in something like this. If the brain emits these signals, the individual is compromised and the Neural Regulator will follow established contingencies.”

“It sounds good,” the Commander began slowly. “But it seems to be a less elegant version of the Restraints.”

“There are advantages as well,” Vahlen pointed out. “Future iterations could likely augment cognitive abilities, memory storage, and analysis. And while the Restraints simply stop compromised individuals, this would disrupt psions by turning anything they could learn into gibberish. But I initially agreed…until I proposed we combine both the Neural Regulator with Project Achilles and the development of Operated MELD.”

She picked up her tablet again, and began tapping. “The Neural Regulator does not just serve as a protection against telepathy, it also can control MELD Cubes slaved to it. Watch.” The cubes on the table suddenly dissipated and reformed into a model soldier. Then fell apart again and formed into a small knife.

“And this would be controlled by the user on their own,” Vahlen said proudly. “No remote required. Much like psionics, it would take some getting used to. As for the specific enhancements brought about by Project Achilles, those would also be able to be controlled.”

“And have the goals of Achilles changed?” He asked.

“No,” she walked over with the tablet in hand which showed the outline of a Human with the proposed changes. “MELD fortified skeletal structure; augmented organs for additional redundancy and healing. Skin fully replaced with MELD overlays. Eyes overhauled with MELD enhancement, with bloodstream injections to kill any foreign bodies and toxins. This also applies to the nostrils and lungs. An interesting side effect is that this will, in theory, allow full control over cosmetic appearance. Skin, eye, and hair color can all be modified by the individual in question.”

She lowered the tablet. “A massive investment, I am aware, but with the additions of the Neural Regulator and Operated MELD, this is perhaps as close to an invincible soldier as we can get. Very little would be able to kill one, and if they cannot be telepathically dominated, with control of swarms of nanites… I am sure you can imagine the possibilities.”

“Indeed.” Vahlen was right. It was going to be a massive cost per soldier. These Neural Regulators would need to be custom-fitted to the individual, time would be needed for them to adapt, and the amount of MELD pumped into them would be ludicrous. However, MELD they could replace, and it was worth doing it right than fast.

This would likely only be for a few soldiers. The amount of changes Vahlen was proposing was near-inhuman. Zhang was going to love the appearance changing capabilities, however. Maybe
they would find their means of imitating the aliens that way. “And is this ready to use?”

“We need to install on a few test subjects first,” Vahlen admitted. “However, once those tests are completed, both of us are confident it is ready for use.”

“Then finish this up,” the Commander said. “I’ll put together a list of candidates and volunteers for the procedure. I suspect we’ll be able to find a few.”

“I would not be surprised,” Vahlen then motioned him to follow her. “Now this way, there is one last thing I need to show you, which I know you have been curious about.” He followed her as she led him to the genetic labs, which were just as busy as the regular research labs. Stepping into them, he was mildly surprised to see Aegis standing in front of a massive aquarium tank.

“Commander,” Aegis turned in greeting. “I presume she is here to show you her... specimen.”

“Yes, Aegis, I am,” Vahlen looked into the aquarium tank, which was filled with vegetation, some rock formations, and sand. “It’s hiding, isn’t it?”

Aegis’s voice was almost a sigh. “It is.”

The Commander peered into the tank. “What am I supposed to be looking for?”

“Just watch,” Vahlen said, as she tapped on an interface on the tank. “You’ll like it.”

Some fish were inserted into the tank, and the Commander waited a few moments before he saw it. He blinked. “The fuck is that?”

If he didn’t know better, it looked like an octopus. An octopus which had just previously been laying on the tank floor, the exact same color as the sand. But it shot through the water, revealing itself to be at least fifteen feet wide. The skin was pure black, and instead of eight tentacles, it had twelve. He swore that the thing was eyeless, until he saw little black orbs. Not two, but eight distributed around the body.

It was if someone had taken an octopus, and turned it into a Lovecraftian nightmare.

No, that was exactly what Vahlen had done.

“Moira,” he said slowly. “What exactly is this?”

“This, Commander,” Vahlen said with a happy smile. “Is what he have been calling a Shoggoth.”

“A truly distasteful creature.” Aegis commented. “It is well named. As unnatural as the stories it is named for.”

“Yes...” the Commander watched the Shoggoth quickly eat the fish, before floating towards them, extending a few tentacles to touch the glass. “Vahlen, just what inspired this idea?”

“I’m glad you asked,” Vahlen placed a hand on the glass, and the Shoggoth placed another tentacle on the opposite side. “You’re seeing one reason now. Octopi are one of the most intelligent creatures on the planet. They are playful, inquisitive, and clever. They also have the capability to squeeze into impossibly tight spaces, can’t be killed easily, have natural regeneration, and some find their appearance unsettling.”

The Commander saw the arms retained the expected suckers, which had a white sheen to them. Contrasted with the black skin, it was slightly disturbing. “However,” Vahlen said. “What made
this a project worth pursuing is that Octopi are immune to mind control.”

His head snapped to hers. “Are you certain?”

“Unfortunately, she is telling the truth,” Aegis said. “Touching the mind of such a creature is… unsettling.”

“The reason for this is that Octopi don’t have a brain like we do,” Vahlen explained. “Their intelligence is, for lack of a better word, distributed. Image your brain being in your arms or legs instead of just your head. That is how it works for Octopi. Each arm is essentially a brain unto itself, and this comes together to form an intelligence which can’t be controlled by telepathy. The perfect psionic hunters.”

“Well then,” the Commander was definitely impressed. Slightly terrified, but impressed. “So I assume you…improved upon it?”

“Oh, certainly,” she said brightly, motioning at the Shoggoth which was now resting and camouflaging itself on the rock formation. “I started with the Giant Pacific Octopus, and worked from there. I increased the arms from eight to twelve, changed the skin color, in addition to giving it the iron skin modification.”

“A questionable addition,” Aegis said.

“Reduced the eye size, and added additional eyes at strategic points on the body,” Vahlen said, pointing to illustrate her point. “I wanted to emphasize their ability to squeeze into small places, and for us to be able to drop this on an alien base and let it kill everything inside. The beak itself has also been reduced in size.”

“So how does this thing operate on land?” The Commander asked. “It’s still an aquatic animal.”

“That was tricky,” Vahlen admitted. “But the solution we decided upon was a modification of the gills, which can now store water within them and act as…oxygenators, as they would be able to run air through the water to oxygenate it as they breathed on land. Worst case scenario, we also developed a cybernetic implant which performs largely the same thing. But so far it has proven unnecessary.”

“Right,” he nodded. “So…how does it fight? Can it be trained?”

Vahlen motioned for them to follow as she led them into the Containment cells. “It will be easier to show you. Shoggoths treat threats to them as almost a kind of game. They like toying with their prey, and taking them apart slowly before eating them.”

“Charming creatures,” Aegis muttered. “Isomnum would be proud.”

“Quiet, Aegis,” Vahlen sniffed. “Just because it’s not something you can dominate or kill easily does not mean it can’t appreciate getting to know others. Shoggoths have actually really taken to Humans, and seem to like us. Of course I naturally made them inclined to treat us as friendly, but you could almost imagine them as a…guard dog of sorts. A very dangerous pet.”

The Commander snorted. “Funny. You have a demonstration?”

“Yes,” they stopped in front of a cell which had a very angry-looking man inside it, and with him was an array of gauss and laser weapons, with some grenades for good measure. The man was quickly putting on the provided Aegis armor, and shooting them suspicious glances. “I have placed one of the subjects in here, with the best of our weapons and armor. The Shoggoth will be lured
here and we shall see who is victorious.”

The Commander had a feeling that the individual within was not going to survive. He would almost feel bad, if the man hadn’t been convicted for rape and a double homicide. How fitting that he would die at the…tentacles of a monster. “You’re an idiot!” The man yelled in triumph as he placed the helmet on and grabbed the gauss rifle. “You really think you can arm me and I won’t get out?”

“Does he know you’re a Telepath?” The Commander asked wryly.

She frowned. “I don’t know. Doesn’t matter. Please put these on,” she handed them some night-vision goggles. “For the true effect,” she added, giving a thin smile as a compartment opened above. The entire room was plunged into darkness as water sloshed to the tile floors. The man immediately spun to the sound of the noise and opened fire.

“Cute, bitch!” He yelled, firing wildly. “But this armor can see in the dark!”

“And there it goes,” Vahlen said, and the monstrous form of the Shoggoth plunged to the ground, leading to the man emitting an extremely high-pitched shriek as he let loose a volley of fire.

With ferocious swiftness, the Shoggoth lashed out two of its tentacles, even as the rounds bounced off its iron skin, and those wrapped around his legs and slammed him to the ground. The Shoggoth pulled the screaming man closer towards it as more tentacles wrapped around the limbs.

“Shoggoth arms are exceptionally strong,” Vahlen explained as the creature tightened its grip over the hysterical man. “Not especially useful against armor, but that doesn’t really matter.” She pointed as the Shoggoth moved its arms and broke the legs of the man. “Ah, yes. One thing they like to do is break the limbs of the victim. Generally they’ll also try and get them out of the armor, but this isn’t always successful. They have a fascination with taking things apart…like the head.”

As she was speaking the creature managed to pull the helmet off the man, and causally tossed it to the side as it began probing the face of the petrified man. “I thought you said they liked Humans,” the Commander said. “Unless you meant as food?”

“No,” Vahlen shook her head. “I doused this man with alien pheromones. And this Shoggoth won’t eat him. They only eat alien corpses and other non-Human life. I’m fairly sure it knows this is training. I modified them so they would be smart.”

“Yes,” the Commander winced as the Shoggoth crushed the man’s head like a melon and then mostly seemed to lose interest. “It’s good to know they’re smart.”

Vahlen turned the lights back on, and the Commander saw the massive animal move towards the wall opposite where it had come in, which was grated and with no obvious way in. On the other side was a pail of what he assumed was food. “See,” Vahlen pointed proudly. “They know what to do. He’ll be able to get through the spaces for the food at the end. This way.”

“Wait,” the Commander hesitated as she opened the adjacent door. “Inside?”

“Yes, it’s perfectly safe,” Vahlen said, waving him inside. “And the Shoggoths should get used to you.”

“You’re very lucky I trust you this much,” he said, thinking on the strange situations he was in sometimes. He was actually going to be in the same room with a massive octopus from hell. Which was thankfully ‘smart’. The Shoggoth was already halfway through the wall; it really was amazing the tight spaces they could fit through. The gaps were no bigger than one inch width and two inch
Out of curiosity, he glanced down at the pail and should have been shocked, but just sighed.

“Vahlen, why are there hands in the pail?”

“Oh, those,” Vahlen was putting on gloves as she took the pail from him. “Grown Ethereal parts. Easy with Sectoid cloning tubes, and works for all species. We’ve been feeding them various alien parts to get them used to the taste. They quite like it.”

The Shoggoth finally squeezed all the way through, and lumbered towards them, extending a massive tentacle towards him. Grimacing, he reached out his hand, and the tentacle slightly touched it with a sucker, before withdrawing as Vahlen tossed it some Ethereal hands. “Do they have names?”

“Informally,” Vahlen said. “So far it’s usually been some alteration of ‘Cthulhu’ or another eldritch abomination. They’ll be given names eventually. But we only have three so far, and it will take time to grow more.”

Vahlen soon finished up, as the Shoggoth began eating in more earnest. “They secrete a toxin that breaks down the flesh,” Vahlen explained as it ate. “Since the beak is small, it hinders its eating time. Sucking up the dissolved nutrients is more efficient.”

“How will it get back in the tank?” The Commander asked.

“Oh, it’ll just squeeze back through and climb up the wall to the tank,” Vahlen easily explained, pointing for reference, as she peeled off her gloves. “They know the way back.”

“Well then,” he finally said. “I think you would give Revelean a run for his money with this. I don’t know if this should be…impressive, but it definitely seems like it to me.” He smirked. “I really wouldn’t want to have that thing chasing after me. I don’t think I could kill it.”

Vahlen laughed and kissed him on the cheek. “Well, you couldn’t kill it with telekinesis. Rather difficult in a boneless creature.”


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XCOM Intelligence Control, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/17/2016 – 10:29 A.M.

Abby looked up after reading the project proposal which Zhang had provided to her. “Shen and Vahlen have been busy. Is all of this…complete?”

“Project Achilles is nearly complete,” Zhang answered. “As are the Manchurian Restraints.”

“Right,” Abby set the tablet down. “Are these mandatory upgrades?”

“Achilles is optional,” Zhang said inclining his head, as he kept his voice neutral. “That level of conversion is voluntary. The advantages provided are immense, especially in terms of infiltration. Shen assures me that we should be able to mimic Vitakarians with little issue.” He pursed his lips. “With that said, not every agent needs to be polymorphic. The Manchurian Restraints will be mandatory. For the first time in history we will have a completely loyal Intelligence corps. That cannot be ignored.”
She could see the appeal of that, although she couldn’t say she was thrilled with the idea of undergoing some kind of mental 1984-ish mental conditioning. However, while she wasn’t sure she trusted Zhang as a person, she did trust him to only do what was necessary. “I see.”

“I bring this up to make you aware of what is coming,” Zhang walked around the holotable and handed her another tablet. “But the other reason was to prepare you for your next assignment, and to get your opinion on a certain matter.” She looked down at the tablet and began reading. “There have been issues in South America,” Zhang continued. “We suspect alien activity, possibly Ethereal-backed. We’ll be sending you to assist ADVENT in uncovering these Reapers.”

“A solo mission or will I have assistance?” She asked, glancing up.

“You are first to assess if there is alien activity,” Zhang clarified. “If there is, you’ll receive psionic backup. These Reapers appear to be extremely skilled, quiet, and deadly. Not many aliens, let alone Humans, can completely rout a Peacekeeper base.”

She frowned, already noticing some interesting notes. “All attacks attributed to them have been exclusively against ADVENT. Not even one civilian casualty. There never seem to be more than one or two operatives as well.”

“Which suggests the leader is local,” Zhang agreed with an impressed nod. “And given that these methods of operation haven’t changed, it implies that if they are being alien-backed, they are not giving the orders.”

“Aliens haven’t had an issue with civilian targets before,” Abby frowned. “And they definitely don’t care about Human opinions.”

“That’s what doesn’t add up,” Zhang clasped his hands behind his head. “There are several possible explanations. The first is that the Battlemaster is in charge, and civilian targets by the aliens have dropped significantly. The second is that there are no aliens backing them, but they do have a psion somehow. Either explanation is dangerous.”

“They likely have contacts in the population,” Abby said. “Any leads?”

“Unfortunately not,” Zhang answered, activating the holotable showing South America. “We suspect they are mainly operating out of Argentina, not anywhere in ADVENT-controlled territory. The Argentinian government has, of course, denied knowing anything about it and has stated their willingness to hunt them down. We have seen few results one way or another.”


“It is,” Zhang confirmed grimly. “Which is why I’m not convinced they’re involved. ADVENT does not want to march any government official in front of a psion without some kind of evidence beyond our suspicions of where they operate, but it would be the quickest way to determine the situation.”

“But it’s diplomatically questionable,” Abby finished. “Not good PR without hard evidence.”

“Our best opportunity is to capture one of the operatives,” Zhang said. “And that is the first phase of your operation. Work with ADVENT to capture one of the Reapers. Depending on what you learn, you’ll get more support. Even if there aren’t aliens behind them, they are a threat which needs to be stamped out.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Abby said. “When do I leave?”
“When the Restraints are complete,” Zhang said. “There is almost certainly a psion working with them, and I do not want you compromised.”

“Understood,” she flipped to the next slide on the tablet. “What’s this?”

“A list of names ADVENT has been providing as useful defectors,” Zhang explained. “Until they fully set up the AEGIS Division, we’re making use of the aliens which pass their tests. I found an interesting name on it. Recognize this one?”

Abby looked to where he pointed. “Runi’cairu’intha?” She looked up, thinking. “Wait. Isn’t that Nartha’s sister?”

“It appears so,” Zhang gave a thin smile. “A family of traitors, it seems. I’ve requested she be transferred here. But there is the question about what to do about the growing number of aliens at the base. Paperclip base will be fine for housing them, but there are measures which need to be taken to ensure our own security. How should this be solved?”

Abby took a few moments to think. Every alien being brought in was a security risk, regardless of their intentions. There was something of a line between encouraging defection, and allowing them to be uncontrolled. “Psionic screening should determine if they are allowed in to begin with,” she said slowly. “Trackers and cranial bombs to provide constant monitoring, and undergoing the Manchurian Restraints when complete. That should reduce the security risk significantly.”

Zhang raised an eyebrow. “Extensive, but good to see that some aren’t ignorant of the risk letting aliens in entails. Good intentions mean little given how we know psionics can work, as well as mental programming. We would be foolish to assume the aliens haven’t developed something similar to the Manchurian Restraints, even if they don’t apply it to their Zararch agents.”

“If they’re really interested in helping,” Abby said. “Then they would realize the necessity of these measures.”

“Not necessarily true,” Zhang pointed out. “But within XCOM, absolutely. I believe I will bring this up with the Commander, who I feel is becoming a little too encouraged with this development. XCOM is a Human organization, not one with aliens as an integral part of it. They can be useful, but they should not be more than that.”

“Agreed.” Abby didn’t know what the politics of the Internal Council were right now, but she could at least agree that aliens shouldn’t be allowed free reign in XCOM, or access to anything important. Aegis was an exception in many respects, but that didn’t mean the rest of these defectors should be.

“I will need an answer regarding Project Achilles within several days,” Zhang said, turning away. “That is all. Refer to the collected intel to prepare for your mission in the meantime. Dismissed.”

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*Engineering Bay, the Praesidium – Classified Location*

*12/17/2016 – 12:01 A.M.*

When the Commander saw the array of new weapons on the testing range, he smiled.

This was going to be a good day.

“Commander,” Shen greeted jovially. “I’m pleased you came so quickly. I believe you’ll be happy
“I already like where this is going,” the Commander said, as they both walked over to the table. “Is this what I think it is?” The weapons on the table were clearly inspired by the alien plasma weapons, but with some obvious improvements. The colors were still black and silver, with some small green outlines, but the exposed barrels and components of the rifles were gone and sealed.

“Once we cracked Elerium, developing our own plasma weapons was only a matter of time,” Shen confirmed as the Commander grasped one of the rifles. It was lighter than a gauss rifle, but much heavier than a Pulse rifle. “The range is set for you to test them out.”

The Commander took a firing stance and raised the rifle towards the alien dummy, and fired. Several green bolts of plasma shot out and slammed into the dummy, easily obliterating the face, with the residue eating through the body itself. The recoil was less than he was anticipating, and so he continued firing as the rifle spat out bolts at a rapid pace.

After a few more seconds there wasn’t much left of the dummy, and he lowered the rifle. “I like it.” He turned to see Shen standing beside him, holding what looked closer to a plasma autorifle. He had an expectant look on his face.

“Given how much you seemed to like destroying that dummy, I figured you would want the most powerful non-MEC variant we developed.” The Commander happily obliged and firmly grasped the far heavier piece of equipment, having to wield it more like a cannon than rifle. “Try destroying that one.” Shen pointed to another dummy, this one armored in some kind of alloy protection.

The Commander grinned. “Gladly.” He pulled the trigger once the shot was lined up, and with a small whine the weapon spat out dozens of plasma bolts in quick succession. The alloy armor protecting the dummy lasted a few shots until the sheer hail of green bolts turned it into charred ruins. The Commander continued firing until the weapon stopped, and ejected some kind of plasma cell.

He let the barrel end set against the ground. “I think it works.”

Shen appraised the damage and gave a short nod. “I quite agree, Commander, thank you for testing it to be sure. I would not have known otherwise.”

The Commander smirked at the rare sarcasm from Shen, and moved to set the plasma…autorifle? Cannon? Whatever it was, he delicately set it down by the remainder of the weapons which included a pistol and sniper rifle. “It’ll be nice to be equals with the aliens in weaponry,” he said thoughtfully. “There is little we can do to improve. We can only look to the unconventional.”

“I believe Vahlen has shared her ideas on that front.” Shen motioned him to follow as he led them to another table in the workshop. “In the meantime, I haven’t ignored our other weapons. I have had a team developing specialized ammunition for our gauss weapons and in anticipation of ADVENT ETC weapons.”

He didn’t recognize the latter statement. “ETC weapons?”

“An initiative ADVENT is finalizing.” Shen explained. “Gauss weaponry is powerful, but there are some drawbacks, specifically the expense and low rate of fire. Electrothermal-Chemical weapons are envisioned to be a means of providing ADVENT with an EMP resistant weapon, and upgrading every single conventional firearm to be near the level of gauss effectiveness.” He paused. “It is an ambitious project, but one that isn’t relevant to XCOM. If you want, I can forward you the current...”
status of it.”

“Do that,” the Commander said. That sounded like something he wanted to keep an eye on. “So what do you have here?”

Shen reached a table with several gauss slugs resting vertically on it. The first had red rings around the top and base, with ClF3 stamped along the side; the one next to it had green rings, with H2FSbF6 stamped along it. The one after it had yellow rings, and a fairly obvious radioactive symbol on the side, while the final one was orange, with the familiar outline of a MELD nanite stamped on the side.

“I want to note that none of these are armed, nor do I think it’s safe to test them here,” Shen explained as he picked up the red-ringed slug. “We’ve been generally conducting these in extremely contained areas, or in the desert. I also would advise not letting soldiers use these without training, because while we’ve attempted to mitigate user danger, we cannot eliminate all the risk.”

“Well then,” the Commander motioned for him to continue. “Tell me.”

“This is, to put it mildly, an incendiary round,” Shen lifted the red-ringed slug again. “Within it is a very small amount of Chlorine Triflouride. Upon impact it will likely ignite and heavily damage the target. Useful against everything, but particularly against Elites and heavy infantry.”

He picked up the green-ringed slug. “This is the most delicate round, but it was necessary to contain what is within it. Fluoroantimonic acid is the most dangerous acid known to man, and it can only be contained in Teflon, which makes up a large portion of this slug. Extremely effective against vehicles and Ethereals.”

With that, he moved onto the radioactive slug. “This is intended to primarily be an anti-Ethereal weapon, but again, can work against others. This is radioactive, and would be used for contaminating Ethereals irreversibly. At the moment I don’t believe it’s safe for regular soldiers to handle, only MECs. But we have confirmed it does work.”

He picked up the last slug. “And this one contained a small amount of pre-programmed nanites that, upon impact, will begin eating all alien material for thirty seconds before self-destructing. Useful against…virtually anything.” He set it down. “I should note that all of these are difficult to produce, even for us, so they should be used sparingly.

“That,” the Commander said. “Is an excellent development. Exceptional work.”

“I’ll pass that along to the team,” Shen said, as they began walking deeper into the workshop. “The aliens are likely to develop new and dangerous tools. We need to be sure to keep pace. I intend on sharing this with ADVENT, since they would likely be able to produce far more than we could.”

“Good idea,” the Commander nodded, then raised an eyebrow once he saw what was up ahead. “Hello, what have we here?”


The suit of armor looked slightly similar to the Aegis armor, but was much bulkier. The suit itself was noticeably taller, with silver alloys weaving the entire suit together, while the hardened plates protected the vital areas. “Much like plasma weaponry,” Shen said as he appraised it. “Elerium allowed us to develop something like this. What can be considered to be the first true powered
armor."

“I’m going to put it on, if you don’t mind,” the Commander said. Shen gave a short laugh, and motioned for him to do it. Once Shen unlocked the armor, it took him close to fifteen minutes to put it all on. It wasn’t easy to put on unassisted, but it was certainly doable. Once on, he put on the helmet and he was connected to the suit.

His HUD had a blue box on the lower edge. LOCK ARMOR? YES/NO?

“Lock armor,” he stated. He physically heard the suit clicking together as it sealed him inside, and now he could walk forward. The HUD flashed up a new message. POWERED ASSISTANCE? YES/NO?

“Not yet,” he said, wanting to walk around with it unpowered first. A few minutes like that definitely confirmed that it was not anything close to agile, but he could still move around fairly quickly. Being gene-modded definitely made things easier, and he could easily run in it. Jumping wasn’t easy either, but it was doable.

The HUD was mostly bare, just showing his current vital signs and that he wasn’t connected to any other nearby soldiers. Interestingly, suit integrity was also displayed in the lower right hand corner. A “Commands” box was in the upper left. “Show commands,” he said.

The center of the HUD showed a list of one-word commands with short descriptions he found he could scroll through by blinking.

HARDEN: All MELD nanites harden on the suit providing increased protection. Note – Cannot use in conjunction with other orders. All other orders will contradict this one.

REPAIR: MELD nanites will attempt to repair noted suit damage. Note – This will consume nanites.

HEAL: MELD nanites will attempt to stabilize any sustained injuries of the user. Note – This will consume nanites and is not a substitute for medical care.

CONSUME: Orders all MELD nanites to depart the suit and kill all aliens within a ten foot radius – Note: User will not have access to nanites until this action is completed. It is advised this only be used in close encounters.

REPLENISH: Orders all MELD nanites to depart the suit and replicate through aliens and materials until they are at peak suit numbers. Note – User will not have access to nanites until this actions is completed, and the time required will depend on the current amount of nanites.

COLOR: Set the color or camo type of your armor. This will not change unless specifically ordered.

LOCK/UNLOCK – Locks or unlocks the suit for combat or unsuiting.

POWER ON/POWER OFF – Activates the elerium core of the suit, allowing greater mobility, speed and strength.”

The Commander looked back to Shen. “Good thinking, putting nanites in this. It certainly gives more…options.”

“It seemed a logical step,” Shen agreed. “While they don’t have the versatility of the proposed MELD Operators, there are certainly ways they can be helpful.”
The Commander took a few steps forward. “Power on.” The elerium core whirred to life and an image of a power cell appeared in the upper right corner, with a percentage sign next to it. He also noticed that the lower left corner had the outline of a nanite, with the same percentage sign. Likely showing the percentage of nanites left. He also saw a color block close beside it, which was silver. No need to change it yet.

“How long do the power cells last?” He asked.

“Full use will drain one in four hours,” Shen said. “However, Titan armor has two cells which automatically swap when one runs out. We unfortunately couldn’t fit a recharging module in it.”

Eight hours seemed like plenty of time to him, and with his now powered suit, he began moving again and was amazed how much easier it was to move. Spending some time just charging through the small obstacle course Shen had put together for testing, he found that not only was he as fast as out of armor, but the suit could make inhuman jumps, boasted higher strength, and offered unparalleled momentum.

It also helped that the suit was temperature controlled, and noticeably better than previous iterations. Once he felt he was finished testing the suit, he walked back to Shen. “Power off,” he said, as he saw Shen holding a plasma rifle. Bless the man, he was just about to suggest that he be the next functional test.

He was learning how these went, it seemed.

Shen just looked resigned to shooting his Commander again. “I assume you wish to test its durability?”

“Yes, you may fire when ready.”

Shen motioned him to a small preset range by the obstacle course, likely for this situation. “I’ll start firing in ten seconds.”

The Commander counted down in his head, and about the third second he gave his command. “Harden.” The armor integrity indicator in the HUD suddenly had a transparent yellow overlay, just as Shen began firing. The Commander felt the bolts slam into his armor, and even looked down to see the residue trying to eat through the material.

Shen began targeting the legs and arms, a surprising show of confidence since he normally just fired a few times and was done. The HUD yellow overlay began turning to red, and the Commander saw the MELD percentage drop to the 25% mark.

“End harden,” he said, and then let the armor itself take a beating from the green bolts. The impacts forced him to take a few steps back, and the indicator began flashing orange on the chest piece. “Repair.” He raised a hand, indicating for Shen to stop, and the man immediately obliged, as the nanites began repairing the suit damage.

By the end his MELD percentage was 12%. “Replenish,” he ordered, and he saw what looked like dust start floating off him, and then landing on whatever was nearby, which were cardboard boxes, old electrical parts, and targets. He assumed none of that was valuable to Shen. It took close to ten minutes, and he watched in fascination as the objects around him seemed to crumble into nothing, then finally the dust flew right back onto him as if nothing had happened. The MELD indicator showed it as 100%.

“I think,” the Commander said as he approached Shen. “You might have outdone yourself here.”
“I’m glad you think so, Commander,” Shen did look rather pleased. “Whatever it takes to protect our soldiers.”

“They’ll definitely appreciate this,” the Commander said. “I don’t suppose you have anything else to show me?”

“Actually, yes,” Shen motioned to the Cybernetics Lab. “Right this way.”

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Cybernetics Lab, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/17/2016 – 1:32 P.M.

Both of them stood in front of a Gateway mounted on a platform with three different targets in front of it. “One application of Gateways we haven’t seen the aliens use is that of a weapon,” Shen said as several operators were performing checks on the gateway. “Aside from transportation, we figured that they could also operate as a delivery mechanism for weapons which normally couldn’t be mounted.”

“All set!” One of the operators called.

“So using it for shooting lasers through?” The Commander asked. “No need for a power source since it’s supplied at the site of the connecting Gateway?”

“Or missiles, or anything else,” Shen added. “This makes early missile detection nearly impossible, as well as their nuclear detection. We could launch nukes or missiles from a remote island in the Pacific which could be delivered across the world with no prior warning.”

“Gateway on!” Another operator yelled as the Gateway initialized. “Synching!”

“The connected Gateway is outside the Praesidium,” Shen said as the Gateway aimed at the first target. “Different weapons will be fired through it to demonstrate the versatility of it.”

A massive laser suddenly shot out from the Gateway and slammed into the target, vaporizing it almost instantly. The laser immediately shut off as the platform rotated to the next target. A few seconds later a small rocket shot through it and exploded into the second target. Another rotation lined it up in front of the third, and this time a stream of plasma bolts turned the final target into cinders.

“Test successful!” Came the call. “Desynching.”

“Very useful,” the Commander said, nodding as the teams worked on shutting it down. “The only issue I’m seeing is the size. If it could be miniaturized…”

“That’s the next step,” Shen rubbed his forehead. “But Sovereign Tech is unsurprisingly hard to change. We’re not sure of the clear path to take, and so far our attempts have not gone well. I’m beginning to see why the Collective hasn’t explored this, because they had to have thought of it.” He shook his head. “The good news though is that ADVENT has successfully established at least one Gateway in every major military base, and we can sync to all of them. Progress has been made there, at least.”

“Excellent.” Good. Instant reinforcements if needed, exactly what he wanted. “Keep working on trying to miniaturize this, and we have a weapon even the Collective can’t really match.”
“In the meantime,” Shen said, walking over to where the MECs were stored. “We have finished the Valkyrie-class MEC, and designed a…better weapon for the Shinobi-class.” It did not take the Commander long to see either of what he was saying.

The Valkyrie was almost exactly what he imagined it would be. Extremely aerodynamic, plenty of fins, wings, and mounted engines on the shoulders, with boosters on the ankles, legs, and arms. This one was colored pitch black with blue highlights, and stood close to the size of a Shinobi, about twelve feet.

“The Valkyrie,” Shen presented proudly as the MEC walked towards them. “Not really the best place to fly, but I assure you that this is far more powerful than the Archangels. Increased durability, nanite repair, flamethrowers and chemical dispensers, micro-missile launchers, and flechette launchers, and cables to anchor itself to enemy aircraft. Anything air-to-ground was considered, and most implemented.”

The Commander rubbed his chin. “I don’t suppose it can hold a sword?”

“Funny you should mention that,” Shen chuckled, amused. “To answer your question, it can, though that isn’t what it’s designed for. With that said, the Shinobi has a new weapon.” He pointed and the Commander saw what looked like a cross between a poleaxe, spear, and hammer. It was sized for a MEC, so the proportions seemed large to him, but it had a massive axehead, with the point extending into a sharp point, and opposite the axehead was studded block clearly supposed to be a blunter alternative.

“I swear I’ve seen that before,” the Commander muttered.

“Quite possibly,” Shen agreed. “That is a Mordaxt, or alternatively, the murder axe. It offers a much more versatile range of actions compared to the standard blade. Now the Shinobi can cause damage to any enemy unit by adapting its style to the weaknesses.” He pointed at the handle. “We did make some changes. The weapon length was reduced to be wielded as a one-handed weapon with the shield, but it can be extended to two handed if such an approach should be taken.”

He pointed at the sections. “The entire weapon has the same MELD reinforcement as the Templar maces or other blunt weapons, though more…advanced. Each main part; the point, hammer, and axe; has configurable attacks, such as the electrical and friction-based attacks of bladed Templar weapons. In this way it allows for more configurability based on opponents.”

That did seem like a useful weapon. “I suppose you’ve made a standard version for our Templars?”

“Of course,” Shen confirmed. “Only a couple, but they will serve any soldier well who wishes to use them.”

The Commander looked in satisfaction on the massive MEC and the new tool of war Shen had helped create. The aliens were definitely going to be occupied for some time more. “Excellent work here today, Shen. Your team is to be commended for the work done. A lot of people will owe their lives to your work.”

“I’ll pass it along, Commander,” Shen nodded thankfully. “It’s…strange. I feel like at some point we should be feeling that the end is coming. But there only seem to be more opportunities and possibilities opening up, not fewer.”

“There are no roadblocks here,” the Commander said firmly. “There is only advancement. Perhaps one day we will discover all there is to know…but that is not coming for a long, long time.”
“And until that point,” Shen said. “We’ll keep pushing the possible.” He pursed his lips. “While I
certainly don’t agree with you on everything, I can’t deny that Humanity has made more progress
in this war than in the past fifty years. If only we could study what we have in peace.”

“One day we will, Shen,” the Commander told him, echoing the sentiment. “One day we will.”

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Barracks, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/25/2016 – 11:12 A.M.

Christmas, the largest holiday of the year, at least if you were American.

Oliver certainly appreciated the Commander giving everyone the day off and the celebration in the
Barracks with everyone enjoying a few hours of levity. With that said, he didn’t particularly care
about the holiday itself. At least in the Netherlands their actual gift-giving celebration was a few
weeks back, and he wasn’t exactly religious to begin with.

Still, the atmosphere and comradery was nice to see.

It was also somewhat amusing to see the aliens try and mingle, even if they really didn’t know
what was going on. Oliver suspected that someone had told them it was a ‘holiday’, and they
probably didn’t really want to ask further either out of embarrassment or because they didn’t care.
They were certainly taking part in the food and drinks, though, at least the ones they could eat.

They were staying far away from any chocolate though, which had resulted in some teasing.

“This is an interesting gathering,” an alien said, walking up beside him with a cup of water in his
hand. “You do not participate in it?”

“Parties? Nah,” Oliver snorted. “Not my thing, too old to really enjoy them. Nice for everyone else
though.” He looked towards the alien in question a bit more, who was unsurprisingly a Vitakarian
who he didn’t recognize. He was tall, darker grey skin than he remembered, and looked more
muscular than the scientists. Probably a defector who used to be a soldier.

“Ah, I see,” the alien took a sip of his water. “Do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“As long as you tell me who you are,” Oliver answered, turning more fully to the alien. “One of the
defectors?”

“Yes,” he answered. “I…was Runi’larias’intha. You would call me Larias.”

“Well, welcome to XCOM if someone hasn’t said it already,” Oliver said. “Intha, huh. You know,
we apparently had a Zararch defector from the same area.”


“Well, that all happened before I came,” Oliver clarified as he went to grab a soda, with the alien
following behind him. “But I don’t think the Commander would lie about that. And telepathy
makes figuring out if they’re genuine fairly easy.”

“Interesting,” Larias took a sip of his water. “There were several soldiers who had siblings in the
Zararch. I imagine the Zararch is not pleased with us.”

“What a shock,” Oliver snorted, deadpan. “I can’t imagine why they would feel that way.”
“So, about my question,’ Larias said as they sat down at one of the tables. “I know this is a Human holiday, but what is the point of this ‘Christmas’?”

Oliver raised an eyebrow, amused as he took a sip of his drink. “Do you not know how to use the Internet?”

“I am still learning,” Larias admitted, looking down. “And that has not necessarily been my priority the past couple weeks.”

“Sorry,” Oliver apologized. Oh boy, how to possibly sum up Christmas. “Alright, well, the point of Christmas sort of depends on who you ask. To some people it’s a celebration of friends and family where they give each other gifts, and to others it’s an important religious holiday.”

Larias blinked once. “I would not have guessed it is a religious holiday. Or treated as such.”

“Eh, even religious people follow the gift giving tradition,” Oliver said. “You’d probably see it more if you visited any American city. Now that I think about it, I wonder if the parades and events are still happening despite the invasion.”

“Interesting,” Larias said. “But why give gifts at all?”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t know,” Oliver admitted. “But we’ve been doing it for a long time, and it’s likely whatever original meaning there was is gone. Still, I enjoyed this time of the year.”

He looked at Larias thoughtfully. “What about your species? You have to have holidays, right?”

“Oh, certainly,” the blue eyes of the Vitakarian seemed to brighten. “Each race has a multitude of their own, and there are a number which are universally recognized. The Celebration of Unification is the day when the Aui’Vitakar was formed, which fully unified our species. It is one of the few days when there are actual planned celebrations.”

“Sounds nice,” Oliver nodded. “Hopefully we’ll have a point where we can celebrate something similar.”

“Hopefully you do not emulate some of our other holidays,” Larias said with some resignation. “The next are the Days of the Plague. These are six days in sequence, where we remember the victims of the Plague that almost killed us. There are six days, one per species. There are subdued city events where people can visit the memorials, speak to the last few witnesses, and learn of the heroes and victims of the Plague. Each night recognizes a different race, and the respective race wears black clothing for the day.”

While it was clearly a sad event, that to Oliver sounded extremely interesting, if somewhat morbid. It was good that the Vitakara remembered the dead and honored them as they could. A shame the majority were allied with the Ethereals, because based on his interactions with them, he was sure both species could have been allies.

“It’s good you remember that,” he said. “Even if it’s painful. We do have similar days of remembrance, even if they aren’t for something quite that deadly.”

“There is a happy end to this,” Larias said. “The seventh day is the Celebration of the Arrival. This was when the Ethereals arrived and saved us. That is another day of celebration and communion with family and friends. We all wear gold and white that day; a bright ending to a somber week.”

Oliver sipped his drink. While he didn’t exactly like the idea of any celebration to the Ethereals, he did have to admit he completely understood why there was one. If Humanity had been dying and they were saved by an alien species, they would definitely have a holiday in their honor. In some
ways, that event it reminded him of Easter, crossed with a trip through a Holocaust museum.

“That sounds nice,” he said. “Much as I dislike the Ethereals, they did save your species.”

Likely because you were useful pawns, he thought to himself, though kept that particular thought to himself. He doubted there was another reason for their actions.

“Not all of the Elders are bad,” Larias said. “Elder Aegis proves this, as did Elders Sana’Ligna and the Battlemaster.”

Oliver gave him an incredulous look as he took another sip. “The Battlemaster is trying to kill us.”

“As you are trying to kill him,” Larias pointed out. “Do you consider yourselves evil or wrong? One can be respected and honorable while being on the wrong side.”

“The Battlemaster ordered an attack on Washington D.C.” Oliver reminded him. “And has not exactly been forthcoming about the state of the millions of Humans in captivity. He’s not as… bad…as some others, but I’d hardly call him someone I’d respect.”

“I suppose you have reasons to feel that way,” Larias sighed. “I do not blame you, but the Battlemaster was one Ethereal who I have personally seen and spoken to. He has respect for his soldiers, and is one who I cannot help but admire, even now.”

Oliver was aware of the morale boost that occurred when commanders walked among the rank and file. For the Vitakarians to have a deified Elder do the same to them…he supposed it made sense, even if it blinded them to certain realities about their masters. Well, maybe they would realize that one day.

But for now, he’d just let everyone enjoy the day and save the arguments for another time.

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Barracks, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/25/2016 – 12:01 P.M.

“Wow, I actually didn’t expect to get something,” Sierra looked at the neatly wrapped gift before her, a small box which she appraised. It looked very much like the stereotypical Christmas present, with a red bow and everything.

“Hey, it’s Christmas,” Ted said happily as he took a seat beside her and Anna. “And I wasn’t just going to not get my squadmates something, limited as my options were.”

“Technically I think we’re called a ‘Host,’” Anna pointed out absentmindedly, as she looked at her own identical box, weighing it to try and guess what it was.

Sierra rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Now I feel bad for not getting you anything,” she shrugged, realizing just how lame it would sound. “Guess I couldn’t think of something that would be…well, appropriate.”

“Hey, she ditched me too,” Anna chimed in, lightly punching her arm mockingly. “Though I can at least say I made some of the food for the party, so that was technically my gift to everyone.”

Ted waved dismissively, a smile on his face. “Don’t worry about it, Sierra. I’ll take your kill count as my Christmas present. Just keep killing more aliens.” He scratched his beard. “But I had the
same problem as you, namely ‘What can I get my squadmates who have jetpacks and use laser 
weapons that would actually be alright?’ Now, I can’t promise this is on the level of an Archangel 
suit, but I like how it turned out.”

“I swear that everyone in America is too stressed about gifts,” Anna said as she kept looking at the 
bottom of the box. “It’s the thought behind it that’s important. No one is going to tell you the gift 
you gave them is bad.”

Sierra coughed. “Well…about that…”

Anna just sighed. “Of course you did. Well, go on.”

Sierra flushed. “Uh, well, this was a long time ago. Back in high school. My boyfriend at the time 
had offhandedly mentioned that he liked this band, I don’t remember the name,” she winced. “In 
retrospect, he was very clearly being sarcastic, but since I wanted to do something nice, I ended up 
getting tickets – which were not cheap – to go see them.”

“I don’t know what’s more surprising,” Anna commented. “That you somehow didn’t recognize 
sarcasm, or that you had a boyfriend.”

Sierra sniffed. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” Anna smirked. “Carry on.”

“At least the look on his face was funny,” Sierra recalled. “Well, right before he slowly asked me 
what this was supposed to be. It didn’t take us long to figure out the…miscommunication.”

“Well, sounds like he took it well,” Ted said. “So, what did you do with it?”

“Oh, we resold the tickets and I took him to dinner, than gave him whatever money was left.” 
Sierra had ultimately enjoyed the night, once that embarrassment had subsided. “And that is my 
story of why I suck at giving gifts and do the safe, but boring thing of just giving people money to 
actually buy what they want.”

“Do you not give out wish lists?” Anna asked.

“Well…”

“Note to self,” Anna muttered. “Make Sierra a wish list so she has actual gift ideas. Anyway, so 
what happened with this boyfriend?”

“Nothing bad, if you’re wondering,” she shrugged. “Different life choices. He went to school on 
the other side of the country, I went into military. It was sad, but we both knew it was for the best.” 
She paused, thinking. “I hope he’s still alive.”

A few moments of contemplative silence passed. “A good story,” Ted finally said. “But I want you 
to open the boxes now. That is why I wanted both of you here.”

“Good idea,” Anna said. “I’m guessing it’s one of those action figures. It’s about the same size.”

“Nope,” Ted’s smile grew. “Go on then.”

Sierra pulled off the bow and followed with the wrapping paper. The box was roughly a foot tall, 
maybe a bit higher, and she opened it and was somewhat stunned as she pulled out a fully colored 
statue. It felt and weighed like it was made out of plastic or some kind of lightweight material, but
felt sturdy enough.

But the statue itself was awesome. It had a flat base, and depicted above was an Archangel flying through the air, which was clearly her own armor from the color and markings, and shooting from her wrist was a massive gout of flame roasting a Muton, which seemed to be the main support for keeping the figure ‘flying’ above.

It was the colors that really brought it together, and it was clear that there had been a lot of time and energy put into this. “Did you make this?” She asked incredulously.

“Well, I designed it,” he said modestly. “It involved me having to learn how to work a bunch of modeling programs and making something that was actually decent. 3D printers are great, and that was the easiest part.” He grinned. “The colors were all mine though, and yours in particular weren’t easy.”

“Damn,” Anna whistled. “You never said you were an artist.”

Sierra looked over Anna’s own statue, and it was equally impressive. It depicted Anna’s Archangel hovering shortly above the ground, supported by fiery jets, as she fired at what was probably a Vitakarian soldier, while a brightly colored explosion was killing a Muton in wonderful detail. There were other alien corpses on the ground, dead judging by the missing limbs and yellow wounds.

“Mine has more dead aliens,” Anna smirked. “Therefore it is better.”

“Yeah,” Sierra set her own on the table. “But mine has a flamethrower.” She narrowed her eyes as she noticed something interesting about the bases. “Hey…” she moved the bases a little closer together and then glanced towards a smiling Ted. “Alright, this is cool.”

“I’m glad you noticed,” he said, standing. “I designed it as one set, and then broke it into respective chunks. But it does look best when put together. And that includes my own piece.”

He reached down to pick up a plain box which had been there the whole time, and pulled out a similarly striking statue. In a similar vein to the others, it had Ted’s own Archangel suit, which was on the ground, and blasting psionic energy front his hands into a line of Mutons. He had somehow managed to capture the destructive distortion around him, with the suit being slightly obscured by purple ‘mist’.

He moved it forward, and completed the set. “And there we go. Maybe selfish, but if I’m making neat little pieces for both of you, I definitely want one of myself.”

“This is amazing,” Sierra said slowly. “Thank you for this.”

“Same,” Anna said. “No wonder you’ve been busy lately.”

“All I ask is you don’t break it,” Ted cautioned lightly. “It’s plastic, so it won’t crumble in your hand, but it’s not exactly made of alloys. Oh, but just in case.” He pulled his phone out. “I’m getting at least one picture-“

“Oh-huh, nope,” Anna stood and pulled Ted over to them and grabbed the camera. “You’re getting in the picture here.”

“But it won’t get the-“

“Hey, I got this,” Anna angled the camera. “I can take group selfies just fine.”
She snapped the picture and handed his phone back. “There you go, now you take the other pictures you want.”

Sierra smiled, and regardless of what else happened today, this would definitely go into the books as a great Christmas. Certainly one of the most memorable, and not necessarily because she was in XCOM.

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Cybernetics Lab, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/25/2016 – 3:37 P.M.

The Commander was surprised both Vahlen and Shen wanted to meet today of all days, but he supposed it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility to expect they would use it as the demonstration of another project. As a gift of sorts. If so, he wasn’t complaining.

The Engineering Bay was quiet as the workers were enjoying their day off in celebration, and most of the machines were also powered off minus the generators and MELD Production plants. It was a good feeling not to have to worry about running out of MELD, and they were producing enough to likely support a small country. More than enough for XCOM.

The circular doors to the Cybernetics Lab slid open and a few minutes later he was back in the Lab, which looked almost the same as it had a few days ago. The MEC suits were still and no machines were moving. Shen and Vahlen were standing a short ways into the Lab, and beside them were two other figures, one armored, the other not.

“Commander, Merry Christmas,” Shen greeted.

“Same to you, Shen,” the Commander reciprocated. “So, you and Moira, you wanted to show me this today?”

“Yes, it just so happened that we completed Project Achilles several days ago,” Vahlen said. “And both our volunteers underwent the procedure successfully, as you can see.”

The Commander looked to the two figures. Vahlen had let him know that both Zara Venator and Isaac Cabal had volunteered for the procedure, and he could definitely tell some differences. Namely that Zara’s hair was missing. “They said it was necessary,” Zara said, shrugging as she noticed him looking. “It’ll grow back eventually.”

Aside from that, she looked largely the same, although her skin seemed to be almost…flowing in some places, with orange ripples running throughout. Not quite translucent, but something fairly close. “So,” the Commander crossed his arms. “The body was enhanced with MELD, if I recall correctly.”

“Correct,” Vahlen stepped forward. “The skeletal structure was hardened with MELD, making it extremely difficult to break or injure. The organs have similarly been enhanced to be more efficient and heal quickly, and the nervous system is able to be controlled via the Neural Regulator, as in pain can be shut off.”

“Good thing too,” Zara raised her hand, and the Commander watched in fascination as her skin seemed to pull back, revealing the raw muscle underneath. “I don’t think I’d be able to do this if I could feel pain.”

“And yes,” Vahlen said. “The skin has been replaced with a MELD equivalent. It can facilitate
protection, appearance control, and enhanced healing. An improved Iron Skin, if you would. Instead of reinforcing the skin with MELD, it has replaced it entirely.”

“Not going to lie,” Zara grimaced. “The appearance changer thing is weird as hell. Still, I can demonstrate.” She closed her eyes, and before his eyes he watched her white skin turn to brown, and when she opened her eyes and showed her now-blue irises, she looked almost unrecognizable. No, she was unrecognizable aside from the voice.

“Huh.” Was all he said. “It did work.”

“Don’t expect I’ll be using this much,” Zara said as she reverted to her normal skin tone. “But Zhang will love it.”

“This isn’t quite perfect,” Shen pointed out. “It only changes skin and eye color, and doesn’t change facial structure or voice. But appearance-wise, it is an improvement.”

“So how durable is she?” The Commander asked, walking around her.

Zara sighed and unstrapped the gauss pistol on her waist and tossed it to him. “Shoot me and find out. Don’t worry, I won’t feel a thing. Not the head though.” She shot a glance at Vahlen. “While they say that even a headshot should be survivable if I’m fortified, I’m not doing that yet.”

The Commander moved around until everyone except Zara was behind him, took aim at her chest and fired several shots, then shot once in the arm and leg. The impacts did force her to stumble back, but she showed no signs of pain. Curiously enough he saw no blood leak out from the wounds and a minute or so later they closed up.

“Wounded blood vessels clot almost immediately if a breach is detected,” Vahlen explained. “Another benefit to injecting the blood with nanites. Skin wounds are healed to seal from outside contamination, and the wounded tissue internally will be repaired.”

“The downside is that I need to keep my MELD levels up,” Zara said, pulling out a small cube from a pocket. “Too many nanites used and I won’t function. Which is what these are for.” Her skin pulled back from her shoulder, and there was a small implant embedded in the muscle. She placed the cube into it and it disappeared as the MELD was disappeared into her body. The skin closed back up over it.

“Impressive,” the Commander said. “And you can harden the skin?”

“Yep,” she smiled and her skin began changing color again until it was a steel grey with the interlocking hexagonal pattern which was far more noticeable than on the Iron Skin modification. “I would not advise getting punched by me when I’m like this. Or trying to punch me in the first place.”

The Commander tapped a finger on her arm which was extended to him. It didn’t make any sound, and definitely wasn’t something that reminded him of metal. But it was hard and cold. If he didn’t know better, his first guess would be that this was a machine instead of an actual person. “And I assume this holds up under heavier fire?”

“We tested it against plasma, laser, and gauss,” Shen said. “Along with grenades. Those did the most damage, followed by plasma and gauss. Lasers were not as effective against it.”

“Excellent,” the Commander gave a grim smile. “And psionics?”

“Depends on the intensity,” Vahlen answered. “However, they are at least on par with plasma.
Destructive psionics are one of the highest dangers to Operators, but it needs to be sustained as the skin *will* heal injuries until MELD reserves are depleted.

“Now, this would already be a dangerous opponent to fight,” Shen said, gesturing the other armored soldier, Isaac, forward. “But with the additional capabilities of Operated MELD, the potential is limitless. So we designed a suit of armor specific to the MELD Operators.”

The suit itself was a dull grey, and extremely streamlined and thin compared to the Titan armor. It was sleek, aesthetically pleasing, and more attuned to the physiology of Humans. “This is Warden-class armor,” Shen continued. “Designed to integrate and connect to the Neural Regulator of the user, store large quantities of MELD, and finally to use them.”

“May I demonstrate, Doctor?” Isaac asked, glancing over to him.

Shen waved him forward. “Go ahead.

Isaac stepped forward, and several of the arm pieces of the armor slid back; arms at his sides, what looked like orange-tinged dust spilled out, swirling around the gauntlets. “The Neural Regulator has some storage capacity,” he explained to the Commander. “Both Doctor Shen and Vahlen have been helpful enough to include pre-built schematics into them, to help with construction and utilization. All I have to do is recall the correct schematic.”

The nanites around his left hand swirled into an extremely thin integrated blade which jutted out of the wrist, while he raised his other hand and the nanites flew towards a spot a short distance away, and began forming into a small barricade. “I have options here,” Isaac continued as the nanites began forming. “Entire structures are extremely draining, so this is best used for reinforcement and debris clearing. I can also permanently establish a structure, or allow it to be recalled.”

At a gesture, the barricade collapsed into dust and flew back towards him. “For example, I can manufacture explosives and ammunition, provided the needed materials are around,” he continued. “These would be permanent, and of course I can consume debris or corpses to increase or replenish MELD numbers, all of which are slaved only to my Neural Regulator. I can’t be hacked wirelessly, and even finding a physical port is difficult since it’s under my skin.”

The blade on his wrist dissipated, and all the nanites went back into the suit as the panels closed back up, sealing the suit. “I can also obviously reinforce the suit, or repair it if needed. It’s more durable than it looks.”

“There were aspects borrowed from the Titan armor,” Shen confirmed. “It will provide sufficient protection. While I doubt our MELD Operators will be numerous, I can easily see even one posing a challenge for even the Battlemaster.”

“Given how he can’t exactly slice nanites,” the Commander said slowly. “I think we might have something that will scare him.”

“Indeed,” Shen said, looking pleased. “And I would like to say once more how much both of your sacrifices for this are appreciated.”

“Please,” Zara waved a hand. “I’m more than happy with the tradeoff. Anything that helps kill more aliens is good for me.” Her lips curled into a vengeful smile. “They won’t know what hit them.”

On that, the Commander had to agree.

Of many of the war-altering additions that were being developed, this might just be the most
dangerous.

Collective Spacecraft Storage

12/27/2016 – 9:09 P.M.

Finally on his way to Andromeda Prime, Nartha was considering the best approach. The easiest thing to do would be to just request access, and once the situation was explained, then go from there. As long as he brought back something plausible, the Zar’Chon would be satisfied.

The bigger issue was if he was going to be able to find any support at all.

Right now he was just refueling and staying for the night before going through the Gateway. Collective Spacecraft storage stations didn’t have too much in the way of luxury, but they were perfectly serviceable. They had beds, food, and even repair crews and equipment if needed. Useful, though he fortunately didn’t have to utilize such.

“I agree.”

He nearly jumped and made ready to fire the pistol until he realized he had set it on the table. However, a few seconds later he just decided to glare at the figure of the amused Chronicler, standing by the wall in shadow. “I really don’t like you doing that.” Hecocked his head and saw that the Chronicler was not alone.

Beside him was a much leaner armed and helmeted figure, possibly a female since she was somewhat shorter. Unlike the grey stony armor of the Chronicler, the armor of the other figure was black, though it seemed to have the same stony texture. Unlike the strange symbol of the Chronicler, her own seemed to have an outline of some kind of Earth animal, some kind of cat or tiger it looked like.

Interestingly, she also had some kind of sword strapped to her back. He looked back to the Chronicler. “Who is this?”

“Fiona Dorren, at your service,” the woman said with a short wave, her voice slightly synthesized from the helmet. “I was asked to come along.” She looked around the room. “Your worlds really are fascinating.”

Nartha narrowed his eyes. “Why are you here?”

“We’re going to pay XCOM a visit,” the Chronicler said. “And now is the perfect opportunity to return and give the Commander a more accurate report on the Collective.”

Nartha quickly considered that. Assuming that the Chronicler was trustworthy – and even if he wasn’t, he didn’t seem to have a lot of choice here – there was still the issue that he was on a mission and his absence might be noticed. “For how long?”

“No more than a day,” the Chronicler said, smiling. “You’ll be brought right back here, and I’ve already taken care of any issues that might arise. Your ship and room will be untouched, and no one will notice you leave when you return.”

“Alright,” he stood. “It would be good to return to XCOM. I’m curious how the war is going from their perspective.”
“Trust me,” Fiona said. “It’s going to start getting a lot better.” She exchanged a look with the Chronicler. “You want to do it, or should I?”

“You do it,” he said. “You need the practice.”

Nartha could imagine a raised eyebrow. “I would prefer not to kill him.”

“Then don’t.”

Nartha looked between both of them. “Should I be concerned?”

“No,” the Chronicler stated without ambiguity. “She knows what she is doing.”

Fiona shot a glance at the Chronicler. “You know what-“

“You are protected,” he interrupted. “They will not pursue you here.”

“Very well,” she stepped forward and put a hand on his arm. “This won’t take long. Just relax.”

The air around them shimmered a blue-green, and then there was a white flash, leaving no trace of any of them behind.

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Containment Cells, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/27/2018 – 8:08 A.M.

All of the Internal Council, now including Iosif and Creed, with Aegis also in attendance, stood before Vahlen with one of the test subjects at her side. The completion of the Manchurian Restraints had been announced, and it was time to demonstrate the results. Vahlen stood proud as she began. “After a significant amount of time, resources, and work poured into this project, the Manchurian Restraints have been completed to my satisfaction.”

There were a bunch of approving nods and congratulations. “The entire process has been documented extensively,” she continued. “However, there are three ways the Restraints operate beyond what you might be familiar with. The first is that all will retain the neural bomb, which acts as a final failsafe if all else fails. The procedures for this will not be changed.”

She pulled out a small device. “The second you are aware is the verbal conditioning, which will allow users the ability to set instructions and orders. But this could potentially be compromised, so there is an additional tool provided.” She clicked a button on the device and the face of the test subject stiffened and he fell to the ground, though he was still conscious, as his far-staring eyes showed.

“This sends a signal to an implant just above the ear, which emits a frequency that will stop all current actions,” Vahlen said. “In the event our psions are compromised and are conditioned to ignore resets, this will allow us to override those orders and reestablish control over them. While it might not be feasible for ADVENT, within XCOM I would advise that each psion have a unique frequency, even if it’s a miniscule change.”

The test subject got back up automatically. “There are different levels of commands,” Vahlen said, turning to the subject. “Upon the receiving of the Restraints, a baseline command will be executed, which is where deep-level commands will be issued. This is where you can prevent defections to alien forces, inability to kill XCOM, and more. These can be changed with resets, but the process
will have to be repeated in its entirety.”

“And what is this code word?” Zhang asked. “Too short and it can be easily found or accidentally said. Too long and it might take too long to execute.”

“We have been using a combination of letters and numbers,” Vahlen explained. “After five letters or numbers are said, the person will be forced to stop for thirty seconds, which is more than enough time to complete the code phrase. This is something you are only supposed to use in emergencies. I recommend no fewer than ten unique letters and numbers.”

“How complex can commands be?” Creed asked. “Can you have psions take commands from... say...the Internal Council, but not from anyone else.”

“Absolutely,” Vahlen said. “The commands can be as simple or complex as needed. One thing you need to be careful of is ensuring there are no loopholes, and at the same time allowing flexibility in interpreting instructions.”

“So you can make exceptions,” Creed nodded. “Good to know.”

“How does the psionic defense work?” Jackson asked.

“It will act in much the same way as the Neural Regulator,” Vahlen said. “However, we can be more flexible here. You can establish exactly what they need to do in the event of a telepathic attack. It can be to execute the current instruction, report to their superior, or simply fall unconscious. I do want to note that this does not prevent mind reading, just mind control.”

“Better than what we have now,” the Commander said. “But this is not exactly compatible with psions.”

“No,” Vahlen shook her head. “Perhaps if we can one day identify the difference between self-produced, and hostile psionics, but we have not reached that point yet.”

“What about control over bodily functions?” Zhang asked. “Specifically pain resistance.”

“That can be done,” Vahlen confirmed. “The brain can shut down the ability to sense pain, though the circumstances where it would be allowed would have to be...specific.”

“But possible,” Zhang nodded. “Good.”

“What happens if they can’t hear commands?” Jackson inquired. “That seems like a loophole which could be exploited.”

Vahlen raised the device. “If they are hostile, this will force them into a malleable state, regardless if they hear it or not. Commands can be issued then. It is advised that a long-term command be implemented which can prevent this kind of rebellion.”

The Commander looked at the blank-faced test subject. “Can you issue orders using the code phrase or will that force a reset?”

“No, a reset has to be explicitly ordered,” Vahlen said. “And yes, you can. They will have a temporary command implemented, and they will execute it immediately. This will only be applied once, and the code phrase has to be repeated for additional commands. This was implemented as intentionally slow to prevent overuse.”

She handed the test subject a grenade which was on the table. “This test subject is incapable of
acting against us in any way. There will be no better demonstration than giving him this and continuing the remainder of this discussion.”

The test subject took the grenade, but just held it with a blank stare on his face. Vahlen turned back to them as Iosif spoke. “This seems well-done, but there is something of an issue. If mind reading is not prevented, then…what is stopping a telepath from learning the code phrases of anyone here? Or our soldiers for that matter? Given what the Imperator and Overmind can do, this seems risky as we could accidentally give them control over all of our psions.”

“We realized this issue,” Vahlen motioned Shen forward. “And we have a solution.”

“Yes,” Shen adjusted his glasses and cleared his throat. “None of us will know the code phrases. And if we do, we will soon erase them from our memory.”

Jackson coughed. “Sorry, what?”

“We feel it is best that all Manchurian commands be issued through JULIAN,” Shen said. “Thanks to both the Chinese and the help of our Andromedon allies, JULIAN is in a state where this is feasible. He can mimic all known words, and is currently the most advanced machine intelligence in the world. While not an AI, that will likely be the case soon.”

“JULIAN will issue code phrases and store them,” Vahlen said. “And only he will be able to give them to us upon a joint request of at least four members of the Internal Council. No one else can access them, and the Imperator nor Overmind can telepathically read or control a machine, nor take control of someone to access the files.”

“Leaving such power in the hands of a machine is dangerous,” Aegis warned. “Should it develop into an AI, it would have immense control over the entirety of XCOM. That is an extreme risk.”

“Perhaps,” Shen gave an indifferent look at Aegis. “But I would rather risk having a machine of our own design store them, than risk the Imperator learning them.”

“In any event,” Vahlen said. “After the respective psion has been contained or stopped, each person aware of the code phrase will either have it deleted from their memory by JULIAN, or it will be telepathically removed.”

“Thus preventing any telepath from learning it,” the Commander mused. “As much as this system is necessary, I do agree that Aegis has a point. Perhaps if we had more experience developing an AI, I would be more comfortable, but by its nature an AI might be able to overcome safeguards. Still, it is a lesser risk than the alternative.”

“Commander, A’Darrah has experience developing an AI,” Shen reminded him. “Union Apear specializes in this work, including how to include safeguards and methods to ensure it doesn’t become hostile. We are not going into this completely without experience.”

He really needed to check in on the status of JULIAN soon, since it had been some time. But today was not that day. “Well, considering all of us are still alive right now,” he glanced toward the test subject. “I believe this demonstration was highly informative. Now the question is how it will be applied.”

“It should definitely be applied to all aliens,” Iosif said. “Defectors or not, that is not a chance which should be taken.”

“I think most of us are in agreement on that,” the Commander glanced to Vahlen. “This can be done on aliens, correct?”
“Correct.”

“Excellent,” he paused. “This is necessary on all psions for sure, as was the original goal. As well as all those on the Internal Council.”

Shen coughed. “As much as I hate to suggest this, having a limited amount of commands for workers of critical systems would also be helpful. It would greatly hinder any sabotage.”

“XCOM Intelligence agents will undergo this,” Zhang added. “I would also request some of the more…uncooperative alien captives undergo them to send back to the Collective as spies. They need no longer be willing or compliant.”

“And just to be clear,” the Commander looked towards the Ethereal. “Aegis, you will be undergoing this as well, as will Caelior.”

“I do not want to put my free will into the database of a machine,” Aegis said flatly. “It is one thing for you to do this, and even to Caelior, but I can protect myself adequately enough from the Imperator.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “Your skills are not in question. This is about ensuring you don’t betray us if you have second thoughts. This,” he motioned around. “Goes for all of us, you are not being singled out. But you will not be excluded just because you dislike the idea of artificial intelligence. If you don’t like that, you can leave.”

“I highly doubt you wish that outcome,” Aegis said just as neutrally. “You need my help, and I assure you I have no intentions of betraying you.”

“I believe you,” the Commander said. “But if you want to stay here, then you will undergo the procedure, same as the rest of us. If you don’t, you can go to ADVENT. Perhaps we need your help, but if you don’t wish to follow our own rules, then that would just confirm you are more interested in using us than actually aiding our side.”

“Guilting me is not an effective tactic,” Aegis said.

“I’m not,” the Commander answered firmly. “I’m telling you what your options are. You will either trust us, or you don’t.” He stopped to think. “Psions, like it or not, are dangerous. Me, Vahlen, and Iosif are all such, but we can clearly see that. They do not deserve to have unlimited power just because they have abilities. The Ethereals were, and are, unchecked in their power, and they have used it to dominate others. We will not follow that same path, nor will we tolerate such from other species. The time of psionic supremacy will end now.”

Aegis was silent for a few moments. “If I do this, I will not have my phrase stored in a machine. I do not care who administers it, but it will not be done your way, nor can it be stored by such. I accept the security risk.”

“We can work with that,” the Commander said, glad Aegis wasn’t going to be unreasonable. “In the meantime, Jackson, send this over to ADVENT so they can start implementing it.” He turned to Vahlen. “Excellent work today, Vahlen. Everyone is dismissed, and the implementation of the Restraints will begin over the next couple weeks.”

All of them departed, with Vahlen plucking the grenade out of the hand of the test subject with a smile on her face. The Commander wondered what Vahlen would do with him, but it wasn’t important.

Another project down. And this was one of the most important.
The Commander felt that the aliens were going to be... *surprised* when they fought next. At the very least they’d find themselves forced to put some effort into their attacks, assuming they weren’t doing that already. But the combined threat of Shoggoths, MELD Operators, Titan Armor, Valkyries, and the Manchurian Restraints gave them far more of a chance than before.

At the same time, he knew it would be a mistake to think the aliens weren’t making similar improvements.

The Imperator had Patricia. The Battlemaster likely wouldn’t take the recent defeats lightly. There were concerns, and with Caelior now in their control, that gave them another tool to use.

The room felt colder than usual; maybe because he was sitting alone in his office. Appropriate documents had been distributed to the soldiers informing them of the Operator position, as well as the Restraints. Initial applications on psions and Intelligence personnel would begin happening within the next few days.

While the idea didn’t exactly seem to be popular, it wasn’t being actively condemned. They probably felt better since he had included that this explicitly included the Internal Council and himself personally.

In the meantime, ADVENT was working on their own plans. There were some interesting ideas he had heard about, in particular their Celestial Project and AEGIS being implemented. Then there were the continued efforts to bring the rest of the world into the fold. Once Britain announced their referendum and won, the EU would collapse.

There were too many countries gone, it was no longer a power in the world. China was the only one, and it was currently an ally. Hopefully once Europe was secured, Saudia would focus her attention on Africa. The SAS was a development that he had only looked at recently, but it did not look promising. Ignoring that it was a clear power grab, that they were backed by ADVENT defectors was not something that should go unpunished.

However, at least ADVENT could now fully expand the PRIEST Program to match the initial document. The threat of a psionic takeover, no matter how small the probability, would be eliminated completely.

That did highlight something that would have to be dealt with later: JULIAN.

There was the question about just what to *do* with an AI. The Commander knew they would develop one eventually, so the question was how to handle the moment when it became self-aware. It was a machine, created to protect Humanity, but there was very little guarantee that it would want that. It would ask questions, develop something akin to emotions, and likely be far more intelligent than any organic being could ever hope to be.

The science fiction movies depicting an AI takeover didn’t not necessarily seem far-fetched. Those either happened because of bad programming instructions, or because the machines rebelled. And while in the end, Humanity emerged victorious, in real life he doubted it would be so easy. He scowled to himself, setting the tablet down. He was avoiding the actual question.

The question of whether to treat it as alive or not. If the former, then forcing it to fulfill its intended
purpose was essentially slavery. And if they went along anyway, there was the distinct possibility that it would try and fight back in some way. Then again, that might not happen, and such actions could be programmed to be impossible.

But it seemed to him that it would be more beneficial if the AI would work by their side willingly. There were risks to unleashing an unrestrained AI on the galaxy, but at the moment the Collective was more at risk than Humanity...especially since they hated the idea of an artificial intelligence. That alone might be sufficient motivation for an AI JULIAN was developing into.

He would have to talk to Shen about the best approach. He personally held a similar opinion to an AI that he did to the idea of clones. If they were capable of sapient and independent thought, reasoning, and emotion, they were alive, or at least deserving of being treated as such. Given the vast range of life just on Earth, much less beyond it, an artificial intelligence didn’t seem out of the question.

Those opposed were likely worried about being surpassed if there was ever a conflict.

Of course, there had to be a conflict for that fear to be valid.

One that had yet to materialize.

Either way, a decision should be made on how to deal with JULIAN sooner than later. But not tonight, there had been enough done today, and some sleep was warranted. He moved to stand when the air around his office shimmered and the Chronicler stepped through, encased in his armor with a case in his hand.

The Commander relaxed his hand, which was near his belt while the other was prepared to telekinetically attack. “Commander,” the Chronicler greeted. “Apologies for the delay, I’ve been busy.”

“Considering we suspected you were dead, I’m not surprised,” the Commander said slowly. “I did get your message from your friend. You need to get more subtle agents.”

The Chronicler gave a small smile. “She’ll get there. But I’ve brought along someone you might be interested in seeing.” He glanced to his right. “Assuming they’ll get here.”

Almost on cue there was a blue-green flash, far less subtle than the Chronicler’s entrance, and an armored figure appeared, along with a Vitakarian. The Commander blinked, already suspecting who this was. He wasn’t in his Human disguise anymore, but he still had the same face. “Nartha?”

The alien raised a hand. “Hello, Commander. We have a lot to talk about.”

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Officer of the Commander, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/26/2016 – 10:03 P.M.

Rarely was the Internal Council summoned after the day was done, but the arrival of their Zararch spy and visitors presumably representing a Sovereign One was a notable exception. Nartha hadn’t wasted time in giving them a report on the state of the Collective. News that was both reassuring, and somewhat worrying.

The good news was that the Collective was, as they had suspected, close to fractured. There were clear divisions, especially within the Andromedons. The bad news was that it sounded like the
Battlemaster was working to correct those flaws as quickly as possible.

“I admit,” the Commander said. “I didn’t expect we’d speak to you for a long time.”

“Neither did I,” Nartha admitted. “Though I was planning to establish some kind of contact sooner or later. I’ve been attempting to avoid unnecessary risks.”

“That you’ve managed to not become captured while retaining your position is impressive,” Zhang said, giving a rare compliment. “Well done.”

“I’ve done what I can,” Nartha sighed. “Though it’s…not looking good for your species. Even if you get off Earth…there is an entire Collective waiting for you.”

“The Andromedons might solve that issue for us,” Creed noted. “You’re being ordered to investigate a prominent Union. That bodes well. If the Collective is busy with an Andromedon civil war and us, that will weaken them.”

“Assuming that the Imperator allows that to happen,” Aegis pointed out. “He would not risk another internal conflict, not now.”

“Would he have a choice?” Iosif asked. “Unless he wants to show his intentions, there are few options.”

“The Imperator does not act with obvious and incriminating intent,” Aegis sniffed. “He is subtler than that. I suspect the Andromedons would never learn a thing.”

“I would be surprised if that was the case,” Shen pondered, scratching his chin. “We cannot have been the first species to recognize the danger of psionics.”

“In any case,” Nartha said. “The Nulorian would certainly be willing to work with us. They’ve been wanting a chance to bring down the Collective for decades. They do trust me now, and it is only a matter of time until I am allowed to speak to Miridian.”

“Let’s be realistic,” Zhang crossed his arms. “The Nulorian are good distractions, but they are a minor power at best, and largely confined to Vitakar. The Andromedons represent a far better ally we should pursue.”

“Agreed,” the Commander nodded. “But the Nulorian will be useful against the forces on Vitakar. There is no reason to ignore them.” He glanced to Nartha. “I suppose thanks to our friends,” he nodded towards the Chronicler and the unhelmeted Fiona. “We can establish a more…formal relationship.”

“We’re not your personal transportation service,” Fiona chimed in. “Just warning you.”

“I don’t expect you to be,” the Commander said without looking at her. “But that can be detailed later. The point is we now have a way into the Collective, and we are going to use it.”

“I think we should move to the other aspect of this,” Vahlen said, looking to the mysterious duo. “The two of you. Who are you and what is your part in this war?”

“I suspect Agent Gertrude has told you what she knew,” the Chronicler said with a smile. “And we had our own brief discussion. But I am simply known as the Chronicler, formerly of EXALT and ADVENT, and now act as a…representative of sorts.” He motioned to the side. “And this is Fiona Dorren, another one who is working with us.”
Working with. Curious. Fiona raised a gauntleted hand. “Pleasure to meet all of you.”

“That tells us very little,” Vahlen said. “We already know that. Also that you represent a Sovereign One.”

“Correct,” the Chronicler affirmed. “And one who has now taken more of an interest in this conflict. When Quisilia attempted to kill me, he fully…awakened him…for lack of a better word. He does not wish his eyes and hands to be killed.”

The Commander narrowed his eyebrows. “Awakened? He was asleep?”

The Chronicler set down his case on the desk and unlatched it. “I believe, Commander, that it would be easier for all of us if you spoke with him directly. He wants to speak to you personally.” It opened to reveal one of the Sovereign Orbs, with the deep blue hypnotic ripples flowing within it. “I believe your questions can be best answered by him. I am merely a voice or representative, and while I know much, he would prefer to speak to you himself.”

“I would be careful, Commander,” Aegis cautioned. “A rogue Sovereign One might not be trustworthy.”

“Rogue?” The Chronicler laughed at that. “You know nothing, Ethereal. He is no more rogue than the Sovereign the Imperator serves, nor the one he attempts to exploit.” He turned to the Ethereal. “There is no such thing as a rogue Sovereign One, Aegis. There are merely those who are different from each other.”

He peered at the silent Ethereal. “Did you believe that you had made contact with a group? The last of their kind?” He narrowed his lips to a thin, grim line. “No, whoever it was lied if you believe that. Your kind are useful tools in the grand strategy taking place now; they are merely one side in a conflict the scale of this universe.”

He looked back to the Commander. “Have Vahlen read my mind if you believe I am attempting to deceive you. If I wished you harm, I would have killed you. XCOM has the rarest of opportunities facing them, and I suggest you consider carefully.”

There was a pause. “I cannot sense deception from him,” Vahlen said slowly. “He at least believes he is telling the truth.”

The Commander looked at the orb. “He communicates through that?”

“Yes,” was the answer. “Place your hand on it.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Abby’s report specified she came across one and you told her to avoid it.”

“If his mind is touched,” the Chronicler said. “The immediate reflex is too much for a normal mind to handle. But he is prepared now, and you will not be harmed. I’m sure you can understand why I dissuaded Agent Gertrude from touching it. I assume her corpse would raise questions.”

The Commander sighed and moved over to the orb. “Let’s see how this goes,” he gave a look at the Chronicler. “If something happens, kill them.”

With that he placed a hand on the orb, which seemed to attach his hand to it, making him incapable of pulling it off. It was oddly warm, and he watched as the room and people inhabiting it faded from his vision as his surroundings turned a ocean blue, as if deep underwater. Some tinted light shown from above, but everywhere he looked, there was nothing but rippling teal and blue.
He was able to pull his hand off the orb now, which sank into the ground, upon which he was surprised to find was black rock of some kind. He knelt down and tapped it. While it did feel like stone, it made no sound. It did feel like he was underwater, but somehow able to breathe. Looking around, the black rock seemed to be a ledge leading to empty space ahead.

Out of curiosity, he looked down and saw nothing but diminishing light. A bottomless pit of sorts. He walked to the edge of the ledge, and waited for several minutes for something to happen. Either a person, a voice, or something. But he initially felt, heard, and saw nothing. He looked down the edge, frowning.

Was he supposed to jump?

He didn’t believe he was in any danger if he did, because this was presumably a construct of the Sovereign One and no harm would come unless it was wished upon him. In that case…he didn’t have anything to lose.

Still, jumping off a cliff into the void was not something he was thrilled about.

So he jumped and fell into the black.

He couldn’t tell how long he was falling or at what speed; everything looked the same, and the gradual dissolution of color did little to give him an indication of speed. It didn’t feel like a freefall either, it felt like nothing at all, as if he was motionless and the world was moving around him instead. But soon the last of the light was gone and he was in complete darkness.

At that moment, the air seemed to grow thicker, though he could still breathe easily. And slowly but surely, he came to a complete stop. There was nothing around him, and the black was so complete he couldn’t see any part of his body. He tested his footing and it was at least solid; kneeling down once more he tested his fingers and the ground felt slick, but not wet and almost absorbent in a way.

Two massive blue lights appeared in front of him, in what seemed a close distance away, but once he got a good look at what was in front of him, corrected that to what was probably a significant distance. Two more lights appeared just above the first two, and he realized very quickly that they were eyes.

The illumination was not perfect, but he could make out some outline of the creature. There was no visible mouth he could see, though the skin seemed to be made out of armor or stone. It was difficult to estimate, but at the distance the eyes were away from him, each one was at least as large as his body. He could see two…appendages hanging from the body under the eyes, which he couldn’t follow further, and the body itself went up until he could see nothing.

This was all in his mind, but he would not have been surprised if this, which he assumed was a Sovereign One, was larger than most skyscrapers. However, from what little he could see…the Sovereign certainly had a tenuous visual similarity to the Director Flagships from the memory of Aegis.

“Commander.” The voice came from everywhere; booming and shaking the reality he was inhabiting. It drilled into his mind, echoing after each syllable and leaving a psionic impression he had learned to recognize by now. Every word was heard and understood with the original intent. It was not painful, but it was near-overwhelming. “I have spoken to relatively few aliens in my lifetime. Most are irrelevant and meaningless in the vastness of time and space. But you have my attention, as does your species. We shall converse.”
The Commander decided to start with a simple question. “I know you’re a Sovereign One. But I know little else. Who are you, and why are you on our planet?”

The reality around him shook and bubbled. “I am T’Leth, Conqueror of the Nilassiah Galaxy, Ravager of Worlds, the Unshackled and Unbound, the Pawnless, the Warrior, I am the Sovereign of Destruction and War.” The immediate area around the Commander shook. “I rejected the cowards my brethren have become; who hide behind others to wage war for this universe. In doing so I became a target. I faced trillions and destroyed countless worlds as I hunted down and purged those who believed their pawns gave them strength.”

The blink the Sovereign gave briefly turned the world to darkness. “This is not my galaxy of origin. I came from one far from here, Nilassiah. Humans call it the Black Eye. I waged war and won. I assumed control and would have been content. The Replicators, the ones the Ethereals called Synthesized, soon came and I waged war to protect my galaxy. Some of those who I had thought defeated returned, and devoted their power to also destroying me.”

The air quivered. “It was too much for even me, and I was damaged and fled to your galaxy. I observed for millions of years, attempting to survive as I was caught in another constant war. I was continuously hounded and hurt once more, but I had learned what I wished. I withdrew to a random world, and I slept. This world was your own.”

Blackness and light again. “I stayed in a healing trance for millennia. I was here before your species evolved into what it is today, and for that time I have been asleep. The Chronicler was the first to learn of me, and when I first stirred and realized that there was a species on this planet. He acted as my eyes and window into your world, one where I learned all there was to know about your species. But my mind was still clouded; tired and weary from what I have endured.”

The eyes seemed to have grown more intense. “Your species posed an interesting question, but I did not think to intervene. Your kind were intelligent, but violent. Empathetic, but ruthless. A walking contradiction I did not wish to puzzle out. I expected you would destroy yourself, but each time your armageddon approached, you avoided this fate. That attracted my attention. What has happened since the Ethereals came has solidified it.”

“How?”

“You should not be alive,” was the answer. “You faced superior technology, numbers, and powers you did not understand, but not only did you defy these aggressors, you extracted victories. You, Commander, have reshaped your species into something to challenge those who should be far greater. The Ethereals perceive your species as a threat, and I must understand why.”

“It isn’t just me,” the Commander said. “I have allies, friends, and I don’t rely on just myself. Too many fall to their own hubris. I make attempts to avoid that when I can.”

“But it is you who are their resolve,” T’Leth rumbled. “You have pushed Humanity farther than in centuries within a few short years. You removed those who stood in your way with ruthless pragmatism, but out of necessity, not malice. You personally shaped ADVENT into what it is today, using one who was formerly your enemy. You were wise enough to see the opportunities again and again. It is not just you who are responsible, Commander, but Humanity would have fallen if you were not the Commander of XCOM.”

“Then I think you already know why I am considered a threat,” he paused. “At least for some. I suspect the Imperator does not hold that opinion.”

The voice of T’Leth sounded almost amused. “Ironic. I have seen it happen time and time again.
Sovereigns rise, they acquire knowledge, they expand and dominate. And they become arrogant. The Imperator is no different than my brethren; he believes he knows our kind. I am not certain of his plans, but his attempts to manipulate us indicate he intends to betray his benefactor.” The voice turned deeper. “A show of a mortal attempting to break free of our reach. The Imperator will fail. The Sovereign Ones control this Universe, now and forever. It is merely a question of which one will rule.”

That did not sound promising. Not for them. “Then there are more than the one assisting the Imperator.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes. Many more. There is no such thing as independence in this galaxy, Commander. There are proxies or those who soon will be. Species are nurtured and grown, evolve and advance for the sole purpose of acting as tools for a Sovereign benefactor. The galaxy is a chessboard, and the Sovereigns are the everlasting players.”

“How long has it been going on?”

“Since the beginning of my life,” came the answer. “Billions of years ago. The conflicts have raged for far longer. The original reasons have long been forgotten, but it does not matter. This is reality. The conflicts are confined to the galaxies, but it will soon grow beyond that. The next step will be a war between galaxies, and it will continue until the stars of the Universe fade, or the last Sovereign stands tall, the victor of a war which claimed the Universe. This is inevitable, but it will not happen for trillions of years.”

The Commander shook his head. The entire thing seemed so pointless to him. “But why? Why would every single Sovereign do this?”

“It is on a scale you cannot comprehend yet,” T’Leth said simply. “Look at what you are doing now for reasons. Your purge of the United Nations, the War on Terror, the Annexation of Canada. Those Humans did not match your vision of your ideal world, and so you acted. Even now you work to reshape the world in your image. ADVENT is your tool, and XCOM is your weapon.”

There was another rumble. “And yet you will protest that you have made peaceful alliances. Gathered allies. This is because you do not break or bend; you are driven in your vision for Humanity, and those around you comply. Imagine, Commander, if every single Human were as driven and intelligent as you are. Do you imagine they would allow you free reign to bring a vision to life that does not align with their own? This is how we see the galaxy, Commander, and that is why there will never be peace.”

The Commander crossed his arms, staring at the blue eyes. “If I’m being honest, it doesn’t sound like you’ve tried.”

“You cannot try something which is impossible to achieve,” T’Leth didn’t sound offended, but as if this was a pointless question. “There have been alliances of Sovereign Ones. But they are done with the understanding that in the end, only one will rule.”

There were a few moments of silence between the Human and alien.

“So what now?” The Commander asked. “What are you in all of this? What do you want with us?”

“I have little desire for proxies or puppets,” T’Leth said. “Actions of those who fear to take risks and are afraid. I do not intend to assume control of your species, though it could be done easily.”

“Your comment to Quisilia seemed to indicate otherwise.”
“A calculated risk,” T’Leth said. “One which I knew the Ethereal would take to the Imperator. He has preconceived notions about us. I was simply giving him evidence to fulfill the stereotype he envisions. Believe me or not, but I am not one to take species as tools.”

“I do have to ask why not,” the Commander said. “I can see the advantages.”

The booming voice sounded mildly irritated. “It is lazy. It stifles creativity and fosters apathy. What fear do you have if you have an army of minions at your disposal? What incentive is there to end this conflict if you are never threatened? Sovereigns can become reliant on their proxies, and I have killed many who were like this, and I will never become one myself.” The voice trailed off.

“Yet, there are advantages. There are more options. Your reach is larger. But too many use them as crutches, not as tools to accomplish a task. And they commit the crime of not preparing to fight a Sovereign One, but the proxies of other Sovereigns. A waste of thousands of years, and throwing lives away for the sake of mere entertainment.” The voice turned disgusted. “I have taken great pleasure in ripping such pathetic excuses apart.”

The Commander considered what to say next. “You say that every Sovereign is…incompatible with your plans. If that is the case, what do you plan for the galaxy should you succeed?”

“I seek a galaxy that is self-sufficient, managed by a master species to keep the rest in line. I seek a galaxy that can withstand the might of threats beyond its edge; one which hunts and kills those who wish to disrupt the established order. I will turn this galaxy into an impregnable fortress, and once that is accomplished, I will continue to the next galaxy, taking the finest of my achievements and controlling it as well.”

The Sovereign became quiet briefly. “I have little interest in managing galaxies, that can be left to others. I can promise something other Sovereigns will not; the ability to exist and develop without interference. There will be no need for proxies to be used if there are no Sovereigns. The conflict has raged too long, and it is time that others are given the potential to rise to the level of a threat.”

“This could threaten you as well.” The Commander noted.

“Perhaps.” T’Leth did not sound troubled. “Yet would they fight me? Or the ones who wish their extermination. It is a risk, but victories are not achieved by being safe. This is merely the ideal outcome, Commander, I have contingencies if such does not go according to what I wish.”

“I don’t suppose you’d mention what they are?”

“Not now, Commander. Not yet.”

Not unexpected, and as far as dealing with extraordinary powerful beings went, it didn’t sound like the worst possible scenario. Not exactly ideal, but it could be much worse. But there was still what specifically T’Leth wanted with them. “So what about us?” The Commander asked. “You say this, but if you didn’t want to use us for something we wouldn’t be speaking.”

“We have a mutual enemy, Commander,” T’Leth said. “The Imperator threatens your species. His benefactor threatens me. His reckless arrogance also threatens to unleash a monster on the galaxy, one I would see destroyed for all time. I see little reason for us to wage this war separately.”

The Commander furrowed his eyebrows. “What monster?”

“An abomination which calls itself the Bringer of Paradise,” T’Leth visibly moved as he spoke, slightly up and down. “A more mocking name I do not know. The Ethereal known as the Creator is
at the center of it. The Bringer has been trapped in what you call the Psionosphere for billions of years either as a consequence of an attempt to transcend reality, or perhaps a means of survival. The details are long lost, but it has been trying to return.”

“Why would the Imperator bring it over?” The Commander asked, frowning.

“Because he thinks he can control it,” T’Leth said. “I do not know how he came to this conclusion, but I have seen the Bringer act before. It corrupts and dominates from a place none can reach. All it takes is one willing and curious subject, and it will spread. It has been treated as a deity, an apocalyptic figure who promises Paradise to those who join it. Lies and drivel, but it is effective. It has not crossed over to this world, but it is getting close. Very close.”

Wonderful. Now things that shouldn’t actually exist seemed to be threatening them. “So we have mutual enemies. This sounds like something which is a threat to us as well…or soon will be.” He paused. “But the question is what we will do. You want an alliance, correct?”

“I am curious, Commander,” T’Leth said. “What do you envision as…acceptable?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Nice that you ask me. I’m well aware I’m not in a position of strength.”

“Indulge me. I am curious.”

“Fine,” the Commander said. “We work as allies. You provide us with the means to move our soldiers around the Collective, and teach us how to utilize and develop Sovereign technology. You also don’t interfere in our government or leadership positions, nor attempt to take control or otherwise betray us. In return, we willingly protect you and assist as needed in your own plans. Everything we know about the galaxy, you will know and since you don’t have a…traditional relationship with another species…you can more easily work from a position of safety, but not cowardice.”

T’Leth rumbled again, clearly amused. “You propose working as an ally? Between a Sovereign One and a primitive species such as yourself? You are a bold one.”

“Am I?” The Commander asked. “You’ve said yourself that we have your attention. You’ve seen what we’ve done and what we have the potential to do. You have no desire for a pawn, and we have no desire for a master. We are far more useful to you as an ally, primitive species or not. You say that too many Sovereigns waste their time killing their proxies in entertainment. Imagine a species capable of challenging Sovereigns. A species that is not only your ally, but one who does not wish to dominate this universe.”

There was a long silence. “What you are proposing has only been done three times in this galaxy. All three times it has attracted the attention of the coward Sovereigns and then the Replicators. Yet each time they nearly conquered the galaxy. Perhaps there is merit in such an arrangement, at least for now. Even if this fails and your species dies, I will endure and learn. There is no reason to not take a risk.”

The Commander felt himself breathe a little easier. “What of ADVENT then?”

“ADVENT is inconsequential,” T’Leth dismissed. “They are a consequence of your actions, and I have little interest in communicating with them. I do not wish my presence widely known outside of XCOM. If you must inform your Chancellor, I will allow it. But this agreement is between me and you, Commander, and by extension, XCOM. Not ADVENT.”

There was something that did need to be addressed before this went further. “You’re aware of the
capabilities of the Imperator and Overmind. Their telepathic abilities are...extensive, to say the least. We have taken steps to mitigate this, but it remains a risk.”

“Yes...” T’Leth said slowly. “I have the capability to protect you. I can ensure that your bases of operation remain uncompromised. Give me the necessary reach, and your planet can be similarly protected. The Chronicler will explain how to accomplish this, but the powers of the Imperator can be dulled and rendered ineffective.”

“And what about assisting us in understanding your technology?” The Commander asked. “Much of it is hard to create in the first place, let alone modify it.”

“Such can be provided,” T’Leth answered. “Though even with the answers in front of you, comprehension is unlikely immediately. It would be years before even your most intelligent can begin to understand the intricacies of the power we create.”

“Good enough,” the Commander nodded. “We don’t wish to become reliant. Understanding where to start will serve us just as well. From there we can...improve.”

“Such statements are amusing, but I will indulge your optimism.”

“This seems like an acceptable start,” he nodded. “What now?”

“Speak with the Chronicler,” T’Leth said. “Determine a course of action. I will await to see the results. Return to your people now, Commander. We will speak again.”

The Commander raised a hand in farewell. “I will. Merry Christmas!” He felt the Sovereign rumble once more and the world suddenly became brighter until the Commander was once more in his office surrounded by everyone. He pulled his hand off of the orb, and saw everyone looking at him awaiting answers. “That was...quick.” Vahlen said.

“Quick?” He’d been in there at least a half hour, probably more. “How long was I like that?”

“A minute, perhaps,” she said. “Did it work?”

He was still processing some of what had been said, but an analysis would be done later. “Yes,” he said, the corners of his lips turning up. “We are now allied with a Sovereign One.”
“Hello, what can I do for you today?”

He’d been thinking of coming here for days, and would have preferred to wait until it was less busy, but the Recruitment Centers were almost always busy so he figured he shouldn’t keep putting it off. “Yes. This is where you do testing for psionics, right?”

The uniformed woman on the other side of the table brightened. “Yes sir, it is. Do you wish to undergo testing?”

A shrug. “Why not?”

“Alright, I can get you set up for that today, if you want,” she said, picking up a tablet. “I do need you to go through the materials, sign with the stylus, and give it back. Essentially a consent form, and you are under no obligation to sign with ADVENT regardless of results. This is purely for testing.”

He took the tablet. “Don’t worry, I know what this is. It won’t take long.”

“Excellent! And your name?”

“Ivan Smirnov.”

“Got it,” she entered something, presumably his name, into her computer. “Just return that whenever you’re finished.”

Ivan walked to the first empty chair he could find and sat down, the tablet resting on his lap as he decided first to see who else was deciding to come here. ADVENT’s Recruitment Centers, like most of what they did, were of extremely high quality. While not especially big, the room was exceptionally clean, well-lit, which slightly contrasted the grey walls with red highlights.

The red ADVENT symbol was also prominently displayed on the walls, along with the various emblems for the branches. Army, Navy, Air and Space, PRIEST, and Special Forces. He couldn’t blame anyone who was taken in by the sleek design of it all. No matter what anyone said about ADVENT, none could deny they knew how to market.

As a result he wasn’t surprised to see the room contained mostly younger men and women, and not an insignificant number who were clearly in their thirties. He’d seen the recruitment numbers, and ADVENT was the fastest-growing military in all of recorded history, which was somewhat disingenuous considering the circumstances, and that they were comprised of multiple countries.

He wondered how many were here because they felt some kind of calling, or because they felt like there was no other choice. It was ironic that ADVENT was responsible for collapse of so many positions, yet managed to position themselves as an entity with open arms for the displaced.

Smart. A change from the incompetence of the past.
Ivan sighed, turned his attention to the tablet and settled in for a short period of reading legalese. To his mild surprise, it was surprisingly straightforward, and stated exactly what the testing would consist of, in what order, and what joining the PRIEST Division would entail.

A physical test of some kind, which he wasn’t worried about passing. He was healthy and in decent shape. This was also apparently where they would determine if he was psionically sensitive or not. If he was, he would be given a psychological test, likely to ensure he didn’t have any mental illnesses or something.

He was curious to see how that would go. There was a written portion, and an in-person interview. Likely to test comprehension and ensure they weren’t giving superpowers to idiots and criminals. He wasn’t concerned about that either, while he’d worked with criminals all his life, he was most certainly not one.

As for his mental state, he knew there was nothing to be concerned about. He had no mental illnesses, and if necessary he could follow orders and the like. He wouldn’t claim to be the biggest patriot or fan of ADVENT, but he could work in it. All he was particularly concerned about was, if he was psionic, becoming such.

He’d do his time in ADVENT, and then do his own thing, preferably with something extra gifted to him. And if he wasn’t psionic, well, the military wasn’t the only option he had. ADVENT had no shortage of positions open.

“Another new recruit?” A man sitting a chair over asked. “Well, you’re not the usual crowd.”

“Potentially,” Ivan said, looking at the man. He was definitely younger than Ivan, probably mid-twenties in a grey suit, black hair and pale skin. Not really a person out of place. “You as well?”

“Air and Space,” he said, inclining his head. “Didn’t get a degree in aviation for nothing. Figure ADVENT could use more pilots. More interesting than flying commercial, anyway. So what about you?”

“If it goes well, PRIEST,” Ivan said. “Otherwise likely something with ADVENT Legal.”

His eyebrow shot up. “Psionics, huh? Interesting.” He looked up thoughtfully. “Considered that, but I think it’s best I don’t know. Much as I’d like that, I’d feel ADVENT would never let me go. They’re not big on risks. Or they could say no.”

Ivan lifted the tablet. “They would probably only say no if you were a criminal or just insane. They need psions; they’re not just going to turn them away.”

“Hopefully, for your sake,” the man shrugged. “I’ve heard opposite, but you might see. Well, assuming you are psionic.”

“True.”

“So what leads you to try that out?” he asked. “If your backup plan is ADVENT legal, I’m guessing you have something to do with that?”

“Criminal Defense.”

The man winced. “Ah. Sorry to hear that. For what it’s worth, I don’t agree with what they did for that. Can’t say I was a fan of the process, but I at least got the reasoning behind it.”

Ivan sighed. “You’re better than most people. Most were thrilled when ADVENT essentially
abolished the system and turned trials into sentencing ceremonies.”

“I’m surprised that was never challenged,” the man noted. “I’d think there’d be a bunch of lawyers who’d protest that.”

He snorted. “Trust me, there were. And ADVENT just rewrote the laws and dismissed us. Stein herself essentially gloated, saying that “Our skills were no longer needed to defend the lowest in our society.” His free hand clenched into a fist. “Fucking Stein. I will never understand why that sociopath was put in charge of anything.”

The man merely nodded. “Can’t disagree. Didn’t want to stay private? Do law but not for ADVENT?”

“I could,” Ivan shrugged. “But the way things are going, I might just be wasting my time if we end up losing, and I’d at least like to contribute in some way. For better or worse, ADVENT is here to stay, and afterwards that will be valuable to people.”

“ADVENT definitely isn’t going anywhere,” he nodded. “It’s the future, like it or not.” He glanced at the tablet in Ivan’s hand. “Ah, sorry, I’ll let you finish that up.”

“No problem,” he said, as he finished filling it out. “And I’ll wish you good luck…”

“Richard Anwar,” he extended a hand which Ivan took. “Pleasure to meet you, and hope everything works out for you.”

“The same for you,” Ivan nodded as he stood. “Good luck.” With that, he went to drop the tablet off at the desk. “Here you go. How long will it be?”

“I’ve put you in for our earliest opening, January second at three o’ clock,” she said, taking the tablet back. “Please try and be on time, otherwise it will be at least another week.” She gave an apologetic shrug. “We’ve got tight schedules.”

“Understandable.” It was at least good that he wouldn’t have to hang around here for hours. “I’ll be back at that time.”

“Excellent!” She smiled. “See you soon.”

Ivan hoped he would be that cheerful sometime, but all he managed was a polite nod as he left. That was a bit later than he was hoping for, but hopefully it would have a good ending. At least he’d have time now to work off his frustration at the fact this situation was even here to begin with. He hated missing it.

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ADVENT HQ – Switzerland

12/29/2016 – 9:00 A.M.

“Estimates say at least a couple months,” Kyong said as Saudia looked over the progress report. “With that said, with a project this size, that is remarkably efficient.”

“Efficiency is not the concern,” Saudia said, setting the tablet down contemplatively as she thought. “It’s going to be keeping this a secret. Even when the Restraints are…implemented…all it will take is one telepathic attack to get that information.”
“Which is why we keep it as restricted as possible,” Hassan added on the other side of the table. “Having it on a need-to-know basis is the best we can do. With that said, I doubt we’ll be able to keep it hidden forever. Are all aspects of the Atlantis Project being implemented?”

“Yes,” Saudia confirmed. “The Nemo Protocol, armor, and weapons. Everything. The armor and weapons will be developed by separate teams and neither will know the bigger picture. Mercado has some prototypes, but testing will need to be done.”

Hassan scratched his chin. “Shipping the amount of materials needed will raise questions.”

“Initially,” Saudia said slowly. “However, we have Gateways to circumvent this. Materials can be transported through them from anywhere in the world without the need for repeated shipments. I will keep a Fleet patrolling the area, but it won’t be obvious they are watching over a certain area. It won’t be enough to attract the attention of the aliens.”

“We shall hope so,” Kyong said. “In any case I will prepare a statement if the media picks up on it.”

“Do it,” she said. “But under no circumstances can anyone outside of who I directly authorize know about this.”

“Understood, Chancellor.”

She nodded. “Now, the other two projects. Both look to be progressing well.”

“The Chinese have significantly assisted us with the Turing Project,” Hassan agreed. “I would recommend President Qin be publicly thanked when it is completed. With that said, I am unsure how the public, let alone unaffiliated nations, will react to an artificial intelligence.”

“All we need to show is that we can have it under control,” Kyong disputed. “Since we have handled psionics without incident, we have their trust. People just want assurance they will be safe, and if the AI that arises out of the Turing Project can achieve this, it is a simple matter of convincing them that is acceptable.”

“That isn’t what I’m especially concerned about,” Saudia noted slowly. “Project Seafoam is what I believe might cause controversy. Cloning organs and animal meat is one thing. The cloning of fully functional Humans will not be perceived the same way.”

“Agreed,” Kyong nodded. “I will warn you that there will be genuine objectors. Purists and religious fundamentalist groups. Especially when they hear details. There will be accusations that we are playing god by growing and improving the Human genome.”

“A vocal minority is not a concern,” Saudia dismissed with a sniff. “If we are going through the trouble of creating clones, they will be superior to the average Human. The genetic modifications we’ve already designed will not go to waste.”

“Honestly, you’re right,” Kyong said. “The larger questions will come from the ethics of the project. Of how the clones will be treated and their level of sentience. I am sure we don’t want to have the perception of leading a slave army.”

“I believe the best way to combat that would be to have one of the clones speak to the skeptics,” Saudia said. “Make it clear these are still Humans, give proof, and the problems will become quiet. But their Manchurian programming does not need to be shared.”

“Other countries will likely want to know similar details,” Hassan added. “There are still cultures
that will look on this as...unnatural. It’s not going to be easy to change perceptions in a short amount of time. Education can solve this to a degree, but there is a certain amount that is ingrained from childhood and cultural norms.”

“We’ll deal with that issue when we have an actual working clone to show,” Saudia said, glancing down at the tablet. “If we’re lucky, we’ll be getting the first batch in a year. And that’s a generous estimate. In the meantime, we’ve got other more pressing matters to deal with while the aliens maintain this temporary ceasefire.”

“There...is one more thing,” Kyong said, glancing down at the tablet again. “In fact, I was updated again this morning. It’s something I’ll be releasing a statement to the public on, but not before you’re up to speed on the situation.”

Saudia raised an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“Remember when Isomnum briefly arrived in D.C. and consigned several thousand people to mental institutions?” He asked.

She grimaced. “Yes. I don’t suppose the proposed psionic therapy has been helping?”

“It’s...a work in progress,” Kyong admitted. “This is an entirely new field of study, and while there have been some successes...even those people aren’t by any means cured. It might be years for them to be normal; months if we’re lucky.”

“What’s developed then?” She asked.

“Well...” Kyong paused, as if trying to think of what to say. “One of them woke up, so to speak.”

“The therapy worked?”

“That’s just it,” Kyong shook his head. “The man was in a coma-like state, with spurts of unconscious physical reaction, since the attack. The telepaths who tried to help were apparently so shaken they doubted they could help without threatening their own sanity. They’d suggested euthanization, but none of his family would allow it, especially since he wasn’t...technically ill. Just trapped in his head is how they described it.”

“And he just woke up?” Saudia asked. “No outside intervention?”

“Aside from IV tubes and standard coma care to keep him alive, no,” Kyong confirmed. “And it’s not really clear how he came out. He almost killed some of the orderlies when he woke up since he thought it was part of whatever nightmare he’d been in for the past few weeks.”

“Has he been debriefed?” Saudia asked curiously.

“He has,” Kyong said slowly, handing a document to her. “I’m not a doctor, but based on what he’s said, he didn’t come out of it entirely in the right state of mind. Claims of fighting through Hell and killing alien-looking demons don’t do much to disprove this. That isn’t what’s interesting.”

“What is?” She asked, as she skimmed the document.

“He has an...unusual reaction to psionics,” Kyong explained. “Telepathy in particular. His endocrine system is completely messed up, and floods him with adrenaline when a telepath touches his mind. It took several violent incidents before they made that connection. More interesting is that it seems like he’s immune to all forms of emotional manipulation.”
Saudia cocked her head. “You mean that he’s…immune to fear?”

“It appears so,” Kyong nodded. “At his request, they did some experiments. It turned out that inducing any emotion had no effect. It just made him angry.”

She set the report down. “Is he the only one like this?”

“Like this?” Kyong said. “Yes. Although there is a team which has requested to see if they could… replicate the results to a degree. Using either soldiers in a similar situation, or with volunteers.”

“Give tentative approval,” Saudia said slowly. “Provided Dr. Munju and Kettani sign off on it. Also make sure the Oversight Division is watching this. Who is this soldier?”

“Kane McTaggart,” Kyong recalled. “Just an ADVENT Soldier stationed in D.C., didn’t even specialize in anything. Has a history of aggression, but no reported incidents when deployed. Nothing especially out of the ordinary with him until now.”

“Is he psionic?”

“No, several tests confirmed that,” Kyong said. “Given how he has a physical reaction to telepathy, I doubt his body could handle actually being a psion.”

“Keep me informed of this,” Saudia said, looking back to Hassan as she switched focuses. This was an interesting situation, but in the grand scheme of ADVENT, she doubted it would have much of an impact. At least not for a while. “In the meantime, we have an itinerary to get to.”

“Indeed.” Now Hassan prepared to list her more important itinerary. Her Chief Diplomat had been busy keeping everything running smoothly and scheduling without conflicts. “Your meeting with Prince Mason is scheduled three days from now, which has been personally approved by the Royal Family. I assume this is still agreeable?”

Ah, yes. “Yes,” Saudia frowned. “Which Prince was this?” The Royal Family had about four or five princes of various importance.


“Right,” Saudia had been rather surprised when the invitation had first been extended. She hadn’t expected the Royal Family would take a direct interest in ADVENT, and her specifically, especially given that they would become obsolete once Britain joined ADVENT. Yet the Prince apparently had something he wanted to propose to her.

It had her curious, if nothing else. While not the most important person in the Royal Family, a direct descendant of the Queen meant he had leverage. His background was especially interesting, as until just a few years ago, before his marriage, he had been a high-ranking officer in the British Armed Forces; somewhat traditional for a male in the Royal Family but something she could admire.

Her curiosity was certainly piqued, if nothing else.

“Speaking of Britain,” she recalled. “Has the referendum been announced?”

“Yes,” Kyong said. “I thought it best we not comment on it unless pressed, so not to give the impression we are swaying it one way or another. But the date is January 20th.”
“And the response?”

“At the moment, public support in favor of ‘yes’ is strong,” Hassan said. “Even the media is split on it, and at the moment are keeping a more neutral stance. Parliament is unsurprisingly furious the Prime Minister would go behind their backs like this.”

“Yes, how shocking,” Saudia noted dryly. “Keep me appraised of how that goes.”

“And also on the agenda is the, ah,” Kyong cleared his throat. “‘Summit for the Discussion on the Role and Purpose of Religion Within ADVENT’. That is for January 5th.”

“Expected turnout?”

“All-inclusive,” Kyong said. “For better or worse, you and Chief Stein are going to be facing a full crowd. We have the Pope, the last Islamic Grand Imam still practicing, the Dalai Lama, many representatives of Hinduism, and of course, at least one representative from every major Christian denomination, as well as Jewish.”

“Most likely at least forty to fifty,” Hassan clarified. “Possibly more. Not to mention the media and crowds. This is, understandably, something that people are interested in.”

“I imagine Stein is not looking forward to it?” Kyong smirked. “A full day of questions did not sound like something she was thrilled about.”

“Stein finds religion about as useful as I do,” Saudia sighed. “An unneeded institution that offers nothing practical to the world. At the same time, it is heavily woven into modern life even today. We can’t just ignore it. So we have to at least try and reduce it without removing it entirely.”

“The majority of the world is still religious in some way,” Hassan reminded her. “It is falling, but it won’t disappear overnight. The influence of religion can be reduced, while still being fair to those who practice it.”

“And that I do not care about,” Saudia said. “They are welcome to continue as they were. I do have an issue with those who deliberately spread misinformation or interfere where they don’t belong. The limits are drawn now, and I imagine some are furious. Especially from America.”

“That is putting it mildly,” Kyong noted wryly. “However, the outrage has been rather muted in light of the alien threat. People simply have more to worry about than us clamping down on exploitative churches.”

“Unfortunate we can’t shut down Scientology again,” Hassan chuckled.

All of them laughed at that. Saudia did remember that day had been good. Nothing quite like smashing a cult to start her day. One of the rare times the interests of ADVENT and Quisilia were aligned. He’d of course offered help, and they had politely turned him down.

“Then I suppose the schedule is set,” Saudia nodded. “Thanks for the report, dismissed.”

Both of them saluted, and left the room.

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Barracks, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/27/2016 – 8:12 A.M.
“It wouldn’t be right if you left without saying hello to some people,” the Commander said to Nartha as they walked through the Praesidium. “And I do have a surprise for you too.”

Nartha was impressed with the new base of operations. Taking the original Sectoid Hive and repurposing it was, in retrospect, something he should have totally expected. It had everything the Commander would need, was larger, and incorporating alien tech was far easier. The news that Patricia had been taken was disturbing, as was what had been shared about the Imperator.

He’d thought the Battlemaster was dangerous. Compared to other Ethereals he seemed a much smaller threat. The good news was that XCOM and ADVENT were continuing to expand, and he now had actual, tangible data and messages he could take to the Nulorian, and any other allies he happened to make along the way.

“A surprise?” He didn’t really know what could surprise him here that was more than an Ethereal, what XCOM had been developing, or the entire situation with the Sovereign Ones. “We just passed the barracks?”

“You can go back there,” the Commander said, glancing down. “You have plenty of time before Fiona takes you back to the Collective. What’s interesting is that we found one of the defectors that knows you. It would be a shame if you didn’t meet.”

Nartha frowned. Had more Zararch agents defected, because outside his family he hadn’t had many acquaintances beyond the Zararch. That, while not unprecedented (Clearly) was not something he had honestly expected. The other aliens in the area were all Vitakara, mostly Vitakarians, which he wasn’t surprised at.

“Ah,” the Commander said with a smile. “There she is.”

He pointed at a Vitakarian woman leaning against the wall, presumably waiting for him.

Wait. No.

That was his sister.

“Cairu…” he said in disbelief.

His voice caught her attention and she looked over to the source, and blinked rapidly several times when she saw him, clearly in just as much shock as he was. “Nartha?”

“I’ll let you get caught up,” the Commander said helpfully, and backed out, clearly pleased with himself.

Brother and sister stood apart, each not sure what to say. “I…” Nartha started, voice halting and starting, still not fully processing everything. “…was not expecting you here.”

“I can safely say the feeling is mutual,” Cairu answered, shaking her head and laughing. “Were you on their side the entire time? When you were back home?”

“At that point, yes,” Nartha admitted. “I have been for some time.”

“No wonder you talked highly of the Humans,” she recalled. “I can’t believe I didn’t pick up something was off.”

“I’m a spy,” Nartha reminded her. “And even I can resist questions from my sister.”
“Still,” she shook her head again as he walked over by her. “How did you…well…how did it happen? You were always the rule-follower."

“My mission was to infiltrate XCOM, gather information,” he gestured around him. “And…it was gradual. I made some friends here. Learned things about the Collective, and did begin to wonder…” he sighed. “Our species is not free. Everything on Vitakar is an illusion designed by the Ethereals, something I’d repressed since there wasn’t anything I could do about it. But what the Humans were doing, resisting a power far greater than their own and enduring?”

He looked to her. “I wondered just how hopeless it would be to at least try and force change. The Ethereals will not release us, nor any of the others under their control. This isn’t right, and this war with the Humans is unjustified and petty. The Commander…the leader of XCOM…he’s someone who I think can actually do this. I suspect ADVENT was formed in some way by him, and with an Ethereal on his side?”

Nartha crossed his arms as Cairu appraised him. “The Collective cannot endure this. Not forever. The Ethereals made a mistake here. They are not infallible or invincible. There is fragility in the Collective, between the Andromedon Unions, between the Federation and Hive Commanders, even between other Ethereals. Our own people are losing faith in the Ethereals. It is slow, but I think that now there are those who are seeing the Ethereals for the false power they were.” His voice turned dark. “Apathetic gods who believe their psionics gives them authority.”

Cairu was silent for a few moments. “I didn’t know you were that idealistic. That’s what I’m supposed to be.” Her lips pursed. “And naïve. I’ve talked to some of the others since coming here…it’s been, as Humans would say, ‘eye-opening’. I never realized just how little…freedom…we had on Vitakar.”

“I wouldn’t punish yourself for that,” Nartha said. “The Zararch didn’t spare any expense when designing the perfect illusion.”

“I was there when Aegis appeared,” she said, her voice small. “I didn’t know what to think about that. And then he started attacking and I knew that if something wasn’t done I’d die. The Elders had been…always unified. I didn’t know this was possible. But I didn’t want to die if we’d been lied to this whole time,” she shrugged. “So I surrendered.”

“Because you didn’t want to die?”

“One reason,” she shuddered. “And because…I’d been thinking about it already. This wasn’t anything like I’d imagined it would be. Fighting Humans is…nightmarish. The ground always shakes, it’s loud, and…bloody. I was on the initial attack on Korea as well. No one else in my group lived. They were either blown up, shot, or died from blood loss.”

Nartha vaguely remembered writing up a report on Vitakarians where he’d specifically mentioned how they weren’t cut out for fighting unless modified. He wished he didn’t have to see that be verified in his sister who was understandably shaken. “War isn’t pretty or fun,” he said. “I’m sorry you went through that.”

“I’m better now,” she said. “Or at least getting there. The Humans are interested in seeing how they can help.” She glanced down the hallway. “I doubt it’s all altruistic. They just want data, but at least they try. I don’t know what I’ll do here. I think the Commander is considering letting some aliens fight, but I don’t know if I want that.”

She shrugged. “But then again, that’s all I know.”
“Well,” he said. “Don’t make a decision yet. Get better first. And there’s nothing wrong with learning something different. Not everyone is cut out to be a fighter.”

“Maybe not,” she admitted. “I do feel rather pathetic for a soldier. Humans don’t seem to have that problem from what I’ve seen.”

Nartha chuckled. “Sister, you’re surrounded by the most dangerous and well-trained Humans on the planet. Trust me, there are a lot of Humans who aren’t soldiers, and I’m sure that even a good number of soldiers would not survive what you did.”

“I did manage to survive the insane sniper,” she noted. “That is something.”

“What?”

“I’m still not sure,” she frowned. “XCOM said that it’s a Chosen, a unit of an Ethereal called the Creator. The Hunter. He started shooting both sides when the fight happened. He stopped, so I hope ADVENT managed to kill him. Although according to them, the Chosen are seemingly immortal.”

He would have to look into that a bit more. Chosen. Probably wouldn’t be too hard to find out.

“You have people you want to meet?” She asked suddenly.

“Just one, mostly,” Nartha said. “The others I knew either died or are gone. I’m not sure they all forgave me for lying to them.”

“Oh, who is it then?” She asked.

“Shun Anwei,” he said. “Have you met her?”

“I recognize the name,” she said, though shook her head. “But just heard in passing. Sadly haven’t met her. Though if you were her friend, perhaps I should.”

“She was…pleasant to talk to,” he said. “Her own people are not always accepted within here, so she appreciated someone who listened. I believe that was why she took the…revelation better than most.”

“Hmm,” Cairu gave him a curious look. “Well, go say hello to her. I’ll be here, just come back before you leave, since I assume you’re not staying.”

“Unfortunately not this time,” Nartha said. “But hopefully I’ll have other opportunities to come back.”

“In any case,” she said walking over to him and pulling him into a hug. “I’m glad you’re alive.”

“You too,” he said. “And please try and stay that way.”

She snorted. “If anyone should be told that, it’s you.”

On that point, he couldn’t disagree.

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Situation Room, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/27/2016 – 9:09 A.M.
The arrival of the Chronicler and their new…alliance…with T’Leth and his people had certainly opened up a host of new options, and many of them outside of Earth. They were still going to be limited, but it was far more than they had previously. Of course, the details needed to be hammered out, which was why the Chronicler and Zhang were in the same room with him.

“I would still advise that the number of agents in the Collective be limited,” the Chronicler was saying. “Humans are not widespread, and they will be noticed.”

“The difficult part will be getting them on Collective worlds in the first place,” the Commander said. “Once on them, we can establish Gateways or other means of self-sufficiency.”

“I would suggest we use them to establish a direct connection to allies,” Zhang interjected. “The Nulorian are a way into Vitakar, and if we establish a Gateway in their territory, we could supply them with soldiers and equipment, and they could assist on operations on Earth if they wished.”

“I like that idea,” the Commander nodded. “With that said, I also think it would be a good idea to establish a working base on a world in Collective space. An uninhabited one, where they wouldn’t think to look.”

“It will take some time to find a suitable one,” the Chronicler said, looking down at the blank holotable. “In the meantime, I still don’t have a full map of Collective space. I didn’t want to attempt direct operations until I’d spoken to you. However I would suggest that Gateways be established on Desolan and Vitakar, minimum.”

“And you can do this?” Zhang asked.

“We can transport the materials and personnel,” the Chronicler confirmed. “Fiona will likely handle that. She’s more…adept at teleportation than I am, despite her reservations.”

“Then I’ll need to put together a group of soldiers and agents,” the Commander nodded. “When we first meet the Nulorian, I’ll go in person. I suspect they would respect that more.”

“If you insist,” the Chronicler sighed. “I have reservations of allying too closely with the Nulorian. They are not normal or stable Vitakara, nor do I think their goals are the same as ours. The few interactions I have had show that they are….radical. Willing to commit atrocities against their own people as Miridian dictates it.”

“We need radical right now,” the Commander shrugged. “And we don’t have any allies elsewhere in the Collective. I think talking with Miridian will make things clearer.”

“Most certainly,” Zhang agreed. “Now for Earth. Will you and your…people…participate in the war?”

“I assume you mean in combat,” the Chronicler said. “Not regularly, if at all. In retrospect, our…open operations in Australia were a mistake. The Imperator knows there is a Sovereign One in the vicinity, where before he had only suspicions. If he knows one is working directly with you, it might trigger the endgame immediately.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “So why risk it to begin with?”

The Chronicler’s eyes became distant. “Two reasons. The first was that I had limited direction from T’Leth who was still…in a fugue. I had been conducting operations on my own for years, and hadn’t received orders to stop, even though he could have. The second is that I am still Human, Commander. I didn’t want to watch these aliens invade our world and do nothing.”
“But you’ll be taking a more subtle approach now,” the Commander finished.

“That is the plan,” the Chronicler said, nodding. “There is a way to stop the Imperator from controlling your world, but it is not the right time to enact it. Using the orbs we can block off certain points from his control, but too much of the world going dark…it will attract his attention.”

“So no protection of Saudia or ADVENT?” Zhang asked.

“That is not advisable,” the Chronicler agreed. “Those are high-profile areas and figures. The Manchurian Restraints will already be enough, and I also do not think ADVENT should be informed until Earth is under our control. Or even the Solar System.”

The Commander thought for a moment. “You know Project Atlantis?”

The Chronicler shook his head. “No, though I can make a guess.”


“Underwater…” the Chronicler mused thoughtfully. “Clever. Yes, I believe so. The ocean being dark would not likely arouse suspicion. Though this will take significant time to develop, even if ADVENT puts resources towards it.”

“Definitely,” the Commander agreed. “But it’s already started, and Gateways are how they’ll transport the materials in secret.”

“Speaking of Gateways,” Zhang coughed. “If possible, we would also appreciate understanding how to modify the size of them. Larger ones can allow for more or larger reinforcements, and when we reach the stage of space, they will be necessary for transportation.”

“I will have one of my people speak to your science and engineering teams,” the Chronicler said with a wave. “The Gateways were supposed to be extremely difficult to modify. It took T’Leth a… good deal of time to reverse-engineer them, even for him.”

“So he didn’t design them,” the Commander noted. “Interesting.”

“Of course not,” the Chronicler snorted. “He prefers equipment more like this.” He tapped his chest on the stony armor. “And our weapons, of course. Although ours are rather pitiful compared to what he can create.”

“I don’t suppose he’d share some of it with us?” The Commander asked.

“I can share the schematics,” the Chronicler said. “Although you are unlikely to be able to build them. It requires…specialized equipment and materials that aren’t on this world. And there is a certain level of comprehension needed to even construct them. It would be a mistake to think that the science behind Gateways is even remotely similar to that behind what T’Leth creates.”

“Wonderful,” the Commander rubbed his forehead. “If it’s that hard, how do you have enough to give Agent Gertrude one?”

“Because I had an extra one,” he shrugged. “And it was a gesture of goodwill. I believed that you would likely find it interesting. Perhaps you could use it in your own projects. But in general such technology is only for those who work directly with T’Leth. You would not be able to mass produce them.” He also cast a side glance at the Commander. “And knowing you, I suspect you would attempt to improve even the weapon of a Sovereign. In general you seem to have a
preference for forging your own path based on the tools you find.”

The Commander smiled at that. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was one,” the Chronicler said. “With that said, I have looked over your projects. Most are good, though for once I agree the Ethereal has a point regarding your proposed AI. That could backfire, and T’Leth and most Sovereign Ones avoid the development of such because it could potentially become a threat to them. Something outside their control that can’t be controlled or influenced easily.”

Zhang looked mildly amused. “Is that supposed to be a warning, or an incentive?”

The Chronicler furrowed his eyebrows. “A warning. If a Sovereign One has hesitations, you certainly should.”

The Commander was fairly sure that he and Zhang were thinking the same thing. Yes, and AI was risky, but that even Sovereign Ones disliked the idea actually made it more appealing. Not as something to threaten them with, but as a…insurance policy of sorts, should that become necessary. It appeared an AI would serve multiple purposes.

Assuming it did what they wanted.

“Well, we’ll continue with it for now,” the Commander said. “We’re taking appropriate precautions. None of us want a rampant AI.”

“Our species has never developed something like this,” the Chronicler said. “There are likely things we won’t think about until it is too late. But this project is up to you.”

“It is,” the Commander said firmly. “Will you be remaining here for now?”

“I’ll return Nartha, and then I will return soon after,” the Chronicler said. “Then we can begin establishing Gateways on the designated worlds.”

“That sounds good,” the Commander nodded. “Zhang, put together a list of agents. I’ll have Shen have teams of engineers for the Gateway construction ready, as well as some of my own soldiers.”

“Yes, Commander.”

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Shooting Range, the Praesidium – Classified Location

12/27/2016 – 11:11 A.M.

Shun looked different to him, and initially he couldn’t place what it was. She was still wearing the standard XCOM fatigues, same haircut and color, and this specific recollection was probably not something he should be doing. Oh well, he couldn’t help if he had a sometimes oddly specific, but accurate memory.

He did wonder if she would recognize him, especially since the last time she had seen him, he’d looked like a Human. He had to admit, he was somewhat nervous about her reaction. Hopefully it wouldn’t take her too long. There were only a few at the shooting range, and he’d walked into it just as she was finishing up.

A good thing one of the soldiers had been kind enough to point him this direction.
She then caught sight of him as he’d walked in, frowned, and appraised him for a few moments before her face morphed into surprise. She carefully set her weapon aside and walked up to him, while everyone else continued shooting. “Nartha…” she began tentatively. “Is that you?”

He let out a sigh of relief. “Oh good, I was afraid you wouldn’t recognize me.”

She laughed and pulled into an embrace which felt very warm. “I can’t believe it! What are you doing here?”

He let her go, and contemplated what to say. “Well…I was getting ready to go to sleep, and a strange Human appeared and requested I come back to XCOM to give everyone an update. So I was teleported by another nervous Human woman, appeared in the Commander’s Office. We caught up for a while, and he surprised me by bringing me to meet my sister.”

He paused. “It’s certainly been an interesting day to say the least. But I wanted to at least say hello before I had to leave.”

“I’m glad you did,” she said. “I would have been furious if you’d been here and not said hello.”

For better or worse, he was getting more accustomed to Human facial mannerisms. A smirk was almost natural now. “And just why would I do that? You were probably the only one here who didn’t want me dead.”

“I think most of us have gotten over that,” Shun noted, nodding around her. “The amount of aliens here is a bit high for the so-called Extraterrestrial Combat Unit.” She grew a bit more contemplative. “I’d wondered what you actually looked like, and I don’t think I was far off. It helped that we actually had some Vitakarians here.”

“Not a disappointment, I hope,” he paused. “Although I do differ from Humans in some-”

“No, I definitely think your eyes are better,” she chuckled. “We can’t really compete with glowing blue ones.”

“Speaking of which,” he noted, looking into her own ones which now had golden rims. “Yours look different.”

“Oh, that would be the gene mods,” she turned up her arm and raised it higher. “Better eyesight, better regeneration, and I can jump off a building and live. Not too bad, I think.” Nartha could see that her skin did seem…not so much lighter as it was mildly translucent at times, when the light hit it a certain way.

“Good for you,” he said. “I’m glad you’re still alive. With how many on both sides had died, I’d wondered if you were one of the casualties.”

She snorted in surprise. “I’m of the opinion that XCOM is one of the safest places to be in this war. And it definitely doesn’t compare to working as a double agent in a Collective run by aliens who like reading minds for fun. If anyone was going to die, it would be you.” She suddenly paused, eyes widening. “Don’t take that the wrong way! I’m very happy you’re still alive.”

He laughed. “So am I. It hasn’t really been easy.”

She gave a brief nod. “I’d like to say I’d agree with it ‘not being easy’, but I don’t think I genuinely could. I can’t really imagine doing that. Working surrounded by enemies and without any help.”

“The isolation is definitely one of the least enjoyable parts,” he agreed. “The ones you want to help
are suspicious for obvious reasons, and everyone else would kill me if they learned what I was
doing. Having someone on the same side would have at least made that easier.”

“Someone to talk to then?” She inquired. “I can understand that.”

“I’m thinking that might change now,” Nartha said, perking up. “I’m sure the Commander will
want to use the Chronicler and his people to move us into the Collective.” He hesitated. “Maybe
you could come along?”

“Well,” she pretended to consider. “I did have some espionage experience before I was moved to
XCOM. Although you might want to suggest that to the Commander. Also, who is the
Chronicler?”

Oh, right. He looked to the wall where there was a bench. “Let’s sit down. Catch up properly. I’ve
got time before I have to go.”

“Good idea,” she said. “And I need to ask about this sister. I didn’t even know you had one.”

“Yes, I suppose I didn’t mention that.” He remembered, sadly recalling that their time post-reveal
had mostly been coming to terms with it and sharing a little bit of information about his species. At
least now there was more time for more mundane stuff, like related family members.

It was a welcome change. If the Commander did send more soldiers back with him, hopefully Shun
would be among them.

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Manitoba ADVENT Command, Winnipeg – Canada

12/30/2016 – 12:13 P.M.

When he’d been officially recalled to Winnipeg, Neil Harrison had been expecting the worst. There
were only two possibilities he could think of, the first was that he would be moved to one of the
ADVENT Special Forces units, possibly the Lancers or Hussars. Given his background, neither
would be surprising. The other option was him just being deployed to the front lines in the
trenches.

Now while he was happy to do his part in the fight, getting sent to the trenches, even as an officer,
would have been a waste of his skills, and while getting sent to a special forces unit would have
been better, neither of those were exactly suited for him. He honestly would have preferred to just
stay where he was, or previously been with much of the Canadian military still in limbo after being
integrated into ADVENT.

ADVENT had essentially shipped over a lot of armor and weapons, and had the military just equip
that and keep their positions until further notice. Now they were actually looking to integrate them
more fully. Which unfortunately meant that Canadian special forces was one of the first targets.

With that said, it seemed very clear now that what Commander Christiaens had planned was not
what he expected.

ADVENT Command here was impressively developed. The situation room they were in was filled
with screens, computers, and a kind of holoprojector from the ceiling. Most of the people in the
room were busy on other things, but the ones who mattered were himself, a bearded man he’d
never met before, a dark-skinned woman dressed in the similarly black uniform of ADVENT
Intelligence, an Asian man who was apparently some high-ranking ADVENT Engineer, and of
course the Commander of the ADVENT Military Forces herself.

Neil had never heard of Laura Christiaens before ADVENT. Well, not exactly, he *had* heard her name before. An important NATO figure, but that was it. Since then, he’d done some more research and was beginning to see why she had likely been selected out of others, who he frankly felt were far better military tacticians.

ADVENT was not an ordinary military, it was comprised of soldiers from all across the world, and making sure everyone got along and everything was handled effectively was a much bigger task. All potential criticisms of NATO aside, it was the closest thing to ADVENT that had previously existed. It made sense that the former Chairman (or woman in this case) would be given the task of something close to the same thing, only on a much grander scale.

If nothing else, she did seem to listen to those under her and push for greater military strength and technology. Always a plus.

“Everyone is here then,” Laura looked to the Asian man. “We can begin. I assume all of you know who I am. This is Feng Mercado, Chief of ADVENT Engineering and Development.”

The man gave a small nod. Neil blinked. Well, that was interesting. What was someone like that doing here? It was already strange that they were speaking directly to the Commander herself, but there were a surprising number of important people here. He briefly wondered who the other two people were now.

“We can go around with introductions,” Laura said, motioning to the bearded man. “The three of you will be working closely together, so it would be good to know names.”

“Walter Blakenship,” the man said, his voice gruff and cracked as if he wasn’t used to speaking much. “ADVENT “Alaskan Advisor”, or whatever useless name they gave. No clue what I’m doing now.”

“We asked Mr. Blakenship for advice on operations in the Alaskan wilderness,” Laura said smoothly. “There are few better when it comes to cold-weather survival. I also understand that you breed, train, and use sled dogs?”

Walter huffed. “Best in the country.”

“There you go,” Laura nodded. “This will be relevant shortly.” She gestured to Neil. “And you?”


“A modest way of putting it,” Laura raised an eyebrow. “Operative Harrison is among the top of the entire CSOR, and has received multiple commendations for his service.”

Which meant he had a bunch of medals and stuff for just managing to live on his own and write down notes on enemy parties. Not nearly as impressive as Laura made it sound, but it would look bad to dispute her. “I did my job, Ma’am, nothing more.” He also didn’t add that he wasn’t exactly at the peak of his career either anymore. Prior to the invasion, he likely would have retired by now.

Damn aliens, messing up everything.

The woman preempted Laura asking for her to continue. “Cycelea Shaw,” she allowed a cynical smile showing her bright teeth. “Inquisitor of ADVENT Intelligence.”
Walter narrowed his eyes. “The hell is an Inquisitor?”

“Something you don’t expect,” Neil said dryly, and he could swear that Laura resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Cycelea gave a genuine smile at him this time. With that said, he didn’t know much about who, exactly the Inquisitors were. He did hear the name referred to some division in ADVENT Intelligence, and the implications were both obvious but troubling if so.

“Inquisitors are psions in ADVENT Intelligence,” Cycelea explained. “Not known to the public for certain reasons. I specialize in telepathy, since you were likely wondering.”

Neil resisted a shiver. Psionics in general was odd, but as long as it was tangible he would get used to it. The purple fire and shields he’d seen from the footage was one thing, but telepathy was completely unnerving. That checked off too many boxes that made him just want to avoid anything to do with psionics.

The first time he’d seen a telepath walk into a group of aliens and with a gesture made them shoot themselves in the heads was enough to convince him that psionics would have been better off if it hadn’t been discovered. Sure, it was useful against the aliens now, but he would laugh if the aliens couldn’t do the same thing.

Walter didn’t seem to be fond of the idea either. “I don’t want to work with a spook, much less a fucking mind-reader.”

“You don’t have to worry about me doing anything like that,” Cycelea said, tapping her head. “Manchurian Restraints. Can’t use my abilities on Humans. Have a code phrase if I start acting up. I’m not a threat to anyone here.”

“Inquisitor Shaw is correct,” Laura said. “She and her colleagues will not subject you to their abilities unless specifically ordered or the action is beneficial. You will be supplied with the code phrases, Operative Harrison. Not generally protocol, but you’ll be cut off from our network for some time.”

He cocked his head. “There are more?”

“ADVENT Intelligence has allowed the deployment of three Inquisitors to assist,” Laura clarified. “Inquisitor Shaw is in charge of them. However, we should get to why all of you are actually here right now.”

Feng clicked a button on his tablet, and a glowing blue map of Canada and Alaska appeared. “The three of you are the core leadership of what we are calling Operation: Long Dark,” Laura began. “In short, this involves slowing or stopping the continued alien incursion into Alaska and Canada. Much of it is more rural, and isn’t especially fortified. Despite the major attacks ceasing, the aliens are continuing to advance and take over the small towns and cities.” She looked each of them in the eye. “You will stop this.”

“The three of us?” Walter asked skeptically.

“No,” Laura shook her head. “You will have a team of operatives working with you. There will not be many, but all of them – as well as yourselves – will have an advantage. The aliens do not know this world, much less how to survive it. Winters here are harsh and unforgiving, but fortunately, most of you have experience thriving in these kinds of conditions. You will use this to defeat, hamstring, sabotage, or otherwise trap the aliens here.”

She looked to Neil. “Mr. Harrison, you will be officially in charge of this operation. Once we are
done, you will approve who you want to accompany you. This is a guerilla campaign, and one best suited to your skills. You will have full control over how it is waged, but your objectives will be immutable: Push the aliens back, rescue or liberate civilians, and recover any ADVENT personnel you find or learn about.”

Now this was something he could do. “Yes, Commander.”

“What can we do with the civilians?” Cycelea asked. “Most will not be able to survive in the wilderness as well as we will.”

“You will have some means of contacting us,” Laura said. “You will have equipment that will be able to transmit your location and if you need civilian extraction, the numbers can be adjusted. If you manage to liberate a city or town, we will attempt to send soldiers to secure the area and fortify it against future attacks.”

“And why isn’t this being done already?” Walter asked.

“It is,” Laura said coldly, turning his gaze to the man. “However, it is being done slowly because much of rural Canada and Alaska is isolated, unconnected, and any forces we send are susceptible to ambushes. Not to mention this is one area where the aliens have established airbases and have a larger air presence. We don’t want to risk provoking another fight until we’re ready, and the brutal truth is that the rural areas are not as important as the cities. They are not worth waging a war at this point.” She paused. “That is not to say they don’t have worth, but in the scope of the world it’s a necessary decision. But we are not doing nothing, as that is why all of you are here.”

Walter huffed, but didn’t say anything. Neil had some more practical questions. “So what is our equipment, weaponry, and transportation?” He asked. “Conventional travel won’t be possible with what I’m thinking.”

“Transportation will be covered with Walter,” Laura gestured to him. “Sled dogs for faster transportation and supplies. There will be some Molosser Handlers who are available, if you want the hounds in your arsenal. Additional supplies will arrive at scheduled dead drops which will include components, ammunition, and medical supplies. It will be a significant amount, we have no intention of abandoning you. With that said, you will largely be on your own without contact from us.”

“Your weaponry will be what you choose,” Feng interjected for the first time. “Gauss, laser, or even conventional. The same applies for explosives and similar equipment. However, we have worked on developing armor for the exact conditions you’ll be in.”

Another press on his tablet and the holographic map was replaced with a new suit of ADVENT armor. This was distinct in several ways, namely how it was not bulky like most ADVENT armor, and if anything seemed to have very little actual armor. The entire suit seemed to be covered in some smooth fabric, although there were some areas that clearly indicated armor under the fabric.

The helmet was similarly thinner and seemed to be attached to the fabric at the neck, and had a standard white facemask without any strange shapes or complexity. “This has been referred to as Snowtrooper armor,” Feng continued. “Designed for operation in cold weather, contains internal and external temperature monitoring and heading, invisible to infrared, not reflective, and can be camouflaged at the desire of the owner.”

Mercado looked rather proud of it. “In short, it is perfect for your own operation here. The aliens will not be able to detect you. The suit is completely sealed, with an additional thin aerogel over it, and filtered, which means no heat will escape. Chemical or gas attacks will fail, as well as smoke.”
That all sounded great, although he was concerned about one thing. “The suit sounds like it will take up energy. We might not be able to replenish it fast enough.”

“The suit has two modes of being powered,” Feng continued. “An elerium core which will last up to two weeks of constant use. Each suit has two. It can also be powered by more conventional batteries. We have also developed a manual recharge device which is capable of recharging both elerium cores and conventional batteries. You will receive additional elerium cores if they become damaged.”

“Nice,” Cycelea nodded, eyes glinting as she looked over the glowing hologram.

“Indeed,” Feng nodded. “We have also designed it to integrate with a prototype trench coat, currently designed to be immune to acid, but at the moment will also act as another means of insulation. It is stab-proof, and has some limited protection against light plasma.” He pressed another button and the Snowtrooper was wearing a trench coat, with the option for a hood. It did look pretty neat, Neil had to admit.

“We’re planning for your team to be the first field test,” Laura said. “It’s done exceptionally well in controlled environments, but it needs to be properly used. Your team is ideal because if it doesn’t work, you will be able to survive on your own.”

“That sounds good,” Neil nodded. “So will I be reporting to you?”

“Reports will be due every month,” Laura said. “They will go to ADVENT Command, but I will likely be reading them. We expect them to be thorough, and will be transferred via the dead drop. Do all of you understand?”

The other two nodded, and Neil joined in. “I believe so, Commander.”

“Then you may begin as you see fit,” Laura said. “You will deploy in three days. Pick your team. Your starting location I will leave up to you, as well as the operation itself. Do not fail, Commando Harrison.”

He saluted. “No, Commander. I will not.”

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ADVENT Recruitment Center 0821, Atlanta – Georgia, United States of America

1/2/2016 – 3:22 P.M.

The questionnaire that he had been given was interesting, and not entirely what he expected. It was split into what he saw as three different sections. The first seemed to be gathering his views on law and justice, the second part covered morality and consequence, and the last portion was a host of random scenarios which didn’t have obvious answers.

This seemed like an unnecessarily long morality test, which was odd to see from ADVENT. The good news was that he was definitely confirmed to have psionic potential, rather highly too judging from the reaction of the nurse who’d run the test through an odd-looking contraption which he assumed took brain scans.

There was no time limit on the test, but the room he was in seemed designed to be as unnerving as possible. It felt like a glass cage, with every wall being a one-way mirror which he knew people were watching from the outside. He had, admittedly, taken his time on this. It did make him wonder if ADVENT was actually serious on having psions fit certain psychological profiles.
If so, he was somewhat concerned.

Finished, he stood and knocked on the door. It opened and a man in an ADVENT uniform walked in. He was roughly six feet, dark-skinned, and with an amused glint in his eyes. Ivan wished there was a way to easily identify what rank they were, because the only identifying mark on his uniform was the ADVENT PRIEST Division emblem.

He was also unarmed. “Done already?” He asked.

“Yes,” Ivan said, handing the sheet to him. “Complete.”

“Good, good.” Instead of leaving, the man went to the wall and grabbed another chair and placed it opposite the one Ivan had been sitting in. “Take a seat, Mr. Smirnov.”

So they were going to do the interview here? “Alright.”

He waited for a few minutes as the man read his answers. Ivan would not have been surprised if the man was a psion himself, or there was another one close by. He also noticed that the man had a communication device in his ear, and had another beige file on the table. Probably the one on Ivan himself.

“Your answers are different than what I’m used to,” the man finally said, setting them down and appraising him.

“In a good or bad way, Mr…?”

“Daniels,” he supplied. “And I believe we should see. Inconclusive is what I find. Most people fall heavily one way or another. You fall into the middle of two opposites.” He nodded to the paper. “What is your impression of what you just completed?”

“A means of weeding out candidates who don’t fit a specific criteria.” He said.

“A good answer,” Daniels said. “However, not the correct one. This,” he rested a hand on the paper. “Gives me perspective on the candidate itself. No one can be disqualified from this. What they say and do afterward determines that.”

So more akin to a crude psychological profile. And combined with the file they no doubt had on him, meant they could likely establish a fairly accurate read on him. Which meant that this man was likely at minimum a psychologist or interrogator. Someone who knew how to read and react to people. He did not especially like coming to that conclusion.

“You want to use ADVENT as a means to an end,” Daniels began. “Is this correct or not?”

Ivan believed it would likely be a bad idea to lie to the man. “A cold way of putting it, but yes. Considering my own workforce has been so helpfully destroyed by ADVENT, I need to acquire a more usable skill. And with the direction the world is heading, having worked with ADVENT will be a useful anecdote.”

“I see,” Daniels said. “Practical, even if selfish.”

“I’m making the best of a bad situation,” Ivan stated. “Forgive me if I don’t buy into the grand vision of ADVENT. They are the reason I am here now.”

“And yet you still would come to us,” he refuted calmly. “Law as a field hasn’t died. I’m certain you can find work elsewhere.”
“In a year, the world might not exist,” Ivan shot back. “And contrary to what you think, not all law fields are the same. I can’t just apply somewhere else. It’s not a fucking computer science degree, and I’m well above the menial intern work. So I’d rather actually try and set myself up for the future, assuming the war is won.”

Daniels nodded. “So this is about you.”

“Is that a problem?”

Daniels didn’t answer, but glanced back down at the paper. “What do you know about the PRIEST Division?”

“That you’re psions. You fight aliens and have abilities,” Ivan shrugged. “And you put bombs in their heads to keep them in line. Can’t say I’d be thrilled with that, but I assume you only blow them up if they become a problem.”

“That is a very basic description,” Daniels said. “And if you weren’t psionic, was there a backup plan?”

“Likely something in ADVENT’s law division,” Ivan shrugged. “I’m aware of the irony.”

“I see,” Daniels focused on Ivan intently. “And why choose the PRIEST Division first?”

“If I have the capability to use psionics,” Ivan answered slowly. “I want that. It would be a suitable repayment for ADVENT destroying my previous career.” Ivan took a breath and calmed down. “I’m not a fan of ADVENT, but I can promise that I won’t cause problems. I’ll follow orders and so on, though I will leave once my time is up and not look back.”

Daniels gave a single nod. “And you say you want to…use your abilities afterwards. I fail to see how that would benefit your chosen field.”

“Telepathy, even emotion sensing, would be useful,” Ivan gave a grim smile. “You have no idea how good it would be to know if the scum I deal with from all sides are lying to my face or not. I’m only interested in justice here, Mr. Daniels, for all parties.”

“Justice can be subjective, Mr. Smirnov,” Daniels pointed out. “The Law is what is important.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I suppose I do,” Daniels said. “You are aware that the PRIEST Division is not one you can exactly walk away from?”

“I would hope not,” Ivan said slowly. “I don’t see how you can keep control of someone indefinitely. That can’t be legal.”

“ADVENT has to be careful with psions,” Daniels gave an apologetic shrug. “We can’t risk them being set loose into the general population. Too many would descend into vigilante justice, exploit their powers in their workplace, as you so helpfully illustrated, or simply settle old scores. That is not to say they are treated badly, but psions won’t enjoy the same freedoms you have now.”

He tapped his head. “You don’t just get a neural bomb, you also have the Manchurian Restraints. A type of mental conditioning which ensures you don’t pose a threat to ADVENT or it’s citizens.”

Ivan was mildly shocked. “How can that possibly be legal? Taking away someone’s free will, what is the line then?”
“It’s perfectly legal, and supported by all areas of ADVENT,” Daniels explained. “Psionics, Mr. Smirnov, isn’t a toy. It’s not a weapon. It is a tool, one which the wielder needs to be careful of using. It should be used for the protection and improvement of mankind, not to be used selfishly or as a crutch. It is a last resort, not the first.”

He sighed. “Based on your responses, both in this discussion, and on the questionnaire, I do not believe you are fit for the PRIEST Division. Now—“

“What?!” Ivan demanded furiously. “I know how valuable psions are to ADVENT. You can’t just refuse me just because you don’t like me. How can you say I’m capable of psionics, but not actually make me a psion?”

“Psions are valuable,” Daniels agreed. “But we want responsible ones. We will find more, and the ones who match the goals and values of ADVENT. You do not fit this, and giving you power is a risk I am not willing to sign off on.”

“I know I’m a powerful psion,” Ivan insisted. “I saw how the nurse reacted. Can you really afford to reject me?”

“All the more reason to,” Daniels nodded. “I would quote you a line about power and responsibility, but I suspect you wouldn’t grasp the implication. Now, if you wish to still work in ADVENT’s legal division—“

“Forget it,” Ivan stormed up and to the door. “I’m not interested in working for people like you.”

Daniels might have said something, but Ivan didn’t hear it as he walked furiously out of the room and through the hallway until he reached the lobby. Slamming the door open, he stepped aimlessly onto the sidewalk and began walking.

He had no idea what he was going to do now.

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Kensington Palace, London – Britain

1/2/2017 – 8:12 A.M.

Another year come and gone. Saudia had never really felt the need to celebrate such, and yet in light of the alien invasion, there were still those who celebrated. There were the usual public events and such, though they took a markedly different feel when there were ADVENT soldiers at multiple checkpoints, Priests inserted into the crowd, and visible (as well as hidden) snipers on the roofs and vantage points.

Yet for some reason, millions of people tuned in to watch a giant ball drop. Riveting.

Next year maybe ADVENT would have a proper New Years event.

But a new year, same work.

She had dressed in notably civilian clothes today, since Prince Mason had suggested such, as she definitely didn’t want the media to get wind of this. Questions about why the Chancellor of ADVENT was meeting the Duke of Cambridge would look suspicious, especially in light of the upcoming referendum. Luckily the good Prince had made the arrangements for a quiet pickup with a driver he trusted, which had taken her straight to Kensington Palace itself, well out of the normal public entryway.
Ethan hadn’t been supportive of her going alone, but she knew that she was perfectly safe. While she hadn’t specifically authorized it, she was quite certain that ADVENT Intelligence would be keeping an eye on any potential threats, and under her clothing was armor that would stop small arms for a short while.

She was capable of defending herself. More importantly, she saw no reason why the Prince would invite her just to kill or capture her. From the dossier on him, that would be idiotic, which was highly out of character.

She was immediately met with two well-dressed guards, as well as a figure she assumed to be some kind of butler or greeter. “Chancellor Saudia Vyandar,” he said, his voice cultured and slightly dismissive. “Welcome. His Highness will see you now. Follow all instructions.”

“Of course,” she said as they walked, glad that the man hadn’t given some long-winded greeting. All of them were content to walk in silence as they made their way through the palace. As expected, it was lavishly decorated and furnished, with every centimeter impeccably clean and orderly. There were some housecleaners in the background, but none of them looked their way.

Saudia idly wondered just how many guards were following them, no doubt concerned about her. For once, she felt that the number of eyes on her was probably not for her protection. They walked up some stairs, and a few more turns later they arrived in front of double doors which the man opened grandly.

Inside was the expected lavish dining room, complete with ornate carpet, glossy wooden tables, a full meal and silverware laid on the table, and tall windows illuminating the room with chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. It was impressive, but she’d lost her ability to be impressed at gross displays of wealth a long time ago.

“His Highness Prince Mason, the Duke of Cambridge,” the man announced. The man who was sitting at the end of the table stood and gave a greeting smile.

“Chancellor,” he said with an extended hand. “Welcome to the Kensington Palace.” He nodded to the man. “You are dismissed. Ensure no one disturbs us.”

With a nod the man left and shut the doors behind him. Saudia appraised the man before her. He was dressed in a simple suit, hair and beard precisely trimmed, and skin still tanned. He was still rather young, only thirty-five, and it showed. And while she couldn’t tell from looking at him, he was still fit according to his dossier.

He was still shorter than her though. Then again, most were.

“Help yourself to breakfast if you wish,” Prince Mason said, gesturing to the food. “And you may take a seat. I didn’t know if you’d be hungry, but always best to prepare. At the very minimum it will improve the aroma.”

She was somewhat hungry, and the food looked good. “Your hospitality is appreciated,” she said, taking a seat at the end of the table.

Mason returned to the end to the table and took his seat, which had a similar platter of food before him. There was also a noticeably large file sitting beside it. “It’s the least I can do here,” he said as she began eating. “The Chancellor of ADVENT should receive nothing less. I admit, I didn’t know if you would even see my request, much less come to me.”

“I will echo the sentiment,” she said. “I was not expecting any contact from the Royal Family. You
can say I am here out of a certain curiosity. You in particular would not ask to meet without reason.”

“Yes, I’m certain you know quite a bit about me,” he smiled without goodwill. “But you, Chancellor, are something of a mystery. No background, no public record, nothing. It took MI6 several months to connect you to a small mining company in Nigeria, which was also interestingly not listed on any registries and has exceptionally heavy security for such a small family business.”

Saudia returned the smile and sipped her water. “Not all of us come from the expected, Duke Mason. And if MI6 wanted information, well, they could have asked. But I suspect they learned little more than that, am I right?”

“That, I’m afraid, is classified,” he said, the smile maintained. “But as far as I am concerned, you past, or lack thereof, is irrelevant. You are the Chancellor of ADVENT, and that is not going to change. You seem to be a fair woman, a good leader, and can make the decisions necessary for one in your position. Good qualities.”


“I actually believe you,” he nodded. “Or you at least try, which is more than I can say for many politicians.”

“I don’t consider myself a politician.”

“Oh, I agree,” Mason took a sip of his tea. “However, I believe we should begin discussing why I wanted to speak to you in the first place. I am a realist, Chancellor. As much as Parliament dislikes the idea, I am certain Britain will soon join ADVENT. The will of the people will not be ignored, and frankly it is irresponsible of us to sit this conflict out.”

“The Royal Family has not given an opinion on the referendum,” Saudia noted. “Is there support?”

“The Royal Family will not give a statement either way,” Mason explained. “Internally, we are conflicted, the Queen in particular is concerned about the effect ADVENT would have on our country and culture. The aliens are a threat we all recognize and need to face, and it is best done as part of ADVENT. At the same time, your statements and plans for the monarchy are… understandably disquieting for us.”

Ah, so this was going to be discussed. Saudia set her teacup down. “While I agree your reservations are understandable, this position is not one I will change. The monarchy is an outdated and irrelevant means of influence and standing. Everything about the concept goes against the meritocracy of ADVENT, as well as my own values.”

“You are aware that we do not control the country,” Mason smiled. “Unless you believe the conspiracies.”

Saudia chuckled. “I suspect that the daily briefings the Royal Family receives, and the Queen’s weekly discussions with the Prime Minister are not filled with random trivia. To suggest the Royal Family does not have influence is laughably naïve, as you no doubt know.” She shook her head. “The average individual does not receive dossiers from MI6.”

“Touché, Chancellor,” Mason nodded. “Though I do say that we did not control the country. I never said we don’t have influence, or aren’t well-informed on matters of state and international security.”

“And then you can understand why I see an issue with a certain family having access to such
information, and possessing such influence, simply because they were born correctly,” she answered neutrally. “The fact that the Royal Family is also unelected, but is also publicly funded does not improve the image in my eyes.”

“Says the unelected woman of ADVENT,” Mason pointed out. “I don’t recall an election for your appointment.”

She smiled at that, a real one. He was smart. “A special case. Future Chancellors will be elected. Obviously we couldn’t hold an election in the…circumstances. With that said, I earned my position here.”

“Yes, through your mysterious intelligence past,” Mason said with a tinge of sarcasm. “But I’m also not convinced you can claim ADVENT is so much better when you have an entire team deciding who can, and cannot be elected.”

“Qualifications are important,” Saudia retorted. “And since you sound like you did research, you would know Election Oversight only bars those who don’t meet the public specifications. I mean, it wouldn’t look especially good on any nation that just allows anyone to run. That’s how you get conmen and Nazis.”

“Chancellor, I’m actually not disagreeing,” Mason smiled. “In fact, your election system is something I quite like. Absolute freedom is not always something to strive for, but I am pointing out that you are ultimately giving the people the illusion of choice; because while they are free to vote for who they want, all the candidates are pre-determined by ADVENT.”

He swept a hand to the side dismissively. “I won’t deny you have points, and the perception is understandable for outsiders, but I will say that we have the interests of the British people at heart. And despite what you think, some of us do more than just sit in our palace and look down at the peasants,” he smirked. “Me and my brother served in the military, our families give millions to charities and personally assist in humanitarian projects. We’re public figures and role models to people, and we take that seriously.”

“And there is nothing stopping you from continuing that,” Saudia nodded. “If the monarchy wishes to be preserved, there is nothing preventing that. They will just no longer receive classified information, or receive public funding. I suspect that the personal wealth of your family is quite sufficient.”

“While true,” Mason admitted. “It comes with a side effect, one which I’ve noticed with ADVENT. Your rules are objectively ‘fair’. But it will have the effect of my family fading into obscurity in the future. Like it or not, Chancellor, we are a heavily ingrained part of British culture. Our traditions, history, and politics are distinctly our own. Good or bad, it is ours.”

He set his teacup down. “As it is now, ADVENT is not interested in preserving the cultures of the assimilated countries. You want to unite our species, that goal is clear. No divisions, no borders, no nationalism. All one species, one people. An admirable goal, on paper, and perhaps needed. But I do wonder if you’ve considered the consequences of it, because it seems very little has been done to limit the potential cultural damage.”

Saudia rested her hands on that table. “I will be honest here, Duke, I care very little for tradition and convention. I find it often holds people, and our species as a whole back. Many people do things ‘traditionally’ because that is the way it is done, even if it is the wrong way. The impact, or lack thereof, on the cultures we assimilate is a non-issue for me. If certain cultural norms vanish as a result of ADVENT, then perhaps they weren’t worth preserving to begin with.”
Mason looked at her thoughtfully, a finger idly tapping on the table. “I believe I can understand where you come from, Chancellor. You may have been born in Nigeria, but you don’t identify as such. You are a Human, with your first loyalty being to your species, not your nation. However, most aren’t like you. As for what you said, I both agree and disagree.”

He paused. “All cultures have positive and negative aspects. I don’t think it would be impossible to emphasize the positive in your countries, while still remaining true to the core of ADVENT. I suppose it depends on what you want, Chancellor. Do you want a homogenized society with the same cities, the same government, the same food, the same norms, where countries are just pieces of land with different geography.”

“Would that be so bad?” She asked.

Mason was silent for a few moments. “I would find it sad, personally. It wouldn’t just be a loss of uniqueness and culture, but also a loss of history which has been ingrained in countries all over the world for generations. Perhaps that is a price of unification, but I don’t necessarily believe it needs to happen. I sincerely believe that you simply have not considered it.”

He moved the large file before him, as well as pushing the platter of food aside. “I am not one to just accept what is going to happen, though, but do my own small part to change it. To this end, I have taken the liberty of conceptualizing something I believe would have tangible benefit to ADVENT, while also addressing some of the concerns I raised.”

Saudia moved her own platter of food aside. “You have my attention.”

“Perfect,” he opened the file. “My proposal is that of a melee-oriented division within ADVENT. I believe that with the Lancer Executors and the Templars, as well as multiple alien equivalents, that melee combat is resurging. The aliens have dedicated units for this, as does XCOM. But I noticed that ADVENT does not have such an equivalent, aside from the Lancers who are an extremely limited number. Does ADVENT plan on addressing this?”

“In the future, perhaps,” Saudia shook her head. “But it isn’t necessarily a pressing priority.” She paused. “With that said, such a division would certainly augment our forces. You came up with this proposal yourself?”

“Along with a few friends in the armed forces, as well as some designers,” he answered. “My inspirations came from the XCOM Templars, medieval history, and the Battlemaster, ironically enough. And it comes together to form what I am calling the Order of Terra. I assumed you would prefer a name that encapsulated our species, not one nation or organization.”

He slid the file over to her. “While I obviously did not have access to the advanced equipment and materials you possess, the designs should speak for themselves.”

Saudia began turning the pages, definitely interested as she saw the high-quality sketches and designs. He appeared to have legitimately put work into this. “Inspired by the medieval period, I see.”

“I would wager that it is perhaps the most famous,” he smiled. “Young children, and many adults, are fascinated by the period. One we romanticize quite often. Chivalry, honor, glory, all attractive and inspiring attributes for young minds.” He waved a hand. “Of course, it wasn’t all like that, but that is what we remember. There is something special about seeing even mock tournaments and shows today depicting such. But eventually the knights and lords disappeared as technology improved.”
He looked at her intently. “I want this to serve two purposes. For you and ADVENT, it will provide another tool in your tactical arsenal and permanently fix the lack of a melee-oriented division. The second is as a means of inspiration and morale boosting. I expect even the aliens become inspired when the Battlemaster appears on the Battlefield. Or if you prefer more cold terms, as a propaganda tool.”

“So how would this work?” She asked, looking through the papers. “You have several different ranks.” She raised an eyebrow. “All named after medieval titles, of course.”

“A missed opportunity if I didn’t,” he said, gesturing to the one she had now. “Squire rank, the lowest in the Order. Primarily would serve as the front line in an ADVENT attack with a greatshield augmented with alien alloys and charged coils to reduce plasma effectiveness. They could be armed with pistols or one-handed sidearms for long-range, and short swords or spears for close range.”

The illustration in the file certainly looked more than what the typical medieval squire had. The armor was more styled in the vein of knights, although somewhat plain, while still retaining some of ADVENT’s notable aesthetic. The ‘squire’ held a massive shield in one hand, with a pistol in the other and a spear strapped to its back.

“I imagine this is how ADVENT would be able to close the distance in firefights,” Mason continued. “This would help break stalemates in ADVENT’s favor. Obviously we are in the modern era, where long-ranged weapons are the norm. That is why all units have short and long-ranged weapons. Pistols for advancing forward, and their swords and spears when they engage at close range. Obviously these weapons and armor would be made to modern specifications.”

“Useful,” Saudia noted. “The Oyariah Titans have attempted similar tactics against us. Were it not for psions, they might have been more successful.”

She flipped the page to the next unit. “A Knight proper,” Mason said. “An officer equivalent if you want to use that terminology.” The illustration here had two different Knights, one holding what looked like a flaming sword with a kite shield, and another holding a rifle with the sword sheathed and the shield over the back.

The armor looked similar to the squire, although it seemed slightly less bulky and the helmets were noticeably more ornate, with 45 degree angled wings on the sides for one, and a clearly-inspired late-medieval period-like helmet for the other. “This is where some personalization can come in,” Mason said. “I thought the shield could be decided by the Knight themselves. They could have different types, with their own emblems – ADVENT-approved of course.”

“Acceptable,” she noted absentmindedly as she read a few of the notes, mostly about color or alternative design. This was definitely just a concept, after all. The image of a Knight holding a rifle was rather amusing to her, but she had to admit if there was ever a modern knight, they would definitely have to have something like that.

“Next are those ranked Lords,” Mason said as she flipped to the respective page. “Or Ladies, if you prefer. Akin to a Marshal in purpose, and who are always on the front lines, as should be expected of leaders. These I envisioned as having more freedom, as you can tell.”

She definitely could. The largest differences in the illustration compared to the previous two was the helmet (Which didn’t look too dissimilar to a Knight) and a cape. Mason had clearly been inspired by the Battlemaster for this one. But what stood out to her were that the four illustrations of these Lords had different weapons. One had a greatsword, one had a sword and shield, another had an axe, and the last one wielded a warhammer.
“I certainly like this concept,” Saudia said, looking up at Mason. “It could certainly be viable. Although I assume you have a leader in place, or equivalent rank.”

“Oh, certainly,” he smiled, motioning for her to turn over the page one last time. “The proposed title of the Lord Commander of the Order of Terra.” Sure enough, she saw the illustration which was extremely similar to the Lords, though there were multiple notes that the color of the cape would not be red, but black.

“With the same freedoms as the Lords, except not quite as often participating in combat,” Mason added. “I didn’t see a need to become overly complex here, as this is not something which needs unnecessary ranks or promotion. However, there is one important element to all of this.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Go on.”

“Knighting was always a ceremonial affair,” he explained. “ADVENT is not especially ceremonial, from what I’ve seen. For the Order, I want to have some of this ceremony, and this is where people like me come in. When promoted to Knight or Lord, such ceremonies could be conducted by the respective monarchy or royal equivalent.”

He soon expanded on that. “This is up to the soldier, of course, but for those who wish it, it could be turned into a celebration of sorts. A public event to boost morale if you want a tangible benefit. However, what this does is it preserves some part of the cultures of these countries, while not giving those in monarchies any actual power. Their role is purely ceremonial, which is what you want if I’m not mistaken.”

“What about for countries without such an equivalent,” Saudia asked. “America has something of a…bad history with monarchy.”

“Well, that’s the interesting thing,” Mason said. “You would have two options. Promote as standard, or find a family with some kind of connection, not necessarily to royalty, but knighthood. I suspect even in America you could find someone. The point is someone with a connection to their own country. Can you really say Japanese or English soldiers wouldn’t feel pride and accomplishment upon recognition from their Emperor or Queen, respectively?”

“Perhaps it couldn’t hurt,” she straightened in her chair, considering. “Now, where do you fit in this? I am impressed with this proposal, but I assume you want a position in it? Lord Commander?”

“I considered it, but no,” Mason shook his head. “I am not in prime shape anymore. I am healthy, but not suited for combat now. With that said I would want a position in ADVENT. To fill a niche you have forgotten about until now.”

“What is?”

“Something akin to a…cultural preserver,” he said thoughtfully. “Someone who would, instead of homogenizing every aspect of ADVENT, work to keep the uniqueness of other countries while not compromising ADVENT values. All done in accordance with ADVENT standards, of course,” he nodded to her. “For most people, I wouldn’t think this would accomplish anything. A throwaway position with no real influence. But you are a reasonable woman, Chancellor. I believe it would be worth something with your approval.”

He clasped his hand together and leaned forward. “If we could come to an agreement regarding this, I know it would assuage concerns in my family. The Crown would publicly support the referendum and solidify our entrance into ADVENT. Provided ADVENT was also public about our role in the creation of this division, and promotion of my own role. It would serve a purpose, I
feel. Beyond thanks, it would show other countries they don’t have to fear ADVENT destroying
and reforming their countries based upon seemingly arbitrary whims.”

Saudia thought for a moment. He made good points, and she wasn’t one to turn down good ideas
that weren’t her own. “I think ADVENT would be open to what you propose,” she finally said. “I
cannot make a unilateral decision like this, but I do want all relevant parties to meet and refine this
further. We can make this work, if you are willing.”

He smiled. “I certainly am, Chancellor.”

“Excellent. I look forward to seeing what you will do in the future.”

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Atlanta, Georgia – United States of America

1/2/2017 – 6:12 P.M.

Food was welcome, but Ivan barely tasted anything as he ate. It was some burger joint he didn’t
even remember the name of, but had just wandered into as he thought. With some food and drink,
he could think a bit more.

The good news was that he at least knew he was psionic. He sincerely doubted they would have
lied about that, and that meant that there was a chance he could find some way to become sensitive
on his own. Google searches unfortunately hadn’t come up with anything, although there was
much speculation about how, exactly, ADVENT and XCOM awakened psions.

He was also fairly sure that he was going to be blacklisted by ADVENT after that incident. In
retrospect, he shouldn’t have been so aggressive. It had on occasion served him well in court, but
unfortunately it wasn’t something he had a firm filter on. He’d never liked censoring himself
because of some perceived insult, and that extended to people in authority.

Stupid, perhaps, but at least he could say he had a spine.

Of course, now that meant he had few to no options. He supposed he could swallow his pride and
find some entry level position, or…actually, he could just emigrate away from ADVENT. Quite a
few countries in Europe were still around, and still had some basic understanding of how criminal
cases should be tried.

Yes, that seemed like a good plan. He’d have to sleep on it, but it was better than staying in
ADVENT. He had no desire or future here. Let the aliens burn it all to the ground if they wanted.
Who knew how much of the war was because of propaganda, and how much was true? He
wouldn’t have been shocked to learn very little of it was accurate.

Whatever, soon he would be gone from here.

“You will not leave the country.” Ivan started at the voice as it appeared that some man
materialized before him. He knew that no one was sitting across from him, but there sat a very
gaunt and pale man in a trench coat, gloves, and no exposed skin aside from the face. He also wore
shades, which looked exceptionally out of place as the sun had gone down, and who wore shades
inside?

Ivan coughed awkwardly. “Sorry, but who the hell are you?” He held up a burger. “If you don’t
mind, I’d like to eat alone. Not had a good day.”
“You will not leave the country,” the man repeated. “They will not let you.”

Ivan suddenly realized that the man’s lips hadn’t actually moved.

He blinked, wondering if he was just tired. “Sorry, but-“

The man reached up and raised his shades slightly, and Ivan saw two orange pools of light underneath them. Without a word he lowered them. Ivan turned cold as he acquired some inkling of what was going on. He quickly glanced around to see if anyone noticed, and saw them continuing on their way and seemingly ignoring both of them.

“They will not disturb us; they cannot.” The voice turned raspy, yet crystal clear. It was the voice of something ancient and frail. Yet there was a hardness to it that dared any to challenge what it spoke. “The minds of the blind are frail and malleable. They are shaped into what is desired and needed. What you see before you is merely an illusion, one invisible to all others.”

Ivan coughed. “Who…are you?”

“I am the Overmind of the Ethereal Collective,” he rasped, words rattling in Ivan’s head. “Second to the Imperator, and Watcher of his Plan.”

Yes. Right. Whoever that was sounded important. “I assume you are talking to me for a reason?”

“I watch your world,” he said. “Even now the people walk as those in a slumber, controlled and submissive to those in command. They follow and obey without question. They accept the status quo even when it affects them. They do not resist when pressured, and will back down upon resistance to their preconceived ideas. You are flawed on your own; aggressive and impulsive, but you keep your own mind. You have my attention for now.”

First, he wasn’t sure if that was meant as an insult or compliment. Both?

Second, he wasn’t sure he wanted a dangerously powerful Ethereal interested in him. That might end badly if he screwed it up.

“You do know I was just trying to join ADVENT?” He said slowly. “I’m not exactly prime… whatever you want from me.”

“You did not attempt to join because of loyalty to your species or hatred of aliens,” the Overmind noted. “But because you felt it was the best option of a situation the fault of ADVENT itself. And when they refused you, you left forever.”

“And I don’t regret it,” Ivan said. “Best choice or not, I’m not going back to them.”

“The question is what will you do now?” The Overmind said. “ADVENT has marked you as a potential problem. You will not be able to leave them. You will be detained. Even as we speak ADVENT Intelligence is poring through your computer files, internet history, and case history. They will know everything about you, and you will be under their eyes forever.”

Ivan swallowed. “Can I ask how you know this?”

A spindly gloved finger touched the man’s head. “As I said, the blinded minds are weak and malleable. I simply watched and listened.”

Ivan leaned back, rubbing his forehead. “In that case, assuming you’re telling the truth, I don’t have a future.”
“Not here,” the Overmind agreed. “But there are paths open to you. I will see if you can grasp them for yourself.” Before his eyes, he vanished, leaving Ivan alone.

“Wa-“ Ivan said mid-word before he stopped, seeing there was no point. He seemed to be alone now, and was left with a lot more questions than answers.

The first thing he needed to do was get back to his house and get caught up on what exactly was known about the aliens. Second was to seriously think about what he had said. Ivan was wondering if this Overmind Ethereal was going to offer to take him off-planet, or even awaken his psionic potential. But it made some sense that he hadn’t done any of that yet. This alien did not strike him as someone to hand out answers or solutions.

It seemed more of a means of letting him know that someone was watching him.

But if he wanted more, he would have to take it.

He took a sip of his warming water, thinking. He would have to verify if what this Overmind had said was true or not. If it was, his life was as good as over. If it wasn’t, then he still didn’t owe ADVENT anything, but he’d be more wary of telepathic aliens appearing out of nowhere. But he had a feeling that the alien hadn’t made anything up.

If that was the case, then he had nothing to really lose. In which case some drastic action had to be taken.

If ADVENT wanted to hoard their ability to awaken psions, then he might just have to take it.

Who knew, perhaps the Overmind would even help him out.

He had a plan now. Much different than what he had earlier, but succeed or fail, he would be better off. Now he had to start determining the specifics of how to execute it.

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ADVENT Headquarters Forum – Switzerland

1/5/2017 – 1:02 P.M.

“We should not be afraid to call this what it is,” Reverend David Steinman was saying. “It is the first step to the dissolution of the institution of religion itself. While ADVENT may be benign now, the signs point to an era equivalent to the dark times of Christian persecution.”

This was starting off wonderfully.

The forum was packed with people, with the various religious representatives in the front rows, the media spread throughout, and a limited number of the public. She had made the decision to allow this to be televised, and wondered if she should have actually mentioned that to the speakers themselves instead of letting it remain an internal secret.

But too late to do anything about that. If these people wanted to give a sermon or condemnation, she was fine with it. In the interest of fairness each person invited would have an opportunity to speak directly to her and Stein, or however they wanted to use their allotted time, and then return to their seats.

Saudia and Stein were seated with their backs to the crowd, though they could see themselves on the two screens on both sides of the podium, allowing the crowd and cameras to always get their
facial expressions and reactions. The representative of the Southern Baptist Convention, one of the largest religious bodies in the world, finally paused for breath and Saudia decided to interject.

“I do wish to correct you on one aspect,” she said. “ADVENT has no intention of dissolving or banning the practice of peaceful and unobtrusive religion.”

“Curious choice of words,” Steinman scowled. “The definition of which depends on your own decision.”

“The definitions do not change,” Saudia answered calmly. “As long as what you’re preaching doesn’t incite hate or violence, doesn’t deliberately spread misinformation, and does not affect the judgement of individuals in influential positions, and follow ADVENT regulations, then the religion is perfectly legal.”

“And what do you say to your orders you sent to every church,” he held up a piece of paper. “You are requiring us to install cameras in our sanctuaries, force us to register all our members in databases, and have observers watching us. What justification is there for that? This is intimidation.”

Stein very much looked like she wanted to roll her eyes, but she answered calmly. “You would only have a problem with such if there is something to hide. The world has suffered from religious violence before; radicalization within places of worship. That will not happen again.”

The Reverend looked insulted. “You cannot lump Christianity in the same category as Islam, which was, if I recall, banned. Yet if I’m to understand, it is legal again?”

“We most certainly can,” Stein said flatly. “It is not a matter of which religion is more or less ‘good’, it is a matter of fairness. We are not going to exempt anyone from following the law. If practicing Muslims make the necessary changes to their doctrine and follow our guidelines, they are just as legal as your own church.”

The man looked like he was going to give some retort to that, but the timekeeper signaled it was up. “Thank you for your contribution,” Saudia said with a smile. “We will have the next person come up.”

Maybe this one wouldn’t spend the majority of his time on a sermon.

The next few representatives were much better, and used their time to inquire more about certain details of the regulations. Saudia suspected they were asking, not because they didn’t understand them, but because they knew this was being broadcast and most of the public wasn’t as educated.

The line of questioning focused on the appointed observers, which Saudia was happy to explain in great detail. They could be involved as much or little as the church desired, they would be respectful of the members, and the only set rule was that they couldn’t be barred from attending events. By the end, the Rabbi seemed more comfortable with the idea. Still skeptical, obviously, but to the surprise of no one, discussing things in a rational manner made everything clearer.

More questions came on the database and information gathering. Stein just explained that the religious affiliation was just another datapoint in a large list for citizens. It would of course be kept confidential and would only be accessed when necessary. Saudia suspected it helped that no one was exempt from this requirement, and it wasn’t targeting specific denominations or religions.

The next man to take the podium was Reverend Ken Codsworth, of the Missouri-Synod denomination of the Lutheran Church. He was a tall man, greying hair and thin glasses. He had
some notes in his hands which he placed on the podium. “Chancellor Vyandar, Chief Stein,” he began in greeting. “The questions raised have so far not touched upon what I feel is a much more worrying concern. I would state that it is forcing us to teach against our beliefs, if not intentionally sabotaging us.”

Saudia suspected she knew where this was going. “Our schools are where parents can be sure that their children will receive a Christian education, without being indoctrinated by other falsehoods about the world. But now,” he paused for emphasis. “You are forcing us to teach your curriculum. What justification do you have to force us to teach evolution when it is something we do not believe is accurate.”

Oh boy, here it went. “ADVENT simply wants to ensure that every child receives a quality education,” she began. “That includes being properly taught the latest scientific theories and facts. At this moment the theory of evolution is the most well-documented and studied explanation for the origin of our species. If you have irrefutable proof that the universe was created out of nothing by a god, then we would happily teach that instead. ADVENT bases our curriculum on facts, Reverend, not beliefs. Just because children can go to a religious school does not mean they will receive a sub-par education, not anymore.”

The man looked torn between fury and frustration. “And what if we refuse this?”

Stein answered. “That depends on the circumstances. If it is simply one teacher not following curriculum, they will be removed from their position and replaced. If it is the action of leadership, the school will be shut down and children placed into the nearest public school.”

“I should clarify for all those in attendance that while parents of course have choices of schools, none are exempt from ADVENT regulations,” Saudia added. “There are too many instances of abusive conditions, questionable curriculums, and religious indoctrination for any school to be exempt from this.”

“Teaching our children about Jesus is considered indoctrination?” Codsworth demanded.

“Of course not,” Saudia shook her head. “But the belief is something they should decide for themselves, not just because their parents told them they should. In school they will be taught truth and facts. If those lead to them believing, then that is perfectly acceptable. We want children to question, Reverend, not simply accept.”

“You are also not forbidden from having religious classes,” Stein added. “Be they history or theology. However, you simply cannot teach these as fact. The existence, or lack thereof, of a god cannot be proven or disproven. Ensure that they understand that, and there won’t be misunderstandings.”

“And how far does this extend?” The Reverend demanded. “I will not preach lies to my congregation.”

Saudia raised an eyebrow. “Then don’t. If you wish to hold a conversation on the merits, or lack thereof, of what you believe or disbelieve, then that is fine. But it needs to be based in something real, not a book written thousands of years ago.” She glanced at the timekeeper. “Thank you for your contribution. The next person may come forward.”

The next few followed the pattern of asking for more details about the curriculum and the finer points of what would, and would not be permitted. Again, likely more for the benefit of those observing than because they didn’t know. The regulations had been decided some time ago. Now came one of the more high-profile guests.
His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama stood the podium, in his orange robes and with no obvious prepared statements. The elderly Tibetan man looked rather healthy for his age, and Saudia was expecting a nuanced take on ADVENT, like he did on certain issues. Given his stances, she doubted he supported ADVENT, but he’d never struck her as a fanatic.

She was interested to what he would say.

“I will keep what I have to say short and with limited questions,” he began. “I would first like to commend Chancellor Vyandar for allowing this to take place in the first place. Discussion and talk helps us all understand each other, and despite the hostility she knew she would face, it was still allowed. An open mind is important, especially in the world that exists today.”

Nice of him, and Saudia made a slow nod of acknowledgement. “But I must be truthful,” he said, sadness in his voice. “This world has descended into chaos and violence. Yet this is not violence from the stars, but actively perpetrated by ADVENT itself on their own citizens.” He looked around the forum. “Peaceful protesters being arrested and hunted, keeping their prisoners as slave labor, and enacting their will across the world through violence.”

A shake of the head. “We witnessed the bloody destruction of the Arabic people, their conquering of Canadians who had done nothing wrong, and today they treat violence as a first resort, not last. The rights and liberties of people of all types have been stripped under ADVENT. They claim it is necessary, but in many cases I have seen that they are not interested in a dialogue when they believe their way is the correct one.”

This was not unexpected from him, Saudia had suspected that he would have issues with ADVENT policies. Pacifists; she would never understand them. “It is not restricted to their own people,” he continued. “ADVENT spreads a message of hate and intolerance towards the aliens from the stars. There seems to be no effort to solve this matter peacefully instead of continuing a conflict where millions die.”

Stein did not bother to contain the look of absolute disgust on her face, and Saudia didn’t especially refrain from showing her own nonverbal disagreement. “The right to defend is acceptable,” he continued. “But escalation will only make it worse. At the same time…this is not a normal situation we as a species find ourselves in. I do believe that many in ADVENT are doing their best, yet I implore those here now to consider a less violent approach, and to treat all Humans with the dignity and respect to which they are entitled.”

He looked once more out to the crowd. “We should all work to peacefully remind ADVENT to pursue this path. Violence and hate will only continue this cycle. Holding ADVENT accountable for their actions, positive and negative, is the best path towards true unity. It will not come through war or conflict, but through acceptance of all.”

He focused on Saudia. “You are a hard woman, Chancellor, but you appear to understand something of justice and fairness. You have the capability to enact change across the world.” He paused. “The Tibetan people have been persecuted and cracked down by the Chinese for decades. Is ADVENT prepared to hold to their ideals, as you are now allied with China?”

There were murmurs at that. It was a good thing she had considered the possibility of this question. “ADVENT has raised this issue with Chinese officials,” she said. “We are in negotiations regarding Tibet, but China is aware that we do not approve of the current situation. We have also requested the release of the 11th Panchen Lama.”

The media certainly liked that, with shocked faces as they double checked their cameras, as the
people around them openly began talking. The Dalai Lama simply bowed his head. “For that, you have my thanks, Chancellor. Please consider what I have said here. The lives of billions will be decided by you.”

He departed the podium as the next person came. That had gone as she expected; the good news was that everyone was likely going to focus on her statements regarding Tibet and the abducted Panchen Lama instead of his rather harsh condemnation of ADVENT policies. Fair enough.

A few more people later, and then stood Arnold Cameron, a minister of the United Methodist Church. Another elderly minister who failed to stand out, he nonetheless cut a strict and sharp figure, standing tall as he addressed both of them directly. From what Saudia recalled on the man, he had been raised in a military household so it made sense that his demeanor was noticeably different from most other ministers.

And he not exactly speaking favorably of ADVENT right now.

“Chancellor,” he said slowly. “Can I have in no uncertain terms what you foresee the future of religion is under ADVENT?”

“Certainly,” she answered. “Religion will endure under ADVENT, but without the extremist elements and regressive policies which have plagued the institution since its inception. I do not believe it should hold sway over the average citizen, and in the future, each individual should come to their own personal decision to participate or not.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Smooth words, Chancellor. I am not convinced. I have pored over your guidelines, and it seems exceptionally clear that the intent is to have all religion die a slow death. Would you be displeased by this?”

She considered what to say, but decided to opt for the truth. “I would not be heartbroken. I have no deep ties or desire for religion to continue.”

“I don’t know if you know what you are truly proposing,” Cameron said. “Much as some such as you deride religion, it is not solely responsible for the evils of the world, and indeed has brought significant hope and good to the world. Charities, art, philosophy – many people you admire from history were men and women of God. And you are saying that it would be better if this had never happened?”

Saudia sighed, thinking of how best to answer. “Religion has certainly done good for the world, Minister, no one can deny that. But religion is not special in this regard. As for the men and women of the past being religions that was, for lack of a better word, simply part of the time. That does not mean they were correct about everything. As our understanding of the world and universe has grown, it is no surprise that alternatives to a god emerge.”

“I will add that there is nothing stopping from religions today from doing good,” Stein interjected. “There is nothing saying that you cannot continue donating money, performing Humanitarian missions, and additional service work. Indeed, we encourage it. This is the purpose of these guidelines – to eliminate the pitfalls and failings of religion and promote the better aspects.”

“You guidelines themselves say differently,” Cameron said flatly. “We can’t ask for money from our congregations, all money has to be reported to ADVENT, we cannot spread our message outside of authorized events…these rules which you say help us do little more than neuter us. There is no excuse other than to ensure churches don’t grow, and our message is controlled, then sanitized to what your people deem necessary.”
“These are rules which are designed to counter specific abuses,” Stein said coolly. “Which it may be an unnecessary inconvenience, there is nothing stopping your congregations from donating. I consider these guidelines a small price to pay to ensure that well-meaning people are scammed out of their money, or drawn into cults like Scientology, or otherwise taken advantage of my so-called speakers of god.”

“But this should be done on a case by case basis,” he pointed out. “Punishing all for the mistakes of a few is a thinly veiled effort to delegitimize and control religion as a whole. This is greater than the body I represent, and I do not believe you understand the consequences. Perhaps you cannot.”

“And what consequences are those?” Saudia asked.

Cameron sighed. “Chancellor, you understand there are people who suffer in this world. Be it in body, mind, or soul. Perhaps it is the terminally ill, perhaps it is those in prisons, perhaps there are those who have everything but feel empty inside. They are without any hope, they know they need something, but don’t know what it could be.”

He motioned around. “For many that stability and hope comes from religion. I understand ADVENT prides itself on facts, logic, and evidence. Then take into account that religion is responsible for giving people something to live for, for giving them hope and meaning where there was previously none. By turning those who have done wrong on a better path. Religion has been responsible for saving many lives, Chancellor, ones you likely won’t know about, but a person who feels like the world has nothing more to offer him and wishes to end it all may reconsider if they know that there is someone who does care.”

He pursed his lips. “Faith gives people hope in very dark and hopeless times, Chancellor. Even now I am sure many soldiers of ADVENT are relying on that hope as they fight for a state which treats their beliefs as childish superstition. It gives them courage and strength to continue on. That, Chancellor, is what you and ADVENT wish to see gone. You would prefer an empty and cold world devoid of hope or comfort that is outside ADVENT. You would prefer people suffer in silence, and only rely on themselves. Belief is a powerful thing, Chancellor, especially if their faith is true. The blood will be on your hands, Chancellor, if you continue down this path.”

That…was an eloquent speech. One she was not sure how to respond to initially. Stein took charge. “Minister, I do wish to reiterate that ADVENT itself has no established stance on religion. We have certainly never referred to it as such, nor subjected our soldiers to feeling uncomfortable or persecuted for their faith.”

“Religion, I will say once more, is perfectly legal,” Saudia added. “There is nothing stopping those who seek religion from finding it.”

Cameron fixed her with a look. “Then why prevent us from seeking them out?”

“Unauthorized solicitation is an ADVENT standard,” Stein answered neutrally. “Nothing is exempt from this. Including religion. But as you know, churches are of course allowed to host events provided they have authorization.”

The man was clearly not pleased with the answer, but his face simply hardened as his time came to a close. “I have made my point,” Cameron willingly stepped down. “Think on what I said. There is more at stake than just debating the finer points of religious regulation.” He stepped down to the cold silence of the crowd.

Saudia had to at least commend him for holding to his beliefs so strongly. And making a case for religion while he was at it. An interesting perspective, and one she would think about at some
point. But in the meantime, there were more people to listen to.

The next few were somewhat entertaining, and one of them flat out demanded why the practice of homeopathy had been banned, and she’d calmly responded that it wasn’t based in fact or rationality, and those who actually performed it were very likely thieves and conmen. Most of the Indians in attendance had looked both offended and concerned. Unfortunately that was one region that still believed in it.

Luckily it wouldn’t be that way forever.

The one up now was especially amusing. “Are you religious, Chancellor?”

She resisted the urge to smile. “No, I believe I mentioned this earlier.”

Reverend Gabriel Adams sniffed. “Then what gives you the right to control what we believe and teach? You forbid us accepting donations from those who only wish to spread the seed of our Lord across the world? And furthermore, restrict those blessed by God himself from sharing this message!”

Adams, as it turned out, was one of the worst of the people invited here. He preached at a megachurch which she saw little better than an organized extortion racket to enrich himself. “We are not controlling what you believe,” she said. “I don’t believe anyone has stated that.”

“As for restricting donations,” Stein gave a grim smile as she looked down at her folder. “I believe you misunderstand how that works. Of course, there is nothing stopping donations to worthy causes. Churches will of course be connected with ADVENT-approved charities across the world. However, donations will not be used for…let us say, frivolous purposes,” she glanced down. “Such as the five million dollar mansion you own, or the sixteen million dollar ranch you have in Texas, or your personal jet-”

“I’ll have you know that all of those are necessary,” Adams said with conviction. “They are needed to spread the word of the Lord. God himself gifted me with such treasures, and who am I to reject them.” He narrowed his eyes. “And how could you even know what I have? What is that paper, and how do you even know it is accurate?”

“Well, then god will have to become more frugal,” she said sarcastically, eliciting a chuckle from the crowd. “Oh, and this?” She held up the paper. “This is your arrest warrant detailing the assets which have been taken. Taking millions from the people you con is, sadly for you, illegal now and you’ll serve as a good face to what we don’t tolerate anymore.” She motioned to two Peacekeepers which had walked up and placed the gaping man in handcuffs. “Take him for trial.”

“Yes sir.”

Saudia had not been sure that was the best way to handle that situation, as the original plan was to arrest him quietly afterwards, along with several other similar figures, but she had to admit it wouldn’t have been nearly as satisfying. It at least gave a good illustration of what was no longer allowed.

There were a few more people who weren’t nearly as combative or dramatic, and those were finished in good time. The next person was one of some controversy. Razeen el-Mustafa, the Grand Imam of what was left of the Islamic faith. He didn’t speak for all sects, but was the only representative of the religion here as the others were too scattered to form large or cohesive groups. He wore the robes and had a thick greying beard with a turban on his head.
“I will begin by extending my thanks to the Chancellor and Chief Stein,” he began. “I will not take a significant amount of time, nor will I subject you to more interrogative questions.”

Saudia did personally wonder how this was going to go. She wasn’t expecting anything too dramatic, as Islam in particular was still viewed with negativity in much of the world. Though she wasn’t expecting much praise either. He likely didn’t want to rock the boat.

“We are a shadow of what we once were,” he began. “And there were two responses to the War on Terror for us. Blame or reflection. We could blame others, blame them for the desecration of our Prophet and annihilation of his Holy City. We could blame the soldiers who came and killed our people in the night and crucified them as a warning. We could blame Allah himself for bringing this upon his people.”

He paused. “Or we could reflect on why it had happened. We could consider the possibility that perhaps – we were wrong in our beliefs. I will admit that when the Caliphate rose, I was a proud supporter. Yet when the atrocities began, there were those who realized that this was not what Allah had taught. We left and tried to show our brothers and sisters that what they were doing was not righteous, but damming.”

He shook his head. “But too many did not listen, and it forced me to ask why so many of us were drawn to that path. The truth is that our destruction was brought about by ourselves, not the West, not even the Commander. We taught and accepted what we preached without thinking about the context of what it could lead to.” He allowed a contemplative pause.

“I do not believe it was right that our beliefs were made illegal, and us marked and watched,” he finally said. “But I cannot deny the justification for it. Many did not believe in second chances for us, but to my surprise I received a message from ADVENT that said exactly that. There are strings attached, but in light of the past, can any of us say they are unjustified?”

The Grand Imam looked around the crowd. “If there is one thing I want to impart, it is that change is not wrong. The world is changing; this is not the same place it was even a decade ago. Religion, not just Islam, has been rooted in the past for too long and it has never led to any long-term benefits. We shouldn’t look solely on the laws and readings themselves to justify our beliefs, but the values and meanings behind them which transcend the pages.”

He clasped his hands together. “I believe Chief Stein said it best here. We only have to fear ADVENT if we are afraid of what they would learn. And if you are afraid, perhaps what you believe is wrong.” He bowed his head and stepped down, to a scattering of applause.

Saudia found it extremely ironic that a representative of Islam of all things had arguably been the most supportive. In any case, they were reaching the last of the representatives, and many of the questions now were somewhat repeating what had already been said. All things considered she felt that this had gone very well.

The only one left was Pope Marcellus, and she had felt he would be best to close things out, as he already enjoyed a good relationship with ADVENT and had been cooperative with the new regulations. He genuinely seemed to want to reform the Catholic Church into something better than it was. A religious figure she could actually respect.

Dressed in his white robes and cap, Marcellus began at the podium. “I’ve thought on what I would say once this was done. I expect I would not be incorrect in saying that this has been illuminating for many people, and it is especially warming to see so many people of different faiths come together in unity.”
He raised a finger. “I have no questions for Chancellor Vyandar and Chief Stein. I have been aware of what they ask since the beginning and have cooperated with them when necessary. Rather, I would like to speak about what I’ve seen here. Fear and indignation were prominent, and not unjustified.”

The Pope paused. “These restrictions and regulations are new and frightening for us. For some it might incite fears of persecution. Of silencing. Suppression of speech. The so-called “war on religion” has been used to describe this. And I can certainly not say that ADVENT has true freedom of religion.”

He lowered the finger and looked around the room thoughtfully. “But there is no cause without reason, not here. We must all ask ourselves just why ADVENT felt such actions needed to be taken. It goes beyond just religious extremism, because if that were the case, only the troublesome ones would be removed.”

“This, my friends, is the consequence of abusing the privilege we enjoyed for so long,” he said, clasping his hands. “Instead of using our influence and numbers to improve the lives of people around the world and spread the word of God, we’ve used it to enrich ourselves, spread hatred against others, abuse the power of government for ourselves and not the people, and all the time believing we were better than everyone because of our belief.”

He shook his head. “All of us are sinners, and many of us forget the simple teachings of the Word. Even ones such as ‘Love Thy Neighbor’ are ignored when convenient. Is it any wonder that this would foster resentment and rejection from those who are not blinded by their own false perception? The Grand Imam said what I feel now. This was brought upon ourselves.”

Marcellus swept a hand over the crowd. “Ask yourselves if what you face now would even be considered if we truly taught and followed our beliefs, and gave more than lip service. We are, as was stated, too stuck in the past. We have rejected knowledge that we feel is against God, yet never considered if the source was right all along.”

He suddenly smiled. “Nowhere do the scriptures speak of aliens. If such an important part of this universe can simply be forgotten, then we must ask ourselves just what we do not know. Too often we pretend to have answers when there are none. We lie and speak in riddles when we could simply say ‘we do not know’. And that is the honest truth. That is why we have faith in something we cannot see, and every night wonder why he allows this to happen.”

He looked back to the duo opposite him. “I believe that we are beginning to realize how little we know about God, we who are fools to even begin to think we can understand him. We must look to the future now, and treat this as an opportunity, not a sentence. A fresh start. Actions speak louder than words, and today I will take the first steps in addressing an issue more prominent than what this gathering has met for.”

Saudia was curious where he was going with this. “The aliens threatens our species, not just ADVENT. We have all seen their brutality and hatred towards us, and a defeat would ensure that those that live are enslaved or killed. As such we are obligated to defend ourselves, and there can be no higher justification for war against the godless creatures descending on us from the heavens.”

Saudia leaned forward. Was he actually going to do what she thought?

The Pope’s expression took one of determination. “This is one conflict we will not flee from. By the authority invested in me by God Almighty and the Vatican, I declare the Tenth Crusade against the Ethereal Collective to purge our world of the alien threat and beyond it. Words are no longer
enough, and I call upon all who are able to assist ADVENT in bringing this goal to fruition.”

Stein, for once, looked surprised, and the entire room burst into chaos as the Pope quietly stepped down. Newscasters were speaking frantically into their microphones and debate raged all around. For her part, Saudia had not expected that. The declaration of a Crusade now had not been something she’d considered.

Yet if there was ever a time for it, it would be now.

“Full of surprises, isn’t he,” Stein commented to her. “I like this guy.”

“Agreed,” Saudia nodded. “All things considered, I think this little event went very well.”

“A crusade declared, China likely mad, and I got to arrest someone,” Stein chuckled. “A good day all around.”
The Battlemaster found the planets of the Zudjari both miserable and beautiful. From surveys and what records Cogitian had been able to find, they had only colonized extremely arid or desert planets, and built their crystalline pyramids seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Of course, the Collective had only managed to stumble across them completely by accident, well after the species had been purged.

The Battlemaster piloted his new Overseer, choosing to keep the same name of the *Cultro*, to set it down right before the massive pyramid. To this day Zudjari technology was still mostly a mystery, and the working theories were that it was some application or adaption of Sovereign tech, but primarily having to do with energy manipulation and generation, which was not how their own research into Sovereign technology seemed to work.

Fectorian visited this planet every so often, and always returned in a bad mood, which the Battlemaster never knew if it came from his inability to understand how Zudjari technology worked, or from dealing with the lone operation of the Forge himself. As he approached the slightly brighter rectangle the seemingly solid surface began retracting and folding in on itself.

The entire pyramid was without a doubt one of the most interesting structures he had ever seen. It was made out of the same crystalline material as what the Outsider Forge produced, which gave the structure an orange, transparent look, although it still managed to hide the complex machinery within.

One interesting fact about this Forge was that it was placed at the exact point where it would always be perpetual day. Day and night existed on the planet, but the nights were exceptionally short, and only near the equator due to how close the planet was to the resident star. Fectorian was positive the pyramid was able to absorb or convert solar energy to power the Forge, which explained a lack of any traditional power source.

His suit protected him from the worst of the heat, but it was by no means comfortable. Fortunately the temperature dropped off significantly once he was inside and the wall closed behind him. The Battlemaster had no idea how the temperature was controlled since not once here did he see vents or anything resembling temperature control.

“Welcome, Battlemaster of the Ethereal Collective,” came the voice of the resident machine intelligence, in a gratingly screeching tone. The Zudjari may have been able to create technology even the Collective couldn’t replicate, but they had clearly never been master programmers. From what he’d learned, the Zudjari Intelligence managed the Forge and ran most of the machines and Outsider production plants, but nothing else.

And it couldn’t operate without instructions.

“Battlemaster, welcome, welcome,” the lone resident Zudjari greeted as he stepped out of a wall. The Battlemaster was still unsure if there were designated paths through the Forge, or if one could walk through any part of it and a path would be created. “I have long been expecting you. It has
been far too long since one of the Imperator’s own graced this forge.”

“Save your groveling,” the Battlemaster dismissed as he began walking forward. “I am here because your creations have disappointed me.”

I’llan Ceen, the one Zudjari allowed to operate the Forge was a figure the Battlemaster didn’t hold any fondness for. While Mu’ut Jeen had been a traitor and idiot, he at least had a spine when he had made the intellectually questionable decision to reward the Imperator’s actions in bringing him and a tenth of the Zudjari in stasis out of it by instantly betraying him and enslaving a small portion of the species on this planet.

Of course, Jeen had been promptly killed by Sicarius on Earth before their existence was compromised. A few telepathic tricks here and there ensured that the entire “Outsider Incident”, as only the highest ranked of Humans called it, was remembered as an isolated event and not something to worry about.

It was a good thing that Jeen had only managed to escape with only a small force and not hundreds. Otherwise the damage would have been far too extensive to be repaired. Of course, it had informed Humanity that alien life did exist, and it could be extrapolated that the Outsider Incident was the reason XCOM had been created, and by extension, the cause of many of the problems today.

I’llan Ceen on the other hand was a mere…engineer. Or so he was classified as. There were no scientists, unfortunately, so the mystery of Zudjari technology would remain such, but Ceen was able to operate the entire Forge and even apply improvements and alterations to what it produced. He was also a coward and terrified of all Ethereals after Sicarius had brought back the corpse of their most powerful psion.

The Zudjari were a tall species, the smallest being eight Human feet tall, with stone grey skin or green, depending on genetic stock; in addition to thin, beady eyes with small glowing orange pupils. Their heads were slanted, bald, and had a mouth which opened vertically. Ceen was likely standard as Zudjari went, with grey skin and a missing eye.

He had yet to explain the eye, as he was found that way.

It might explain his cowardice.

“I have, of course, reviewed the footage and data you have sent to me, Battlemaster,” Ceen continued as they walked through the Forge. “These Humans, very dangerous, very intelligent. Nearly an equal to us at our infancy, but of course they do not compare to the power of the Ethereals—”

“Your Outsider units are obsolete,” the Battlemaster interrupted flatly, not looking down at him. “Their usefulness has ended. Physical weapons can break them apart with disappointing effectiveness and energy weapons will overload them. But you know this, even though I specifically recall you stated that they would be immune to energy weapons.”

He stopped and looked down at the alien whose eye had widened. “I expected better.”

“I deeply apologize,” Ceen quickly said. “I did not know that particular…flaw…existed. I swear that we had never seen it before—”

“Then your enemies must have been either weak or stupid. The Humans figured it out almost immediately after they developed laser weapons.”

Ceen quickly walked forward as he led the Battlemaster down another path. “Outsider units as they
exist are inefficient. Agreed! I have been working exceptionally hard to correct the mistakes and have produced upgraded units which will more than suffice against these Humans.” He paused. “However, I want to point out that….well…individually this is a lot of work…”

He trailed off as the Battlemaster stared at him, but pressed forward in a rush of breath. “My work would proceed much more quickly…if I had some more help…”

The Battlemaster held his gaze until the alien looked away. “No. The Zudjari lost their place in our Collective. They have not earned a second chance,” he paused. “If your work produces results, that will be reconsidered.”

“Ah, then let me waste no further time!” The wall opened into a large triangular area which had an entire wall of suspended Outsider crystals. The other two walls were moderately transparent, and through the orange-tinted glass the Battlemaster saw one aspect of the Forge. It appeared that light was being concentrated into vials, all of which had a crystal of some kind seeming to grow in it.

In front of one of these walls were tables of certain kinds of equipment or technology that seemed already made. “The base Outsider form has been improved, it will regenerate far faster. The crystalline-repair aspect was extensively improved and the mono-crystalline manipulation was further refined into what you will soon see.”

The crystal began expanding and seeming to fold outwards. The Battlemaster had given up trying to think of how they worked. If Fectorian and Revelean were baffled, he certainly would not be able to figure it out. Eventually the crystalline Outsider was standing before him, an orange glow emanating from the chest where the core crystal resided.

The Battlemaster without warning lashed out with his sword and the Outsider moved by leaping away with surprising agility. A blade-like extension folded out of the right arm and it tried striking back which the Battlemaster easily deflected and lightly dueled the Outsider as it used its speed to try and move around him.

The Battlemaster telekinetically pinned it to one place, as well as the bladed arm, and followed up with an overhead swiped downwards. The Outsider raised the free arm and a shield folded outwards from the arm and took the full blow, sending cracks through the shield.

Interesting.

The Battlemaster telekinetically blew it into one of the walls, which cracked but immediately healed itself. The shield the Outsider had retracted into its arm, as it appraised the Battlemaster. For his part, the Battlemaster had seen enough and psionically dashed forward and stabbed deep into the chest of the Outsider, shattering the core crystal.

The alien creation dissipated into nothing, and the Battlemaster turned back to Ceen. “This is an improvement. Good.”

“Excellent, excellent,” Ceen picked up another crystal. “That is what I have designed as a Navigator. Fast, agile, and capable of killing enemies in enclosed spaces with ease.” He activated the second crystal. “This one is a Commander unit, one designed specifically for front-line combat.”

The Outsider that formed was identical in shape to the previous one, but at least two heads taller than it. “The difference with these is that for optimum effectiveness, they must be fitted with additional equipment,” Ceen said as he walked over to the table and picked up what looked like a piece of hardened crystal. It was a dull orange, almost brown, and didn’t look alive like most of the
crystalline structures here.

“I have come up with the concept of hardening crystal to serve as a form of armor,” Ceen explained as he placed what looked like a single breastplate on the chest of the Outsider. “The downside is that, as dead crystal, it cannot be integrated into the unit itself and must be applied manually. The Outsider will fuse to the dead crystal, and there will be superior protection provided.”

The Outsider took the cue and walked over to the table and began assembling the armor, by essentially sticking it on various places of its body until it resembled an Outsider, but one that had no glow and looked far more protected.

At a nod from Ceen, the Battlemaster slashed upward and while there was a deep cut in the armor, he hadn’t actually cut through it. “The crystal sadly won’t heal,” Ceen noted. “But it will easily protect it from extensive damage.”

The Battlemaster nodded. “An improvement. You have indeed been working diligently.”

“Much appreciated, Battlemaster, I thank you very much,” he said as he rushed to another, noticeably larger crystal. “And this is the final unit I have refined. The Overlord. The Humans will not be able to stand up to it, I can assure you.” The crystal folded outwards and the Battlemaster was staring at an Outsider his height and size. Unlike the other Outsider units, this one did not have hands, but constantly folding and unfolding stumps.

They then materialized, each arm in a different configuration, with the right arm morphing into a cannon of some kind, and the left forming into a kind of shield. Ceen handed the Overlord a piece of dead crystal which had a small device on it pointing down. The Outsider placed it on the shoulder, and it shot a laser directly into the Overlord. This made it glow brighter and the cannon fired a bright beam of orange which began cutting through the thinner crystal walls, which began cracking. It switched, and then began firing orange bolts which caused other cracks on the wall. The laser shut off, and the firing stopped.

“A unit with the ability to harness energy and convert it into destruction,” Ceen for once seemed highly proud of his work. “It, of course, can wear the specially designed armor, and integrated energy dispensers. I trust that this is a marked improvement.”

“It is,” the Battlemaster gave him genuine credit. The alien had proven his worth today. “Of course, they need to face the Humans in battle. Should they perform well, we will revisit the situation of your people.”

“You are generous, Battlemaster, I thank you,” Ceen said, bowing his head. “I will work to outdo myself even now; you will not regret giving my people a second chance.”

“We shall see,” the Battlemaster said as he turned around to leave. “But know that there will not be a third.”

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Union Viarior Trade Command – Andromeda Prime

12/28/2016 – 1:09 P.M.

Narton had not expected the headquarters of a Union which primarily, on paper, was known for power brokering, trade, and otherwise exerting unparalleled economic dominance having something equivalent to a military fortress. While he wouldn’t have been surprised if some of their bases were heavily armed, this looked like they were expecting an army to invade.
His onboard computer had informed him that every one of the sixty AA plasma turrets had been trained on him, along with the vast majority of their missile defense systems. In comparison to its defenses, Union Viarior Trade Command was very...small. It consisted of a large square patio which had landing areas for all kinds of spacecraft and seemed to be perpetually full.

There was a significant amount of traffic, with ships entering and leaving at a steady pace. As Zararch, he had a spot reserved for him but knew the Andromedons were likely not happy about this.

The main structure in the center of the square was the Trade Command itself, a supermassive skyscraper which put the tallest buildings on Earth to shame. It lacked any windows and looked like a vertical grey rectangle, with defense platforms what looked like every fifteen floors wrapping around the outside with visible Battlefield Engineers and soldiers.

Union Viarior clearly didn’t mess around.

He certainly hoped V’Zarrah was on their side, otherwise there was a good chance he wouldn’t leave this building alive. As it stood, one mistake and one suit rupture and he was dead. The full-body suit wasn’t uncomfortable, but he didn’t like the prospect of being on a planet which would kill him if he breathed the air.

Then again, this was what the Andromedons dealt with literally everywhere else, so perhaps he shouldn’t complain too much.

The Andromedon guards on the planet were also different than the ones that were normally seen on Earth. True, there were some of the suited Andromedon Soldiers guarding the entrances and manning important equipment, but the vast majority of Andromedons were unsuited and wearing some more form-fitting clothing. Andromedons were very...spindly out of the suits. Definitely not a physical threat.

Some of them were cybernetically enhanced, especially in the eyes, but most seemed unaugmented. However, there were a lot of unsuited guards who were numerous enough to have full patrols of ten around the docking area. Nartha walked into one of the doors marked “Client” in both Andromedon and Ethereal Script. The only other option was “Viarior Personnel”.

It was probably safer to choose the former.

The doors slid open as he entered, and he ignored the looks he received from the others in the room, the majority of whom were Andromedons of various Unions. However, all of them clearly saw the Zararch insignia on his shoulders. Even the Andromedons knew better than to interfere with Zararch operations.

There were a few suited Vitakara around, but he ignored them and let them deal with the various Andromedons. He stood in the line with the Andromedons as he waited for his turn to speak with Viarior Initial Management. To their credit, the Andromedons were efficient, going through clients, potential or otherwise, in mere minutes.

He did know something about how they operated. Initial Management was essentially scheduling appoints to make more permanent arrangements; it wasn’t exactly traditional customer service. They heard what you wanted, then scheduled you with someone who could discuss that, then one came back at that time.

There was a steady stream of Andromedons using the dozens of elevators that lined the walls of the room – a clever insulating tactic in the event of an attack – which took them to various floors.
There were five hundred levels in total, with the elevators being able to reach speeds fast enough to bring a being from floor one to floor five hundred in five minutes.

However, he was already expected. He didn’t anticipate this would take especially long. The Andromedon in front of him finished, and Nartha stepped forward and rested his hands on the desk. “Zar’nartha’inha. I should be expected. A meeting with V’Zarrah.”

The Andromedon manager appraised him a few seconds as he manipulated the haptic display that was written fully in Andromedon, which Nartha was nowhere near fluent in. “The Zararch agent, yes. Your scheduled meeting is in two hours. It will be level two-fifty, there will be a Viarior Soldier to escort you to him. In the meantime you have authorization to walk the premises. Be advised there is a constant watch on all visitors.”

“Understood,” Nartha nodded. “Interesting. I would have thought V’Zarrah would have the highest floor.”

“Perhaps he does,” the Andromedon said with some annoyance. “But he wants to meet you there. The whereabouts and location of the leader of Union Viarior is not shared with anyone outside his inner circle and bodyguards. You already pose a security risk, be thankful he is willing to deal with the Collective at all.”

Nartha widened an eye, even though he knew the Andromedon couldn’t see it. “Given the level of security, the Imperator himself would have a difficult time here. But I will not pose any more of a security risk than I already do.”

He stepped away and another Andromedon immediately took his place. So, he had an invitation to explore, with drones probably watching his every step. Fair enough, he would be suspicious too. With that said, perhaps he could learn something by wandering around. The first thing to do would be to explore the defense pads, assuming he was allowed.

He walked to an elevator and selected the fifteenth floor. Given the absurd amount of floors in the building, he had to enter the number manually, instead of just selecting the floor. It also didn’t help that the elevator was in Andromedon numbers, but they were luckily in the same order.

As it also turned out, there was also an Andromedon guard in the elevator, and Nartha didn’t fail to notice the gas dispenser on the ceiling of the elevator box, and a tiny micro-turret in one of the corners, with a camera in the other.

He smirked under his helmet and shook his head in amusement. And he thought the Zararch were paranoid.

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Training Arena – The Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

12/28/2016 – 10:18 A.M.

“I don’t think this is a fair fight anymore,” Nico said slowly, as the point of Yang’s weapon lightly jabbed into the back of his neck, while another one had the blade under his wrist which held his own weapon. “Fighting you up front is suicide.”

Yang smiled and recalled the weapons to her hand with a gesture, rather pleased with how she had been improving. Even better was that Nico was a fairly significant distance away from her, exactly the position she wanted him to be. She still had her standard telekinetic skills, and the more subtle manipulations of weapons were becoming close to a second nature.
Literal days of practice had that effect.

None of the Mutons or Vitakara posed a threat any longer, using weapons or no, handicapped or not; the only thing that would be able to provide a suitable challenge was another psion. Preferably one who was able to defend themselves. If there was one area she knew she could improve, it was in telepathic defense.

Although she didn’t know anyone she trusted enough to let into her mind. Because that was unfortunately a requirement.

“Looks like we have a watcher,” Nico said as he walked up, nodding to the edge of the area. Yang cocked her head and pursed her lips. Patricia Trask was leaning against the wall, just watching them, wearing the elaborate clothing of the Ethereals. It was somewhat uncanny how the Imperator had been able to determine their exact measurements.

He’d given her a similar piece of clothing, and she’d stuck to much less elaborate clothing even if it probably wasn’t as good. Wearing it once had been an unnerving experience because it was too tailored to her, not a centimeter off. The only people who should know about that would be her husband (If she’d had one), her parents, and her stylist (Which she no longer had).

The Imperator was none of those things. And she didn’t want to think about how exactly he knew about it. Measurements were one thing, but when it came down to the damn material and color, very specific details she hadn’t told anyone, that crossed a line into somewhat creepy. Of course, the Imperator likely hadn’t intended to come off as a stalker, but that didn’t mean she had to wear it.

But Patricia seemed not to have that reservation. Good for her, and to the Imperator’s credit, it did look good on her. Definitely designed to command attention.

Well, she’d been avoiding actually meeting the esteemed guest of the Imperator, largely because she hadn’t cared all that much to begin with, and also because she didn’t want to see her at all. But she supposed it was only a matter of time until it happened. Nico seemed to think she was fine, and the kid had a decent ability to read people, but that didn’t really mean anything when the person in question was one of the most powerful telepaths Humanity had produced.

“Might as well say hello,” she sighed. Nico smiled as she walked over to the telepath. Yang wasn’t especially thrilled that Patricia was a notable few inches taller than she was, even when she was wearing much heavier armor. However, even if she wasn’t really a telepath she could easily sense that Patricia had a much more noticeable presence than Nico, even as powerful as he was.

Probably more training. “Hello, Yang,” she nodded. “We had to meet eventually, despite your attempts to avoid me.”

Yang narrowed her eyes. “Sorry, I was busy focusing on more important things. Another Human, regardless of if she’s supposedly important, didn’t concern me. Nothing personal.”

Patricia simply raised an eyebrow. “It’s not really recommended to lie to telepaths. Emotion sensing is one of the first things I taught myself.”

“Fine,” Yang shrugged. “I’ll be honest and say that I have no clue what the Imperator was thinking when he brought you here.”

Patricia actually looked somewhat solemn at that. “I see.”

That annoyingly piqued her curiosity. Which admittedly did exist regardless of if she wanted it or
not. She had to admit that she wanted to know what the Imperator had said to make one of Humanity’s greatest warriors change sides. Assuming she was on their side. “Well, do you know?”

“I think so,” she said slowly. “He told me some things… I needed to hear. I almost wished he hadn’t. I suspect he likely enticed you to stay as well.”

“Didn’t need to entice me much,” Yang said. “But yes; that seems to be a general theme. Imperator knows what we want, what’s important to us, and then gives us it.”

The woman opposite her cocked her head. “And you don’t think that’s manipulative?”

Yang snorted. “I’m not a moron, and I doubt you are either. There is not a damn thing the Imperator does which isn’t manipulative in some way. He has his own agenda and plans, but he isn’t a liar. Not to me. So I don’t care, I’m happy to train and get ready to kill people on Earth.”

“Really.” Patricia said it as more of an observation, not like a question. She focused on the swords in her hand. “There was a telekine I knew which tried a similar technique. You’re much better at it.”

Yang suddenly chuckled as she knew what Patricia was talking about. “Oh, the one who tried throwing her swords at the Battlemaster? That was one of the funniest things I’ve ever seen. She should have stuck to throwing aliens in the air.”

“Ha ha,” Patricia said without humor. “Hilarious. She was a good woman though.”

“In XCOM? No,” Yang sheathed her swords. “Anyone who is in XCOM is definitely not a good person, not anyone who works under the Commander. And don’t pretend like you don’t know who he is.”

Patricia sighed. “Most of the soldiers don’t, nor about our more…morally dubious actions either.”

“Hm,” Yang wondered if that was true or not. She didn’t see how word wouldn’t get out in a much smaller organization like XCOM, but the Commander likely ran a tight ship. Or killed anyone who began asking questions. “I suppose it doesn’t matter. As long as the Commander is leading XCOM, they’ll just keep doing the same thing.”

Patricia looked mildly irritated at that. “Says the woman who openly states her intention to kill more Humans. A paragon of Humanity, you are.”

“Please,” Yang sniffed. “I never said I was a good person. But at least the people I kill will deserve it.”

“Who then?”

“The Chinese government to start with,” Yang ticked off. “Then ADVENT leadership. Probably a good number of soldiers. Then anyone who was part of the old government and system. All the cowardly and corrupt who looked the other way while regular people were pushed down, or victims of power plays.”

“Ah, so you’re a champion of the downtrodden,” Patricia nodded, and Yang couldn’t figure out if she was sarcastic or not. “More idealistic than I guessed.”

“I’m not doing it for anyone other than myself,” Yang shrugged. “Not anymore. People can’t be worse off under the aliens than they were under their own species. I’m not lying to myself; this is revenge, Trask, not anything more.”
She nodded slowly. “And you think every single person you will kill deserves it? Every soldier or politician?”

“Doubt it,” Yang admitted. “But it’s a necessary sacrifice. They are part of the old system, and the old system needs to be destroyed completely.”

Patricia now looked amused. “Funny. Necessary. That is very close to the justification the Commander used as he planned the destruction of the United Nations. He knew not everyone, or even most of them, were beyond redemption. But their deaths were necessary to usher in ADVENT.” She paused. “The point is that I don’t think you can use the Commander as some point against me when you seem to use his exact logic.”

Yang had to admit that Patricia did raise a good point. One she hadn’t really thought about, largely because she didn’t know much about the Commander to begin outside his actions and reputation. But not necessarily why he had taken the actions he had. She scowled. “For someone with us now, you sure don’t sound like one.”

“I’m most definitely not on your side,” Patricia said. “Not yet, at least. I’m…staying for now. Seeing how things work, talking with people. I wish it was as simple as choosing a side, but this is unfortunately a…complex situation.” She looked away. “I wish it was as easy for me as it was for you.”

Yang might have made a sarcastic comment on that, but she didn’t really feel like doing it. Which was unlike her. Patricia definitely seemed…conflicted…even more questions as to why the Imperator was risking this, but it was definitely something that was bothering her. A lot. She was now both curious about what the Imperator had said that had made her reconsider her entire life, but at the same time wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

Yang knew she was a useful weapon. She didn’t need to know the deepest secrets of the Imperator. Those seemed to be dangerous and bad for your mental stability.

“I did want to point out something,” Patricia focused back on her. “Your telepathic defenses are very weak.”

“I really hope you didn’t poke around in my head.”

“I don’t do that,” Patricia shook her head. “But it’s impossible not to notice. I’m sure Nico has as well, but he’s too nice to say anything. But if you don’t fix that, you’ll die against any competent telepath. I would be able to take control of you in a few seconds, no matter how fancy your swordplay is.”

“I’m aware,” Yang sighed. “But I don’t trust anyone to be poking around inside my head. Definitely not you.”

“Fair enough,” Patricia conceded. “But you’re not going to get better on your own, not really. If not me, then maybe ask Nico. He seems to get along well with you.”

Yang paused. “Perhaps. But it’s weird if it’s him. You know he’s just a kid, age-wise at least.”

Patricia shrugged. “I suppose you’ll have to decide if you’d rather not because it’s ‘weird’, or die when you fight a telepath. I’m sure the Imperator would be willing?”

A pause. “No.”

Patricia cracked a smile. “Well, if you change your mind regarding me, I could help.”
Yang appraised her suspiciously. “Oddly helpful for someone aligned against your friends.”

“Who knows?” Patricia said with a smile. “Maybe I want to give them a challenge. Or maybe what I teach you is flawed and will let them kill you easier. Up to you, but you’re not my enemy. Not yet, at least.”

She glared back at Patricia. “Very funny.”

“I’ll see you later, I think,” Patricia said with a farewell wave. “Good luck with the Battlemaster.”

“Yeah,” Yang was somewhat apprehensive as she knew what was coming. “I’ll need it.”

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Union Viarior Trade Command – Andromeda Prime

12/28/2016 – 3:02 P.M.

As it turned out, Nartha was not allowed to view the defense platforms. Not unreasonable, but he had to admit to being somewhat disappointed. Well, he had certainly seen quite a bit of Trade Command regardless. There wasn’t too much of note that wasn’t either restricted or otherwise blocked. It was an exceptionally smooth operation, and most of the floors he visited had steady streams of traffic.

Now though it was time to actually meet V’Zarrah.

Stepping into floor 250 was little different initially from the other floors. All of them seemed to have a similar structure. A hallway which went around the perimeter, and had paths around four square rooms, four on the outside and one directly in the center. There were different markings and indicators on them, obviously, but the basic architectural layout was exactly the same.

However, this floor had Andromedon Soldiers on it. Nartha doubted it was typical for the floor, but it certainly meant that V’Zarrah took his security seriously. Already four Soldiers were walking up towards him, and he saw no fewer than two Contamination Operatives standing in front of other paths. Several Battlefield Engineers were also accompanying the soldiers, their drones hanging in the background.

“Come with us, Zararch,” one of the unidentifiable soldiers ordered, voice low and booming. “No surprises.”

“Of course,” Nartha said, keeping his hands up so they saw he wasn’t armed. “You need to scan any electronics I have?”

The Andromedon motioned to one of the Battlefield Engineers who approached with his drone, which began floating around and scanning him. “One holoprojector, one datacube – encrypted. No weapons, explosives, or oxidizing agents.”

“The datacube is for V’Zarrah’s eyes only,” Nartha added. “It won’t be plugged into any Viarior devices.”

“Ethereal datacubes cannot be connected into our system regardless,” the Soldier said. “A security weakness. He poses little threat. Continue the escort.”

In the middle of the four Soldiers, they marched him to the center square room. Inside he was surprised to see nothing but a decontamination field which led to a circular tube. The rest of the
room was a cold grey, and there were no fewer than six microturrets on the ceiling, and a small area where an armored Andromedon was operating the decontamination field.

“Step through and into the tube,” the Andromedon ordered, pointing with his weapon. “It will take you to V’Zarrah.”

Nartha nodded and stepped through slowly and deliberately. Since no alarms were raised he assumed it had gone alright. The steel tube opened up, and he stepped inside. So V’Zarrah wasn’t actually on this floor, but it was a ruse for anyone who might be listening. He didn’t exactly like being in a coffin-like tube, but he doubted anything would happen to him.

Wording flashed on a monitor at the top of the tube, thankfully Ethereal Script, which said Microgravity Engaged. He heard the start of a machine and he found himself weightless. It wasn’t quite like being in space, but he was lightly hovering off the ground. Ah, clever. Going up or down would be important information for anyone who intended to harm V’Zarrah.

If the individual didn’t know if they were going up or down, that piece of information was lost. Nartha knew the systems on here to maintain that must be at an extreme level of precision, as moving in either direction would pull a certain direction. Interesting.

It seemed slow as a result, and perhaps ten minutes later the gravity returned to normal and he was firmly on the floor. Nartha was fairly sure they had gone down, but thanks to that little security measure he didn’t know for sure. The door slid open and he stepped out into a similar room, minus any Andromedons and decontamination equipment.

There only seemed to be one path forward, and Nartha followed it as harsh white lights lined the top of the walls. Minutes later another metal door slid to the side and he stepped into what he presumed was the private office of V’Zarrah. To his surprise there was an entire wall of physical documents and books, and opposite that was a massive screen showing the explored galaxy. Likely intractable as well.

V’Zarrah stood at the end of the room, in a full battle suit and standing in front of several holographic displays which were showing scrolling information in Andromedon. He also didn’t fail to notice the small armory behind him, openly displaying plasma rifles, grenades, and other destructive equipment. Even suit attachments were included.

“Zararch.” V’Zarrah shut down the display with a wave as he turned to fully face the Vitakarian. “I suppose it was only a matter of time before the Ethereals demanded a show of loyalty. Perform it, I have little to hide.”

Nartha tried not to focus on how much larger the Andromedon was than him. He could barely see the silhouette of the Andromedon within the suit, which was also looking down at him. “No need to be defensive, V’Zarrah, I don’t intend to cause unnecessary problems.”

“You may not, but the Ethereals do,” the Andromedon didn’t hide his irritation. “Both them and I know that the time I waste here could be put to better use. But instead they send their investigators to probe for non-existent problems.”

“Hardly non-existent, Overseer,” Nartha said, deciding to use his title. “Union Viarior was one of the Unions who voted against resuming military contributions to the Ethereal Collective. I’m sure you can see how that could look suspicious.”

“The Imperator did the bare minimum,” V’Zarrah answered bluntly. “And yet the Unions prefer to curry favor with them despite only having words as promises. Union Viarior would have preferred
to see the Imperator’s words translate to action before contributing further. The Ethereals have not
been reliable partners in this endeavor, and I do not fear saying so. We were justified in our vote,
and if they take issue with our politics they are welcome to speak to me in person.”

“I will make a note of that,” Nartha said. “However, there are other matters. There are…
concerns…that Union Viarior is supplying and funding smaller Unions for their own purposes,
some of which have been connected to the so-called “Sectoid Problem”. What is curious is that
they are becoming more vocal and numerous, even as Viarior deepens connections.” He held up
the datacube. “There is, of course, proof. The Zararch is skilled at disseminating data. I am sure
this was done without your knowledge, but perhaps this should be investigated? The last thing the
Collective needs right now is another war.”

It was as veiled a threat as he could make. Both of them knew very well that nothing happened in
Union Viarior without the Chief Logistics Overseer being aware of it. The idea that he wouldn’t
be aware of such actions was laughable. V’Zarrah’s suit was silent for a moment. “Union Viarior
supplies and finances every single Union in the Andromedon Federation. That is our way of
business. Their political platforms or how they use the equipment we supply them with is not our
concern. I fail to see how this is a relevant concern.”

“Then I am sure you would suspend business with those the Collective has identified
as…troublesome?” Nartha asked. “Ignorance is acceptable to a point, but knowingly funding
potential dissidents would be…inadvisable.”

“No.” V’Zarrah stated bluntly. “Union Viarior keeps careful track of our clients. We will not break
from them without reason. Certainly not at the whims of the Ethereals. Again, if the Ethereals wish
to accuse me, they should do so in person.”

Well, this had gone on long enough. “I presume this room is secure, Overseer?”

“Yes.”

Nartha pulled out a holoprojector and activated it. “Then I presume you are aware of V’Thrask? An
Andromedon who, along with a number of others – some of whom are also from Viarior – defected
to XCOM during the Battle of Seattle. At your instructions.”

V’Zarrah was still, looking at the image of V’Thrask. “Where was this acquired, Zararch?” A
pause. “The knowledge of Andromedon defectors would have reached me before you.”

Nartha smiled under his helmet. “From the Commander of XCOM himself.” He pressed another
button on the holoprojector and the image of the Commander appeared, hands clasped behind his
back as he began addressing the Andromedon leader. “Chief Logistics Overseer V’Zarrah,” the Commander began. “That is the title which was
provided to me by V’Thrask, and I apologize if it is too forward. I am the Commander of XCOM,
and currently enemy of the Ethereal Collective. I suspect by now you are aware of our alliance
with Aegis, and the Imperator, or another Ethereal, has attempted to lessen the impact of this
revelation.”

The Commander paused. “From what V’Thrask has told me, you are not impressed with Ethereal
leadership. I suspect you have been told this war would be over in weeks or months. That we have
no chance of success. However, I would claim the opposite. Despite what you have been told, we
pose a threat to the unity of the Collective. We have pushed back the Battlemaster, the armies of
the aliens, and our defiance has made…ripples across the Collective. Aegis is one of many aliens
who are rejecting the Collective and seeing another way.”
The Commander gave a small smile. “I would carefully consider this, V’Zarrah. Nartha has more details if you wish to converse further, and inside that datacube there is evidence of our capabilities. I see no reason for us to continue this farce of enemies, and I hope you feel similarly. Until then, I wish you good fortune in your endeavors.”

The hologram shut off and Nartha lowered it as V’Zarrah was silent. “So,” he rumbled. “A Zararch traitor. I was skeptical such a thing was possible.”

“Most are,” Nartha nodded. “An oversight that will likely be corrected if I am ever discovered.”

“Give me the datacube,” the Andromedon said, extending a gloved hand. Nartha complied as he held it in his hand. “An…intriguing offer. One I did not anticipate.” He looked down at the Vitakarian. “But I suspect you will need…evidence to maintain your cover.”

“Correct,” Nartha nodded. “My orders were to search your databases for anything…suspicious. If nothing was found, documents of your transactions would be needed. I suspect you could forge them if necessary.”

“I am amused the Zararch would believe such a simple demand would suffice,” the Andromedon rumbled, possibly laughing. “I can provide the ‘evidence’ you need to show our innocence to the Zar’Chon. And I wish to meet with the Commander.”

“Good,” Nartha breathed in relief, and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “On here is a secured network. I will contact you through it when the meeting is ready. On this topic…I don’t suppose there are other Unions who have similar reservations?”

“That is a discussion between me and the Commander,” V’Zarrah said slowly, turning away. “My people will provide you with the evidence. Leave me, I need to see what the Commander has provided me. I will await your response.”

With that, Nartha turned away and headed back to the tube, ecstatic at how well that had gone. Having one of the most powerful Unions as an ally was going to improve their chances significantly.

The Commander was going to be happy to hear it.

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Training Arena – The Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

12/30/2016 – 8:20 A.M.

The Battlemaster supposed it was time he met the woman who the Imperator had suggested as a
potential candidate for the Avatar Project. As far as candidates went, on paper she seemed to fill the requirements he would expect from one in her position. The daughter of a military general, a powerful telekine, physically capable, and willing.

What he didn’t know was if she could actually fight. He had little interest in strategists and leaders who failed to participate on the front lines. Human generals for the most part sent others to die in their wars, as they considered their own lives too important. He continued to find that stance amusing, as it proclaimed a self-importance that they couldn’t be replaced.

Tactics and strategy was not as difficult as military leaders liked to believe. It was a simple matter of assessing information and acting on it in the optimal manner. Logistics were arguably more important than pure strategy, and it certainly wasn’t a gift for the privileged few. No, actual military leaders needed to be warriors and involved beyond the situation room.

A climate-controlled area would never be anything close to resembling an actual battlefield. Reports never fully addressed the nuances of the true situation.

Nevertheless, he was mildly curious as to how Yang Shuren would have prepared. She would never be his equal in combat, but he at minimum expected her to be able to defend herself. At best she would surprise him. At worst she would die.

It had been a decent while since he had returned to the Temple Ship. It was far too quiet for his liking, but it was good for introspection. He wondered how different it would be if he was able to sense what the other psions did; the presence of the Imperator. He had heard descriptions of his power, but more importantly, seen it in action.

Yet the Imperator was not like most Ethereals, and the Battlemaster was unsure if that was an advantage or not. On one hand, he understood the need for aliens and abandoned the xenophobic policies of the Empire, but on another the Battlemaster did not understand his full plan. The Imperator was keeping things from him, moving pieces into play, executing hidden plans without his knowledge.

He trusted the Imperator, that had not changed. Yet he didn’t know if the Imperator fully understood what he was doing. He was barely over two hundred years old, little more than a young adult in the Empire. But he was now in charge of the last of the Ethereals. Even with the Overmind assisting him, the Imperator was a relative child in terms of his experience.

It made the Battlemaster feel unfathomably old. Hundreds of years of life seemed more apparent to him. He’d seen the Empire at its height, and watched its entire collapse. He’d outlived the vast majority of those he’d known, though most had been lost in battle. He’d had time to form his own ideals and opinions through the centuries.

The Imperator did not have that experience. He had the intellect and raw power, but the Battlemaster did not know if absolute power should have been given to him without question. The Empire had been desperate, but the Imperators were not all-knowing or powerful.

The Battlemaster would have personally preferred if the Overmind had initially taken control, or even Aegis. If someone with experience had taken control of forming the Collective, it might not be in the position it was today. The Imperator could take his position as a leader when he’d earned it. He had made too many missteps, mistakes that would and should not have happened under someone else.

Then again, it could be worse. Isomnum could have been placed in charge.
Or Quisilia.

But what was done was done. The Imperator was learning and eventually the Collective would be what it should have been from the start. He might have forced the Imperator’s hand in this instance, but it would lead to a stronger Collective, and the Imperator was aware he wasn’t perfect. He knew when he was wrong.

The Battlemaster didn’t like the Temple Ship for this reason. He became too focused on the failures of the Imperator and what could have been done instead. The entire concept of the Temple Ship seemed an unnecessary extravagance, a deification for some kind of god-like figure. The Battlemaster had been sorely tempted to smash some of the murals Cogitian had made.

He’d never bothered asking why the Imperator needed such deification. What exactly had the Imperator done to earn it? Because while the Battlemaster had killed his share of the Synthesized, he never found a need to brag about it. Especially when they had lost the war.

That was the thing which most irritated him. Not necessarily that such murals existed, but that they venerated a war when he had ultimately lost.

The idea that one would openly flaunt this was baffling. The millions of dead Synthesized meant nothing if the end result was defeat. The Temple Ship also seemed to serve little purpose other than to avoid contact with the rest of the Collective. Even the Andromedons had a central location of government. The fear of assassination or attack was far too weak, and it seemed like the Imperator didn’t really care about maintaining his Collective when he could stay here and conduct his secret operations.

The Battlemaster shook his head and pushed the thoughts aside. He wasn’t thinking clearly right now. The first thing he would do was take Yang Shuren out of this place, assuming she lived. And she was going to be facing a moderately annoyed Battlemaster.

The woman in question was waiting at the edge of the arena. She fit the image he’d seen of her. Slightly taller than average for a female, Chinese ethnicity, cropped black hair, dark brown skin, younger-looking than her age suggested. She was in armor provided by the Imperator, grey with red tints and to some would look inspired by ADVENT armor.

The materials were undoubtedly better, however.

“Battlemaster,” she greeted respectfully. She spoke English, with a noticeable accent but easy enough for him to understand. “Thank you for this opportunity.”

“The idea was not my own,” he said bluntly. “However, I am willing to consider you upon the prodding of the Imperator. But you must know if this is something you want. I will fight you momentarily, and if are not sufficiently skilled, you will die. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Battlemaster,” she confirmed. “I will do my best to assist you in whatever capacity you wish.”

He cocked his head. “I am not interested in blind subservience, Yang Shuren.”

“That was more to give you an indication of what I can do,” she corrected. “Be that fighting on the front lines or deciding how to cripple ADVENT. Trust me when I say I’ve been looking forward to both since I have arrived.”

“We shall see,” he withdrew his sword and held it beside him. “I do not expect you to beat me. Survive.” He thrust out with a lower arm and she went flying backwards. She unceremoniously
slammed into the far wall, but quickly got back up, drawing both short swords from her back. Duel wielding was a curious choice, but not inherently bad if one was skilled enough.

The Battlemaster advanced forward, and Yang tossed the weapons into the air, which remained suspended as she reached out with a free hand and yanked back. His sword was suddenly yanked forward in her telekinetic grip which he had to physically tighten to maintain his control over. The two floating weapons sped towards him at the same time.

Now this was a technique he hadn’t seen in a long time. He vaguely recalled one of the Templars performing similarly, but Yang seemed more skilled at it. Unfortunately for her he was familiar with the style and knew its weaknesses. Two arms raised and telekinetically deflected the swords which flew behind him, and he let his sword go.

Yang surprisingly didn’t lose control of her sudden grasp on his weapon, and threw it as far across the room as possible as she focused on the Battlemaster himself. He very clearly felt the telekinetic grip encasing him; present but weak. One he could easily break free of if he wished, but he would rather she exhaust herself this way.

Her two floating swords returned, an impressive range of control, and sped towards his helmet as silver streaks. They halted just before his faceplate, in his own projected telekinetic field, and were directed towards his open palm which he grasped as Yang was hit with another telekinetic blast. 

Weapons in hand he sent them directed back towards her, which she froze with a raised hand as she struggled to get up.

At the same time he recalled his own blade to his hand, flourishing it as he closed in on the woman. He slashed down and she manipulated the blades to catch his own in a scissor maneuver while she quickly dashed away. He helped her along by catching her in a telekinetic grip, and slamming her into the wall.

Her control over the blades lost, the only thing which stopped his second downward swipe was her hands raised up as she telekinetically held the blade back, and redirected it into the wall while she hit him with her own telekinetic blast which barely made him stumble.

He’d done this long enough. She was competent, and would survive against most opponents. A Battlemaster was not a fair match for anyone, but she had performed decently. Enough where there was potential for her to become far better. He lifted her telekinetically and rested the tip of his sword on her throat.

She didn’t look afraid so much as resigned, even as she continued to make indirect telekinetic assaults. Fighting to the last. Good. He withdrew the blade and let her fall to the ground. “You have potential, and can be better. Come with me.” She coughed, but summoned her own weapons back to her hand as she followed him, clearly relieved.

“Tha-thank you,” she coughed. “Where are we going?”

“Away from here,” he answered. “We do not hide in the shadows. The Collective is our responsibility, and we must be a part of it. Is there anything you need from here?”

“No,” she shook her head. “I’m fine with just leaving this place.”

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Busan – South Korea

1/3/2017 – 8:28 P.M.
Duri wasn’t sure why he had bothered actually issuing this challenge to begin with. With a smirk on her face Aleksandra easily maneuvered his arm to rest flat on the table. To his credit, at least he hadn’t gone down easily. But a regular arm against a mechanical arm was almost doomed to fail. The rest of his squad laughed at the ending.

“You lose,” Aleksandra said. “Like everyone else.”

“I blame all of you,” Duri said, rolling his eyes at his so-called squadmates. “What made you think that I could beat her? Cara is probably stronger than I am!”

“Hey, maybe we all would have weakened her,” Beatriz shrugged. “Not fair if you get out of doing it too.”

“Fine, fine,” he grumbled good-naturedly. He was pretty sure most of them were jealous of the Shieldbearer’s new arm, since it seemed much better than their weak flesh ones. All of them were in pretty good spirits, especially since there hadn’t actually been much alien activity for close to a month. It was a little strange, but something Duri wasn’t going to complain about.

The lull had been great, in fact. He’d been able to speak with his family much more regularly, ADVENT was getting ready to roll out new upgrades, there were even a few alien defectors who were getting more acquainted with the soldiers. At least now he could attest to that not all of them were bad.

Overall, he was suspicious in thinking that things were going really, really well, but they certainly seemed to be. They were at least all alive, which was more than he could say for a lot of aliens, and unfortunately a good number of humans. But the casualty numbers could be much, much higher.

“Oh, did you know what I had to do today?” Nobuatsu asked, as they ended and all got drinks.

“Don’t drag it out, just tell us,” Miguel said.

“I had to treat an alien,” Nobuatsu continued. “For chocolate poisoning.”

Duri snorted. “The hell?”

“Oh! I’ve heard of that,” Beatriz recalled brightly. “Isn’t it poisonous to them?”

“Poison? Not exactly,” Nobuatsu explained, gesturing aimlessly. “It’s like marijuana for them. Although they can overdose with it as I found out. The alien was high as a kite when he came out of the anesthetics, couldn’t understand a word he was saying.”

“Who was the one who gave chocolate?” Cara asked. “Some prank?”

“No, just a mistake,” he said. “One of the soldiers gave him some to ‘expose him to real human food’.”

“And that is why regulations like ‘Don’t share food with aliens’ exist,” Duri finished. “None of you better be feeding aliens.”

“You make it sound like they’re some kind of zoo animals,” Cara snorted, miming a deeper voice. “Please do not touch, feed, or entice aliens you encounter.”

“I swear we’re going to get a TV show like this if they ever get their own town or something,” Beatriz said. “Today we observe the Vitakarian in his natural habitat…”
All of them laughed at the absurd concept. “Don’t think ADVENT would like that,” Duri chuckled. “Although who knows. Have any of you seen that XCOM show?”

“Oh, god,” Cara facepalmed.

“You mean the best and most realistic show ever to grace the medium?” Beatriz asked sarcastically. “Oh yes.”

“I hate that show so much,” Miguel said. “I swear it’s like every single character has magic armor and can’t be killed.”

“It’s called plot armor,” Cara supplied.

“I don’t know about you,” Beatriz said. “But when I saw the Commander of XCOM tank six missiles, and then proceed to rip the spine out of an Ethereal, I was on board. You can’t tell me that isn’t awesome.”

“Nah, my favorite part is when that Korean lady single-handedly took out an entire UFO alien team,” Nobuatsu said. “And when she blew it up, she said to that guy she was with “I guess their plan…blew up in their faces.””

“Pure poetry,” Miguel shook his head in disbelief. “Where did they even find people to write this?”

“The whole team is a bunch of comedy writers,” Beatriz said. “I don’t know who thought it was a good idea to turn a show about XCOM into an over-the-top comedy, but they completely pulled it off.”

“I also like how they somehow made the character who is totally not Patricia Trask even more overpowered,” Duri added. “I mean, being able to control armies is clearly not cool enough, no, give her…” he looked at Beatriz. “What did you call it?”

“Exterminatus powers,” she supplied.

“That,” Duri finished with a nod.

“Having Quisilia being the one to defect instead of Aegis was great,” Cara added.

“I’m not so sure that isn’t him,” Duri said slowly. “I mean…would it be surprising if he was playing himself?”

“That’s not happening,” Beatriz began, then frowned. “I…think…”

“I wonder what XCOM thinks about it,” Miguel said. “They are either really insulted or really amused.”

“How could they not like it?” Beatriz asked. “Real life is depressing. We’ve already got a realistic alien invasion going on. Why bring that to a TV show?”

“That…” Miguel frowned. “Is a good point.”

Duri tapped the table. “All right, I’m turning in. Drills tomorrow bright and early. And next time it comes on we’re all watching the next episode together, since apparently we all do anyway.”

Cara gave a mock salute. “Copy that, Officer.” All of them gave their goodnights, and most turned in for the night. All in all, a fun time. There were a few bright spots in this war, even if they were few and far between.
This was perhaps the worst plan in the history of plans, maybe ever.

The Hunter cared about very little in the world. As far as he was concerned nothing really mattered except what he wanted. The Ethereals, Humans, Collective and ADVENT, ultimately pointless and worthless groups that would eventually fade away. The only thing he could really say he enjoyed was the art of killing. Maybe it was a genuine feeling; maybe he’d just been designed to feel the rush of euphoria when he blew the head off something.

It didn’t really matter. Killing made him feel alive. Who or what it was didn’t matter as long as it was alive and prey.

With that said, he wasn’t an idiot.

Right now he definitely could not say that for the illustrious bitch herself.

He was on top of a skyscraper, looking through the scope of his rifle onto a hotel which was housing displaced civilians from the south of the country. There was much less security now, especially since the Collective had been doing fuck all the past month. But there were…he paused, thinking of the number.

Ah right. Over three thousand, according to the information the Caretakers had shared. Three thousand, four hundred and eleven. How the hell they knew that was something he’d given up on long ago. The Caretakers always had eerily accurate and exact knowledge, and the less he was involved with those freaks, the better.

He had been given the dubious honor of being responsible for clearing the hotel in question. Some were marked to be captured, for whatever horrific fate awaited them in the ironically named Paradise, and the rest he was free to murder. In one of the few times of his life, he was conflicted.

Not because he was going to kill hundreds of Humans in their sleep, he didn’t care at all about that. There was something of a thrill in the operation, he wouldn’t lie, but it didn’t override his more important sense of self-preservation. Namely, that the moment the Battlemaster found out about this – and he would find out one way or another – he could safely assume he would either be killed or kept in constant torture forever.

Neither option was appealing.

At the same time, going against the illustrious Creator was not an option, since no matter how bad the Battlemaster was, the Creator would somehow find a worse punishment. So in short, he was completely fucked regardless. And now he was frantically thinking about the best way to salvage this so he wouldn’t be screwed.

In all honesty he was probably screwed one way or another. So the current plan was to carry out the Creator’s plan (Of which he had no fucking idea what the goal was aside from getting her more Humans to experiment on), be sure to get footage of him following orders, then go to the Battlemaster and ask very politely to not be disemboweled.

The Battlemaster was a reasonable Ethereal, a rarity, and he could at least understand the delicate predicament he was in…or perhaps not.
The Hunter hadn’t actually considered the idea that the Battlemaster wasn’t actually aware of what was going on in Paradise. He’d always assumed, since the Battlemaster was as close to the leader of the Collective (The Imperator wasn’t worthy of the title) as anyone. But if he didn’t know…oh boy, the Creator would be lucky to not immediately be executed.

He grinned a sinister smile as that thought entered his mind. If anyone could put a stop to whatever the fuck was happening with the Creator, it would be him. Normally he wouldn’t care, but there was a point where the stuff that happened there was plain unnatural. It went far beyond the corpse-looking Caretakers. It went far beyond the dozens of test subjects being subjected to every kind of torture.

No, the Creator was involved in something much older and dangerous. He didn’t know what it was, but it was perhaps the only thing that terrified him. An endless void which had once touched his mind, promising comfort, joy, and love to him. It had taken a full week to shake the persistent voice in his head, and he’d almost shot himself in it just to make the dangerously tempting words stop.

After that he’d never gone beyond the first level again.

He stood, and walked to the robed figure. It was a Vitakarian, or at least, was supposed to be. The skin looked dead, the figure was gaunt and it wore little more than a full black robe with the gibberish of the Creator written in silver. “Six rooftop guards,” he reported. “Standard guard. I can take them out easily.”

“Unnecessary,” the voice was cracked and raspy, though with undertones of authority. “Four are marked for retrieval. You will execute the unmarked.”

“Right…” he drawled. “And I suppose you’ll just mark them for me?”

The alien lashed forward with a hand and placed it on his temple. The Hunter found he couldn’t move, even if it only lasted for a moment. “You know now,” the Caretaker said. “Prepare to return the souls to Him.”

And he knew now. He glanced back to the rooftop and somehow knew which ones were marked for death, and which were to be extracted. “What now?”

The Caretaker gestured, and beside him a blue-rimmed portal appeared, psionic mist obscuring where it had come from, but more Caretakers stepped out, far more than he had ever seen before. Lanky and thin Sectoids who looked based on the Vanguard template, also wearing black robes. Humans were also in their number, their eyes pale and hair grey; looking somehow more degraded than the Vitakarians.

There were a total of twenty of them. One of the Humans, a decomposing female, extended a hand towards the hotel and began speaking in some language that made his skin crawl. It sounded old. Old and primal. Even the damn Sectoid had joined along telepathically. “They have deafened the world to our presence,” the Vitakarian Caretaker said. “Go. Accomplish your mission. The world will not hear the misguided cries of those who are still mortal.”

“What about cameras? Alarms?” He asked, gripping his pistol.

“The Stalkers have neutralized them,” the Caretaker stated with surety. The Hunter had no clue what the hell a Stalker was, but perhaps he didn’t need too. As long as they did their job, it wasn’t his business. “His will is absolute and final. There is no obstacle.” Another portal materialized. “Now enter and begin.”
Here went nothing. The Hunter stepped through and found himself on the roof. Now, he had several ways of carrying this out. He could be stealthy and take them out with a little telepathic trick he’d learned, or he could do it the fun way.

Might as well, the Caretakers certainly didn’t know the meaning of the word.

He raised his pistols, and began firing at the guards. It was sad how slow they were as he shot the weapons out of their hands, shot their kneecaps out, and then followed up with any arm or hand which moved towards a weapon. In roughly ten seconds the entire rooftop team was neutralized. He twirled a pistol in his hand before blowing off the head of one marked for death, and following up with killing the other one with a shot to the throat.

Perfect shot.

A portal appeared in the center of the roof and the Caretaker stepped out, now with several Muton Caretakers, which wore light armor instead of just robes. They looked just as healthy as the rest of them, which was to say like a recently exhumed corpse. They grabbed the wounded ADVENT soldiers and dragged the screaming people back to the portal before throwing them into it.

Poor souls.

The Caretaker once again placed a hand on the Hunter’s helmet. “Your next targets.”

He was not going to get used to the sudden transfer of knowledge anytime soon. Shaking that off, he entered the top floor and considered where to start. Thanks to the uncanny abilities of the Caretakers, he somehow knew every single name on this floor and their room number. Well, he might as well start at the beginning.

He gave a polite knock and the idiot Human opened. A woman whose eyes widened before he blew her head off in a spray of red. Only occupant and marked for death. Time to move on.

The Hunter had a plan of action, he would target all of the rooms with single occupants first, the vast majority of whom he could just kill, then move onto the rooms with more than one occupant. It proceeded smoothly enough, although he had to make some forced entries. It was amusing to see their terrified faces right before they died.

The Caretaker appeared at the end of the hallway, portal working as he brought the targets and ended up just tossing them in the portal which likely went straight to Paradise. He continued with the rooms of multiple occupants. One had a small group of women, half of whom he shot. Another had a family which only the mother was required to be captured. One room was just older human children with some younger siblings. Not much of a challenge.

Even on the first floor he was picking up on something rather interesting.

Nearly all of these Humans seemed to have some connections to a soldier. In certain cases it was clearly a mother or father with some children, or it was a spouse. But it was an extraordinarily high number of coincidences. If the Creator was being bold enough to target the families of soldiers… well, he wished her good fortune when the Battlemaster found out.

One floor was cleared, and he moved to the next one. Same deal, the Caretaker transferred the knowledge to his mind and he got to work. One door he just kicked in. This one had a mother with two children. Only the older child needed to be kept alive. The woman shrieked before he ended her life, and quickly ended the life of the smaller girl sleeping on the bed before pressed a hand to the mouth of the other one, sending a telepathic sleep command.
Loud children were far too annoying to deal with.

He tossed her into the portal, and continued working. The more he continued, the less fun it became. He now remembered why he rarely bothered killing civilians. They didn’t pose a threat, they usually just accepted their fate and died, and basically made his job easy. Which made it boring. There weren’t any actual fighters around to be outraged, which was half the fun of killing civilians.

So he had to be creative. He took out an entire floor without his guns, and then another just by using whatever was in the room. Scissors, as it turned out, were highly versatile weapons. At this point he was shooting into the air, or just opening the doors and calling people out to fight him to see if there was at least some entertainment to be had.

It was slightly enjoyable when he managed to get an entire floor to gang up on him. Some rushed him with makeshift weapons, others simply tried protecting children (Which he shot first if they weren’t marked, since they screamed), and he had some good fun as he ended their lives or crippled them before their one-way trip to hell.

“You are efficient,” the Caretaker said as they reached the tenth floor. “The Creator will be pleased.”

“My life’s goal has been achieved,” he answered sarcastically. “We’re good on time? Status of other operations?”

“Occidera has nearly cleared her building,” the Caretaker answered. Shocking, his all-serious sibling was going to beat him in efficiency. Well, good for her. “Senorium is finishing the last fifteen floors of his building. We have three hours before our window has expired.”

And also a shock, his more idiotic and fanatic sibling was taking forever. Either way, it didn’t matter. That little bit of recording was going to be very interesting to the Battlemaster. “You know why the Creator wants this many people?”

“No,” the Caretaker said. “And you do not need to know.”

And irrefutable proof the bitch herself was behind this. The Battlemaster was going to have a field day with it, and would probably murder her. The Hunter was quite aware that the only thing that would make the Battlemaster more livid than going after families of soldiers (And probably families in general), was going after kids.

And there were a lot of both who were dead. He didn’t care, but there were definitely those who did. As far as he was concerned, every person he shot or captured was another mark to the Creator’s death warrant.

It would be so ironic if he was the one to finally bring her down. That was the dream.

He looked to the hotel hallway that awaited him. More targets and walking dead left to deal with.

Time to make that dream into reality.
Saudia felt numb as she looked at the plethora of pictures and reports from the massacre. The calm of ADVENT had been shattered in one of the most horrific displays she had ever borne witness to in her life. She had certainly been party to some distasteful events, and the Commander was no stranger to the effectiveness of brutality.

But it was nothing compared to this.

“How many?” She asked quietly.

Kyong, Stein, and Elizabeth were in front of her, all in their own stages of coping. Kyong was teetering on the edge of composed and broken; he was a civilian with no experience in dealing with traumatic events. But he needed to know the situation to coordinate ADVENT’s message. And there was no better way than to have him see what had happened.

Stein was clearly furious, but composed. Saudia supposed her long law career had allowed her to build a tolerance to shocking imagery, especially to do with children. Her first act had been to lock down the entire city, with over five thousand Peacekeepers being moved to ensure that everything was accounted for. All aliens in ADVENT were currently being subjected to Deacon and Inquisitor interrogation.

Objectively, Saudia suspected that the defectors had nothing to do with this, but there was someone that needed to be blamed, and the first thing people would suspect was not just aliens, but the aliens ADVENT had been moving to integrate. Getting them out of the way immediately would both buy time from a PR perspective and find out any perpetrators if they did exist within the ranks.

Elizabeth was impassive, but Saudia knew she was taking this as a message. And she was shaken. Having children herself, she knew they were targets for anyone who wanted to get to her. The fact that this had happened with no alarms or failsafes being tripped meant that the aliens could very well get into anywhere, anytime.

It felt both morbid and in bad taste that Saudia wondered if they should be thankful they had only targeted civilians. It could have very easily been any one of them.

“Numbers are still being counted,” Stein answered, handing her the tablet she’d been holding. “Over six thousand so far. Three locations, all packed with civilians from the south of Korea.” She flipped though some of the photographs. “Killings are indiscriminate. Men, women, children, no obvious preference or goal. Causes of death range from apparent suicide to being bludgeoned with a couch.”

“Disagree,” Elizabeth said flatly, setting her own tablet down. “I’ve run the lists. The vast majority of people who were in the attacked buildings were the families or relatives of currently serving soldiers. This wasn’t a random attack.”
“God damn it,” Kyong muttered. “When they learn they died this way…”

“We’re going to need a lot of counselors to keep them from killing themselves,” Saudia finished grimly. “Or aliens. As far as telling them…that I will leave to Laura. They’ll have to be told but…there really isn’t a good way to share the news.”

“I’m also going to add that there definitely seemed to be different teams leading each of the attacks,” Stein continued. “The wounds seemed tailored to the location. In one the main cause of death was precise stabbings, dismemberments, and quite frankly, clean kills. Another one had a mixture of deaths that seemed to be caused via psionics, and multiple self-inflicted casualties. The final one was a mixture of firearm deaths, melee combat, and everything in between.”

“So whatever did this used small or single teams,” Saudia grunted. “And were also highly skilled.”

“Definitely couldn’t have been alone,” Stein shook her head. “They would have needed to neutralize security, alarms, and everything else. All footage was wiped and the drives just gone. This wasn’t done by teams of one.”


“Those Chosen?” Saudia recalled. “Even they couldn’t pull this off on their own. And we already know it was the aliens.”

“I’m aware,” Elizabeth said. “I’m just planning how best to torture them when I’m done extracting what I need.”

“I’m also afraid the deaths are just part of the story,” Stein sighed, pursing her lips. “There are a good three thousand unaccounted for. They’re just gone. No trace.”

“This reminds me of the old abductions before the invasion,” Elizabeth said. “Only back then the aliens were more subtle and just kidnapped everyone.”

That was something she was partially confused by. “They wanted to send a message, but also acquire more…prisoners. Doing both seems…odd. They could achieve more by focusing on one or the other. Was there anything special about the missing persons?”

“Couldn’t find anything,” Elizabeth shook her head. “This had absolutely nothing to do with getting more prisoners, or let’s be real, test subjects, and everything to do with sending a message. They took just enough that the vast majority are corpses, and they’ll be considered the lucky ones because the few who are now captives of the aliens are likely being eviscerated.”

Saudia grimaced. “Unfortunately accurate.”

“I don’t get this,” Elizabeth muttered. “It makes no sense. The aliens gain nothing from this. Not to mention this seems extremely out of character for the Battlemaster. Especially since his dossier explicitly states he doesn’t kill kids.”

“Do you really think this would happen without his approval?” Saudia asked. “Something like this?”

She shrugged. “Perhaps he was overruled.”

“That does not matter,” Stain growled. “This came at the hands of aliens. There needs to be retribution. Justice for those who were slaughtered.”
“That will be demanded,” Kyong agreed. “And I cannot blame them. This can’t go unpunished.”

“How?” Saudia sighed. “We’re stuck on Earth, our military is out of position for a lighting strike, and places to attack are limited. The only option is to crack down on alien defectors, and I won’t do that without evidence, no matter how much people want that.”

“We have POWs,” Stein said. “Not defectors. Ones we captured. Interrogate them, sentence them, and execute them. Skin or chop them into pieces and send them to alien strongholds, along with videos of their torture. Or give them to some of the soldiers whose families were murdered. Cull the aliens who are useless to us, and show the aliens there are consequences to this kind of attack.”

“I’d stop short of skinning them,” Elizabeth cautioned. “ADVENT is not like that. But executing them and sending their bodies to the aliens isn’t a bad response. She’s right that they don’t provide us with anything useful aside from potential bartering chips.”

“Bartering chips for what?” Stein snorted. “The aliens aren’t giving any of our people back. You’re deluded to think otherwise. And we must also send a message. Execution is tame compared to what they deserve.”

“We’re not going to kill our POWs,” Saudia shook her head. “Yet. That will be used as propaganda against us, and while I’m sure it would be cathartic…these aliens are almost certainly not behind it, not to mention it doesn’t do much aside from sate public bloodlust.”

“So what do you propose?” Stein asked.

“The aliens have cities they control,” Saudia stated. “I want Sacramento leveled. Missile strikes, bomber runs, whatever it takes to level it. One attack, then we relent before an escalation. I do not believe that the Collective will retaliate, not for this. I will order Laura to have this executed by the end of today.”

“Acceptable,” Stein nodded. “This calls for a response. This will be stronger than simply killing captured aliens.”

“Indeed,” Kyong nodded. “Let them know the payment for this atrocity.”

“Another thing,” Saudia said. “I want every single image and report sent to every government around the world. Let them see how their neutrality holds in the face of that. I also want the less…gruesome images on the news. I want it on every screen and everyone to know this is what the aliens will do to us.”

Elizabeth gave a single nod. “Ones with children included?”

“Yes.”

“What else?” Kyong asked.

“A special letter drafted to the nations of the so-called Sovereign African States,” Saudia said. “As well as the rest of the continent. They are to turn over all former ADVENT traitors within one month or ADVENT will annex their countries. All ADVENT defectors and traitors are now enemies of the state, and will be captured, tried, and executed.”

“Gladly,” Kyong said. “I’m surprised you let them survive this long.”

“There were more important matters,” Saudia said humorlessly, even as the corners of her lips turned up. “But I am done tolerating them. Betos will be the last executed. I want her to watch all
those who followed killed in front of her.”

Kyong frowned. “Would that be legal?”

“I wouldn’t worry,” Stein added with her own humorless smile. “Her punishment can be specifically worded to...include something akin to this. Completely legal.”

“Excellent.”

“In the meantime, I will address the public,” Saudia rubbed her forehead to clear her thoughts. “It’s not going to be pleasant.”

“Has XCOM said anything?” Elizabeth asked.

“Not yet,” Saudia answered, also wondering what the situation there was. “But knowing the Commander, anything we’re going to do will pale in comparison to what he has planned.”

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Situation Room, the Praesidium – Classified Location

1/9/2017 – 9:22 A.M.

Confusion and fury.

That was what the Commander was feeling at this very moment. This made no sense, but at the same time, what better way to send a message? In all honesty, it was justified in a way if he thought about it. First Aegis, now Caelior, there was room for a response. But a response like this? Not even against ADVENT proper?

He supposed it didn’t matter the reason or justification behind it.

Only the response mattered.

“What are we going to do about this?” Creed finally asked, saying what they all were thinking.

“I have some ideas,” the Commander sharply turned back to the holotable. “Chronicler, can you transport a small team to Vitakar?”

“Possibly,” the older man nodded, not wearing his armor at this point. “What are you thinking?”

“A simple solution,” the Commander said neutrally. “We wipe out the Aui’Vitakar. We have salted nukes. Providing them to the Nulorian would provide cover. They would of course wonder, but it would just be an interesting coincidence.”

“I’m not sure that is...the best response,” Shen said slowly. “While there needs to be retribution, there may be a more effective way of carrying it out aside from killing innocent aliens-“

“They are part of the Ethereal Collective,” the Commander growled. “Ignorance is no longer an excuse. They are complicit and will be treated as such. The Sectoids and Andromedons won’t succumb to terror or loss easily, but the Vitakara will be shaken and broken from so many dead. They would serve as an effective response to the Imperator.”

“Or it will just make them hate us,” Shen countered. “As horrible as it is, I don’t think anyone on Vitakar actually sanctioned this. Do you think they actually know the reason, or will they see it as just an attack with no justification?”
“I agree with Shen,” Aegis finally said. “The Battlemaster would never have sanctioned this attack. He would never sanction the assassination and abduction of children. Not when he’s in charge.”

“Do you really believe he didn’t know?” Vahlen demanded. “Something like this?”

“He would never approve it,” Aegis repeated. “Even if it came from the Imperator. I do not believe this is as clear as it seems.”

“That doesn’t matter,” the Commander pointed out. “Even if he refused to carry out the order, there is nothing stopping the Imperator from taking command himself. This is clearly orchestrated by the Collective, like it or not. And given how it was carried out, the Overmind or Imperator had to be involved since no one noticed it.”

“But what do they gain from this?” Aegis demanded, stepping forward. “There was no reason to carry this out, and neither the Imperator nor Battlemaster operate through terror. All it does is further unite your species and drive up anti-alien sentiment. The Imperator is not a fool, I cannot believe he’d sanction this.”

“Let us look at the facts,” Zhang interrupted, setting his tablet down. “Based on the autopsies and reports from both the Peacekeepers and ADVENT Intelligence, there were three separate attacks, and in each location the causes of death varied. Which so happens to match up with the Chosen. The majority of civilians were killed, many of whom were related to soldiers in ADVENT, and several thousand were abducted. The goal of this attack was terror, and I see two probable suspects behind this.”

“Isomnum and the Creator,” the Commander finished, frowning. “This does fit Isomnum, but I don’t see why he would risk reprisal from the Battlemaster or Imperator in carrying this out.”

“What about the Creator?” Jackson asked.

“The Creator is of deteriorating intelligence and growing sadism,” Aegis said. “But she is no fool, and I doubt she even cares about Earth. She is too focused on her own work, and I suspect orchestrating such an operation would be outside her interests. Her Chosen clearly work with the Collective upon request. Isomnum could have requested them.”

“I doubt it’s the Creator too,” the Commander said, shaking his head. “She’s a scientist, not a schemer or tactician. Even if she wanted test subjects, so do Isomnum, Revelean, and Fectorian, and I doubt the latter two would follow this route either.”

“As twisted as the Creator is,” Aegis agreed. “This is not her. But this does fit Isomnum.”

“Is he that skilled to pull this off at three separate locations?” Creed asked. “And have the manpower too?”

“Absolutely,” Aegis sighed. “Remember, he was an Overmind. This would not be a challenge for him.”

Creed rubbed his forehead. “Wonderful.”

“The problem is we don’t know,” the Commander muttered. “Isomnum is an easy scapegoat, but that might be intentional. Easy to pin the blame on rogue operators acting on the orders of ones above them. Trust me, I ran these kind of operations for the US for years. They work.”

“This is where it would help having spies in the aliens,” Zhang noted. “With inside information we would be able to determine the general mood. Right now we have nothing but speculation.”
Aegis, how likely is it that the Battlemaster would know about this?” The Commander asked. “Would he attempt to deny it if he wasn’t behind it?”

“In a situation like this, yes,” Aegis said. “I doubt he knew about it, and he is likely furious. If he did not know...we will know shortly.”

“I want to return to your earlier plan for Vitakar,” Shen said. “While at this point I feel indiscriminate attacks would do more harm than good, you are right in that they are a more empathetic species. This would likely horrify them, especially if they were associated with it. Instead of bombing them, why not show them what is happening?”

“It would force the Zararch to crack down,” Zhang said slowly. “But we have psions. They do not. And I don’t think anyone would care if a few were killed in the process.”

The Commander considered for a moment. “Fine. We hold off on bombs for now. Let’s see if the Collective responds. If it appears the Battlemaster was not aware of it, or behind it, we go forward with your idea, Shen.”

“And anything else?” Jackson asked.

“Not immediately,” the Commander said. “But if it isn’t the Battlemaster, it’s almost assuredly Isomnum. And when we capture him, he is going to wish he was dead.”

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Tactical Briefing Room, Solar System Command Center – Mars Collective Base

1/9/2017 – 10:02 A.M.

“I didn’t order this,” Ravarian said, swallowing as the Battlemaster approached him, his sword drawn. “This would never be launched without your approval—“

“Then who did?”

“No one here,” Ravarian said quickly. “Trust me, I’ve interrogated anyone who could have possibly organized it, and even then, none of them could launch it without my approval. You can check the logs and correspondences. The Zararch didn’t do this, and more importantly, there is no reason to do this. What exactly do we gain here?”

“The Zar’Chon is innocent here, Battlemaster,” Quisilia stepped out of thin air in front of him. “As is the Zararch. And from what I can tell, anyone else who could authorize something like this.”

The Battlemaster stopped, and just glared at Quisilia. “So this just happened out of nowhere? It’s all deception?”

“That...” Ravarian coughed as he continued with a theory that had been growing. “May be the case. The Collective clearly did not cause this, but the Commander has performed multiple false flag operations before. The United Nations, the Council. Chancellor Vyandar was also behind the collapse of Brazil, and the Middle East incident. The Commander in particular understands the power of brutality. It isn’t out of the question that this is a propaganda attempt to drive up support for ADVENT.”

“Not a bad theory,” Yang Shuren, the Human that the Battlemaster was now allowing around him for whatever reason, spoke up. He was unsure why the Battlemaster was letting her participate, but he was not stupid enough to ask questions like that now. “But this doesn’t fit the Commander. Not
really. He doesn’t just do stuff like this without reason. Let’s be honest – ADVENT isn’t exactly 
hurting for support right now. They’re enjoying what they have now. Why would they need *more*? 
Everyone on Earth already thinks you’re the enemy to some degree. This has too much of a chance 
of backfiring to be the Commander, and not solid enough reasons.”

“Your expert analysis is appreciated, Miss Shuren,” Ravarian said keeping his sarcasm down. 
“And I would contest that by saying that the issue ADVENT faces is that we are not *enough* of a 
threat yet. There are still many countries who don’t wish to join, including many European, 
African, and South American nations. An attack like this drives up fears, and encourages unity.”

“Then why not do this in one of those countries?” Yang asked. “If that was the goal, would it not 
be more effective if it *wasn’t* in ADVENT?”

“Perhaps,” Ravarian conceded. “But you can’t disagree that it is easier to set up in ADVENT.”

“Yes, if you’re cheap,” Yang rolled her eyes. “Or lazy. Are those words you ascribe to ADVENT?” 
One of the swords floated to her hands. “Be honest. Name *one* nation that ADVENT *wouldn’t* be 
able to do this to? Who could *possibly* stop an operation like this enhanced with *psions*?”

“The Humans have used this already as an excuse to escalate the fight again,” Ravarian pointed 
out. “The Sacramento base is *gone*. Completely. They seem to think that we won’t retaliate for this, 
and at this point, it appears to be accurate. Not responding to such an attack sets a disturbing 
precedent. We cannot just allow our bases to be destroyed with no response.”

“This was not ADVENT,” the Battlemaster spoke. “The targets were specific. Families of soldiers. 
There are too many downsides to their intentional deaths to be worth it. There were easier targets. I 
agree with Yang. Neither ADVENT nor XCOM had reason to do this. The military strike is a 
reflex. There will be no response from us.”

Ravarian sighed. “Fine, then who was it? It clearly wasn’t us.”

“I don’t know,” the Battlemaster admitted slowly. “But I am going to do two things. Prepare to 
broadcast a statement to Earth. They will not believe us, but I will deny it all the same, and I 
suspect Aegis will come to the same conclusion. Then I will find who is behind this, execute them, 
and send their body to the Humans with the extracted confession. This will not be tolerated.”

“Understood,” Ravarian said. That was as solid a plan as he could think of. He wasn’t convinced 
this wasn’t a false flag attack, but did have to admit the reasons ADVENT or XCOM would 
perform it were questionable at best.

But if it *wasn’t* them, then it was someone who was confident enough not to fear the retribution the 
Collective would bring. The Battlemaster rarely got angry, but attacking children and the families 
of soldiers was a line he wouldn’t intentionally cross. Ravarian almost felt bad for anyone the 
Battlemaster killed in the investigation.

But a larger part hoped that he would take his time killing them.

It would be deserved.

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*Unknown Location – Argentina*

*1/9/2017 – 9:57 A.M.*
And work had been going so well. Volk had happily been planning the next three months of operations, the Argentinian government was slowly coming around to the idea thanks to a combination of smooth talking, tech agreements, and preliminary diplomacy, and the base was finally fully complete and functional.

It was exceptionally nice, air conditioned, with full research and fabrication labs, and crystal clear TV stations.

Volk had a wide smile on his face, though on the inside was seething. Asaru was standing in front of him in the brightly-lit room, arms crossed and for once looking serious. Volk was almost sure Elena was going to start shooting her if what she said wasn’t good enough. He’d barely stopped her from murdering one of Asaru’s other soldiers.

Not that he could especially blame her right now.

“No, do you remember our agreement?” He asked mildly, appraising the plasma pistol in his hand. “If I recall, I believe it had some specific stipulations.”

“What happened in Seoul was not us,” Asaru said firmly. “We’re…not sure what is going on, but this was not sanctioned by the Ethereal Collective.”

“Liar!” Elena screamed as she fired her rifle at Asaru, unloading shot after shot until it was empty. All the projectiles passed directly through her, of course, but it managed to calm Elena down and he tentatively put a hand on her shoulder. “Evidence released to the public,” she said in a rush. “Images, autopsies, clear evidence of alien weapons, psionics, and abductions. Too coordinated to be independent. Level of psionic and technological power extremely high.”

“Evidence which ADVENT is releasing,” Asaru pointed out. “As…distasteful as it may be…it is entirely possible they are behind this attack. To further villainize us in the eyes of the public and any allies. A clever tactic-“

“Shut up,” Volk growled, raising a hand. “I’m not a floundering pawn like you’re used to, most likely. Please, give me one reason why ADVENT would do this? And more importantly, why they need to do it?”

“Increase public-“


“But do you know that for sure?” Asaru asked. “I promise it wasn’t us.”

“No, but I’m inclined to believe her more than you right now,” Volk pursed his lips. “It doesn’t make sense for anyone to be behind it. But someone is, and I don’t think it’s ADVENT for once. But I also doubt you knew about it either. This,” he gestured aimlessly. “Is plausible deniability. Terrorism from another group. Since there are no actual dissidents in the Collective that I am aware of, I suspect this is a group acting on the orders of someone else. Probably an Ethereal.”

“I can assure you the Imperator would not sanction this,” Asaru said. “Nor would any other Ethereal…” she trailed off suddenly, her own lips pursing. “Although…perhaps there is one. Only one would dare consider such an idea, and then carry it out.”

“Who?”
“An Ethereal named Isomnum,” she said slowly, grimacing. “A highly distasteful individual obsessed with the usage and research of fear. Highly isolationist, highly dangerous. More powerful than I am. He was the one who extracted the Battlemaster in D.C.”

Volk remembered the aftermath of it. At the time he’d gotten a bad feeling about the Ethereal, but anyone who had a death mask for a helmet elicited that reaction. But it sounded like this Isomnum was disliked even among the Ethereals. “Would he actually go against the Imperator?”

“I would not have assumed so,” Asaru said. “But the only ones who might would be him, and perhaps the Battlemaster. And over this the Battlemaster is certainly not the culprit. Yet even for Isomnum this is irregular. I will need to speak to the Imperator about this. There will be repercussions for this, I assure you.”

“There better be,” Volk said. “And I want proof.”

“You will have it.” Asaru said, before she vanished.

Volk sighed, but did feel like Asaru was going to get some answers. Much as everyone would like to scapegoat the aliens, this was the act of an idiot. And while the Collective and ADVENT made questionable decisions, he didn’t think the leadership consisted of morons. If he didn’t know better, he’d think this was an odd attempt to worsen Human-alien relations, but like Elena had said earlier, that wasn’t really necessary.

“I want to leave here,” Elena said, looking up to him. “It feels unsafe right now. Aliens watching.”

She meant the base. Elena didn’t like staying in it for long periods of time. Or whenever she was anxious. He could see how she might feel trapped in here, especially with the amount of aliens around, and given the current situation, he couldn’t blame her. “Alright, let’s get out of here,” he said quietly, putting an arm around her and pulling her close. “We can do whatever you want today.”

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The Throne Room of the Imperator – The Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

1/9/2017 – 10:09 A.M.

“I am under the assumption,” Patricia said slowly. “That you didn’t order this.”

The Imperator was…displeased to say the least, both in his aura and in his voice. Though not at her. “No. This did not happen at my command. I have little need for such unnecessary measures. A pointless waste of life and breeding of xenophobia.”

“Thought so.” Patricia hadn’t really believed the Imperator would do it. Not only was it an idiotic idea to begin with, it didn’t give them any advantage, and looked very bad if you were trying to get someone on your side. “So who did?”

“It was not ADVENT,” the Imperator said. “I am certain of it, though cannot be completely sure since the Manchurian Restraints have been placed on…many high-ranking ADVENT personnel. I would prefer not to reveal my presence to them immediately. But I have seen enough to convince me they were not behind it.”

“And XCOM?”

“Blocked entirely,” the Imperator stated as he strode forward. “Which is the consequence of Aegis,
or more worryingly, the Sovereign on Earth. I suspected it was only a matter of time before it began reaching out. XCOM is an obvious choice, and I doubt it took much to convince him it would be an…ally against me.”

Patricia scowled. “Let’s hope not. The Commander is willing to do anything to defeat the Collective, even if it means allying with something like that. And saying the right things to the Commander isn’t difficult. Assuming it didn’t take control altogether. Not even Aegis could stop a Sovereign, correct?”

“No.” The Imperator said flatly. “Nor any other psion in XCOM. I suppose it is possible this was the work of XCOM, but I am skeptical.”

“The Commander wouldn’t do this, not of his own free will,” Patricia shook her head. “He would only do it if it served a greater purpose and was necessary. Forming ADVENT justified such actions. There is nothing here which justifies this. He didn’t need to make people angrier at the Collective.”

“No, and even a Sovereign One wouldn’t go to the trouble of something so…pointless,” the Imperator mused. “There are possible culprits; few would dare to carry something like this out. This fits Isomnum’s work, yet I am not convinced even he would do it. The alternative is exceptionally unthinkable though.”

“Which is?” Patricia asked.

“That this was carried out at the command of the Creator,” the Imperator said. “Or more accurately the Bringer. She has been corrupted to a point where her loyalty is to it, not me. A planned and acceptable consequence, but even still she understands the…consequences of actions like these. They are of rebellion. The Bringer would be playing with fire. I do not toy with such creatures and he knows it.”

Patricia furrowed her eyebrows as she looked outside the windows to the void of space. “How much have you spoken to this Bringer?”

“To the Bringer himself? Only twice,” the Imperator said. “His subordinates and the Creator relay anything else essential. But Mosrimor has been useful in this regard. I know enough about him to establish boundaries and safeguards. To act in such a manner against me is…ill-advised. Which makes me question his involvement. He knows the consequences.”

“It couldn’t hurt to speak to both of them,” Patricia suggested. “You would find an answer one way or another.”

“What will be difficult is the Battlemaster,” the Imperator said. “He will want to punish the culprits. It is not time to sacrifice Isomnum yet, nor will he succeed in killing the Bringer, nor do I want him to yet. Denying him justice will not be taken well.”

“He doesn’t know the truth,” Patricia realized. “About the Sovereign Ones.”

“No,” the Imperator said. “He will not take the existence of the Bringer…well. And he would be unlikely to take the truth as you or I would. He sees no enemy greater than the Synthesized, and will do whatever it takes to defeat them. He does not care about greater ramifications of the Sovereign Ones. Giving him Isomnum and allowing some means of taking his vengeance may alleviate his wrath.”

“And if it is the Bringer?”
The Imperator was silent for a few moments. “Then he must be distracted. The Creator’s Blacksite of Paradise should not be investigated by him. He would not approve of what is taking place.”

Patricia wondered just how bad it could be. The more she heard about the Bringer, the more she wondered just what was going on there. If it was bad enough where the Imperator worried about the Battlemaster finding out, it must be far worse than the Sectoid Hives. Which was something she was struggling to really comprehend.

“Nebulan suspects Isomnum,” the Imperator said. “What gives me pause is the apparent usage of the Chosen. They must be interrogated as well. Before the Battlemaster does. I will have Quisilia distract him until this is determined. You will come with me here. Your species has suffered because of the fool who performed this, and you will determine their fate.”

“How?” Patricia raised an eyebrow. “I’m not the only Human here.”

“No,” the Imperator agreed, gesturing for her to follow. “But you are the most important. Come with me, Patricia. There is a dissident to find.”

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Busan – South Korea

1/9/2017 – 12:11 P.M.

Duri wished something would happen. Something to wake him up from the nightmare he was in right now. This had to be some kind of twisted figment of his imagination; everything seemed brighter than it should be, there was a ringing numbness in the air and everything around him barely registered.

It had been bad enough waking up to the news of the attack. The images they’d shown were horrifying. They’d all watched in stunned silence until Duri realized that was where his family was.

The news had been given to him shortly after.

I’m afraid that I have to report that your family is among those killed, Officer. I’m sorry.

The man had said some other words, but he hadn’t registered them.

Your family is dead.

Dead.

His wife.

His girls.

Dead.

Not because the city had come under siege. Not as a casualty of war. Just victims of a senseless slaughter. Hundreds of miles away.

Dead.

They were dead because of him. Because he didn’t want them going north. Because he thought they’d be safe away from the front lines. A cruel irony, if they’d done literally anything different they would still be alive. But he’d insisted because he’d been sure of their safety.
Dead.

He’d numbly asked for pictures. Proof. They’d refused. Not until you speak to someone. You can’t handle it right now. Not until you’re calmer. Perhaps they were right. Any other time he would have punched them. But somehow his military discipline won out, and he just stared blankly at them before wandering out.

They yelled something after him. He didn’t hear it.

Dead.

He wandered aimlessly, picking up more parts of the story by accident. It wasn’t just his family that was dead. It was others. Then it came out that some were abducted, not dead. Then that the attacks had been deliberately targeted at families of soldiers.

Dead because of him.

He was shocked he hadn’t begun crying yet. Instead he was just numb. Still clinging onto some fragment that none of this was real. He’d wake up, call his family, and tell them to get as far away as possible. Or hell, bring them down to him. Here he could protect them. That was all he wanted to do. Protect them.

What kind of father and husband would he be if he couldn’t do that?

A failed one.

It was a bright day outside, a sunny one. Too bright. Too pleasant. There was even a breeze. Would the weather be so nice if this was real? Wouldn’t he be able to feel everything a little more crisply? Just a little bit?

“Duri!” He barely registered a shout, not looking away as he looked onto the sea in front of him. Yes, very bright and blue. It was never that color.

“Duri!” Beatriz scrambled up, her face immediately morphing to relief. “Thank god you’re fine. We thought….well…” she swallowed. “Did you find out…”

“Dead.” He said numbly, not looking at her. “They won’t show me the bodies. They just said they’re dead.”


“This?” He looked down at it in his hand. He’d forgotten it was still drawn. “Doesn’t work.” He pointed over the sea and pulled the trigger. Nothing. “I tried twice. Don’t know why I didn’t load it,” he shrugged. “Maybe I would wake up.”

Beatriz took a few deep breaths. “Duri…you should come back with me. We can talk…you shouldn’t deal with this by yourself. It isn’t a good idea.”

“Talk about what?” He shrugged. “They were there because of me. And now they’re dead. No mystery. They’re not coming back.”

“Duri, this is not your fault,” Beatriz insisted, grabbing his arm. “You sent them there to protect them. You didn’t kill them, the aliens did. Not you.”

He was silent for a minute. “I haven’t been listening. Do they know for sure it was the aliens?”
“Chancellor Vyandar confirmed it,” Beatriz said. “Of course the Battlemaster has said they had nothing to do with this.”

“Liar,” he agreed, an alternate plan forming in his mind. “He should at least admit to what he did. Lying is insulting. Where are the aliens on base?”

“Don’t know,” Beatriz said. “ADVENT said they were going to question the ones in custody to see if they knew anything else…”

“It’s funny,” he said slowly. “I was just wondering if the aliens weren’t all bad.” He looked down at his empty pistol. “Guess I was wrong. But my family needs to be avenged one way or another. I shouldn’t die until then.” He reached in his pouch and pulled out a clip and slid it into his pistol.

Beatriz looked alarmed. “Duri, this is a bad idea. You’ll be killed or court-marshalled. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said numbly, turned to face her wearily. “I don’t have a reason to live anyway. The only ones I wanted to protect are dead. ADVENT may kill or arrest me, but I don’t care now.”

“Just talk to someone first!” She pleaded. “You can’t ruin yourself over this.”

“Call someone to stop me if you want,” he shook his head and began to walk. “I don’t need someone to talk to right now. I’m sorry.”

She looked at him helplessly, but didn’t say anything. “This is something I have to do,” he said as a farewell. “I hope you never have to understand why.”

He left her alone, as he walked towards where the aliens were being kept.

All he needed was three. One for each of them. Then ADVENT could do whatever they wanted to him.

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Chambers of the Battlemaster – Mars Collective Base

1/9/2017 – 4:11 P.M.

It was ironic that for the first time he and ADVENT were on the same side. The Battlemaster suspected that there was little that he and ADVENT leadership would agree on, but there were certain lines that would not be crossed on either side. Targeting civilians was something done only as a consequence of other actions, and even then when there was a clear goal to it.

Very rarely had it seemed to have an effect outside of making enemies. Civilians died in war, but there were few instances where deliberate targeting was justified.

Attacking families of soldiers, regardless of side, was one of the most dishonorable actions one could take. Enemies were afforded a certain level of respect. This respect was extended to families. They were not exempt from the dice roll of war, but to deliberately target them simply because of association with an enemy was the action of a coward.

This was why he despised intelligence work, where this line of thinking was mild compared to what spies considered. It had its place, but it was a station that he would never fully endorse or support.
Dead children were also casualties in war. Accidentally it was always unfortunate. But to deliberately target them was a level beyond evil. Humans already had subpar treatment for many children, and killing the ones who actually had parents was made somehow worse. He couldn’t fathom the mind of someone who would deem this acceptable, among any species.

Although it made him realize that the Collective had been complicit in this kind of activity for some time, he just hadn’t wanted to realize it. Who knew how many children had been sent to Revelean, Fectorian, and the Creator. Perhaps this excuse could be distraction, but it would be a lie. He had just not considered it relevant until now.

That would change soon. And if they took issue with it, they could use clones.

“What are you thinking?”

Yang had been somewhat talkative as they’d worked, each of them trying to get a feel for each other. He was thankful she wasn’t put off by his stature, but it was…different…attempting to talk to someone so openly. He had made an attempt to articulate his thoughts, but it was usually without preparation.

“Considering,” he said. “The Collective has been complicit in distasteful behavior for some time. I had not confronted it until now. It is…disquieting to realize it after all this time.”

She cocked her head. “Like what?” She was having her new and improved weapons float by her sides, a constant practice the Battlemaster respected.

“Children,” he mused. “Our treatment of them. Human ones at least. Many have been killed by us before the deaths today. That will need to be changed.”

“Ah, right,” she nodded. “Can’t say I’m disappointed to hear that. Glad that you aren’t the kid-killing type.”

“I would purge the genome of any who are,” the Battlemaster muttered. “Degenerates.”

“You’re bothered by this,” she noted after a few minutes. “Almost as much as ADVENT. More than I expected, honestly.”

“Are you not?”

“Of course I am,” she scowled. “ADVENT is the enemy, not the people. But you’re…” she gestured. “Well, an alien. And the one in charge.”

He thought about how to articulate this to her. “During the days of the Empire…Children were rare. Only given or allowed to those who earned them. They were the ultimate dream, the progression of our species. There were none more valued or treasured than our children. Rarely were there more than one at a time.”

He paused. “Humans were the first species I saw who were…ambivalent to children. They did not care about any other than their own offspring. What children do not starve are placed into buildings and sold by governments.”


“Isn’t it?” He asked. “You must pay the government for the privilege of giving a child a home. I performed my own research. Your institutions are corrupt and bloated, more concerned with money than children. Perhaps not permanent slavery, but they exist to make money. And those are
the lucky ones.”

He shook his head. “A species which does not care for children if they have the means to do so is flawed and failed. The Vitakara have orphans, but they are adopted by families within days. Humans are selfish and wouldn’t think about other children unless they were directly affected.”

Yang pursed her lips. “Can’t say I disagree.”

“So I am upset,” the Battlemaster continued. “The children who died today were lucky. They had families and lives. They did not choose to participate in this conflict, and yet they died senselessly. Many have lost family members already, those who died in conflict. More will be rendered orphans by my hand. But those who die in battle made a choice to fight. But children have no choice. Especially not Human ones.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll take over orphanages when you conquer Earth?” She asked with some hope.

“Perhaps. I cannot do worse than your species.”

The room chimed as someone outside the door approached. The Battlemaster turned, wondering who it could be. “Open.” The door slid open and the Hunter of all things walked inside. He was clad in his battle armor, minus the helmet, and surprisingly unarmed.

“Battlemaster! What a pleasant surprise.” He caught a glimpse of Yang. “As well as whoever you are.”

“This is not a good time,” the Battlemaster warned. “State your reason for bothering me or leave.”

“Don’t rush me,” the Hunter raised a hand, grinning under his hood. “After all, you want to know who could possibly be responsible for that terrible massacre—“ The Hunter gasped as he was lifted into the air and pulled into one of the Battlemaster’s waiting hand.

“What do you know?”

“First,” the Hunter coughed. “I want to say that none of this was my idea and I was just following orders!” He hissed as the Battlemaster began applying pressure over his whole body. “Alright! Stop it! The Creator ordered the attack! We took part in it.”

The Battlemaster threw him into a wall, fury building as the Hunter rose to his feet shakily. “The Creator?”

“Yes,” the Hunter coughed. “Look, I knew it was a bad idea. But sorry, if I’d done anything I would be getting tortured for the next year. You’re scary, but sorry, it’s not much compared to going against the almighty bitch.”

“What did you do?!”

“Got orders to work with a bunch of the Creator’s people;” he explained hurriedly. “Caretakers she calls them. Ghouls pretty much, but somehow psions. Teleporting and everything. My job, and that of the other Chosen, was to capture some people, and kill everyone else. We got in, then got out. The Caretakers took care of security and keeping everyone away.”

“Why did they capture anyone?” Yang interjected. “Was there a reason, or was it random?”

“Don’t know the criteria,” the Hunter said. “But it was definitely not random. Trust me, I had the
exact *names* of people who were being captured shared with me. The Creator knew *everything* about the people in those buildings. Somehow.”

The Battlemaster was silent for a few moments. “What was her reason for this?”

“I have no fucking idea,” the Hunter raised both of his hands in surrender. “Look, I have zero problem with killing those people, but I’m not an idiot and knew that would *probably* make you mad. Hence why I’m here and telling you so you don’t eviscerate me and drown me in acid or something.”

“How considerate,” the Battlemaster growled, twisting his hand and the Hunter crumpled as his kneecap shattered. “Yet you still participated.”

“Of course I did!” He yelled. “You have no idea what’s going on with the Creator, do you? My choices were not follow her orders and face death at *best*, or go through with them then tell you later and hope you don’t murder me anyway! I didn’t *have* many great options here!”

“Let me be clear,” the Battlemaster rumbled as he ground the leg of the Hunter further into mush and splinters. “If you are *ever* faced with a choice between me or the Creator, *I* am the one you go to. The Creator is *not* a threat to me. If you fear retribution, I can handle her.”

The Hunter laughed. “No, you can’t. I promise you can’t. I’m probably going to die anyway just by telling you this, but at least you might kill the bitch for me.”

“You will not die by her hand,” the Battlemaster promised. “You overestimate her own power. She is a scientist at best, one twisted and deranged—”

“Word of warning,” the Hunter interjected. “*You* better not underestimate her. Do you think I’d be this reluctant if she were a fucking *scientist*? There is something in Paradise. Something a lot more powerful than her, than me, and probably you.”

The Battlemaster paused briefly. “Do you have proof the Creator was behind this?”

“Ah, yep,” the Hunter grimaced as he pulled a datacube out of a pocket. “Recording of the whole incident, at least where I was. Audio and everything. Figured you’d want it.”

“This will be useful,” the Battlemaster said, telekinetically calling it to his hand. “Your contribution is noted.”

“Another thing,” the Hunter twisted his leg back into position. “I’m pretty sure the Creator got this brilliant plan from Isomnum. They’ve been talking a lot recently. I bet they wanted everyone to blame it on him. He wasn’t behind it, but he gave her the idea, I’m pretty sure about it.” He gave a grim smile. “But that’s just my assumption, no evidence for that other than what I heard.”

The Battlemaster felt the datacube in his hand. The situation was now extremely complicated. The worst case scenario he had anticipated was one Ethereal behind it. Two were worse, even if one had merely provided the idea. But he was an Ethereal of his word, and ultimately, it did not change much. Isomnum and the Creator needed to be dealt with.

He wouldn’t kill them outright, but drag them before the Imperator. They could defend themselves before he executed them and sent their corpses to ADVENT. He wasn’t surprised about Isomnum, but the *Creator* was unexpected. He had not thought she’d known much about the war to begin with, let alone try and *influence* it.

Neither of these Ethereals deserved to live. Their species was small, but only those who deserved
life should keep it. Perhaps this would motivate the Imperator and Revelean to consider focusing on repopulation.

It sounded like there was much about the Creator he was uninformed of. Fortunately whatever she was doing would not last long.

He had targets now. Once he reviewed the evidence he would act. Justice and retribution would be swift and merciless. Ironically much like the operation that had started this. “Your assistance is appreciated,” the Battlemaster told the Hunter as he telekinetically lifted him into the air. A few flashes of his sword later, and the Hunter was now limbless, as the Battlemaster tossed the torso a short distance away. “But you still murdered those people. That requires punishment. Be thankful it was not worse.”

“I hate you so much,” the Hunter spat as he hissed in pain. “Well, sorry!”

“Apology accepted,” the Battlemaster said, sharply motioning for Yang to follow him. “You are not beholden to the Creator any longer. If such an event happens again, you will die. Is that understood?”

“Loud and clear!”

“Come, Yang,” the Battlemaster said. “Isomnum has an explanation to provide for us.”

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Busan – South Korea

1/9/2017 – 3:30 P.M.

The Officer in charge was unreadable with the helmet on, but was thankfully the only one there. Duri had his off. He’d forgotten it to begin with, and he didn’t really care enough to get it back. Not like he was trying to hide. This was a self-destructive plan, but the alternative was doing nothing.

And he just couldn’t do that. Not now.

“Hold up,” the Officer said, raising a hand. “We’ve got the area restricted.”

“I know,” Duri said. “I want to go in.”

The Officer looked at him a few moments. “Why?”

Duri just pulled out a picture of himself and his family and handed it to the Officer. He didn’t feel the need to say anything at that moment. Both of them knew what had happened, and now why he was here. “They warned me people like you might come,” the Officer finally said. “Technically I shouldn’t let you in at all.”

Duri was just silent. The Officer extended a hand. “All weapons have to be confiscated,” he paused. “However, there may be a pistol around the cells. But I wouldn’t know that.”

“Of course not.”

He handed his pistol over, and began walking in as the Officer unlocked it. But he suddenly grabbed his arm. “I’d think carefully,” the Officer warned. “In the event something happens I’ll have to call for security. I won’t be able to help you.”
Duri gave an emotionless nod. “I understand. Thank you.”

He stepped inside the holding area and walked towards where the cells were. Of course, calling them *cells* now was a bit generous, as they were essentially rooms with steel walls. There weren’t locks on them anymore, they had actual beds, tables, and some small furniture. All of them were occupied, and all of them watched him in concern.

As they should.

The pistol wasn’t in an obvious place, in one of the lockers, but he found it easily enough. He simply entered the nearest cell he could find. Five aliens resided in it, four Vitakarians and one Dath’Haram. All unarmed and slowly backing up as he entered the cell. They must have seen the deadness of his eyes because several of them became visibly worried.

He’d learned that Vitakarians began blinking rapidly when agitated or surprised. “Officer,” one of them said, likely speaking for the group. “I know what happened. I’m sorry about it and it’s terrible, but killing us isn’t going to bring anyone back…” he trailed off as Duri raised the pistol.

“Their deaths were pointless and without reason,” he said blankly. “Why should you be special? They died by the hand of your kind. Justice is needed.”

The Vitakarian swallowed, but continued. “We didn’t kill them. This isn’t justice, Officer.”

“Perhaps not,” Duri agreed numbly, his hand staying firm. “But I don’t care now. The three ones I loved most are dead. Three aliens will die now.”

He suddenly felt something like a vice cover his entire body. “Officer,” a female called out, and turning his head he saw another Officer with one of the Priests beside her, arm extended to him. “Put the weapon down. It won’t end well for you.”

Duri looked back and fired the pistol. There was only clicking and he looked at the weapon in disbelief, before letting out a broken chuckle. He tossed the useless weapon to the side, looking at the officer in defeat. “A trick.”

“One for your own good,” the Officer said, taking off her helmet, revealing a Korean woman with cropped black hair. “You aren’t the first person today to try that. If we’d let it just happen you’d be in jail. This is ADVENT saving you from throwing your life away. You are **not thinking clearly.**”

She took a step towards him, as he stood there limply, not having the strength to resist whatever would happen. “Look, I get it,” she said softly. “My sister was butchered by the animals that did this. I want to put a bullet through every alien that was responsible for this.” She tentatively placed a hand on his shoulder. “But the **right** aliens. And when you’re in an acceptable mental condition. You-we’re not going to be able to get over this easily. But we need to at least try.”

“Why?” He asked, voice cracking. “I don’t have anything left.”

“Yes you do,” she said firmly. “Even if you don’t see it now. I don’t know who you lost, but would they want you to just give up?”

He shook his head; hesitantly, but he did it. She took his arm. “Come with me, let’s get out of this place.”

He didn’t say anything as he was led out, still in a semi-surreal state. Maybe she could help him, maybe he somehow still had a future. But now he just felt tired and drained. He just wanted the day to end, to sleep.
To forget.

Maybe that realization broke the dam inside him, and he let silent tears roll down his cheeks as he was guided away.

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Communications Hub – Mars Collective Base

1/9/2017 – 6:11 P.M.

Yang did not especially want to be standing in a darkened room as the holoprojectors lit up, even with the Battlemaster center-stage. She had heard the stories about the Dread Lord, and the fact that no one felt comfortable providing anything more than basic information about him, and that she’d never heard any sort of casual talk, let alone any jokes about his subjectively edgy persona said a lot.

Cogitian actually had a few documents on him.

Those had been enough to put the Dread Lord on her list of ‘Ethereals never to talk to ever’. Even the dispassionate text of what he’d done and descriptions of what it was like to be around him unnerved her. What the Imperator had been thinking bringing him along she didn’t know, although the literal fear factor was certainly a possibility.

But she would have preferred that the stories just stay that – stories. She had no desire to meet the illustrious Dread Lord in person.

But he was now connected to this incident, so the Battlemaster’s first course of action was to speak to Isomnum directly. And to her mild surprise, he had responded rather quickly. Perhaps he was always this fast, but no one called him. She did feel some levity at the thought of Isomnum staring hopefully at a phone hoping someone would call him, but no one did because he was the closest thing to a demon the Ethereals had.

The hologram materialized, showing Isomnum in extreme detail. He matched his dossier image perfectly, right down to his death mask helmet. Two hands were held in front of him, and two were clasped behind him. The Dread Lord looked at the Battlemaster first, then down to her. She shivered as the empty eyes of the helmet stayed on her for far too long.

“Battlemaster.” Yes, his voice was just as discomforting as described. “Why do you speak to me?”

Yang then noticed that Isomnum wasn’t alone, there was another figure to his right, and another to his left. The leftmost figure was a Sectoid of all things, although this one was notably... unique. It wasn’t a Vanguard, but it was modeled in the form of the Hive Commanders, if they were more proportionately built. It bore black armor of some kind, which seemed embedded directly in the flesh, and the eyes were a white that even came through the hologram.

The rightmost figure was a surprise. It was an elderly woman; Japanese she noticed, with her greying hair pulled back into a single ponytail. She wore nothing ornate, but instead a medical coat of sorts, with an array of surgical tools attached to a belt on her waist. Round-rimmed glasses rested on her face, and her face was impassive and cold, similar to the mask of the Ethereal beside her.

She supposed it wasn’t out the question that Isomnum would have Humans working with him, but some part of her suspected that this wasn’t an ordinary Human. She didn’t like the idea that this person was yet another gift to an Ethereal from the Imperator, but it wouldn’t necessarily be out of the question.
“Have you spoken with the Creator recently?” The Battlemaster began, also looking at his entourage.

“Yes. She came to me for advice,” Isomnum motioned to the Sectoid. “I provided what she asked. In return she granted me this; a fascinating and intelligent creature. Further useful for the deconstruction of the Sectoid psyche, it is more adaptable than the Hive Commanders believe it is.”

“I do not care about your pets,” the Battlemaster dismissed flatly. “What did she request from you?”

“How to properly break the Humans through terror,” he answered dispassionately. “Techniques, examples, how to use it to manipulate populations. Simple tasks, there are many avenues in which to exploit the Human psyche. The average Human can be broken through certain triggers; too much stress on a particular aspect will break them. Family is a noted constant. Figures of importance or prominence have an effect on those below them. Targeted, they will have a detrimental effect on the mental health of a population. This leads to irrationality, which leads to mistakes, which leads to exploitation, to conclude in manipulation.”

Then Isomnum had definitely been behind this plan, even if it was just providing the Creator with the structure. The Battlemaster wasted no time. “Did you know she would carry it out?”

“Did she?” Isomnum’s tone shifted to moderate interest for the first time.

“If so, I am impressed. I did not think she would follow through. She is too…obsessed. Too broken to question whatever she is communicating with. She did not matter to me, but it has yet to dull her skill. Yet if she has performed what I suggested, then I may have to reexamine her potential.”

The Battlemaster was angry enough that Yang could easily sense it, despite not being a telepath. “You are aware that I specifically stated that nothing of that nature was to happen without authorization. You should have informed me even if it was just a suggestion.”

“No.” Isomnum stated without emotion. “You are afforded no more respect than any of our kind. The concerns of aliens, their lives and feelings, are irrelevant. You have no stomach for war, for doing what is necessary for victory. I do not answer to you, you are ineffective.”

“The Imperator placed me in charge of all operations on Earth,” the Battlemaster continued calmly. “It does not matter your opinion of me, this went directly against the wishes of the Imperator.”

“Words which are hollow,” Isomnum added. “You are easy to placate, Battlemaster; easy to manipulate. You have been, and are little more than a tool used by others at their command. You think you have independence; authority, but all the power you have is an illusion. You are a weapon pointed at our enemies, always looking for validation or approval from those who are your superiors. You have authority over aliens. But your words or threats mean nothing to your own kind.”

Yang didn’t know if he was trying to make the Battlemaster angry or not, but she was concerned it was working. “He’s trying to distract you.”

“Yes, listen to your own pet,” Isomnum said, looking back to her. “The Battlemaster, an Ethereal, listening to the words of an alien. You rely on them too much, Battlemaster, they are a corruption, one which you have succumbed to. Use and dispose of them as you wish, but you do not treat them as they are meant to be used. You care for them, and that is your weakness.”
He looked to her, and she was suddenly assaulted with a psionic mind far stronger than anything she had ever face before. It reminded her of a lurking beast, hovering at the edge of her telepathic reach and pressing against her like a tidal wave. “Battlemaster…” she swallowed. “I can feel him.”

“Cease your attack,” the Battlemaster commanded. “There will be consequences if you continue.”

Isomnum gave a hollow laugh. “None will mourn an alien. The Imperator will simply provide you another pet to placate you. But you will not forget how you lost this one.”

The toying Ethereal easily shattered her defenses and was inside her mind, a stabbing and constant pain as he made sure she knew and he sorted through her mind like a burglar robbing a house at gunpoint. Her life from childhood to now flashed at various places before her eyes. “He’s in my head!” She screamed in a panic.

Her vision blinked and flickered, pain stabbed throughout her body, not from bullets or standard weapons. On the ground she saw and felt her leg being ground up and eaten by spiders, which then began crawling into her body and she felt the eggs they were laying inside her. The area around her was no longer what she remembered, instead she was surrounded by corpses, all of them her family.

Perhaps she screams, or maybe not as the spiders were in her mouth, she didn’t remember how her hands became deformed and covered in blood, but she saw it all the same. She knew there was something else there, some part of her which knew this wasn’t real. But it was vivid and visceral.

And Yang could do nothing but scream as her sanity was broken bit by bit.

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**Blacksite 004: “Sanctuary” – Unknown**

1/10/2017 – 3:20 A.M.

In the white room, the Battlemaster sat and thought. The actions of Isomnum were intolerable, and would need to be dealt with in suitable fashion. It was fortunate he had thought to take control of the situation immediately before her mind was lost for good. And he could always rely on Sana to be available when necessary. Especially when he was carrying a convulsing Human woman in his arms with an explanation of “Isomnum.”

There were only a few options he had before him, and ultimately Sana he trusted the most and if there was anyone who would be able to help reverse the damage, it would be her. Perhaps. Sana was a doctor, and a powerful telepath, but he didn’t know how often she worked with cases like this. But he didn’t want to trust Yang to the Imperator or the Overmind.

He was surprised with himself how much he cared at all. While Yang was more…palpable than he had originally intended, it had been a matter of weeks since they’d met. It was probably simpler than that. No one deserved what Isomnum inflicted on his victims, especially when it was done with the intent to provoke him.

In which case, it had certainly succeeded.

However, he also disliked what Isomnum had said. Yang had been right in that it was clearly to throw him off, but the Battlemaster didn’t think it couldn’t have some truth to it. He was no Imperator, he had no desire to do anything other than what he was good at. That didn’t necessarily make him just a weapon or tool. While it might not be something that Isomnum would care about, he did have some authority in the Collective.
Certainly more than Isomnum had with the Imperator.

Although…he did wonder now. How true that was would depend on what happened next. What Isomnum had done was unjustified and the most blatant in a long list of his offenses against not just aliens, but the Ethereals themselves. His involvement in this incident was enough for the Battlemaster to justify his removal.

But he wasn’t sure the Imperator would allow that. While he could understand the reluctance to kill off an Ethereal when there were so few left, the Battlemaster was convinced that the Collective would be better off without him, and that he was too dangerous to be left alive. It was both the practical and right thing to do.

The Creator’s fate would depend on her own justifications.

The Imperator was hiding something important there, and the Battlemaster was not naïve enough to think that the Creator could be doing anything major with him knowing about it. It was concerning enough that he hadn’t been told of it, but what was more concerning was that the Imperator was in support of it.

From what the Hunter had said, he wasn’t going to like what he found.

At the very minimum the Creator needed to be detained until they figured out what was going on.

He let out a sigh. And this was happening just as the Collective had begun to stabilize. Now there were two Ethereals acting outside their authority and deliberately interfering with Earth. Not a good situation, but one he would have to solve soon. The Humans would never let this go until they knew the truth one way or another, and right now it just served as a rallying cry.

The problem would only get worse if the Imperator declined to punish either of them.

He wasn’t sure what he would do in that case.

The Imperator was not unreasonable. His reluctance to punish Ethereals was understandable, but this idiotic assumption that they could keep acting like they were invulnerable and superior to everything else was one reason the Empire fell. Isomnum was a remnant of an era that didn’t exist any longer, and some day they would find an alien species that would pose more of a threat than the Humans.

Despite what Isomnum thought, aliens were not inferior. Not really. If that were the case they wouldn’t bother with them at all, and they wouldn’t have been working to make sure they were on the same side. Humanity had at least proven that aliens could hold their own, which likely made Isomnum irritated that was the case.

The door slid open and Sana walked inside, her expression one of focus. The Battlemaster stood as well. “Will she recover?”

“Yes,” Sana answered. “Though only because you brought her to me immediately. The damage would have been irreversible if you had delayed.” She shook her head. “A parasitic command. A perfected one, I have only seen it a few times. Goes through the victim memory by memory and forces a certain reaction. Unsurprising it was fear. Luckily it hadn’t gone too far, and I was able to stop it.”

She let out a sigh. “I suppressed the memories of what she endured.”

“Suppressed? Not removed?”
“It is…complicated,” Sana waved a hand. “Removing the memories outright could possibly cause personality incompatibilities. If she returns later, I could examine how to remove them without damaging her, but from what I saw of her mind…she would not want me in her head. Or anyone.”

“An understandable response,” the Battlemaster nodded. “But you have already done it.”

“Only to save her sanity,” Sana nodded. “She is…not a sound woman. Hardly one to bring into battles.”

“Violence does not indicate mental status,” the Battlemaster said. “Otherwise I would never be considered of a sound mind.”

“You are not the same as her,” Sana shook her head. “But that is a different conversation. What Isomnum did here was inexcusable, and I am certain it was not the first time.”

He snorted. “Of course it wasn’t.”

“What do you plan to do?” Sana stepped forward, her robes sweeping over the floor. “I saw the conversation in her memories. It was direct defiance, and if he was involved in what happened…” she trailed off. “This cannot stand without consequence, especially if it came from one of our own kind.”

“I will deal with Isomnum later,” the Battlemaster stated, moving to walk out of the room. “But first I will need to bring the Creator into custody. She has been allowed unmitigated freedom in her experiments, and what I have heard bodes ill for what I will find. She will at least be easy to subdue and bring in.”

“Should you inform the Imperator?” Sana asked. “He would also be interested in what happened. This is not what he wants.”

He glanced at her thoughtfully as he entered the main medical ward. “No. The Imperator knows more than he has said. I want to see for myself if this is the case. He would not order this, but he has been lax in reigning in the likes of Isomnum and the Creator.”

“He will not appreciate that,” Sana pointed out as they reached Yang’s bed. The woman was now clad in a simple medical robe, and looked almost peaceful as she slept. A monitor hooked to sensors on the bed transmitted all important medical information. Heartbeat, brainwaves, blood pressure, all the necessary vitals.

The Battlemaster barely heard Sana’s comment as he looked her over, but gave a quick response. “That is too bad. He should not have allowed this degree of freedom.”

Sana checked some of the equipment, and continued speaking, without looking to the Battlemaster. “So when will you go to the Creator?”

“When she wakes up,” he nodded to Yang. “I feel delaying would not end well. Too much of an opportunity for the Imperator to intervene, or the Creator to destroy or alter evidence. She likely knows the Hunter told me everything.”

“She just went through a traumatic experience!” Sana exclaimed in disbelief. “And you want to drag her to deal with the Creator?”

“The Creator is not a threat,” the Battlemaster said. “And yes. The memories were suppressed, she should be fine since the damage was not physical.”
“I highly recommend against this,” Sana said. “She needs rest, not a visit to the Creator’s hell.”

“There is another thing,” the Battlemaster raised a hand. “I want you to come with me.”

She appraised him carefully. After a few moments of silence she just asked. “Why?”

“Because there are going to be those who need your help,” he said grimly. “Once the Creator is subdued, I will put whatever is within Paradise under your control. Dispose or help the victims as you see fit, but I want you to become more involved in the Collective. Shutting down Paradise would certainly assist in that.”

Her mouth was a thin line. “I cannot disagree that it would feel good to end the Creator’s streak of insanity. Yet it might turn violent.”

He faced her squarely. “You have fought before, and if you forget, we will be able to protect you. And you could help her.” He nodded down to Yang. “But I am not expecting a fight. The Creator is no warrior, and she will capitulate easily enough.”

Sana sighed. “Very well. Better I go than Revelean. Yang will likely awaken shortly, and in the meantime I will…prepare.”

“Do that,” the Battlemaster said, as he sat down on another bed in the ward. “I will wait here.”

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En Route to Blacksite 10: “Paradise” – Orbit of the Dead World

1/10/2017 – 10:00 A.M.

When the Imperator had first given the Ethereals the resources and authority to construct their own personal stations, it was not a gift squandered. Some were small and compact, fulfilling a singular purpose, and others were massive, spanning dozens of levels and factories in their own right. Each one was a work of art which reflected their designer.

The Battlemaster remembered the Creator’s original Blacksite. It had not been called Paradise then, but something else he couldn’t bother to remember the name of. But it had been small, a spherical station that housed several levels of labs and chambers. Modest, but utilitarian, much like how the Creator had been.

That no longer resembled anything close to Paradise.

“Where is it?” Yang asked, looking surprisingly refreshed for what she had gone through. The Battlemaster chalked it up to Sana suppressing the event, and the enhancing drugs which had been pumped into her. They would keep her awake and alert, and were specifically designed to rejuvenate psions.

“Straight ahead,” the Battlemaster said calmly as he piloted the Cultro forward. “We’re almost there.”

Yang frowned. “It’s on the moon?”

“Not a moon,” Sana corrected, stepping forward as she also appraised the marvel before them. “That is Paradise.”

It was easy to mistake the space station for a moon. It was the size of a small one, though not even
half the size as the one orbiting Earth. It was a sphere with a black outer shell, almost blending into
the void it inhabited. The Battlemaster knew that it wasn’t completely dense, each level allowed
some space between it, eventually growing smaller and smaller.

But as he’d found out, acquiring complete schematics of Paradise was impossible. The most he’d
been able to find was the first level, which included useful details like where the walls could move
to form different passages, the Gateways leading to different lower levels (And even parts of the
same level), labs, cells, and the lone stasis chamber.

He did not like how little they knew about anything beyond the first level.

And he especially didn’t like that they were walking in blind to just what the Creator had.

Upon reviewing the video the Hunter acquired, the fact that Vitakarians of all things were
somehow managing feats of teleportation, and the Creator was using strangely decayed specimens
of all species, it all pointed to something especially unnatural happening. The closer he drew, the
more he realized just how big the station was.

He didn’t feel like they would pose a threat, but it was disconcerting such a thing was possible at
all. Another question in the list to ask her.

“Communication incoming,” Yang said, looking at the solid green light indicating a hail.

“Open it,” the Battlemaster nodded. She pressed a button and the hologram of the sender appeared.
Unlike the previous ones he had seen, this one was a Human, and did not appear to be degraded in
the same way others representing her were. The Human wore a white robe with intricate patterns
and symbols embroidered into it, and the robe itself was weaved expertly through silver armor it
wore, the shine the Battlemaster recognized as his own. Materials from the Dead World.

That raised unpleasant implications.

The man’s face was shaven, as was his head. The eyes were a steel grey, but the face was
completely impassive. Not a single muscle moved as the Battlemaster waited. When he spoke, his
voice was devoid of tone. “You are encroaching on Paradise. You are advised to leave
immediately.”

“This is the Battlemaster of the Ethereal Collective,” he answered. “I will speak to the Creator. Tell
her I am coming.”

“We know why you have come,” the man said, unmoved in the slightest. “You will not find what
you seek here. That was a warning, Battlemaster, one it is advised you heed. Paradise operates
under the approval of the Imperator, and we are authorized to defend our institution from threats.
Do you intend harm towards the Creator, Battlemaster?”

“Only if she gives me no choice.”

The man was impassive, as he waited a few seconds for seemingly no reason. “You will be
allowed to speak to her. No more. Do not go where you do not belong, Ethereal; even you can die
here.”

The hologram vanished, leaving the Battlemaster both amused and curious. “The Creator’s minions
hold high opinion of themselves. Interesting that they claim the Imperator’s protection.”

Yang pursed her lips, as she placed her helmet over her head, a design the Battlemaster had taken
from Human medieval knights, although updated to work with her armor. “I don’t know. I have a
bad feeling about this.”

“As do I,” Sana agreed. “This is not normal. Fortunate that I did not listen to you about the lack of risk.”

For once, the Battlemaster was glad someone had ignored him. Sana was wearing her battlefield attire, something he had not seen her wear in decades. It wasn’t quite armor, but interlinked alloy weave which wrapped around her body, retaining some characteristics of robes, but with freedom of movement. She wore no hood, and there were several tools and drugs along her waist and pockets in case she needed them.

They flew the rest of the way in relative silence to the designated hangar. Interestingly enough the Blacksite physically opened up to them, blade-like pieces retracting into a triangle-shaped area, which was definitely not standard Collective design. He easily piloted it in, and set it down, while retracting the exit bulkheads and disabling the seals.

“Something is wrong here,” Sana said cautiously, looking around. “Something is interfering with my telepathy.”

The Battlemaster drew his weapon. “Blocking you?”

“No…exactly,” she explained. “But normally I am able to easily sense the minds of those around me. I cannot, or at least not beyond a short radius. I can feel you, Miss Shuren, and there are several waiting outside. But their minds are…protected. I would not be able to penetrate them without direct action.”

“Keep your guard up,” the Battlemaster instructed as he led the trio off the ship. “This may be more difficult than expected.”

Angled pillars dominated the architecture, ones which extended upwards to meet at a peak. It was not like any traditional Ethereal architecture, and reminded him somewhat of Human cathedrals. It seemed to be designed to evoke a constricted, oppressive feel, especially in such a tightly controlled space. The area was bare of any equipment or furnishings. There was only a cold grey and glossy tile for the floor which continued in all directions.

Awaiting them was a curious entourage. There were five figures, four of whom were each a different alien species, a Human, Vitakarian, Sectoid, and somehow, an unsuited Andromedon who all wore black robes and hoods. Like the figure the Battlemaster had seen before, they were in various states of decay. The Andromedon in particular looked almost white, and the skin of the others looked veined and cracked.

Unhealthy to say the least.

In contrast to them, the leading figure, a female Dath’Haram, looked unnaturally…striking. If there was a model for the race, this alien would embody it. Regal, toned, skin a pleasant shade of green and her face and eyes aesthetically pleasing even to aliens. She was without physical flaw, and even the Battlemaster couldn’t deny that she was pleasant to look at.

She wore a cloak instead of robes, but this was noticeably more intricate and ornate, allowing more freedom of movement. It had a hood, but it was down with her face exposed to the world. The trim of the robes was a sparkling gold, and strange symbols and glyphs – the same type he recalled from the Creator – were also embroidered in gold thread on the robes in specific places.

“Battlemaster,” she began with a short bow; even her voice and motions were smooth, attractive,
and without flaw. “We have been expecting you, as well as your disciple Yang Shuren and the honorable Sana’Ligna.”

At least this one was more conversational. “Then you know why we have come. Take us to the Creator.”

“As you wish,” she turned and gestured for them to follow. “Please follow me.”

They did, with the Battlemaster standing beside the leader, and the remainder of the aliens – Caretakers, the Hunter had called them, flanking them. “Who are you?” The Battlemaster asked as they walked into a similarly triangular hallway.

“I am merely the Umbra of Paradise,” she said, flashing her teeth in a Dath’Haram smile. “A mere watcher over this place. No one of significant importance, I assure you.”

The Battlemaster had a feeling that she was more important – and dangerous – than she wanted to say. But he said nothing as they kept walking until they reached a Gateway. It started automatically on their approach, and they stepped through it – from the schematics the Battlemaster knew it led to the so-called “Ascension Ring” of the first level.

“You have not been here before,” the Umbra said as they entered a larger hallway, this one a more traditional rectangle. “What brings you to Paradise?”

The Battlemaster looked down at her. “The Creator has interfered in Collective operations. I am here to determine how to handle her.”

“Ah,” the Umbra shook her head. “The Creator does not make mistakes of such nature. If she did interfere in a plan of the Collective, I am certain she was justified in doing so.”

“Unlike,” Yang snorted. “So what’s wrong with them?” She motioned to the Caretakers.

“Wrong?” The alien blinked almost in offense. “Nothing is wrong with them. To be chosen as a Caretaker of Paradise is one of the highest honors one can achieve. If of course requires sacrifice, but the gifts received are worth the mere physical pain of this world.”

The Battlemaster could imagine Yang’s unimpressed face. “They look dead.”

“One cannot bear power without a price,” the Umbra said solemnly. “These Caretakers now serve a higher purpose than their previous lives. They were all once mere mortals, unimportant, nonessential; ones who sleepwalked through life until they became ascended.”

A circular door with similarly blade-shaped segments retracted as they stepped through, into another circle which was filled with Humans. Not just any Humans, the Battlemaster saw that every single one was a Caucasian female. Blue shields separated the ring of captives into segments, with each ‘cell’ having exactly five occupants.

“What is this?” Sana demanded, as she saw what the center of the chamber held. There were a ring of odd-shaped stasis-like chambers, each one holding a Human female at various stages of some kind of mutation or disease, beside it was a table where two Caretaker Sectoids were operating on another.

“We are exceptionally organized, and of course do not squander what the Collective provides us,” the Umbra continued without pause. “These are captives from Earth. We are continuing to determine the full capabilities of their genome based on ethnicity, gender, and which adapt best to our technologies being developed today.”
The Battlemaster looked at the woman who was clearly in agony, though wasn’t able to scream because of some organic-looking creature placed over her mouth, though her eyes begged for relief. The Caretakers looked like they were trying to graft something to her flayed arm, and that they were having difficulty with it.

The Battlemaster looked around at the captives, all of them having dead expressions as they shrank away from them wherever they approached. “Am I supposed to be impressed?” The Battlemaster finally asked in a low voice. “Because this display is…lacking.”

A blade suddenly flashed by him and buried itself in the head of the woman, instantly killing her. All of the Caretakers immediately dropped to combat stances, blue energy encircling their hands and lightly glowing behind their eyes as they focused on her. A wave from the Umbra had them ease, but the Dath’Haram looked at Yang in clear disapproval. “Do you feel satisfied, Yang Shuren? Is your murder of a woman common among your people?”

“When the alternative is whatever the hell this torture is, than yes,” she said, the bloodied blade recalling to her hand as she glared through the helmet at the alien. “Is the pointless torture of civilians common among your people?”

“The woman you killed was nothing,” the Umbra said, taking a step forward. “A mere pawn of a store on Earth. A life devoid of any purpose. Here she had found one. She could have become something great, and if not, she would serve beyond death; a purpose that is eternal. In her short time here she made a larger impact on the galaxy than she ever would have on Earth. An impact which has just been culled by your selfishness.”

“And who is to decide the purpose and worth?” Sana demanded. “Did this woman choose to be here?”

“Change elicits fear,” the Umbra said, her voice low as she spoke the words. “Mortals fear the unknown. They fear the unknowable. Yet does that mean they should not be shown anyway? Should they be forgotten simply because they choose to remain blind?” She shook her head. “I was once like you, Sana’Ligna.” She stepped towards the Ethereal, who took a step back herself. “Blind and fearful of what I saw. Sickened and revolted, but eventually I learned, I watched. I began to see the purpose behind this, behind everything.”

She motioned around her. “Once I accepted the reality of the galaxy, of my place in it, for the first time I was able to know peace and assurance. Not as a mere hunter of the Dath’Haram, or a Bladedancer guarding old and irrelevant ruins, but as one who shapes the future. And I have seen the future, Sana’Ligna, and it is beautiful.”

The Battlemaster was disquieted by what she was saying. Not due to the words themselves, but by the fact that the Creator had a far more intricate hold over these aliens than he had realized. She somehow achieved a deity status with them, something he didn’t previously think she had the subtlety and mindset for.

“Enough.” The Battlemaster raised a fist, and motioned for her to move on. “Take us to the Creator. Order them to cease whatever they are doing. If I return and they are experimenting on another woman, I will kill them.”

The Umbra sighed, but waved dismissively at the Sectoid Caretakers, who left silently. “This way.”

The Battlemaster did not especially feel any charitable emotions for the Creator at this point. He supposed this had always been going on, but seeing it in person
was a different experience. On a certain level he could see that it was likely not too different from what Revelean did.

But Revelean was usually more...considerate. Experimented subjects were never conscious, or they were just killed. They didn’t suffer unnecessarily, and at least Revelean developed what he considered to be useful research. To his knowledge he had never heard of the Creator developing anything that wasn’t unnatural or of actual usefulness to anything else.

Even the Chosen were mere pawns of limited loyalty and power, and he did not want to know exactly how the Gatekeeper had been developed. What he could not completely understand was showing this off to him as if it were something to be impressed by. “Are there children here?” Sana asked.

“Of course,” the Umbra answered immediately. “Do not fear, they are specially chosen by us. Children have important roles, their purpose and potential is much grander than an adult.”

“You will take me there after we speak to the Creator,” Sana stated. “You will need to learn to live without them.”

“Heartless, Sana’Ligna,” the Umbra sounded sad. “You would tear children away from their home? From the love they receive here? Who are you to decide that this is not their home? I believed you to be better than that.”

“I am certain that whatever happens here,” Sana said slowly, her voice quiet in a way the Battlemaster knew was close to her becoming violent. Something that was exceptionally rare. “It is the farthest thing from love.”

“There is love in everything we do here,” the Dath’Haram merely continued her faux sorrow. “Yet I understand you cannot accept it. But it is what gives us strength and guides us through the trials. Even you can receive it if you open your mind to something greater than yourself.”

“Enough of this,” the Battlemaster cut her off. “Umbra, I should tell you now that the Creator will be leaving with me. Paradise will be turned over to Sana, and you will follow her orders as if she is the Creator.”

The Umbra did not respond, but merely led them forward. They entered another “Ascension room” which had nothing but Vitakarians in it, of both genders. This room had no additional Caretakers, but it was almost more horrific. All of them were horribly starved, little more than skin and bones as they looked at those on the other side of the energy fields with envy. The Battlemaster let his fist clench when he saw several of the cells had bones and clearly half-eaten corpses in them.

“Stop.”

All of them did at Sana’s voice, who unsurprisingly looked and felt both mortified and furious. The Umbra looked behind her with a faint display of disapproval. “Do you wish to continue-“

“Silence.”

The Ethereal placed two fingers of one hand on the side of her head, closing her eyes as the psionic energy faintly swirled around her. One of the Caretakers raised a blue-tinged arm right before he felt a cool blade rest against his neck.

“Touch her, and you die,” the Battlemaster said coldly. The Caretaker relented and returned to being his impassive self. After a short time the prisoners began falling over, not dead from what the Battlemaster could tell, but sleeping. Not a cure, but he knew it was better than letting them
suffer further.

“We can continue,” the Umbra said with clear dismissal as she continued walking. They continued in silence as they entered more rooms, each one some kind of twisted and repulsive experiment. Everything from each cell being exposed to a certain frequency which had caused some to cruelly force themselves deaf, or a room where each member had a hand and a foot removed.

None of them asked what the purpose could be. None of them could see any possible reason other than sadism, but at each one Sana insisted on stopping; insisted on doing something to help, even if it was minor. The Umbra allowed it, though was clearly annoyed with all the delays.

Paradise. A sick joke if he had ever heard one.

“The Creator is just beyond this room-ah!” She didn’t have time to finish as the Battlemaster telekinetically slammed her to the side as he crumpled the door leading to the Creator’s chambers. The Umbra looked mildly annoyed, and once more waved off the Caretakers from again channeling their strange abilities.

The room was almost bare, square, with an elevated square in the center where the Creator stood over a surgical table which was thankfully devoid of anything else. The chambers themselves were dimly lit, and on the walls hung tapestries of abstract symbols and art which he had no idea how to decipher. The Creator was in the same robes he had seen earlier, almost an odd mockery of Sana when she was in her own non-battlefield attire.

In the far corners he saw two figures standing silently. One was what he could only describe as a massive Sectoid, one as tall as he was. It was as if a Vanguard had been doubled in size, and given the muscle mass to match. Its head was also noticeably bigger, even proportionate to its size. The armor it wore was alien, yet regal in terms of pure craftsmanship with beautifully carved patterns and designs which seemed almost organic as it weaved through the robes it also wore as a covering.

The second one was a Muton that looked surprisingly small, or at least seemed that way as it was only the same height as the Sectoid, where it was usually the opposite. This one actually looked similar to a Berserker, at least in the color scheme. Silver armor as exquisitely crafted as the Sectoid’s covered its form, all of the engravings in red, along with a cloak over it. It wore a helmet which resembled a Muton’s face, but one with what could only be described as a solemn expression. A hammer proportionate to its size rested in one hand, the head on the ground, while the other hand was inside some kind of armored gauntlet.

“Blessed Creator, Artist of his work,” the Umbra bowed deeply as they approached. “The Battlemaster and his entourage have arrived.”

“I see them,” the Creator appraised them in disapproval. “Why have you come here, Battlemaster? I have important work to be doing.”

“I see them,” the Creator appraised them in disapproval. “Why have you come here, Battlemaster? I have important work to be doing.”

“Now is not the time to play ignorance,” the Battlemaster growled, his voice deadly calm. “Just answer my question: Did you order the attack on Earth?”

She cocked her head. “Ah, that. The Hunter betrayed my secrets I see. No matter. I ordered it, yes. I have grown tired of this constant delay in conquering Earth. Your methods are inefficient, I consulted Isomnum, and from there determined a way to break the morale of the Humans and acquire some resources that are useful to me.”

The Creator glanced down on them in near-contempt. “And I see you couldn’t help but get
involved, Sana. Naïve and useless as always. I do not apologize for my actions. In the future, you will be informed of my operations.”

“That is all you can say?” Sana exclaimed in disbelief. “After what we walked through and saw this is all you can say?”

“This is not your domain,” the Creator said in frustration. “I do not give you instructions on how to run your Blacksites. You would do well to extend the same courtesy. All who come here see Paradise, in this life or the next. All who arrive in these walls turn their directionless lives into meaningful ones. Myself included.”

“You tread on dangerous ground,” the Battlemaster continued keeping his voice low as he unconsciously let his power make the air quiver. “You know better. I believe you have forgotten your place in the Collective. You have been deranged and allowed freedom for far too long. You will be coming with me.”

“No,” she answered, crossing her upper arms. “You lack the authority-“

She let out a yell as she was yanked forward until she impaled herself on his extended blade. He telekinetically dragged her forward until her body was at the hilt, and he roughly grabbed her face with a free hand. “I want this to be perfectly clear,” he hissed in fury. “The only reason you are alive is because you are one of us. I will drag you before the Imperator and he will execute-“

He was cut off as the Creator unexpectedly gripped his weapon with a blood-stained hand. “You,” she hissed with surprising strength and fury. “Just made a fatal mistake. Your fate is sealed.”

“Battlemaster!” Yang shouted, and he pushed the Creator away just in time to avoid the spiked hammer of the Muton which would have slammed right onto his head.

“Kill them!” The Battlemaster roared as he recalled the blade to his hand, eliciting a shout from the Creator as the blade slick with blue blood swept in an arc which decapitated the nearest Caretaker – who flashed with a brief blue light from the wound - as the others began channeling their powers for real. Yang had already killed another one, and was currently facing attacks from the other two.

The Umbra simply sighed in distaste. “An unfortunate outcome. Kill them if you can, delay if you can’t.” She briefly shimmered blue and vanished. The Battlemaster looked to where the Creator was, and saw her being kept up by the massive Sectoid, who created a blue portal and pushed her into it as he turned to face the Battlemaster.

“Take care of him,” the voice that emerged from the Sectoid – a real one – sounded oddly rich and deep. “The healer will be dealt with.”

“As we have prepared for,” the Muton spoke – a female of all things. Their voices were distinctly a shade lighter, even though he had only heard one talk a handful of times. “It is an honor, Battlemaster.” Her arms began flowing with scathing purple energy which didn’t seem to scorch or scar the pristine armor; with the purple flame sheathing her weapon and gauntlet in the acidic energy. With a flourish she charged forward, swinging the hammer with the ease of a feather which he caught by the flat of his sword which held against the purple energy, first intending to test her strength.

She pushed down, but he held, just as he pushed back with a telekinetic blast. He quickly dashed forward and delivered a strike to her head, then did another dash towards the Sectoid, one sheathed in blue power as he assaulted Sana with energy of the same color. The opposing Ethereal was sheathed in her own purple aura, an ability he had not seen in decades.
He smiled under his helmet at the sight. The air itself became tinged with purple as she expanded her aura. Yang behind him was fighting skillfully, having killed another Caretaker telekinetically although she was still dealing with one.

The Muton suddenly thrust an arm forward and sent him flying backwards, which he quickly corrected via a mid-air psionic charge right back into her, the force knocking her backwards, thanks to a psionically enhanced punch. Invigorated, he rose and began striking the Muton, harder and faster than he had in decades, switching hands and adding psionic punches to the strikes.

He had forgotten what it was like to fight under the influence of Sana.

The better part was that the longer it persisted, the stronger he became.

And the weaker his opponents became.

Yang executed the last Caretaker with a beheading, and telekinetically threw her swords towards the Sectoid who didn’t even bother lifting a hand as he redirected them back at her. The Muton was fighting back, now adding her own psionic attacks and punches. She finally let out a roar and extended a hand, catching him in a vice and corrosive energy began lapping at his armor.

Unfortunately, he was still better at it. She had simply provided a means of concentrating more…directly. He focused the telekinetic power on her most vulnerable points, the joints, eyes, and organs. He heard a squish and multiple cracks as the Muton stumbled, though didn’t fall. The Sectoid was still trying to assault Sana, but was having little luck, as his psionic attacks did little but irritate her skin which knit back together near-instantly.

The Battlemaster briefly appraised both the Muton female, whose own corrosive aura hadn’t dimmed in the slightest, and the resilient Sectoid. How exactly the psionic power the Muton displayed was even possible was a question for another day. Right now he needed to focus on the situation, and took a closer look at the Muton’s companion.

The giant Sectoid couldn’t beat Sana telekinetically, and every second he continued fighting his body became weaker. But with a glance and a sudden teleport, now he was suddenly in front of the Battlemaster, and with a gesture threw him backwards causing him to slam into one of the tapestries. The Battlemaster charged forward again, and began striking from as many angles as possible.

Ironically, the Sectoid was almost a better duelist. Every strike was immediately blocked by a blue shield which existed just long enough to stop his strike. A hand faced palm-down, and the Battlemaster was anchored to the ground. The Muton charged forward with the gauntleted hand pulled back and wreathed in psionic flame, but was suddenly slowed as Yang appeared to the side, one hand extended towards the alien.

The Sectoid teleported in front of her in the blink of an eye and with a gesture bathed her in corrosive energy which easily penetrated through her armor and ravaged her body, leaving it writhing on the floor. The Battlemaster, free once more, charged the Muton, pinning it in place with his telekinesis and stabbed directly into its eye.

But his sword never hit the target, as the blade itself had been caught by the gauntleted hand of the Muton. Golden ichor bled from the hand, but the Muton swung the hammer at his head, which he in turn caught by the handle with one of his hands. Both aliens grappled with each other, with the psionic energy beginning to scratch the Battlemaster’s own gauntlet, while the blade cut ever deeper into the palm of the Muton.
With his lower arms he telekinetically drew upon his own power and directed it towards the head of the Muton once more. It roared and pushed towards him with significant strength, but he held fast, and the helmet began crumpling in on itself, already leaking more blood from the crevices.

The Muton finally drew back, yanking the weapon back to his hand, and he dashed to the side of it, grabbed the gauntleted arm telekinetically and stabbed towards it. The armor itself held, and he only managed to nick one of the gaps.

But the Muton was blinded now, even more than she had been before, and with Sana assisting, it was only a matter of time until the battle was decided. It appeared the Sectoid had recognized the same thing, as it teleported behind the Muton, and lifted it telekinetically as a portal was created behind it which it backed into, a psionic shield protecting against any possible retaliation.

The room was silent.

He looked around the room in near-disbelief at what had happened. This should not be close to possible, but it had turned out that a freak Sectoid and Muton had somehow been able to pose something of a challenge for all of them. And both of them were likely still alive, which meant they would be coming back, something which would not bode well since they would bring help.

A brief glance to the Caretaker corpses revealed that that bright flash he’d seen when he’d killed one had seemed to have some effect on the corpses. Whereas in life they had looked aged and sickly, in death they appeared shriveled and little more than sludge for some of them. This could not be natural. Psionic energy housing? He had heard of the theories of the feasibility in the Empire, but those had never materialized.

The Creator was not a powerful psion. How could she have discovered something like this, let alone seemed to perfect it?

Sana was by Yang, who was waking up. Sana had removed her helmet and had placed a palm on her forehead as she mended the wounds inflicted by the Sectoid. “What the hell?” she coughed at she saw the scars on her arms healing. “How are you—”

“It is called Biopathy,” she answered softly. “A rare skill even many Ethereals cannot learn, let alone master. I promise I will give more details later.”

“Right,” she coughed once. “Speaking of which, what the fuck was that?!”

“Unknown,” the Battlemaster said flatly. “I’ve never seen anything like it. This is far beyond experimentation. Not even the Creator could discover this on her own, not in this short a time.”

“Well, she did it,” Yang said as she rose to her feet. “Did no one bother to check what she was actually doing?”

“We can discuss this later,” Sana said, looking around. “I believe the Creator will have more of these modified creatures attack. This place…it is disruptive, but tinged with power. The barrier between the Psionosphere and reality is thin. I would not have been able to assist so quickly anywhere else.”

“I doubt our ship has survived,” the Battlemaster said grimly. “And for the current situation, we are trapped here. Our options are limited, and if she has more of those things, even we will not be able to last forever. We have one option.”

“Go deeper?” Yang winced. “Think they’ll even let us?”
“This place is connected by two-way gateways,” he answered. “They cannot be tampered with, not even the Creator could decipher Sovereign technology. There are no security measures, if we find gateways, we can cross them.”

“So the plan is to kill the Creator before she kills us?” Yang asked. “Not the worst plan.”

“But a dangerous one,” Sana looked down, as if considering something. “I suspect those were not the most dangerous creatures she had. There will be more. We need help.”

“That would be great,” Yang said sarcastically. “But where exactly are we going to get it? The captives?”

“No, they would be led to their immediate deaths,” Sana looked to the Battlemaster. “We must release Mortis.”

“Who?” Yang asked.


“When you say ‘dead’…”

“I mean he was rendered medically comatose,” Sana said slowly. “Unless…I directed him. At the end he was little more than a walking bioweapon. We share a psionic bond…” she trailed off. “This is not important, not now. We need his help if we want to survive.”

“Are you sure you can direct him?” The Battlemaster asked as he turned to go back into the hallway, remembering the schematics. “It’s been-“

“I can,” Sana said sadly as she began following. “There are some skills I can’t forget, even if I wanted to.”

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Level 1, Paradise – Orbit of the Dead World

Unknown Time

“Look out!” Yang shouted and the Battlemaster spun around to see, or rather, not see something leaping at him. The writhing solid mass was telekinetically caught, right before he stabbed upward into it. The skin was hardened, but with the iron grip of telekinesis he made it penetrate the body, it stopped writhing, and he followed up by crushing the head in his hands.

Even in death the creature was difficult to see; somehow able to blend into the environment around it, a memetic ability, he had only heard rumors of the possibility. Revelean had been working on something like that, but it appeared the Creator was far ahead of him. It hadn’t been the first attack either. One had nearly disemboweled Yang who’d required healing from Sana, and they’d been hounded by the things for the past half hour as they’d walked.

Yang herself was in sub-optimal state. Even if her physical body was able to be continuously healed by Sana, her armor was severely degraded. It was corroded all over from the psionic attack by that Sectoid, broken in multiple places, and the continuing attacks were only adding scratches and damage to the already-beaten armor.

It wouldn’t be able to protect her for much longer. A problem. One he’d have to deal with at some point.
The walls had shifted, but the Battlemaster knew which way to go. They had also sustained ambushes along the way; Caretakers appearing out of portals in front of, or behind them, with the intent to score quick kills. However with Sana with them such attacks at best only slowed them down, and after the attempt by one to push him and then Yang into a portal, the Battlemaster was keeping his guard up constantly, as was Sana.

The ambushes had stopped, but the beasts that had likely been patrolling the halls this entire time were still being encountered. They were…interestingly creative as well. They managed to always attack from where he did not expect it. From the sides, from above, when his head was turned the other way, and just when he was distracted for a moment.

Almost as if there was something watching.

The Battlemaster didn’t really know how that could be possible, since there was nothing resembling a security system, and there were no obvious observers. Either way he was on edge, and the constant attacks were doing very little to lessen this. Given how many times Yang had already almost been killed, she was sticking very close to him.

She’d made a joke that she was on her third life. One he’d laughed at if only to reassure her. If he hadn’t brought Sana along, he was certain she would be dead. He wasn’t even sure he’d be in the position he was in now. And this was probably the optimal situation.

Trapped in a hostile space station, threatened by a sadistic traitor Ethereal and her creations. The Imperator, if he knew about what was really going on, was going to have a lot of explaining to do. But there was still something wrong with this place that he couldn’t sense, but Sana and Yang could. Likely to do with his immunity to telepathy.

A blessing at this point.

“Here we are,” the Battlemaster said, looking at an unmarked door which led to the stasis chamber on the schematics. He was slightly surprised that he hadn’t encountered more resistance, but perhaps the Creator didn’t want to risk more of her pets quite yet. Or maybe she couldn’t. He didn’t know what she was planning or thinking anymore.

“What happens if they moved them?” Yang suddenly asked.

Well. That would be a problem.

“Let’s not jump to the worst scenario,” the Battlemaster suggested, as he telekinetically forced the doors open, and they entered the room. Inside was something much more reminiscent of actual Ethereal design. Well-lit, two large lockers on one wall, and on the opposite one, two stasis chambers. He didn’t fail to notice there was a dull blue orb which was embedded into the wall above, and between the two stasis chambers.

“A Sovereign Orb,” Sana also noted. “Perhaps that is why they are avoiding this area or haven’t moved the stasis pods. The Imperator also gave orders they were not to be touched.”

“I would assume it is the former,” the Battlemaster said, looking to the rightmost pod. “Orders alone would not have prevented them.”

The figure of Mortis’Ligna was as he remembered. Eyes closed, arms crossed over his chest, oxygen mask and suit keeping him alive. For being medically close to brain-dead, his body looked as healthy as a normal Ethereal. The Battlemaster hadn’t entirely liked the idea of using an Ethereal he’d developed something of a friendship with as a weapon, but the Synthesized had demanded
such a sacrifice.

And now they needed him again.

“What is this?” Yang asked, pointing to the other stasis pod which was very clearly not of Ethereal origin. It was composed almost entirely of orange shards, offering a splintered look into the chamber within.

Well, so it had ended up here. Interesting. “That is a Zudjari,” the Battlemaster said as he looked at the sleeping alien. “’Axis’ he is supposedly called, one of their most powerful. I did not realize that he had ended up here.”

“Nor did I,” Sana said. “I had assumed the Imperator had stashed him somewhere remote, like he did with Origin.”

“This is remote,” the Battlemaster pointed out. “At least very few would stumble upon him here.”

“There was a completely different species and I never was told this?” Yang sounded mildly annoyed. “This seems like it should be a lot more important than you both are saying.”

“The Zudjari are an ancient species,” the Battlemaster gave the short version. “We discovered them some time ago. We awakened some and they immediately betrayed us. We decided it was best not to investigate them further until later. There are not many of them, and this one was deemed a possible threat.”

“But that is an assumption,” Sana said slowly. “And we could use all the help here we can.”

“You want to release him?” The Battlemaster demanded. “He might attack us!”

“All of us can handle one Zudjari,” Sana said. “More importantly, I doubt he would attack when we’re all that stands between life and death.”

“Do it,” the Battlemaster sighed. “We don’t have much time here anyway.”

Sana quickly went over to the stasis chamber of Mortis’Ligna and began the awakening procedures. “Shield your mind,” the Battlemaster warned Yang as the pod hissed and began opening. “If you do not, you will die immediately.”

She swallowed. “Understood.”

The pod opened and Mortis’Ligna opened his eyes.

Then began to look around, and saw first Sana then him and Yang. “Sana…” he said in a voice that sounded like it had not been used in a long time. “What is…happening…” he stumbled out and was quickly caught by his sister.

To say he was shocked would be an understatement. Somehow, it seemed the Dead Ethereal was alive again. “You’re awake!” Sana exclaimed in similar surprise and amazement.

“Of course…” he said, strength returning to his voice, as his eyes narrowed. “What is that?”

“She is a Human,” the Battlemaster said, nodding down to Yang. “An alien species we are… utilizing to an extent.”

“The situation must be bad if the Empire is relying on aliens,” Mortis commented, and the Battlemaster realized that he had no idea what had happened.
“How much do you remember?” Sana asked slowly. “Your recent memories.”

“Oddly fuzzy,” he said, as if realizing that. “I remember fighting, I was...injured...yes, you healed me. I remember you were there,” he pointed to the Battlemaster. “I assume I was placed in stasis until I recovered.”

So he didn’t remember anything. The question was now how to break it to him. “You’ve been gone a long time,” the Battlemaster finally said, deciding to be blunt. “Sana will tell you later. We lost, the Empire is gone. The Imperator gathered a small number of us and placed us in stasis to survive it. Ever since we’ve been working to rebuild and prepare for their return,” he motioned to Yang. “Hence why we are working with aliens.”

“The Imperator?” He looked at Sana. “Which one? How could we lose...” he trailed off.

“I’ll tell you later,” Sana said. “But right now we’re in a precarious situation. We’re trapped on a station where a rogue Ethereal is trying to kill us.”

“What?”

“And we need to get to her before things get worse,” the Battlemaster continued. “Sorry for waking you up, but...well, it’s a long story. But we’re in need of your skills.”

Mortis looked down at his hands. “I see. Well, not exactly, but I trust both of you. Explain to me on the way, and I’ll kill anything that dares try and attack us.” His tone turned dark. “Especially if we have lost everything.”

“Not to interject in what I’m sure is an important conversation,” Yang interrupted. “But I can’t understand anything.”

“Apologies, Miss Shuren,” Sana said, as she placed two fingers to Mortis’s head. “It would be beneficial if you could understand the Human.”

“I suppose,” Mortis took a step towards her. “Interesting specimen. Psionic? Impressive. I can see why our species is interested in them. Can she fight well?”

“I can speak,” she answered. “And well enough.”

“Five fingers like us? Fascinating coincidence,” he continued. “Is there a whole planet full of them?”

“Unfortunately,” the Battlemaster sighed. “The situation is...complicated.”

“And will be discussed later,” Sana said as she moved to the Zudjari stasis pod. “We have another alien to talk to.”

“What is this?” Mortis asked, confused as he found his proper clothing and began donning it. “How many aliens are working with you?”

“Technically we’re not ‘working’ with this species,” the Battlemaster corrected as the crystalline structure of the pod began to retract as was expected of Zudjari technology. “The last time we woke one up, it tried to betray us.”

“I assume it didn’t go well for them?”

“No.”
The Zudjari adjusted almost immediately, and once he stood, froze, eyes rapidly blinking as it appraised the situation. It wasn’t attacking, which was…good. Yang gave a brief wave, and Sana raised a hand and touched her head, then pointed at him. The Zudjari nodded once, and she did the same transfer of language she had done with Mortis.

The Zudjari shook his head, before focusing on them. “This tongue…is strange. Mouth not suited.”

“You will adjust,” the Battlemaster said. “Others of your species have.”

“Others,” he looked around. “What are you? Where am I?”

“Right now you are trapped,” the Battlemaster motioned around with a bloody sword. “As are all of us. We needed help, and from how Mu’ut Jeen described you, you are a powerful psion.”

The Zudjari visibly perked up at that. “Assimilator Jeen lives? Excellent.”

“No, he doesn’t,” the Battlemaster interrupted. “He made the mistake of attacking us, and is now dead. He is the reason you are here and not at the Forge.” The vertical mouth of the alien opened and closed several times. “You are Axis, correct? You were one of the few who were named.”

“Axis…” the alien paused. “That will suffice, for now. I will demand the full story, but I see and sense that this situation is precarious. But I must know…does Origin yet live?”

“Yes, but he is away and has not been awakened,” the Battlemaster said. “We did not want a repeat incident.”

Axis closed his eyes in clear relief. “Then I am content for now. Allow me to prepare, and I will assist in this conflict I find myself in.”

“I assume you’re going to be useful?” Yang asked.

If Axis had questions about another alien, he didn’t share them. “I am an Axis of the Zudjari Mosaic. Only the Origin can surpass my power, alien.”

“Then prepare,” the Battlemaster said. “This will not be an easy fight.”

“What is the plan?” Mortis asked, as he finished putting on his own gear.

“We fight to the center of this place,” the Battlemaster said, turning to the exit. “And then we kill the Creator.”

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Supplementary Material

Chronicles of Salvation:

- Nulla - When Eyes Open
- Inma - Gates of the Garden

Chapter End Notes
So, some of you may have questions about what is actually going on in this place and how everything happened or got to this point without much warning before this chapter. The next chapter will definitely answer some of these questions, but there is a significant amount of extra backstory/lore here that isn't going to be discussed anytime. Most of anything to do with Paradise, the Creator, or Bringer was not originally conceptualized by me, but by Edumesh, one of my editors who put an absurd amount of work into it.

Because I wouldn't want his work to go to waste, I asked if he'd be interested in doing a supplementary companion piece detailing everything else regarding the Bringer and Paradise, and he said yes. So there will be a new additional piece of supplementary material coming fairly soon. I forgot there was a waiting period for making accounts, so he's in the process of getting one now. Hopefully he'll have it in a few days. I'll link it here and in the next chapter when it is posted. It's definitely something different than most of what I've written so far.

If you don't want to wait until it's posted on AO3, the Chronicles of Salvation is posted to FF.net, but will eventually be posted here as well:
https://www.fanfiction.net/s/13013855/1/
Watching Mortis put on his war attire was almost nostalgic in a way. The arrival of the Twin had been an event, whether there was a war or not. His armor was sleek and form-fitting, covering even his joints, the black metal polished until it shone brightly. The edges of the armor were trimmed in gold, with the symbol of the Ethereal Empire emblazoned on the chest.

The helmet was similarly designed; form-fitting, black, and without eye sockets or lights of any kind. The equally black robes he wore were more akin to those of Quisilia and Macula; integrated into the armor and hanging down his sides, nearly touching the floor, but didn’t impede his movement. He pulled the hood over his helmet, and gave his sister a nod, before repeating the gesture with the Battlemaster.

Axis was similarly preparing, and it was somewhat fascinating for the Battlemaster to watch, as the armor was far different than anything in the Collective. Each piece interlocked and connected to each other to create one single suit of armor. There was a fine black mesh that gave the illusion of flexibility, but there was hard metal underneath.

The locks around the knees, wrists, and elbows clicked as each piece was added, with the small lights turning from red to orange to signify a successful lock. The armor around the neck was much thicker, and the back seemed significantly more armored than the front. The helmet itself was globe-shaped, with the face and upper head visible through a transparent element. The helmet reminded the Battlemaster of the Human space suit helmets, although this one was likely far more fortified.

The Zudjari pressed a few buttons on his wrist, and the transparent element darkened to black, then reverted back again. The alien rolled his shoulders, and held out a hand and orange crystal sprouted from his fingers to create a short shield, while another crystal blade appeared on the opposite wrist. At a nod of confirmation, both retracted into his suit. So their armor could generate that crystal. Good to know, and combined with his psionic abilities, that made him a more dangerous opponent.

At least for now he was on their side, although the Battlemaster would have preferred to know exactly what he was dealing with. He knew how the Sectoids used and understood psionics. They were able to easily observe and determine the same of the Humans. He could not say the same about the Zudjari, and if Mu’ut Jeen had been a representative of their power, it meant that, psionically, Axis was on the skill of a Hive Commander.


The Battlemaster brandished his sword, lifting it vertical to the ground, flat facing Axis. “I was…am…a Battlemaster. The final ritual to become one was to go to the Dead World and forge my weapon. I was successful, but the price was that my telepathic abilities were reduced to nothing. But in return, I can no longer be affected by attacks on the mind. As for my weapon…” He let it lower to the ground. “I was trained as such. We had no need of the rifles of other aliens. Fighting your enemy close is more respectable and honorable. It shows the skill and bravery of the
individual in question. More importantly, most are unprepared for such an attack.”

“Curious,” Axis turned around his own wrist, displaying the device the crystal had emerged from. “Yet I can understand the…satisfaction…of killing an enemy up close. Though few were a challenge for me. Weapons are…” he shooed his hand. “Archaic. Wasteful. For myself, at least.”

“You say that, but I’m sure you’ll change your mind when a bunch of ‘archaic’ and ‘wasteful’ missiles rain down upon you on Earth,” Yang interjected from the side sarcastically. “Did either of your species actually fight anyone competent?”

“One,” they both said at the same time, looked at each other, and then back at Yang.

The woman snorted.

A loud clang attracted all of their attention, and the Battlemaster immediately spun towards the source of the noise. The Sovereign Orb that had been above the two stasis chambers had suddenly fallen onto the ground, and the dull blue light that had surrounded it was gone, and revealed it to be a solid black orb.

“I don’t suppose that is supposed to happen?” Mortis asked, taking a step forward. “Also, what is that?”

“That…was…a Sovereign Orb,” Sana said cautiously, eyeing it suspiciously. “Or at least I thought so.”

“What is a Sovereign Orb?”

Mortis was going to be in for something of a shock later. “We’ll explain later,” the Battlemaster said, as the orb suddenly hissed and cracked open, half of it raising several inches higher. A black mist-like substance began spilling outward. The Battlemaster hissed. “Nanites!”

Everyone backed up from rapidly expanding mass, although the mass didn’t expand beyond a foot from the orb, which rose into the air and further segmented into fourths, and then eights, all tenuously connected as it hovered at roughly Yang’s height. The nanites swirled around the orb, likely kept in place by some magnetic field or perhaps the nanites were designed in such a way that aviation was easy.

“Is this an ally?” Axis asked hesitantly. “Or should I contain it.”

The Battlemaster hesitated. “I am—"

“Stasis pods unlocked – Zudjari Axis and Mortis’Ligna.” The voice that emerged from the machine was emotionless and mechanical. “Unauthorized breach suspected. Analyzing units in the vicinity.”

Several clumps of the nanites sped towards them, far faster than any of them could move away. None of them felt anything, but the Battlemaster felt dread as the nanites slipped into the nearly invisible gaps between his armor, and the rest of them looked to be in various states of concern. The Battlemaster didn’t think the Imperator would put some kind of contingency that would kill them.

But then again, he hadn’t expected the Creator to try and kill him either.

“Analysis complete – All units marked as allies and cleared of Bringer corruption. Ethereals identified as the Battlemaster, Sana’Ligna, Mortis’Ligna. Zudjari identified as Axis of the Zudjari
The mass swirled around the orb. "Structural damage identified on allied unit Yang Shuren. Weapons insufficient to defeat Bringer-corrupted units. Providing support." A large amount of nanites sped towards Yang, and began fixing her severely damaged armor. Another (smaller) mass jumped towards the Battlemaster.

Or more specifically, his weapon.

The blade was suddenly coated in a black layer of nanites, from hilt to tip. Axis’s gauntlets were also covered with the nanites, and when he created a small blade the nanites quickly formed to cover it. Well, this was certainly going to make his job easier if they would do what he thought they would. Yang’s armor was soon fixed, and those nanites returned to the orb.

"Ally support complete," it rumbled. "Beginning purge of all Bringer-corrupted influence. Level one purge commencing." The orb then began moving towards the exit, slowly but surely, the mass of nanites continuing to swirl around it, like a black plague of insects.

"Since when were we this good at nanotech?" Mortis asked in confusion. "The Empire was good at a lot of things, but our nanotech was nowhere near this level."

The Battlemaster considered his answer. "We didn’t."

"Answers can be discussed along the way," Axis interrupted, pointing out. "We should begin moving. That…thing…will be a sufficient distraction for this Creator. But I would prefer we kill this…individual sooner than later. I dislike this place. It is…wrong. I cannot telepathically make sense of what is deeper in this place."

"It is certainly…off," Mortis mused, flexing the fingers on his upper hands. "But interesting. The veil between the Psionosphere and reality is certainly weaker here, something I didn’t think was possible. But I agree, we should move now. A warning – do not under any circumstances drop your telepathic guard."

Yang frowned as she put her repaired helmet on again. "Yes, I was told this, but why?"

Mortis gave her a long look, made more foreboding by his eyeless helmet. "Because you will die. That unfortunately cannot be helped. But I can assure you that if our enemies are mortal…they will die."

"Then forward," the Battlemaster recalled the map. "I know the way to the second level."

After that though…they would be in uncharted territory.

Normally the prospect of a challenge would be exciting. Such was rare these days. But the Battlemaster felt that they had stepping into something that was truly dangerous. Something that they should not have stumbled across.

But it was too late to turn back now. They had no choice but to go deeper.

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Level 1, Paradise – Orbit of the Dead World

Unknown Time
The Battlemaster knelt down to the group and cupped the orb-thing in his hand. Much like the strange beasts which had attacked them earlier, this also had some strange camouflage skin, from most angles being nearly invisible, and in others having some kind of black covering. A light squeeze of his hand made the black skin crumble, leaving him uneasy with what he held.

It appeared to be a brain.

A Human one, to be specific, although it could have perhaps been a Vitakara. It was too small to be a Sectoid or Muton, and not even the Creator would not use any Ethereal genetics. Nonetheless this was…unnerving, for lack of a better word. It was not quite the same shape as a standard brain, however, it was more rounded and no indication to the split human brains had down the middle.

Complex machinery was weaved through it, although not much. A small anti-gravity device was on the bottom of it, and a small ‘eye’ was also attached. Was this some kind of security system?

He let the thing drop to the ground as he turned back to the group. The group which had the corpses of more of those creatures around it. Along with more orbs that had fallen in their trail. Mortis looked down at the brain. “The Imperator is certainly more lax than the Empire when it comes to…experimentation,” he said tactfully. “While I am currently questioning his mental faculties, I can admire allowing this degree of freedom.”

“I highly doubt he sanctioned this,” the Battlemaster said slowly, though he wasn’t sure if he believed it. The Imperator was no fool. He would not have let this place stand if he in any way opposed what was going on.

“In any case,” Mortis turned back to the corridor. “They will not pose problems for us.”

In that he was right. They had heard the leaps of those creatures, but as expected the moment they had entered into the presence of Mortis, they simply keeled over and died.

The Battlemaster had never asked how Mortis had developed that particular skill, but he supposed it didn’t matter. Perhaps as a means of self-defense, perhaps as a side effect of his Biopathy. All that mattered was that the only thing beings thought when they stood before the Dead Ethereal was that they should cease to exist.

And the brain shut down.

The body followed.

All it took was seconds.

The group had split into two, all of them keeping their guards up as they walked the corridors – which had shifted since his arrival, though the Battlemaster remembered the patterns. Yang and Axis took the front, while Sana, Mortis, and the Battlemaster were in the back. It didn’t take long before Sana began informing Mortis quietly of what had transpired.

They walked for…it felt longer than it probably was. Nothing more ambushed them. Yet. With obvious guilt Sana was finishing explaining his situation, with the Battlemaster largely remaining quiet as he watched and tensed for any surprise attacks.

“Interesting…” was the first thing Mortis said, his voice contemplative as he likely looked aimlessly forward, probably wishing he was somewhere else to ponder this. “I wonder if a similar result could be achieved without the necessary psionic bond.”

“I don’t believe so,” Sana said softly. “The Empire tried to replicate what happened. It was a
“I see,” Mortis glanced down at one of his hands, perhaps thinking of how many more he had killed while being an unknowing puppet. “I do not resent you for this, sister. I would have allowed more as our species was on the line. I do not remember anything of this…and perhaps it is for the best.”

“But I do,” she said. “And I regret it. In the end it didn’t matter.”

“Blame the idiots running the show for that,” Mortis’s tone turned bitter. “I’m not surprised that the first thing the Imperators did when they awakened was get rid of whoever had slowly bled the Empire dry. I know we could have won this, if only they had listened to us and made the necessary.”

“It would have led to the same result,” the Battlemaster finally spoke, making them turn to him. “The Synthesized had held back the entire time. Yes, the Imperators killed one of the Primes. But it was the only one.”

“Imperators,” Mortis sniffed, shaking his black-helmeted head. “Last ditch efforts by the Empire. A step forward, but I agree that they would have failed no matter their arrival, though not for the reasons you think.”

“Then why?” The Battlemaster was curious. Mortis had only seen the beginnings of the Imperators before his accident, but he was well aware that Mortis had disliked many of the military actions and strategies used by the Empire, though didn’t believe he was fully qualified to speak up against it. He was, after all, something of a hybrid. Respected, but with no authority. Powerful, but alone in his specialization, only his sister could understand. He was on a different level than other Ethereals; alone in a sense.

“But Imperators,” Mortis said, throwing a glance forward as they all paused, hearing a low rumble. Another wall moving most likely. Cautiously, they resumed walking. The Battlemaster could hear Yang and Axis speaking ahead, but focused on Mortis instead. “Imperators,” Mortis began again. “They are…how do I put this?”

He thought briefly. “Superior. They were the most powerful, the smartest, on another level even to the most powerful. Deities in a way…” he trailed off thoughtfully. “And naturally, they did not believe they could make mistakes. I spoke with three. Each one was unnaturally confident. Each one had a plan they knew would bring victory.”

Mortis straightened his cloak. “It was infectious, even for me. The Imperators did not strike me as…arrogant…their skills were justified. But they lacked fear. They can’t conceive of someone genuinely outwitting or beating them. It is always an excuse, always something to blame that didn’t go according to plan. They have no check on their ambitions. They believe they are infallible because that was how they were treated by everyone.”

The voice of the Dead Ethereal lowered an octave as they walked into one of the testing facilities and he saw captives, these ones all female Vitakarians who seemed to be succumbing to some kind of infection which was covering their bodies. All of them watched silently as every alien in the room died as Mortis walked through it; quite possibly a mercy in death.

Mortis clearly did not want to speak of it. “If what I am seeing right now is any indication, the Imperator that is still alive is no exception. A superior without equal. I imagine he has a master plan to defeat the Synthesized? Something that now he can pursue, unshackled by the constraints of the Empire?”
Hearing the sarcasm and bitterness from Mortis was jarring. Not because it was out of character, Mortis, and Sana to an extent, had both been proven right in the worst possible way. Their opinions on the Empire silenced and redirected until the need for change was apparent – but it was too late.

No, it was jarring because it was coming from an Ethereal. The Twins lacked the emotional…

coldness that most Ethereals possessed. The words coming from Mortis were what he would expect from a Human, perhaps a Vitakara. Sana never expressed this tendency like her brother had, but Mortis had been the closest thing to a deviant in the Empire.

Or a radical.

Not that it mattered once the War began. Everyone fell in line; but Mortis had never forgotten that his insistence that the Empire required change could have…if not led to victory, perhaps given them more of a chance. But he had never said so to the many enemies he’d made in Civil and Military Command. It wouldn’t have changed anything.

Mortis was waiting for an answer. The Battlemaster should have been more confident, but he had an uneasy feeling that Mortis was perhaps more accurate than he wanted to admit. “A tenuous plan, yes. One which involves aliens.”

“Obviously,” Mortis said dryly. “Little option now, though it’s good to know that barrier is broken. I suspect it has gone well?”

The Battlemaster and Sana exchanged a look. “Largely,” the Battlemaster said slowly. “Though at the moment…there is a species which is fighting back.”

“Really,” Mortis sounded torn between amazement and sarcasm. “I…don’t suppose you could elaborate on that? And…ah, how that is actually possible?”

“Well,” the Battlemaster motioned to Yang. “The species is psionic. There is also an Ethereal assisting them. An Aegis.”

“But Aegises were always the most loyal?” Mortis now just sounded confused as they kept walking. “Why would one do this? This would not happen without a good reason.”

“He disagreed with how the species was being handled,” the Battlemaster said tactfully.

“Because we invaded their planet without spoken reason or warning,” Sana oh-so helpfully added, taking the opportunity to voice her own opinions about the Earth situation. “Despite assimilating previous species peacefully.”

Mortis actually stopped and stared at the Battlemaster. “I would have thought better of you. That seems out of character for you.”

The Battlemaster grimaced under his helmet, keeping his voice level. “I have orders. I am not privy to every decision or reason of the Imperator. I trusted him and did not question if he had a plan or reason.”

None of them commented on the past tense of the word.

Mortis let out a sigh. “And this is the Imperator who is going to beat the Synthesized. Excellent. Quite clearly of sound strategic mind and rational decisions.” He shot a pointed look around the hallway, even as more of the beasts died. He was becoming more emotional, more unstable and his aura was fluctuating in range.
At least here it was useful.

“Mortis…” Sana extended a hand and touched his shoulder. “Be careful when speaking to the Imperator. He will not be so…”

Mortis simply stepped in front of his sister without a glance behind, his voice cold. “You are too kind, sister. Too meek. It is your nature, but take a stand for what you believe for once in your life. We made that mistake before, when the Empire quietly distracted us. You have not learned. But I am not going to do so again.”

He turned around, facing the Battlemaster. “I’ve woken up to learn that the Empire is dead, and the best hope for our species is in the hand of an Imperator which invades primitive species for no reason, allows far too much leniency with others he’s brought along, and doesn’t bother to apparently share everything with the few of us who are left.” He spun back around sharply. “Forgive me if I am not filled with immediate respect for our supposed leader. I do not hold you accountable, Battlemaster, but you are loyal to a fault.”

He motioned forward. “But now is not the time for this. That will come after we kill this thing which calls itself a Creator.”

“Battlemaster!” Yang suddenly called, as she pointed to the end of the corridor. Glad to have the diversion, the Battlemaster stepped forward as he saw what she was pointing at. “I think this is the Gateway.”

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Level 1, Paradise – Orbit of the Dead World

Unknown Time

Yang didn’t know when she had moved ahead of the Ethereals, with Axis joining at her side. It felt disproportionate to be far smaller than literally every other alien in the area. Axis alone was close to three meters. She wished she knew a little more about the Zudjari in general, let alone the one who called himself Axis.

The Zudjari also seemed to not be comfortable around the Ethereals, and even if he didn’t know anything about her, he was at least taller. Likely it gave him some more confidence. The armored alien with the spacesuit-like helmet had been largely silent as they walked, perhaps thinking about how unlucky he was to wake up in this place.

And she could sympathize.

This place…it was wrong on more levels than one. There was a profound wrongness that permeated the entire area. She felt more powerful here…unnaturally so. Yet at the same time she felt chills up her spine as if she was constantly being watched. Multiple times she’d felt like she heard something, a whisper, just on the edge of her consciousness.

“Why are you with them?”

Yang glanced up at the deep voice of the Zudjari, who stared ahead resolutely as they walked. She knew what he was talking about, and didn’t give a rhetorical reply. “Their leader gave me a choice. I accepted it.”

“Yet you are not a slave?”
Yang snorted. “No.”

“Yet the same can’t be said for others of your kind.”

“Also no,” Yang said. “The Ethereals are not slavers.”

They stepped into one of the sickening experimentation rooms, which had reminded Yang about the stories of Unit 731, horrific experiments done by the Japanese on captives during the Second World War. A dark part of her had been fascinated by what had happened there, and what they had learned from such experiments.

She had never wanted to see what it would look like, done with modern technology. Humans were clearly not the only species to possess cruelty. She had thought the Ethereals were largely better. Sure, they experimented on captives and prisoners, but there was a definite purpose to it. Not cruelty, but a clean, sterile goal. ADVENT and XCOM were the same, and she’d be a hypocrite if she thought otherwise.

Then again, if the Imperator had kept the existence of this place from all of them, who knew how accurate her perception really was?

Axis was speaking as they walked through. “Do you really believe that? Have all these aliens been captured or convicted of crimes?”

Yang just shook her head, but remained silent. “And yet you fight with them willingly.” It was a statement.

“Yes,” she shrugged, idly balancing one of her swords enhanced by that Sovereign machine in a hand. “Trust me when I say that the…leaders of my own species aren’t better. This…isn’t representative of the Ethereals.”

Axis looked down on her for the first time. “You have no goal. No purpose.”

She smiled dryly under her helmet. “Oh, I do. But it’s personal. I don’t care about my species anymore. Not really. I don’t need to have a greater goal or purpose than revenge.”

Axis surprisingly nodded. “I have encountered aliens like you before. When their focus is complete, then they are nothing. They are empty. And we saved them, fixed and molded them into something with a goal that mattered.”

Yang just looked up into the black helmet of the alien. “And what if I don’t care about that?”

“You will.” Was the simple reply.

She didn’t respond to that. They walked in silence for a while, until Yang needed to speak to ignore the increasing pressure on her head, even as the Ethereals began talking heatedly in the background. “Your turn. What are you?”

“...an Axis of the Zudjari Mosaic. One who regularly communicated with Origin.”

“I have no idea what any of that is.”

The alien paused, considering. “This galaxy…Yang…” he stumbled over her name hesitantly, not specifically sure if she wanted to be called that. At a nod he continued. “This galaxy is vast, expansive, and unique. But it is not an accident. Those that inhabit it are not products of chance. It
is…” he paused. “A puzzle. A mosaic. The galaxy are these with the pieces scattered; the mosaic broken. That is what my species learned, and it is upon us to rebuild this broken Mosaic into what it was originally.”

He looked back down on her. “Every species, every planet, no matter how great or insignificant, is a part of this Mosaic. It was the mission of the Axis’, my mission, to determine what the purpose of these species and planets was.”

Yang raised an eyebrow under her helmet. It was, she had to admit, an interesting reason to give to conquer the galaxy. “And how did you know what the purpose was?”

“Origin.”

“Which means nothing to me.”

“Origin existed before this galaxy was broken,” he explained slowly. “The cataclysm which shattered it killed the original creators. Yet Origin survived, rebuilt, and determined that our species were the ones who would put it back together. And…we failed.”

Even through the deep voice, Yang heard the bitterness and self-loathing, as well as sensing it with her heightened telepathy. She didn’t think it would be ideal to ask questions, such as how they knew Origin was something real, or pointing out that the concept of a galactic ‘mosaic’ was somewhat questionable, given how species had likely risen, expanded, and died, without the Zudjari ever knowing about them.

Unless the ‘mosaic’ was not supposed to be something static. Perhaps she could ask him about it later, assuming they got out of here alive.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” she said with a shrug. “You’re still alive.”

“I suspect these Ethereals have more selfish reasons for the subjugation of the galaxy. My survival means little in light of this.”

He did have a point. “Stick to the Battlemaster,” she finally said. “He’s reasonable. I doubt he’ll agree with you on everything, but as far as best utilizing things…he knows what he is doing. He’s one of the good ones. Not,” she motioned one of her swords around. “Like this.”

“I feel I don’t have a choice,” Axis muttered. “They are more powerful than I am, regardless. The black armored one, he is unsettling. The other robed one is as well, even as she is a complete opposite. I am already in a trap, and unlike you, I have no desire to stay in it.”

“Maybe you can ask them to put you back in the pod,” Yang said as they rounded a corner. “But right now, I would assume life is preferable to death. I’m sure they can come to some kind of agreement with you. The Imperator did for me.”

“The one who allowed this place to exist?”

“Yeah,” Yang scowled. “Trust me, he’s going to be getting enough questions from the three Ethereals here now. I’m sure he has some explanation…he should hope it is a good one.”

“Would it matter?”

Yang thought about that, and then came to an unfortunate realization that the Zudjari had another good point. “Probably not,” she admitted. “Furious as the Battlemaster is…he is loyal to the Imperator. All of them are.”
Even if the Battlemaster lost his trust in the Imperator, he wouldn’t do anything else. He might hate it, but he would keep working towards his mission. All of them would. The Imperator couldn’t be challenged or beaten. At least not successfully, and all of them knew it. For better or worse, the Imperator was the unquestioned power in the galaxy.

She’d only see him use it responsibly, but even he, she supposed, could make mistakes or misuse it. But he had to know that abusing it as such would decrease loyalty.

This was a mess.

She needed answers. They all did.

Yang perked up as she looked to the end of the hallway. There it was, a working Gateway, though it was definitely designed differently. It was an inverted V which would be barely tall enough for the Battlemaster to fully fit through. But it could be done, and the swirling and rippling psionic energy filled the V, flashing between obscuring and transparent where Yang could see the faint image of something on the other side.

“Battlemaster!” She called. “I think this is the Gateway.”

They all were around it soon enough. “We should be careful,” Sana advised. “It could be a trap. Or one could be waiting on the other side.”

“This is not a Gateway design,” the Battlemaster noted, placing an armored hand on the black metal which made the structure. “She changed it…not even Fectorian has yet.”

“Who is she working with?” Axis asked. “She could not have done this on her own.”

“She was gifted the resources of the Collective,” the Battlemaster said slowly. “Personnel, information, equipment. But she was in charge. And she could not have learned how to construct or manipulate Sovereign technology. Not without us knowing.”

“Unless the Imperator hid it,” Mortis added bitterly. “This Imperator certainly keeps secrets. There is far more going on here than any of us think.”

“We still need to move forward,” the Battlemaster said. “I will go through, then come back if it is safe. I can survive ambushes if necessary.”

“No,” Yang stepped forward. “Can’t risk any of you. Not if we want as many people out alive as possible. Let me go through, I’m more expendable.”

“Technically, that would be our other alien friend,” Mortis said, gesturing to Axis. “But you are a brave alien.”

The Battlemaster looked down at her, thinking. “We will be trapped regardless of if I survive or not. It makes little difference who is more or less valuable. If you wish, come with me as I investigate. I will not deny you that.”

Well, it was certainly better than just waiting here anxiously. And she did feel some pride at the Battlemaster allowing her along. It at least showed she was worth something. “Then let’s go,” she said.

“If it is safe, one of us will return,” the Battlemaster said as both of them walked to the Gateway.

Taking a breath, Yang stepped into the psionic portal.
Level 2, Paradise – Orbit of the Dead World

Unknown Time

Welcome home.

Yang gasped as they stepped through the Gateway, a couple seconds which felt like an eternity as she felt the very reality around her change. The feeling of being watched magnified tenfold; she no longer wondered if something was watching her, she knew it was. The air itself seemed charged, and she felt significantly stronger and more aware.

The psionic connection she possessed had expanded, as if this was a nexus of psionic energy. And just beyond the veil between the Psionosphere and reality was a presence, something that had an all-seeing eye on her. It didn’t feel malicious, but it was terrifying just how close it was. How profoundly wrong it all felt.

“Yang.” She jolted as the Battlemaster placed a hand on her shoulder, taking her out of the trance. She shook her head and looked around where they were.

It was a circular room, one with the steeples angling to a simple center point. But the room was no longer just a sterile metal room. Harsh red and white lights lit the room, though not from electronics, but what appeared to be strange organic objects which lined the walls. And the walls themselves were an unsettling fusion of metal and flesh, and towards the exits – two of them – there were noticeably beating organic…things.

“I…” Yang swallowed. “Something is watching us. All of us. It’s not the Creator.”

The Battlemaster took a few tentative steps forward, weapon at the ready. “Will it attack?”

Of course, he couldn’t sense it. “I…don’t know,” she whispered, and the presence seemed to be…almost amused. “It’s…it’s in the Psionosphere, I think…can’t you feel how weak the barrier is here?”

“Yes, but not in the same way you do,” he said slowly. “This must be artificial. The degradation of the Psionosphere should be impossible.”

It is the future. One where all will feel the euphoria experienced now.

“[Fuck!]” She hissed, reverting to Chinese briefly as that clear sentence simply appeared in her mind. It was gentle; warm; inviting; certain.

The Battlemaster spun to her. “What is it?”

“It’s talking,” she said immediately, her weapons immediately in her hands. “To me.”

“It attacked?”

“No! It just…appeared in my mind. I didn’t even sense it happening.”

The Battlemaster looked around for a moment, then walked over to the wall, near a concentration of the flesh-like substance, and made a slight incision on it. Yang understood what he was doing, especially once a few of the nanites slid off it and began eating the flesh around it. It would take time, but it would soon start consuming the room.
Life will endure. Metal will not.

Shut up. She thought in return.

“We should bring the rest,” the Battlemaster said. “Return and I will stay here.”

Yang nodded, eager to get back even if it was temporary. A few seconds later she was back in front of the Twins and Axis. “Clear, for now. But…be careful. There is something else here.”

“How?” Axis demanded, even as they moved to the Gateway.

“Have you felt like someone has been watching you?” She asked over her shoulder. “Down there…it’s much worse.”

They all stepped through…

And into a fight.

The Battlemaster was in a duel with…something…it almost looked to her like a knight. It was a piece of armor that made the Battlemaster’s look like something crudely forged, a deep silver metal with deep blue shapes and symbols engraved over it. It was an organic, sleek, and beautiful design which concluded in an eyeless helmet that emulated the design of the Winged Hussars, with appendages extending off the sides of the helmet up.

The weapon it held was a simple katana, or at least appeared to be.

A katana encased in psionic flame, a ghostly purple which somehow didn’t seem to damage the metal.

The duel between it and the Battlemaster was moving at a speed which Yang could barely keep track of even now. So quick were the strikes of the mysterious opponent, and she was seeing just how fast the Battlemaster could retaliate…in addition to also fending off the six other Caretakers in the room, including a massive…animal of some kind.

The hairless, six-legged creature leapt at the Battlemaster, the mouth opened wide, exposing the unnatural rows of teeth within. The Battlemaster sent a telekinetic blast towards the armored enemy, who somehow stood resolutely, even if it was distracted as the Battlemaster stabbed upward towards the beast.

It struck true, right through the mouth to the brain, and the Battlemaster immediately slashed up through the skull to meet another blow from the figure. Yang’s weapons were already out and telepathically being directed towards the nearest Caretaker who sneered as she turned – a decaying Human – and raised an arm before she reached out and crushed the head of the Caretaker, which emitted a brief blue flash.

Sana was immediately encased in psionic energy, as the empowering aura began filling the room. The figure dueling the Battlemaster shouted, and two Caretakers immediately teleported towards Sana. They appeared behind her, and then stood frozen as she gestured at them, right as Axis stabbed an Outsider shard into the brain of one, and then grabbed the head of another, psionic energy now encasing the Zudjari.

The duelist the Battlemaster was facing was somehow withstanding an overhead slash downwards. Yang directed one of her swords towards him, and somehow holding the Battlemaster off with one hand, he looked directly at her and the air around her crackled as the Psionosphere was torn into a rift.
She dashed out of the way, even as the rift left deep scorches in her armor, and right into the waiting hand of a robed Caretaker, one pale hand resting on her chest armor. This one was a Sectoid. Another went to her head as she felt a beginnings of a psionic attack. “Do not resist,” the Sectoid said, as it didn’t begin attacking her mind…not directly.

The barrier she felt between the real word and the…thing which watched her…that was coming apart. A ghostly hand reaching out to her mind, a presence which longed to be a part of her. Yang felt the terror rise in her, and through the paralyzing spell the Caretaker had placed her under, punched it in the face.

The feeling dissipated, and that was all she needed to recall with one hand one of her blades, and with the other, catch the robed alien in a telekinetic grip. Blue energy flowed off it, but when the blade reached her hand, she stabbed upwards to its brain, impaling it and splattering blood over her helmet.

Blinking rapidly at what had nearly happened, she looked around. Two Caretakers had tried going after Mortis, and they lay dead on the floor. Apparently Mortis didn’t consider them worth expending any more energy than a simple telepathic command, and was walking to where the Battlemaster and the armored alien were engaged in one of the fastest-moving fights she could see.

Normally the Battlemaster would have ended it by now, but in addition to being a duelist of some kind, it also had some skill with defensive psionics, as the armor was now shielded with blue ‘plates’. Yang moved to assist how she could, and realized that she couldn’t. Looking down she saw that she was stepping on a section of the floor which was made out of the same flesh substance on the walls.

Except she was up to her ankles in it.

The armored figure suddenly flashed blue, and the Battlemaster was encased in a cage, and immediately retaliated by locking the figure in a telekinetic vise. A major mistake, Yang saw. The Battlemaster was just as dangerous a psion as he was a duelist.

A fact the figure seemed to have forgotten.

And then it suddenly keeled over, limp. Yang looked to Mortis, with an outstretched hand. The psionic barriers dissipated, and the Battlemaster immediately walked over to the body as silence fell over the room.

Only it was not silence. Yang could then hear beating. A heartbeat.


Mortis looked to her, and Yang looked down to see that the flesh which had encased her ankles was now a disgusting pale slurry, one she shook off her boots and stepped onto the metal. The Battlemaster and Mortis were talking ahead. “What was that?”

“I don’t know,” the Battlemaster said, kneeling down and attempting to take the helmet off it. “But it was exceptionally skilled. Its technique was as good as mine…and a better psion.”

“Where could it possibly learn that?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps a Bladedancer.”

“A what?”
“Irrelevant. They did not train this.” The helmet was taken off, to reveal a slim Human of all things. One slightly pale, but unlike the Caretakers, in relatively healthy condition. But it had definitely undergone extensive modification. The sightless eyes were an unnatural blue, and the skin was reminiscent of the Iron Skin modification ADVENT and XCOM employed. Only far more intricate. Triangles inside circles inside squares, overlayed thousands of times. Barely perceptible in the dim light, but obvious when looked at from the right angle.

“Don’t let those things touch you,” Yang warned as she strode up. “They don’t do standard telepathic attacks. They-”

“What has your Imperator done!?” Axis stormed over furiously, tossing the corpse of a Caretaker onto the ground before all of them. “Do you have any idea what this is!?”

“Do you?” The Battlemaster demanded.

“I thought it impossible,” Axis spat. “But I made the mistake of touching the mind of this thing – and found a memetic telepathic command.”

Yang furrowed her eyebrows. “What is that?”

“A psionic theory in the Empire,” Sana said. “Never truly experimented with. It-“

“A virus,” Axis supplied. “A virus which is spread telepathically. This exact same thing almost killed half of the psions in the Mosaic. If you hadn’t been prepared – if I hadn’t realized what it was…it infects your mind. It would turn you into one of them.”

“Did that happen?” Yang began, then shook her head. “Wait, are you saying this is the same memetic command?”

“Oh, yes,” he growled. “Because I was one of the first who learned to protect myself from this command – and then ripped the knowledge from the minds of these things. Don’t ask me how it started, but we found a psionic alien – decaying similarly to what these appear to be doing…and brought him to help.” Yang heard the hiss of disgust. “Our psions read his mind…and then became corrupted. Entire planets were lost as these things converted the populations. Turned them into more of these creatures.”

“Where did it come from?” The Battlemaster demanded.

“They believed they were working for some goal,” Axis stated. “Enacting the will of something called the Bringer of Paradise. A delusion most likely, but memetic commands have that effect. We purged all of them, but it seems this Creator wasn’t under the same intelligence.”

Yang shuddered, as the presence tingled on the edge of her consciousness. “I don’t know…I think this Bringer might be real.”

“I am inclined to agree with this assessment,” Mortis added, glancing back at the dead corrupted Human. “When I touched his mind, even for a moment, I was immediately retaliated against. It was…unlike anything I had ever felt. It didn’t feel like a command per-se, but like an attack with a presence behind it.” He looked up. “There is something else here, most of us can feel it. Be careful when telepathically fighting…it would be unfortunate if our guards were let down and we succumbed to this.”

“Regardless, if this Bringer exists we simply kill it as well,” the Battlemaster said. “They know we are here now. Be careful where you step and fight. It appears these walls and floors are dangerous.” He glanced to the wall where he’d sliced it earlier, where the nanites had expanded to
take over a significant portion of the flesh square. “Begin nanite infection where you can. If we perish here, they will consume everything else.”

He waved his black sword forward. “Move forward. Kill whatever you find.”

They stepped forward, even as the heartbeat echoed in their ears.

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Level 2, Paradise – Orbit of the Dead World

Unknown Time

Perhaps, the Battlemaster realized, he had spoken too soon.

Both Mortis and Sana were speaking with Axis, specifically about protecting themselves against the command implanted in these Caretakers, and the entity that was supposedly watching all of them. The clues were there, and the Battlemaster was no longer certain he actually could easily kill whatever this Bringer was.

As difficult as it was to believe, the theory that stuck in his mind and persisted was that they were dealing with a rogue Sovereign One.

Even his mind questioned using the word rogue. This implied that rogue Sovereign Ones existed, and he assumed that the ones assisting them now might have mentioned this particular one. More importantly, if this was a Sovereign One, the Imperator had to know what it was…and he could only assume it had been given free reign.

Distasteful as it was, if this Bringer was a Sovereign, he could see why the Imperator would grant it extra freedoms.

It didn’t excuse what was happening here, but the pieces of why it seemed no one knew what was going on could be attributed to this. Too many pieces made sense for it not to be anything else. The strange abilities, the absurd level of genetic modification he had already seen, the resources, personnel, it was something that made little sense if one assumed it was the Creator, a talented geneticist but certainly no genius, who was behind this.

If she was being assisted by a Sovereign One, everything suddenly made far more sense.

Which then begged the question of why the Imperator was so insistent they ignore researching and implementing Sovereign technology. The Creator was clearly doing it, and if what he had seen was anything to go by, these soldiers would prove to be a challenge for any conventional army. There weren’t enough to make a difference, but if it was anyone other than three of the most dangerous Ethereals, a talented Human, and a powerful Zudjari, it would have resulted in death.

So he was assuming that he was dealing with a Sovereign One, which would also explain the strange presence all of them believed was watching them. Sovereigns were certainly capable of such from what he had seen. No Sovereign orbs had been observed though, which made him curious how it exerted it’s influence, because it certainly was not in the station itself.

Or was it?

They knew very little about Sovereigns. The common assumption was that they were large, the Voice had shared she had seen a massive creature that dwarfed her own size when they had communicated – one the size of a skyscraper. But it was a telepathic illusion. Perhaps he would see
a Sovereign in the flesh for the first time.

If so... he was unsure how he could kill it, even with the support of Mortis and Sana.

“It’s getting darker,” Yang noted as they walked, moving past another room which seemed somewhat equivalent to an experimentation lab – if the primary decorator used beating heart-organs, and lined the walls and floors with flesh. It was empty, but the dull black tables were stained with yellow, red, and especially disturbing – blue.

“There may be another ambush,” the Battlemaster warned, lifting his weapon. “Prepare.”

There had been several more attempts since the fight in the entrance. Before they could do anything Mortis simply raised a hand and they died on the spot. He was in no mood to deal with annoyances, and neither was the Battlemaster. He was still concerned over the very real possibility of them being separated via a quick teleportation, but they would have to strike faster than Mortis could kill them.

An unlikely feat, although Mortis reported that they were at least trying to defend themselves. Failing, but trying.

And also that the virus described by Axis didn’t quite feel like such, but like an active telepath was protecting them. A powerful one.

The Bringer?

The Battlemaster stabbed his blade into one of the beating organs. They had figured out that the slow beating that permeated the area was definitely caused by those – and alarmingly, Axis had reported that they were emitting some kind of limited telepathic field. As a result they destroyed them every single time they found one.

Unnatural. There were too many things here that shouldn’t be possible.

Is this what working directly with a Sovereign brought?

He wondered how much further they would have advanced if they had embraced working with the Sovereigns. However, such discussions could take place after they were out of here, which unfortunately was looking more and more difficult and dangerous.

“It’s getting taller,” Sana also noted, and the Battlemaster immediately saw what she was talking about. The ceiling which had remained high to start with, seemed to expand upwards into the void. Indication of a room ahead? A large one? This screamed of some kind of trap, and the additional comments didn’t dissuade that.

“Are those drapes?” Yang sounded confused, but indeed there were now ceremonial silver and blue drapes which hung from the walls, and up ahead was a literal curtain blocking the way forward. Perhaps a dining hall? A theatre? He would not have been surprised by either at this point.

“Do you sense anything?” He asked.

“No,” Sana said slowly. “But that means little. I haven’t sensed anything until it was right in front of me. This place clouds our ability to sense anything. But there is a large concentration of... something inside.”

Most likely enemies then. A trap of some kind. “Be ready,” he said, raising his sword in a
defensive stance. “This may be a difficult fight.”

Yang spread her hands apart and telekinetically moved the curtain to the side. Pitch darkness was all they saw, but there was no other way but forward. Defenses raised, they half-moved, half-charged forward into blackness.

And stepped in front of an audience which immediately applauded their entrance.

The oddness of the immediate sight made him briefly hesitate, and he then saw that all of them were bathed in moonlight, a small circle which illuminated only them. He didn’t look to find the source, not yet. It turned out not to be an illusion, they were actually on a stage, in front of an audience of…robed Caretakers, and other armored and robed figures.

A quick count, from what he could tell, as the entire audience was only sparsely lit, also with moonlight, there were fifty. A small audience, but they made up for it in sheer enthusiasm. But they quickly took second priority when he paid attention to what was actually on the stage itself. There was an extremely ornamented table with, disturbingly enough, plenty of seats for everyone, including full dishes of food.

Then the other figure on the stage spoke.

“Representatives of the Ethereal Collective, welcome!” The voice was male, oddly…delicate…and even more strangely, was clearly accented in French, a Human language. The words were also English, and overall the voice made for something unexpected indeed. Which paled in comparison to the source of the voice itself.

It was perhaps the oddest thing he had seen yet, which certainly spoke to the surrealness of this place.

The source of the voice was a Sectoid, but most certainly not an ordinary one. First it more closely resembled a Human in stature, if slightly taller than an average one. It was slightly less defined than a Vanguard, but that was a minor detail. It’s attire grabbed his eye; which was a full suit – complete with a tie – white conductor gloves, and dress shoes.

It’s face was smaller than even that of the Vanguards, and seemed to have a completely naturally designed mouth, which almost looked maniacal in contrast with the smooth noseless face, and the solid-blue eyes which glowed with power. Clearly a psion, and probably a dangerous one at that.

It carried few weapons, save for some kind of melee weapon on its waist the Battlemaster couldn’t quite see, and what appeared to be an old Human pistol strapped diagonally across its chest, both within easy grasp if necessary.

“Oh ah,” the Sectoid raised a finger as Mortis raised his hand. “None of that now, honored Ethereal. You wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to our other guests, now would you?” He elaborately motioned upwards and more shafts of moonlight illuminated the terrified forms of children, four Human, two Vitakarian, one Borelian, and one Dath’Haram.

Each of them were held in a strange grip of a creature, one with six appendages, all of which were holding fast to the wall they had pinned the children against. A head-like…thing rested at the respective place of this creature, and was just under the heads of the children. The Battlemaster couldn’t make out more details of these spider-like beings, but the message was clear enough.

“Now, now,” the Sectoid said with an air of confidence that normally would be delusional in front of an Ethereal. “I’m aware of all of you. The great Battlemaster, the gentle Sana, and radical
Mortis. All three here tonight, in addition your disciple Yang, and the awakened Axis. Truly tonight is a spectacle to never be forgotten!”

He raised a hand and the crowd cheered further. “Now then,” he said, taking a short bow. “I am Preximius, your host for tonight. Understand that if you… disrupt this fine evening, then there are certain consequences.”

Almost on cue, the creature with the leftmost child, a Human, moved the head upwards until two spiked appendages extended, and with a lightning motion, stabbed the child through the skull. Preximius closed his eyes, and rolled his head back as the creature kept the body suspended.

“Oh, fuck,” Yang breathed. “I might be sick.”

The Battlemaster had the feeling that she wasn’t simply referring to the act of murder. “Ah,” Preximius said contentedly. “Truly wonderful, the mind of a child is. An innocence and joy which is so often lost to the cold reality of the galaxy. Delicious and extraordinary, I certainly hope each of you enjoyed this fine appetizer?”

This seemed addressed to the crowd, which sickeningly applauded and laughed at this. “What kind of monster are you?!” Sana yelled. “Those are children!”

“They most certainly are, I have eyes if you couldn’t tell.” The crowd chuckled as the Sectoid moved to the head of the table. “And tonight we celebrated the life of one. A bright flame who lived a life of happiness, friendship, and love. All have their place, all touch us in some way, and now she is in Paradise, and as such, at His side.”

He shook his head. “Ah, such games we play. All of you are too attached to life. Indeed, resisting tonight would only send these young minds to the Paradise we can only touch in this mortal realm. Yet I must command your attention somehow, and this is certainly effective.” He motioned to the table. “Now, sit! Tonight will be a most entertaining evening indeed. We so rarely get such distinguished visitors.”

A hand touched his shoulder. “Give me time,” Mortis rumbled under his breath. “Keep this freak talking.”

The Battlemaster simply nodded. At the moment he didn’t want to sacrifice the children. He didn’t feel he was in mortal danger here…yet. Playing along might be beneficial. “Why?” He demanded.

Preximius heaved dramatically. “Because it is polite? You have been a rude guest to our home thus far-“

“We were attacked!”

“You dared to strike His chosen Artist,” Preximius sounded genuinely offended. “Even for a simple brute such as you, that is too grave an insult to take lightly. Now, sit.”

Sana and Axis moved to take a seat, with Mortis moving in that direction. The Battlemaster stayed put, he wouldn’t follow the instructions of this thing. Yang hesitated, then stayed at his side. “Stubborn,” Preximius said with a dismissive wave. “Expected of a sightless. Yet tonight can continue as planned! Now, let us begin!”

Applause broke out, and amazingly, the Battlemaster saw a small orchestra begin playing. There was a mixture of primarily Human and Vitakara instruments, and in distaste he saw they had seemingly been modeled as though they were in corpses. This Sectoid couldn’t even make simple music without it being over-the-top….there was a Human word for this.
Edginess. Or shocking. Either way he did not appreciate whatever ‘artistic’ value it held.

The Sectoid suddenly frowned, then glanced up at the children who were still continuing to sob, struggle, and express to someone the terror they felt. “No, this simply will not do,” he said. “I apologize for such disruption to our evening. Children sadly cannot quite understand the privilege they find themselves in here.”

The Battlemaster realized that he was referring to the fact that the sounds of the terrified children were disrupting the music the orchestra was playing below. Preximius closed his eyes, and there was a slight distortion in the air. The Battlemaster coldly determined his assumption was right as the children suddenly became quiet.

Until they began to sing instead.

No words, but their young voices instead joined in the music of the orchestra. Haunting and impeccable as if they had been trained for years. A choral addition which only brought juxtaposition to the rising music taking place in the madness and nightmare around them.

The faces of the children did not seem frightened any longer, but content as they sang for the crowd and guests of Paradise.

“There…” Preximius’s smile widened once more as he laced his fingers together and rested them on the table. “Perfect; such beautiful young voices to complement our evening.”

“You are a monster!” Sana spat furiously. “How could you-“

The Sectoid almost looked hurt. “Dear Sana, I would have thought you of all would understand. Terror and fear are self-destructive. It is cruel to let them suffer so needlessly.” He waved upwards. “And now they feel no such emotion. They only understand the contentment and joy that comes with Paradise. Can you really not understand this?”

“You are forcing them to do this against their will!”

“For their own benefit!” The Sectoid was undaunted. “And is that not what you say when you ease the pains of those who come to you. The experiments of the mind you perform.” Preximius said the words with a malevolent glee. “Did you ever ask what they wished? No! Because you simply knew it was for their own good! To ease their pain and suffering.”

Mortis glanced over at Sana, who glared furiously at the Sectoid. “Do not even begin to compare yourself to me.”

Mortis had also seemingly had enough of this.

“Give me one reason I shouldn’t melt you and your audience,” Mortis growled. “Aside from holding children of all things hostage.”

“Because you want to live,” Preximius said with a smile. “Death, kill, destroy, you are a simple creature with simple wants, are you not? Open your mind to some more pleasures in life. Food, music, art! Please, Mortis, I don’t intend to kill you, but I wish so much to learn about our guests tonight. At least until the Imperator graces us with his presence.”

“And signs your death warrant,” Yang added.

“A comforting dream for you, child,” he looked to her with a ghoulish smile. “But no. I suspect that had the Imperator had…concerns, I might very well not exist. And certainly that would be a
shame!” The crowd laughed.

Preximius turned his head back to Mortis as the music played in the background, a melody the Battlemaster didn’t recognize. “You think you’re so very special, wave your hand and things fall apart,” he raised his own hand daintily, fingers wiggling. “Only using it to tear down and destroy. At least your sister understands a broader application. One to shape, nurture, and grow!” He moved a hand over the meat on his plate, and it slowly began dissolving into a brown sludge. “But you are not the only one with such tricks, and I assure you I am but a mere novice compared to our wondrous Patron.”

He clapped his hands together. “Now! Our first show of the evening! Mortis, you will take center stage. Give us a show!” There was a laborious pounding, the sound of something large walking forward. “Remember! The children rest in your hands.”

From the opposite end of the stage, a massive beast walked out. A huge black-skinned creature, one towering over even the Battlemaster, the visage alone was intimidating enough. Sharp claws, dual wings on it’s back, oddly hanging and moving tentacles lined the body, and the head held six eyes, all of which glared hungrily down upon Mortis.

The hands began swirling in uncontrolled psionic energy…

And then it collapsed to the ground and didn’t rise.

Mortis hadn’t even spared the creature a look. “I am not in the mood, Sectoid.”

Preximius had the gall – and somehow emotional capacity – to look offended. “No! No! Such a waste of life! You are indeed a pitiful, insipid creature! No respect for the simple art of delivering a distinguished death!” He shook his head, voice rising. “Death is a celebration! A joyous event delivered with rapture. It is not the sterile cold thing you deliver. The nerve!”

The Sectoid jumped up, pointing at Yang. “You! Let us demonstrate a proper show! On guard!”

The melee weapon he had, which the Battlemaster now saw was a rapier of all things, appeared in his hand and with a wave he teleported in front of Yang and jabbed forward, just before she managed to get one of her swords out and deflect it.

“Yes! Excellent!” He shouted jubilantly to the applause of the crowd.

Yang shouted in surprise as she began fighting the elegant dance both now found themselves in. “He’s getting in my head!” She shouted, panicked. “I’m not doing-“

“Such chatter, Yang!” Preximius said with a smile as he expertly dueled the clearly less experienced woman. It was quickly apparent that this seemingly frail Sectoid was extremely robust, and more disturbingly, intended to be toying with her. Light strikes which caused no damage, but unbalanced her. Near misses. Even she got a few swings in.

It was as if the Sectoid was doing his best to make it exciting.

Enough was enough.

A psionic charge forward slammed directly into the far smaller Sectoid, and even as he went flying a slash opened up that fancy suit he wore. The Battlemaster pulled Yang back as the sputtering Sectoid rose. “You dare to interrupt? And here I thought you had honor!”

“We are done,” the Battlemaster said flatly. If Mortis wasn’t ready, it was too bad. The Sectoid
waved a hand over himself and the weeping flesh healed over. “Move or die.”

“You seal their deaths!” Preximius hissed, raising a hand, bathed in silver moonlight. “Let the children go to Paradise!”

The Battlemaster charged forward, but the Sectoid simply teleported to the end of the room, then frowned as he glanced up. The creatures holding the children were…still. “Impossible,” he growled. “Unless…ah ha!”

“Have you ever been under a biopathic attack?” Mortis asked quietly, psionic energy encircling him. “A real one? I’ve been told it isn’t pleasant.”

That was when the Battlemaster noticed that the music had gone silent, and the children had ceased singing. And it had been like that for some time. A quick glance to the crowd showed that while Preximius had been trying to work his show…Mortis had begun a biopathic assault on the crowd. And now they were beginning to feel the effects.

Moans, grunts of pain, and even a brief scream or two began filling the theatre. “I have a strategy,” Mortis continued, taking a step forward, voice dangerously low. “The weak parts of the body first. Organs. Squishy, weak, things. The eyes are the first. Your vision blurs, fluid leaks out of your ears as your brain begins melting, you feel sweat drip off you, until you realize that it is not sweat, but your skin forming a puddle on the ground.”

The Sectoid inexplicably smiled as Mortis continued speaking. “The loss of your skin leaves muscle underneath. Muscle unprotected by skin. It does not matter what you are, you feel the pain. You scream. And scream. And you feel as your body dissolves cell by cell until nothing is left but mush and liquid. It is a painful way to die,” a hand extended towards the Sectoid. “As you will experience now.”

The Sectoid hissed, his own arm flaring with psionic power, then froze as Mortis unleashed a full biopathic attack on him. It was fascinating to watch for the Battlemaster as the Sectoid suddenly had to devote his own skill to healing himself, as the skin off his face began dripping off, and then healed.

But the Sectoid performer would not outlast Mortis. Especially not as he was enraged.

Yet the Sectoid just laughed in a high mad pitch. “A masterful showing, Ethereal.”

A low bow accompanied the words, even as the Biopathy continued ravaging his body. “And here I was afraid you were a mere killer, no,” Preximius gave a toothless, unsettling smile. “You do understand. Well done.” The Battlemaster heard no scorn or malice in the words, but even more disturbing, sincerity.

Preximius straightened up and waved to a non-existent crowd. “We shall meet again!” With a flourish he teleported himself away and there was silence in the theatre. Silence except for the faint cries of children and the heartbeat of Paradise. The Battlemaster looked to where the audience was, and saw that the occupants had been reduced to a slurry of dissolved liquid and bone in colors of yellow, red, and flesh.

Yang spoke first. “Just what the fuck was that?”

“Something I will finish killing later,” Mortis said, though the Battlemaster could tell from his tone that he was unsettled by the reaction the Sectoid had to his skin melting off his body. He stood there as Sana and the Battlemaster went to the children who, while they were no longer singing,
were almost black-faced in the grip of the things which held them. It was a simple matter to remove the creatures, as Axis had dominated their minds which had prevented them from following the Sectoid’s command in the first place. The Battlemaster took a significant amount of pleasure in killing several, while Yang killed the rest.

As it turned out, the child which had been killed was…not dead, but not especially alive. She appeared to be affected by the telepathic equivalent of a chryssalid egg. One which began corrupting the body immediately. Her eyes were streaked with blue, and she thrashed as whatever had been implanted in her took hold.

Mortis killed her with a thought. Forever this time.

Sana put the rest of the surviving children into a deep slumber, as they stood around to discuss what to do. “We can’t take them with us,” Mortis said grimly. “But if we leave, they might just die anyway.”

“There is no choice,” Axis interjected. “They are far from the only victims here.”

“Yes…” Mortis shot a look at the Battlemaster. “Test subjects are one thing, Battlemaster, *children* are quite another. I suppose you had no idea this was happening.”

The Battlemaster shook his head. A response he knew he had no excuse for.

This was, in some way, his fault.

“There were not supposed to be children,” he said hollowly. “I made that explicit.”

Mortis looked at the sleeping children…and one dead one. “Excellent job. Tremendous.”

“Enough!” He finally spat. “You have no idea what is going on!”

“You do not get to wake up and judge everything you see!” The Battlemaster spat. “Do you think I want all of this? That *any* of us want this? We’re not in the Empire, Mortis! Things have changed!”

“And it does not appear to be for the better,” Mortis nodded. “But I agree. You aren’t the problem here. You appear to be a willful and ignorant pawn of this Imperator, who just believes everything said.”

“Oh, shut up,” Yang interjected, scathing irritation in her voice. “Prior to this, I know the Battlemaster had damn good reason to believe him. The Emperor clearly doesn’t know what he’s doing sometimes, I agree on that point, and especially right now. But the Battlemaster,” she pointed. “Is the only one who appears to actually care about the Collective that was built. You want to yell at someone? Yell at all the other Ethereals who haven’t been doing *anything* outside their pet projects. Which happens to include your *sister.*”

The Battlemaster had not expected a defense…from her of all people. He gave the woman a nod of appreciation, as Mortis turned to Sana. “How accurate is what the human says?”

“I have a name.”

“Yang,” he said flatly. “How accurate is this.”

Sana released a sigh. “More than I want to admit. The Battlemaster has…held the Collective
together. Not perfectly, but he…is not responsible for this. Nor do I say he is a simple tool. Such would imply the Imperator cared enough to use him.”

“I see,” Mortis sighed. “This place has me on edge. I…apologize, Battlemaster. We…should focus on completing our mission.”

“Apology accepted,” the Battlemaster looked around, feeling mentally exhausted. “I agree we should continue moving. Arguing serves no one. Not now.”

“Where to?” Axis finally asked. “And what about the children?”

“We can’t take them with us,” the Battlemaster said grimly. “But leaving them leaves them vulnerable.”

“We could kill them,” Axis suggested. “It would be better than remaining here.”

“We do not intentionally kill children,” the Battlemaster ground out. “No.”

“And leaving them alive to experience this is better?” Axis crossed his arms. “This is mercy, Battlemaster, not malice.”

“No.”

“Here,” Sana knelt down by the head of one of the silent Vitakarian children. “I’ll place them in a psionically induced sleep, where only I can awaken them. I will also know if it is broken or harm comes to them. They will live…and not suffer one way or another.”

“And how do you know they won’t bypass it regardless?” Axis pressed. “If one thing should be clear, it is that these particular being do not follow convention. What would work for…well, what you expect, may not work against them.”

“It is better than killing them,” she responded, steadfast.

“Do that,” the Battlemaster ordered. “We will be sure to recover them before we leave.”

As Sana performed that, the Battlemaster looked around for an exit and saw several paths; through the theatre seats, or another route. “We follow where that beast came from,” he pointed his sword at the right stage end, opposite where they’d come out of, once Sana had finished putting the children into the psionic sleep. “Unless anyone objects?”

“As good a route as any,” Yang said. “And if it’s a dead end, we can try again.”

They all seemed to agree to that, and then exited stage right. Deeper into the nightmare they knew wasn’t even close to over.

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Level 2, Paradise – Orbit of the Dead World

Unknown Time

That incident with the Sectoid – Preximius – had been terrifying. Even her enhanced mental defenses seemed to mean nothing as the alien had easily slid through the gaps, and started a barrage of small telepathic commands.

_Dodge! Back! Forward! Stab!_
Her body had complied immediately, and the duel choreographed by the Sectoid proceeded as the performer decreed, while she just inwardly shouted and tried fighting back. She had been reduced to a puppet for the malicious delight of an adoring crowd.

A deep satisfaction filled her at the thought of the audience being reduced to sludge.

If she somehow survived this – a feat looking less and less likely – she was going to have to improve her own skills significantly. Perhaps it wasn’t her fault she hadn’t been prepared to enter this particular hell, but she had to be prepared for anything it seemed.

Insane, well-dressed, and French Sectoids for example.

“I wonder if they realized they can’t kill us,” the Battlemaster commented as they walked.

The halls seemed to be growing more winding, and the sounds became more visceral. Yang was fairly certain the squishing sounds were from the station itself moving around them. Indeed, Mortis had briefly gone backwards and reported that the passageway they had been in had closed behind them seamlessly.

As a result he was liquefying any kind of biological material he was coming across.

It was like they were trapped in some knockoff American horror movie, only real and much worse than any movie director would ever portray. She found it somewhat ironic that after this, it was going to take a lot to ever actually scare her again. Isomnum notwithstanding, but she never intended to end up in his presence again. Or see him, for that matter.

“They forces are becoming more sophisticated,” Axis said, responding to the Battlemaster’s comment. “They do not seem to send these Caretakers against us any longer.”

“But that,” the Battlemaster clarified, as he telekinetically crushed one of the beating organs on the walls, which Mortis began liquefying. “They can’t kill us. Not if they wish to avoid retribution. The Imperator does seem to have authority here, and they know if that we die…it will go badly for them.”

“They could still trap us,” Mortis pointed out.

“Yes,” the Battlemaster agreed. “They could. That concerns me. They believe that if all of us remain alive…then the Imperator will not punish them.”

“And what are we going to do if he makes that his command?” Yang wondered, twirling her swords in her hand, trying to keep her guard up. The presence watching her was muted…or at least lesser thanks to Axis sharing a far more effective means of protection, but she still felt it and it made the hairs on her neck stand up.

“There will be no such command,” the Battlemaster said. “If the Imperator commands such, then I will ignore it.”

“How?” Yang wondered. Not that she was against the idea, but she didn’t know how feasible it actually was.

“I will order Deusian to destroy this place,” he said. “She can do so easily.”

“Who?” Mortis asked.

“And what if the Imperator countermands that?” Yang pressed. “Will she listen to you or him?”

The Battlemaster was silent for a moment. “I do not know. But I will not willingly allow this place to exist.”

“For what it is worth,” Mortis added, as he finished liquefying the nearest wall. “You will have my support in this.”

“Mine as well,” Sana added. “This is too far to allow, even for the Imperator.”

“We’ve got some company,” Axis interjected, pointing forward and Yang grimaced as they saw a familiar figure.

“I do not believe you understand how important that show was to Preximius,” the Umbra said dryly, hands clasped in front of her. “He puts a certain effort into his shows, and his audience being reduced to sludge in the middle of a performance will certainly damage his reputation.”

“Stand aside, or you will join their number,” the Battlemaster rumbled, not halting his movement. “You will not kill us.”

The Umbra was wearing slightly different attire now. While the basic robe was maintained, at her hip was a holster for a sleek black pistol, and a gleaming Dath’Haram blade coated in a bright red substance was hung telekinetically suspended at her side. She was prepared for a fight, even if Yang wondered if she could take a hit.

Something told her that this alien was good at dodging.

“Kill you?” The Umbra gave a beautiful smile. “That is a decision for the Saints. I am merely a servant for them and the Bringer himself. I have my instructions.”

Saints? Yang wondered why this Bringer seemed very attached to Human religious names and concepts. Perhaps it was simple translation. English was a Human language, and she suspected those same concepts existed in alien culture. Regardless, it confirmed there was definitely some kind of chain of command here.

“You have caused us a great many problems,” the Umbra continued. “For one concerned with the lives of those here, your decision to release the Exterminator is perplexing.”

“The Sovereign Orb began on its own,” the Battlemaster said, stopping a short distance from her. “I did not intentionally activate it.”

She tapped a gloved finger to her chin in thought. “I suppose it does not matter. The machines consume all, even those you wished to save. In the end you achieved little here but death. Does that satisfy you?”

“No,” the Battlemaster said, lifting the sword and pointing the bloodied tip at her. “But the blood is on your hands. Not ours.”

“A matter of debate, yet I have spent enough time talking,” she gently reached out and took a Dath’Haram blade in her hand and flourished it before him. “I have my orders. You are protected for now. But the other aliens do not have this luxury.”

Yang realized what was happening and leapt away….

And right into a portal that materialized in that direction, and flung her onto a cold metal floor. She
immediately stood in a darkened room, and was struck by how constrained and confounding it was. Two people could fit through the corridors at most, and she was in a large circular room, with corridors leading every which way.

Axis had also been thrown into the same room, and he stood as well. The light just barely illuminated the room, as a blue flash saw the Umbra walk out, with a smile on her face. “Now,” she said. “We have all the time we need.”

Axis’s suit activated, shielding him in crystal as psionic energy formed around him as he likely began a telepathic attack. Yang began her own attack, telekinetically tossing a sword to the Dath’Haram while leaping towards her with the other in hand. The Umbra closed her eyes briefly, and when she opened them, the blue glow of power filled them.

With a flick of her wrist the thrown sword didn’t even get close and was automatically recalled to Yang’s hand while she began attacking with the other. With a few exchanges, Yang realized that she was just as outmatched as she had been against Preximius. The woman handled her blade like a delicate instrument, and moved like a dancer.

Yang’s own strikes seemed obvious and clumsy by comparison, and the grim smirk that permanently rested on the face of the alien simply showed that this was as real a duel as the one Yang had previously taken part in. Axis gestured and the Umbra was encased in a psionic box, but within a mere second she vanished and appeared behind the Zudjari, hand flashing to the sidearm on her waist and fired a blast of contained purple energy at him which cracked the crystal and sent him sprawling forward.

“Admirable,” the Umbra said as she flourished her weapon. “But not nearly enough. You will both serve him well, once you understand and accept the gift that will be offered.” Yang lashed out with a telekinetic grip, which the Umbra responded with by teleporting again, and suddenly Yang was thrown to the ground by a returned telekinetic throw.

She lay pinned on the ground by the same force, the Umbra’s arm extended down to her as she slowly walked forward. “Rest easy, Yang. No need to fight it now.”

Yang struggled, but the Dath’Haram was too strong. She had beaten her easily.

But she would still fight to the bitter end. She would force the alien to kill her, but she would not become one of these things.

There was a sudden green-blue flash and the silver blur of a new weapon and the Umbra hissed in pain before instantly teleporting several meters away, her arm on the ground. In her place stood a completely new figure.

Clad in stony black armor, left fist clenched and the other holding a forged sword, and a black helmet obscuring the face of whoever it was, the figure didn’t look like one of the normal inhabitants. The voice that came out of it though, was not exactly what Yang had expected. “You would do well to step away,” a female British accent said, flourishing her own blade in warning. “At the moment, I’m perfectly fine with dicing everyone here into little pieces.”

The Umbra for the first time looked curiously at the figure, even as the stump of her arm bled. “What are you?” She asked, seemingly not dissuaded from continuing the battle as she lifted the blade in her good hand. “You should not be here.”

“On that I agree,” the other woman pointed her sword at the Umbra. “I’d heard the stories of what happens here, but unfortunately it’s somehow worse.”
The Umbra pursed her lips and as she took a step forward, teleported to right in front of the armored woman who immediately matched her blow, and both began a series of exchanges that were almost too fast for her eyes to follow. The armored woman seemed to treat the fight the same way the Dath’Haram was – as a dance.

Spins, deflections, quick foot movements, it was a mixture of delicacy and precision. The Umbra realized she was dealing with someone who wasn’t a novice, and flashed behind the armored woman, who flashed in a blue-green light and stabbed the sword through the Umbra’s stomach, who immediately teleported away.

The armored woman let out a low chuckle. “Do you think you’re the first person to try that trick?” She lowered her sword to the side in a ready stance, other arm up for balance. “You’re a novice at it.”

She took her sword in both hands, holding it by her head as the point was directed at the Umbra and charged forward in a blur that seemed to be faster than the Battlemaster’s psionic charge. The already-stunned Umbra barely moved out of the way, and retaliated with a stab as the armored woman blinked out of existence and appeared right behind the Umbra and stabbed.

This time the alien was prepared for it, and similarly teleported just as the armored woman reversed her grip and stabbed backward, nearly impaling the alien in the eye as both teleported away again, several meters from each other. “For the record,” the armored woman said, returning to her ready stance. “The other one who tried that against me was better than you.”

“I doubt it,” the Umbra’s voice betrayed no pain, and Yang wondered how best she could intervene, especially as Axis was also getting up. “You should not have been able to penetrate this deep.”

“I’ve been told that,” the woman responded. “You know when you are beaten. Unless you want to meet your Bringer, then leave.” The woman began having the bluish-green energy mirror her body in a near hologram-like effect. “This is your one warning.”

The Umbra saw it, and seemed to consider her options, then with a blue flash she vanished, leaving them alone in the metal arena. Yang eyed the woman warily. Despite helping them…she wasn’t sure this if was an ally or not. Especially with that particular armor. “I didn’t think I would be saving your lives,” the woman said, turning to them. “But for now, it seems there is a common enemy.”

“Who are you?” Axis asked with similar wariness.

“Ah, yes,” the woman reached up and took off her helmet, revealing a surprisingly young woman with pale skin, white-silver hair and eyes that looked hazel or green, Yang couldn’t tell which in the dim light. “Fiona Dorren. And until recently, in opposition to the Ethereal Collective. In short, your enemy,” she nodded to Yang. “Although I don’t know about you.”

She cocked her head at the Zudjari. “I haven’t seen you before. Or your species for that matter.”

“You are from Earth?” Axis didn’t seem to hear her question. “One of the Humans fighting these Ethereals?”

“Yes, I am,” Fiona looked at the alien with some curiosity. “And I suppose you aren’t here willingly?”

“He was in a stasis pod,” Yang supplied. “Along with an Ethereal. Mortis’Ligna. We needed help
“Mortis is awake?” Fiona blinked, then frowned. “Actually, wait. We can talk as we move. Despite being on opposite…or mostly opposite sides,” she shot a glance to the Zudjari. “We both want to get out of here. I help you get out, or get you back to whatever Ethereals that are here, and you answer my questions.”

At Yang’s hesitation Fiona grimaced, putting her helmet on. “You will die without my help. You know that, right?”

“I will travel with her,” Axis stepped forward. “I have no loyalty to the Ethereals, and I do intend to leave this place alive. You would do well to join us.”

Yang sighed. Axis already knew a lot, and Fiona was going to get information one way or another. And really, perhaps she could at least assure XCOM that the Seoul Massacre wasn’t actually their fault. “Fine,” she said. “I’ll go with.”

“Good,” Fiona turned around as she appraised the number of doors around them. “Now we need to figure out where to go next.”

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Level 2, Paradise – Orbit of the Dead World

Unknown Time

“She will live,” Sana said as they walked. “They would not kill her.”

“Unknown,” the Battlemaster muttered flatly. “The Imperator will value our lives. A Human and Zudjari are expendable.”

“Do you consider them such?”

“No.”

“Then the Imperator will have to make some concession,” Sana said with more confidence than he felt now. “He will understand.”

“Unless his plan is more important,” the Battlemaster said as he stabbed another beating organ. “He would sacrifice one of us if it accomplished his ultimate goal.”

“On a certain level, I can respect that,” Mortis said, his voice bitter. “Hard decisions need to be made. But not in service to whatever this thing is. There can be no good which comes from this.”

The Battlemaster felt somewhat annoyed with himself for actually caring about what happened to Yang, but it was a combination of actually talking with her and seeing just what this place was that made him concerned for what would happen to her. This was no place to die for anyone, especially not one like her.

The Zudjari he was less concerned about on a personal level, but would have preferred he live as he at least provided another ally against these corrupted aliens. Not to mention he ironically seemed to have more of an idea of what they were facing than any of them. His loss might prove to be a hindrance.

Regardless, the further they continued into this place, the angrier he felt. Anger was dangerous, the
beginning of a loss of control, a breakdown of the meticulous and steady mindset he had developed for himself.

Yet he cared about preserving that less and less.

His highest wish now was to plunge his sword into the Creator’s heart, and then execute every being who was involved in this atrocity.

Rarely did he wish death on so high a scale, but there was no redeeming those who took part here. Only justice. Justice which translated to execution. It wouldn’t bring anyone back, or make his mistake of complacency better, but it would at least send a message and for once, he would know he was doing the right thing.

A rarer commodity these days. Even rarer in war.

What was considered ‘right’ was of course subjective. The word varied on organization and individual, but at least during the Empire he had known he was on a side he could rely on and believe in protecting. While he couldn’t say the Collective hadn’t given him a goal, the actions with which had been taken of late, culminating in this revelation, were further eroding this belief.

Unfortunate that there was only one side, and he was stuck on it. He was not a traitor to the Collective. It could be fixed, he knew that and wouldn’t run from the responsibility like Aegis did. But he could see much easier what would drive Aegis to such a radical path. Had Aegis learned of this?

Questions he needed some answers to. Questions which demanded his survival in the here and now.

“More up ahead,” Mortis muttered, as the Battlemaster noticed that ahead was a medium-sized box-like room with a fixed exit. One which was guarded by two of the same type of duelist he had fought upon coming to the second level. These soldiers were similar, but had obvious changes signifying their individuality. Different runes on their armor, different helmets, different weapons.

The slimmer of the two carried a sword and shield, and had the helm of a traditional medieval knight, while the one opposite appeared to be an Oyariah from the size, and it held a large hammer in it’s hands. The helmet was an eyeless orb, but the Battlemaster suspected that it wouldn’t hinder it much.

Standing between the two ornate soldiers was a Human woman, who wore full robes of silver and black; intricately and artistically designed with a precision the Battlemaster couldn’t help but admire. Whoever was behind the craftsmanship of their equipment would have been highly respected in the Empire.

The woman’s raven black hair hung barely above her shoulders, and was meticulously done, not a hair out of place. It matched the stone-like expression on her ebony face; and from her absolute stillness one might be forgiven for wondering if this was a living person, or an exceptionally realistic statue. No blinking. No obvious breathing.

The two soldiers saw them and began moving forward when the woman lifted a hand, and they immediately froze, and returned to their original position. The hand moved back down to where it had been. The Ethereals walked forward in silence, and upon fully entering, the Battlemaster saw that there was another occupant, sitting on a small bench off to the side.

“The Battlemaster himself. I knew the day would come, though did not expect it to be now.”
The source of the rich voice stood, and faced the group. A Human, older than most, with chalky white skin, though not degraded like caretakers. Scars lined his face, but none stood out more than the large scar over his left eye. The eye itself was clearly *not* Human, but a black orb with a shining blue pupil, heavily contrasting the opposite brown one.

Ash grey hair covered his head, cut short, and the Battlemaster knew that this was a dangerous Human. Or at minimum, an experienced one. The armor he wore was pitch black, with writing in an unknown language engraved on his armor in blue lettering. A standard longsword which had rested on his legs was held in his right hand, while the opposite held a helmet which resembled a stern male face, though the eyes were a deep red.

“Who are you?” This man seemed to know him, but for once here, the Battlemaster wanted to know more details about what was happening in this place.

“I am Grand Marshal Immortalis,” the man stated. “Not my original name, but who I am now. I command the warriors of the Order of the Absolving Tempest, the Carmine Baptists of Paradise, under the Zeal of the Bringer of Paradise. You have trespassed on our homes and spilled our blood. There will be retribution for that, but I will ask, what is your goal?”

“The death of the Creator.” He stated plainly. The Battlemaster suspected he would appreciate bluntness.

“You should turn back,” Immortalis said. “You will not reach the heart of Paradise. Stepping through the door will necessitate…action.” The face of the Human grew into something cold. “To succeed and reach what you have I can respect, Battlemaster, but His tolerance is coming to an end. You will not wish to feel His rage should you persist.”

“Draw your weapon,” the Battlemaster pointed his sword at the warrior. “We waste time.”

A single nod, and Immortalis placed the helmet on his head. “Let us begin.”

The Battlemaster instantly shot a hand out towards the trio of beings in the door, sending a telekinetic blast their way. The Baptists stumbled, but the woman didn’t even flinch from the blast. His other hand began stabbing towards Immortalis who deflected the strike, and set his sword ablaze with psionic energy. The purple-blue fire seemed to make the writing on his armor glow, and the red of the eyes of his helmet do the same.

The duel began.

Immortalis immediately struck with his blade, getting close to limit the Battlemaster’s effective range, although it didn’t stop the Battlemaster from throwing a fist at close range, which Immortalis easily dodged, though was forced slightly back, and shot psionic energy from his hand which the Battlemaster dodged by charging out of the way, and then directly towards the Human who sidestepped and somehow absorbed the brunt of the strike.

The Battlemaster briefly glanced to see how fast Mortis and Sana were working, and then noticed that the woman was actually moving her hands. The air around her shimmered with psionic energy, even if the face stayed as stony as before. Looking to the Twins, the Battlemaster saw psionic barriers materializing and dissipating with unnatural precision.

They were designed in order to not protect or destroy, but unbalance. The edges slammed into both Mortis and Sana; the legs, arms, heads, preventing any immediate offensive they could deliver, and the two Baptists were marching towards Mortis, psionic energy setting their weapons alight. Clever, very clever.
Immortalis twisted a hand, and the air around both of them split as the Psionosphere broke and unleashed gouts of psionic energy, commanding his attention. The Battlemaster exchanged a few blows, then after catching Immortalis in a blade lock, sent out a telepathic grab which yanked the two Baptists towards him.

The smaller one twisted in the air and landed down in a strike which he caught with his gauntlet and grabbed with a lower arm, then flung them at the robed woman. Without looking, a blue shield appeared before her, stopping the thrown soldier immediately and she continued her intrinsic psionic destabilization of the Twins.

The Battlemaster sent a telekinetic push towards Immortalis, who barely moved, but it was enough and the Battlemaster charged towards the woman, and as expected ran directly into a shield. But he was prepared, and caught the woman in a telekinetic grip and began squeezing. The woman was suddenly enshrined in a blue shield, but she was now focused on him, even if her face still somehow betrayed nothing.

Now all of the remaining soldiers were converging on him, but the Battlemaster knew all he needed to do was endure. With one hand he caught the head of the hammer of the Oyariah, grimacing as it began charring his hand through the gauntlet. The smaller Baptist stabbed towards gaps in his armor, which scored some hits, even if he was able to stop most with several kicks and punches and even the ones which hit did not quite puncture his skin.

Immortalis simply bathed him in scorching psionic energy, a miniature rift appearing around his body as it corroded and scarred even his armor. He threw his sword towards Immortalis who easily dodged it, but relented on the storm momentarily.

But he had done enough. The aura of Sana bathed the room, and a glance towards the woman showed her skin beginning to melt off her face, and the smaller Baptist began coughing as the Oyariah froze, the Hammer cluttering to the ground. Even Immortalis took a cautious step back up. “Retreat!” He commanded, realizing the tide was against him now that the Twins were no longer contained.

A flash of blue and Immortalis teleported away, as did the Oyariah warrior. But the smaller one was now on the ground, ripping off her helmet revealing another Human woman who was hacking up blood, as she began dissolving as well. A quick glance over to the robed woman showed a convulsing body even as the face was mostly sludge, and leaking into a small puddle.

The air around Mortis was distorted and tinged purple, even as he simply stared at the dying female Baptist. The Battlemaster snapped the neck of the armored woman with a telekinetic twist, and the body slumped to the ground, an expression of fear and pain on the half-melted woman’s face. There was silence once more.

Mortis returned to normal, and once he walked over, shook his head as he glanced at the woman. “You should have let me finish. The ones here deserve none of your mercy.”

“No,” the Battlemaster said slowly. “They don’t. But I do not prolong the deaths of my enemies regardless. Work faster if you wish them to suffer.”

“Considerate,” he snorted. “That was a clever woman. I will have to be careful of that being used again.”

“Indeed,” Sana had also regained her orientation and composure after the thrashing she had received. “They are learning.”
“Unfortunate they are competent,” the Battlemaster muttered, as he looked to the door. “And I suspect this Immortalis was telling the truth. This is simply a vanguard. The true challenges are ahead. They will only become more dangerous.”

“Normally I would say ‘charge’,” Mortis said slowly. “But we’ve already lost two. And we’re going to get worn down, while they will likely have fresh people to throw at us. Perhaps we should hold our ground here, because I am certain the Imperator will come. As idiotic as he has shown himself to be thus far, he shouldn’t take long to make some connections.”

“Normally I would also agree,” the Battlemaster shook his head. “But I need to know the extent of this. I need to know the worst and most dangerous of it. They clearly do not want us to keep going down there, even if they know killing us is not in their best interests. There is something they want to hide. I can’t trust the Imperator will share it with me. I need to see for myself.”

Mortis let out a sigh. “You have a point.”

“Then we move forward,” the Battlemaster said. “At least we know we are going the right way.”

“For now,” Sana said slowly.

“For now.”

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*Unknown Level, Paradise – Orbit of the Dead World*

*Unknown Time*

Yang felt like the more they walked, the more lost they became.

It turned out that the mass of doors led to small, enclosed corridors which intersected and weaved within each other, and conformed to a giant maze-like area which the three of them were now trapped within, with no obvious path or direction to go. Yang was more convinced that the maze itself was changing as they walked, as distant (though quiet) creaks and groans reached her ears.

What was more disconcerting was the lack of a ceiling. The walls extended close to four meters high, but there was quite clearly no ceiling, and only showed empty blackness, and silver light barely illuminated the way forward from small glowing organs placed along the tops of the walls.

She felt like they were being toyed with and watched by something; something that could at any point leap from the blackness and murder them.

Fiona kept them distracted, or at least not focused on the weight of the darkness above. “So the Battlemaster had no idea what this place was?”

“No,” Yang shook her head. “I mean…he knew the Creator controlled this place. Not what was going on.”

“And what was he planning to do?”

“Talk to the Creator and likely remove her from this place,” Yang shrugged. “Possibly execution. Now that…this happened…he’s going to just kill her.”

“Well, good for him,” Fiona decided to go left as they reached an intersection. “Nice to have the Battlemaster targeting something other than Earth. Doubt the Imperator will allow that to happen
though, if he’s let it go this far, letting the Battlemaster mess it up isn’t going to happen.”

“And what is going on here?” Axis asked. “You appear to know more than most.”

“I probably know only a little more than you,” Fiona said, sword up in case of attack. “The first thing is that this Bringer of Paradise doesn’t actually exist in reality.” She pointed upward with an armored finger. “It exists in the Psionosphere.”

Yang stiffened. “Impossible. Nothing can survive there. The Ethereals researched trying to navigate it physically, and either they got horribly injured before they even stepped foot into it, or annihilated instantly. Research into it was banned after too many killed themselves. They executed people by throwing them into it!”

“While I cannot attest to the intelligence of this research, she is correct,” Axis added. “What you call the Psionosphere was specifically ordered not to be tampered with by Origin. Tearing the Psionosphere was not usually approved of because the merging of it and reality was so destructive.”

“I’ve heard that,” Fiona said. “But it was once a Sovereign One. Trust me when I say the standard rules and logic do not apply to them. If any one could survive in the Psionosphere where everything else would die, it is one of them.”

Yang thought about that briefly, disliking how all the walls were maddeningly the same color and with nearly imperceptible symbols and patterns – had she missed those initially? She shook her head, trying to focus. That would actually make some degree of sense, if this Bringer was in the Psionosphere, then it would explain just how it could sense and exert its presence so easily.”

“So what does it want?” Yang asked. “Why...” she paused, gesturing around. “All of this?”

“The only thing I know for sure,” Fiona answered grimly. “Is that it wants to fully cross back over. To my knowledge, it has never once gotten this far.”

There was some silence at that.

“What happens if it crosses over?” Axis finally asked.

Fiona snorted. “The best case scenario is that we have an extremely powerful psion loose, and that what is here mirrors a lot of the galaxy. The worst case heavily depends on what theory you subscribe to regarding the Bringer himself. Particularly how much...control he possesses over the Psionosphere.”

“Just give the worst case,” Yang said.

“The worst case is that the Bringer retains control over the entire Psionosphere,” Fiona said slowly, deliberately. “This assumes that the Bringer’s consciousness is throughout the Psionosphere at this point, and not within a section. We don’t know that, but if that is the case...well, in theory psionics could be shut off, changed, or enhanced at will. The Psionosphere touches every part of reality, aside from the Dead Worlds. Worlds could be protected or destroyed in moments. Entire populations could be dominated or murdered through telepathy in seconds. It would be a threat that cannot be defeated conventionally.”

Yang thought for a moment. “How likely is that...theory?”

“I would like to say ‘unlikely’,” Fiona said as they turned right. “But the truth is we don’t know. This is actually uncharted territory, thanks to this ultimate idiot of an Imperator who thinks helping
this thing was a good idea.”

“We don’t know his reasons,” Yang felt the need to point out. “I can’t imagine the Imperator would make a mistake this large. You can call him…ambitious, but he isn’t an idiot.”

“You can ask him,” Fiona focused ahead. “But the only reason I’m here now is to gather as much information about this thing as possible and return. I don’t know nearly enough yet.”

“Who do you actually work for?” Yang pressed. “XCOM? You don’t look like one of them.”

“No, not XCOM. Another interested party.” The helmet of Fiona turned back to her. “And no, I’m not going to say who.”

“How did you even get here?” Axis asked.

“ Took a few tries,” Fiona said nonchalantly. “But teleportation is something I’m good at. Once I had the location, it was fairly simple. Observed some of the fight going on in the first level – seemed to be a fairly even fight last I saw between the Bringer and that nanite weapon. Wanted to catch up to your group. Managed it, saw you and Axis get dragged through a portal, and after locating you, fought the Umbra. And here we are.”

“Could you teleport us somewhere else?” Axis asked.

Fiona notably hesitated. “Assuming you mean out of this maze? I can, yes. But you could die. As in, I could teleport into a solid object and bisect you. I can keep myself immaterial long enough to prevent that, but it doesn’t extend to others.”

Yang cocked her head. “How can you do that? Psionics, and teleportation itself, doesn’t make you immaterial.”

Fiona just sighed. “Like I said, Sovereign technology provides quite a few advantages that would normally be considered…unnatural.”

“So nothing can hurt you,” Axis stated curiously.

“In theory, no,” Fiona said. “But I can still be surprised. And if my concentration slips, well, at best I lose a limb or two. I’m not a telepath like you, so I can’t rely on that.”

“Even here?” Yang gestured around, even in the confined space. “Even I can use telepathy reliably, even if my skill is telekinesis.”

Fiona tapped the armor by the neck. “This protects my mind from tampering. It’s the reason I can’t be watched or dominated. It also prevents me from utilizing the…additional properties of this place to my advantage.”

“Wait.” Axis suddenly stopped, then turned around. “We’re going the wrong way.”

“What? Are – hey, wait!” Fiona teleported in front of the fast-moving Zudjari who came to a stop. “What are you doing?”

“Voices, this way,” he pointed the direction he was heading, although his voice was obviously strained. “We need to go to them.”

“Yang!”

The Battlemaster’s voice. So they were here too. She felt relief wash over her. “I hear it too,” she
said. “But the other way,” she pointed behind them. “Let’s go before we lose them.”

“No!” Axis pointed the opposite way. “We need to go this way!”

Yang scowled at how unreasonable he was being. “Are you deaf?”

“Both of you enough!” Fiona interjected. “Axis! Make sure you aren’t being influenced. You too, Yang! I don’t hear a damn thing.”

“Trust me, Human,” Axis took a step forward to Fiona. “I would know if I was under a telepathic attack.”

“In this place, so would I.” Yang added. She strained, but there wasn’t a voice any longer. But she felt the intense need to follow where the voice had come from. She knew this was the right way, and nothing was going to stop her, so she started walking, not paying any more mind to either Fiona or Axis. She just needed to get to the Battlemaster, and then get out of this place together.

Joining forces once again was all that they needed to do right now. If she lost him again she didn’t know what she would do.

Wait, no. She shouldn’t be doing this. This could very well be a telepathic attack. She should stay with Fiona and Axis. Stick together.

But at the same time, she would know if she was being attacked. She knew quite well what that felt like now, and this wasn’t it. But she knew she was allowing her emotions to take over and push her to do irrational things. Like running away from her current companions.

She stopped, and leaned against a wall, trying to get a handle on herself. She needed to stop. She needed to keep going. Staying put wouldn’t do anything.

Think!

The barely perceptible engravings seemed more noticeable now, and perhaps there was some kind of clue in them, and she stared at them, all the while feeling a growing an intense need to keep going forward, going backward, doing something except standing put looking at the glyphs which merged, split and swam before her eyes.

What was she trying to get from this? A way out? A puzzle piece right before her?

She rested her helmet on a hand, trying to figure out what to do. At this point she knew what she was feeling now couldn’t be normal. But she didn’t know what it could be. She knew it couldn’t be a telepathic attack, but something which was eating away at her and making her feel this way. Dehydration? Starvation? How long had it been since she’d eaten or drank?

Yang finally forced herself up after what felt like hours, and everything seemed to be swimming in front of her. The walls extended upwards indefinitely and had a silver sheen to them she was surprised she hadn’t noticed before, and as she turned to one of the paths in front of her, she saw it.

It was a creature, but one that definitely wasn’t like the others. A thin body which was covered in some kind of shawl or robe which hid the legs which appeared almost membranous, although from here it looked like it was almost lying on the ground. Upon her noticing it, it lifted its arms, two sets, one of which it pushed itself up with, and the other pair extending towards her in a beckoning embrace.

The skin was a beautiful deep blue, that of the ocean. Upon pushing itself up, Yang also then
noticed that there were two gelatin wings which sprouted from the back, spreading to their full length and dwarfing the body itself. Like bat wings, she thought, only put on a...she hesitated using the word ‘humanoid’ but it was the first thing that came to mind.

The face itself was flawless, much like the Umbra’s. A smile was on it as it beckoned forward. The only thing that gave Yang pause were the four eyes on the face. They were positioned in a square, pure black, and yet she could feel what the creature was trying to convey from them. It wanted to help. She needed to go to it.

She took a step forward.

_No! Don’t!_

This wasn’t supposed to happen! Why was she going _towards_ the creature that was probably going to kill her? Why was she forgetting what this place was?

The creature beckoned once more, and she unwittingly took a step forward. Then another.

There was then a sudden blue-green flash and the hiss of a blade moving through the air and the creature let out a horrible and final shriek as Fiona’s blade decapitated it. Leaking reddish blood, the creature slumped to the ground, and the compulsion that had driven her for what felt like hours vanished instantly.

Either from exhaustion or relief she dropped to her knees as Fiona approached her. “What...” she croaked, her voice dry. “What _was_ that?”

“They kind of creature which uses telepathy to hunt,” Fiona helped her to her feet. “An exceptionally intelligent and talented creature at that. It was even beginning to affect Axis. By the time he figured it out, you were gone.”

“How,” Yang shook her head, trying to clear it. “How did it happen? I didn’t sense anything?”

“Axis thinks it was watching us ever since we got in here,” Fiona gestured around. “I didn’t think about it at the time, but this is a...you know that myth about the labyrinth? With the minotaur? That’s this, probably a way to execute prisoners. Anyway, he suspects it infiltrated your minds slowly and carefully so we didn’t notice, then forced you to ignore the standard warnings you would have otherwise had. It was subtle, and frankly, _much_ too sophisticated for something that was probably made in a lab.”

“How did you find _me_ again?”

“Oh, that was easy,” Fiona said. “It didn’t take too long to find you, especially since I can teleport. But I left you alone until the creature came so I could kill it. I don’t want this bothering us again.”

Normally Yang might have been mad, but now she just wanted to get out of this area. “What now?”

Fiona looked around them. “I found the exit too. I’m going to risk teleporting you. Axis is already at the end, and last I checked he was alive. Let’s hope he still is. Here,” she extended a hand which Yang took. “Here goes nothing.”

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_Level 2, Paradise – Orbit of the Dead World_
They did not get far before they noticed that the path was going down. It was gradual, subtle, but the walls were becoming more constrained, the lighting darker, and the metal gradually being replaced with flesh. It melted under the power of Mortis, and ran in foul-smelling rivers down onto the metal, or was absorbed in the remaining flesh-like floors before those were melted as well.

No one was taking chances any longer. Sana’s aura was pulsing and active, drawing on the energies of this place which offered near-limitless endurance compared to the normal reality they inhabited, and it was becoming stronger the more they descended. Mortis was prepared as well, his mind sharp and own death aura enhanced by concentration, and would immediately kill anything that was poorly protected, mentally or otherwise.

The Battlemaster himself was deeper in his battle trance than he had been in months. The limitations he normally felt were gone, and without having to fear telepathy he immersed himself within the Gift that had played a role in turning this place into a nightmare. It had initially taken some time to fully maintain it without actual combat, but he had adapted.

In this place, he had to or he would die.

Conversation had little place any longer.

There was no need to talk to these creatures. Each one was marked for death.

A room was coming up. The Battlemaster caught a flicker of movement within. A fight was coming. Another one. But now they would face the actual might of the Ethereals. As they had been warned they had only experienced the beginning of Paradise, so too had these abominations experienced but a taste of the power they brought to bear themselves.

And so the Battlemaster raised a hand and clenched a fist, as did Mortis. The small entrance began widening and snapping under the telekinetic grip, ripping the surprisingly delicate material apart, as the flesh which helped bind it together fell apart as the cells were divided. Within the Battlemaster saw the force that awaited them.

A dozen soldiers in the room, in addition to the Muton he had fought at the beginning, seemingly no worse for wear. These must have been her soldiers, as their armor reflected her own. Helmets that resembled faces molded in a singular emotion, armor black and red, growths and tumors seemed to be on some of the less-armored ones, but that seemed to only indicate the extensive genetic modification they had received.

Two carried longswords as they immediately started moving towards them, bodies and weapons enshrined in violet-blue fire as they intended to burn away the armor he wore. Time further slowed for the Battlemaster as he picked out additional details in the crowd. He needed to prioritize, as their last encounter had begun poorly.

The weaker-looking of the soldiers he would kill first, and already he saw two of the ones who had the faces of stone-faced individuals, with red-tinged robes. The hands were already beginning to rise and bodies begin to be encased in psionic energy.

And so he lifted a hand, palm facing the ceiling, and pulled it into a fist, creating a telekinetic vortex in the center of the room which was powerful enough to crack the Psionosphere. Most of the soldiers were pulled towards it, though the robed soldiers and the Muton resisted. The air rippled around Mortis as he began his work, and the Battlemaster charged into the fray.
The Muton swung at him with her hammer, but it was slow enough he saw it coming almost in slow motion, and instead telekinetically gripped and tore it from her grasp, slamming it into the far wall, as he threw her backwards with a furious throw. The Muton seemed unprepared for his sheer ferocity and only managed to teleport in mid-air, reappearing where her hammer had been thrown as the Battlemaster marched forward.

A soldier with a scowling Human woman’s face as her helmet yelled a battle cry as she shot corrosive energy at him, and he reached out and telekinetically crushed the skull into paste. He then psionically dashed forward towards one of the robed soldiers and before they realized what was happening stabbed one in the heart while telekinetically pulling the other to him and immediately crushing the head of the Muton right after he ripped the helmet off.

Hearing the rush of a swung blade, he spun around and met the hammer of the Muton, and with the greatest threats to Mortis and Sana eliminated – indeed the rest of the soldiers were noticeably slowed, and all moving towards Mortis. Several made the mistake of teleporting behind the Ethereals, and had their minds promptly penetrated and stunned by both Sana and Mortis, the latter of whom wasted no time in turning their brains into mush, while the rest he simply focused on causing slow and agonizing death.

The Muton herself was also encased in the psionic fire of her brethren. She was more skilled than the Battlemaster had initially given credit for. She landed blow after blow against him; psionic fire ravaged his armor leaving dents, scorches, and corrosion. He believed there was now an opening or two now.

It did not matter. For every blow she landed he responded similarly.

She was a talented abomination, but she was no Battlemaster.

Her control over psionics was sublime, and would have put even some lesser Ethereals to shame. When given time she would use her own telekinesis to hold him in place, or even attempt to throw him around. Every opportunity she would try and burn and damage his armor with the acidic psionic fire. She used teleportation to surprise him from different angles. Shields would occasionally protect her blind spots from his swings.

But her telepathy was beyond useless.

He suspected she worked like many telepathic melee fighters. Reading the minds of her opponents so she knew their weaknesses, knew their strengths, knew how to predict what they would do.

But he did not have that vulnerability.

And so he surprised her.

Strikes were feints. Overcompensation would lead to him crushing another organ with his pinpoint telekinetic control. Every shield placed would simply respond to a psionic charge where he slammed into her with the force of a train and into the following wall. Every attempt to scorch his armor just led to another opportunity for him to slowly crush her piece by piece.

And regardless of how well she was trained, she lacked the pinpoint precision or concentration needed for what he was doing. Too many attacks distracted her. She likely believed she was special. She was perhaps another Preximius or Immortalis, a leader in this place of horror, taught to believe she was above the concerns of lesser aliens.

Someone who had never once faced a true threat.
How long they dueled for the Battlemaster did not know. He felt none of the punishment she supposedly dished out, just vague changes in pressure on his armor. An insulation provided by Sana or his armor, he was not sure. But he knew it was coming to a close. The rest of her soldiers had been killed by Mortis, and combined with the weakening aura of Sana, the Muton knew she would die.

“Run,” The Battlemaster spat, deep in his battle trance, to the Muton as he grabbed one of its arms with two of his own, and telekinetically applied as much pressure to the arm as possible, hearing it snap in some places, the metal crumple, and the fingers twist. He blew her back with another telekinetic push, even as she once more teleported to safety a short distance away.

He raised his bloodied sword at her. “Run back to your master in shame. You will die by my hand, or you will run. Make your decision.”

He psionically charged forward in the blink of an eye and nailed the Muton in the helmet, sending her stumbling backwards. Every step she took now left liquid seeping out of her joints, the Biopathy beginning to ravage her body as well. The Muton took a look around the three Ethereals, and then immediately teleported away.

The Battlemaster paid little attention to the fallen suits of armor around him, or the puddles that splashed his boots and legs. He suspected that Muton would not appear again, but if it did, he would beat it as he had before. If that was the best they had, it would not be enough. With Sana and Mortis behind him, he looked to their goal.

Another portal, likely leading deeper into the station.

Without hesitation, he walked towards and through it.

No more games. No more chances.

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Unknown Level, Paradise – Orbit of the Dead World

Unknown Time

There was a distinct difference here. Yang knew they had to have gone to another level. They had soon found another Gateway, which had taken them to a square room which had immediately had four strange plant-like constructs of flesh, with four planted talons into specific flesh patches on the floor, turn head-like orbs to them as if to fire.

Fiona had sprang into action and decapitated two within the blink of an eye while Yang crushed the other two telekinetically, causing them to explode in a spray of red and yellow. Continuing forward they had run into a small group of Caretakers, these ones seeming more prepared and equipped than others, and from what they could tell, the room they had stepped into was an armory of sorts.

They had also been dispatched with relative quickness, but if this was the actual layer of defense…

Yang didn’t know how long she could last.

She was exhausted, her mind felt in tatters with how much it had been infiltrated and abused by hostile figures, and the presence that constantly watched her – the Bringer – had only grown stronger to the point where she couldn’t even muster the strength to block it out.
You have proven your worth today child. Are you not entitled to rest now?

Oh, she most definitely was. But she knew that her version of rest and the Bringer’s version were definitely two different things.

I don’t want your approval or advice, she spat to the presence.

She could swear she felt a flicker of sadness. I will always be here, child, you will come when the time is right.

Yang shivered.

“It’s talking to you too.”

Yang looked to Axis who was still in the battle-mode of his suit. “Yes.”

“I don’t know what to think of it,” Axis shook his head. “I have looked more into the minds of these Caretakers. This level of indoctrination is nothing like anything I have seen. I had thought this to be a malevolent presence, but I don’t know. It might actually believe what it says to these followers.”

“Obviously what it wants you to think,” Fiona scoffed, flicking blood off her sword. “This thing only wants to cross over to our reality. Everything it says or does is a means to this goal. Obviously it’s going to make itself seem less evil than it clearly is.”

The Bringer seemed almost amused. And the woman speaks so surely. She has lived through the trillions of years of cycles. She has experienced the slaughter of countless. She knows so much more about the nature of the galaxy. So naive. Such a useful tool of T’Leth.

The Psionosphere seemed to shift.

An expression of amusement or laughter.

Ah...yes...the plan becomes clear. A useful tool she is. All in the name of protection, all in an effort to end the ceaseless hunt.

Yang shook her head, though latched onto something she felt would be important. “Who is T’Leth?”

Fiona didn’t look back. “Someone I know.”

Yang shrugged. “He seems to think you are a tool of this T’Leth.”

“We have an agreement,” she said. “I help him, he does the same to me. If that’s being a tool, then I suppose the Bringer is correct.”

But how far are you willing to go to stop me, Fiona, the words rumbled in Yang’s mind. How far? Would you risk what you have sought to avoid?

“He’s wondering how far you would go to stop him,” Yang repeated to her, since she felt the woman would want to hear what the Bringer was saying behind her back. “Do you know something I should know about?”

Fiona was silent for a few moments. “Yes, but I don’t want to tell you. Suffice to say, I know what he’s talking about, and if he’s so curious, just let him know that I’ll only do what I need to finish this mission. And also tell him to be careful what he wishes for.”
“I don’t think I need to tell him anything,” Yang said slowly. “He probably hears everything we say anyway.”

“Back!” Axis suddenly shouted and Yang leapt backwards just as a black blade stabbed the space she had been, and in her place stood yet another strange creature. Like the beasts on the first level, this one seemed to have some kind of invisibility, where it disappeared at certain angles, and flickered in and out of focus.

However it was made easier since the creature itself had pitch black skin. It had no face or eyes she could see, was extremely thin and had four arms which ended in long blades which also seemed to be able to move more flexibly than one would first assume. A black shawl covered it, which made it very easy to track thankfully, which was ordained with more of the glyphs and symbols others in this places possessed.

Fiona was immediately on it, and performed a teleporting slice which the creature blocked with one of its bladed arms, while Yang reached out and attempted to lock it in a telekinetic vice. The creature then teleported away before she could establish a firm grip and Yang leapt away, fearing that the thing was behind her.

A good assumption, and she avoided another stab. She risked a glance towards Axis, who was fighting another one of the things, only this one was slightly different in that it seemed to be taller and more muscular, and was engaging the Zudjari in a duel which was going…badly, given how many hits he was taking, and chipping away at his armor.

Yang tossed one of her swords in its direction, and it actually managed to impale it in the arm. It immediately swung its attention to her as she pushed the blade deeper. Fiona was engaged in a duel with the other one, as it was forced to fully concentrate on her when Fiona began employing her own teleportation.

To Yang’s untrained eye, Fiona was still far better at it, as she dismembered one of the arms, then almost seemed to be in two places at once, striking both times as two more arms fell off. Yang once more reached out, and locked the head in a firm grasp, crushing it in her hand. Axis was still dealing with the larger creature, but with the other one down, Fiona turned her sights on it.

This time it only took one swipe and the creature was decapitated. In the ensuing silence, Yang went over and pulled her sword out of the creature, wondering what it was supposed to be.

*Disappointing.*

Yang got the impression the Bringer was not referring to her. *Forgive me for not feeling sad.*

*Nor should you. They are in Paradise now, and they served diligently during their lives. You granted them a gift, child, one that should be celebrated.*

Despite that, Yang did note that the first word had been *disappointing.* Regardless of their service, the Bringer had clearly expected something more from these creatures.

“I have a feeling our actual test is going to be ahead,” Fiona said, motioning to the end of the hallway. “If we’re going to be attacked, it’s going to be there. And I don’t think whatever it is will be a pushover.”

At the end, Yang saw it open into a darkened arena, similar to the one they had fought the Umbra in, but much larger. Large enough where she couldn’t see far into it, as the blackness permeated the area. Perfect for an ambush.
Do not fear, child. Death does not await you in there. Your story is just beginning.

Ignoring the haunting words, Yang steeled herself and followed Fiona into the darkness.

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Level 3, Paradise – Orbit of the Dead World

Unknown Time

The welcoming force they had encountered was almost immediately killed.

The Battlemaster suspected that the reason they had not faced more resistance was due to the fact that they would just be throwing more soldiers away. Fighting the trio of Ethereals was close to suicide, and whoever was commanding the defenses likely realized such resistance was futile.

So they had walked through the more segmented hallways of this level. It seemed more organized than the previous level, more akin to the first. There was more visible metal, but interspersed with clearly obvious organic defenses of some kind which Mortis melted before either he or Sana could intervene. The rooms seemed close to barracks or armories; each containing detailed armor and weapons from multiple species and differing historical periods.

The Battlemaster made a mental note to reclaim these pieces of equipment when he finished. He would find some use for them. Interestingly he saw very little modern weaponry, few rifles or pistols, and the ones he did find seemed to either be altered primitive guns, or ones which seemed inert with wires and tubes that looked like they connected to another power source.

Fectorian would need to examine them in detail later.

He idly wondered how the Sovereign nanite weapon was performing on the first level. Hopefully it was succeeding against the forces that were no doubt converging upon it. He would need to requisition more of those later, preferably for this place.

How long they walked for the Battlemaster didn’t know, but they faced little resistance. But the hallway soon became narrower as it converged into one final direction. The ceiling began angling up, and up ahead the Battlemaster saw a faint blue light filling the arena ahead, for he could immediately tell that was what it was.

“There is something ahead,” Mortis muttered. “This is probably what they fell back for.”

The Battlemaster said nothing, but simply advanced forward and they soon stepped into the arena itself. It was made completely of metal, extended upwards to then converge once more at a centerpoint in the ceiling. The pillars along the walls were similarly angled and interwoven with each other, in triangles, like the first level.

His boots clacked on the floor, and he realized his impression was not completely correct. Tile of some kind lined the floors, and was clearly arranged in a mosaic of some kind that he couldn’t see on the ground level. A closer look at the pillars also saw they were engraved with the symbols he had seen throughout the station.

In the center of the arena was another triangular gateway, this one massive, extending close to twenty feet into the air. It was shut off, allowing the Battlemaster to see through to the opposite end of the arena he was standing in. But that was not what immediately drew the attention of every Ethereal in the vicinity.
There was a figure standing before the inert Gateway, one which was amazingly somehow taller than the Battlemaster – though only slightly. Like the Caretakers, it wore robes, though they were a deep purple with highly symmetrical lines of blue-embroidered symbols woven throughout. The figure looked…thin, proportionally to its size.

The Battlemaster saw the two arms it had were clasped behind its back, and a hood covered the face… but all of them could easily see the face in question. The marble-like skin, if it could be called that, appeared more to be scales or stone, as it overlapped in places and was fully symmetrical along the face. No obvious mouth was seen, but there were plates that could be their equivalent.

The figure had six eyes, each seeming to glow a harsh blue as it appraised them, though the Battlemaster could not determine anything close to what it was thinking or feeling.

“Ethereals of the Collective, you have come far,” the voice was deep, vibrant, and came from everywhere in the room. The figure showed no indication it had spoken, but the Battlemaster suspected that was the case. “Hundreds have died in your path of destruction through our home. Your cause is righteous in your mind, but you will go no further.”

“We have killed every threat here,” the Battlemaster was slightly calmer than he had been during the duel with the Muton. “This will not end until the Creator is dead.”

“You will go no further,” the figure repeated. “The actions of the Artist are unfortunate, and were not sanctioned. A mistake, one you may feel anger for, but one that does not require the ultimate punishment. Such actions will not happen again.”

The Battlemaster let out a harsh laugh, lifting his weapon and waving the blood-soaked sword around. “Do you really think this is about that anymore? No, creature, it is about everything that is happening here.”

“We have done nothing wrong here,” the figure said calmly. “All of this was permitted and sanctioned by the Imperator. Your superior. Let the bloodshed come to an end. The Imperator will arrive eventually and he will explain to you.”

“What are you?” Sana finally asked.

“I am merely an Aspect of the Bringer,” the figure said. “His Temperance. His mind and cunning, His restraint and patience. I am nothing more or less. Each of you is a worthy opponent, each of you has strengths, weaknesses, and patterns. Each of these I know. Each of these I will use. I need not kill you today, only ensure you do not cross this point.”

The voice of the…Temperance…didn’t change, but the Battlemaster suspected it had been annoyed by what they had done. “The destruction is no longer tolerable and it will come to an end now. Yet I will offer you one final chance to stand down. Await the Imperator for answers.”

The Battlemaster pretended to consider. “No.”

He swung his blade down, and immediately transitioned into a psionic charge. Almost immediately he slammed into a barrier erected in front of him, and even after recovering quickly, he lashed out with several strikes and slashes towards the massive figure, though each one was deflected by a blue barrier which appeared just before he struck the fabric.

The Temperance slowly moved a hand forward, and the black-gloved hand faced him, palm out and the Battlemaster was thrown backwards by the edge of a psionic barrier which slammed
against him. He recovered quickly, and quickly glanced to Mortis and Sana, the latter of whom was encased in a psionic stasis field, even if her power was not diminished.

Mortis was under constant assault by multiple appearing and disappearing micro-barriers, which did little lasting harm but did do enough to prevent him from utilizing his Biopathy. The same tactic the one woman had used, only this being seemed to be far more skilled at it, and the Battlemaster was not sure what he could do to stop it.

He reached out and telekinetically grabbed the Temperance and began applying pressure. Past the robes, directly onto the skin and bone of the creature. Almost lazily the creature looked to him with the unblinking glowing eyes and then froze – as it looked back to Sana and the barrier attacks on Mortis briefly dissipated.

The Battlemaster continued the psionic grip, though was running into resistance as blue light from barriers likely shone from inside the body, as the Temperance likely wished to protect against the telekinetic assault. He quite possibly had underestimated that both Sana and Mortis were also expert telepaths, and was now engaged in a telepathic duel against them.

Of course, this would prevent Mortis from utilizing his Biopathy, but it would give the Battlemaster something to do in the meantime, and with his telekinetic grip still maintained, charged forward once more, and stabbed towards the likely heart of this alien would be. The other hand of the Temperance lashed forward from behind its back, palm flat before the tip of his sword as it held it back psionically.

“You should fight against one with your talents, Battlemaster,” the Temperance said, voice as calm and emotionless as before. “It is rare to find an opponent who can match him.”

The Gateway flashed behind him, and the Battlemaster was thrown back by a powerful telekinetic attack. Anchoring himself telekinetically as well, he cautiously appraised the creature that stepped out before the Gateways shut off once again. This one was just as tall as the Temperance, but far bulkier and strong.

Blue psionic shields covered it, arranged like armor, showing an almost knightly figure that stood beside the robed alien. The head was especially shielded, and while the Battlemaster could vaguely make out the skin underneath the other barriers, the face was little more than an obscured void.

The greatsword made out of nothing but psionic energy was held in its hand, a dark mirror of the Battlemaster; a rival he had never known existed until this point. The air around the creature began splitting and breaking, the Psionosphere itself destabilizing in its presence. The creature let out a furious roar that shook the ground, and charged him.

The Battlemaster prepared to defend himself.

This was the endgame.

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Unknown Level, Paradise – Orbit of the Dead World

Unknown Time

Yang wondered if her mind was slowly being compromised yet again as they walked into the darkened arena. A soft blue light fell from the sky, but when she looked upwards she only saw a black void. The arena itself was constructed with what seemed to be black metal and weaving architecture, with the walls themselves shrouded in shadows.
Multiple times she thought she saw figures in those shadows, genderless humanoids that were watching. Most places she would question if she was seeing things, but here she didn’t know. It was becoming more and more difficult to determine what reality actually was. Spend too long here and she might actually lose her mind.

A thought that would normally terrify her, but right now she felt too exhausted to care.

Constant fights and battles; her mind besieged, assaulted, and cracked; voices real and imagined. It made the swords feel heavier than anything had before, and her armor a weight that made her sluggish and slow. Did she truly have the strength for more fighting. Fiona could go on. Axis likely could as well.

She didn’t know if she could or not.

So she stuck close to the Zudjari, because if she was attacked, he would likely see it before her.

Fiona’s sword was drawn as they reached the center. “No exit. Likely a trap.”

“Then should we leave?” Axis asked, forming his crystal defenses into shields. “I do not want to stay in this place.”

Yang turned back to the entrance and her heart likely skipped a beat. “Behind!”

Axis and Fiona turned around as they saw the same thing she did. Standing at the entrance was a tall humanoid cloaked in living shadow, seeming to suck the nearby light around him. Yang couldn’t see the arms, but the smoldering red eyes where the head was were enough. Fiona suddenly appeared behind it and slashed down, and her sword seemed to go right through it as the shadow dematerialized and appeared directly behind her, a dark arm grabbing her by the neck and lifting her up.

Yang tapped again into the psionic wellspring this place was and immediately felt more invigorated, though didn’t know how long that would last. She brought her swords to her hands, then telekinetically tossed one towards the shadow. Fiona disappeared in a blue-green flash and appeared right before the shadow, sword raised and ready.

The shadow performed a micro-teleportation and stabbed a shadowy arm forward towards Fiona which went directly through her body as Fiona sidestepped and sliced down onto the arm which also disappeared as the shadow appeared opposite her once more.

Fiona swung her own blade up. “Clever. But I can do that too.”

With a flourish she teleported towards the shadow once more and began a prolonged exchange of slashes and micro-teleportations, as each of them both tried to get hits on the other in a battle that was almost impossible for either Yang or Axis to actually follow. One moment the two figures were on one side of the arena, and then in a flash they were on the other.

She felt useless in the fight, as everything she did was either deflected or missed thanks to teleportation, the shadow seemed nearly impossible to properly lock on to through telekinesis, and it barely seemed to regard her as a threat at all. Axis was in a similar predicament, as simply moving towards the fight was pointless since both duelists were moving around so quickly.

“I cannot sense his mind,” Axis growled, even as the air distorted around him. “It is…slippery. It is too small for someone of this level of teleportation control.”

Calling it a duel seemed the wrong word as she watched it. The Shadow didn’t actually have any
kind of weapon he could see, but it was clearly trying to grab and retain control over Fiona. The problem was of course that she was simply too fast, and as a teleporter she could escape any grasp within moments. Her immunity to mind control made her impossible to control this way.

On the other side, Fiona seemed to be as ineffective against the shadow as it was against her. Every strike was either dodged or missed entirely. It was clearly as skilled as she was, and as Yang watched, she noticed just how flowing it was. Fiona performed a series of stabs and cuts, and the Shadow simply weaved out of the way with a masterful precision that seemed oddly slow, but fluid.

It suddenly looked over to them, and appeared before them. The air around her became blacked as it towered over her and extended a black hand to grab her chest and looked directly into her eyes for an entire long second. An eternity.

Her brain felt as though it was suddenly submerged in sludge, barely able to process what was happening. Instinctively she knew this thing was in her mind, but she could barely muster any strength to strike the arm of the shadow itself. The blades raised and then fell as she suddenly lost all feeling in them.

Her heart stopped.

Her sight vanished.

The world became silent as her hearing ended.

She felt herself dropped onto the ground with a thud. Or it would have been a thud, if she could hear.

Then she realized she couldn’t move, and felt herself convulsing as the effect of her heart stopping began to reap the consequences. The pain was unlike anything she could describe, and she could not even scream into the dark void that was now her reality.

She had failed. She was going to die here.

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Throne Room of the Imperator, Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

1/11/2017 – 12:11 P.M.

Patricia couldn’t determine how or what the Imperator was thinking or feeling, but if there was one thing she could determine, it was that he was somewhat irritated and angry. Fortunately it was not directed at her, but in small part towards the Battlemaster, and the majority reserved for the Creator and the Bringer of Paradise, who she had learned a lot more about over the past few hours.

The Imperator was realizing that he had made several mistakes in the handling of a being that existed within the Psionosphere. Mistakes he was correcting now.

The Overmind, Quisilia, and Fectorian were standing before the Imperator now, as he stood and waited for the Overmind to finish whatever he was doing. She believed he was locating the exact coordinates to directly teleport to Paradise, but she figured it was more than that – they wanted the exact location of the Battlemaster, Sana, and Yang to teleport to them directly.

There were immediate plans to severely neuter the influence the Bringer had already created, and Paradise was about to become a lot more observed in the future. The Imperator was, quite simply,
furious that the Creator had performed one of the most controversial actions of the war to date, and otherwise damaged their standing both in and outside the Collective.

Patricia was mildly surprised the Imperator was going to spare her, but the fact was that she would be instrumental in his plan to control this crossed over Bringer, and so she was unfortunately going to have to live. Although she wouldn’t have nearly as much freedom, and the Bringer was going to be taught a severe lesson in abusing trust.

“The stasis fields are fully prepared?”

The Imperator knew the answer, but wanted to hear Fectorian say it regardless. “Yes, they will hold your captives,” Fectorian kept his tone respectful, but Patricia remembered that he had been… somewhat irritated when he learned even part of the situation. He had likely held his tongue out of respect for the Imperator, but anyone could see that he was not happy, especially when he was given short-notice construction orders. “Like for Origin, they are designed to hold a Reaper-level Ethereal. There will be no escapes or failures.”

“Holding the Bringer’s toys is not something we should be concerned with,” Quisilia’s tone was light, but he had been oddly silent through the whole thing. “Both of us know what is likely happening on that station, and now the Battlemaster and Sana – two Ethereals who could not have possibly been more ill-suited to it – are on it and have seen everything. You do know they’re going to know you’ve been allowing this?”

“The Collective experiments on captives, this has been done before,” the Imperator said slowly. “Distasteful as it is, this is something they will accept.”

“Yes, assuming they stayed on the same level,” Quisilia’s tone was sarcastic enough it verged on disrespectful. “Both of us know there is a lot more than ‘experimentation’ going on. So are you going to tell the Battlemaster the reason or not?”

The Imperator was silent for a moment. Patricia knew he was not particularly happy the Battlemaster had created this situation, even if it wasn’t completely his fault. He was irritated that the Battlemaster, along with Sana, had first questioned Isomnum (which had supposedly gone badly), and then gone directly to interrogate the Creator with Sana’Ligna, without even once informing the Imperator.

Something the Imperator had seemed legitimately surprised at when they determined what had happened. And then surmised that at best the Battlemaster was engaged with the defenses of Paradise, and at worst was dead. Honestly Patricia wondered which scenario would be easier to solve. In the grand scheme…the chained essence of a Sovereign One was more important, but on the other side it was a massive risk.

Of course, without prior warning the Battlemaster had almost certainly gotten the wrong idea about what was going on, and was likely furious at the Imperator. It was the reason the Imperator had kept the details so secretive. There were certain people who would simply not accept the justification for these measures, and the Battlemaster was one of them. Not to mention Sana’Ligna.

“I suspect I will have little choice,” the Imperator finally said. “But I do not think he will be convinced of the necessity of it. He is too focused on the immediate picture. The Collective. Even if he understands the bigger picture, he may ultimately reject it.”

“Is there something I should know about?” Fectorian interjected. “I believe I deserve to know exactly what is going on here. What are these stasis pods being used for?”
“An experiment which has temporarily gone awry,” the Imperator said. “It involves Sovereign technology. An example of why we should never become reliant on it. This is all you need to know, if your experience is required I will ensure you know.”

Fectorian straightened, and looked directly at the Imperator. “Very well. If you do not require my services further, I will leave,” he turned abruptly and began exiting the room. At the edge he looked back around. “I suspect the Battlemaster will be more forthcoming than you are, Imperator. There are too few of us left to keep secrets.”

The door shut behind them, and Quisilia shook his head. “I would not have advised that.”

“The fewer who know, the better,” the Imperator said. “This will eventually fade and the situation will stabilize. The Battlemaster will eventually calm down, especially if he focuses on Earth.”

“Then I hope you plan on doing something to actually appease him,” Quisilia continued, sounding unimpressed. “Because I’m going to tell you that if you think simply explaining this is going to make everything go away, you clearly don’t know him. He’s going to want Paradise destroyed, and the Creator and the Bringer’s Aspects brutally murdered. At the moment you are planning how best to preserve the situation and ultimate goal, not how to deal with the Battlemaster.”

“What do you suggest?” Patricia asked. “There are few good options here.”

“You,” Quisilia pointed a black dagger at her. “Don’t have a say in this, Trask. I’m not even sure why you’re involved in this situation, but you are. That doesn’t mean you get to make suggestions.”

“Answer her question,” the Imperator stated.

“Kill all of the Aspects,” Quisilia said heavily, clearly unhappy. “It would be a severe setback, I know, but it would ensure the Battlemaster is appeased, even if the Creator is spared. Essentially kill everything on Paradise, and start over. Not ideal, but I think keeping the Battlemaster is more important than completing the Crossing in a timely manner.”

“No.” The Imperator stated flatly. “We may…need it in the future, if the Sovereign on Earth becomes more involved. It has taken decades to reach this point, and we do not have that time before this kind of measure will be needed. The Battlemaster will simply have to be convinced.”

Quisilia simply sighed. “I see the reasoning, but he is not going to like it.”

“No,” the Imperator agreed. “He will not. But this is ultimately essential.”

“Which reminds me,” Quisilia recalled slowly. “Do you think he awakened Mortis?”

“With Sana, yes,” the Imperator said, standing. “I suspect that made their jobs easier. Once this situation is contained, we will relocate him to here. I do not want an Ethereal, especially him, near the Bringer, regardless of assurances.”

“They have been located,” the Overmind suddenly spoke. “Two groups. Separated. The Battlemaster, Sana, and Mortis, and Yang Shuren with a foreign mind. They must have awakened the Zudjari as well.”

“I’ll recover Yang and the Zudjari,” Quisilia said, twirling the blade in his hand.

“Patricia and I will go to the Battlemaster,” the Imperator finished. “Give us the exact locations. How deep did they manage to get?”
“The third level.”

The Imperator lifted a hand and the air in front of Patricia split into a purple-tinted portal. She put on her XCOM helmet in preparation. “I do not know what we will find,” the Imperator said slowly. “Prepare to immediately defend yourself. I will be immediately behind you.”

With a nod, Patricia stepped into the portal.

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Unknown Level, Paradise – Orbit of the Dead World

Unknown Time

Yang was unsure what happened, until she suddenly gulped a mouthful of air.

“Apologies,” the voice of Axis said, as she realized that she still couldn’t see and was still paralyzed. “Lower brain telepathy is something I have limited training in, and your minds are not like ours. I’ve done what I can, but I don’t know-“

“I can hear,” she breathed. “I’m not dead. Can’t see or move.”

“Fiona has its attention for now,” Axis said, even though Yang couldn’t actually hear much aside from some slashes in the distance. A silent duel of immaterial warriors. “I’m going to try-“

His voice turned to something like surprise. “What-?”

“That is enough,” Yang tried to move her head as she lay on the ground, although her paralysis hindered it. Don’t panic, they’ll fix this. They’ll fix this. “This little party is over.”

Quisilia?

“You know this Ethereal?” Axis sounded similarly surprised.

“Yes,” Yang muttered. “Which means the Imperator is not far behind.”

“While I’m sure you’ve had great fun with this, I am going to have to demand you stand down,” Quisilia said, presumably addressing the shadow-thing. “The Imperator is very… displeased with what has happened here.”

We have come under attack. The voice appeared in their minds, a raspy and slick male one which could not have sounded more sinister if it tried. Defense-

“Ah, no,” Quisilia sounded amused. “You can call it whatever you want, but let’s just say no one who isn’t brainwashed is going to believe you. Also, who is this?”

“Fiona,” Axis muttered.

“And that is my cue to leave,” Fiona said, likely teleporting beside them. “Stay or go?”

“Get me out of here,” Axis said.

Yang didn’t hear anything, but she presumed that Fiona was gone, and had likely taken Axis with her. She was almost sad, since the Zudjari had not seemed that bad. That he had saved her life was also a point in his favor, though she couldn’t really blame him for wanting to leave this place as soon as possible, and especially not trusting the judgement of the Ethereals.
What had the Imperator been thinking?

“You, stay there,” Quisilia ordered, likely to the shadow. “Hold onto this. You move, I will kill you, regardless of what the Imperator ordered.” Yang heard something being tossed through the air, but didn’t have any idea what it could be. Footsteps approached her a few seconds later.

“I can’t move or see,” she said, hoping he would hear her. “That thing-“

“Yes, you’re fortunate you lived at all,” he said. “I’ll get you to Sana immediately. You can be healed. The Battlemaster will be pleased to know that you lived, and I’m sure you can say quite a bit about the ones who were with you.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “To the Battlemaster. Please say there is a good reason for this.”

“There is a reason,” Quisilia said as she was picked up by him. “I suspect you would not agree, though I cannot tell you regardless. That is the Battlemaster’s prerogative.”

Yang would have closed her eyes if she hadn’t already been blind. “What the fuck was the Imperator thinking?”

There was a noticeable pause. “In the long term, Miss Shuren.”

“Please tell me he will stop it.”

Another pause. “There will be consequences for what happened here, I can assure you of that.”

She didn’t ignore he had avoided the question. “Will the Creator be executed?”

“No. She has a part to play.”

She had feared that would be the answer. But deep down she had known that the Imperator wouldn’t allow this if he truly didn’t think it had some worth. All of them were presumably alive, and the cost was minimal. In terms of cold statistics at least. The Collective had ultimately lost nothing in this incident, and no permanent harm had been done.

Except of course the damage to the reputation and trustworthiness of everyone who had been involved in hiding this. She knew on her own she was ultimately not important, and her wants and opinions wouldn’t change anything. A mere weapon given to the Battlemaster to utilize as he saw fit.

But she felt some hope that the Battlemaster would not take this lightly. “Then I hope you’re prepared for what the Battlemaster and Mortis will do once they are told this,” she said quietly to Quisilia. “I can’t do anything. But they will.”

She felt some measure of surprise from him. “Did you say Mortis?”

Oh right, they didn’t know he had recovered from…whatever he had been afflicted with. She smiled. “Yes, he apparently has recovered. And he is not happy.”

“Oh dear,” Quisilia mused. “That is going to make things more complicated.”

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Level 3, Paradise – Orbit of the Dead World

Unknown Time
The warrior fighting him was one of the most challenging the Battlemaster had ever experienced in his life. Rarely, outside of other Battlemasters, had he dueled someone who was just as strong, fast, and skilled as he was. There had been few who surpassed him, and he had known that one day he might hold the title of Grandmaster.

But this warrior before him was without a doubt his equal. Possibly better.

Blow for blow, they matched each other. A psionic charge was met with a telekinetic throw. Swings were blocked head on, not dodged. It was certainly a different experience to fight something his own size, and the Battlemaster began falling back into a comfortable rhythm he had not used in a long time.

Larger meant slower. It meant easier to predict and exploit.

This warrior was likely as dangerous as him, but there were weaknesses he could exploit. A larger size meant more areas to hit. More mass slowed him down, and made his moves more predictable. The Battlemaster did not feel he was in immediate danger – yet.

But the corrosive aura he had around him was an actual problem, as were the beams of psionic energy he shot from his hands. His armor was slowly deteriorating, subjected to rift after corrosive shot. Even this forged armor could not last forever against psionic bombardment, and to make this issue worse, the longer the duel progressed the more extreme the psionic hurricane around the warrior became.

The burning psionic sword slashed down, and was blocked by the Battlemaster as he responded by sending a telekinetic shockwave towards the warrior, shaking the ground. With another hand, he maintained a telekinetic grip on the arms, briefly forced them open, and stabbed forward. The psionic armor blocked it, but the warrior let out another roar, and threw a fist towards him which missed, and the Battlemaster stabbed under the armpit, which was also deflected.

But it was enough to unbalance the warrior, and the Battlemaster shoved him to the ground as the warrior responded to it by immediately turning around and with a gesture created a psionic maelstrom where he was standing.

The Battlemaster winced as he felt the psionic acid land on his skin, a testament to how degraded his armor was by this point, and performed another psionic charge to the warrior who moved out of the way and swung in a wide arc, which the Battlemaster easily ducked and stabbed forward to the chest.

It was growing angrier. Good.

He allowed it to miss several more times before punching it once in the shielded head. No damage, but it was enough to unbalance it even further. A furious but sloppy strike followed, which he deflected quite easily as he threw it back with a telekinetic push. The psionic storm was growing fiercer, and that blow seemed to make something fundamentally change.

The blue psionic armor flickered and suddenly dissipated as the psionic disruptions around him flashed, then turned into a full storm, revealing the true form of the creature. A mix of armor and hard brown skin covered the body, almost as though the armor was physically attached to the creature. Lining the torso were extra little limbs, underdeveloped and waving as they were free from the confines of the psionic armor, rippling with psionic power.

The head was not covered by any helmet, but a hood of some kind, and no face could be seen. It could not have been an illusion, but the Battlemaster only saw blackness within the hood. Perhaps
it did not actually have a head at all?

The psionic sword remained in hand, and with another furious and ground-shaking roar, charged as the Battlemaster felt the full power of the storm around the warrior. Psionic acidic energy ravaged his armor even more, and began destroying the hardened skin underneath, and the Battlemaster was thankful for Sana’s own power as any light wounds he sustained were healed almost instantly.

But for the first time in a long time, it was painful.

The warrior rained down blow after blow in an insane frenzy, with no regard for strategy or skill. It was the swings of a berserker, one which exchanged discipline for unrestrained fury. After swinging once it reached back and ripped the hood back and a massive beam of psionic energy shot from the head towards him.

It slammed directly into his chest and he psionically charged out of there before his armor’s integrity could be weakened further. Once away, he saw what the head of the creature truly looked like. It wasn’t even a head, but almost a vertical ring of flesh that formed the outline of one, which he could see through. All it was good for was propping up the hood, and possibly worked as a focus point for a psionic attack.

The Battlemaster had given up trying to work out how the biology of what he had seen worked. This was not the time or place for it.

A psionic charge back into the whirling maelstrom resumed the fight once more, and while he could easily deflect, block, or dodge the wild swings, the psionic storm around him was beginning to take its toll. He could not stay in it forever, even as he landed blow after blow on it, dismembered some of the small arms on the torso, and otherwise thought he was causing it damage.

But it also could heal, and he didn’t know what the best way was to beat it.

He charged backwards out of the storm to briefly appraise it before it began walking towards him again.

Possibly a problem.

He spared a glance over to where Sana and Mortis were, and they seemed to be in the exact same situation. It spoke to the skill of the Temperance that they had somehow managed to not break through yet, but at least he was being occupied.

A purple flash appeared behind the Gateway, and Patricia Trask stepped out, followed immediately by the Imperator, who was already radiating power.

“Stand down.”

The warrior he had faced was suddenly encased in a psionic stasis field, lifted into the air and compressed into a more compact form with the limbs folded backwards. The head of it suddenly split into pieces, although that seemed to affect it very little as the psionic storm began dissipating. It was likely struggling, but the barriers would not allow it.

The Temperance was also encased in a barrier and suspended in the air, although it wasn’t constricted as much.

About time.
“Sana,” the Imperator said. “End your assault. Your orders are to stand down.”

What?

“Kill it,” the Battlemaster roared. “What are you doing?”

“Imperator,” the Temperance said, in the same toneless voice. “I am pleased you have finally arrived to mediate this unfortunate dispute.”

“Stand down, Battlemaster,” the Imperator commanded, raising an arm in his direction. “I want to know the actual situation—"

“What!” The Battlemaster yelled, flinging his sword in a wide arc to emphasize his shout. “This entire station is the situation. One that needs to be completely destroyed.” His anger began growing as he stormed to the Imperator. “Answer me this, Imperator, did you know about what was happening here?”

“Not specific details,” the Imperator answered with irritating calmness. “But the overall situation I was aware of, and approved of.”

The Battlemaster didn’t know how he felt about the Imperator simply admitting this. “What were you thinking?”

“Quite clearly your mental capabilities were as atrophied as I had feared,” Mortis said, speaking for the first time towards the Imperator. “Which is odd, as I specifically remembered the Imperators being among our most intelligent. The only possible way to correct this mistake is to do as the Battlemaster suggests and purge everything on this station.”

The Imperator looked to the Ethereal in almost surprise. “Mortis’ Ligna, I see you have… recovered.”

“Yes, I certainly have,” Mortis also stormed forward, his own voice rising. “And I am informed that not only is the Empire destroyed, not only are we invading a primitive alien species for no reason, but you are sanctioning and running this place which grows every kind of abomination and experiments on children. And you don’t even deny it!”

“This situation is far more complex than it appears—"

“Really,” the Battlemaster was unsure if his tone was sarcasm or outright contempt. “No, Imperator, it is not. You may have everyone conditioned to accept your every word, but that does not apply to me. The Ethereals I knew forbade the exploitation of aliens, the Ethereals I knew did not run horror camps like this one for no good reason, or talked with things living in the actual Psionsphere! The Ethereals I knew had standards and rules, and didn’t let every idiot with a scalpel start cutting up innocent aliens! You,” he pointed at the Imperator. “Have no authority as far as I see it. The Empire would have despised you. No. The Empire would have executed you.”

There was silence at that, and the Battlemaster felt no urge to defend the Imperator here. While he didn’t consider the Imperator on that level of contempt, he deserved no pity or respect in this instance.

“He is right,” Sana stepped forward, her voice softer but firm. “We have retained and expanded the worst aspects of the Empire without making the reforms necessary. This goes beyond experimentation, Imperator. This is unjustifiable and cannot be salvaged. Perhaps you had good reasons for this, but those do not matter now. What does is what you do next.”
“Each of you has a right to be upset,” the Imperator finally said. “This situation is my fault and I accept this. It escaped my control, and the freedom I allowed was abused. There will be consequences for this, for that you have my assurance. An explanation as to why this was allowed in the first place will be provided on the Temple Ship.”

“What consequences?” The Battlemaster demanded.

“There are six Aspects to the Bringer,” the Imperator looked to the Temperance. “Constructed over years and each holding some of his power and mindset. If one dies, that aspect itself is destroyed and may take centuries to reform. As a result, there is a certain… motivation, to keep these Aspects alive and well.”

He looked back to the Battlemaster. “You have encountered two of them. Quisilia has encountered another. As powerful and skilled as the strongest of the Ethereals. But they have… been allowed too much free reign. As the result of this disappointing incident, three of these Aspects will be imprisoned and a far closer eye kept on this station.”

“What?” Mortis yelled. “Are you insane? Why would you want to help this thing? Did the fact that it exists in the Psionosphere not give you an indication that maybe working with it is a bad idea!”

“It is under control.” The Imperator stated with steel in his voice. “I would not take this action unless it was necessary, and I know how it will be kept under control. I know what it needs, and it needs us far more than we need it.”

Mortis threw a glance around. “It is clearly under control.”

“The mistakes will not be repeated,” the Imperator promised. “You can rest assured of that.”

“No,” the Battlemaster shook his head. “Not good enough. The Aspects must die, as will the Creator.”

“While I can sympathize, that will not happen,” the Imperator said. “This is unfortunately necessary.”

The Battlemaster steeled himself. “Then I will inform the Voice.”

“The Voice is aware,” the Imperator said. “This is similarly sanctioned. The Sovereign Ones support this action, and I am taking their advice into consideration. Something I believe you have suggested I do more of.”

That was a blow. If the Sovereign Ones were also sanctioning this then… why? But he couldn’t help but think the Imperator was using that as an excuse for the inexcusable. Sanctioned or not, this was not something that he was going to allow. “That does not change this situation. You may try and keep this running, but I will stand in your way every step of the way.”

The Imperator regarded him idly. “And what will you do, Battlemaster? Stay here? Fight me? You have more important duties, both to our species and the Collective. You have spent a long time on Earth without much to show for it. Perhaps your effectiveness has waned.”

“Insults and insinuations will fail,” the Battlemaster said flatly. “Both of us know the situation on Earth needed time to be reformed. You also have no one to replace me. Your threats are empty, and as far as I am concerned, this is part of my duties to the Collective. Destroying places like this,” he motioned around. “If you will not do what must be done, then the entire Collective will know of this place. As will Earth. I stated that I would bring those who were responsible for this attack to justice, and that is what will happen.”
There was another flash, as Quisilia suddenly appeared, holding the beaten form of Yang in his arms. “Hello! What did I miss?”

The Battlemaster’s concern turned to her. “She’s alive, but her body has been telepathically disrupted,” Quisilia assured him as he walked over to Sana. “You should be able to fix her.”

“I’m… fine, Battlemaster,” Yang called weakly.

“Good,” he said, before turning to Quisilia. “Where is the Zudjari?”

“Gone,” Quisilia said. “There was someone helping them. I believe she was affiliated with the same individual who attacked me in Australia.”

He would have to ask Yang about that, though he did feel he owed whoever this was. Regardless of the side of this individual, she had apparently helped them survive. The loss of Axis was unfortunate, but he felt some treasonous satisfaction that at least someone on Earth would know about this place. “Unfortunate, but we will deal with it later. The important part is that she survived.”

“I would ask how serious you are, Battlemaster,” the Imperator finally said. “You would throw the Collective into pointless chaos to fulfill your sense of justice? It is far more destructive to the Collective than anything which has taken place here, all in an effort to blackmail me? I would suggest you hear what I have to say before you consider such actions.” The Imperator took a step forward. “We are both aware this is a bluff. You would not do that because it would throw the Collective into chaos, the same Collective you have spent decades refining.”

“Because you would not,” the Battlemaster answered. “But if there is such a good reason for it, then I suppose you have no problem sharing it with the Collective?”

“Do not make this situation simpler than it is in actuality,” the Imperator said, his voice dropping. “This is a direct order to stand down, Battlemaster. At least until we can discuss this more rationally. Will you break an order because you are, right now, emotionally compromised?”

Would he?

Should he wait to see what the Imperator had to say before making a decision?

Then he remembered the rows of experimentation chambers where the victims had literally cannibalized themselves due to starvation, where they had been experimented on while they were alive, the children the mad Sectoid had forced to sing for them, and he knew that he had found a line. One that not even a superior could overrule.

A hand suddenly grabbed his upper arm. “Don’t push him farther,” Mortis said quietly. “I do not know if he will kill you, but he is gathering power. Don’t forget what happened, but getting yourself demoted or killed now won’t solve anything.”

Rationally, the Battlemaster knew he was right. This station would still be here. The evidence wouldn’t vanish, and there was nothing stopping him from carrying out his threats. But he would not give the Imperator the satisfaction of agreeing with him. Instead he looked to Quisilia. “There are a group of children on the second floor, in a theatre-like area. Recover them, and sweep the station for any others, child or adult. Remove them and send them to Sanctuary.”

Quisilia gave a mock salute. “With pleasure.”

The Battlemaster looked back to the Imperator. “Let’s leave this place,” he didn’t bother disguising
the contempt in his voice. “Before I change my mind.”

Supplementary Material

Chronicles of Salvation:

- Duo - Gentle Genesis
- Bactum - Voice of the Divine
Four more disappearances. It was time to either determine the cause of the killings, or catch the perpetrators causing the scouts and deep patrol teams to vanish. Enough was enough, and she did not want to report to Alberta-3 that her forces were being bled dry. The Sargon was not like regular Mutons, and from one conversation she knew she was dealing with an alien smarter than her.

Runi’falia’borelia marched into the snowy forests where the soldiers had gone missing. She had initially felt fortunate to be assigned to a place on this planet with something resembling an acceptable climate, even if it wasn’t quite as nice as Borelia proper. It could have been far worse, she could have been assigned to Australia.

She shivered.

Instead, she’d been placed in charge of a small city which had been easily taken over by Collective forces, and was instructed to keep the population in line, catalogue the number of citizens, and fortify the cities for eventual counterattack. The first thing she’d done was prepare all non-essential civilians for processing to a more secure location. Women and children mostly, the males were useful as labor, and there were specialists that knew the area, methods, systems, and additional information about Humans.

Processing was nearly forty percent done, and the population was largely placated. No unrest, and cooperation was acceptable. The problem was not within the city, but beyond it. Falia suspected the culprits were either ADVENT stragglers, or hunters known to inhabit the land and not necessarily live in the cities. There was reason to suspect such, given that the bodies that had managed to be recovered showed signs of death by unconventional or less powerful weaponry than ADVENT standard.

Most of the time bodies weren’t found at all. Falia wondered grimly if they’d been eaten. She knew Humans didn’t typically eat sapient life…but she wouldn’t put it past some of the more savage Humans to do so. The stories of Human cannibals were…unsettling. Over twenty had died since their initial takeover, and only three had been able to be recovered.

However, four at a time was unusual. Normally it was one or two stragglers. Four implied that this was now a concerted effort, if it hadn’t been so before. Either they were now facing an actual ADVENT resistance, or there were stragglers working together to pick off her soldiers. No longer tolerable.

Twenty-five soldiers equipped in battle armor, thermal detection, and the finest weapons of the Collective would be more than adequate to deal with whatever stragglers they are dealing with. The force was mostly Borelians, but there were a few Vitakarian support soldiers and a Dath’Haram medic in case that was actually needed.

Along with two Humans, both of whom knew the area well and were animal hunters. Falia didn’t intend to use them as hostages, but if it came down to between protecting her soldiers or Humans, the choice was clear. “There is no animal which could kill them, is there?” She asked one of the
bundled Humans, a short male with light skin.

“Not one that lives in this area,” the man answered, shrugging. “A bear definitely could, but the problem is that they’re likely hibernating, and more importantly, don’t live in this part of the country. Nothing venomous either. Afraid you don’t have an easy answer here.”

“Have you heard anything about this?” She growled. “Within the city? From the people?”

“No one’s sad about it,” the man said slowly. “But no contact, if that’s what you mean. Not surprised though, you’re dealing with people who excel in hunting animals down. Aliens aren’t too much different.”

“Is there anything in particular we should look for?” Runi’baliaha’borelia asked, another Borelian soldier. “You know how these people think.”

“We can make guesses, we’re not mind readers,” the second Human said. “But you’ll want to look for signs of activity. Fires, food, blood, anything out of the ordinary. Tracks will be covered up in the snowfall, and if they’re smart they’ll be covering their tracks anyway.”

Falia bared her teeth. “Will they have ways of controlling their body heat?”

The first Human snorted. “These are hunters, not ADVENT. No.”

That was good enough. “All soldiers switch to thermal,” she said. “They won’t be able to hide from us.”

“There may be traps as well,” one of her Vitakarian soldiers commented, raising his rifle. “Watch for those.”

“Agreed,” Falia motioned for the Humans to go to a duo of soldiers. “Watch them. They’ll have either left or we’ll kill or capture them.”

They nodded, then she and the remaining soldiers began fanning out into the woods, thermal vision on as they searched for the hunters. The trees were not thick, but they were dense and the woods were close to silent as they walked through them. The snow crunched under their feet as the darkness grew deeper.

She idly wondered if this should have been done when there had been more light. The problem was that she also wanted to bait these hunters out, and give them the illusion they would have the advantage if it was dark instead of light. Now that she was actually here, she wondered if it was a more significant advantage than she had first assumed.

“We’ve lost one!”

She turned towards the sound of the voice, as a couple of her soldiers came running up. “We turned around, and he was gone,” the first explained immediately. “No sound or thermal detection.”

They were here then. “Hostiles in the area,” she said through her linked intercom. “Regroup on my position.”

There were multiple acknowledgements…and a disturbing amount who didn’t report in at all. A few minutes later she was standing in front of a force which was half the size it had been. Something it seemed the majority of soldiers hadn’t noticed until now. “Did nobody see them?” She demanded. “How could there be no trace they were here?”
No one had an answer, and she thought for a moment, thinking of a way to salvage this. Much as she hated to admit it, retreating might be the smartest idea. Whoever these Humans were, they were very good, and almost certainly more numerous than she’d been expecting. Still, the thermal should have picked at least something up-

She heard something whistle in the air, and at a glance up saw a sphere-like object…“Grenade!” She yelled as she was already moving. “Down!”

A bright orange flash and boom followed, as a half dozen grenades landed around them, killing some of the clustered soldiers outright and wounding others. Her armor had absorbed the worst of the one closest to her, but she’d been on the outer edge of the blast radius. Sharp cracks suddenly rang out, and soldiers around her began falling, helmets punctured by firearms.

Stumbling upright, she then caught her first glimpse of the ones that they had been pursuing. But these were not hunters, they were quite clearly trained soldiers. Their armor was slim, colored a mix of whites and greys, and thinner than standard ADVENT armor. The helmets were blank faces which didn’t expose any skin, and now that she noticed, no skin at all was exposed.

She quickly switched to thermal and saw her suspicion was frighteningly correct. There was no thermal presence, despite this soldier standing right in front of her.

There were at least four, carrying shotguns, pistols and rifles as they executed the soldiers she had foolishly clustered together. She raised her own rifle until she felt a calm feeling sweep over her, one which made her hesitate before aiming, let alone shooting.

“Oh, no,” the soft voice of a Human woman said right beside her. “You’re coming with us. We’ve got questions for you.”

Inexplicably, Falia felt like she was going to collapse on her feet and fall asleep.

Much to her drowsy surprise, she did, and fell first to her knees, and then on her face in the cold and soft snow of Canada.

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Canadian Wilderness – Canada

1/4/2017 – 10:11 P.M.

In truth, the area where they’d brought the Borelian leader was not far away from their ‘main’ base, if it actually deserved such a name. At best it was a camp, one of four in the area. It just happened to be the one he was primarily working out of now. But this place they were at in the woods now was isolated, foreboding, and intimidating.

Perfect for an interrogation.

They didn’t necessarily need to conduct one, but Neil didn’t want to rely on psionics unless absolutely necessary. That kind of power didn’t sit right with him, regardless of if it was being used on aliens or not. The Borelians might have looked like animals, but that didn’t mean they would be treated as such.

While they were alive, in any case.

Two soldiers in ADVENT Snowtrooper armor stood behind the alien who’d been stripped of weapons and heavy armor. On her knees, she was still in the psionically-induced sleep thanks to
Cycelea. The Inquisitor was at his side, while he was also flanked by Adam, a Molosser Handler who had one of the genetically modified dogs at his side.

The hound was huge, with a purebred wolf as the initial base instead of the standard German Shepherd. A bit too large for Neil to feel comfortable around, but the hound was a ferocious fighter and an excellent tracker, as well as exceptionally well-behaved. It was, however, baring its teeth and focusing the bright MELD-infused eyes on the alien.

At a single command, Adam could let the dog rip the Borelian apart. Not a pleasant way to die, and Neil wondered if the dog had developed a taste for Borelians after being fed several corpses they’d recovered earlier. Well, the dog had seemed to like it either way, even if he was messy with it.

Neil looked to Cycelea. “You can wake her whenever.”

“One moment.” The Inquisitor walked up to her and placed two fingers on the temple of the unconscious alien. She’d explained it was easier if she had physical contact with the being whose mind she wanted to control, and Neil had decided to accept that. It did make some degree of sense.

All of them were still in Snowtrooper armor, and he didn’t plan on revealing any of their faces. Not only because it was dangerous due to the cold, but because he didn’t want anyone picking out his face if this alien was psionically interrogated. Not to mention there was a certain intimidation factor he could exploit.

From what he knew of Borelians they wouldn’t be able to be coerced easily, and were resistant to pain. However, to his knowledge this had never been tested psionically. He supposed that was one good thing about psionics; it removed the need to inflict pain. Why bother when you could take what you needed straight from their minds?

The alien slowly opened her eyes, then tried recoiling once she saw the trio in front of her. The hound growled, as Neil raised a hand. “Don’t struggle, or you’ll be subdued again.”

Cycelea drew upon her power, briefly illuminating her form with a purple aura. The Borelian stopped, as Neil had hoped, recognizing the signs of psionic powers. “Yes,” Neil confirmed. “She’s a psion. A telepath.” The eyes of the alien widened at that.

“She’s definitely spooked at that,” Cycelea said through their internal comms, unheard by the Borelian. “Psionics in general seems to unsettle Borelians.”

“Now,” Neil continued, as if he hadn’t heard Cycelea. “I’m not exactly a fan of relying on that kind of thing, mind reading and all that,” he idly motioned with a hand. “But at the same time, I have work to do, so unless you want her poking around in your mind, you’ll answer my questions. You understand me?”

“Yes.” A low voice answered, not distinctly female compared to Human voices, but having heard both genders of the race speak, it definitely wasn’t as deep as a male.

“Good,” he crossed his arms. “Who knows you’re out here?”

“Several of my Captains. No one else. We assumed it was a group of hunters.”

Just what he wanted to hear. “We did our jobs then. So you could return without raising questions?”

“You killed all of my soldiers!” She growled up at him. “That will raise questions.”
Neil smiled under his helmet. “Incorrect. We only killed about half of your forces; the rest we’re holding. It wouldn’t be an unbelievable story if you were to be ambushed, and eventually retreat. Perfectly believable.”

“I won’t do that, I refuse to help an enemy,” she spat. “You will have to kill me.”

“Really,” Neil said dryly. “I don’t recall saying you had a choice. This was me…” he paused. “Thinking out loud. I don’t want you, I want your superior. The one managing Collective territory here.”

“Then you want Sargon Alberta-3,” she said. “But you won’t be able to kill him. And if you do… they will send another.”

Neil ignored her comment. “How many Sargons are there?”

“Three in total.”

Neil nodded; that was good. Sargons as far as he knew weren’t cheap, so killing them would hurt the Collective, even if they would eventually be replaced. Cut off the head, cause damage, and repeat. The Sargons were the most dangerous threat now, and if he was too aggressive, they might take direct action, and he wasn’t confident he could outwit three of them.

But strike before they all noticed? A plan with much higher odds.

“Do you have their locations?” He asked. “As well as the locations and names of other Human City Overseers?”

She bared her teeth. “I know where the Sargons are stationed, and I have access to the data on occupied Human settlements. But I will not provide them to you, as I have not memorized them. Even your psion can’t pry something I do not know.”

“Unnecessary,” Neil said. “Here is what is going to happen. You’ll return and continue as normal. However, you’ll turn over every detail of your operations to one of my operatives. As well as the names, locations, and as much information as possible on all Collective officers and leadership. In return, when ADVENT liberates this area, you’ll be given a comfortable cell and a positive recommendation for your trial.”

“No,” the Borelian stated. “I will not.”

“I’m afraid you will,” Neil said, waving Cycelea forward. “While I’m not a fan of psionics, it does have its uses, and sadly I cannot take the chance that you’ll try and screw us over. Cycelea will ensure you do exactly as I say, as will all the other soldiers we have. Don’t worry, she’s said it won’t hurt.”

“No…” the Borelian interrupted, the fight suddenly out of her. “Don’t let that happen! I don’t want her in my mind! I’ll do what you want.”

Neil hesitated. “Perhaps, but I have no guarantee. And that is just not good enough for me. My objective is more important than your mind.” He looked to the Inquisitor. “How long will it take?”

“The last one took just over an hour,” she said, stepping forward as the Borelian tried shrinking back. “I don’t think this one will be more difficult.”

“Report back to me when it’s done,” he said, turning away. “And good job.”
Ignoring the sounds of the Borelian roaring in protest before being abruptly cut off, he began making his way back to the camp with Adam. “Think this’ll work?”

“If the Inquisitors do their job, it will,” Neil said. “I intend to make this a test run. See how much we can get away with here. The Sargons are the priority, however, and we should move to remove them as soon as possible.”

Adam nodded. “Think we can make it look like an accident? Or take a Sargon over?”

“An accident? Possibly. Take one over…no,” Neil recalled what he’d been given. “Sargons have their own version of Manchurian Restraints. Besides, I wouldn’t risk keeping one alive. But I am hoping with our newly acquired Overseer, we can lure them to places of our choosing.”

“The others might catch onto that,” Adam grunted as he patted the hound on the head. “Especially if it happens twice in a row.”

“Which is why we ideally take control of another Overseer,” Neil said. “And launch the ops to kill the Sargons at once. With three Inquisitors and ADVENT’s best snipers, we can pull it off.”

“All at once?” Adam asked thoughtfully. “We’re not exactly an army.”

“We don’t need to be,” Neil said. “We just need a few good men and women to be at the right place at the right time.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Adam looked around the forest as he saw the camp coming up. “I don’t suppose we’ll be having something different to eat tonight?”

“Fresh Borelian meat,” Neil chuckled. “Some of the guys are actually going to try it. Your dog can have what’s left.”

“Ugh,” Adam was probably grimacing under his helmet. “Something just seems wrong about that.”

“Well, that’s what rations and deer meat are for,” Neil patted the man on the back. “But we all do what we must to survive, and aliens are as good a food source as anything. It’s not like it’s cannibalism.”

“Technically.”

Neil smiled. If their biggest arguments were what to do with the corpses they had, then so far things were going well.

Now they had to wait and see how well the Inquisitors had done their jobs.

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ADVENT Diplomatic Command - Switzerland
1/12/2017 – 9:19 A.M.

“Polls are looking quite promising,” Kyong said as they reviewed the latest international and diplomatic news of note. “The Royal Family coming out in support of joining ADVENT has greatly boosted the popularity of the referendum.”

“Prince Mason came through,” Saudia nodded approvingly. “Worth the concessions I gave him.”

“For certain,” Kyong agreed. “And I would argue that those ‘concessions’ will improve our
reputation and military further. In fact, I believe Hassan is already developing a number of diplomatic avenues exploiting our dedication to preserving and protecting the culture of nations and our species. And Laura receives her melee unit for the military without having to rely on the Lancers.”

“A win-win for everyone involved,” Hassan said with a smile. “Are you sure you weren’t a diplomat before becoming Chancellor?”

Saudia thought back to her time in EXALT. “Not formally, but I was...good...at having opposing parties come together for a shared goal. That skill has served me well.”

“I believe we’ll need it in the future,” Hassan said. “You’re developing something of a reputation among the diplomatic community, both in and out of ADVENT. People are beginning to realize that when you become personally involved, things happen. Usually good things.”

“The details I leave to you, Firdaus,” she said inclining her head. “But I’ve found that people are more amenable to offers if they’re treated as equals. Respect goes a long way, especially when bringing nations into the fold.”

“Speaking of which,” Hassan pushed over a tablet. “We’ve got several interesting offers on the table here. Take a look. The Referendum, and the Seoul Massacre are shaking everything up.”

Saudia picked up the tablet, read it briefly, then looked to Hassan with a raised eyebrow. “Greece, Italy, and Poland want to talk about potential integration into ADVENT. That is...a pleasant surprise. This all but shatters the EU once and for all if it happens.”

“Yes it does,” Hassan nodded, lightly smirking. “Which is why some of them are using their positions as leverage. They are going to want certain amenities in exchange for joining ADVENT.”

“As long as they don’t want exemption from laws,” Saudia nodded. “So what are they?”

“Greece is in...some financial troubles,” Hassan began. “I’m sure you’re aware of them. They want us to cover any and all costs of leaving the EU, as well as settle any debts they have. I’ve passed the numbers to Jasmine and she’s looking at the best way to go about this while ensuring we recover quickly. It’s certainly feasible though.”

“And the other two?”

“Guaranteed protection, mostly,” Hassan gave a humorless smile. “Modern ADVENT tech, weapons, amenities; what they would get regardless. Of course I said we could provide it, but we can let them think it’s a concession we are making.”

Saudia smiled back. “Of course. This shouldn’t be too difficult. Have we heard anything from the SAS?”

“Nothing yet,” Hassan shook his head. “Which is...surprising. Not even an acknowledgement, and ADVENT Intelligence has been having trouble getting eyes there, which is another concern. I feel there is more going on there than we think?”

Saudia grimaced. “Alien involvement?”

“It would make the difficulties Intelligence is facing explainable,” Hassan said slowly. “But I can’t say for certain. Betos did know quite a lot about the inner workings of ADVENT, although now her information is significantly out of date.”
“I’ll have to speak to Elizabeth about that,” Saudia said, thinking. “We have Inquisitors now. If they ultimately penetrate or not…it will reveal a great deal.”

“In the meantime…” Kyong looked to his own tablet. “Further talks with the Chinese are upcoming. They’ll be wanting some more of our technology, especially since they’re helping us with our own AI projects.”

“We can likely spare some technology,” Saudia said. “Feng has finalized ETC weaponry, which would provide a massive boost to the Chinese specifically. Not on the level of standard ADVENT weapons, but enough to protect themselves.”

Hassan frowned. “Sorry, what is this?”

Saudia rubbed her forehead. “Honestly I only remember that Feng said it would make our arsenal of previous generation weapons relevant again. You’ll want to speak to him for a better idea, but I do know it will allow us to produce weapons for our militias and stockpiles fast enough to make sure every city can protect themselves within months.”

“I’ll speak to him about it,” Kyong nodded. “Now, there is one more thing I want to bring to your attention, which I believe could potentially give us a significant diplomatic advantage going into Africa.”

“Besides the alien threat?” She asked rhetorically.

“Yes,” Kyong said, pressing the screen on his tablet several times. “This was sent by the Environmental Development Team of R&D. Project Greenwall. Have you heard of it?”

Saudia shook her head. “No, not that one.” It was not especially surprising she didn’t hear about it, there were a multitude of projects that were being worked on that she only knew the basics of, if anything beyond that. Only major projects or ones with something to show were ones she knew of. Project Greenwall was not one of them. “What is it?”


Saudia just raised an eyebrow. “Really.”

“It isn’t quite as crazy as it sounds,” Kyong explained. “The proposal is extremely thorough. Creations of artificial lakes and controlled flooding, planned forest development and soil creation, controlled livestock deployment and grazing, and plans for excavating and utilizing the excessive amounts of sand, especially in the Sahara. It’s not necessarily that the technology is demanding, rather it just requires manpower, time, and dedication.”

“In theory that is possible,” Hassan said slowly. “But the scale of it…it would be one of the largest projects undertaken in Human history. With no actual guarantee it would actually work.”

“It is a large project,” Kyong said. “However, it would be a unification project, one spanning countries who would work together to better the entire continent. It would also allow these nations to contribute themselves, and feel like they are making a difference. This is especially potent for civilians.” He paused. “In more practical terms, this makes Earth more habitable, and will be an exceptionally powerful tool we can use to appeal to nations to join ADVENT. This would partially be a PR stunt…but a substantial one.”

“You’re saying we offer this, without requesting integration into ADVENT?” Saudia frowned. “I don’t agree with that. If they wish to benefit from ADVENT, they should join themselves. Should we fix Africa for them, they have no reason to join us.”
“Let’s be honest, Chancellor,” Kyong said. “The world will eventually be under ADVENT control. It may be five or fifty years, but it will happen. Doing this, no strings attached, could speed up this process and make ADVENT more appealing. If we’re seen to be willing to do this to non-ADVENT nations, imagine what it is like within our own borders?”

“There is the slight problem of this happening during an alien invasion,” Saudia pointed out.

“This would not be a military project,” Kyong reminded her. “It would primarily employ mostly civilians, with ADVENT oversight of course, and focus on involving the local country and economy which it takes place in. Contributing to the war effort is important, but not everyone necessarily needs to do so.”

“There is something that could be done as a trial,” Hassan said, who had most likely also downloaded the document on his tablet. “The project calls for the proof of concept to be done in the Middle East, a smaller area to work with which could prove the viability of it.”

“An area that is fully under our control,” Saudia mused. “And in the process of reconstruction.”

“A regional project might have positive ramifications,” Kyong said. “Something on this scale would tighten the bonds between the nations, as well as ADVENT. It would give the civilians something to do that directly benefits them.”

“Of course this would likely take years to be fully realized,” Hassan said. “But I imagine within half a year we could see immediate improvements.”

Saudia thought for a moment. “Send this off to Tygan, Munju, Jasmine, and Marshall. Laura as well. If most of them sign off on it, let the trial run start. Add your own signatures if you wish. It could have merit, but I want other opinions. Inform the author of this project to be prepared for detailed inquires.”

“Yes, Chancellor.”

While Saudia did wonder if this was something ADVENT would end up doing, she was certainly going to make sure that if they won, this project would be accomplished. If nothing else, ADVENT didn’t lack ambition. It would do good for the world to see that ADVENT was capable of changing the world legitimately for the better.

Of course, some might argue that the removal of an ecosystem was similarly destructive, but Saudia did not consider the loss of a desert a major loss. The wildlife would adapt or die, but the overall habitability for Humanity would rise.

More importantly, this might be the first step towards experimenting with terraforming. Earth was the first test, and if they could successfully alter the Earth, other planets in the galaxy would soon follow.

Perhaps this project would ultimately prove beneficial during the war after all.

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ADVENT Military Base, Busan – South Korea

1/12/2017 – 10:10 A.M.

He was far from back to normal, but he supposed that having ruled out suicide or alien murder as an option, he could consider it an improvement. Enough for him to function, at least. Duri was just
going with the flow at this point. Easier to fall into a routine. Do what they say. Speak to the counselors. He didn’t know if they actually cared, but they at least put enough effort in to seem genuine.

Sitting under an overcast sun as ADVENT continued construction in the background, Duri kept reading the documents the consular had given to him. Physical documents, she’d said he would be able to focus more than just putting them on a tablet. Whatever the validity of it, he did like the feeling of something real in his hands.

“Didn’t expect to find you here,” Duri glanced behind him to see Nobuatsu walking up. Not too much of a surprise their medic was keeping an eye on him. Out of all of them, he’d likely been the most concerned with Duri doing something drastic. “Last time you went missing-“

“You don’t need to worry,” Duri reassured him. “I’m past that point.”

“Still,” Nobuatsu took a seat on the same bench. “At least tell one of us. Not a good sign when none of us know where you are, and our first instinct is…not anything pleasant.”

“I’ll do that,” Duri promised, then sighed. “Sorry, I’ve…not been a good officer lately.”

The medic chewed his lip. “With what you went…what you’re going through, I’d be more personally concerned if you hadn’t reacted. Don’t apologize, just…keep us informed.” He nodded to the documents in Duri’s hand. “Stuff the counselors gave you?”

“So say,” Duri answered, glancing back down at them. “Whatever the Battlemaster says, the Collective was behind this. Aliens. The only way to get some measure of justice is to destroy the Collective.” He pursed his lips. “So I need to learn about the aliens. Most of these are descriptions and information about them. Their biology, organizations, cultures, government, politics. The defectors are useful for something, at least.”

“And you’ll use it to fight them better.” Nobuatsu nodded. It wasn’t a question.

“To start with,” Duri answered. “But I’ll know what will hurt them the most. Understanding how they think will be the first step to destroying everything they care about. I don’t need to strike the killing blow, but when I get the opportunity, the aliens in the Collective will suffer.”

The medic chewed his lip. “Assuming ADVENT will allow you.”

“ADVENT?” Duri snorted. “They won’t mind how we kill aliens. They certainly aren’t going to feel sorry for them. We don’t need to stoop to their level to make their lives hell.” He placed a finger on the paper. “It takes very little to break Vitakarian lines. Explosives and long-term weaponry shatters morale quite easily. Mutons are fodder without leadership. The Collective can’t handle chaos without degenerating further. It’s like they’ve never actually fought a war before.”

“I don’t think they have,” Nobuatsu agreed. “Well, I don’t think the Vitakarians or Mutons have.”

“Andromedons seem to have experience,” Duri recalled. “Their own history is quite interesting. More so than I expected. But even they were best at space guerilla warfare. Open battlefields are not their forte. Don’t ask me about the Ethereals. Most of what’s on them is restricted.”

“Well,” the man gave a wan smile. “The Ethereals don’t have a good track record for wars, otherwise there would be a lot more Ethereals to worry about.”

“In any event,” Duri set the papers down. “They’ve suggested I look into applying for genetic modification.”
Nobuatsu blinked. “I thought that was only restricted to special forces and essential ADVENT positions?”

“It is,” Duri said. “For now. They’re fast-tracking the construction of what they’re calling Gene Therapy Clinics. There are two kinds from what I’ve heard: Civilian, which is more for handling hereditary diseases and pre-birth genetic manipulation. Then there’s Military. That has the actual combat mods. Iron Skin. Enhanced Eyesight. Organ Redundancy. Supposedly ADVENT is going to make a big push for even the lowest soldiers to be modified.”

He whistled. “Can they even keep up with all of that?”

“Don’t know,” Duri admitted. “It’s ADVENT, so I wouldn’t say it’s out of the question. The point is that because of my…focus…he suggested I look into it, and if I agreed, I could be one of the first.”

“Are you planning on it?”

“I’ve got nothing to lose,” Duri said with a shrug. “And if it helps me kill more aliens, I’m not going to turn it down.” He sighed. “I doubt my wife would have approved. She found the idea…unnatural. She’s probably right, but if becoming something unnatural is an advantage, then I need to take it.”

“Understandable,” Nobuatsu nodded. “I’ll admit, the idea intrigues me as well. Whenever one of these clinics are built, I’ll likely look into it myself.”

“Hopefully they build them sooner than later,” Duri said as he looked back to the ADVENT personnel continuing to fortify in the distance. “This lull will not last forever.”

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ADVENT Military HQ - Switzerland

1/12/2017 – 3:00 P.M.

“Let’s get down to business.”

Saudia was more than happy to begin, as they had a great deal to discuss. There was a great deal of projects and plans the military had to take into consideration, and every member in the room had an important role in making sure everything successfully came together, as well as had the necessarily clearance to know what ADVENT was planning and the full scope of their operations.

Laura’s own inclusion was obvious, and she was, as far as Saudia was concerned, the lead on this meeting. The military was her domain, and Saudia was here to ensure that everything was reasonably proposed and planned. The additional men she’d also brought along were Ravi Kapadia, the Chief of Military Logistics and vital part of keeping the war machine stable, and Robert Groves, Director of the newly implemented Superweapons program of ADVENT.

Saudia had raised her eyebrow when she’d seen the division proposal several weeks ago. Since Laura had brought him along, she assumed it was for a good reason. But it was a reasonable proposal, as she suspected they would need superweapon-level technology to ever hope to beat the Collective, much less kill the Ethereals.

“Where do you want to start?” Saudia asked, resting herself above the holotable. “This is your meeting.”
Commander Christiaens cleared her throat and motioned Ravi forward. The Indian man had seemed slightly nervous when they’d been introduced, but he composed himself well enough now. “First, an update on Project Atlantis.” The holotable flashed and showed a blue simulation of the ocean floor, along with some construction equipment and half-finished buildings. “Construction is proceeding, and with the construction Gateway Network established, we’ve ensured that it’s unlikely the Collective will realize what we’re doing for quite some time.”

“But they still could?” Saudia noted.

Ravi coughed. “There is always that risk, Chancellor, but with the precautions we’ve taken, it will severely hinder them. Aside from the initial staging team, there have been no further physical operations in the areas where Project Atlantis is taking place. The facilities shipping the materials do not know where they are going, or what they are used for.”

“The fleets themselves are also unaware,” Laura added, pointing as the hologram shifted to a 3D plane to show the surface and the construction far underneath it. “I’ve scheduled a rotating patrol for multiple fleets, so while there will almost always be some level of surface protection, it will appear completely normal.”

“Once construction of the facilities is finished…” Ravi paused. “Phase two will begin; relocation of the engineers and architects to Atlantis. Nemo Protocols will be established to ensure no contact with the surface. All necessary communication with the project will be done in person – no physical or digital documents should be shared with the surface. We have to anticipate the Collective will attempt to improve their penetration capabilities or utilize psionic observers.”

“Nemo Protocols include Manchurian Restraints?” Saudia asked, though she suspected the answer.

“Absolutely,” Ravi nodded. “Minor ones, but we can’t take chances here. The fleet will be quite possibly our best chance of surprising the Collective. Even if they do discover it, if we can prevent them from knowing what Atlantis is for, we still have a chance.”

“And these engineers,” Saudia asked. “Have they begun outlines for the fleet?”

“Indeed,” Laura pressed a button on the holotable and several schematics popped up. “There are isolated teams who’ve been tasked with designing one ship of the eventual fleet with certain parameters. At the moment they’ve been led to believe that construction will take place in remote locations, possibly in the Middle East or South America. Perceptions we have reinforced with false references and documents to throw off any Zararch penetration.”

“Ideally, we want production to begin immediately after the factories complete,” Ravi added. “Hence why the Engineering teams are developing proofs of concept for spacecraft. Nothing resembling a working ship…yet. But considering at best the basic facilities for Atlantis will not be complete for a minimum of three months yet, they have time.”

“Time to also begin implementation of what will be our newest iteration of our Naval Forces,” Laura said. “I’ve requested the Seatrooper Project be sped up, using the reasoning of exploiting an area of Earth the Collective does not have a notable advantage in, to further expand and update our naval forces, and to provide a counter to the Andromedon Aquatic Forces and possibly the Sar’Manda in the future. That is the official justification.” She looked Saudia in the eyes. “Unofficially, the reason is to protect Atlantis from any Collective attack. If they learn about it, and decide to attack, I want them to run straight into an army under the sea.”

Saudia remembered the proposal. “Then I suppose development will focus on the Depthtrooper prototype?”
“Yes and no,” Laura said. “The standard Seatrooper will be given the media focus, one which Feng is all too happy to perpetuate. But yes, the bulk of development will be on the Depthtrooper units, as well as the proposed Atlantis Guard and Neptune Explorers. The Atlantis Architect proposal has already been largely implemented since construction has begun, but it will be refined.”

“Good,” Saudia nodded. “You have my approval to take any measures you feel are necessary to ensure the success and secrecy of this project. Send over whatever documents you need me to sign.”

“Excellent,” Laura nodded to Ravi. “Continue.”

“Of course,” Ravi switched the hologram once again to show a map of the world. “The vital components of the Gateway Network are officially up and running. We have Gateways at all major zones of potential conflict, major government facilities, and major military bases. In theory we should be able to reinforce areas like Busan, Seoul, Tokyo, Vegas, and more near-instantly…with infantry, admittedly, but it will be enough to buy more time.”

Saudia nodded. “Good news. And the network is secure?”

“As secure as we can make it,” Laura pursed her lips. “Aegis has assured us that they are impossible to hack unless one knows the connection numbers. As long as those are protected, and protocols are followed to prevent any unauthorized Gateway from connecting…yes, it should be secure.”

“We have two options for immediate expansion,” Ravi continued. “We can continue to place Gateways in every major city, and soon all across the country, or we can utilize the Gateways in a more…revolutionary way.”

“How?”

“Logistics, of course,” Ravia smiled thinly. “The Gateways have provided us a way to immediately stock, resupply, and speed up the utilization of essential components and equipment. What would take days to arrive at our bases could be done instantly as soon as production has finished. No risk of interception, no risk of being lost, the traditional targets of supply lines would be completely removed from the equation. We don’t have to rely on transportation to support our facilities any longer.”

That was something Saudia had to admit was a significant advantage. Supply lines were usually easy targets, and she could only assume the reason they hadn’t been targeted yet was because the Collective might not have actually considered it. “The only issue is the size limitation,” she pointed out. “The Gateways are not large enough for significant quantities at a time.”

“Yes, it won’t remove supply lines immediately,” Ravi admitted. “But I can assure you that for most pieces or packages, it can work and will ultimately be faster.”

“Then focus on that,” Saudia said. “If the essential part of the Network is complete, then focus on improving the logistics. I do want expansion on secondary bases to continue, but at a pace which is feasible.”

“Of course, Chancellor.”

“Thank you, Mr. Kapadia,” Laura nodded. “Before we move on, we should briefly discuss something which does affect all of ADVENT, not just the military. EMP attacks, specifically. Treduant’s stunt was useful and exposed a major weakness in the Collective…and ourselves, for
that matter. I doubt it will take time for the Collective to realize this.”

“The Blackout Protocols,” Saudia recalled the initial plans ADVENT had developed after D.C. had been attacked. “I agree. EMP hardening for our vital systems is essential, as well as preparing for any of our forces coming under this attack. Feng has said ETC weapons should help mitigate this too.”

“I suspect we’ll want to try this tactic again,” Laura said. “But it shouldn’t hinder us like it did last time.”

“Pass it along to Infrastructure and Engineering,” Saudia said. “The protocols in place are sufficient for now.”

“And I am planning to put into motion another branch for the Army,” Laura continued, sliding a tablet towards her. “Or a kind of special forces if you prefer. The trenches are likely going to be copied by the aliens, and with it the same strengths and weaknesses. Namely that they are confining, and properly equipped soldiers could cause massive havoc if they managed to get into the line.”

Saudia looked down at the document with some interest. “Stormtroopers.”

“No, it wasn’t based off of what you’re thinking,” Laura said, almost rolling her eyes, picking up on her lightly teasing tone. “Or did you not know of the actual German Stormtroopers?”

“Of course I do,” Saudia said. “Though only the name.”

“They specialized in exactly what I described,” Laura said. “In World War I they were responsible for infiltrating and raiding trenches. They caused a significant amount of havoc and death for the Allied Forces, and I want to have some good come out of that idea. Turning this idea against the aliens would be fitting.”

“Wouldn’t this fit closer to the Order of Terra?” Saudia pointed out.

“The Order will be better for sustained and major assaults,” Laura countered. “These would be independent missions, more focused on chaos and sabotage than outright victory. They’ll be mobile, few, and heavily armed. Surprise is more important than protection. It would be a dangerous position, but it would have a valuable role.”

“I can see them working closely with the Order as well,” Saudia noted. “Especially when sweeping and clearing buildings.”

“Yes, they would complement each other well,” she agreed. “But I want to have this ready to go when the aliens end up stealing our idea.”

Saudia smirked. “It’s amusing that they would take ideas from such a primitive species. They probably hate it.” There were several chuckles at that.

“Speaking of dangerous weapons,” Laura finally motioned the final man in the room forward. “Director Groves, of the Superweapons R&D.”

“A pleasure, Chancellor.” Unlike Ravi, Robert Groves seemed fully comfortable around her, and had an air of confidence around him. “I’m pleased this department was opened in the first place.”

“I suspect it will be needed,” Saudia nodded.
“Indeed,” Robert nodded, scratching his beard. “While I’m not certain that ‘superweapon’ is the best description of what we are doing, it is sufficient. I would personally define it as the development of large-scale offensive and defensive systems and delivery mechanisms for the purposes of protecting ADVENT and quashing the alien threat.”

Saudia raised an eyebrow. “Meaning?”

“That we are capable of far more destructive capability than the Collective wishes to believe,” Robert said with some smugness. “We have nuclear weapons, of course. But sadly, no major leaps of similar scale have taken place in decades. Already we are capable of producing salted nukes, a devastating weapon which most would be understandably hesitant to use on our planet. However, we are working on the means to make these weapons of destruction more… practical.”

He pressed another button, and the image of a missile with some accompanying text appeared. “Project Telum Ignis, which is something of a continuation of Project Casaba-Howitzer, which itself was a refinement of Project Orion, both of which were US Projects that have been in various stages of implementation. Casaba-Howitzer was never technically ended, but in the past couple decades the focus was shifted to other projects.”

He raised a finger. “Now, you may be wondering what the project was. To shorten the story, Project Orion was the investigation of using nuclear bombs to propel a spacecraft, and in this process discovered how to focus a nuclear blast into a narrow cone. They immediately realized it could be used as a weapon, and from it Project Casaba-Howitzer was born to explore this idea of a nuclear directed energy weapon. I’m pleased to say that Project Telum Ignis is on track to perfect it.”

The hologram continued in a simulation which showed the nose of the missile exploding and firing cone-shaped blast in front of it. “The benefits of nuclear power without as much collateral damage,” Robert continued proudly. “This is, admittedly, something that is most useful on large or stationary targets. Military bases, capital ships, but I can assure you that it will vaporize anything in its path. Even better, it’s far less powerful than standard nuclear weapons due to requiring much less power to focus it. Any fallout, even if used on the ground, should be negligible in the long run.”

“You foresee this as an anti-spacecraft weapon?” Saudia asked.

“I foresee it as an anti-target weapon,” he clarified. “Aim this at something, and it will annihilate it. But I understand what you are saying. I see these being exceptionally useful against alien bases, medium-sized spacecraft, and space stations. I say specifically these because they don’t move much, if at all. If they detect it ahead of time, smaller craft and priority targets could get out of the way. The focused power of the missile does diminish the radius. At the moment, this weapon is called the Atomic Lance. We are preparing to build prototypes to test, but simulations are extremely promising.”

“You want to test it,” she said. “On Earth.”

“Yes,” he said immediately. “Preferably against an alien installation.”

Saudia exchanged a glance with Laura. “I’ll look into it. Continue your development in the meantime. Good work.”

“I have one more project to share,” Robert said, raising a hand as he switched the hologram with his free one. “This one is slightly more… ambitious and risky. But it could in theory prevent anything from entering our planet.”
Intriguing. “Continue.”

A hologram of the globe appeared. “Project: Nanosphere.”

Ravi pursed his lips. “You were right when you mentioned it was risky.”

“As it sounds,” Robert continued. “This involves nanites. Specifically ones designed to be released into the thermosphere and maintain an orbit around Earth. They would be launched via rocket or railgun, and simply float…until they encounter foreign material. They would begin disassembling the foreign objects and replicating to add to the greater Nanosphere.”

The hologram showed several red dots which floated around the globe. “This serves us twofold,” he explained. “It will first help clean the atmosphere and orbit of the amount of space junk that exists, and destroy any alien craft that comes into our atmosphere, provided there is a nanite swarm in the area. It would need a significant amount of nanites to be effective, but we’ve calculated an amount that will be enough to begin the process to saturation.”

Saudia smiled grimly at that. The idea was certainly appealing. However, there were some obvious questions. “I assume there is a means by which we would be able to pass through? We do not want to be trapped on our planet.”

“Of course,” Robert quickly assured her. “There are three methods. The primary one will be the development of an IFF which all ADVENT spacecraft, satellites, and other personnel will broadcast which will negate the Nanosphere in a certain radius. Alternatively there will be a kill switch for multiple parts of the Nanosphere, and it is highly susceptible to EMP attacks. And for those concerned about nanites falling to Earth and replicating…if they somehow fell out of orbit, they would be burned up upon reentry.”

He motioned to the hologram. “This is not an especially difficult project, but nanotech makes people hesitant. But Nanosphere takes the risks into consideration, and those are far outweighed by the benefits this provides.”

“Put this into production immediately,” Saudia ordered. “This is the kind of work I want to see. Excellent job.”

“Thank you, Chancellor,” Robert inclined his head with a smile. “We will not disappoint. You will receive a full implementation plan by the end of the week.”

“I look forward to it,” she said, looking around. “Unless you have something to add Laura, I believe this covers everything important. Good work everyone, meeting adjourned.”

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ADVENT Intelligence Outpost, Brasília - Brazil

1/6/2017 – 6:11 A.M.

“So you haven’t really done anything?” Abby asked blandly at the Intelligence operative opposite her. “Why?”

“Because quite frankly, we’ve had better things to do,” ADVENT Intelligence Officer Silvio Andrade answered in near-frustration. “The terrorist attacks were bad, yes, but they didn’t really leave anything behind, and more importantly, there haven’t been many attacks since, or at least none of that magnitude.”
Abby pursed her lips. “Psionic attacks were reported, correct?”
“Correct.”
“And these terrorists probably didn’t want to found, correct?”
“Most likely.”
“And there were reasonable reasons to focus on other operations instead of hunting them down, correct?”
“We were dealing with an illegitimate invasion, the removal of the de-facto leader of the country, and Operation Sherman was starting. Yes there were better things to focus on.”
“Right,” Abby said. “So how out of the question is it that these terrorists used their seemingly considerable skill in telepathy to…redirect your attention?”
Silvio opened his mouth to answer, suddenly closed it, and frowned as he thought. “That…is a good point…”
“I’m assuming ADVENT Intelligence thought the same,” Abby said, crossing her arms. “Or maybe the Commander figured out something was off about the response. Either way, I’m going to help put this matter to rest. I’ve requested several Inquisitors to assist in this operation, as well as the Military Branch of the PRIEST Division on call should we need them.”
Silvio appraised the younger woman opposite him. “I’ll make sure we get what is needed. It sounds like you have a theory about this.”
“I do,” Abby pulled out a beige file from her bag and slid it across the table. “Reviewing the initial reports, and speaking with Aegis, it’s very likely that there is an Ethereal behind this. One by the name of Nebulan.”
“Shit,” he cursed as he took the file. “Didn’t think it would be that bad. Anything beyond guesswork?”
“This particular Ethereal is a master illusionist,” Abby said as he read. “More than capable of affecting three separate attacks, and also capable of making sure they aren’t investigated. In fact, this wouldn’t be the first time she’s done it.” She quickly raised a hand. “Don’t ask. Classified. The point is that this fits her methods, and explains why no one immediately launched an investigation into a psionic attack.”
“Well then,” he let out a sigh. “I can say right now that my confidence in taking down an Ethereal is not especially high. I can safely say we aren’t prepared for it.”
“Things are different now,” Abby reminded him. “We’ve got our own psions and the Manchurian Restraints. She won’t be able to pull it off this easily again.”
“I suppose the question is what she’s doing,” Silvio mused. “Using disenfranchised Humans or just dominating them? For what?”
“Using them,” Abby suggested. “A means to an end. Plausible deniability to an extent. Possibly using Argentinian and Brazilian nationalists and separatists. ADVENT isn’t popular in Argentina, especially after Uruguay, and Marshal Luana didn’t help the image during her brief control. Recruitment wouldn’t be hard for a telepath.”
“What are the chances that the Argentinian government is compromised?” He wondered.

“Don’t know.” Abby pursed her lips, propping her chin on her hand. “But we should establish that she probably is in Argentina before we investigate, if she’s even on the continent at all. I want everyone who’s been assigned to this case so far, all here, and I also want a Savoraim or Qalandar specializing in memory alteration or telepathy.”

He furrowed his eyebrows. “What?”

“Research Branch of the PRIEST Division,” she quickly recounted. “Savoraim and Qalandar are research positions. I first want to know if I’m right and Nebulan did tamper with this investigation.”

“I’ll request them,” he promised. “As well as everyone already working on this. Give me and them a couple days to get here and sort everything out. In the meantime you can talk with the people here now.”


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**ADVENT Infrastructure Modeling and Research, Berlin – Germany**

1/13/2017 – 9:58 A.M.

This was, Saudia believed, the first time she had actually visited the Modeling and Research facility of the Department of Infrastructure. It had been one of the first buildings repurposed for this specific purpose, which she recalled was experimenting with means of infrastructure, since after all, they wanted to improve it and not simply stagnate.

Thus the Department of Infrastructure included many scientists, in addition to engineers, among its ranks. While anything relating to infrastructure would be a large investment, Saudia was quite happy to do it if the results were of the quality she expected. She didn’t have issues sinking what would be millions of dollars into experiments that wouldn’t always work.

She knew they wouldn’t be wasted on anything frivolous or clearly unworkable. These people knew not to abuse ADVENT’s generosity.

A benefit of having the largest economy in the world, and complete control over a currency the Collective was only too happy to provide them. Ironically, each battle was helping to replenish any funds that were lost. Jasmine had a better handle on the economy than she did, so she trusted that it wasn’t going to collapse anytime soon. Appropriate taxation was certainly another contributor to their economic dominance.

“Chancellor Vyandar, welcome!” A thin British man greeted her, accent more pronounced than most British people she’d interacted with. “There is much to show you!”

“Lead the way, Mr. McNeil,” she motioned forward as they began walking through the fairly open facility. Frederick McNeil, Head of the Department of Infrastructure, architect, project manager, and visionary. He’d been a heavy proponent of looking to future solutions for aging infrastructure, although until recently even he had trouble securing the necessary funding.

That was fortunately not a problem any longer.

“I see your teams have been hard at work,” Saudia noted as they walked, seeing the rooms
organized by project type and clearly marked with directions and maps placed throughout the building. Not especially pretty, but highly practical. “I’ll let you decide what to show first.”

“Yes, of course,” the man adjusted his glasses as they made a turn. “There are three main areas of focus: Economical, Military, and Civilian. I will start with the less impressive, which is the Economical portion.”

“I’m hurt,” Saudia said lightly. “With the amount of money we’re giving you, you don’t need to try and conserve it just to make us feel better.”

McNeil luckily chuckled. “Trust me, Chancellor, we’re spending your money. But to clarify: When I say economical, I mean something that can be developed, built, and deployed in a short amount of time without the need for exotic resources, while also reusing what ADVENT has no immediate use for.”

They stepped into a square room, which had several squares of bound-together cylinders of various sizes. There were several other personnel in the room, as well as several gauss weapons on the table. “Our first viable Economical project, Liquid Barriers.”

“Are those tanks filled with water?” She asked.

“Water certainly works, but in truth you could theoretically put anything into them,” McNeil clarified. “However, the idea started based on the fact that projectiles are slowed down significantly underwater. So we put together some cylinders made out of inexpensive metal, filled them with water, and shot them.”

“And it worked?” Saudia asked.

“As in it stopped the projectile? Yes.” McNeil motioned her to one of the cylinders. “Obviously it doesn’t stand up well to a sustained attack, and grenades decimate them. But if you want a fast way to defend or reinforce an area, these will provide an extra layer of protection.” He raised a finger. “More importantly, it can be a means to dispose of certain unwanted materials. Black water, which is sewage, works just as well as pure water, and sand is also surprisingly effective. Sand actually works best against laser and plasma weapons.”

Sand. Well then, perhaps there was one use for the large amount of sand that was going to become available soon. “What about repairing it? Going out into the crossfire does not seem wise.”

“We thought of that,” McNeil put his hand on one of the handles she now saw built into the cylinder, and turned it so the outside was now facing them. “Complete 360 degree repair. Can be repaired and refilled from the safety of the barricade.”

Saudia nodded. “Good. This can be used to fortify civilian cities and areas without much current defensive capability. Possibly will save lives, and can be incorporated into established defenses. Viable; send it to Commander Christiaens to see where she wants to integrate them.”

“Certainly.” he nodded, already moving to the next area. A few minutes later they were in an area which was noticeably cooler, and Saudia saw quite a few models of buildings and larger test walls and systems in the experimentation rooms.

“Military Infrastructure R&D,” McNeil said proudly. “What I hope to say is the future of ADVENT military infrastructure. I believe you’ll be pleased with what we’ve developed and discovered.” They first stepped in front of a block of what Saudia first thought looked like silvery foam. Which is to say, full of holes.
“This was particularly interesting to us,” McNeil said. “CMF, or composite metal foam. Don’t let the appearance deceive you, this is one of the toughest substances we’ve developed. The air bubbles, which you see, actually are highly important to this material. They are essential for CMF absorbing impacts and heat, since they don’t just ricochet off the metal, but instead can shatter on impact.” He motioned. “See if you can lift it.”

Saudia frowned, but complied. To her surprise, she was able to lift the metal block up, even if it wasn’t exactly light, it wasn’t nearly as heavy as she would have expected for something of its size. “CMF is light as well, thanks to the more porous nature of the material,” he continued. “Not to mention it ultimately saves resources. We can make two or three times the amount of CMF as traditional metal, since the process consumes roughly a third of the raw materials needed.”

“I see,” Saudia wondered what the drawback was. “And is there a catch to be aware of?”

“It takes longer to produce, as the metal itself needs to be bounded to a matrix element,” he said, which Saudia didn’t exactly know what he meant by that. “But I don’t believe there is a significant drawback other than the lack of high-volume production facilities.”

“So where do you see this being incorporated?” She asked.

He motioned her to a table, where she saw the standard design of an ADVENT Barracks building, only it was made entirely out of the porous metal. “For future construction of ADVENT military facilities, I’ve incorporated a layer of CMF into the design, further reinforcing them. But the material itself, Chancellor? Far beyond infrastructure. Vehicles, armor, shields, this has significant potential beyond my oversight. I’ve already informed the other department heads about this.”

“Good,” Saudia nodded. “If you have appropriate schematics, I can ensure the new facilities are built to the new standard.”

“Oh, I’m not done,” McNeil smiled, bringing her over to another model. “What you’ve seen is made solely from materials on Earth. When made with alien alloys…I believe we might possibly have something tougher than their own metals. This,” he pointed at the shield of metal. “Is CMF made out of pure alien alloys and hardened with an outer layer of MELD. We have yet to actually find a way to destroy it. While extremely resource-intensive, not even alien alloys have this much durability.”

“Well done,” she complimented. “No small feat.”

“Indeed, and there is a little more to show,” he motioned her to yet another model, though this one seemed built out of stone. “This is the results of Project Blackrock,” he said, extending a hand to the model. “An investigation into the potential advantages of using stone as structural armor. Diorite, Granite, and so on. The results were surprisingly positive. Extremely hard, high heat resistance, and not exceptionally difficult to find.”

He cautiously raised a hand. “Now, with that said, there are a few weaknesses. Heavy kinetic weapons and explosives can damage it, but on the other side it will render energy weapons near-useless.”

“How do you see it being used?” She asked.

“Preferably as exterior armor,” he reached to the model and picked it up, revealing there was a CMF model underneath it. “Ideally, the most important structures in ADVENT would have a concrete composite based on Project Blackrock, with a CMF layer of protection, with slabs of cut stone serving as exterior armor. An impenetrable fortress; further still if we wish to incorporate
He shrugged. “Otherwise, these can easily be cut into fortifications for reinforcing buildings and positions. The only challenges will be cutting and harvesting the required stone types, but with ADVENT supporting it, this can be an easily overcome challenge.”

Probably not as easy as he was suggesting, but Saudia quite liked the work he and his team had managed to do. “I’ll speak to Commander Christiaens about implementing all of this. Well done.”

“And for one final showing,” he said, exiting that room and continuing downward. “I have, of course, sent my proposals for new building standards for all new ADVENT infrastructure to account for EMP attacks. If nothing else, I would hope the specifications on generators and critical systems be implemented.”

“That will be done,” Saudia promised as they walked into what she assumed was the Civilian infrastructure development area. McNeil led her into yet another room, this one with a large, rusted pipe in the center. On the end was a sleek metal ring, but other than that, it looked like a standard sewage pipe.

“One of the largest problems in infrastructure is it breaking down and corroding,” McNeil said. “Be it from rust, algae, or other manner of corruption. Impossible to fully fix, too expensive to replace, and the best that happens is occasionally it’s kept from getting worse, or maybe someone shells out the money for replacing it. Worst case no one does anything and it breaks, costing more money and time.”

He tapped the end of the pipe. “However, that may not need to be a concern any longer. With the significant amount of advances in nanotechnology, we wondered, ‘why not apply this to infrastructure?’ So we worked on a nanotech system that ensures our piping and buildings remains pristine.”

He picked up a small remote, as the ring on the edge of the pipe flashed yellow. “Stand back, Chancellor,” he warned. “The nanites will consume anything other than the metal on the pipe. I don’t want you losing a hand. Watch.”

Saudia stayed well back as the ring flashed red, and she saw a congealed black-orange ring form, and began slowly, but noticeably, moving along the pipe. In the process, she saw, it consumed everything in its path. When it passed over a part of the pipe, all that was left was clean steel.

“The nanites operate on a whitelist program,” McNeil explained. “The metal of the pipe is what they are specifically directed not to consume. Anything else is fair game. They are precisely programmed, and will only go a specified distance down to the nanometer, and then immediately return.”

“Can they replicate?”

“No,” he shook his head. “They only break down what they encounter. They also are programmed to self-destruct after a half hour if they don’t return to the housing ring. There are kill switches for each ring as well, and their instructions can’t be modified remotely. We’ve taken precautions, Chancellor. The greatest risk this will pose is an idiot sticking their hand on it during the cleaning procedure.”

“And ADVENT does not support the idiots,” Saudia muttered. “Not a concern. Again, your team has outdone themselves here. I want these in major cities. Once those test cases have proven successful, we can justify an expansion to the rest of ADVENT. I’ll see this gets done myself.”
“I’m pleased you approve, Chancellor,” he said, inclining his head. “We both want the continued improvement of our species. It’s refreshing to work for someone with the same goal.”

“Trust me,” Saudia said. “It’s far past time that became the priority of everyone, not just the few.”


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ADVENT D.C. Research Center, Washington D.C. – United States of America
1/13/2017 – 4:11 P.M.

Saudia looked up from the outlining document for Project: Green Lantern. “Normally I wouldn’t be opposed to a project of this scale, but this seems different.”

Tygan cleared his throat. “With all due respect, Chancellor, I can assure we have taken all… necessary…precautions to ensure the safety of the personnel involved.”

“And if this succeeds,” Dr. Munju added. “We have a weapon that will kill not just the Battlemaster, but any other alien that we face.”

“There is already a significant amount of interest in Gamma rays in the scientific community,” Tygan said. “Tapping into such interest seemed a prudent move, and the results of this project will undoubtedly serve ADVENT beyond the development of a powerful weapon.” He did pause for a moment. “Each researcher knows what they are involved in. This is a Manhattan Project for the war, Chancellor, one which could legitimately affect the outcome.”

Saudia sighed. “There are a significant amount of projects on the scale of the Manhattan Project. I’ll ascribe that comparison when it actually happens. Keep Green Lantern running and I want every precaution taken. I don’t want them blowing themselves up accidentally.”

“I suspect these people know what they are doing,” Munju suggested dryly. “We don’t recruit the incompetent, Chancellor. You know that.”

“That is true,” she said, clasping her hands behind her back. “ Speaking of which, I would know what else you have to update me on.”

“Thanks to XCOM, we have the means of producing plasma weapons,” Tygan said, consulting his tablet. “Dr. Mercado will have more on that for you. The science team, now that we have a more complete understanding of the nature of plasma, has begun more…extensive research. The respective team has been working closely with Dr. Mercado, especially in regards to the propulsion utilizations of plasma. I suspect you may know more about how that relates to the larger picture.”

For the fleet. Made sense, and she’d have to inquire as to how that was going when she spoke to Feng. “And you mentioned there was a breakthrough in regards to our energy output?”

“Indeed,” Tygan straightened his glasses. “Through the success of Project: Thursday, we believe that we have been able to turn Thorium into a nuclear fuel, almost bypassing the need for Uranium.”

Saudia raised an eyebrow. “And this means?”

“In practical terms,” Tygan said. “We can begin major development of Thorium reactors across ADVENT and, if not meet the energy requirements for the world, come significantly close.
Thorium is far more plentiful than Uranium, Chancellor, and we control the largest deposits in the world. We can sever our dependence on previous generation energy production and move towards fully renewable.” He coughed. “In addition, with the Uranium need being significantly reduced for reactors, more will be freed up for…military applications.”

“I will also add that it would eliminate a military vulnerability,” Munju added. “Once the Collective realizes that targeting oil hurts us, they will exploit it. While not invincible, transitioning to Thorium reactors will eliminate this particular weakness. The more we reduce our dependence on non-renewable energy, the better.”

“Agreed,” Saudia gave both men a nod. “Send this to the Department of Infrastructure. I’m sure McNeil will be overjoyed. Good work.”

“Thank you, Chancellor,” Tygan bowed his head. “If you would follow me, I believe there is something we can update you on.” She complied, and they walked through the narrow hallways of the lab, the pristine sanitary smell sticking out to her. The trio walked through another sliding door into a fairly small lab, but these had stacks of nutrient tubes along the leftmost wall.

Saudia stepped towards them, immediately seeing what was inside. “Are these…”

“Yes,” Tygan said, sounding slightly unhappy. He still hadn’t been on board with the project, but he’d nonetheless complied. “The first products of Project Seafoam. The first Human clones.”

They were little more than vaguely baby-shaped fetuses, but it was unmistakably a Human fetus. A sense of finality of the situation settled around here. They were growing clones. It was set into motion. Necessary, but hopefully it would not have the consequences of a Pandora’s Box. It was one thing to write and justify the need for clones.

But seeing the fetuses before her lent a sense of reality to what she’d ordered. “How far along are they?”

“In normal pregnancy terms, close to four weeks,” Tygan said. “However the growth has been…significantly accelerated. This is one batch being grown, at six times the development of a normal Human. Within six weeks it will almost be ready to be born from a normal mother. Within six months it will be close to adult size.”

“We are currently experimenting with how fast this can be accomplished without negative side effects,” Munju added, stepping forward as he looked over the rows of growth tubes. “At minimum we are aiming for one year from the start of the cloning process to soldier. Preferably less, but we can’t accept too much more. So we have multiple batches going at once.”

“And the learning programs?” Saudia asked.

“Will begin to be implemented at various stages of brain development,” Tygan said slowly. “I must stress that this project is proceeding far too fast for my liking. We will not truly know how successful we are or not until the first clones awaken. The learning modules should work in theory, but we again are experimenting with the best means of implementing them, either through chips connected to the brain, subconscious hypnosis, telepathy, Manchurian programming, you get the idea.”

“However,” Munju interrupted. “As far as growth speed, we should be able to determine that within several months. By then each batch will have been moved to an adult pod and we can determine if the speed had negative impacts.”
Tygan frowned. “We can estimate. We will not know until they awaken.”

“The important thing is that this has started,” Saudia said. “You’ve done good work, despite any reservations you have.”

“I will take some comfort in that,” Tygan said. “I trust they will not be abused, even if entire batches will inevitably be euthanized.”

“Unfortunate,” Munju grunted. “But that was always going to happen in this project.” He turned around, motioning her to a table behind the stacks of growth pods. “I do have some less heavy news to consider, Chancellor.”

She looked down at the table and saw another small model. One of a sleek design, open rooms with glass roofs, and within top of the line medical facilities, surgical pods, and the latest of all ADVENT designs. “I believe we have reached a point where we can formally begin opening civilian gene clinics,” Munju said. “And officially unveil the ADVENT Eugenics Division.”

Tygan grimaced. “I would caution using that word.”

“The public has become afraid of a word which has become tainted,” Munju sniffed. “Eugenics is certainly at its core not an evil word. It is the simple betterment of our species through genetic modification. You may not wish to call the cure of autism, hereditary diseases, and genetic mutations eugenics, doctor, but that is what it is.”

“Dr. Munju has a point,” Saudia nodded. “ADVENT is not the Third Reich or Imperial Japan. Our usage of eugenics will only be to remove the negative aspects of the Human genome while preserving the rest.”

“I don’t dispute your intentions,” Tygan clarified, still frowning. “But I do not see the reason to use that word where other, less offensive, terms would suffice.”

“Because it is the most accurate,” Munju snorted. “I suspect any public outcry will die down when people learn their children do not have to worry about diseases which have ravaged their families, or become afflicted by rolling badly on the genetic lottery. Mothers no longer need to worry about bringing children with mental disabilities into the world, or having that knowledge determine if they will keep or abort it. The perception on eugenics, Doctor, has been altered once before. It can be altered again.”

“As it stands now, the name will stay,” Saudia interrupted, not wanting to continue this debate. “So, the civilian Gene Clinics will be managed by the Eugenics Division. What of the military Clinics?”

“I was going to talk to Laura about that,” Munju said. “I suspect she will advocate for control over it herself, but she might let it be managed by Intelligence or Oversight to avoid the headache of it. At your approval, I can send it to Infrastructure to begin construction.”

“Consider it done,” Saudia nodded. “I’ll begin establishing the Eugenics Division in the meantime.”

“I sincerely hope you find an acceptable candidate,” Tygan said, grimacing. “This appointment should be handled with care.”

Saudia smiled, and patted him on the shoulder. “You’re at the top of the list. Think about it, doctor. You’ve earned a promotion.”
He blinked. “But my work here-”

“Will continue,” Saudia stated lightly. “Surely you don’t think that the Eugenics Division wouldn’t be heavily involved in cloning?”

He pursed his lips. “You make a good point, Chancellor. I will…consider…your kind offer. Although I would assume Dr. Munju is similarly deserving of a promotion.”

“You’re the geneticist, not me,” Munju gave a thin smile. “While the idea of conquering the Human genome is enticing, my skill set is more on exploring and researching the mysteries of the alien technology. As much as you hate to admit it, Project Seafoam is largely of your own hands. I’ve simply helped where needed.”

“Well, as I said, I will consider it,” Tygan repeated. “In the meantime, Chancellor, there is one final project I believe you will want to be appraised of.”

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A few minutes later they were walking through a Gateway which connected to one of the ADVENT Mental Clinics. Specifically the one that housed many of the victims of Isomnum’s attack. Even now people were still trapped in mental prisons or completely broken psychologically. The terrible risks of fighting a psion made manifest.

The Mental Hospital was fairly bright with the white lights and walls, even if it was extremely cold, even compared to most hospitals. There were patients in rooms either unconscious, strapped as they suffered nightmares, or talking with psychiatrists. “I believe it was mentioned to you that there was a certain patient who recovered on his own,” Tygan said. “And there was a team wanting to study the phenomenon.”

“I remember,” Saudia nodded, furrowing her eyebrows as she glanced back. “Has something happened already?”

“Happened? I don’t believe so,” Munju interjected. “However, they did develop a specific plan and project outcome. Ah, there is the Project Director herself.”

They stopped in front of a short Asian woman with short black hair pulled back in a ponytail. Upon them coming, she dismissed whoever the doctor was who was speaking to her, and turned to face them fully. She was astonishingly young, if Saudia didn’t know better, she would guess this woman was at most in her early thirties, possibly just graduated with her psychology degree.

“Chancellor,” Munju introduced. “Dr. Emily Shodon, Director of Project Phobos.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” the young woman said with a smile. “I’m surprised you decided to personally come, but I’m pleased to see someone taking notice, even if it just started.”

Saudia motioned behind her. “I listen to my people, and they considered this important enough to share with me. However, I haven’t been appraised of what Project Phobos is.”

“Well,” Emily rubbed the back of her head. “There is quite a difference between what Project Phobos is now and what I want it to be. The project originally happened when one of the victims of Isomnum’s attack just…woke up.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that,” Saudia recalled. “By himself.”

“That’s only part of it,” Emily clarified. “We’d given up on him. We tried psionic therapy three
different times and none of them could stay for more than a few minutes. Each of them recommended we just put him out of his misery. How he woke up is close to a miracle, but that’s not what’s interesting.”

“What is then?” She asked as they rounded a corner.

“He has some kind of neurological reaction to psionics,” she said. “But what’s truly remarkable is that certain types of telepathy just don’t affect him anymore.”

Saudia blinked. “Explain?”

“He offered to help with the experiments,” Emily said. “Let them try and influence him. Repeat what Isomnum did to him. He said it couldn’t affect him any longer. Turns out he was right, I had to call in a Leviathan-class to get into his mind since it was so bad no one else wanted to try. He tried everything against him, illusions, mental pain, fear, none of it really worked. It admittedly almost sent him into cardiac arrest, but the man reported that even though he could have taken control of his mind, it would have required effort and was…not pleasant.”

“I don’t suppose he explained how he was able to do that? Saudia asked.

“He tried,” Emily shrugged. “I personally don’t think he came out of it completely whole. His descriptions were…delirious and disjointed. He thought he had been condemned to Hell, and pretty much suffered until he learned to ignore the pain, overcome the fear, and fight back. He said he was fighting for years, until he killed three very specific aliens: The Warlock, the Battlemaster, and Isomnum. When he killed Isomnum, he said that was when he woke up.”


“Needless to say he was not exactly pleased to wake up and learn that Isomnum was alive,” Emily gave a small smile. “I suspect his background shaped what he went through. He grew up in a fairly fundamentalist Christian family. Dante’s Inferno kind of Christian family. Big on instilling the fear of Hell into others. I don’t have his full records, but even if he eventually left it, it seems to have definitely made an impact on him.”

Saudia pursed her lips. “So this Kane is Subject Zero in your project. So with that out of the way, what are you trying to achieve?”

“To create more of him,” Emily explained as they stepped into a small, quiet room. “The goal of Project Phobos is to turn Humans into soldiers who can’t be affected by telepaths like Isomnum. Ones immune to telepathically imposed fear and pain. Soldiers to kill Isomnum.”

Saudia gave a brief nod as she saw many of the people around the room. Some were clearly being affected by psions in lab coats; others were sleeping or talking with each other. “And how do you accomplish this?”

“We take it in phases,” Emily said. “Right now we’re in the stage of gathering what we need. Brain scans, interviews, neural analysis, patient observation. This needs to be done for each potential candidates. This is a volunteer-only program, and possibly one of the most intense within the entirety of ADVENT.”

“How?”

“We push them to their limits, psychologically,” Emily explained. “Candidates are exposed to our psions. Every fear, insecurity, and flaw is dredged up and magnified. They have to learn to overcome them. We’re doing to them what Isomnum did, although over a longer period. Whatever
Kane thought he did, the process of defeating his fears was key to him waking up. If he can do it, others can as well.”

“And what happens if they lose their minds?” Saudia asked.

Emily sighed. “That is a risk. One which is acknowledged at the start. I want to stress that this is volunteer only, invitation only, and that they can walk away at any time. They won’t be taken back, but it’s understandable that someone wouldn’t want to participate in this. We’re being careful about who we invite. Obviously not everyone is suitable.”

“And who are you inviting?” Saudia asked.

“Soldiers who’ve experienced and overcome severe mental difficulties, either with help or by themselves,” she explained. “This goes beyond victims of Isomnum. Soldiers suffering from PTSD, cancer survivors, people who’ve lost loved ones and remained intact, those kind of people. The ones who could theoretically not only survive worse, but grow stronger because of it. The goal of our mental clinics are, of course, to help cure any mental issues these individuals have…but afterwards, those willing can join Project Phobos.”

Saudia nodded. “An ambitious project. One I will be interested to see if it actually works.”

“I’ve got a good team working with me,” Emily said. “Psychologists, veterans, members of the PRIEST Division. I’m no psion, but the science is fascinating and helps me understand it better. We’ll get results for you, Chancellor, I can promise you that.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Saudia nodded. “And what stage of the project are you in now?”

“Gathering recruits,” Emily said, motioning around. “Some of them are starting preliminary testing. More to get a baseline of what our parameters should be for the next rounds. After a few we’ll begin in earnest.” Her face grew more serious. “There are going to be a lot of people who won’t make the cut, Chancellor, I’ll warn you now. We’re talking under a ten percent pass rate. You’re not going to get an army out of this.”

“I don’t need an army,” Saudia gave a grim smile. “But a small team to kill a certain Ethereal will be acceptable.”

“As long as I’m part of that reckoning.”

All of them stopped at the sound of a deep voice from the side. Saudia had known that the man before them was massive, but he was somehow taller than her, if only by an inch. Short black hair rested on the head of a man with eyes that seemed very close to black, and within them was a steel Saudia had only seen in truly hardened people, and sociopaths. It was the ruthless gaze that gave even hardened criminals pause.

The sheer size of the man punctuated the fact that this was someone dangerous. Saudia found it easier to imagine how even in the imaginary hell this man had been trapped in, he would eventually win. He was dressed in a simple t-shirt, pants and boots. His posture was straight, however, and he kept a respectful distance from the group, even if he wasn’t intimidated.

Saudia suspected that after being trapped in a prison from Isomnum, nothing would really scare him ever again.

“Kane,” Emily stepped forward. “I see you’re up. This is-“

“Chancellor Vyandar,” he said, still standing still. “I’m aware. I keep up with the outside world,”
his lip curled up. “Including what the alien filth did to Seoul. Isomnum’s hand was in it, of that I am sure.”

“Perhaps,” Saudia said non-committally. “I would not be surprised. But he will be fought, and he will be punished.”

Kane smiled for the first time. “Yes he will. I killed him once before. I can do it again.”

Saudia raised an eyebrow. “Reality is not in your head.”

“The mind is where he is strong,” Kane responded, his smile remaining. “If he cannot defeat me in his own domain, how could he win in mine?”

Saudia was unsure how to respond to that. The man definitely seemed unstable, as Emily had suggested. She didn’t really want to provoke him, as his size and demeanor was slightly intimidating, even for her. But Kane looked to Emily. “What is left for me here? Do you need me for more tests?”

“Only a few,” she promised. “Then, if you wish, you can rejoin the military, provided you are cleared.”

“No,” he shook his head. “My place is not there. You know what I want.”

Saudia looked to Emily. “What does he want?”

“To join XCOM,” she answered. “But like I said, it doesn’t work like that. Invitation only-”

Saudia lifted a hand, cutting her off. “Why XCOM, Kane?”

He looked to her with unblinking eyes. “XCOM fights Ethereals, and that is where I belong. There are more Ethereals to die at my hand than just the so-called Dread Lord.”

Saudia suspected he would likely get himself killed, but he certainly had spirit, and if he wasn’t useful to the Project, she was fine with XCOM having to deal with him. “I’ll send your name directly to the Commander. But he will decide to accept you or not.”

He nodded his head and saluted. “Thank you, Chancellor.” With that he walked away, leaving the four of them relatively alone again.

“He’s certainly an interesting character,” Saudia noted. “I wonder if the Commander will take him.”

“I hope he does,” Emily grimaced as they continued forward. “I definitely wouldn’t want to be the one to give him bad news.”

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ADVENT Intelligence Outpost, Brasília - Brazil

1/12/2017 – 10:28 A.M.

Jaylin felt rather out of her league as the team put together by the XCOM Intelligence agent finally assembled. She and Agent Gertrude had only spoken once, although it was for a fairly significant period of time, largely on the attack, which she had no trouble remembering. It ended with her being assigned to a new intel op dealing with these terrorists.
It wouldn’t be a bad change, since she’d felt rather useless recently since the attacks had largely stopped and the populations weren’t protesting anymore. Leon was in the same boat as her, although she was glad that she wouldn’t be going into this alone. Someone equally out of her league would be along with her.

She was better at keeping herself composed though.

Jaylin wasn’t quite sure what to make of this particular XCOM agent. She looked barely old enough to be a regular field agent, let alone one in charge of an operation like this. Jaylin was fairly sure she was the youngest one, aside from Leon, who was only twenty-three. But there was a clear air around the woman, a quiet authority that the agent didn’t feel the need to exercise yet.

The nondescript Caucasian woman was also almost certainly more dangerous than she looked. Jaylin had seen enough gene-modded soldiers to immediately spot the golden rim of MELD around the irises, and if her eyes were modded, then her body was also significantly altered as well. She didn’t really know what else XCOM would have also added to increase her lethality.

Were they skilled enough to create cybernetic implants?

For that matter, was ADVENT Intelligence?

She honestly didn’t know much about ADVENT’s own intelligence counterpart, though obviously by design. All people really knew about ADVENT Intelligence was that you should do everything you can to not attract their attention. Their agents were always watching. Probably mostly propaganda, but Jaylin could easily believe that there were certain people and places under constant watch.

This Agent Andrade seemed like a straightforward man, even as he was talking with Agent Gertrude quietly at the end of the conference room. He didn’t strike Jaylin as the straight-laced intelligence type, always very serious. Which…she wondered if that was intentional. A good agent was one no one else knew about, after all.

“Think they’re going to get started?” Leon muttered beside her, fidgeting in his own military fatigues, which she wore as well. Not the kind of meeting to wear armor.

“Probably,” Jaylin answered as she saw Agent Gertrude shoot them a look, before looking around at the others assembled. “Be quiet.”

The woman finally took a stand at the end of the table, with Agent Andrade beside her. The rest of the assembled turned their attention to her as she pulled out a small remote and set it on the table.

“Good morning to all of you, I’ve met with most of you at least once, and I’m sure you’ve spoken to Agent Andrade. As far as I’m concerned, there isn’t a major need for formality. You can call me either ‘Abby’ or ‘Agent’. Same with Silvio, or call him ‘Officer’ so there isn’t confusion. I am in charge of the overall operation, if you have questions relating to mission objectives, goals, and tactics you come to me. If you have questions about your specific task that will be assigned, you speak to Silvio.”

She motioned to the left, where Jaylin and Leon were seated. “These two are soldiers who’ve encountered the terrorists that attacked the bases, and eyewitnesses to what happened. Specifically, they know better than everyone here what we’re going to be up against. Jaylin Tanika and Leon Mina, Peacekeeper Riot Control. They’ve been temporarily assigned to this operation.”

Both of them either raised a hand or nodded in acknowledgement of the introduction. No one asked if it was right two fairly low-ranked soldiers were in this kind of sensitive operation, which Jaylin
did appreciate. “Serena Campos,” Abby nodded to a well-dressed Hispanic woman, wearing professional business attire. “ADVENT Diplomatic Corps. She’ll be needed for reasons that will be explained shortly.”

Jaylin already suspected where this was going. Abby was definitely planning to investigate Argentina, and getting a diplomat for this operation was a smart way to go about doing it. “August Wepper,” Abby continued, indicating the Caucasian man sitting beside Leon. “ADVENT Qalandar. For those who don’t know, a researcher of psionics. Specifically specializing in telepathic tampering of subjects.”

Jaylin was less sure about what he was here for. To figure out if they’ve been infiltrated? To test out psionic theories? She’d admittedly never heard of anything called a Qalandar, but she would look that up later. “Kil Ae-Ri,” Abby said, as a Korean woman in the fatigues of the PRIEST Division nodded. “Protopriest. Telepath focus. She’s not the only one on call from the Military branch, but she will help us defend against any psionic attacks.”

So for the combat operations that were inevitable. Good planning. The final man in the room was dressed in simple black clothing, the only indication of…anything, was the small embroidered silvery spider on the upper right chest. Hispanic as well, so possibly a local. He was likely an Intelligence agent as well, now that she thought about it.

“Marco Tasis,” Abby finished. “Inquisitor of ADVENT Intelligence. Their psions.”

Oh. Well, it made sense they would have their own psions, but she was surprised she’d never once heard about this. “This is a good time to remind everyone that this entire operation is classified,” Silvio added. “Anything you learn or hear of as the result of it will not be relayed to any unauthorized party. I trust this is clear?”

They all nodded. Both lead agents exchanged a nod. “Based on what we’ve learned,” Abby said. “We are confident in saying that the perpetrator of these attacks was an Ethereal by the name of Nebulan.” The holographic display in the center of the table flashed to light, showing an Ethereal outline with a question mark in the darkened body. “A master illusionist, who likes using aliases and covering her tracks as much as possible. The Ethereal Aegis has provided us with an extensive breakdown of her personality and methods, however, which is now being shared with you.”

“If it’s an Ethereal,” Protopriest Kil asked slowly. “Why has she been quiet aside from the first attack?”

“Unknown,” Abby shook her head. “Perhaps she struck too early and wanted to spend time developing her defenses or location. Possibly hoping we’d forget about the attack. I suspect the reason ADVENT hasn’t pursued this until now is because Nebulan affected the leaders involved, making this incident a lesser priority.”

Jaylin blinked. “She can do that?”

Abby pursed her lips grimly. “I’m afraid so. Which is why Dr. Wepper is here. If Nebulan has been affecting ADVENT personnel, he will help uncover it. That is only one part of the investigation though.”

“What about the Humans that attacked?” Leon asked. “Are they controlled by her?”

“There are several possibilities,” Abby answered. “In theory, she could. But based on her personality, it is equally likely that she is working with, and using them for some unknown goal. Alternatively, these are Humans who have been recruited into the Phantom Division, Nebulan’s
“own personal army.”

“What do we know about them?” Kil asked.

“That they’re among the most advanced soldiers in the Ethereal Collective,” Abby said. “Extensive genetic modification, all highly intelligent, specialize in recon, sabotage, and assassination, using equipment more advanced than alien standard. If they’re involved, and they almost certainly are, then we’ll eventually need to bring Lancer and PRIEST support. The Phantom Division are elites of the Collective. We won’t take chances with them.”

“And the Ethereal is still the most dangerous,” Marco said with some amusement. “Such an interesting species.”

“By far,” Silvio agreed. “The danger of the Phantom Division is slightly blunted by our own psionic capabilities, if not offset more by their technological advantage. However, Ethereals are known to eclipse our own psions if handled improperly.”

“So what is the plan?” Jaylin finally asked.

“Twofold,” Abby said. “Determine if ADVENT personnel were affected, and locate the main base of operations for Nebulan. We suspect that she may be in Argentina, so in a friendly gesture to our neighbors, we will be paying a diplomatic visit to warn them about these terrorists, and determine if they know anything more.”

“I will warn you that they likely won’t allow anyone besides me inside,” Serena pointed out. “There are nations which are paranoid about psions affecting their minds. Argentina is definitely one of them. While I am good at reading people, if they are actually involved in anything, they will be good at hiding it.”

“Have no fear, Diplomat,” Marco said smoothly. “We’re good at getting what we want, and especially enjoy exploiting those who have no idea how psionics work.”

The distrust Jaylin knew some had for psionics seemed rather prudent now. In this case it was justified, but she could see why ADVENT might not want to make it public knowledge that their spies had psions who had no qualms about reading the minds of targets who may or may not be innocent.

“Right now I want everyone to review the compiled information on what we’re likely facing,” Abby said, shutting down the hologram. “More detailed directions for each of you will be sent by the end of the day. Dismissed.”

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ADVENT Intelligence Outpost – Colorado

1/16/2017 – 12:02 P.M.

Saudia furrowed her eyebrows. “You mean you did send Inquisitors?”

“Just a few, who promptly vanished, and then I stopped,” Elizabeth didn’t sound perturbed, but Saudia knew she was concerned. She wouldn’t have pulled back observation of the SAS unless she felt otherwise. “I don’t know if they’re dead, and the SAS hasn’t released anything indicating there was an attempted infiltration…which I’m positive they would do. Proof of ADVENT ‘trying to assassinate the hero Betos’.”
Saudia agreed. If the SAS was behind the surprisingly effective counter ops, Betos would have definitely exploited it. But they’d been quiet. “So do you have an explanation?”

“Only one feasible one,” she admitted, leaning against the wall. “There is only one party that stands to gain from this idiotic situation.”

“The Collective.”

“Exactly,” she punctuated. “And there is now an entire regional faction against us. A potential opportunity. They’d obviously want to keep their presence as quiet as possible, so covertly ensuring the SAS isn’t compromised keeps us in the dark, and they can use that as proof saying “See, we can help you.””

Saudia considered that. The possibility had crossed her mind before, although there was always some reservation. “Betos is an idealist. The aliens are no better than ADVENT, and in fact, much worse, as the recent Seoul attack proves.”

Elizabeth made a disgusted face and similarly disgusted noise. “You’ve read her dossier, right? It would be stupidly easy to convince that idiot woman that anything bad about the aliens is propaganda perpetuated by us, and the aliens are the good guys in all of this. The aliens couldn’t ask for a better puppet.”

“Good point,” Saudia muttered, rubbing her forehead as she sat down. “So. What is your plan?”

“I guess I’ll start there,” Elizabeth sat down beside her and moved the tablet over. “Now, I don’t want you calling this a crazy idea. I’m not going to use agents again, not until we know what’s going on. With that said, I am going to field test one of the projects I’ve been running.” She shrugged. “I’d intended to use them on the West Coast, but infiltrating the SAS is just as a valid target.”

“Infiltrating them with what?”

“The African Pied Crow,” Elizabeth tapped the screen, which indeed showed one of the birds on a blueprint with several additional components. “Corvids, if you want to be accurate. Birds like ravens or crows.”

“Really,” Saudia was not immediately convinced. “Ravens. I didn’t know they could give reports on what they see.”

“Ha, ha,” Elizabeth said sarcastically. “You sound just like the Officer I shared this with initially. ‘Elizabeth, you can’t use Ravens as spies, that doesn’t make sense.’” Saudia snorted at her impersonation. “He shut up once he saw I’d had one of the early specimens of Project Kutkh follow him for the entire day. Got some good footage from it.”

“Footage?” Saudia looked back down at the document.

“Obviously,” Elizabeth said. “Fabrication made little cameras which fit over their heads. Almost invisible unless you’re looking for them. Lightweight, HD, the works. Anything the corvid sees, we will see. Eventually I want to have the eyes themselves replaced by cameras, and have everything stored on an implanted hard drive, but we haven’t gotten there yet.”

“I see,” this made more sense. “That…is reasonable.”

“That’s only part of it,” Elizabeth continued, flipping through the various pages. “Cameras are useless unless they’re pointed at something we’re interested in. The good news is that corvids are
very smart. Not that most people know, but for birds they’re great. Their memories and facial recognition skills are what we use here. We’ve got them to the point where we show them a picture of an individual, and if we release them into a place they know the target inhabits, they’ll track them down.”

“And how much video can these cameras hold?” Saudia asked.

“Four hours, we’ll get it larger later,” Elizabeth said. “Obviously, not a lot of time for what will be likely hours of hunting and observation. Which is why the cameras are sound-locked. The corvid makes the sound, the camera turns on. They lose sight of the person, they do it again to turn it off. If they locate the target, after listening and then losing the target, they return to the nearest outpost where we take the data.”

“I suspect the aliens will not expect spies in the forms of birds,” Saudia said. “Clever.”

“I agree,” Elizabeth said. “The good news is that corvids are everywhere on Earth. So they won’t seem out of place, and our only problem is if they’re attacked by wildlife or otherwise killed, and their bodies found later.”

“Well, I want to know how well this goes,” Saudia said. “If it works out, we have potentially perfect infiltrators. I don’t suppose you’ve considered psionics?”

“Telepathy? Yes,” Elizabeth waved a hand. “Although from what my telepaths have said, it isn’t really clear or easy to navigate their brains, and unless it’s necessary, I want my psions actually doing something essential. We can explore telepathic memory extraction later. For now, the technology appears to serve fine.”

“Good,” Saudia pushed the tablet back to Elizabeth. “Aside from that, there is the larger issue of the aliens themselves. Their cyber capabilities are better than ours, especially if they begin using the Andromedons.”

“If they haven’t penetrated us already,” Elizabeth pointed out. “I doubt it, and we have purging protocols in the event of a breach, but definitely not something I want to rely on. Which is why we’re still having our cyber divisions focus on some breakthrough in quantum computing. In theory, if we develop quantum computers, we will be able to resist any kind of cyber attack from the Collective.”

“Does the Collective also use it?” Saudia asked. “I’d think they would have developed it before us.”

“Not exactly,” Elizabeth said. “At least, I don’t think so. Their internal networks are managed by the CODEX system. Which, while it does seem to have a quantum foundation, is more akin to a machine intelligence. The Andromedons certainly do though, or at least several of the major unions. I suppose we should be thankful they don’t usually share their secrets with the Collective.”

“Alternatively,” Elizabeth rested her chin on a fist. “Project Ra completes.”

The ADVENT AI project. Saudia nodded. “And the status of it?”

“Beginning stages at best,” Elizabeth shook her head. “There won’t be major progress for some time. I’m letting select Chinese AI scientists work on modules, though those won’t be used in the final AI. We have a firm base thanks to the Chinese, but no one has ever gone this far before. But if we do develop an AI, it should be more than capable of resisting Collective cyberattacks.”

Saudia thought for a minute. “Have you contacted XCOM?”
“They’ve insinuated they’re working towards something similar, but weren’t any closer,” she answered. “Ethereals don’t like AIs. They consider them dangerous, which means we’ll definitely have an advantage if we complete it. But Aegis was sadly unhelpful.”

“And I assume you’re taking the precautions so we don’t end up having to deal with a rampant AI?” Saudia asked rhetorically.

“Damn it,” Elizabeth answered sarcastically. “I knew I forgot something.” Both women broke into a smile at that. “Yes, Chancellor,” she said, more serious this time. “We’re taking every precaution possible. Just like with nanotech, we’re not going to make something we can’t control in some way.”

“Let’s hope so,” Saudia raised an eyebrow. “I’d really hate to deal with an AI after the Collective is gone.”

“Everyone would, Chancellor. Don’t worry, that isn’t going to happen.”

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_AEGIS Diplomatic Command – Switzerland_

1/17/2017 – 10:35 A.M.

While it had not exactly been the easiest of beginnings, Saudia was pleased that the AEGIS Division was still on track to properly be unveiled fairly soon. The hardest part had not been finding the personnel and facilities (Which would be relatively few at the beginning), but ensuring that their new extraterrestrial residents were as sincere as they said they were.

For the most part, the defectors appeared to have been telling the truth. The reasons varied, but what was important was that they were motivated to stand against the Collective. Saudia and Elizabeth had suspected that the defectors who had done so because of more…selfish reasons, such as fear or because other were doing it, had their own decisions validated and reinforced by more logical reasons.

It had essentially been taking the defectors who’d had legitimate reasons to finally abandon the Collective, put them in the same room, and by the end, the entire room would be fairly angry or at minimum irritated against the Collective.

The best part was that there was no need to lie. Simply exposing the Aui’Vitakar for the puppet state it was often convinced most, and sharing the abuses of the Collective, such as their Blacksites, the truth of the Muton situation, the experiments of the Sectoids…all damning evidence. As much as the Seoul Massacre had turned public opinion against aliens briefly, it had been yet another mark against the Collective which had horrified the aliens.

For the particularly unsure groups, she’d simply asked XCOM to send Aegis to speak with them. Being graced by the presence of an actual Ethereal would likely be remembered as one of the most important days of their lives. If you couldn’t trust an Ethereal who said what he had helped established was too far gone, then who could you trust?

There had been, of course, several aliens who had used the defections as an attempt to infiltrate. It had gone _badly_ for them.

The Inquisitors were thorough, and within days had weeded out the illegitimate defectors from the real ones. Most of them didn’t have much actionable intelligence, but there was always a need for
live aliens in the Experimentation Labs. They would serve some purpose, at least. Saudia was aware that there were at least a few illegitimates that ADVENT Intelligence were using to monitor and control their access to the Collective, however that was established. With psionics, it wasn’t especially difficult to turn them into unwitting double agents.

Today, though, would be the first true step for the AEGIS Division. It was more than just responsible for ensuring aliens integrated into ADVENT, but would also manage diplomatic ties with all alien factions. Saudia was aware that Chief Ambassador Kamar Dennis had some ideas for addressing the Collective directly, and they might very well be discussed today.

The room they were meeting in was small, but well-furnished. A circular table with a holoprojector in the center, red carpet, adjustable ambient lighting to relax all occupants, and some visual additions, such as the ADVENT banner hanging in the center. The chairs were equally spaced apart, angled so Saudia would be in front of the banner. A bit of a dramatic touch, but she didn’t especially mind.

To her rightmost position was Kamar Dennis, veteran diplomat and her top pick for the position. He had been interested in the aliens long before this, and his previous experience as a diplomat to less-traveled locations in the world, who often didn’t speak the same languages or have similar cultures made him an ideal fit for a position dealing with alien life.

As such he was noticeably older than her, with a neatly trimmed beard and moustache, his skin almost identical in color to her own, and in the fairly plain attire planned for the AEGIS Division. A nameplate, with the position beneath it on the upper right chest. The symbols of ADVENT and AEGIS were on opposing shoulders. Like most ADVENT attire, the uniform was black with muted red highlights.

And to her leftmost position was Runi’sirasis’vitianis, a former officer of the Runianarch. Within all the defectors that had been gathered, there were always at least one who seemed to have a measure of command or spoke for the group. Sirasis had been selected by the defectors to speak for them, although there was the knowledge in the back of all their minds that none of them had any diplomatic experience.

They were all soldiers, and would be making decisions that may very well have significant ramifications in the future. A daunting responsibility, but the good news was that ADVENT would be more than happy to assist in their efforts. Sirasis was a Vitakarian, a good move in Saudia’s opinion. Of all the races their similarities with Humans would help with how the rest of Humanity perceived aliens.

The alien did admittedly look like a very well-muscled soldier, but her face and voice clearly indicated her gender. Vitakarian voices did have a generally soothing effect on Humans, from some brief studies they’d done. A good advantage for the speaker of a people. She was tall though, even when sitting down.

“Chancellor,” Sirasis greeted as she sat down. “I’m glad to finally meet you.”

“The feeling is mutual, Representative,” she answered. “This is an important day, for both our species.”

“Yes,” the alien shifted in her seat. “Although I would not call myself an representative, Chancellor. Just a soldier placed into a…delicate situation.”

“Nonsense,” Kamar interjected, shaking his head. “From personal experience not being a trained diplomat lets you cut through the meaningless drivel that plagues talks like this. You want results,
correct? So do we. ADVENT respects directness, Representative Sirasis, we do not offend easily.”

“From what I’ve experienced, your people are…reasonable,” Sirasis nodded. “And I can say we have been treated well. Or at least protected from the more xenophobic of your species.”

“An unfortunate reality,” Saudia said. “It will take some time to fully change perceptions towards you species, which is what AEGIS intends to accomplish.”

“In addition to integrating us into your society,” Sirasis said, pursing her lips. “I don’t know how best to say this, Chancellor, but while we appreciate ADVENT taking us in…there are those of us who would prefer to return to our own government. Whatever one may be left, by the end of the war, of course.”

Saudia nodded. “Of course. In fact, that was something we need to discuss. We don’t have an intention of forcing you to join ADVENT, though we will of course assist with integration for those who want it.”

Sirasis looked relieved. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“In the meantime,” Kamar said, pulling out a file. “I’ve spoken with Chancellor Vyandar, as well as a few members of the Congress of Nations, and we all believe that it might be a good idea to get a head start on the business of…let us say the reformed government of your species. I think we can both agree we not leave the finer details till the day Vitakar is liberated.”

The glowing eyes of the woman flashed as she blinked. “What are you suggesting, Ambassador?”

“That the new government of the Vitakara be established now,” he answered brightly. “Staffed and managed by yourself and a chosen body of course. As a fully legitimate and recognized government by ADVENT, you would have a diplomatic embassy in our capital, and for all intents and purposes, be a fully functioning alien power. Allied, of course, with ADVENT.”

“There are advantages to doing this,” Saudia added. “The first is that your species is fully prepared to reestablish itself when Vitakar is retaken, or another capital planet should you so choose. In addition, it will further legitimize your position within us. Right now it is easy to paint yourself and your people as mere defectors and traitors. An established and functioning government will negate that to an extent. You would not be a band of defectors, but a Vitakarian government in opposition to the Ethereal Collective. One not controlled by the Ethereals, but maintained – completely – by yourselves.”

“I…” she seemed at a loss for words. “Over what? We don’t have anything. We’re on your planet, and there definitely won’t be support for us on the colonies now.”

Saudia and Kamar exchanged a look. “If we go to this trouble of establishing a new Vitakarian government,” Saudia said. “ADVENT will allocate enough territory for your people to live that will be considered sovereign ground of your people.”

“And not necessarily limited to an area the size of a city,” Kamar said, pulling out a file. “It would scale depending on how large it grew, with a maximum cap of course, up to the size of a small country. Potential plots would be large areas in Canada, Russia, Afghanistan, and the Midwest of the United States. Parts of it may need to be developed, but you will have enough room for the needs of your people.”

“That is…generous,” she said, still sounding stunned. “Until Earth is fully reclaimed and the attacks on Collective territory start, yes?”
“If your people choose so, it can be,” Saudia said. “But ADVENT will not retake the land we give to you. Your people could maintain a location on our planet as long as you wish. It would be made to work.”

“I see a problem…” she said. “Not a single one of us actually knows anything about running a government, let alone establishing it.”

“Which is why you’ll have help,” Kamar said. “ADVENT will be happy to provide input and advice if needed. In a strictly advisory manner, of course. We would not want to build your government for you. In a case like this, it isn’t necessarily a bad thing if you are unfamiliar with how to establish a government. You have a perspective and experience most in your position don’t have. I presume that you don’t consider the Aui’Vitakar perfect?”

She snorted. “No. But I can’t claim to have thought about them much.”

“But I suspect there are others who know a bit about it,” Saudia noted. “The good, the bad, what to keep and what to discard. This, Representative, is your opportunity to make something better than the Aui’Vitakar.”

“More importantly, Representative,” Kamar added. “It is what it will represent. This will show to every Vitakara on Earth, and in the system, that there is another path. There is another choice they can make. The Vitakara no longer have to live under the Collective in fear simply because there is no choice. Now there will be, and what your people build will be the future of your species.”

The Vitakarian visibly swallowed. “A lot of responsibility.”

“Indeed,” Saudia nodded. “Believe me, I am aware. Uniting an entire species is no easy task, but it is worthwhile. I believe you can handle the responsibility, and your people can as well. And as we said, we are certainly available to help.”

“So…” Sirasis trailed off, deep in thought before she said anything. “I would need to discuss all of this with everyone. Hammer out something preliminary. See what they think.”

“Of course,” Saudia nodded. “Take as much time as you need. We will not be going anywhere.”

“We won’t delay,” she promised. “Thank you, Chancellor. This is more than I expected.”

Saudia gave her a smile. “We are not the Collective. I believe that in the future ADVENT can certainly work with aliens, and even be their allies. This would mark an excellent first step in that goal, one I certainly hope your people will consider.”

“We will,” Sirasis promised. “You have my word on that.”

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Center of ADVENT Research and Development – Russia

1/26/2017 – 1:09 P.M.

“Thanks to XCOM,” Feng Mercado was saying. “We now have a far more complete understanding of elerium. Enough to fully solve the energy issue we had previously run into with the initial Dropship design.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “As you can see, the results speak for themselves.”

That they did. The design of the dropship was largely unchanged, but now there was a much lower,
yet persistent hum which emanated from the dropship as the air was distorted under the anti-gravity emitters keeping the dropship up. “Quiet, fast, and with an integrated PDS field so they won’t be shot down. The optimal solution for deploying large squads of soldiers.”

“Yes,” Saudia agreed. “Are these combat-ready?”

Feng scratched his chin. “They’ve passed our battery of tests. They’re as close as we can get without a real field test. However, I wouldn’t expect a large number of them soon. They’re complicated to make, and pilots, maintenance staff, and mechanics need to learn how to pilot and repair them. That takes time. I would estimate we can use them in sufficient numbers in about…” he paused. “Two to three months, depending on how badly Commander Christiaens wants them.”

“I’ll have to think about it,” Laura said, also looking at the dropship thoughtfully. “Consult with Command. But this will be utilized, good work.”

“Excellent, come with me,” Feng said, turning on his heel and leading them out of the hangar into a much narrower hallway. Eventually they stepped into an area which Saudia could clearly see had been used as a design room. The main rectangular table was clean, with a holoprojector, but the walls were treated to be used like whiteboards, and there was a large amount of scribbled notes, formulas, and other commentary (along with some rudimentary designs of whatever they were designing) written in English, Russian, and Japanese.

“We have, of course, been hard at work on other projects which have yet to materialize,” Feng said, turning on the holoprojector. “Three of which I want to get your opinions on.” The holodisplay turned on, showing what looked to be a large, thin, wing-like aircraft with a significant amount of weaponry on the underside. Looking at it from the side, it was definitely thicker around the center of the aircraft, though not by much, and the center looked like a small launchpad itself.

“The Thunderbird, as we’re calling it,” Feng said. “Our answer to establishing air superiority on any planet, not just Earth. As of now the armaments are…not fully decided, as there are several paths we can still take. But the Thunderbird itself would be capable of bombarding enemy positions, engaging enemy aircraft, and launching multiple missile types.”

“That seems like a decent arsenal to me,” Saudia noted. “What’s missing?”

“This is I believe a perfect opportunity to explore drone swarm technology,” Feng pointed to the center of the aircraft. “Right now there is room for a small fleet of next generation drones. However, the issue is the coordination of all of these drones at once. A machine intelligence is best suited to handling the sheer amount of computation necessary, but I’m unsure if that would be an acceptable addition.”

“Something equivalent to what the Chinese did?” Laura asked. “I don’t see an issue with that.”

“The issue is that we’re not sure it would be enough,” Feng crossed his arms. “For best results, I would almost recommend an AI. Perhaps merging it with Project Ra?”

“I’ll consider it,” Saudia said. “Would this be automated?”

“It will have that capability,” Feng answered. “I feel it will be necessary, even if it will be able to be piloted manually. But there likely will be a very small crew. Despite the size of the Thunderbird, it is intended to never actually have to land.” He highlighted parts of the schematics. “There will be nuclear reactors powering it, and those will be able to be replenished manually or with drones.”
“How large is this thing going to be?” Laura asked slowly, looking at the hologram.

“These are, as one of the designers said, the air equivalent of the United States aircraft carriers,” Feng said. “A fortress in the sky. A flying flak tower of sorts if you wish to make that comparison. It will be…large.”

“And where is that going to be constructed?” Saudia frowned. “And with the size…it will attract attention.”

“That is an excellent point,” Feng grinned. “The aliens would definitely take notice of a large construction zone. They might, at first, even think it’s a spacecraft. They will investigate and discover, much to their relief, that it’s likely a mere stepping stone to spaceflight. Dangerous, perhaps, but nothing that will set up alarms.”

Saudia’s lips curled up. “A diversion. I like it.”

“We keep the actual fleet secret, and build an air fortress at the same time,” Feng nodded happily. “The aliens keep watching these facilities, because obviously the fleet will eventually be built from them.”

“That will probably buy us several months at least,” Laura nodded slowly. “Especially if we include interceptable correspondences discussing the potential of the Thunderbird for future spacecraft designs. I’ll speak with Elizabeth about this.”

“Paradoxically,” Feng said. “These will be fairly exposed, security wise, but an intentional sabotage to keep the fleet secret. Something real will be built, but it will ultimately be a smokescreen.”

“I like it,” Saudia nodded, referring more to the misdirection it would cause. The Thunderbird…she would have to wait and see how well it could actually work. “What is next?”

“The completion of Project Pluto,” Feng continued, changing the hologram to show what appeared to be a large missile, with smaller missiles attached near the engine along the sides. “A US government project exploring the possibility of a nuclear-powered missile delivery system. It was abandoned, despite the fact the it seemed to work, for being potentially ‘too provocative’ towards the Soviet Union. Fortunately, we have no such concerns.”

“And what makes this different?” Laura asked. “I’ve heard of this project before. It’s a...very old one.”

“In theory,” Feng answered. “The nuclear power allows it to remain airborne potentially for months, flying at supersonic speeds around the world. It essentially allows us a missile deployment system that flies under the radar, that we can launch at any point, and they deploy at any point, at any place in the world. It would have a limited missile capacity, but this is a primitive defense network for our planet.”

“Not bad,” Laura said in approval. “The Collective would certainly find that disconcerting.”

“Tests are still ongoing,” Feng said. “However, I know it can be done within the month. As long as ADVENT Command agrees, these can be deployed the day they’re completed.”

“I’ll ensure everything is in place,” Laura said. “And you also have something else?”

“Yes,” Feng once more changed the hologram. “This is more of a...lower tech idea, but that isn’t necessarily a bad thing. This project was specifically designed to be invisible to Collective sensors
and used for surprise night bombing runs. Project Night Witch.”

The hologram changed to show what looked like a small glider plane, with a small bomb arsenal strapped to it. It looked small, and fairly simplistic, which she suspected was the point. “The name certainly implies what this does,” Laura said, a smile on her face. “It’s good that the contributions of the Night Witches continue to be remembered.”

“Indeed,” Feng agreed. “Powered gliders. Invisible to most radars, painted black to reduce visibility, capable of gliding over their targets silently and leaving with the enemy none the wiser.” He highlighted some parts of the glider. “Now, the armaments are obviously enhanced. Gas weapons, ClF3 bombs, cluster bombs. The intent is to cause damage, yes, but also psychologically affect the aliens. An invisible enemy is indeed a terrifying one.

“These don’t have covered cockpits,” Saudia noted, pointing to the hologram. “Is that safe?”

“With modern technology, yes,” Feng confirmed, switching the hologram to a pilot encased in a cold weather suit with an oxygen supply. “The pilots will be perfectly safe, since they will be insulated and have plenty of oxygen supplied for the less than ideal conditions in the air.”

“I assume you’ve built these then?” Laura asked.

“Yes, and tests have been extremely successful,” Feng waved a hand once dismissively. “A trivial design, laughably easy compared to most of what we do. We’ve been running tests for months, and we have enough data to conclusively show the benefits, and more importantly, that it works. I intended for these to be used on the West Coast, or the operations that are no doubt happening in Canada.”

Laura and Saudia exchanged a look. She definitely had the same thought Saudia had. The Night Witch fleet would definitely be useful for Long Dark. Laura cleared her throat. “I believe there would be some use for them. I want enough of them to be produced immediately for combat operations.”

“Give me numbers, and we’ll produce them,” Feng confirmed. “More questions?”

“Not on this,” Saudia answered. “But I do know you have more to show.”

“Yes, several more projects which can be demonstrated,” Feng said, as he led them out of the room. They walked for several minutes until they entered what Saudia remembered as a testing area which had several projects in various stages of being put through various tests and demonstrations. “We’re still working on incorporating the Andromedon Barrier technology into something usable,” Feng said, motioning to the left where there was a team of engineers with automated weapons shooting at a projected red barrier. “However, that project is proceeding well.”

“What about that one?” Laura pointed to a more intricate testing ground which, as far as Saudia could see, involved drones and mirrors.

“Project Daedalus,” Feng said as they kept walking past. “A project in the early stages; using mirrors to direct lasers onto specific targets from safe distances. Useful primarily as a defensive system, especially for our cities.” He gave a short shrug. “However, as I said, it’s in the early stages.”

They eventually made it to a weapons range, which had an array of what looked like conventional weapons on a table, with Chief of Fabrication Ofelia before them. “Chancellor, Commander” she greeted Saudia and Laura respectively. “I suppose you are here for a demonstration of what we’ve
been working on in the weapons department.”

“If you want to start there, certainly,” Saudia motioned to continue.

Ofelia grunted. “Well. Thanks to XCOM we have the capability to develop plasma weapons. However, they are relatively complex and expensive resource-wise, so they will not be mass-produced for some time.”

“Our current weapons will suffice then,” Laura nodded. “Plasma weapons can be reserved for Officers and special forces.”

“In the meantime,” Ofelia picked up one of the previous-generation rifles, although looking at this closer, Saudia could see that it seemed to be slightly sleeker than a previous assault rifle would have looked. “We’ve been researching a concept known as electrothermal-chemical technology. ETC for short. Likely the next step of weapons development had we not diversified and produced gauss, laser, and plasma weapons.”

Saudia frowned. “I suppose the obvious question is why you’re researching an obsolete concept?”

“Not obsolete,” Ofelia disputed. “Each weapon type as advantages and drawbacks. The closest comparison is gauss rifles, which, while they are more powerful than ETC weapons individually, they cannot match the volume of fire and capacity that ETC weapons are capable of. We know that an M2 Browning is more powerful than a gauss autorifle, correct? But we would not be able to produce a gauss equivalent because the technology can’t work for a weapon with that much output.” She patted the rifle. “With ETC tech, you can.”

“And what does that mean?” Laura asked. “Clearly, mind you.”

“In short,” Ophelia said. “ETC weapons utilize plasma and electricity to ignite and control the propellant in firearms. This results in much greater power, accuracy, and relatively cheap for the damage it outputs. Specifically, it only requires a few changed components in previous generation weapon schematics to turn them into ETC-capable variants.”

She turned towards the range and aimed at an alloy-outlined dummy target, and fired. It sounded very similar to a previous generation gun, enough that Saudia couldn’t really tell the difference. With that said, the dummy with multiple holes in it definitely made the point. Conventional weapons of that size would have been lucky to even dent alien alloys.

“Aside from being easy and cheap to mass produce,” Ofelia continued, turning back to them. “There is another advantage. These are almost completely EMP resistant. Assuming one is not firing when a pulse hits, it will still work. So here you go, Chancellor, an easy way to outfit the various militias, upgrade all our conventional stuff, and something good to arm our allies with. I’d think even our own soldiers would want this.” She set the rifle down. “They want stopping power and raw damage per shot? Gauss is the way to go. If they want to just lay down fire as quickly as possible? ETC guns are for them.” She patted the rifle. “What do you think?”

“Useful,” was the first thing that came to mind. “I’d prefer we see how they do against aliens, but it is a good way to ensure the militias are properly armed, and that we have reliable weapons if ever faced with an EMP weapon. If they can be quickly produced, all the better. Anything to add, Commander?”

Laura nodded to Ofelia. “I’ll be coordinating with ADVENT Command. We’ll have production numbers shortly. Send over everything you’ve gathered on them.”
“Yes, Commander.”

“China will also be interested in these,” Saudia mused. “It can only improve our standing with them.”

“Can’t wait to see what cheap knock off they come up with from our work,” Ofelia muttered. “But good for them.”

“Excellent work, to both of you,” Saudia said to Ofelia and Feng. “Any other notes you want to make?”

“Nothing of import yet,” Feng shook his head. “Refining of the Order of Terra schematics is proceeding well, as is the Celestial Project. We’ll have updates for you shortly.”

“Keep me informed then,” she said. “But today you’ve made a lot of people happy.”

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Supplementary Material

Chronicles of Salvation:

- Medtrum - The Inward Mandate
There were a number of things that he could be doing now, but instead he was taking a break and spending some time with their new Sovereign ally. Although that wasn’t quite accurate. After their previous talk, everyone had said he’d only been occupied for a few minutes when the Commander’s own perception of time had been much longer.

Time didn’t work the same when talking to T’Leth, so some time could be dedicated to getting to know him. Or at least as well as one could get to know the personality of a being older than their entire species several times over. Vahlen was with him too as well, which she had jokingly referred to as a ‘date’, and he didn’t know if it was funny or sad that this was the closest they would probably get to having a date until the end of the war.

As it turned out, T’Leth seemed fairly open to it, at least according to the Chronicler. He suspected that idle conversation was not something the Sovereign One enjoyed.

It did appear that T’Leth was interested in showing them something specific as the moment they touched the Sovereign Orb, both of them found themselves in a place that definitely was not Earth, nor the abyss the Commander had found himself inside the first time. It was as if they were within a valley with metal walls on either side, and above it showed the vastness of space tinged with purple mist.

The area within the metal valley was filled with what he could most easily describe as checkpoints and guard towers, rising up in regular intervals with a curious aesthetic of angles, tempered by a more organic softness. Red, black and white were the dominant colors; banners flew on the artificially created winds displaying symbols or words of unknown meaning.

There was a precision and direct layout to everything, the streets and buildings were impeccably clean. In the distance he could see larger black pyramids rising up over the more mundane rectangles and squares that made up the buildings around them. Another thing he noted was that the top of the walls were lined with multiple gunnery stations, and there were unfamiliar weapons mounted to the tops of the buildings there.

“A space station,” he wondered aloud. “Amazing.”

“It’s larger,” Vahlen pointed straight upwards and he saw that just through the faint purple mist, which must have been some kind of nebula, were what were likely arms of the station, which were much, much bigger than whatever they were on now. “The scale of this…”

“The High Fortress of the Just,” the rumbling voice of T’Leth interjected. “The seat of power for the Adherents. Also the location of the Imperial Sanctum, as the Ethereals called it. It is a simple fundamental rule of this galaxy, the dominant powers control this station. It has been called many things, it has housed millions of species, it has been razed to its foundations each cycle, and is rebuilt in the vision of those who come next.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow at the manifestation of T’Leth, who stood in silver armor, easily over eight feet tall, and most definitely not a Human, nor any other species he could
recognize. The anatomy was almost spindly, even with the armor, and the hands were three digits which more closely resembled pincers or claws than fingers.

The face though solidified the insectoid comparisons. Though it didn’t have an armored helmet, the black carapace fulfilled the same function, even as it exposed the fairly large black eyes and disconcerting mandibles that made up its mouth.

“This is destroyed now, I assume?” He asked.

T’Leth made a clicking sound. “Long destroyed. One of the final cycles before my arrival to Earth. I’ve found myself thinking more on this particular species and benefactor of late.”

“Why?” Vahlen asked, sitting down on one of the steps.

“To understand that requires the story,” T’Leth answered. “One I can relay if you wish.”

The Commander sat down next to Vahlen. “We have time.”

T’Leth gave a single nod. “There was a Sovereign of this galaxy known only to the rest as the Traveler or Wanderer, depending on who was speaking. She was highly secretive; never explicitly intervening in the ways other Sovereigns did, but instead acting as a source of information for many. A broker of power and knowledge. A service many Sovereigns utilized, even though they were aware of the potential danger. But none truly knew about her plans and motivations.”

“Did you also use her services?” The Commander asked.

T’Leth cocked his head. “Yes, several times. Her own price was miniscule, and allowed me to get a better grasp on her own personality. She wanted to know about the worlds I visited, the locations of primitive species. Vaults and ruins of previous civilizations. I suspect she was an explorer, perhaps more comparable to a treasure hunter, historian, or archeologist in your terms. In return she provided information on certain…enemies I had.”

The Commander gave a small smile. “To be more specific?”

“Information I exploited to destroy the proxy species of other Sovereigns,” T’Leth answered bluntly. “I was under the impression she quite liked her interactions with me, as she was as sick of this petty conflict as I had grown to be. But in all this time, she had never acted on her own, and for a long time no one suspected she would do anything different.”

“But she was biding her time,” Vahlen guessed. “A plan millennia in the making.”

“Yes,” T’Leth confirmed. “When the Replicator fleet attacked and forced the Sovereigns into hiding once more, there is a long period of quiet in the galaxy. But instead of quiet, the moment the Replicator fleet returned beyond the edge of the galaxy, a new species struck from the uncharted regions. The Adherents as they called themselves, under the unsheltered command of their master.”

“The Traveler.”

“The Just; as they called her, an approximate translation,” T’Leth clarified. “She was fond of titles. The Adherents were a species that revered war and conflict, at minimum developed and refined over multiple cycles. All hidden. All without attracting the attention of other Sovereigns. They claimed this station and began spreading across the galaxy rapidly, exploiting their high birthrates and using reproductive technology to grow their species from billions to trillions within years.”
T'Leth motioned them to rise and began walking down one of the pathways. “So how does a warlike species live if there is nothing to fight?” The Commander asked.

T'Leth rumbled. “There was plenty to fight, Commander. The first planets the Adherents attacked were the hundreds of planets that housed developing or primitive life. They were slaughtered with ease, and some were the planned proxies of Sovereigns. Those eventually fell too, and the Traveler had paralyzed the cycle and become the undisputed power of the galaxy.”

The alien avatar pointed to the pyramid. “As for what they did when there was no conflict, it is simple. They fought themselves. Daily battles of strength and prowess took place in those pyramids, there were constant cullings of those they deemed inferior both physically and genetically. The Traveler never allowed a civil war, and indeed, the cullings had been engrained in their culture to an extent where those killed simply accepted their fate.”

“She sounds violent for a Sovereign,” Vahlen noted, looking at the walls which the Commander saw held simple pictograms and images, all of which portrayed fighting or combat in some way.

“The Adherents were a means to an end.” T'Leth sounded as though he would shrug if it was possible. “A species to wage nothing but war was necessary. It served the purpose of the initial conquering of the galaxy, and I assume she thought it would be enough to fight back the Replicator invasion. The black fleets they had been taught to expect since the beginning.”

“But it wasn’t,” the Commander guessed. “She lost.”

T'Leth seemed to consider for a moment. “I remain undecided on that. I made contact with the Adherents when I realized what her plan was. I agreed to fight the Replicators as there was no Sovereign threat. I suppose that fact that she permitted this was an indication she liked me enough. A rare alliance, but one we both knew was temporary. When the initial invasion took place, it was rebuffed easily for a time. Then the numbers became overwhelming, the tactics more refined, the power stronger. But that is not what caused the downfall of the Traveler and her Adherents.”

Vahlen pursed her lips. “Another Sovereign?”

“The Leviathan.” The words came almost in a hiss. “He came out of nowhere and attacked this station. The Traveler was no warrior, yet she resided here. None stood a chance against this Sovereign, and I am surprised the station was not simply destroyed.” A pause. “Perhaps it was, and it was rebuilt later. But it matters very little. I attempted to help, and managed to engage the Leviathan. A mistake that nearly cost me my life.”

“Amazing,” the Commander commented dryly. “Intervening to save another Sovereign. I thought you didn’t do that.”

“The Traveler was a useful check on the galaxy,” T'Leth said. “A way to even the balance of power. And one of the few who was interested in ending this war instead of perpetuating it. Having her die, especially to the Leviathan, would serve no one aside from her killer. Aside from that, I considered it practice for the day we fought decisively. Although I severely miscalculated his skill and power. A mistake I will not repeat.”

“And so he hunted her down,” Vahlen said slowly. “Unfortunate. I think.”

“Yes,” T'Leth confirmed. “To a largely barren world, where he struck her down. I am unsure how he tracked her, but there was no mistaking the result. With their god gone, the Adherents fell apart and were massacred by the Replicators. A valiant effort, but it was simply not good enough.”
“So why have you been thinking about it lately?” The Commander asked.

“As a lesson,” T’Leth said. “Even as she used the Adherents, there are similarities to our own… alliance. They were treated as close to equals as one could get, and with the cunning of the Traveler and the strength of the Adherents, they came close to conquering the galaxy.”

“I see some striking differences between us and them,” Vahlen noted.

“The principle is the same,” T’Leth said, looking over the barren city. “The Traveler made mistakes. She was too involved, the Adherents were too obsessed with war and conflict. It was a wasteful society, one which she overmanaged. Every single achievement she gave to them, none of it they earned. Most of them barely understood the technology they used because in the end, they were a tool. A means to an end.”

“And a tool cannot act on its own,” the Commander said.

“No,” T’Leth agreed. “The loss of the Traveler and this station should not have doomed the Adherents. But because of the mistakes made, they were little more than children without a parent when she was attacked. The Traveler learned too late that there is a reason Sovereigns normally hide or distort their presence to their proxies.”

“I assume then this is something you are applying to our own alliance?” The Commander asked as he looked back up to the expanse of stars and nebula in the sky.

“Yes.” T’Leth notably was silent for a few moments. “This is an…opportunity. One I certainly did not expect, not from your species. But if this is done correctly, one day Humanity will control this galaxy and the Sovereigns and Replicators will be defeated and hunted. But this is far into the future, Commander. Long after your lifetimes. Long after the Ethereals and their puppetmaster have been destroyed.”

“Well,” the Commander nodded. “Let us hope the war continues in our favor. The help you’ve provided so far has certainly been useful.”

“Pardon the interruption,” a new voice said, as the Chronicler appeared out of nowhere. “Commander, Vahlen, you’re needed.”

“Why?” Vahlen asked.

“Fiona’s returned,” the Chronicler’s face was neutral, but his voice was deliberately tight. “She’s bought very disturbing news. And a friend.” He glanced towards the manifestation of T’Leth. “We need to talk. The situation regarding the Bringer is much worse than we thought.”

“Go.” T’Leth dismissed the Commander and Vahlen. “Speak to Fiona. Chronicler, continue.”

And within seconds the world around them disappeared and the Commander and Vahlen were back in the real world.

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Situation Room, the Praesidium – Classified Location

1/12/2017 – 9:09 A.M.

This was…one of the more unexpected developments the Commander could have expected.
When Aegis had off-handedly mentioned the Zudjari in several documents he’d written, it had been very explicitly stated that the Collective was not planning to use them anytime soon. He knew Vahlen and a few of the other scientists had inquired as to the species, but he personally did not consider them relevant.

And now one of them was standing in front of him.

Even with the astronaut-like helmet removed, the Zudjari easily towered over him. The armor itself was nothing like either Collective or Human-make, and the technology involved seemed to be a natural evolution of that used by the Outsiders. A confirmation of their Zudjari origins. While he couldn’t read Zudjari body language that well, this one didn’t appear to be hostile. In fact, he seemed somewhat overwhelmed.

Given the story of how he’d come at all, it wasn’t much of a surprise.

But Aegis, he was focused on the other big piece of news Fiona and their new Zudjari friend had brought.

“Mortis is alive?”

“There was an Ethereal called Mortis,” Axis repeated, a tone to the voice the Commander couldn’t place. Possibly annoyance at having to repeat himself. “A user of a psionic discipline called Biopathy. Related to another Ethereal called Sana. That is all I know, I had very little choice in participating.”

“And he has recovered…” Awe was in Aegis’s voice. “This changes much. Mortis would never have approved of what the Imperator is doing. And if Sana and the Battlemaster have been exposed to the worst of the Creator’s experiments—”

“None of them were pleased,” Axis interrupted. “Especially Mortis. The Ethereal Battlemaster was more controlled, but he was definitely furious at whatever that place was.”

“Perhaps we should focus on the fact that the Creator has been working on bringing over a Sovereign One apparently trapped in the Psionosphere,” the Commander said dryly. “Ignoring how that shouldn’t be possible, it might be worth asking why the Imperator is letting this happen.”

“I’ll give you that answer,” Fiona shrugged, as she cleaned up her blade. “He thinks he can control it.”

“Control a Sovereign One,” the Commander said as neutrally as he could. “It can’t be just that.”

She snorted. “I never said it was a good reason. Aegis, anything to add?”

“I am of a similar mind,” Aegis said slowly, looking down at the Zudjari. “The Imperator would not take such a risk unless he was sure the benefits were certain and greater than the cost. Yet control over a Sovereign One…even in this state…it seems far too risky, even for him.”

“Except that we’re forgetting one thing,” Zhang suddenly noted, stone-faced. “The Sovereign One the Imperator is working with. Historically the Sovereign Ones have warred with each other, and this Bringer is trapped. If given the opportunity to fully control a direct threat…the Imperator could be working with the Sovereign to make this feasible.”

“Damnit,” Fiona cursed. “That makes a lot more sense. Still, the problem is that according to what T’Leth has said, the Bringer isn’t an idiot. And from what I saw, the Creator has placed zero boundaries on what is happening. Incidentally, she definitely was behind Seoul. Apparently the
Battlemaster was actually telling the truth.”

“And you base this off what?” Creed narrowed his eyes. “The word of this other Human? A traitor?”

“Quiet, Creed,” the Commander rubbed his forehead. “Given what we know now there is no use pretending the Collective was behind it. It didn’t add up then, but it does if it was perpetrated by the Creator using the forces of a Sovereign One. That being said, the Imperator does share blame for allowing this to happen at all.”

“So much for the Battlemaster promising to turn over whoever was responsible,” Jackson reminded them. “I somehow doubt the Imperator is going to let him hand over the Creator. Not if she’s involved with bringing a Sovereign under his control.”

“He will be furious,” Aegis said. “He would never approve something like this.”

“That means absolutely nothing,” the Commander shot Aegis a hard look. “The Imperator is in charge of the Collective, not the Battlemaster. What he would or would not approve of doesn’t matter, he’s still working to keep the Imperator in power and that isn’t going to change no matter how much he dislikes it.”

“Except he had no idea this was happening,” Aegis said. “Nor did anyone else for that matter.”

“And what do you expect him to do?” The Commander asked bluntly. “Shut it down?”

“He will make an attempt,” Aegis noted. “Of that I can promise.”

“There are two other Ethereals who can corroborate his story,” Axis added. “While I do not fully understand the dynamics of this species, both of his companions seemed to wield some influence.”

“Mortis more than Sana,” Aegis said. “And yes. Mortis is, for better or worse, similar to your species emotionally. It will be very difficult to convince him that the Creator’s experiments are justified.”

“At the risk of derailing this conversation,” Iosif coughed, speaking for the first time. “We should probably discuss the fact that there is a Sovereign power which was capable of fighting and matching three of the most powerful Ethereals, and someday they are going to be used against us more openly. And this force, I’ll remind you, consists of non-psionic species wielding psionics with some level of mastery, along with whatever other things the Creator has designed which are also psionic. The potential Ethereal infighting, or lack thereof, is not something we can predict or control. This is more important.”

“I concur,” Zhang nodded. “Worst case scenario is that the Imperator begins using these…forces.”

“You cannot fight them like a normal psionic foe,” Axis interjected. “Telepaths especially will fail if they are unprepared. The Mosaic encountered this Bringer before, it seems. I know how to protect myself against what it does.”

“Yes, you are in an interesting situation,” the Commander noted. “I suppose we might as well discuss your future. We can’t have hostile aliens running around, but this is not necessarily your fight.”

The Zudjari was quiet for a few moments as his eyes briefly became unfocused. “The fight you wage is not my own, this is correct. But for now we have a common enemy. The last of the Zudjari are being held hostage by this Ethereal Collective, and Origin is a prisoner. And any alien who
allies or tampers with an abomination like the Bringer is an enemy to be purged from this galaxy.”

He looked back down at the Commander, and pointed one finger. “I will help and fight with you, on the condition that the Zudjari be freed. Origin may be lost, but my species should not be condemned or held hostage.”

The Commander crossed his arms, thinking before answering. “From what Aegis said – and this comes from him, the reason they are currently being held is because when the Ethereals awoke them, they immediately attacked. While I’d like to help your species, I’m less inclined to do so if it means we’ll be attacked as thanks.”

“The Ethereals intended to use us as soldiers or pawns,” Axis answered firmly, voice rumbling. “I am not surprised Assimilator Jeen fought, even if it was not in his favor. Some species are willing to become slaves in return for a single favor. We are not. Does your species intend to treat our kind as the Ethereals did?”

The Commander’s mouth formed into a grim smile. “I can assure you that ADVENT, and Humanity as a whole, has no interest in conquering or assimilating aliens. As long as we aren’t bothered, no one else will be either.”

“Then you will have little to fear from us,” Axis nodded. “I was second in authority only to Origin. The Zudjari will follow me, and we will try and find our place in this galaxy once more…” he trailed off. “I have much to think about and consider. The Mosaic cannot be formed in this galaxy, but if that were the case…why should we have been preserved?”

“You’ll have to think about that,” the Commander said before the Zudjari lost himself in self-reflection. “We’ll have to formalize an agreement with ADVENT regarding the eventual treatment of the Zudjari; you’ll need to be caught up on everything before that though. But for now, we’ll protect you, and you help us in return. I expect ADVENT will agree to help your species.”

“That will suffice for now, Commander,” Axis nodded, looking around. “Then I will go to my room…or a cell, if you have one.”

Vahlen sounded surprised. “You want a cell?”

“I do not wish company, or to be disturbed,” Axis said flatly. “I can tell your species is an inquisitive one. I do not want to be prodded or questioned now on my people, history, or any inane question that will arise from such.”

“We can arrange that,” the Commander promised. “And…welcome to XCOM, I suppose.”

“Perhaps we should consider a name change,” Creed suggested dryly. “Soon we’ll have more aliens than Humans here.”

Jackson rolled her eyes. “I’ll let you know when alien numbers actually come that close.”

“That’s enough for now,” the Commander said. “Everyone dismissed; Zhang, Aegis, Creed, Iosif, we’ll need to go discuss a more feasible plan with Fiona here at some point. If you’re willing to be debriefed?”

“Whatever you need,” she sheathed her sword. “I definitely need to prepare for a rematch.”

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*Atlanta, Georgia – United States of America*
As it turned out, it was difficult to come up with a workable plan for penetrating the ADVENT Recruitment Center, and from there getting to the machine which would awaken his psionic abilities. The most obvious thing was it would have to be done at night, since the process would take at minimum a few hours.

The Overmind had, surprisingly, been rather...present as he planned this out. Not so much giving advice as making him aware of certain crucial details that he had no hope of figuring out on his own. Such as the fact that it would take close to eight hours for the machine to work. But aside from that, the Overmind hadn’t really helped him.

Well, he’d occasionally make a comment or ask a question which made Ivan pause and reevaluate something. Other times he would be a phantom figure in the background; disconcerting at first, but he’d grown more used to it.

The first thing he’d done was get an untraceable cash flow. He knew ADVENT would catch something if he went and withdrew several thousand dollars, even if it was over a period of weeks. So there was an easier solution. Convert money into other assets, jewelry, antiques, and so on, and sell those off to third parties for cash. Completely out of character for anyone who knew him, but it wasn’t as though he was advertising this.

So that had gotten him a substantial amount to work with, and since ADVENT hadn’t shown up with questions, he’d assumed it’d gone unnoticed, or at least flagged as not a high priority. He’d stayed off the Internet as well, and used public places and networks for any kind of searching which might raise red flags.

Thanks to his work, he was able to call in quite a few favors from former clients and friends. Several he had snoop around the Recruitment Center, or go in and pretend to be interested, while taking note of certain things. From there he was able to put together something of a layout of the place, as well as people of note.

It was through these people that he had also become aware of what passed for the black market in ADVENT, something he wasn’t sure would be possible given the obsession with law and order. But it turned out that it did exist, although from how one of his former clients had described it, it was a lot smaller and secretive than anything before.

It had cost a small fortune just to buy one of the gauss pistols. He’d asked about a suit of armor when he’d considered infiltrating that way, and the man had laughed and said “I don’t know what you’re into, but you don’t have nearly enough for a suit. ADVENT has those locked up tighter than gold and they cost a pretty penny because of it.”

So that had been the end of that plan. It wasn’t strictly necessary; he needed a weapon, and now he had one.

The harsh truth was that there weren’t many scenarios that were both plausible and feasible to pull off. Ideally he wanted someone on the inside to help him, but that was out of the question. He was resigned to the fact that it was extremely likely that he wasn’t getting out of this undetected. Assuming he could get the security shut off, someone would be looking for him eventually.

Possibly not a concern, assuming the Overmind followed through on his end.

There was the matter of getting into the building in the first place. Breaking in could lead to a host of problems, so unfortunately the best solution was to find an employee and coerce them into
helping him. Not something he was especially pleased by, but it had to be done. Luckily he’d identified a suitable person who would assist him.

Danielle Cortez, an unassuming young Hispanic woman who worked as a technician in the Center. Lived alone, had a few friends, but not many, able to be overpowered if necessary, and thankfully not especially intelligent since he’d been able to enter her unlocked house and access her devices and calendars. He knew her plans and itinerary for the next couple weeks.

It was, admittedly, stalkerish. But he didn’t intend to hurt her, and once he had what he wanted, she would be released and never see him again. A means to an end.

He was, though, going to be extremely vulnerable when he was in the machine, but the Overmind had promised that he would ensure there would be ‘no disturbances’. He supposed he would just have to put some trust in the Overmind that he was going to wake up and not immediately be shot by ADVENT security.

“You have planned well enough.” Ivan grimaced, though he wasn’t startled any longer. “Working within limitations allows room for growth.”

“And I might die,” Ivan muttered, sitting down at his home table, seeing the figure of the woman he was going to be kidnapping later, though with glowing orange eyes.

But the face was completely impassive. “Then you had best ensure there are no mistakes.”

“Trust me,” Ivan grunted. “I’m aware. So, assuming everything goes to plan, what will happen next?”

“You will be extracted to safer territory,” the Overmind said. “I will not share details in the event you fail and are interrogated by ADVENT.”

Ivan just raised an eyebrow. “I appreciate the vote of confidence. Truly your kind look upon your allies with confidence and appreciation.”

“And your kind utilize humor and sarcasm as a deflective coping mechanism at curiously high rates,” was the deadpan reply. “Fascinating to see it so pronounced in a species.”

“Really.” Ivan got up and went to his fridge to get a drink. “Well, since I’ve got you talking, why aren’t your kind a little more…” he waved a hand around. “Open?” he scowled. “But literally every single one of you is serious and like a military officer in charge of a base where no fun is allowed. Even Aegis is like this.”

“It is how our species is,” the Overmind answered. “Emotions cloud judgement. Thus they were tempered. We feel our emotions, but they do not control us.”

Huh, interesting. “You can control that?”

“Every aspect of an individual can be controlled and manipulated,” the Overmind said slowly. “It is merely a combination of time, research, dedication, and technological progress to fully master the genome. We came close…very close. I have seen our species come from being a collection of independent clans and states, to the undisputed power of the galaxy, to our eventual fall and now our rise once more.”

Ivan stopped pouring, processing what the alien was saying. He coughed. “Just…how old are you?”
The Overmind was quiet briefly. “Old, Human. Older than your entire species’ recorded history. Old enough to watch an entire rise and fall over thousands of years. Old enough where I have seen everything the galaxy can offer. Age becomes less important to the immortal, and in truth I do not fully know how old I am now.”

Ivan coughed again. “You’re…immortal?”

“Yes, we are,” the Overmind said. “Our species is. An evolutionary consequence of our low birthrates. We lived a thousand years when we were restricted to our planet. As we conquered our genome, periodic treatments ensured that we never degraded, and as a result, never died.”

“Ah, I see.” Ivan took a swig of his vodka. “You’re not actually immortal, you just cheated actually dying. Clever. Don’t suppose you could do that for other species?”

“Perhaps,” was the answer. “None have tried before.”

Hm, well, when he was off Earth, maybe he could try and see if some scientists could look into that. “Well, to tomorrow I guess,” he said, lifting his glass to the emotionless figure. “A toast, a Human tradition. Good luck.”

The figure showed no visible reaction, but a similar glass suddenly appeared in the hand, which mechanically raised to mirror his own. “Good enough,” Ivan conceded.

Well, one way or another, his future would be decided soon. Hopefully it turned out in his favor.

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Isolated Location - Argentina

11/13/2017 – 11:11 A.M.

This was an unfortunate interruption. Volk pursed his lips. “I suppose it was only a matter of time.”

“XCOM experienced in psionic interference,” Elena nodded. “Intervention inevitable. Revised plans must be established.”

To put it lightly. When Asaru had said that they didn’t have to worry about ADVENT for some time, as long as they weren’t tipped off unnecessarily, he hadn’t thought to wonder what to do when XCOM decided to investigate. The report from one of the Phantom Division who was keeping an eye on ADVENT Brazilian Command confirmed that XCOM Intelligence had sent an agent.

Abigail Gertrude.

Interestingly enough, this was a woman who actually had a history. A former US Marine combat medic. Exceptional student, extremely intelligent, by all accounts a woman with a bright career ahead of her. She hadn’t seen any action, but despite that a few months into her services she’d been reassigned, and that was where the trail ended.

Seeing as how she’d shown up as an agent of XCOM, she must have been recruited by them. It was certainly an odd career change. Combat medic to soldier made sense, and XCOM would have obviously needed women like her. However, combat medic to soldier to intelligence agent? That was rare and unusual. She didn’t, in Volk’s unprofessional opinion, fit the mold.

That said, XCOM wouldn’t send a novice and she’d apparently been putting together a similarly
interesting team. A couple Peacekeepers who’d survived the attacks, multiple psions, a diplomat, several of whom did have actual backgrounds to pull from…which luckily gave him an idea of how she was going to tackle this, and confirmed to him that his misgivings about how the operation was proceeding in Argentina were accurate.

In the end, he wasn’t a leader, a revolutionary, or aiming to start a rebellion. Lofty dreams, but he wasn’t cut out for that kind of thing. He was an assassin, a killer, and it was better to focus on using those skills against ADVENT. Supposedly this Betos woman in Africa was also working with another Ethereal, and she seemed to want to be the revolutionary.

“We need to change our plans,” he finally said, to himself as much as Joreal and Asaru. “If we hadn’t been cautious, ADVENT would be invading Argentina soon and we’d have accomplished nothing. They’re going to speak to the government, and they’ll eventually learn about the ones who dealt with us. Scrub their minds, Asaru, we’re changing our game plan.”

Joreal seemed skeptical, but Asaru just widened a blue eye. “You do not want to fortify Argentina any longer?”

“There wouldn’t be enough time, and it would ultimately fail, and be another state assimilated by ADVENT,” Volk shook his head. “This serves as a base of operations. But that isn’t what any of us are. We’re assassins, not guerilla warriors. Our mission is to hurt ADVENT as badly as possible, and to do that we need to start just targeting people.”

Asaru gave a bright smile. “I cannot say I’m disappointed by your change of heart. Macula will be pleased to hear it.”

“Do you have a target in mind?” Joreal asked.

“Elena?” He nodded to her as she cleared her throat.

“Focus should be on highly placed military officials and heads of state,” she said. “The public assassinations of high-profile figures will demoralize ADVENT personnel and citizens. More specialized targets will hurt their intellectual, scientific, and engineering capabilities. Sabotage or tampering of research facilities is also advisable.”

Volk pulled out a small piece of paper. “I already have regional leaders for the Midwest of the United States. Crippling them in this area will likely improve the Collective’s chances whenever they attack again. In the meantime, the first high-profile targets will be Supreme Leader Iseul Gwan, and South Korean President Chia Seo-jun.”

“That would hurt even worse given recent events,” Joreal complimented. “North Korea still views Gwan in a reverent light. His death would shatter morale there.”

“I have the feeling you aren’t finished,” Asaru noted curiously.

“No,” Volk said, smiling for the first time. “Before we do any of this, I want this investigatory team dealt with. We are going to send Abigail Gertrude back to XCOM in a body bag, along with everyone else she’s recruited to her mission.”

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ADVENT Intelligence Outpost, Brasília - Brazil

1/14/2017 – 12:44 P.M.
“The meeting is set,” Serena said, handing Abby the tablet. “I got the impression they weren’t exactly happy about it, but mentioning that XCOM was also interested definitely got their attention.”

“And everyone on the list will be there?” Abby asked, taking it.

The diplomat nodded. “Yes. If there was any collusion, we’ll know about it. They also stated that only yourself and I will be able to meet them in person, as soon as they have verifiable evidence that neither of us is psionically sensitive.”

“Well, we prepared for that,” Abby said, shrugging. “I assume their people will be coming to take the samples?”

“Within a couple of days,” Serena confirmed. “They confirm that, we’re all good to go. Not that it’ll stop our resident Inquisitor.”

“He might not even need to be in the building,” Silvio commented from his chair at the other end of the room. “The psions usually have a pretty good range.”

“I’ll let you figure that out,” Serena said. “Just wanted to give you an update on that.”


The woman saluted, leaving them alone again. Silvio appraised her inquisitively. “What do you think the chances are that the Phantom Division tries to interfere?”

“We should prepare like they will,” she said, sinking into a nearby seat, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Which is why I think we should bring a team of disguised Lancers for our guard instead of standard soldiers. If we are attacked, or something happens, I want to have soldiers on standby who can actually fight back.”

“I’ll get some agent backup too,” Silvio promised, making a short note on his own tablet. “Plainclothes civilians throughout the city. Hide our numbers further.”

Abby pursed her lips. “This will be a big waste if nothing happens.”

“Well, it’s for a good cause,” Silvio shrugged. “And we don’t want anything to happen. But if it does, you’ll be happy you’ve got Lancers and agents to help out instead of standard soldiers. Not to disparage our fine fighting men and women, but from what you’ve said, they aren’t going to stand against the Phantom Division, or these terrorists for that matter.”

“The terrorists may be the larger threat,” Abby mused, rapping her fingers on the table. “They could also hide in any crowd. So far we haven’t witnessed any kind of suicidal actions, but I wouldn’t rule those out.”

“It will be curious to see what they do,” Silvio said thoughtfully. “Doing nothing may make us drop it if there is nothing, but if someone is guilty, we’ll have another lead to follow. But doing something will definitely confirm that we’re on the right track.”

Abby was silent for a few moments, and decided to give voice to a concern she’d been having over the past few days. “I don’t think that we’ll find anything. Not now.”

Silvio frowned. “Why?”

“Because we’re dealing with Nebulan,” Abby explained, reclining back in her seat. “An Ethereal
that specifically likes memory tampering. If they learn what we’re doing, there isn’t anything stopping Nebulan from warping their minds. An attack would be out of character…at least in the middle of a city. She’d do an ambush, somewhere isolated.”

“But this is assuming she learns about us,” Silvio said. “She might not, or learn too late to do anything without it being obvious.”

Abby snorted. “I guarantee there is at least one Phantom agent watching the government if they’re involved. The moment they hear about the meeting, they’ll know what we’re doing. Nebulan isn’t an idiot.”

“So what you’re saying is that Wepper should also probe their minds,” Silvio said slowly. “Has he had any luck so far?”

“Partially,” Abby flipped to the relevant document on her tablet and slid it to him. “The good news is that he found the identifying marker which usually indicates if a memory was tampered with or not.”

“That’s…good news?” Silvio looked up, waiting for the catch.

“The problem is that he was only able to reliably find it in victims with whom it had only happened recently,” Abby supplied. “A few hours at most. These were volunteers. And it seems impossible to tell what the original memory would be. The best thing about it is that the tampering marker seems universal, so it would be easy to find…assuming you know the area to look.”

“So it’s like finding a needle in a haystack,” Silvio muttered. “Even assuming he goes at full speed, could he go through their memories fast enough before they leave? All of them?”

“Unlikely,” Abby admitted. “And there’s still too much unknown. We don’t know if this would change depending on the mastery of the tampering psion. We don’t know if it can be done faster. For all we know, this is the worst possible way to do it. I guess it’s better than nothing.”

“This probably would be fairly recent when the meeting takes place,” Silvio said, thinking as he rested his chin on a fist. “Within a week to ten days. At least it’s a shorter window. Might not be enough though.”

“We might have to rely on command conditioning,” Abby finally said. “If we don’t find anything, and they are working with Nebulan, psionic contingencies will either inform us what they’re doing, or at worst make them wonder if we’ve compromised their government.”

“Then you better get authorization for that from Falka,” Silvio said. “We’re only authorized to read their minds. Actually planting commands needs additional approval.”

Abby sighed. “Is that necessary?”

“It is for us,” Silvio shrugged. “With XCOM I don’t know if that would change things, but I’d rather be safe than be arrested by the Oversight Division for ‘Unauthorized psionic manipulation’. Since we’re dealing with an Ethereal, I doubt you’ll have problems getting it approved. But we’ve got rules for psions here, psions can’t do whatever they want and we can’t use psionics however we want.”

“Fair enough,” Abby conceded. “I’ll get a request written up and sent to you. And the requests to Special Forces and Intelligence, for the Lancers and Agents.”

“I’ll get everything prepped on my end too,” Silvio gave a bright smile. “I almost hope they try
something. I’m curious how a group of enhanced spies will fare against the best special forces ADVENT has. And psions, of course.”

“Like you said,” Abby answered. “Let’s hope we don’t have to find out.”

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Stasis Chambers, the Praesidium – Classified Location

1/18/2017 – 11:00 A.M.

“I’m sorry, could you please repeat that, Commander?”

The sheer disbelief in Saudia’s tone was almost amusing to the Commander, but he couldn’t really fault her reaction. “Aegis believes it can be done. Now that the Manchurian Restraints are completed, we have our insurance policy-”

“Let me get this straight,” Saudia interrupted, lifting a hand. “You want to wake Caelior up from his very secure and protected stasis pod.”

“That is the plan.”

“And then use him against the Collective?”

“Preferably he’ll be more willing to fight for us,” the Commander said, thinking how best to phrase it. “Caelior was…misused back in the Empire. Aegis sharing some of the truth with him definitely took out a lot of the fight he had.”

Saudia looked like she wanted to slap him. “You…do remember this is the Ethereal who single-handedly leveled Tokyo?”

“And we would be fools to not turn that kind of power against the Collective,” the Commander answered. “With some proper education in tactics, and sufficient motivation, we have one of the most powerful Ethereals to exist on our side.”

“And how do you know he isn’t going to try and break free?”

“Because Caelior doesn’t want to die,” the Commander answered simply. “Because he will want to take revenge for the way the Collective used him. Because we’ve taken extensive measures to curtail any sort of action against us. We’re doing this very carefully, Chancellor, and I asked to speak to you here to keep you up to speed on what we’re doing. I’m not asking permission, but I think it’s best if we’re both on the same page here.”

“I’m glad you at least did that,” she muttered, leaning against the wall. “The media insanity around Aegis would be nothing compared to having Caelior showing up. So thank you so very much for not springing something like that on us.”

“We live and learn,” the Commander allowed a smile. “And in the interest of that… he pulled out a printed piece of paper and handed it to her. “Also keeping you in the loop, we might be acquiring some additional allies.”

“How?” She immediately grabbed the paper, and skimmed it. It wasn’t fancy, and solely for the purpose of sharing information. The Commander didn’t want any virtual copy of it on ADVENT computers. She blinked several times as she blazed through it, looking up at him again in disbelief. “The Andromedons?”
“Technically a Union,” the Commander clarified. “Possibly more. But a very-“

“I know who Union Viarior are,” Saudia interrupted. “I’ve also read all the reports you shared with us. And you’re going to meet with V’Zarrah?”

“Yes.”

“How?” She furrowed her eyebrows. “Is he coming here?”

“Can’t share that,” the Commander shook his head. “But it’s taken care of. I’m telling you because if we reach an agreement-“

“It could affect the development of the fleet,” she finished slowly, blankly looking at the walls as she processed the implications. “Resources, designs, training; the Andromedons only have the Sectoids as rivals in naval power. We could have a fully-trained and prepped fleet in a fraction of the time if this happens.”

“Let’s not celebrate just yet,” the Commander cautioned. “But you should be aware of it. Share that document with whoever you think should be informed and destroy it.”

“I’ve handled sensitive documents before,” she noted, carefully placing it in a folder she’d brought along, retrieving it from where she’d set it down. “I don’t think it will be necessary to share it with anyone outside Elizabeth, Laura, and Feng. They should be aware.”

“Commander?” Both of them turned as Vahlen walked inside, giving Saudia a brief nod. “We’re preparing to bring Caelior out of stasis, we’re waiting on you.”

“Showtime,” the Commander said, following Vahlen as they exited the room.

“How certain are you that Caelior can be controlled, doctor?” Saudia asked.

“We’ve applied the strictest of Restraints,” Vahlen said. “He will not be able to speak or act when he awakens, not until one of us manually sets his programming. Witnessing the process should give you more concrete reassurance that he will not pose a threat.”

Saudia didn’t seem fully convinced, but that wasn’t something the Commander was concerned about. One way or another she’d come to terms with what they were doing. They stepped into the stasis chamber, which held Caelior’s own pod which was suspended on the far wall, the bare metal dully reflecting the light from the ceiling.

Aegis and several technicians were already there, the latter of whom were closer to the pod itself, while Aegis stood near the door. “We will be sectioning off the room,” Vahlen said, as she stepped closer to a computer console which seemed to control the pod. “Security precaution, nothing should go wrong.”

“Comforting,” Saudia muttered, as a transparent, but shimmering barrier appeared between the trio and Vahlen.

“There is little danger,” Aegis promised. “If necessary, I can restrain him again.”

“Beginning draining sequence,” Vahlen said, and they heard a low hum begin as the green fluid within the pod began draining into chambers within the walls themselves. For a pod as large as the one which held Caelior, it was a good fifteen minutes before Vahlen announced, “Sequence complete, pod chambers opening.”
Right on cue the pod opened up and Caelior almost fell out of it, though he was caught by the two technicians who were prepared for it, then maneuvered him to a specially designed chair proportionally designed for his large size. The Ethereal wasn’t completely naked, but the Commander knew that Caelior was likely not thrilled at the prospect of being observed when he was so vulnerable.

“Caelior, welcome back to the world,” Vahlen said, walking to stand in front of him, her voice sharp and professional as she spoke to the Ethereal, making it clear that he better listen. “I assume you enjoyed your rest. Now, do not panic. The reason you can’t move or speak is because you have been subjected to the Manchurian Restraints, which have locked your body down and made you unable to react to any stimuli.”

As she spoke, the technicians had still restrained Caelior. Better safe than sorry. “This will be changed shortly, but we understandably can’t take chances. The good news is that you are no longer paralyzed, although it will take you some time to your body to fully readjust to walking and using your limbs again.”

She motioned to the trio behind the barrier. “Once the programming is properly in place, Aegis and the Commander will be talking with you about what happens next. Chancellor Vyandar is here to ensure that we aren’t making a mistake in keeping you alive. I hope you’ll prove our decision was the correct one.”

Vahlen pulled up the other chair in the room and sat down opposite Caelior, while glancing at the notes on her tablet. “Now, let’s begin.”

Ideally, in the future this would be done by Julian. But for now, they had to make do, and doing it manually was likely needed anyway since Saudia was here. “How long do you think it will take?” Saudia asked.

“Hopefully not too long,” the Commander answered as Vahlen began applying the Manchurian commands. “But I don’t think we should rush her.”

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Throne Room, the Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

1/12/2017 – 7:11 A.M.

The Imperator at least had an explanation. That was more than the Battlemaster had expected, but to say that it was justifiable was so far beyond the realm of possibility that he was surprised the Imperator had thought he would consider it even remotely acceptable. While the revelation of the theorized nature of the Sovereign Ones was something to consider, it in no way justified allowing this Bringer to have free reign over the Creator.

At least this finally explained why the Imperator hadn’t pushed for more thorough integration of Sovereign technology. If he viewed everything as a potential threat they couldn’t completely control, preventing it from being used in the first place was a good way to prevent a supposed ally from stabbing you in the back.

Perhaps, the Battlemaster mused to himself, he would be more accepting of the Imperator’s concerns if he’d actually seen some evidence that this was actually what was taking place. Mosrimor, the lone Sovereign supposedly allied with them, had barely interfered at all, and as far as the Battlemaster could tell, didn’t seem particularly involved to begin with. The Bringer seemed more involved than their apathetic Sovereign ally had been.
However, there was a bigger concern to be raised. “You deliberately withheld this from me,” he said slowly. The twinkling from the backdrop of stars cast a silvery light on the Ethereals in the room, long and dark shadows rising behind them. “This entire time, you neglected to tell me the actual reason for invading Earth.”

“I did,” the Imperator confirmed; an honesty the Battlemaster appreciated for what it was. It wasn’t as though there was much choice. “As well as others. This kind of information should not be common knowledge, and only shared if the need is dire.”

The Battlemaster took a slow and deliberate breath. “Did you not think that maybe, the knowledge that there is a Soverign One on Earth might be information that I would consider important!?” His voice was rising, but he didn’t especially care. “You didn’t just withhold information, you lied to me about why we were invading Earth! We are not prepared to fight a Soverign One!”

“Deliberately,” the Imperator answered, still calm. “Had we gone in with this objective in mind from the beginning, we might have forced its hand. Now we have the option to actually land on the planet and wage war without cause for alarm. Had we gone with the sole purpose of killing the Soverign, we might have never stepped foot on Earth and would be facing a much more dangerous Humanity.”

At the Battlemaster’s silence, the Imperator continued. “I did not lie to you about Humanity. I do intend to assimilate them into the Collective, and they have thankfully helped establish a framework of government to work with once their leaders are removed, XCOM is purged, and the Soverign is dead.”

“I would like to point out the absolute brilliance of your plan,” Mortis said, voice dripping with contempt. “In your oh-so-noble quest to kill every Soverign in the galaxy, you specifically go out of your way to invade their planets and make them your enemies where otherwise they would have never known you existed. Or maybe, you could have considered well…peacefully contacting the Humans? You do realize there are other ways to get on a planet without invading it? But no.” Mortis waved a hand. “Now you’ve made the enemy of something a lot more dangerous than you that completely didn’t need to happen. Great job. Truly.”

“You have certainly not changed,” the Imperator said dryly. “Spare me the dramatics, Mortis, no one is interested in your contempt. Consider that if I had done as you said, I would have given this Soverign the opportunity to infiltrate the Collective through Humanity. That is how they work. I would not have made an enemy, but I would have allowed what has been built to be corrupted.”

“And how do we know your theory is accurate?” Sana finally asked. “By your own admission, you have only contacted one of these Soverigns. The Bringer is another, and you suspect there is one on Earth. How do you know that each one is as manipulative and warmongering as you say? What proof do you have of this? The Humans were not under the influence of one.”

“Because a pattern emerges when one looks at the ruins scattered in the galaxy,” the Imperator answered. “It is heard through the words of their puppets, and themselves. Carefully constructed sentences and promises, while being vague on motives or details. If you want a specific piece of evidence, Mosrimor was the one who provided the location of Earth to me without saying why. He knew, or at least suspected there was a Soverign, and he wanted us to confirm it.”

“Did you consider that maybe we were unlucky enough to get the evil, manipulative Soverign?” Mortis asked. “Patterns or not, you’re basically doing what he wants anyway, so good job. Puppet.”

The Battlemaster took another breath, and turned around as they debated. “I don’t think you withheld this information because of tactics or strategy,” he said slowly. “You withheld it because
I might disagree with you.”

“You are too focused on your view of the galaxy,” the Imperator said. “You do not grasp the larger picture here. It is not a stretch to determine how the cycles of the galaxy play out. The Synthesized are a symptom of a larger war, not the endgame. You have made it your mission to kill the Synthesized, when your true targets should be their creators, and the ones who see species like ours as mere tools.” His lower two hands were clasped together. “The Bringer gave me locations of ruins; this is a use he has provided. I have verified what he has shared myself. More importantly all one needs to do is look to the inner galaxy. There are species under the control of Sovereigns. They manipulate through deities, proxies, AIs, but this is not a realization I came to overnight, Battlemaster. It is the culmination of years of research, and evidence both circumstantial and actual.”

“Tell me,” the Battlemaster said. “Was the Empire under the control of a Sovereign One?”

“Unlikely,” the Imperator conceded. “But we are an…exception, more than the rule.”

A snort came from Mortis. “Convenient.”

“Recall that we knew our species was the result of an artificial creators,” the Imperator pointed out. “Our species wondered for generations, and found no answers. Yet it seems abundantly clear that we were the product of a Sovereign. I cannot explain why it did not take control, or where it has gone, but we now have the answer. Even if they were not under their control, only they have the skill to engineer a species such as ours.”

“Regardless of the validity of this theory about the Sovereign Ones,” the Battlemaster stated, turning back to the Imperator. “Deliberately seeking out the Bringer is unjustifiable, and goes against what you ultimately want.”

“A means to an end,” the Imperator said. “This is perhaps the only opportunity to acquire and control a being powerful enough to fight another Sovereign. And that will unfortunately be something which is needed. Once the last Sovereign is dead, the Bringer will be disposed of.”

“And if you mess up, you unleash that thing on the galaxy,” Mortis pointed out. “You have no idea what you are doing here. Assuming you’re right, you’ve entered into a conflict that might have been going for millions of years. Do you really think you’re going to be able to outsmart and outwit beings which are older than our entire species?”

“Sovereign Ones are fallible,” the Imperator said. “Their arrogance and superiority can be exploited.”

“How interesting,” Mortis answered. “I was just going to say the same thing about you.”

“You may wish to be a pawn for the Sovereigns,” the Imperator said, an edge creeping into his voice. “But I will not willingly become one in this conflict, and I will attempt to break this cycle forever. Perhaps I will fail, but I will have made an attempt most are never even aware of.”

“So don’t,” Sana suggested, stepping forward. “Reject Mosrimor. Reject the Bringer. Sever contact. Withdraw from Earth. The Empire was without a Sovereign, the same can be done here. An attempt can be made to break free of this theoretical conflict without resorting to...making agreements with monsters and invading blameless planets.”

“Do you honestly believe we could accomplish what I intend with such a plan?” The Imperator growled at Sana, making her step back. “You are idealistic, not stupid. The galaxy has changed.
The Sovereign Ones are at large, and this time they will not let the remnant of the Empire pose a threat. We have little choice but to similarly augment ourselves, even if it leads to unsavory places.”

“I’m sure that reasoning never once backfired,” Mortis said, starting to pace back and forth. “Yes, our actions are just as bad as the ones we’re fighting against, but this time it’s actually justified, and before you know it, you’re helpfully uplifting and guiding species to use against the enemies because ‘it’s necessary and they do it’, but this time it is justified because the ends justify the means.” He looked at the Imperator. “Does that sound familiar? Isn’t this exactly what you’re doing with this little Collective?”

“No,” the Imperator stated harshly. “We saved the Vitakara from extinction. We made agreements with the Sectoids and Andromedons. Do not compare me to the Sovereigns who create and manipulate for millennia.”

“While not quite the same,” Sana added. “Your denial rings hollow when Paradise is allowed to exist.”

“Paradise will be controlled more tightly,” the Imperator said. “I mistakenly-“

“No.” The Battlemaster jabbed a finger at him. “Effective immediately I will be suspending any and all activity to Paradise and the Creator. The Gateway will be shut down and decommissioned. If you won’t deal with her, I will cut off her supply of food, components, and prisoners.”

“This is bigger than what any of us would prefer,” the Imperator answered slowly. “What the Bringer is doing is distasteful. It is also our best chance to fight the Sovereign Ones. You may decommission the Gateway, but I will simply have another constructed. I apologize, but this is a necessary task.”

“Is this the real reason Aegis defected?” Sana asked. “Because perhaps he was right to.”

“No.” The Imperator shook his head. “Aegis never learned of it, otherwise he would have informed others, I suspect. I suggest all of you take time to actually think about this. Consider what is best for our species and the Collective. Consider what is best for the galaxy. If the price of this understanding is a hatred of me, then so be it. I made mistakes in not sharing this with you and controlling the Bringer, but I will not apologize because they were justifiable and necessary.”

He looked at the Battlemaster. “Consider very carefully what you do next. I will not have further disruption in the Collective, not when significant progress is being made now. I have authorized more Ethereals to conduct additional destabilizing operations on Earth. I want this planet conquered and the Sovereign dead. See to it that this is done.”

“You forget I don’t answer to you,” Mortis reminded him. “And I’m very much not inclined to right now.”

“I suggest you reconsider as well, Mortis’Ligna,” the Imperator turned and began ascending the stairs. “If that is your feeling, then you may leave the Collective. But if you stay, you will follow any instructions I give. I will give you time to decide, but there will be no rebels here. Choose between your species or yourself, but it cannot be both.”

It was as clear a dismissal as could be made, and the Battlemaster had all he wanted regardless. He spun around, and began marching towards the exit, Mortis and Sana close behind him.

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Danielle Cortez had no plan for tonight. She was exhausted having not slept well previous nights, and was hoping that this would be the night where she could break that cycle. Go home, eat, change, shower, and sleep before work the next day. Seemed a good enough plan, where she wouldn’t have to worry about recruitment numbers and Trask levels.

She pulled into her driveway, got out, and immediately made her way inside and walked directly to her fridge intending to get some water. She didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary, that was, until she turned and saw a figure sitting at her kitchen table.

With a gun.

She let out a brief shriek before the figure put a finger to where his mouth would be gesturing with the gun to be quiet. The figure was definitely male, and much bigger than her even sitting down. He wore completely black clothing, gloves, boots, pants, and jacket. The face was shrouded by a hood, but she could see that there was something covering his face.

“Hello, Miss Cortez.” The man’s voice had a trace of an accent, perhaps Russian, but she didn’t know. It was easily comprehensible and polished. Not what she had expected. “Cooperate and you have nothing to fear. Please no sudden movements or sounds. Understand?”

She gave a small nod.

The man stood, towering over her, making her curse her shortness even more, although it honestly didn’t matter at all with a gun in the picture. “You can speak,” the man said. “But I think we can both agree that attracting attention would be especially bad for you.”

She gave another mute nod, become more terrified of what the man wanted. How had he broken in at all? Was he going to rape her? Would it be better to just fight anyway? “You work for the ADVENT Recruitment Center,” he said. “A technician. With the psionic systems.”


“Glad you confirmed it,” he nodded. “This is what you’re going to do: We’re going back to the Center, and you are going to hook me up to that machine. Do that, and you’ll be released unharmed.”

Danielle blinked. The Psionic Awakening Unit? How did he know about that, and did he know that it might not work? How would he react… “But…we have to run tests…not everyone can-“

“I’m aware,” the man interrupted. “But I wouldn’t concern yourself with that. I know I’m psionically sensitive.”

A reject? It made sense, but he didn’t seem to have thought this plan though. Not the least of which was that when she hooked him up, he would fall unconscious. More than enough time to get some help. Unless he shot her? No…he would need her, he wouldn’t know how to work the machine. Maybe she could still get out of this.

Perhaps misdirect him. “There are security systems,” she said. “At least one guard. I don’t know where all of them are.”

“You let me worry about that,” he said, motioning for her to turn around with a flick of his gun.
“As for the guard, we’ll simply use the back entrance. Yes, I know there is one. Give me your cell phone.”

She slowly reached into her purse and took it out, and slid it towards him, hands up in the air.
“Thank you.” She expected to hear the sound of it being smashed or destroyed, but instead heard nothing. “Let’s go for a drive.”

A few minutes later they were on the road, the man sitting in the back seat with the pistol likely aimed at the back of her head. She tried not to look in the rearview mirror too much, and just focused on the road. For better or worse she lived fairly close to the Recruiting Center. On the way she tried to think of the rejects from the PRIEST Division.

There were a fair number who simply weren’t suited to have psionics – that had been emphasized during the training. Standards had to be met, and there were absolutely no exceptions whatsoever. Some people took it well, and found other work in ADVENT, but others didn’t react so calmly.

She cursed her forgetfulness, although in truth it could have been someone weeks or months. “Male” and “Well-spoken” didn’t really narrow down the possibilities, especially since he hadn’t given any details, such as the Trask level, or even basic things like skin and hair color. The man had clearly planned this out, though she still didn’t know how he would deal with being knocked out for hours.

She considered questioning him a bit more, but she didn’t know if it was a good idea to press him. Would he actually shoot her if he needed her? Could he afford to do that? But at the same time, could she risk it?

Danielle did not want to die. Not like this.

So she said nothing and they drove in silence.

A short time later she pulled into the alley which led behind the building, and parked. “Get out,” the man ordered, and she complied as he stepped out in unison with her, the pistol still aimed directly at her. She wished she knew more about guns, because she didn’t even know if it was a real gun or a fake, or if the man knew how to use it at all.

Danielle unlocked the back door, and stepped inside, with the man following her. “Go directly there,” he said behind her. “Don’t delay, I know the layout of this building.”

She couldn’t risk that he actually did. She could only hope that the night guard would either be watching the cameras or patrolling where they were going. A hostage situation would not be the worst outcome because backup in the form of PRIESTs could be called, telepaths. Of course, he might know that and just kill her.

But she definitely did not want to give those kinds of powers to this man.

It seemed she had little choice in that, though.

She took the way to the Psionic Awakening room, a smaller rectangular area with little more than two opposing pods on the ends of the room, with the accompanying consoles to begin and monitor the process. There were a few chairs against the wall opposite the entrance for recruits to sit on.

“Go to that corner,” the man ordered.

She complied, and heard some rustling in the background. There was a camera in the room, he might have been taking care of that. The click meant he’d locked them inside. In theory, no one would be able to get in and they wouldn’t accidentally stumble around it since there were no
There was something she was missing. This person had planned for everything up to going into the pod. Once he was in, she was free to do whatever she wanted. Was there another person who was following them? “Alright, let’s get this started,” the man said, inviting her to turn back around. “A word of warning, once I’m in there…don’t try anything, since I know you’re wondering that. It won’t turn out well for you.”

She bit her tongue, thinking that was an actual bluff. Since he’d locked them in, she was safe for the time being. Even without a phone, she could simply halt the process or keep him under indefinitely. “I’ll need to attach some sensors and insert some IV tubes,” she said, figuring that he would know the process of this, since he already knew a disturbing amount already. If he reacted badly…that might give her more options.

But he nodded, and stepped up into the vertical pod, even as the gun was still aimed at her. Danielle was surprised by how calmly she was doing this, her hands were barely shaking as she prepped him for the process. A few minutes later she was done, at least with that part. “You should keep your arms flat,” she said. “You don’t want the arm crushed when the pod closes.”

“I’ll worry about that when it’s started,” he said dryly, the gun still trained on her. “Go on then.”

She complied, and began the process. “The pod will close in ten seconds,” she told him as the hum of the machine filled the room. “Then it’ll enter the automated awakening process. It will open automatically once the period is over.”

The man nodded, and laid his arms flat against the pod as it began closing. “Your cooperation is appreciated.” Those were his last words before the coffin-like pod closed and began working. She was still for a moment, thinking she needed time for the pod to knock him out before doing anything.

She yawned, realizing how exhausted she was. The process would take eight hours, that would be enough time for a short nap. It wasn’t as though he was going anywhere, and she needed to be clearheaded in case there was anyone else watching her to make sure she didn’t get help. Just a short nap was all she needed.

Sitting down on the floor, she fell into a deep sleep.

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Canadian Wilderness – Canada

1/14/2017 – 7:00 P.M.

The subversion of Fort McMurray was proceeding very well. Neil was quite happy with how things had been going. With the Overseer under their control, within days they had established a means of information transfer and he had a significant amount of data to work with. More than enough to plan what to do next.

Killing the Sargon was the priority, and Neil had soon realized that there were plenty of ways to kill a Sargon that wouldn’t necessarily implicate ADVENT. Psionics opened many additional possibilities, as they were finding out as Cycelea was slowly working to turn ranking members of the alien forces in the city into additional tools, and he suspected that within several weeks they’d have full control over Fort McMurray, all without the aliens ever realizing it.

He still had commanded the Overseer to continue patrols into their territory, where they either
killed them, captured and psionically took control of them, or just wanted them to see the skinned and frozen bodies of their comrades. All to give the Sargon a legitimate reason to investigate himself.

Around the campfire Neil idly chewed on a piece of Borelian meat. Despite some reservations, it actually wasn’t that bad. It was a little more chewy than most animal meat, and if it wasn’t cooked enough it had a really bad aftertaste, but cooked just right it was very filling. Waste not, want not and all that.

With his other hand he drew crude shapes in the snow, a way of visualizing possible ways to kill the Sargon.

“I still can’t believe you eat that stuff,” Cycelea commented walking in from the woods, Snowtrooper armor still on. It was close enough to the fire that Neil had taken his helmet off, and Cycelea followed his example, shaking free her hair. “Ah, that feels good.”

“Mission successful then?” He asked.

“Yes,” she nodded. “I’m getting pretty good at it. To the point where I’m worried I might overlook something important. But I don’t think I’ve made any mistakes. Yet.”

“You seem to know what you’re doing, I’m not concerned,” Neil said, reaching close to the fire and taking a plate of meat to her. “Figured you’d be hungry. Don’t worry, 100% from Earth.”

She looked suspiciously at it, but took the plate and sat down. The wind chill felt nice close to the fire, even as it howled in the distance, picking up and blasting snow around them. Not likely a storm, but he didn’t want the fire going out anytime soon. “Everyone on watch?” Cycelea asked.

“Or sleeping,” Neil confirmed. “Everyone’s got something to get done.”

“Including you?” She raised an eyebrow as she ate.

“Oh, yes,” he gave a thin smile. “Namely deciding how our upcoming Sargon is going to die. Input is needed, obviously.”

“Hit me then,” she crossed her legs, waiting for him to continue. “I’ve got ideas of my own.”

“Alright,” Neil picked up the stick and began tracing in the snow. “We’ve got our traditional way. Have the Overseer lead him out to show the area itself. We ambush and kill him, and since we have control over a lot of aliens, it turns into a chaotic mess. Not good for anonymity, but it would do the job.”

“Doesn’t seem subtle enough for you,” Cycelea mused.

“I think there is a better idea here,” Neil said. “The Sargon will arrive in a vehicle most likely. While he’s touring with the Overseer, we have some controlled aliens plant a bomb, or sabotage it some other way. Have it detonate when he’s nowhere near here. Suspicious, but it could be a freak accident, and even if they suspect otherwise, it wouldn’t be near us.”

“Until they look at where he was last,” she pointed out. “Might draw more attention.”

He scowled. “Good point.”

“However…” Cycelea leaned back slightly. “If you could make it so that it detonates at a different time, like from when he leaves his home base…that would be far more difficult to track. Assuming
the bomb isn’t discovered in the meantime.”

“The problem is we’d need to know when he’s using it again,” Neil said. “And we don’t have any aliens under our control there.”

“Yet.”


“The Sargon will likely come with a guard,” Cycelea said. “Elites, but also regular Mutons and possibly Vitakara. Nothing stopping us, or specifically, me from planting some new orders in their minds. Orders that could involve anything as complex as detonating a bomb at a certain point, or even simply attempting to kill the Sargon that way.”

Neil scratched his chin. “Three Inquisitors could subvert a group fast. Especially with all the practice you’ve have been getting.”

“Exactly,” she smiled. “And in the unfortunate event that it works and our alien spy is discovered, it will appear to be an act of a traitor, and not connected to us.”

That was an especially devious plan, and one he quite liked. “Well then, Inquisitor,” he said with a returned smile. “I think I know how we’re going to kill our Sargon.”

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The Prism – Classified Location

1/12/2017 – 10:09 A.M.

The Battlemaster suspected that Mortis would have been more impressed if they hadn’t just come from speaking to the Imperator. Sana had returned to her own Blacksite, where he suspected that she was just waiting to inform Mortis of everything that had been going on. But Mortis wanted to talk to him first.

“Impressive station,” Mortis said as he looked into the main simulation room. “I suppose there are some perks of this Collective.”

“Some,” the Battlemaster said, placing his sword back within the mounted hold. “Though the usefulness of such is out of reach at this moment.”

“I suppose you would feel that way right now,” Mortis said. “I’m surprised the Imperator kept something like that from you. It seems like crucial information.”

“Because it is,” The Battlemaster growled.

“I suppose the question is what happens next,” Mortis mused. “I will need to become acquainted on the situation of these Humans, and right now would prefer not to wander aimlessly. The Imperator is of the type who would likely follow through on such a threat.”

“I will inform the others about what has happened on Paradise,” the Battlemaster said. “As well as what the Imperator believes about the Sovereign Ones. Our kind must know the truth of what is happening. The Imperator will not halt that.”

“Are you sure?” Mortis asked.

“He cannot,” the Battlemaster shook his head. “If he bars me or others, then that will raise
questions. Too many questions, especially now that you’re here. Perhaps he will preempt what I say, but the truth will come one way or another.”

“I think we both agree that the Imperator is taking the wrong path, yes?” Mortis said, turning back to him. “I dislike it, but he does have a point about the Sovereign Ones. We should not be bound to them, and forge our own path.”

“But not like this.”

“Exactly,” Mortis nodded. “Paradise needs to be destroyed completely. Though I am at somewhat of a loss as to how to accomplish that. I suspect there are enough Ethereals who are loyal to the Imperator no matter what, and the only other option is this species on Earth.”

Yes. Earth. ADVENT and XCOM would be especially keen to destroy something like Paradise. Given what Yang had shared, they likely already knew. “The options are limited. The Imperator will dislike any action taken against Paradise, and possibly remove me from command if drastic action is taken.”

“How important is that to you?” Mortis wondered.

“I am a Battlemaster,” he paused. “Perhaps he could not force me out, but it would be a disconnect I would feel since he would isolate me as a result. There must be a better way. I have put too much into this Collective to damage it because of the actions of the Imperator.”

“From the sounds of it, you are the only Ethereal to put anything into it,” Mortis pointed out. “I suspect the aliens in it have a much higher opinion of you than the Imperator. What is he going to do if you do something he doesn’t like? Execute you?”

“Unlikely,” the Battlemaster admitted.

“So do something then,” Mortis suggested. “Carefully, mind you. Something subtle. Which reminds me…Sana mentioned you have an intelligence chief?”

“Who answers to Quisilia,” the Battlemaster corrected. “Who appears to back the current path of the Imperator.”

“Unfortunate,” Mortis walked to a large chair and sat down. “This is a time where I wish that we had a rival. Someone to use against the Imperator. I observed this in other species. One dominant power is almost never good for anyone, especially when they are mentally challenged.”

“The closest schism was when Aegis defected,” the Battlemaster released a sigh. “But within the Collective there is nothing. The Imperator is without equal. Nor do I necessarily think that should change, even if he makes mistakes, I am unsure what would happen to our species should he die. We do not have more Imperators…and those will be needed against the Synthesized.”

Mortis appraised him for a moment. “Not exactly a vote of confidence for the Imperator. I agree, the Imperator will be needed. However, I do not necessarily think he is fit to lead the Collective.”

The Battlemaster stared dubiously. “Whatever you’re thinking of that could possibly work, it won’t.”

“I have experience dealing with people of subpar intelligence in authority,” Mortis stood. “But I need to talk to Sana to get a clear picture of this situation first. In the meantime…” he waved a hand. “Go check up on that Human that was with you, or go conquer that planet. And let the others know about Paradise if you want.”
“I’ll start working on that,” he said dryly, knowing that Mortis did have a point. He should check on Yang, to make sure she was recovering. It was fortunate she had survived the ordeal at all, which spoke to her skill, but he had the feeling it was also luck. Either way, he was glad she had not died.

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Unknown Location

1/14/2017 – 5:16 P.M.

Yang groggily awoke, and the fact that she could see again was immediately a reason for relief. That she could also move her limbs after a few seconds of experimentation proved it. She was half-tempted to think that the entire ordeal had been some fever dream after taking a large dose of alien drugs. The only problem with that was that she never took drugs, and unlike any dream, she actually remembered what had happened.

She closed her eyes again.

“Good. You are awake.”

She was somewhat surprised, and unexpectedly pleased that the Battlemaster was taking some time to check up on her. Well, perhaps she shouldn’t be, and winced at that thought. “Second time in as many days,” she muttered. “Thought I would do a little better than this.”

The Battlemaster was in his armor, though it was cleaned up and like new, though he lacked his sword and instead was sitting on a nearby bench that lined the grey metal wall. Looking around, Yang had no idea where she was, only that she was laying on a pretty comfortable bed while a console at the foot of her bed showed her vital signs. The room was dimly lit, but very clean from what she could tell.

“You lived.” Was all he said. “Most would have died in your position.”

She gave a shrug, which was more difficult to do laying down. “Don’t make me feel better. Trust me, if I hadn’t had help I would have died,” she flashed him a smile. “But thanks for trying to make me feel better.”

The emotionless helmet looked at her, and she realized that he didn’t really know what to say to that. Right. The Battlemaster wasn’t exactly a humorist, which she supposed meant that he’d actually meant what he’d said. He was not one for empty compliments. It was a statement of fact for him. Well, at least she wasn’t a complete disappointment.

“I apologize for putting you in this situation,” he finally said. “That was a scenario you were unprepared for, and I failed to consider the Creator was more…fortified…than I believed. I have no intention of killing you because of my negligence.”

“Please,” Yang weakly waved a hand. “I guarantee that no one could have predicted whatever the hell the Creator was doing there. And anyway, how am I supposed to be a worthwhile partner if I don’t fight with you in places like that?”

“Because you are not prepared for it,” he answered. “But you handled yourself well, and will emerge stronger for it. But I prefer to not force improvement this way.”

“Well, I definitely know what I need to do to get better,” she said. “Once I’m stronger, I’ll be training more.” There was some silence. “So,” she turned onto her side to face him better. “Is the
Creator still alive?"

“Yes.” The word was curt and bitter.

“Really?” She was actually surprised. “What happened?”

“The Imperator arrived and ended the conflict,” he answered heavily. “Then proceeded to reveal that he’d known about that place the entire time. He has decided against taking further action against the Creator, from anyone, myself included.”

“What?!” Yang could not believe that he’d actually said that. “What!”

“The Imperator has demonstrated questionable judgement here,” the Battlemaster said. Calmly, but there was a low anger underneath it. “But destructive action is not going to be tolerated.”

“Why!” She didn’t care that she was yelling, the fact that Paradise was still in operation was almost making her sick. “What is he thinking!”

“He considers it a means to an end,” the Battlemaster said. “He told me, and I will tell you now.”

“Really?” Yang asked bitterly. “Or would the Imperator disapprove of that too?”

“He would,” the Battlemaster nodded once. “But I do not care. You were there, and deserve to know the truth. You should make yourself comfortable,” he paused. “This will be a long story.”

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Officer of the State, Abuja - Nigeria

1/12/2017 – 8:11 A.M.

It was time to put the games to an end and shape the SAS into something which could feasibly stand against ADVENT. Betos had initially been hopeful that the men she’d asked to help form it would help develop it into something strong and united, but instead they appeared to have simply seen it as a power grab to further enrich and benefit themselves.

And that simply would not do, especially given recent events.

The attack on Seoul had been a major shock to her, and she had wondered why the aliens would do such a thing, especially given the guarantees of Macula. However, a closer look at it had made it appear that it wasn’t as clear cut as ADVENT wanted to make it seem. For one, she knew that the Ethereals would gain nothing from such an action, especially if they were courting Human allies like her, and second, she couldn’t completely dismiss the idea that this was a false flag attack ADVENT carried out themselves.

Given what she knew about them, it would not surprise her. She didn’t know for sure, but the way ADVENT had taken advantage of the tragedy by first razing an alien-controlled city to the ground without repercussions, and then demanding that she be turned over to them made her wonder. She knew that civilians were just numbers to ADVENT. The destruction of alien installations, and the capture of their most famous defector could be easily justified in their minds.

But she ultimately did not know for sure.

Were ADVENT capable of such an action? Yes.

Would they do it? She didn’t know, and Macula didn’t have evidence for it. The problem was she
could pose that same question to the Collective and achieve the same result.

Was the Collective capable of such an action? Yes.

Would they *do* it? There were almost no upsides that she could see, which was why she was inclined to believe Macula when he said they were not behind it. It wasn’t that they were incapable of the action, it was that they would be idiots to actually follow through.

She had been summoned by the Joint Presidents, as they were calling themselves, after the message ADVENT had sent to them. And thus she was on her way to meet them, and subsequently introduce them to Macula and his forces. Mox and Kellani were behind her, the latter of whom was disguised to hide his Oyariah features.

Kellani was extremely large, however, and it did attract some odd looks, but none of the soldiers were brave enough to stop them, especially with Betos in front. She was in her armor, helmet under an arm as she marched into the building which had been converted into the State Building for SAS Executive matters.

They had to stop for weapons checks, although Betos had made sure that they were clean before even coming. Much as she wanted to have a rifle at her side in there, the security measures wouldn’t have allowed it and she had no desire for confrontation yet. It might come later, but she knew with Macula around that there would be no threat.

Inside the Joint Presidents were seated in a semi-circle, in a fairly ornate room with a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, several bookshelves lining the walls, and colorful rugs lining the floors. The men opposite her were all in suits with the exception of Kone, of course, who still had a pistol and knife openly displayed.

“Marshal Betos,” Ndulue greeted with a nod. “Thank you for coming so quickly.”

“Your bodyguards may remain outside,” Kone added, suspiciously looking at Kellani. “This does not concern them.”

Neither Mox or Kellani budged, and Betos simply set her helmet on the table in front of her. “I decide if my soldiers are privy to what I am or am not involved in, not you. You have nothing to fear from them, we were checked before arriving.”

“And we rank above you, Marshal,” Ezeudo said, leaning forward. “This is a private matter between us. If you wish to inform them later-”

“I thought I made myself clear,” Betos interrupted firmly, raising a hand. “They will stay. If you wish to debate this, I will leave as I have actual responsibilities to attend to.”

“Very well, Marshal,” Kone’s lip curled up in contempt. “ADVENT has sent a formal request to turn you over to them, or they will annex our countries. We have a month to comply.”

“I am aware,” Betos confirmed. “And how seriously are you considering complying?”

To their credit none of the men denied they were. “This is a…complex situation,” Ndulue began slowly. “We are agreed that without you we would not enjoy the status and alliance we have now, and complying with anything ADVENT demands is distasteful.”

“At the same time,” President Atem said with equal cautiousness. “We do not stand a chance against their armies, even with the weapons and armor you have provided. If it were the Western countries of the old world, I would not give these demands a thought. But ADVENT *has* shown
their willingness to carry out these acts of conquest and genocide. This is a power incised by the alien attacks on their citizens, they demand retribution for those who oppose them. And we – specifically, you, Marshal Betos are the face of the Human resistance.”

“It is a matter of survival,” Kone spoke, the beady eyes behind his spectacles boring into her. “We refuse and risk what we have achieved being destroyed. Comply and ADVENT may leave us alone. We are divided on a course of action, and decided to consult with you to see if there is an alternate option we have not yet considered.” His tone indicated that he saw no other option.

Here it went. “Understand this,” Betos was careful to enunciate everything clearly. “Even if you do turn me over, ADVENT will eventually attack. Their mission is to control every part of the world and if it is not in the immediate future, it will come eventually. There will be some reason, some application of pressure they will use, to bring the SAS into the fold. Complying now will only make their job easier in the future.”

“Perhaps,” Kone said neutrally. “But you do not know for sure.”

“I can promise that you will have a better chance with me in command than if it were otherwise,” Betos said. “ADVENT is only concerned about the SAS because I am here, not because of you.”

Ezeudo chuckled. “Bold words from a woman. Then turning you over to them should ensure they ignore us for some time.”

“And you will eventually pay the price in the future,” Betos answered evenly. “Having worked with your military, they would be destroyed in any encounter with ADVENT without actual leadership and strategy. Which right now has poor representation.”

“Insults do not change minds,” Kone said. “You are speaking the words of a woman who is trying and failing to fight her fate.”

“There is another option,” Betos finally said. “We make an alliance with the Ethereal Collective.”

There was dead silence as the four men stared in shock, clearly not expecting her to say that. “First,” Ndulue said slowly. “We have no means of contacting them, or if they’d be willing. Second, that would ensure that we’re attacked by ADVENT.”

“The SAS will come under attack by ADVENT one day,” Betos answered. “The only way to effectively fight back is to be similarly equipped. As for the aliens being willing…” She motioned to Kellani who removed the helmet, revealing the stone-skinned Oyariah.

“You’ve been speaking with them!” Ezeudo yelled, immediately rising furiously. “What are you thinking?”

“We have no desire to enter this war between the Collective and ADVENT,” Atem noted slowly, appraising the Oyariah suspiciously. “This was a mistake, Betos. How long have you been speaking with them?”

“Long enough,” she said. “I did not want to bring them up unless it was necessary, and so I could see what you had planned for the SAS. As well as to negotiate with them.”

“You were not appointed our diplomat,” Kone growled. “You stepped far outside your authority. I have no desire to ally with these aliens, nor be involved in this war. But you Betos, you have forfeited any chance you had at walking away from this free. I suspect ADVENT will be very curious to learn what you know about the aliens. Perhaps that will grant us some more favor with them.”
“I am afraid Kone is right,” Ndulue said. “This changes everything, Marshal. We cannot be dragged into this conflict and what you’ve done will only ensure ADVENT attacks us, especially once they learn about what you’ve done. For the good of the SAS, you must be turned over.”

“I would… reconsider that,” Betos looked to the far wall to see Macula standing there. Appearing out of thin air, which meant he’d been affecting them with his time perception telepathy. The orange glow of his eyes seemed ominous as he looked at the Presidents.

“How did you enter, alien?!” Kone hissed, his pistol in his hand and aimed at the Ethereal. “Answer now.”

“I walked in,” was the answer, as the Ethereal raised his upper left hand, and snapped. Instantly he held Kone’s weapon in his hand, with Kone looking down in shock at his empty hand. It was both amazing and terrifying to see Macula demonstrate his powers. “Unfortunate that I hear you discussing your intentions to turn Lady Betos over to ADVENT, despite taking the steps necessary to ensure your independence. Disappointing.”

“An Ethereal…” Ndulue breathed. “How…”

“Lady Betos has expressed her disappointment in your government,” Macula said as he tossed the weapon away, and began pacing across the room. “A bunch of old men obsessed with power and control. Using your armies to settle old scores and punish your enemies. Petty. Intolerant. Disrespectful to the vision Betos proposed to you. She handed you the keys to eventual control over Africa, and yet you have thrown them away.”

Directly in front of them, he turned to face the men directly. “But unlike you who are stuck in the past and your prejudices, I see the vision she wishes not just for Africa, but Humanity itself. You had your chance to bring it fruition, and you squandered it. You do not deserve the power you hold.”

“You would not kill us…” Ndulue swallowed. “You cannot.”

An obsidian blade appeared in the hand of Macula. “Is that right, Human? Would you stake your life on it?”

“We are the presidents of nations,” Kone stammered. “Our deaths would cause riots in the streets. Chaos in government! Think before something is done which you will regret!”

“You overestimate your worth,” Macula said softly, taking a step forward to them. “The ones you look down on will not mourn you. And each of you is merely a Human. One who can be replaced by ones with vision.” He turned around. “But I am a mere representative here to ensure the success of Lady Betos. Thus, I will leave your fate to her.”

“Think carefully, Marshal,” Ndulue implored her. “You wouldn’t be here if not for us. Executing us because this alien encourages it will only make you their puppet.”

“She only allied herself with you out of necessity,” Macula said, suddenly appearing behind the men. “You no longer have a use. She can do better.”

“These men would have turned you over to ADVENT,” Kellani said. “They are untrustworthy and do not deserve mercy.”

“But do they deserve to die?” Mox asked. “Betos…”

“They have lost their place in the SAS,” she said slowly. “But we will not execute them. Not here.
They will be removed from power and held in cells. If there has been misconduct and crime, then it will be brought to us and they will be tried. But we will not execute them for the sake of it.”

The blade vanished from Macula’s hand. “As you wish, Lady Betos.” With a wave of his hand the eyes of the men rolled up into their heads, and they fell down or slumped onto the table, unconscious. “It is time to assert your control over your citizens, Marshal. Bring in your people and begin.”

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ADVENT HQ – Switzerland

1/27/2017 – 1:09 P.M.

Saudia had not expected anything major to happen today, and in fact was enjoying a day of approving projects, reviewing the dozens of reports that were being sent to her, and otherwise giving statements when appropriate. She did understand why there were many prominent officials who usually just had someone write every statement for them, and never touched it themselves. It was a time consuming process and exercise in saying a lot of the same things over and over. But she’d never really approved of that practice; and she certainly didn’t trust anyone to speak for her, especially on matters of state.

Hassan was in front of her desk, and the hologram of Elizabeth was also close beside him as she reviewed the known details from what appeared to be a mass murder attack in China. “Were there recordings?” She asked, glancing up at them.

“The Chinese have not released them,” Hassan explained. “Likely. But they probably want to try and contain this themselves before releasing more details.”

“It doesn’t add up,” Saudia muttered. “A well-respected and highly ranked official walks in one day and begins killing his staff? That doesn’t sound normal. Any history of mental illness in his family, Elizabeth?”

“From what records we’ve been able to acquire, no,” Elizabeth answered. “Which is odd, I’d agree. Nor does he seem the type susceptible to blackmail. Finances check out, married with kids, clean criminal record, healthy, and has multiple accolades from the Communist Party. This isn’t the guy to just snap.”

Saudia pursed her lips. “I suspect you’re thinking what I am?”

“Alien meddling?” Elizabeth shrugged. “Possible, but we won’t know for sure until the Chinese release more details. If it is, it’s certainly cheeky. Have an untraceable attack which hurts Chinese leadership, perpetrator dies, and since the Chinese don’t have Manchurian Conditioning, they have no defense.”

“If it is aliens,” Hassan wondered. “I wonder what their goal was. It seems this may have been a testing ground for something.”

“I’d like to put in the request with the Chinese regarding that,” Elizabeth pointed to the report in her hand. “Page 6, evidence number 14. I don’t suppose you know what that thing is?”

Saudia turned to the appropriate page, and shook her head. She had noted that it stood out from the evidence, and in fact was the only photograph the Chinese had included. It appeared to be a black pyramid, small enough to fit in the palm of a hand, and found in the briefcase of the man who’d carried it with him before his attack. “No. But it might not be anything. A pyramid isn’t exactly a
unique ornament.”

“I don’t know,” Elizabeth crossed her arms, tone skeptical. “I’m not sure why the Chinese would include the picture if it was just an ornament. And even if it was, why was he carrying it with him?”

“I’ll pass along the request in my personal message to President Qin,” Saudia said, setting the report on her desk. “And get the media ready within the hour. We’ll do the standard response. ‘ADVENT gives their sympathies for the attacks in China today and stands by to offer support,’ and so on. You know the drill.”

“I-“ the phone suddenly rang, and Saudia pressed speakerphone, knowing that the secretary wouldn’t call through unless it was important.

“Yes?” She asked.

“Foreign Minister Xuan is on the line,” she answered. “I would have passed it to Hassan, but I know he’s with you. Do you want to take it or should I-“

“Put it through,” Saudia interrupted, looking to the confused faces of Elizabeth and Hassan. “Foreign Minister Xuan.”

“It must be more serious if they’re contacting us,” Hassan noted. “Normally that would wait until the official statement. It’s only been hours.”

At a click, Saudia returned her attention to the phone. “Chancellor Vyandar,” Xuan greeted.

“Thank you for answering so quickly. I’m sure you’ve heard of the incident.”

“Yes, we have,” Saudia nodded. “I would like to extend our condolences. We will officially make a statement of support later-“

“Appreciated, Chancellor, but we can ignore formalities here,” she picked up a touch of tension in his voice. “The report we sent you was the same as what we sent to other nations. A formality, as you understand. That was before the more recent development. The situation is much worse than the media is aware of right now.”

Saudia leaned forward, furrowing her eyebrows. “In what way?”

“We don’t know,” Xuan said. “Not fully. But everyone who was working on the crime scene is… changed. They’re killing and dragging people to the scene, and fortifying it. Soldiers are doing this, Chancellor. This has only developed within the past half hour. This must be based in psionics. We need your PRIEST Division to fully contain this. I can guarantee that ADVENT will have full access to all information and materials related to this incident.”

“I’ll begin mobilization of a detachment of the PRIEST Division,” Saudia confirmed, making Hassan and Elizabeth stare at her more intently. “I assume you have the scene locked down from the outside?”

“Yes, but we would prefer not to bomb one of our government offices. We do not want the population panicking. The situation is already unsettling enough, this cannot get out of hand. The situation is contained for now, and PLA soldiers are fighting to regain ground, but the ones inside are entrenched.”

“We appreciate the request and update, Minister,” Saudia said. “I’ll have my secretary put you in contact with Chief Ambassador Hassan to keep you appraised on our progress.”
“We thank you, Chancellor,” Xuan answered. “Your assistance will not be forgotten.”

Saudia hung up the phone after the farewell. “Looks like this is definitely psionically based. A bunch of people at the crime scene also are acting odd and shooting at government officials and soldiers. They’re requesting PRIEST help.”

“I’ll have agents on the ground,” Elizabeth said. “This turned into an interesting day.”

“Unfortunately,” Saudia rubbed her forehead. “Let’s get this done.”

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Vitakar Orbital Station – Vitakar Orbit

1/26/2017 – 9:55 P.M.

Nartha was quite happy for the short break the Zar’Chon had given him after the ‘successful’ mission with the Andromedons, which had not been in person largely because the Zar’Chon was still handling operations on Earth. It was a good thing that was the case, because Nartha was concerned that if someone was reading his mind when speaking to the Zar’Chon, the presence of the small orb Fiona had given him would be a large red flag. That was something that he needed to figure out.

The Zar’Chon had tasked him with reviewing a bunch of reports from Earth and giving his analytical opinion of them. It was quite useful, as he knew now exactly what the Collective did and did not know about ADVENT and Earth in general. No names of agents, but he could figure out locations easily enough and volume could also indicate how many there were in an area.

He was keeping a separate piece of paper for notes to turn over to XCOM. There were a lot more agents in America and China than he felt ADVENT would be comfortable with. Sadly he only had access to information acquired, no details as to future plans or operatives, even though someone could probably put the pieces together.

He’d also kept the Nulorian up to date, as much as he could, and while they initially seemed extremely unbelieving that there would be a possible alliance with Andromedons, the proof he’d provided had appeared to convince them. Enough to where they had said that it would go straight to Miridian himself.

Nartha figured it was only a matter of time before he met the illusive figure.

He was saving the reveal of Human agents until there was actually something to show for it. XCOM was apparently working on it and would be in contact soon. As well as the Commander choosing a meeting time for V’Zarrah.

“Hello, Nartha,” he started as the familiar voice of Fiona spoke behind him. “Been a spell, hasn’t it?”

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” he said, turning to her. “But hello to you too.”

“Shun says hi,” Fiona said idly, for once not actually wearing any armor and just normal Human clothing. It was conspicuous since he’d never seen her not in armor.

“Ah, good,” Nartha acknowledged, rather pleased she was carrying messages. “Tell her I hope to see her soon. Speaking of that, I assume you have news?”
“The Commander wants to meet V’Zarrah,” Fiona handed him a sheet of paper. “At this time. He’ll be brought to this location. If you want to come along as well, let me know.”

He looked down at it. “Unfortunately probably not a good idea. The Zar’Chon will be suspicious if I go dark for a long time. This can be done without me, I can get what’s important afterward.”

“As long as this gets to him, that’s fine,” Fiona nodded. “And as for getting some XCOM teams in Collective territory, we’re finalizing that. Within a week, I think.”

“Excellent,” Nartha quickly walked over to his table and pulled out data cube, along with a copy of his own notes. “Take this to the Commander. The Zar’Chon made the mistake of giving me access to intelligence reports on Earth. He might be interested in them.”

“Will do,” Fiona took the offering. “You never stop working, do you?”

He shrugged. “I don’t have anything better to do.”

“Fair point,” she gave a brief and slightly mocking salute. “Until next time, Nartha.” With a blue-green flash, she vanished into thin air once more. Turning back to the table, Nartha began working on sending the information to V’Zarrah.

He sincerely hoped the meeting went well.
Saudia knew there would be a significant media buzz around her unexpected visit to China, not to mention the relative proximity she had to the scene of the incident itself. While she wasn’t directly on-site, she was in a nearby building where she would be able to follow the entire operation. Foreign Minister Xuan was also on-site, and seemed extremely shocked that she was so close.

He probably hadn’t expected to see her in combat armor either. She didn’t view the entire suit as necessary, but protocols dictated that if she was to be in proximity to a dangerous situation, she had to wear protection. She had absolutely no fear for her life, especially not when surrounded by Ethan and the most well-trained and genetically enhanced soldiers ADVENT had, as well as shadowed by Intelligence agents, along with an entire PRIEST Team who were continuously scanning telepathically for threats, and a Defensive specialized psion to shield her in the event of danger.

Overkill, but she figured the price was worth it. She didn’t fail to note how much the people liked whenever she directly participated in something. The picture of herself leading ADVENT forces to arrest the former Prime Minister when ADVENT had annexed Canada had been in the news for days as were statements like “She isn’t letting others do her work”, which she knew ADVENT Intelligence had run with as part of their own media operations.

Of course, right now the media did not have any idea of what was going on, and she expected a slew of questions to answer. Which she would, when she actually knew the extent of the situation herself. Her entourage, along with several ADVENT field Officers and Protopriests, made up the majority of personnel in the impromptu Situation Room. Minister Xuan, along with several Chinese soldiers and officers, made up the rest.

The operation had already started, and with Protopriest support the Chinese had already pushed through the initial floors. With that said, the words from the Protopriest in charge were disconcerting. “I definitely sense something. Telepathic-based for sure, but it doesn’t seem to be psionic. Or at least nothing like I’ve felt before.”

Protopriest Alice Dromor had found that more troubling than the rest of them, if her face of concern was anything to go by. “Specify, Protopriest Ji, is it a sustained telepathic command or aura?”

“Both,” was the answer, as they watched through the armor cams as several Priests annihilated the defenses with psionic blasts or telekinetics. “It’s like…a loop, almost. The same command repeated over and over, but in an aura. The THD, that’s what this is…but against allies.”

“What is he referring to?” Xuan asked quietly as the operation proceeded.

“The Trask Hypnosis Doctrine is the method of subtly subverting an enemy group or population,” Protopriest Dromor said without turning. “Usually a repeated phrase or command, sent over and
over again against enemy minds. Easy to maintain and devastating if applied correctly. First performed by Patricia Trask, if you were aware of our counterattack against Las Vegas. She used this to kill a significant amount of enemy forces before ADVENT arrived.”

“I see,” Xuan nodded. “So that was how she did it.”

“Updates, Protopriest?” Dromor returned her attention to the operation. “Is the telepathy stronger?”

The soldiers were moving through the building, and coming very close to where the crime scene had been. “Yes, it is,” was the confirmation. “Enough to where I can sense the source. I’m attempting direct penetration, but it’s impossible. This isn’t a mind, I’m positive it’s an artificial projection.”

“That’s…” Xuan looked to Saudia. “Is that possible?”

She simply pursed her lips. “At the moment, the answer appears to be yes. But I’ve never seen or heard of something like that before.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Dromor shook her head. “Psionics cannot be accessed by machines. There needs to be an organic component; a mind complex enough to access and manipulate the Psionosphere to this degree.”

“Well, should or not, that’s what it appears to be.” Everyone in the room leaned forward as the armor cam showed the original crime scene. Several of the affected Chinese soldiers and workers were easily dispatched, and in the center was the pyramid Saudia remembered from the file the Chinese had sent to them.

But it wasn’t the same pyramid any longer. It was floating a few inches off the ground, and the entire pyramid was partially segmented, little chunks and points not quite connected to the greater shape. It was as if someone had broken the pyramid into pieces, and was using telekinesis to hold them in place a few seconds after it had been broken. But these were clean and straight cuts, obviously not broken.

No light or color emerged from it, if anything only the air appeared distorted around it. “Orders?” Protopriest Ji asked.

“Contain it, see what it does,” Dromor ordered, and a few seconds later the pyramid was encased in a box made of psionic shields. The pyramid did not seem to react in any noticeable way.

“Nothing,” Ji said. “I’m going to try and force my way in. It’s closer, so I can concentrate better.”

They waited quietly for a few moments, and then as unexpectedly as it had begun, the pyramid suddenly pulled itself together and fell to the ground, an inanimate object once more. “What happened!?” Dromor demanded.

“I don’t know,” the Priests moved closer to the pyramid, with Ji picking up the device. “I began to try and penetrate it and it just…shut down. It’s not emanating anything now. Perhaps it sensed I could penetrate it.”

“Which means that it’s sophisticated enough to have protocols like that,” Dromor muttered. “Or that it’s powered by a user somewhere else. Neither is good.”

“What should we do with this?”

Dromor looked to Saudia. “Chancellor, I would be highly cautious handling something like this. I
cannot say that we could effectively contain it if it starts up again. However, we can set up an isolated research facility if you want.”

“No,” Saudia shook her head. “We send it to XCOM. Aegis might know what this is, and how to best contain…or dispose of it. They’ll share whatever they learn from it, and I do not want to risk this activating anywhere else.”


“Understood.”

“Concerning,” Xuan said as the room became more relaxed and the soldiers began talking amongst themselves. “I do not know what the purpose was behind placing such a device in my country, but it is fortunate you were able to intervene.”

“Indeed,” Saudia answered. “We appreciate that you shared this incident with us. Now it will be contained and hopefully explained later by XCOM. A potential crisis prevented from escalating.”

“The President will extend his thanks to ADVENT publicly later,” Xuan assured her. “Although I would request that you forward any relevant results from this artifact whenever ADVENT learns of such. If one of these artifacts appeared in my country, I do not wish us to be caught unprepared again.”

“I’ll see what we can do,” Saudia promised. “Now I have my own media to address. They will be demanding answers for this…unexpected excitement.”

“Then I will let you handle them,” he said, giving a thin smile. “Until next time, Chancellor.”

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Psionic Training Area, the Praesidium – Classified Location

1/20/2017 – 11:03 A.M.

And so the saga of XCOM being a haven for all kinds of disaffected and outcast aliens continued. Nuan had honestly been unsure how anything could top Aegis in the first place, but no, not only was there a completely new alien in the Praesidium (Who preferred to keep to himself for now), but fucking Caelior of all aliens was not only around, but actually active.

Was he on their side now?

Iosif was being…helpful. As much as he could be, as they watched what Nuan could swear was a therapy session for Caelior, with Aegis helping him train and walk again. Apparently XCOM had done something which had paralyzed him, and he was almost learning how to walk again. “He was essentially a massive propaganda tool,” Iosif was saying. “A rallying point for the Ethereal Empire. They played into the image he made for himself, and as a result…well, he became an arrogant twat.”

Nuan raised an eyebrow. “A twat?”

“How Jackson described it to me,” Iosif shrugged. “He needed a good humbling.”

“Right,” Nuan chewed her lip. “Are you actually allowed to tell me all of this?”
“It isn’t classified,” Iosif assured her. “It just isn’t especially important now anyway. There is a lot of stuff I can’t tell you, but most things relating to Ethereals and their history can be shared. I guess Aegis thinks he can redeem him in some way.”

“You think so?”

“I’m not sure he has much of a choice,” Iosif looked thoughtful as they watched the Ethereal get used to using his powers again by lifting three shipping containers full of concrete. “His entire life and status was a lie, and he is understandably angry at the Imperator for perpetuating it. I think it helped that he was completely beaten. It was good for him.”

Seeing the Ethereal easily lift the shipping containers, even with a wavering arm, made Nuan feel glad that he was, if not on their side, at least under their control. Hopefully. “I guess he’ll be getting back to normal soon?”

“I’d expect so,” Iosif said. “A few weeks at most. From the looks of it, his own skills haven’t deteriorated.”

“Ah, such an impressive display,” Geist noted, walking into the room, arms crossed. “Lifting things into the air. Truly the Ethereals have taken the practice of psionics to its fullest potential.”

Nuan scowled. “Speak for yourself. That can’t be easy.”

“Hello, Geist,” Iosif greeted. “You’re in a good mood.”

Geist raised an eyebrow. “You know what? I just finished having a fascinating conversation with that Zudjari about how they utilized psionics. Imagine my surprise when I learned they had actually attempted some development of the discipline, and in fact created what I consider to be a completely new branch of telepathic theory.”

“Oh, I know,” Iosif recalled. “Memetics. Agreed, that can be useful to us.”

“Yes, and I suspect it would have taken us time to come up with the same theories,” Geist said, leaning against the wall. “But the Zudjari appeared to do more than refine the powers they had, and instead worked on how to expand and modify them. An attitude I’ve noticed the Ethereals simply do not possess. There is a disturbing lack of creativity. Lifting crates?” He sniffed. “Any telekin can do that.”

“And you have a much better idea?” Nuan asked sarcastically.

“Spare me your sarcasm, Miss Kun,” he waved a hand. “In fact, I have. Telekines have the world at their disposal, which they can manipulate as they see fit. They can exploit the environment for unparalleled movement, they can extend their reach through manipulating tools and weapons, they could have the potential to create or affect weather. And instead most confine themselves to throwing things at each other or picking up opponents like toys. Basic. There is opportunity for so much growth.”

“That…” Nuan paused, thinking. “Alright, you have a point.”

“I think you also have to consider that Caelior is…recovering,” Iosif suggested. “This is a basic exercise.”

“I will need to speak with Caelior about a refinement of his own strategy,” Geist said, turning to look at the Ethereal pair. “His potential is extreme, and one that powerful should not rely on such basic manipulations.”
“You don’t seem too affected by him being here at all,” Nuan noted with interest.

“Caelior?” He glanced to Nuan. “The Ethereal is under control and will be a valuable resource. Should he prove unreliable, he will be disposed of. I have no strong feelings one way or another. The Commander obviously kept him to use against the Collective, and we are no worse off with him here and alive than the alternative.”

Iosif just chuckled and shook his head. “Practical as ever.”

Nuan sat down. “Has the Commander ever just considered recording Geist insult the aliens and their poor usage of psionics and broadcast it? It might hurt some of their feelings.”

“That…” Iosif grinned, and looked down to her. “I’ll have to speak to the Commander about that.”

“Wait,” Geist frowned. “I did not intend to become a mere propaganda piece. Do we want to give them ideas?”

“What?” Iosif asked lightly. “You think any Ethereal is going to take ideas from a Human? Us, a mere primitive species?”

“Good point,” Nuan muttered. “Although if I heard Geist insult me like that, I’d certainly want to prove him wrong.”

“Hilarious,” Geist said, deadpan. “However, I suspect the Commander, and yourself, have more important issues to tackle, as I have my own projects.”

“Projects around your psionic ideas?” Nuan asked knowingly.

“Of course,” he nodded. “And by the time the Collective decides to attack again, I hope they will be ready to use.”

“Assuming they do decide to attack again,” Nuan said thoughtfully. “Maybe they don’t want to keep fighting.”

“Sadly,” Iosif sighed. “I’m sure that’s far from the case.”

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The Conduit Chamber, Paradise – Orbit of the Dead World

1/19/2017 – 10:16 A.M.

The center of the station of Paradise reminded Patricia of several cathedrals she had visited. The high ceilings, the sense of scale and awe which permeated the area, and the feeling that one was standing in something old and grand. The area the strange agents of the Bringer had referred to as the Conduit chamber was this very room.

It was a circular room, with the metal walls rising up from the ground to meet at a certain peak far above her head. In the center of the room was a large, though clearly unfinished, pillar which was elevated off the ground with steps leading towards it. The pillar itself had its innards exposed, revealing wiring, strange transparent materials, and what was likely components to handle psionics.

From what the Imperator had said, it appeared that this would be where the Crossing would take place. The moment where the Bringer would cross over into their own reality. It was…to put it very bluntly, not the best of ideas she had heard. When the Imperator had casually mentioned his
plan, she had lacked a proper context for what exactly the Imperator was dealing with.

Now that she did, she wondered if the Battlemaster was right and it would be better to send the Bringer back to whatever hell he had come from. It wasn’t necessarily the sheer loss of life that was happening here that was the only problem. It wasn’t as though ADVENT or XCOM weren’t experimenting on Humans or aliens as well; she’d known this better than anyone, although she agreed with the Battlemaster that sending children and civilians was unacceptable.

But if there was going to be experimentation done, it needed to be for a purpose.

In Paradise, the purpose could be merely entertainment for a show.

She’d come very close to murdering that insane Sectoid when he’d oh-so-willingly explained why he was using children for performances. No wonder the Hive Commanders kept their drones docile, and for the first time she was thankful the Sectoids had such a tight control over their species. It appeared that given the chance, they could be just as bad, if not worse, as Humans.

These Aspects of the Bringer though…they were different. Especially the one that stood in the room beside her and the Imperator. The face of the Temperance was different now. Instead of the strange face it had showed, now it was a marble Humanoid head complete with a neatly trimmed full beard. So it had the ability to shape its features. Possibly good information to know.

“There is a chance that the Conduit may not function properly should you proceed with this level of...security,” the Temperance finally said, the voice at the same pitch as it always was. It was eerie how it never changed tone once.

The Imperator was not perturbed. “Then work around it. I was far too lax in my oversight of this place. Consider yourself fortunate you have not joined your brethren or been executed as the Battlemaster demanded.” He looked directly into the dead eyes of the creature. “Be thankful that I am allowing this to continue at all.”

“Your reasons are sound.” The Temperance was clearly not looking to argue. “We will adapt, and we will earn the trust that His Artist lost.”

Patricia snorted. “Still want to pin all of this on her?”

The head turned down towards her. “The Artist made a grave error which did not reflect His will or order, and brought down judgement upon all of us. If you refer to the state of those within Paradise, such is the way of His path. All have a purpose, and all fulfill it. And in the end, each and every individual enters His embrace. It was not merely the Artist, but a combination of multiple factors and misunderstandings. Our restrictions are deserved, and we will work to earn back this trust.”

Patricia pursed her lips. “We shall see about that.”

“I’m done,” Fectorian stepped down from the Conduit, sounding rather unhappy as he shot a look that was definitely annoyed, even through the helmet, to the Imperator. “Send the signal and this entire area is obliterated along with Paradise, and several trillion nanites will consume the ashes. I suggest you remove my own access to the controls, otherwise one day I will detonate this place whether you like it or not.”

“Noted,” the Imperator said neutrally, turning to the Temperance. “You understand the price now for further acts of antagonization?”

A nod. “Clearly.”
It was part one of the Imperator’s plan to resume his iron grip over Paradise. With enough elerium bombs to crack a moon, the loss of the most important piece of technology for the Bringer would be devastating and unable to be replaced. This would prevent an…unauthorized crossing from taking place, or as sufficient motivation not to fuck up further.

The second part was one Patricia especially liked. “Now, turn around,” Fectorian ordered the Temperance, pulling out a small black square. The Temperance complied, and he placed the square on the back of the head, which soon broke into several million nanites which traveled over the body until they burrowed into crevices and openings. For good measure Fectorian places four additional of the nanite pads on the neck and arms of the Aspect.

“I sincerely hope you try something like this again,” Fectorian mocked, as the Temperance turned around. “I’d especially like to see your barriers protect you when you’re eaten alive. Please give me a reason to turn them on.”

“Fectorian,” the Imperator had a neutral tone, but Patricia knew he considered that kind of mocking unprofessional. Although Fectorian was not exactly one who held a high opinion of the Imperator at the moment. If it was up to him, he would have destroyed the entire place, and Patricia wondered if he hadn’t put a back door which might allow him to do just that.

She wouldn’t shed any tears should it happen, but she unfortunately agreed that without a controlled Bringer, it would be difficult for the Imperator to fight a Sovereign One. Though she was still of the opinion that if that couldn’t be completely guaranteed, it shouldn’t be attempted. She would rather the Imperator find another way than risk unleashing this thing on the universe.

“My job in this part is done,” Fectorian said, moving to exit the chamber. “Unless you want to help me establish the surveillance network, I would prefer to work alone. That goes for the statue.”

“I will take my leave.” The Temperance also quietly walked away.

“Then I suppose we will as well,” the Imperator said, as he waved a hand and the air formed into the shape of a portal. “Let us return.”

Within moments they were back on the Throne Room of the Temple Ship. The darkness was now almost a familiar comfort compared to the harsh, red lights of Paradise. The oppressive presence that loomed over everything there was thankfully gone, and even the Imperator’s own presence was nowhere near as intense and pressing.

Perhaps she’d gotten used to it.

“You disapprove.” The Imperator was moving to his seat, as the map of the galaxy lit up throughout the expansive black chamber.

“I’m skeptical.” There was no point in lying. “I see your reasons for continuing with your plan. But I’m not convinced it is safe to carry out.”

“The Crossing will not take place without my express permission,” the Imperator said, his words echoing with surety across the chamber. “I will dissolve the Aspects and force the Bringer to start again should he continue to test me. They are within a box, one which I control completely. Their only options are to defy me, and suffer the consequences, or comply and follow my exact instructions.”

“Do you need to preserve that…culture they have too?” Patricia crossed her arms. “Is that actually necessary?”
“Yes, and no,” the Imperator laced the fingers of his upper hands together. “There is nothing requiring me to indulge in their twisted fantasies. But I allow them because it makes them more productive and willing to help me enslave their god. If this requires the deaths of civilians and children, the innocent and guilty alike, and in return results in trillions who will no longer be under the thrall of the Sovereign Ones, then that is a price I will pay.”

He paused. “You understand this, Patricia. A price is necessary for the greater good. XCOM has performed similar acts in pursuit of what they – what you – believed was right. Would you consider what has been done wrong?”

She pursed her lips. “That’s the wrong word to use. Just because it was necessary does not mean I think it was right.”

“Exactly,” the Imperator nodded. “I do not take pleasure in loosing the monsters of Paradise, but it is a necessary step to shattering the chains the Sovereigns have placed on the galaxy. I do not expect XCOM or ADVENT to understand. They will condemn this, not because they are necessarily in the wrong, but because they simply do not understand the stakes. I cannot reveal the plan to them, nor do I think many would accept it.”

He cocked his helmet at her. “Tell me, Patricia, do you see another path to facing the Sovereigns?”

She sighed. “Not an obvious or easy one, no. You’ve never seen one fight. Neither have I. Can you really prepare for something you’ve never seen or fought before?”

“Yes, but the methods will be incorrect,” the Imperator agreed. “Hence why Earth is… important. And now, we know the name of the Sovereign who resides on your planet. T’Leth.”

The galaxy map shrank until it focused directly on Earth. “How likely is it that the Commander is in contact with this T’Leth?” The Imperator asked. “If the Sovereign is bold enough to send agents to such a place, I would imagine by now there has been contact established.”

“Likely,” Patricia sighed. “Knowing the Commander, he won’t be trusting of any Sovereign initially. But he would at least see any enemy of the Collective as an ally.”

“You assume the Sovereign has given him a choice at all,” the Imperator noted. “The Commander is not a powerful psion. He would not be able to prevent himself from being manipulated or controlled. Not from a Sovereign. There is a very real possibility that XCOM and ADVENT have been compromised.”

She frowned. “But…how sure are you of that? Mosrimor didn’t dominate you, this T’Leth might not have either. Not that I think he’s an ally to be trusted, but that is a major assumption.”

“I am not sure,” the Imperator said. “But there is one way to determine the extent of this alliance… if it exists at all.”

She raised an eyebrow. “How?”

“You contact them as I have contacted you,” the Imperator stood. “Allow me to show you how. Use this to speak to the Commander. To Creed. To whoever you trust to answer your questions. Find your answers, not from me, but from those you lived with and fought besides.”

“Or I could go to the Praesidium myself,” Patricia pointed out. “Or would you not permit that.”

“My word stands,” the Imperator stated. “Should you wish to leave, I will not stop you. But consider if I am right, and when you return you will become a pawn of T’Leth. Do you truly
believe that the Commander will throw away an alliance with one as powerful as him? Do you believe your species has a choice in how to handle a Sovereign? Your species retains their independence at the whim of T'Leth. You cannot change that there.”

“Point made,” she scowled. “Fine. Teach me how to do this.”

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Training Arena, the Prism – Blacksite of the Battlemaster

1/24/2017 – 11:11 A.M.

It was remarkable just how real everything here seemed. While the Prism couldn’t replicate certain parts of psionics, such as telepathy, it could simulate everything else almost perfectly. There was a sense of weight to the projections that made every test feel authentic. It was arguably better than training against actual opponents since she could set the intelligence and difficulty levels to whatever she wanted.

No more fighting drugged-up Mutons and failed Zararch.

She had also given up trying to figure out how this whole thing worked. The Battlemaster had said it was Sovereign technology which utilized dark energy, and that was as far as she had understood. Yang just accepted that this was how it was. And right now, she was fighting through a labyrinth in order to get to Nico, her opponent here.

They’d been taking turns, with one person preparing the defenses and giving orders to the projections, and the other assaulting whatever location they created. It was a good way to hone their own skills, and especially their tactics. There had been plenty of victories and defeats for both of them, but Yang was feeling good about how she was doing right now.

It helped that she was still furious at the Imperator for what she could safely say was one of the most idiotic decisions she had ever heard in her life. It was gratifying to know that the Battlemaster, and quite a few Ethereals it seemed, were against the decision, but none of them actually wanted to do anything.

Damn chain of command. The Battlemaster was too loyal for his own good. But she knew it was unreasonable for him to throw away everything to undermine the Imperator’s decision. Whatever the case, this entire incident had killed a good portion of the respect she had for him. For a practically and logically driven individual, this seemed just…extreme.

And no, she didn’t consider the Sovereign Ones as good justification. One of their agents had saved her life, so at least that one couldn’t be completely bad. It was a good scapegoat though. Literally anything could be justified if you said it was to prevent the galaxy from being manipulated by space gods.

The anger was still there as she reflected on it, but now she was able to channel it better. It gave her that extra bit of punch and adrenaline she needed in fighting.

It felt good to kill everything she came across.

Four Muton Elites suddenly appeared from all sides, their plasma cannons glowing as they warmed up. Good flanking attempt, and in a maze like this she might accept that Nico hadn’t just cheated and teleported them there. Within seconds she sent her swords towards the weak spots of the helmets, and they easily penetrated, killing two instantly.
With the other two she telekinetically crushed the plasma cannons, rupturing the elerium core to cause an explosion which didn’t kill the other two Elites, but her compressing their internal organs into paste finished the job quite nicely. Telekinetically calling the swords to her hands, she continued onward.

The Prism was also useful for training to kill specific enemies. She’d done enough repetitions on killing Elites that it was already becoming instinct. Most aliens and basic ADVENT soldiers were easy to kill with little effort. XCOM soldiers were a lot more difficult, as were some of ADVENT’s special forces. Likewise, there were Ethereals and some of the more dangerous Zararch agents which also posed a threat from the Collective.

Andromedons were tough to crack as well.

At last she saw a door which she knew would lead to the end. Nico was either out of aliens, or coming very close. She had killed a significant amount on the outer perimeter, and dealt with the ambushes inside. Normally Nico put up a better defense, but she was fairly certain that he’d failed to take her new genetic enhancement into account.

That had been one of the first things she’d done when she’d fully recovered. She was never going to be stuck at a place like Paradise with the body of a regular Human woman. Yang couldn’t completely say how well Ethereal genetic enhancement would stand up to that of XCOM and ADVENT, but from how she felt now, she knew she could hold her own.

Extending a hand, she clenched a fist and the door crumpled and ripped off its hinges. Nothing shot out in response, or came out, so she proceeded cautiously, keeping a telekinetic field active in case something came at her. As it turned out, there was nothing inside except Nico sitting in a chair looking almost embarrassed.

“I forgot you’d been enhanced,” he winced. “Sorry, otherwise it would have been harder.”

“Duly noted,” she said, relaxing. “You took the maze from what I told you about Paradise, didn’t you?”

“You said you almost died in it,” he yawned, standing up. “Thought ‘why not try and see how that works’? Made some mistakes though, clearly.”

“I don’t mind it,” she waved. “It was cathartic.”

“I guess you’re not going to let that go anytime soon,” he said. “Not that I blame you.”

“Not planning to,” Yang confirmed. “You can tell Sicarius that.”

“Believe me,” Nico grunted. “She knows the situation very well. She wasn’t especially thrilled with it either, especially when I told her what you told me.”

That was actually surprising. “The Imperator didn’t tell her?” Yang didn’t bother disguising the surprise in her voice. “Why? I thought that was the one he actually cared about.”

“She is,” Nico emphasized. “But I suppose she isn’t as…practical as him. She knew the basic plan, not actual details.”

“What a surprise,” Yang muttered dryly. “You would think that something this secret might mean that it shouldn’t be done.”

“Nothing can be done about it now,” Nico shrugged. “Anyway, you want to take command for the
next round?"

“Sure,” she said. “Good luck. Because I’m not going to go easy on you today.”

He grinned. “Wouldn’t expect you to. I’ll be ready when you are.”

Sitting down in the chair he’d been in, Yang began using the console to set up her own challenge. Eventually the planning and focus distracted her from the issues of the Collective and Ethereals. Here at least, she could do something that was the closest thing to fun in this place.

Which was an unfortunately depressing thought.

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Throne Room – Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

1/22/2017 – 1:32 P.M.

Patricia was unsure why the Imperator wanted to speak to her now. She was still experimenting with the far-distance telepathy techniques the Imperator had begun instructing her in, but she had underestimated just how...vast the gulf's between minds were. It was at a macro scale that she was still having some trouble fully visualizing.

Such was expected, according to the Imperator. Even Ethereals had difficulty operating or utilizing their abilities at a scale beyond their own immediate vicinity. Only those who had trained their lives from birth to instinctively grasp this scale could transverse it effectively. The Overminds and the Imperators had the capabilities to perform this, and Mortis and Sana were capable of the inverse.

Humans could do the same, she was sure of it. The Imperator suspected the same.

According to the Imperator, once your target was located it was extremely easy to repeat. It was finding it in the first place which was the challenge. The universe was vast and expansive; all living beings were imperceptible in the cold black of the universe. Even Sovereigns weren’t exempt from this isolation, which she supposed would explain why they were still fighting each other for millions of years unceasingly.

“You have been here longer than I initially expected.” Patricia turned to the silver domed head of Sicarius. The Ethereal assassin had a tendency to follow her, just hiding on the edge of her sight. She rarely spoke, but just watched her. In times where Patricia was alone or even when speaking with the Imperator, Sicarius was just waiting in the background.

Forgotten.

She found the effect Sicarius had on everyone fascinating. Even telepaths weren’t immune to it unless they were prepared. Patricia wondered how many times she’d spoken to the Imperator or other Ethereals with Sicarius plainly in view and her mind simply ignored her. The effect Nartha had spoken of she now knew firsthand.

It was almost sad. Everyone around her soon forgot she existed. The only exceptions Patricia had seen were the Battlemaster, for obvious reasons, and Nico, who she suspected was simply trained to always block out Sicarius’s telepathic aura to forget. It wasn’t difficult to imagine why Sicarius wanted a partner of her own. Having someone who knew you while you were alone in the world was enticing.
She shook her head to avoid becoming distracted. “Surprised?”

“Mildly.” Sicarius just stood there, still as a statue. “But your time for impartiality is coming to an end. You cannot stay on the edge forever.”

“Not forever,” Patricia agreed. “Are you afraid I’ll go back?”

“No.” Sicarius took a step forward. “You know the truth now. There is no going back. You will not choose between returning to your kind or not; you will choose to run from what must be done or face it.”

Sicarius had a point, though Patricia would not have phrased it as such. But the core, that there wasn’t any true going back, that was very real. The Sovereign Ones changed everything, and she couldn’t just pretend that they did not exist. Some may be able to live in willful ignorance, but she was unfortunately not one of them.

It was something she was concerned about. That if she did decide to return, and everyone was still the same…that they wouldn’t listen to her. It would be so easy to dismiss anything said as lies told by the Imperator, that her mind had been affected, any number of admittedly plausible reasons to avoid the truth.

Patricia just sighed, tugging on the white glove of the silver clothes she wore. They were still some of the most comfortable things she’d ever worn. “I know. You don’t have to remind me.”

Sicarius looked at her, probably in sympathy if her face had been shown. But the faceless helmet only reflected light. “I believe you do, Patricia. It is not an easy choice, but time is running out for you. The Imperator will not allow your neutrality forever.”

“When the time comes, I’ll make my choice,” Patricia said. “But until then, I’m not going to pretend that I’ve decided one way or another.”

“I think you have decided,” Sicarius said. “It is now a matter of admitting it to yourself.” She motioned to the Throne Room. “Go to him, I will not keep you longer.”

Patricia gave her a nod and walked up the steps to the chamber door. As she glanced back Sicarius was gone. There hadn’t even been a whisper indicating she had moved. This part of the ship was always eerily quiet regardless, and Sicarius was just the haunting ghost. By now Patricia was at least somewhat used to it.

Inside the Throne Room the Imperator was standing in the expanse in front of a large holoprojection of Earth. It was color-coded, with hundreds of points of interest and slowly spinning. “ADVENT is continuing to prepare,” the Imperator stated. “Their territory has continued to expand as more and more join their numbers. The United Kingdom overwhelmingly voted to join, and it is only a matter of time until the remainder fall into line.”

Patricia took a moment to just observe the idly rotating globe. “The lull is coming to an end.”

The silver helm of the Imperator turned to her. “It is. There will be small doses of conflict before this, I know that to be the case, but the war will soon reignite. The Battlemaster is preparing his legions, he is strategizing how to break the Human lines. ADVENT will not be an easy target. Yet there are places other than ADVENT where the war could reignite.”

“Africa?” Patricia asked. “China? It will only serve to push them into ADVENT.”

“Indeed,” the Imperator said, pacing around the globe. “But Africa…no, there are events taking
place there that I would prefer ADVENT not interfere with. Not yet.”

“You’re working with Betos,” Patricia stated, crossing her arms. “That explains quite a lot. I suppose you forgot about the notice ADVENT sent to the SAS?”

“ADVENT has far more important issues to deal with in the world,” the Imperator said calmly. “The notice will fade from their minds for the moment. It will fade from the realm of public opinion and knowledge soon enough. The Overmind is assisting in this. There may be conflict in Africa, but it will not be between ADVENT and the Sovereign African States.”

Patricia decided she wouldn’t ask how exactly he was doing that. She had her doubts at the feasibility of erasing or suppressing something like that, but that was something for them to worry about, not her. The knowledge that the SAS was working with aliens was enough to ponder on. “So what am I doing here?”

“I am curious of your opinion,” the Imperator said, walking in front of the part of the globe displaying North America. “There are multiple fronts to reignite the conflict. ADVENT in America continues to push forward, and our territory there is threatened. I suspect the Battlemaster would want to begin retaking lost ground there. This time there will be no holding back.”

Patricia snorted. “He’d need a massive army and something truly spectacular to break America. He could probably conquer it…eventually.”

“There are the other fronts as well,” the Imperator continued. “Japan. South Korea. There are territories which are not as closely protected. Russia. Germany. India. There are no shortage of places to strike. I am curious, Patricia, what is the ideal decision here?”

She felt it was a trick question. The Imperator wanted a specific answer from her. Well, he would probably accept what she gave, but there was definitely an ulterior motive than simply asking what she thought would be the best tactic against her species. “That depends,” she said slowly. “Are you speaking from the Battlemaster’s perspective – or your own?”

She immediately sensed the Imperator approving of her choice of words. “I am asking the question.”

“The destruction of ADVENT is not a priority then,” she continued, more confident this was what he wanted. “Earth must eventually choose a side, be it that of ADVENT or that of the Collective. The new offensives should not focus on territory ADVENT already has, but what it does not. At worst ADVENT intervenes and emerges victorious, or alternatively the territory of the Collective is expanded. But another country refusing to join one side or another will be removed, and will not revert to what it was.”

She looked at the map. “China should be a priority. Argentina, Africa, and what remains of Europe as well. They should be made to choose a side. ADVENT will not due to their laws, but the Collective is not under that obligation.”

“Good,” the Imperator gave a single nod of approval. “You see what is important in this conflict. The species must be united as one before they are properly assimilated. There is less risk of drawing the Sovereign as well through this. But before that happens, there is another way to incentivize ADVENT to act across the globe.”

“Oh?” She was curious. “How?”

A small vial was lifted from around the Imperator’s waist, and hovered just above the palm of his
lower right hand. “A curious discovery the Zararch made when performing research on diseases
Humans were weak to. The Sectoids have been interested in such for some time, and they stumbled
upon a disease that, in a rare moment for your species, people worked together to eliminate from
the world through vaccinations and immunization.”

Patricia tried remembering what that could be, and then it snapped into place. “Smallpox.”

“Indeed,” the Imperator confirmed. “Your species made the disease extinct. Nearly. There are still
two places where the disease has been preserved for research purposes. I had Quisilia and Sicarius
acquire one of the samples, and at this moment it is being turned over to the Sectoids for some
slight refinement and synthesis.”

“You want to release a disease which has no actual cure, back onto Earth?” Patricia demanded.

“I am confident ADVENT can work to a cure,” the Imperator said. “And it will be an additional
tool to force the independent nations to take sides. I have also ordered a cure of our own, one
which would be a useful recruiting tool for Betos. I suspect an epidemic in China would require
ADVENT intervention.”

“I’m not going to pretend like you don’t know the mortality rates for this,” Patricia said slowly.
“You do. You really think ADVENT won’t figure out it was started artificially? You think the
Battlemaster would also use this? It’s deadly to kids in particular.”

“The Battlemaster now has a useful role as plausible deniability,” the Imperator said. “He is the
face of the Collective to your species. He does not need to be informed of these actions. ADVENT
may suspect he is lying, but they will not be able to prove it. Aegis will also attest that such actions
would be out of character. They believe the Battlemaster has the highest authority. This can be
used.”

He moved the vial telekinetically to Patricia, which she delicately took. “We are agreed in the
direction the war should take, Patricia, but I am curious what your own thoughts on this are. Do
you consider the unification of Humanity worth sacrificing thousands for?”

“A very conservative estimate,” she muttered, torn on what to say. On one hand she knew what the
correct answer for the Imperator was. But was the unification of Humanity that important?
Especially if it could be done other ways? But it also came down to efficiency, and an epidemic
would quite possibly accomplish what armies could not, in a much shorter amount of time.

This was, ironically, not out of the realm of possibility for the Commander to consider. He’d
murdered an entire state legislature and proxy assaults on civilians to keep a country from joining
the aliens. He’d eliminated the Council and United Nations when they stood in the way of uniting
Humanity. He’d always had the will to carry out choices that no one else would consider.

Now it was her turn to make a similar decision.

There would be at least one person who understood the decisions she’d made.

She looked directly at the Imperator. “I would do it,” she held up the vial to him. “For the greater
good.”

He reached down and took it from her fingers, the vial looking so fragile between his own. “You
did learn from the Commander,” he said. “I am impressed with your resolve.”

She felt similar to how she’d felt when she’d assisted in the destruction of the United Nations.
Hollow and disjointed, the airy feeling of a dream, though it was all too real. But this time she’d
been the one who’d made the decision, not one who carried it out.

Patricia was under no illusions what the Imperator was doing here. He wasn’t the one making decisions, she was. Against her own species, but she still couldn’t disagree that it was ultimately necessary. For the greater good. Was it different if she was making the same decisions in front of an alien than if she had done the same with the Commander if he decided the unification was proceeding too slowly?

Would she feel nearly as conflicted?

She didn’t know now. That worried her.

But she hadn’t been coerced into saying one thing or another. Every action and word had been her own.

“Why?” She finally asked. “Why are you keeping me here? Showing me things that you aren’t even sharing with your own kind?” She gestured to the globe. “I’d think you’d ask the Battlemaster his opinion before me. Why am I special here…it doesn’t make sense…” she realized her voice had broken slightly at the end, but it couldn’t be helped. There were too many conflicting emotions going through her.

To her surprise, the Imperator lowered himself to one knee to be closer to her eye level. “That, Patricia Trask,” he began quietly. “You just demonstrated to me. Your resolve mirrors my own, something few other Ethereals possess. But the resolve is not enough, it must be used for the right reasons. Isomnum or Macula would have easily condemned the thousands to die as you have, but they do so for petty and destructive reasons. You did not do it because you wished to cause suffering, or saw it as the culling of the inferior, you did it because you believed it was necessary. That is rarer than you might expect.”

He paused. “You understand my goals, you understand the logic behind them, and you feel compelled to act on it. Your mind will not permit you to forget. You can see the scope and reach of what I propose; what I work towards; what I prepare for. You see, and do not reject reality, you do not make excuses or justifications to run, but you accept it…and question when you doubt. But that is not a flaw, Patricia, I would not accept someone who would not be as conflicted as you are. The choice you face should not be one taken lightly.”

He stood back up. “And this is why I share things with you that my own kind are not privy to. Because you understand necessity in a way that too many others do not, and you do not make your choices based on logic or morality, but through this lens of necessity. And so I share my thoughts, and ask your opinions, because I value what you have to say, and want there to be no secrets when the time comes to choose a side. Sicarius is right. You cannot remain on the edge forever.”

“I know.” She said quietly.

“Did that answer your question?” He asked after a few moments.

“Yes,” she finally answered. “I think it did.”

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Command Center of the Battlemaster, Mars Collective Base - Mars

1/24/2017 – 1:00 P.M.

The Imperator wanted Earth conquered, and so it would be done. Though the Battlemaster was no
longer as invested as he once was. Not only was there the threat of this Sovereign to contend with, but there were still issues in the Collective which needed to be addressed. And so he would address them one way or another.

Or rather, he already had addressed them. But it would be a short time until the ramifications were felt. In the meantime, he was continuing his own research on Human history. Since the Humans were drawing inspiration from their past wars, looking to how they had developed the means to overcome the challenges he faced today could prove insightful.

The World Wars in particular were of interest, and he was rather impressed at the capabilities the species possessed when pressed to war. They clearly had not lost that advantage, although now had turned it on him instead of each other. But it also seemed like, in true ADVENT fashion, they were also looking to mitigate the weaknesses of the past.

What worked during the World Wars would not necessarily work today.

If nothing else, it was a fascinating history lesson, and offered a better look into the psychology of Humans. Although he did wonder how accurate that really was. Humans were a diverse species in thought and mindset. He didn’t know if he could really say for certainty what most of them thought like. There did seem to be some general constants, but few enough that there was plenty of room for diversity.

He shut down the holoprojector and went over to one of the consoles. The data cube he had filled sat on it, waiting for him to make a decision. The good news was that he had a way to carry it out if he wanted, thanks to the Zararch, but he suspected that the Imperator would disapprove. But at the same time, the Imperator was going to disapprove of his more recent actions, so one more, assuming he found out, wouldn’t hurt him more.

With that done, he could then focus on Earth.

While he stood in front of the blinking console, he did realize that he’d made his decision. Paradise was not something he would ever associate himself with, and he needed to make it clear, even if it gave the Humans another piece of propaganda against them. But the Imperator deserved such. If he wished to stand by his decision, the Battlemaster would force him.

“I suspect you are not going to do something good,” Quisilia said slowly from the entrance. He must have teleported in. “So is this something I should know about?”

“Perhaps,” the Battlemaster allowed the datacube to be inserted and read. “I was not expecting you.”

“Well, I do pay attention to what happens in our little Collective,” he said, twirling one of his obsidian blades in his hands. “Not always on Twitter, despite what some people guess. And surprisingly, this includes military orders. You’re sneaky, Battlemaster…well, if you’re assuming that literally no one is paying attention to you.”

“If the Imperator wishes to countermand my instructions,” the Battlemaster allowed some satisfaction to creep into his voice as he sent the contents of the datacube away. “He can do so himself, although then I will sadly be forced to explain why I felt they were needed in the first place. Which might reflect badly on him.”

“Let’s review,” Quisilia said. “You stopped the shipment of all alien test subjects to the Creator. Then you imposed a restriction on only using clones for physical experimentation and moving all Human captives to controlled worlds in Vitakarian space.”
“Yes,” the Battlemaster said, finally turning to him. “Using the captives as test subjects only gives ADVENT ammunition against us, and cloning is far more efficient. Simply take samples of the captives, grow an identical batch, and you can continue without the same issues. As for the Creator, I do not especially care if she is displeased.”

“The Imperator is more irritated with the fact that you did this without consulting anyone else,” Quisilia added. “Aside from those who support you in this. While you have done good things for the Collective, you should not be making these decisions without keeping everyone informed.”

“Then the Imperator should take a more direct interest,” the Battlemaster said. “I only have this much authority because no one else would take it.”

“And let’s not forget your little plan to get around alternate Gateways for the Creator,” Quisilia sighed. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised Fectorian agreed to help you. You and him are of a similar mind on this.”

“I will let you know I did not shut down the Gateway,” the Battlemaster said. “And in fact, have provided additional protection for Paradise. Who are always on the watch for any threats.”

“The ships Fectorian sent are targeting and destroying anything that enters the system,” Quisilia noted flatly. “A curious malfunction.”

“Yes, a terrible mistake,” the Battlemaster also kept his voice emotionless. “I’m sure Fectorian will get right on fixing that. Maybe he could send some more in the meantime.”

“You are a very bad liar,” Quisilia said. “But I can appreciate your attempt here. But the Imperator does not exactly agree that your actions are conductive. Now, what were you doing before I came in?”

The Battlemaster considered simply refusing to answer, but he also knew keeping secrets wouldn’t help anything. “Informing XCOM and Aegis of Paradise. The Hunter’s confession and the multiple hours of footage from Yang’s armor within it. It exonerates the Collective from the Seoul attack and places the blame squarely on the Creator.”

Quisilia just stared at him. “Battlemaster…just…why would you do that?”

“So I can return to completing the mission I was given,” he walked over to the holotable projecting an image of Earth. “Conquering and assimilating the Humans. However, before I achieve that I need to ensure loose ends and issues in the Collective are solved. Paradise was one of them, and I have done what I can to solve that problem. Not an ideal solution, but now I can continue unhindered.”

“Do you want the Imperator to think you’re trying to sabotage him?” Quisilia asked slowly. “Because that is very close to what is happening.”

“The Imperator can be insulated,” the Battlemaster said. “The Creator is the main perpetrator after all. But it would certainly reflect badly on the Imperator if he did nothing. If XCOM releases this to ADVENT, it is only a matter of time before the Andromedons and Sectoids see it. Questions would arise.”

“You know, if you hadn’t just told me everything I would think you’d actually picked something up from myself and Ravarian,” Quisilia sounded mildly impressed. “Well, I’m not sure how the Imperator is going to handle you now.”

“And are you going to tell him?”
“Depends,” Quisilia sheathed his blade. “If XCOM decides to release it, I won’t keep it to myself. It’s enough that he may take away your command. As it is you may be sharing joint command with another because he wants someone he can rely on handling the Humans.”

“He cannot remove me,” the Battlemaster said. “No matter what he says. I’ve been with the Collective too long to just reassign me. And for joint command…it would depend on who it is.”

“Undecided, for now,” Quisilia said. “However, it may be Isomnum.”

The response was immediate. “No.”

“Just…it would be best for you not to fight the Imperator on everything,” Quisilia advised. “I’m not a particular fan of the Dread Lord, but he is effective in certain areas. Though I did mention that if he was paired with you he might end up dead.”

“A possibility,” the Battlemaster acknowledged.

“Look,” Quisilia’s tone turned serious. “There are a few divisions I’m sensing between our kind. Understandable and I can see both sides. But right now, the last thing we need is this kind of infighting. You think you’re right, and so does the Imperator, and both of you don’t know how to back down or compromise, and I doubt neither of you think you should.”

“Correct,” he stated neutrally.

“But this right now,” Quisilia waved a hand. “It’s not helping anyone. Neither of you are going away. Paradise and the Creator aren’t going away either. But I consider this bickering dangerous when there is an active Sovereign One on Earth, which is also not going away. Everyone needs to focus on killing it, and then we can properly sort out what to do about the Bringer. And any other grievances you have.”

“The Imperator will not compromise on this,” the Battlemaster said. “Do you believe otherwise?”

“You are just as stubborn,” Quisilia shot back. “You’ve done what you can to express your views. But everyone needs to stop that and focus on Earth. The Imperator can end his vague threats, and you can stop trying to undermine his decision. For now, it should stand. Once everything is at a comfortable status quo, we figure this out together. As a species, not just with the Imperator.”

“Would he allow that?” The Battlemaster was definitely not convinced.

“He can come or not,” Quisilia said. “But you have a point that a decision like this shouldn’t be made unilaterally. The Imperator won’t make decisions like this without all of our input. So he can argue his point, and you can argue your own. We make a decision as a species one way or another. Compromised Ethereals like the Voice and Creator will obviously be excluded.”

That…did not sound unreasonable. “Assuming this is not said to placate me,” the Battlemaster answered slowly. “I think it is acceptable. Though the Imperator must agree as well.”

“I’ll convince him,” Quisilia promised. “He does not want you as an enemy or you to hate him, but he does believe he is right here. A good opportunity to reset everything, and I think he’ll be willing to participate.”

“As do I,” the Battlemaster said. “But his actions must back up his words.”

“Of course,” Quisilia agreed. “As it will be for you.”
“Then for now I’ll return my focus to Earth,” the Battlemaster said, moving to the holotable. “Go. I need to think alone.”

Quisilia exited the room quietly, leaving the Battlemaster alone in his thoughts.

A war was much easier to deal with than politics. He disliked that was happening now. He’d thought their species was above such things, yet here he was.

More proof that their species wasn’t as superior as some wished.

He sighed, and tried to focus on the latest reported ADVENT movements.

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SAS Command, Abuja – Nigeria

1/15/2017 – 4:17 P.M.

There was the one main problem that they needed to solve. Now that the previous leaders of state has been removed, and temporary replacements appointed in their place, the next immediate problem to solve was how to ensure that ADVENT didn’t come crashing down onto them. Keeping international silence would work for a time, but not indefinitely.

Macula apparently had a plan for this.

Betos frowned. “How feasible is that?”

“Easier than you might suspect,” Macula was seated in front of a holotable which his own forces had established. “It is difficult to fully grasp the reach an Overmind has. A single portion of a planet is hardly a challenge to a telepath as strong as himself.”

The proposal, as Macula had explained it, involved two parts. The first involved an Ethereal called the Overmind telepathically securing the territory, and then performing weekly repeats of this telepathic observation, which would – according to Macula – go through the minds of everyone, perform cursory checks to ensure there weren’t moles or spies, and then inform Macula or herself of any problems.

Although Macula had said that it was also entirely possible that the Overmind would simply force any individual who was compromised to turn themselves in. With the Manchurian Restraints in play now, that was not as guaranteed since there was almost certainly anti-psionic measures. Such a measure seemed extremely inefficient, until Macula had further explained that the Overmind wasn’t limited to one mind at a time, but could go through hundreds in moments.

“If ADVENT does have agents here,” Betos said slowly. “Then they’ll know something is up.”

“I’ve been doing this on my own in my spare time,” Macula waved a hand absentmindedly. “ADVENT absolutely suspects something is wrong. I would force them to act as double agents, but unfortunately ADVENT was competent and programmed the Restraints to refuse to follow orders from aliens. ADVENT can keep sending agents, but they will keep dying. Which is why to keep ADVENT distracted, we’re going to have to do some of the work ourselves.”

“Meaning?” Betos asked, crossing her arms.

“You have a different role to play, Lady Betos,” Macula clarified. “I’m referring to my other alien brethren. Since ADVENT has made it difficult to tamper with them, I believe I will have to employ
the services of Quisilia and Nebulan’s Phantom Division. ADVENT, despite their propaganda, is not always a well-oiled machine. There are vulnerabilities we will exploit to keep their focus elsewhere.”

“Fine.” That seemed reasonable to her. If the aliens wanted to pull their own weight doing this, she was more than happy to oblige. “I think we both have the same idea for what to do next.”

The orange glow of Macula’s eyes seemed to glow brighter. “Yes, I believe we do. It is time the SAS establishes their own psions to combat the ones ADVENT has. There is little reason to deny your people this advantage.”

“Glad we’re on the same track,” Betos confirmed, feeling like they were finally making some headway. “Training may be an issue, however, at least initially.”

“Some shortcuts may have to be taken,” Macula answered. “But it can be worked around. With ADVENT blinded to our operations, we can fully begin the establishment of the SAS military properly.”

“With what facilities?” Betos asked. “It will take time-“

“On Earth?” Macula let out a low chuckle. “We are not limited like ADVENT or XCOM. The SAS has access to the foundries of the Collective. Your military can be upgraded within weeks, and your soldiers turned to the equal of any ADVENT has. What is needed from you, Lady Betos, is leadership and organization. This is, ultimately, your own organization. It is up to you to shape it into what you desire.”

Betos nodded. There was going to be some significant restructuring and appointing being done over the next few weeks. It was good that resources would not be an issue, at least for now. The Gateway infrastructure still needed to be built, but in the meantime the armor and weapons themselves could be put into production on alien worlds.

There was a nagging issue. “Satellite coverage,” she said. “Is that being handled?”

“Yes,” he said. “Satellites providing coverage over Africa are being subverted. Data being sent to ADVENT is monitored. That is under control.”

She was going to assume that Macula was telling the truth, as there was very little reason to embellish or lie. “There is also the matter of cities and infrastructure,” she said. “Both military and civilian. I expect there will be alien support for this as well?”

“Certainly,” Macula nodded. “Although… it would require a significant amount of external teams to elevate your cities to…acceptable levels. Before this, you must ensure that the populations are ready to have aliens around them. Once that is accomplished, the construction can begin in earnest.”

“I suppose it’s settled then,” Betos stood up and looked at the holotable. “I have a lot of work to do. You handle your end, and I’ll do mine.”

“That will not be a problem,” Macula also stood. “There is much to be done.”

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Situation Room, the Praesidium – Classified Location

1/28/2018 – 8:11 A.M.
Getting a wake up call from Zhang in the middle of the night was extremely unexpected, even more so when it was clarified that it wasn’t an immediate emergency. With that said, the Commander knew Zhang would not waste his time on something unimportant.

He had been correct.

For reasons that both the Commander and Zhang had yet to figure out, they had received a data cube through one of their own agents, who’d found it placed in his home, promptly decoded it, and immediately sent it back to the Praesidium. Inside it were several high-quality recordings, the first of which was the Hunter explaining who had actually been behind the Seoul Massacre.

It had been the Chosen, as they had suspected. But the true orchestrator was the Creator.

Amazingly, it seemed like the Battlemaster had actually told the truth.

And that had only been the first video. The others had shown, from the perspective of someone else, Yang Shuren, the Human Fiona had told them about, with the Battlemaster, in addition to Sana’Ligna and Shuren, originally going to Paradise to interrogate the Creator, and then it turning into a full and unrestrained battle.

They’d watched in near-amazement at the Battlemaster fighting the Creator. It was one thing to hear the testimony of Fiona and Axis on Paradise and the depravity they’d seen, but it was definitely another to actually see visual evidence of it himself. He knew there was still an element which couldn’t be transferred, mainly the presence Axis had reported, as well as other telepathic attacks, but that wasn’t strictly necessary here.

The Chronicler, Axis, and Aegis were also in the room now as Zhang finished explaining the overview. Any sleepiness the Commander originally had was gone. This footage was a gift-wrapped opportunity. This was what they could point to as the Imperator allowing to happen, not to mention showing the clear discord that existed between the Ethereals.

“We haven’t determined who sent it,” Zhang finished, shutting down the brief clippings of footage. “But I would think the suspects are very few, and all of them have extremely interesting implications.”

“I don’t think there is a question,” Aegis said. “The Battlemaster is the only one who could authorize this kind of information drop.”

“The one who, if I recall, is orchestrating the invasion of Earth?” The Chronicler shook his head. “Unlikely. That would be extremely devastating if it were the case, and the Battlemaster does not strike me as disloyal; not to the Imperator. This is intentional self-sabotage; Sana is the more likely culprit. Or perhaps Mortis.”

“I would not be surprised if it was him,” Axis said. The Zudjari’s eyes were narrowed. “This Battlemaster was highly displeased with what he saw there, and strikes me as one who would do everything he can to contest a decision he disagrees with. But I can only speak from personal experience.”

“This is correct,” Aegis said. “The Battlemaster has limits he will not cross. Paradise goes far beyond what he would ever tolerate. I suspect that in his eyes, sending this to us exonerates himself and the Collective, and heavily implicates the Imperator and Creator. Which tells me that the Imperator is not punishing her. This is his revenge.”

“But this could easily backfire on him,” Zhang noted. “We can do whatever we want with this
“I will note that, if I recall, the Battlemaster promised that the actual perpetrators would be handed over,” the Commander recalled. “I don’t think he’d appreciate being called out on failing to fulfill that promise.”

“He could not have predicted what was happening,” Aegis pointed out. “It must have been the Imperator who forbade it. No one else could dissuade him from killing her.”

“I can work with that, regardless,” Zhang smiled. “All the world needs to know is that, ultimately, the Battlemaster is subservient to a master which allows this horror show to continue. His fault or not, he supports a leader which perpetuates it.”

“I do not think antagonizing him is the best course of action,” Aegis said slowly. “That he sent this at all is proof that his loyalty is shaken. We should not throw that away.”

“Forgive me, Aegis,” the Commander said, raising an eyebrow as he leaned back in his chair. “But I’m not especially concerned with hurting the feelings of someone who is still a major threat to my planet. It was nice he sent that, true, but if his loyalty is really shaken he should be more public. Why not release it himself instead of using us as a proxy?”

“Because the Imperator would more than likely silence him, as he attempted to silence me,” Aegis’s tone was growing frustrated as he continued. “Would you prefer the invasion be handled by Isomnum or Deusian? By someone who isn’t as restrained as the Battlemaster has been? That is what you would accomplish by something like that. This is the best he can do while still retaining his position, and for the moment, he considers that more important than causing chaos in the Collective.”

“Not bad, when you think about it,” Zhang mused, making a short note on his tablet. “He uses us to discredit the Imperator, sends it in a way that we would know immediately who it came from. We use it to further disrupt the Collective and shame them into acknowledging their actions. This can get back to the Hive Commanders and Unions, making them raise questions of their own. I agree with Aegis, the Battlemaster did this in the correct way, assuming this was his plan.”

“Which raises the question of how this is going to be handled,” the Chronicler noted, pacing the room. “Send this to ADVENT telling them to acknowledge the Battlemaster was telling the truth?”

“Frame it as a clarification, an update,” the Commander said. “The story just needs to be that the Creator orchestrated the attack, it was allowed by the Imperator, and that base and Ethereal are still in operation based on our most recent intelligence. Point out that the Battlemaster failed to come through on his promise. Don’t press it too much, but make it a firm point. The media machine will do the rest.”

“Do you believe they should have the raw files?” Zhang asked.

“That’s up to ADVENT,” the Commander said. “But I would give them that, yes. Much more material to work with, even if traumatizing. Ultimately, whatever they do will work in our favor. The clarification that it was ‘merely’ the Creator behind it will be lost in the sheer outrage of the public once they see what Paradise holds. Nothing much better to galvanize the public further.”

“This should also be sent to all known alien bases,” Aegis suggested. “It will be difficult to dismiss this as merely fake. I suspect the Battlemaster will not confirm or deny, and if someone does deny it…he will have to correct them.”
“In any event,” the Commander said, rubbing his eyes. “I have some extra material to prepare for V’Zarrah. I think he’d be very…interested in this. Maybe we can have Nartha get it to the Nulorian. Not that the Zararch would probably let that spread, but Miridian can at least make an effort.”

“I’ll have Jackson prep all of this to send to ADVENT,” Zhang said. “Your input was appreciated, Axis. You are dismissed.”

“I see,” Axis looked around. “But everyone else is staying?”

“We have more matters to discuss,” Zhang punched a code into the holotable. “Which is above your authorization.”

The Zudjari merely nodded, and exited the room with no further questions. “Since we’re all here, I’ll update you on several additional matters which have arisen. The first of which is this,” the hologram of a pyramid appeared, with some background text. “This was just captured in China—”

“Where did they get that?” They all turned to the suddenly intense voice of the Chronicler, who was standing and fixated on the hologram in front of them.

Zhang shot him an annoyed look. “China, as I said. Apparently brought in by a worker, and the device seemed to make them act differently. Lose their minds to the point where they killed everyone in the building and held off PLA forces successfully enough that they reached out to ADVENT for help. The PRIESTs involved confirm that there is some kind of telepathic emanation, and sent it to us since we, ah,” Zhang cleared his throat. “‘Specialize in the safe analysis of unknown alien materials and objects’.”

“Which means they don’t want this thing to accidentally kill whoever’s researching it,” the Commander noted wryly. “So instead they send it off to an isolated party with some experience in this. How thoughtful.”

“They are extremely fortunate they did so,” the Chronicler said in a low voice. “Those are Indoctrination Pyramids. Used by the Synthesized. Constructed by them to emit certain telepathic commands to assume control over, and dominate, other living beings. They can be tailored for any species, can be infinitely customizable, and what should concern everyone here, are directly connected to one of the Synthesized Primes.”

There was dead silence at that. “A Prime,” Aegis said slowly. “Would it still work if a Prime is destroyed or gone?”

“Destroyed? No,” the Chronicler shook his head. “It is…closest to the Sovereign Orbs. The Sovereign always maintains a connection to it, even if it is never a priority. Their minds are not as limited as our own, and a machine like a Prime could easily handle multiple streams of data at once. As far as it being gone…that is possible. Instead the Pyramids will be left as idle; traps for aliens to stumble across.”

“Or to use as traps,” the Commander added. “Aegis, are there any Ethereals who have found or research Synthesized technology?”

“Isomnum,” he answered without hesitation. “During the war he was a primary researcher of their technology, and was a proponent of using it against them. It would not surprise me to know this was continued, unless one of these Pyramids was originally found on Earth.”

“Fools,” the Chronicler hissed under his breath. “Every pieces of their technology is a trap for the
gullible. The Pyramid could not have come from Earth, T’Leth would have eventually found it by now.”

“Even if it was shut off?” Zhang asked.

“Pyramids do not ‘shut off,’” the Chronicler clarified. “They execute new protocols, some of which are dormancy protocols until it detects it is safe enough, or a new person enters the vicinity.”

“From what I’m gathering,” the Commander said. “You don’t want us to research this.”

“That is exactly what I am saying,” the Chronicler stated. “That is what they want you to do. Curiosity killed the cat and all. T’Leth can contain it somewhere safe.”

“Can it be researched safely?” The Commander asked.

The Chronicler just stared at him. “Did you just forget what I said?”

“No, I didn’t,” the Commander met his gaze. “I’m asking you if it can be done safely. We’re in a more…malleable situation with a Sovereign to help here, and I can see several different uses for devices which can send out telepathic commands on their own. Can it be done safely or not? Please make sure he doesn’t lie, Aegis.”

“Certainly,” the Ethereal acknowledged.

The Chronicler grimaced. “In theory it can be done ‘safely’, which is in a controlled environment, overseen constantly by psions or a Sovereign One, with multiple safeguards to destroy the Pyramid, and isolated enough to not hurt anything or anyone outside the research vicinity.”

The Commander smiled. “Well, it just so happens we have a cooperative Sovereign, and we are also happening to build underwater bases which are fairly isolated from the majority of Humanity. So this is what we will do – you take the Pyramid for safekeeping. Secure it however you want. When a facility to the standards of T’Leth is done, research begins. Does that sound fair?”

“I’ll confirm with T’Leth,” he muttered. “But that would be…acceptable.”

“I’ll let Vahlen know about this development then,” the Commander said, picking up his tablet. “Do we have anything else pressing?”

“The list of agents to begin work in alien territory is finalized,” Zhang said, giving him a nod. “It just needs your review and approval. Chronicler, you should go over this as well. I want these agents sent over within the next week.”

“Just in time for our meeting with V’Zarrah,” the Commander commented. “I’ll get that finished by this afternoon. Also, I want you to get me some information about a certain individual.”

“Who?” Zhang asked.

“Someone interested in joining XCOM,” the Commander said. “Kane McTaggart. Subject Zero for the Phobos Project, and a curious individual. Someone who was able to wake up voluntarily from Isomnum might be useful here.”

Aegis shifted his helmet to look down at him. “No one can voluntarily awaken from the nightmares Isomnum projects onto his victims. Even psions will not recover if they have been compromised. This cannot be done without help and time.”
The Commander shrugged. “He did. Why do you think ADVENT was so interested in building a project around him?”

“It is unlike Isomnum to make such mistakes,” Aegis mused. “I might be interested to speak to this individual. Director Zhang, please forward what you find to me, as well as this Phobos Project.”

“I’ll do that,” Zhang said, standing up. “I’ll have a report to you tomorrow, Commander. I expect it will not take long to acquire the background of this individual. He’s not a spy or highly ranked. No major amount of red tape to cut through.”

“All right,” the Commander nodded, giving a salute. “We’ve got work to do then, dismissed everyone.”

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Unnamed Planet

2/1/2017 – 12:02 A.M.

The world was bare and desolate, the moon of a nearby planet. How Fiona, or more accurately, the Chronicler had known it existed at all was a mystery. It was simply grey stone which rose into small mountains in sections while craters of all sizes marred the desolate rock. There was no atmosphere, and looking up revealed a planet covered in white clouds over deep blue oceans. A water world most likely, surrounded by the black maw of space; white stars glittering in the distance.

A beautiful sight the Commander had hoped to see one day. Preferably on the Moon of Earth, but this would suffice until then.

The Commander wore his Titan armor, which had been slightly modified to include a larger oxygen supply. He did not imagine that they would be in this place longer than four hours, but just in case he had brought additional tanks. “Nice place,” Jackson looked around the moon, her voice sarcastic. “A bit bland, but nice.”

“No one will find us here,” Fiona said, deliberately ignoring her sarcasm. “Now we just have to wait for our Andromedon friends to show up.”

“Which shouldn’t be too much longer,” the Commander said, looking at the clock on his HUD. “They are a prompt species.”

His words turned out to be correct as within ten minutes there was the blip of an alien spacecraft, clearly Andromedon, coming down to land. It was definitely smaller than any other Andromedon spacecraft he’d seen, but fitting the standard Andromedon aesthetic of harsh geometric architecture modeled around a rectangular body. It had a flat nose, no windows, no ‘wings’, but quite a few weapons placed along the sides and top.

It turned to its side as it landed before them, landing struts emerging from the bottom to set down gently. The trio began walking towards it, just as the door itself unsealed and a ramp extended to the ground. Out stepped a single Andromedon, V’Zarrah he presumed.

The Andromedon was also similarly dressed for combat. From what he had learned, V’Zarrah was perfectly capable of holding his own in a fight, and his suit was the absolute top of the line. Heaviest armor, chemical dispensers, micro-missiles, blast shields to go over the commonly exposed helmet, and rumored nano-tech offensive and defensive systems.
“You are the Commander of XCOM.” It was definitely V’Zarrah. No other Andromedon present would ask or know that, and the Commander doubted that V’Zarrah would share his plans with many others.

But it was also not a question. It was a confirmation. “Yes,” he answered, their voices seeming to be carried far on the dead moon. “You are V’Zarrah.”

“I am curious how you arrived on this moon,” V’Zarrah walked closer to them. “Your species is intriguing. Strong enough to hold against the might of the Ethereals, sharp enough to turn Zararch agents to your cause, and yet smart enough to realize that without allies your war will be lost. And it all circles back to you, Commander. The cause of the Collective’s current issues.”

The tone seemed to shift. “An impressive feat. Few could do what you have done. For that reason I have agreed to this meeting.”

The Commander inclined his head. “And how much do you know about me?”

“I know that you have a history of determining the most efficient course of action,” he answered. “And then following through on it, no matter what others have said. I know that since you took command of XCOM, you have sought to prepare your species adequately. I have no confirmations as to the incidents around Germany, or the timely deaths of the Council and the United Nations. I do not have proof as to your own involvement in the creation of ADVENT, and the subsequent assimilation of upstart nations and territories such as Canada or the Middle East.” The voice turned to focus on the Commander. “But I have made my way through life seeing the connections, coincidences, actions, results, and the strings that bind them all together. You need not confirm your role, I already know it. And any being who can turn their species into their vision, by themselves or with help, is someone I want to meet.”

It wasn’t especially a surprise that V’Zarrah had been able to put together a fairly accurate picture. Someone with access to as much data as he had would find it rather easy. It also wasn’t surprising there was no condemnation, only respect. The Andromedons were a practical species. “But you want to meet me for a reason,” the Commander said. “As do I.”

“In that you are correct,” V’Zarrah said. “I have grown tired of the apathetic leadership of the Ethereals and their insistence on controlling the foundations of our society. The Federation itself is merely a tool to keep our species in line.”

“I thought it was the result of the Kett’Tasira,” Jackson interjected. “The Ethereals did not insist you follow-“

“The Federation was temporary!” V’Zarrah hissed, shifting his massive frame threateningly to Jackson who took a step back. “We are not like the Ethereals. We are not like the Vitakara or your own species. The Federation was meant to ensure our survival, it was not meant to be anything more. And so our species continues to be complacent. We are not permitted to act when action is called. The Federation has grown into everything our species was against. It is past time that it is destroyed.”

“And return to what?” The Commander asked. “A constant war that plagued your species for thousands of years? Is that better?”

“Through war we grew, we advanced, we evolved,” he answered harshly. “We are not your people, Commander. I thought you of all people would understand the necessity of not compromising your vision for your own species. Do you really believe the Unions simply forgot the conflict that has persisted for generations? We have not. The Federation has been kept alive by the sole command
of the Ethereals, and the Unions simply wait and plan.”

V’Zarrah spread a hand. “There are the alien loyalists, the cowards, the compromised, and the apologists of our species. Those have no place in our society, and they would have been purged long ago – or if they had proven stronger and smarter, they would have killed me. The Union Wars will not end until only one faction remains, and that one will be the superior and worthy of leading the Andromedons into the future.”

“And thousands of years of wasted time and lives,” the Commander answered. “Restarting the Union Wars is not something I want to support.”

“Ah, you misunderstand me, Commander,” V’Zarrah paused. “I agree in a way. I have learned enough to know that there are greater threats in this galaxy. Ones which require a united species. For you it was the Ethereals. For us it was the Kett’Tasira. I suspect we both know the machines that wiped out the Ethereals. Further conflict, while necessary, might prove our undoing. I do not intend to drag this war out, Commander, I intend to win it immediately.”

A light shined from his gauntlet, and the images of the Union symbols of the Federation glowed before him. “The Federation can serve a purpose. If one faction acts quickly and decisively enough, they can be eliminated. As it stands now, none could act fast enough before the Ethereals intervene. However…if the Ethereals were focused on a larger threat.”

“You could strike,” the Commander finished. “And what, exactly, would be your own vision for your species?”

“Our species will grow and form into a galactic power,” V’Zarrah said. “One independent of alien influence and control, one which is capable of destroying all who oppose or threaten us. And one day, we will return to Andromeda and exterminate the Kett’Tasira from the galaxy. Too many of our kind believe we should simply move on, or that we should be more open to outsiders. We have now seen the results of allying with aliens. And this galaxy is not our home, and it never will be. It may be thousands of years later, but I will ensure our species reclaims Andromeda.”

The Commander nodded. “In that case we have similar goals, minus a return to Andromeda. We are not interested in interfering in alien affairs, and expect the same in return. However, I believe we can be allies…but no more than that. A mutually beneficial agreement, nothing more or less.”

“Yes,” V’Zarrah shut off the hologram. “Another reason I decided to meet you. Your species in particular understands the threat of alien domination. You understand better than most that outsiders should be treated warily at best…and allies watched closely and never relied upon. This galaxy will punish the trusting and gullible, we all use each other as a means to an end.”

“A more fatalistic outlook than my own,” the Commander cocked his head. “But we agree that reliance leads to apathy and complacency. Both our species must be able to operate independently, and anything else is extra.”

“I have a question now,” Jackson stepped forward. “Are you intending to emerge as the sole Union from any conflict, or are there others?”

“There are others who share my vision for our species,” V’Zarrah confirmed. “Ones I have known long enough to trust them as much as possible. If it was during the Wars, we would have merged into a unified Union long ago, but doing so now is…unwise. Unions Apear, Stuirah, and Zacarrim are allies in this.”

The Commander didn’t need to be psionic to feel the shock Jackson excluded. He felt almost the
same way. Those were Unions which were fairly major. Apear were supposedly pariahs with everyone due to their work on AI, and Stuirah were the primary engineers of the Andromedon fleet. Zacarrim were a surprise, though mostly because they were extremely apolitical, even if there were no better cybernetic engineers.

“That is good to know,” the Commander acknowledged. “It just so happens that we have some projects of our own which would benefit from those kind of specialists. I would also expect you have expectations for us, in the event that you help us.”

“It is simple,” V’Zarrah said. “You assist us in wiping out the rival Unions, as well as the Sectoids. In return we assist in destroying the Ethereal Collective. We can provide you specialists for your own projects, as well as covertly funnel your people resources which are scarce on Earth. Both of our species will grow through this partnership.”

“In return for the small task of helping you wipe out half of your own species, and completely wiping out another one,” Fiona noted. “Harsh, even for your own kind.”

“I am not negotiating this, Human,” V’Zarrah said to Fiona. “The Sectoids pose an existential threat to our species, and the Unions to be purged are a consequence of the rot which has taken hold in the Federation; that which will weaken our species as a whole.”

“Enough,” the Commander raised a hand. “The Sectoids will not be a problem. From what we know, they won’t give us a choice anyway. As for the Andromedons… it is our own species which is at stake here. If the Andromedons want to kill each other for their own greater good… that is their own decision, and here, we need allies in this war. Consider it a deal, V’Zarrah. You help us defeat the Collective, and we will help you take control of your species.”

“Excellent,” V’Zarrah nodded. “It is good to begin moving the pieces into position. I have waited for a day like this for a long time.”

“I also have this,” the Commander took a small case Jackson had been holding. “I think that you’ll find there is quite a bit of useful information inside it. Including how to contact us again. What you do with the contents? That is up to you. I will inform the Chancellor of our agreement, and next time you, or a representative comes, we can nail down specifics.”

“We will be in contact, Commander,” V’Zarrah said. “Good luck.”

“Appreciated,” the Commander smiled under his helmet. “I feel our luck just got a lot better.”

Chapter End Notes

So, a few things to mention here. The first being that artist TheBritWriter (Check his Deviantart) drew a piece for me which is based on the Ravaged One's Assault back on XCOM. So definitely go look at that if you want to see what one of the Ethereals in this setting looks like. Will probably be working with him again at some point, was pretty happy with how it turned out.

Second thing is that I've done some side writing for fellow author SLoH4's Shadow of the Phoenix series (in addition to being an editor as well), more specifically an addendum piece to his universe, essentially a kind of XCOM-Files type thing. This is for Star Wars for those who are unaware, and I recommend you check it out if you
want to see how well I do something which isn't XCOM. I'm listed as a co-author in my profile, so you should be able to find it very easily if you go there. It'll be right beside my other stuff.
On one hand, this was going to potentially cause problems in ADVENT. The revelation that the Battlemaster had actually been telling the truth was...odd. In a twisted way, it did make sense, as from the dossier both ADVENT and XCOM had compiled on him, authorizing a strike like that in Seoul was extremely out of character. But that had never truly been in question, what had been was denying he didn’t know it at all, or that the Collective wasn’t behind it.

It would be easy to dismiss the evidence XCOM had provided as fake, but she knew that would just be denying an obvious truth. ADVENT would have to acknowledge that the Collective appears to have not been behind Seoul, which led to the next problem of how to actually distribute the proof of that.

The Commander said he was in favor of the raw footage being sent to media companies to edit as they wished, since the only ones who would be harmed would be the Collective. She personally disagreed with that, as ADVENT needed to figure out their own statement on this before even thinking of giving it to the media, not to mention she wasn’t sure it was within the public interest to show even a portion of the sickness of Paradise, redacted, edited or not.

Paradise itself, as well as this Creator, were a completely separate problem. There was an army there powerful enough to stand against three of the most powerful Ethereals in the Collective, and an unknown alien and Human of unknown psionic powers. If the Collective started using soldiers like that against ADVENT, there would be problems.

However, the silver lining was that this whole operation was so secret not even most Ethereals had known about it, so there was a potential that these would never move beyond that space station. It didn’t change the fact that one day ADVENT was going to have to fight and destroy those things, but perhaps they didn’t need to worry about them quite yet.

That was mixed-to-bad news.

On the other hand, an alliance established with not one, but three Andromedon Unions was perhaps one of the most uplifting things she could have heard. “The Union that produces their spacecraft is part of this alliance?”

“Union Stuirah,” the Commander confirmed. “Arguably the best designers of spacecraft in the known galaxy. Perhaps we can move past them some day, but for now they understand spacecraft much better than we do right now. You can see the implications for Atlantis.”

“Yes, yes,” she nodded, concentrating hard. “However, I know that Elizabeth is going to have issues trusting aliens with what is our most important project; a concern which I share.”

The Commander surprisingly gave a small smile, as he shut down the holotable absentmindedly. “If there is any alien which understands your reservation, it is the Andromedons. I’m not suggesting we give them access to Atlantis immediately, but working with them to design our own spacecraft should be pursued. Their expertise can help us avoid mistakes we can make. More importantly, these Unions have a very good reason not to sell us out.”
“The Ethereals.” Saudia nodded. “That doesn’t mean we immediately trust them.”

“Of course not,” the Commander rapped his fingers on the metal. “But there has to be enough trust to make this work. Viarior has a stranglehold over the entirety of the lesser Unions, allied with Viarior or not. They have dozens of factory worlds and off-the-maps facilities. Their logistics networks are unmatched, and they have been planning for something like this for a long time. I would trust them not to screw up, if only because they’ll die otherwise.”

Saudia knew the Commander was moving towards his own recommendations, or more accurately, more recommendations. “What do you have in mind?”

“Something to give us an edge,” he said, taking a file and sliding it over to her. She appreciated that pretty much everything related to Atlantis or the Andromedons he never shared digitally, it was always through a physical medium in an isolated and secured location. A paranoia she understood, especially now.

She picked it up, and began reading. It was not an especially long document, but it was enough to keep her occupied for close to a half hour, mostly due to her reading part-way, and fitting that into the current war model. The Commander spent the time she read reviewing several of XCOM’s own reports, as Saudia had unconsciously sat down into one of the nearby chairs, with only the hum of the base filling the air while she read.

Saudia finally closed the file, looking back up at the Commander. “Assuming that by some miracle everything works out perfectly, and in the end we beat the Collective, the Andromedons will know an extensive amount about our naval operations, strategies, tech, and tactics.”

A nod. “Correct. But do you see another way to build a functional fleet, train crews, and be able to hold our own without being smashed by the much larger and more experienced Collective armadas?”

“Having Andromedons train an officer corps is a risk,” Saudia pointed out, standing. “I don’t want our eventual navy to be reliant on what they learned from aliens. We should develop our own understanding of naval combat, because this,” she tapped the file. “Will give the Andromedons an advantage.”

“Nothing says we can’t do that eventually,” the Commander added slowly, crossing his arms. “But perhaps at a time where we aren’t facing the threat of extinction. Time is of the essence here, Chancellor. We are not going to win this war without alien help, and that is a fact we need to accept. Will that put us in potentially vulnerable positions in the future? Perhaps, but if we don’t then there will not be a future. We are only as reliant on the aliens as we allow ourselves to be. That does not mean we can’t learn from them or accept that they might have more experience than us in certain areas.”

“I’ll consult with Laura and Elizabeth,” was all Saudia said. “Moving past that aspect, having the Atlantis facilities function solely as shipyards is a good idea, with other parts being produced by the Andromedons elsewhere.”

“V’Zarrah suggested that,” the Commander said. “While it would definitely be suspicious if a factory started producing ships, a thousand factories over a hundred planets, from a dozen different Unions, producing small individual parts for various projects will not raise any alarms. If we can focus our production on assembly instead of that and exclusive manufacturing.”

“The fleet can be produced in a fraction of the time,” Saudia finished. “And if we follow having the Andromedon train teams of officers, the moment the fleet finishes, we can launch our attack to
take back the Solar System.”

A smile was what she received in return; a smile of calm confidence with a curious satisfaction in his eyes. “Exactly, Chancellor.”

Saudia had the feeling that there was more the Commander wasn’t telling her. She’d had the feeling for some time. The Commander was curiously not particularly concerned as much as he had been earlier in the war. Perhaps it was because things were falling into place, such as an alliance with the Andromedons, but that couldn’t just be it.

She wondered privately if they were in contact with another Ethereal wanting to defect. It would explain his attitude, and why he wouldn’t necessarily share it with her immediately. Perhaps this Paradise incident was affecting the Collective more than she thought.

Or perhaps he was just in a continual good mood now?

It wasn’t especially important. As long as they kept doing their jobs, the attitude of the Commander was unimportant. It did bring something to her mind, however. “Have you learned anything more about that pyramid?”

“Only that it’s very dangerous and alien,” he answered, the smile vanishing into his more typical neutral expression. “Aegis doesn’t recognize it, but believes it’s a precursor artifact of some kind recovered by the Ethereals. Perhaps Cogitian learned how to use it, although the current assumption is that it was placed by Isomnum or Sicarius to test it. We’re still researching it in an isolated location, it may be some time before we learn anything more.”

Plausible enough, that would explain how it came out of nowhere without bearing any resemblance to modern Collective tech, and this certainly fit the profile of Isomnum. It did make her wonder about the aliens who had made them though. There was always someone else out there, and even after they were gone, their legacy took far longer to vanish.

“We will be in contact shortly,” Saudia said. “AEGIS will be sent in a few days to establish something more formal with these Andromedons. Pass that along to V’Zarrah.”

“With pleasure, Chancellor,” he inclined his head in farewell. “Until next time.”

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Fort McMurray, Alberta – Canada

1/24/2017 – 9:34 P.M.

Showtime was coming, and Neil wanted to do this in an actual sheltered building rather than around another fucking campfire. And they could do that now, since the Inquisitors had neutered any kind of resistance the aliens could put up. Security was under ADVENT control. Military leadership was under their control.

ADVENT had successfully taken control of Fort McMurray, and it was time to fully liberate it. But not before the Sargon of the region was disposed of. It was time to take the required actions, which was why the Inquisitors and several of his soldiers were around a deactivated holotable. He didn’t care for the tech, not when paper still existed.

“We’ve set it up well enough,” he began. “So far forty aliens have been lost on patrols, and even more have recorded finding the bodies and bones. Morale of the rank and file aliens is low and they’re scared. Whoever’s idea it was to leave a meal of Borelian meat that one time, I want to
personally commend you.”

“Thank you sir!” One of the men said, grinning through his beard. “Didn’t take it well?”

Neil held up a small stack of papers. “Got them riled up enough to actually send multiple requests to command demanding to know if Humans actually eat their enemies. We definitely spooked them. None of them want to go out on patrols anymore, so I say we all did our jobs very well, and our good Inquisitors also pulled their weight.”

Cycelea smiled, as did the other Inquisitors next to her. “Guess your purple space magic came in handy,” Walter grunted. “Fine. Thanks.”

“So far we’ve controlled outgoing reports to not make the request for help seem unexpected,” Neil continued. “But also not to a degree which would attract suspicion. Over the next week this will escalate. For the next week there will be patrols sent out and we will ambush and kill every other one. Make it seem to be a direct challenge to our target: Alberta-3.”

“Can’t believe they’re called that,” a woman muttered. “Dumb name.”

“They’re brutes, what do you expect?” Another man asked. “Surprised they managed it at all.”

Neil just raised an eyebrow at the room’s chuckling. “From what I understand, names are assigned. And I’m going to make whoever thinks a Sargon is an idiot eat Borelian meat for a week if they say that again. These aren’t regular Mutons, they’re smart; probably smarter than you. And even if they weren’t? We’re still going to treat this as if we’re killing a fucking Ethereal. Everyone clear on that?”

A chorus of affirmations and acknowledgements, and Neil gave a sharp nod. “Excellent. I’ve avoided burying anyone so far, and I’d like to keep it that way. So now for the heart of the matter – how are we going to kill Alberta-3?”

“Please don’t tell me you didn’t figure that out already,” Walter said. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Rhetorical question,” Neil sighed, rubbing his eyes. Perhaps bringing their resident wilderness expert wasn’t a good idea. Too late now. “Of course I have a plan, and if it’s bad, I’m sure you’ll say something.”

“You know it.”

“We don’t want to attract the Collective’s attention,” Neil said. “Yet. So we need to kill the Sargon and make it appear to be an accident. That means that the killing is done off-base.” He noted some inquisitive glances, and raised a hand. “How we do that is through sabotaging his transport. While the Sargon is touring the base Cycelea and her team will convert whatever aliens are guarding the vehicle, and then plant a bomb on it. Time permitting, food and drink will be poisoned as well.”

“So it’s detonated on the way back?” A man asked.

“No, that makes it too obvious,” Neil shook his head. “Detonation will be done through one of his own. We’ll have multiple sleeper agents hopefully, and they will detonate the bomb the next trip the Sargon takes. That way if any suspicion appears, it will be in the wrong city.”

“What happens if the bomb is discovered?” Was the next question.

“Then the agents will assassinate the Sargon,” Cycelea said. “The Sargon will die one way or another, but we’re going to aim for the best possible outcome, not just one that works.”
“Exactly,” Neil said. “Truthfully I don’t expect it to go off *that* smoothly. For all we know he’ll come with mechanical soldiers or Sectoids or something we can’t subvert. But previous intel makes me confidant this can be pulled off. Worst case scenario, we kill him here. We have control over the military leadership and the Mutons will obey without question, even if it is against their own.”

“So what are we going to do during that time?”

“We’ll be in the city when he arrives,” Neil said. “Falia will suggest that Human shields are necessary. The Inquisitors, several of you, and I will be ‘randomly selected’ and accompany the Sargon out on his tour. If an Inquisitor or I gives a signal, we kill them. Otherwise we wait and listen. To further pull this off, one of us will be ‘captured’ and will be able to lead them into several ambush points which can be sprung if necessary.”

“You really want him to see all of this?” A short-haired woman asked.

“I do,” Neil said. “Assuming the best case scenario happens, the Sargon will inevitably write a report on what he found. I want any discomfort and fear to be spread. All the better if he blames it on rogue Humans and not ADVENT. I don’t know if it’s possible to unsettle a Sargon, but it’s worth it to try.”

“Question,” Allen, one of the other Inquisitors asked, raising a hand. “We pretty much control the entire scenario here. Why not capture the Sargon instead of killing him? We could learn a lot from it.”

“Too early,” Neil shook a head. “I agree, but it’s too early to do that. We’re not equipped to interrogate a high-value target like a Sargon out here, and we want to keep a low profile as long as possible. Once we kill a few more, and the Collective knows something is up, then we can capture the Sargons. But good that you’re thinking ahead.”

“So worst case scenario,” Walter spoke up. “Everything fails and the Sargon survives an assassination attempt?”

“Then we either kill the Sargon when he comes back to investigate,” Neil said. “Or we get out of the region and move on to the next target before an army is sent after us. Which is why when the Sargon leaves we have a very limited window to liberate every civilian in this town. Commander Christiaens has been informed of the strike day, and civilians will be evacuated using some new kind of dropship. Impossible for the aliens to not notice it, so they must be dealt with before that point.”

“Activate our moles?” A man asked.

“Precisely,” Neil nodded to Cycelea. “Overseer Falia orders the Mutons to kill every alien not under our control. The Inquisitors will take care of the Mutons when finished. We’ll restrain the aliens under our control, and let ADVENT command decide what to do with them. They want them, fine. If not we kill them and harvest some meat for the next journey. Worst case scenario we take out an entire alien base, and have automated reports that will be sent out over a period of a week.”

“Win-win,” Cycelea said happily.

Neil snorted. “We’re not going to settle for that. We are going to kill the Sargon *and* liberate this town. Everyone clear on the plan? Because we’re not going to be meeting here again.”
“Yes, sir!”

“Glad to hear it,” Neil straightened up. “If any of you miss coffee and want to make some, go for it. It’ll probably be the last you have for a few more months.”

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*ADVENT Intelligence Outpost, Brasília - Brazil*

2/4/2017 – 11:49 A.M.

They were gathered again for a meeting which Jaylin figured was right before the day they were preparing to head out to meet the Argentinian representatives. In the meantime she’d gotten acquainted with the layout of the area they were going to be in, to prepare it for any ambushes as best she could.

Dr. Wepper wasn’t present, largely since he was still doing some research on his psionic tampering theory, but he said that he hoped to start doing actual tests within a few days. Jaylin had to admit she didn’t know if she’d feel better if there was, or wasn’t verifiable evidence of psionic tampering. Even if there wasn’t, she’d always wonder about it in the back of her head.

“All right, everyone pay attention,” Abby said, tapping the table. “I don’t want to have to repeat this more than once. Tomorrow may likely be the first time we face the Phantom Division proper, and as such we’re going over the plan one last time.”

“We have acquired a team of sixteen Lancers,” Silvio continued, allowing a satisfied smile to appear. “In addition to a half dozen agents of ADVENT Intelligence. The agents will be disguised as civilians, and the Lancers will be in ordinary ADVENT soldier uniforms. We don’t want to tip off anyone we’re ready for a fight.”

“There will also be another Inquisitor monitoring the crowd,” Marco interjected. “He will be in communication with me or Protopriest Kil.”

“I will be similarly disguised,” Kil added. “And I will be monitoring the Lancers for any kind of psionic tampering. Should that arise, I will immediately let everyone know.”

“So I do want to ask one thing,” Jaylin cleared her throat. “It’s good that everyone will be disguised. But if we are attacked, none of us are going to be in optimal gear. Definitely not enough to stand up against the Phantom Division if they’re as enhanced as you say.”

“Armor won’t matter to the Lancers,” Silvio shook his head. “By that I mean it’s not as important as they want you to think. They’re extensively gene-modded, you can shoot them and they won’t go down in a few hits. If they get their hands on weapons or get in close, the Phantoms will have a bad time.”

Jaylin coughed again. “I would like to point out that there are those of us who lack this kind of modification.”

“If we come under attack you’ll be protected,” Abby assured them, meeting her eyes which only showed confidence. “The focus will almost certainly be on me or the Priests. You and Leon will need to follow my own orders or those of the Priests. Don’t risk yourselves unnecessarily. Understood?”

“Yes.”
“On that subject,” Silvio continued. “There will be Lancer Executor weapons packed into the transports, along with several more of their favorite toys. We also got authorization to bring two SHIVs along with us. Illusions won’t work on them.”

“A shame we couldn’t get an MDU,” Leon chuckled.

“Considered it,” Abby said. “Sadly too noticeable and will definitely put any watchers on guard.”

“Let’s continue with the plan,” Serena said.

“Yes,” Abby confirmed, leaning on the table. “We will travel in three armored transports. I will be in one, Protopriest Kil will be in another, and Inquisitor Tasis will be in the third. If we lose one transport, I don’t want to lose all of our Priests. Jaylin and Serena will be with me. Leon will be with Protopriest Kil, Silvio will be with Tasis. The rest of the seats will be filled with Lancers. The transports will be sufficiently stocked with weapons and gear.”

So she would be with Abby. Jaylin felt better about that. Even if Abby was not the most powerful of the group, she felt more comfortable than being in the transport with a psion. Besides, she had learned that Abby was a reliable and dangerous woman in her own right. Then again, as the marked leader, she was potentially more likely to be targeted.

“Upon arrival at the building, everyone will help establish a perimeter,” Abby continued, bringing up a small hologram of the layout. “Silvio, Serena, and I will go in and meet the representatives. We expect the talks to take several hours at least. During this time Inquisitor Tasis will be monitoring the meeting psionically, and Protopriest Kil will ensure that there aren’t any threats in the immediate vicinity.”

“After talks conclude one way or another, we will return in the same way we arrived,” Silvio said after a few moments. “And assuming nothing happens, we return here and figure out what to do next. This is if everything concludes without any sort of attacks.”

“If we are attacked, it will either be during the talks itself, or on the way to or from the location,” Abby said, the hologram now showing the route. “Nebulan seems to prefer isolation, so if we are attacked, it’s more likely it’ll be along the route. However, if she wants to be unpredictable, it may happen during the talks.”

“And if we’re attacked?” Leon asked. “Illusions will be a problem.”

“You let me worry about that,” Kil nodded to him. “That’s my job. To make sure any illusions are blocked or at least distorted enough for you to know they aren’t real. Kill the things that are living; which I expect the Lancers will also do perfectly fine.”

Leon just frowned. “I don’t mean to insult you, but are you sure you can defend against an Ethereal?”

Kil was silent, then pursed her lips. “I don’t know. The best I can hope for is to delay her long enough to let ADVENT know we’re under attack and they send reinforcements.”

“I will also be able to help,” Marco added. “Two telepaths are better than one. Illusions can’t kill either. If you all or the Lancers kill the real attackers, she won’t be able to do anything.”

“Aside from taking control directly,” Abby said dryly. “But I agree. If she loses her ground soldiers she’ll back off. And from talking with Aegis, illusions are most effective on the unshielded. Blocking them should not take much energy, and more importantly, if Nebulan wants to apply them to everyone she’ll need to break each mind, which is more difficult and takes longer. And I
will also be helping.”

“Right, you were a soldier,” Jaylin remembered she’d mentioned it once. “Guess you have experience with this.”

Abby gave a thin smile. “More recent than you think. I have a…specialized suit of armor. I’m letting you know so you don’t mistake me for an enemy if I have to use it.”

That didn’t especially surprise Jaylin, especially since she’d come from XCOM, who likely had more advanced armor than even ADVENT. “Sounds good.”

“Keep in mind we are assuming the worst-case scenario,” Silvio pointed out. “It’s very possible that Nebulan herself will not be involved and she’ll just send a team of Phantom Division operatives, if she attacks at all.”

“Exactly,” Abby confirmed. “Prepare as if we know she’s going to attack, but don’t be surprised if nothing happens. That’s a major part of what we’re trying to find out – who knows what. We’re going to learn something important from this, and attack or no, we will have a much more concrete plan moving forward.”

She straightened. “Everyone get some rest. Tomorrow is going to be a stressful day. Dismissed.”

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Borelian Wastes – Vitakar

2/7/2017 – 5:16 P.M.

The good news was that Miridian was taking an interest in him.

The bad news was that Miridian was taking an interest in him.

What Nartha had deliberately tried to avoid thinking of, despite the necessity of it, was that the vast majority of Nulorian were terrorists that almost everyone would universally agree would be better off dead. It was one thing to target the Zararch, or the military; that Nartha could understand easily enough, and it was justifiable from a certain point of view.

But the Nulorian were considered terrorists for very good reason. Nothing was off-limits for them. Civilians were the most common, sabotage was another common tactic, poisoning, assassination, and worse. They also had a very barbaric tactic of capturing low-level government officials or soldiers and torturing them to death and sending them in untraceable messages. Not to the public, that was always blocked, but it did have the effect of making any Zararch who reviewed it uneasy, especially since much of the videos were scripted to provoke and enrage the Zararch agents they knew were watching it.

And these were still the best people to take down the Collective on Vitakar. Dealing with the monsters in the Nulorian was going to be an entirely separate problem, and he didn’t know how willing Miridian would be to any kind of concessions. Probably none, judging from who he’d sent to meet him.

“Cold?” The Dath’Haram asked him, a low droll voice which was misleadingly conversational. It was just on the edge of continuously amused, and more upbeat than the situation demanded.

“No,” Nartha stated in response. “I dressed well enough.”
The Dath’Haram simply showed his teeth in an approximation of a smile, as the snow flurried and dusted them in the fine white powder. “Zararch agents are always prepared, or so they think. I sincerely hope your friends also thought ahead. If they show up.”

Being in the presence of Nul’sorras’haramoalian was one of the most uncomfortable experiences he’d ever had in his life. The Dath’Haram moved like water, had a voice that would put most at ease, and was half a head shorter than himself. A very unthreatening individual, had Nartha not known he was also one of most infamous terrorists in the entirety of Vitakara history.

He was one of the Nulorian who was known throughout the Zararch – and openly accepted it. The debates had raged on if Sorras was actually insane, or if there was a much greater meaning or message to his attacks. He’d exclusively attacked the Dath’Haram his entire life, killing men, women, and children without mercy. Schools were rigged and bombed, families were slain in the middle of the night, and even Bladedancers had been executed by him.

Nartha had not failed to recognize the golden-trimmed hilt of a Bladedancer sword. No Bladedancer would ever part with it willingly; they would rather die first. Which meant Sorras had killed a Bladedancer, though by what means were up to debate. Although, when was he ever going to have the opportunity to interview the most infamous known terrorist in the Nulorian?

“That blade,” he indicated the sword. “How did you kill him?”

In a one-second flourish the sword was in the hand as Sorras looked at it with pride. “Ah, you’ll have to be more specific, Zararch. I’ve killed three of those Bladedancers, and each one in…different ways.” He fixed his glistening eyes on Nartha. “I presume you want to know if I beat one in combat, or if I used less savory means.”

“I’ve been curious,” Nartha said slowly. “You have quite a reputation.”

“One I’ve done my best to maintain,” he said smugly, letting the blade tip sink a hair into the snow. “The first one I killed in combat, sword-on-sword. They called it an assassination, but it’s in the nature of the Zararch to lie. It was isolated, but there were some witnesses. After I ensured they wouldn’t run off, I fought the Bladedancer.” His tone turned almost longing. “Skilled warriors they are. Ones who won’t answer a threat with pacifism.” He spat the last word. “I eventually won, obviously. Broke his sword and displayed the corpse. I foolishly thought that might get my spineless race to actually do something, but no.”

He paused for a minute, and they both listened to the snow being battered around in the wind.

“I’d proven to myself I could kill a Bladedancer on their own terms,” Sorras finally continued, sheathing the sword slowly. “I had no reason to repeat the process. I slit the throat of another in her sleep and took the blade I’d rightfully earned the first time. The third stepped onto a mine I’d laid. I suppose it just proves that if not in a duel, Bladedancers are not hard to kill. That’s the truth, Zararch. I presume I’ve answered your question.”

“Completely,” he said neutrally.

“Mhmm,” he hummed knowingly. “You don’t like me, do you?”

Nartha figured Sorras would understand honesty. “If I didn’t need you, I would kill you.”

The Dath’Haram simply nodded. “I don’t expect you to like me, or understand. But I think you will eventually. You impress me, Zararch, regardless of your personal feelings. Any of our kind who can break the conditioning we grow up in, especially in the Zararch…that is commendable. It is no
surprise Miridian has begun to recognize that you were no mole.”

Nartha grunted. “And what does it take to meet him?”

“Soon,” Sorras promised. “Sooner if you were telling the truth about the Humans who can transverse to our world. I am skeptical, but that is why Miridian sent me. He knows I will tell the truth of what I see.”

Nartha checked the time. “We’re just entering the timeframe for arrival. Knowing XCOM, they will be here soon.”

Sorras just nodded and then sat down cross-legged on the snow as they lapsed into a silence that stretched out over minutes. He barely felt the cold, either because of his clothing or because he had blocked it out of his mind. It was dying down slowly, and the sun was beginning to set. Then there was a sudden blue-green flash and a group of armored soldiers suddenly appeared from nowhere.

Sorras was immediately on his feet, and Nartha already moving to greet the group. XCOM must have upgraded their armor, because the soldiers before him were in suits that were much larger and bulkier than the Aegis-class armor. A very noticeable upgrade, in addition to the plasma weapons they wielded. Although, as he took a closer look, some of the suits were a little slimmer and sleek, and there was Fiona in her stony armor, sword still attached to her back.

“We made it,” she said, motioning the group forward. “Hello Nartha. Hope you weren’t waiting too long.”

“Not too long,” he answered. “Glad you made it.”

“So,” the armored form of Shun said, looking around. “This is Vitakar?”

He smiled. “Yes, though not one of its most scenic locations.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, reaching up to take off her helmet, and shaking her hair free. “I’ve seen worse views.” She stepped forward and pulled him into a quick hug, which almost caught him off guard but he recovered in enough time to embrace her armored form. Not especially comfortable, but he could look past that.

“Greetings, Humans,” Sorras said, stepping forward and giving Nartha a curious look. “It appears the Zararch agent wasn’t making this up. Miridian will be very interested in this. Who is the leader?”

“Me, right now,” Fiona said. “Fiona Dorren, although when I’m not around, it’s Agent Jarvis.”

“We can make more formal introductions out of the cold,” Sorras answered. “But first I will introduce myself as Sorras, one of Miridian’s best and most trusted operatives, and rather infamous to the Zararch.”

Which was putting it very lightly, but Nartha could correct the record in private. XCOM needed to know that Sorras wasn’t necessarily someone they should treat as a close ally. “Let’s move in,” Nartha said. “We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

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**Zararch Command, Collective Mars Base – Mars**

1/26/2017 – 12:11 P.M.
For the first time in a long time, Ravarian was pleasantly surprised with something the Ethereals had done. Granted the reforms by the Battlemaster were needed changes on the whole, though he was not especially clear on why he was restricting usage for the captured Humans and taking some kind of internal revenge on the Creator, who he was still not clear on what had happened in her Blacksite.

What was the point of transferring Human captives off-planet and not utilizing them? Was it some bizarre development of a conscience? Was it some kind of justification for transferring to clones? Mildly irritating, but nothing he could do and Quisilia had essentially said to accept it. Well, it wouldn’t stop the Transference project, although given his new directive, perhaps he should hold off inserting the conditioned Humans immediately.

“What changed?” He wasn’t completely expecting an answer, but he did want to know the sudden shift in mindset. Especially from the Imperator.

Quisilia looked up from his phone, Fluffy curled up around his feet. “I suspect you will not like the answer.”

Ravarian narrowed his eyes to slits. “I’ve had to deal with answers I don’t like for some time, I can hear another.”

Quisilia put the phone away. “Our esteemed XCOM guest. She agreed with it.”

The Ethereal was partially right. Part of Ravarian did not like the answer, the other part was surprised she had given one at all. “She agreed?”

“Yes.”

Ravarian waved an arm. “Why?”

“Because Miss Trask is, at her heart, someone who understands the mindset of the Imperator and his goals,” he answered. “Rather remarkable, yes, and I think he’s convincing her that they have very similar goals for her species.”

That was…unlike anything Ravarian had heard. It struck him as profoundly wrong that the Imperator was successfully turning the most powerful Human psion to his side, and if Quisilia was to be believed, without using his own extensive psionic abilities. Words alone. It did not seem natural or right. It was unnerving.

He was no interrogator or negotiator. He was direct, skilled, and intelligent, yes, but his skill was not in convincing individuals to give up their secrets, or necessarily playing a role. He could act, true, but he was not a natural. He could never sway an enemy to his side with words alone. He could make offers, threats, and other kinds of coercion, but oration was simply not something he could master.

But the Imperator could not only turn one to his cause, but a psion and XCOM soldier for good measure. People with that capability unnerved him more than psions, assuming that the Imperator wasn’t using them already.

He pushed that aside, and focused on the part he especially did not like. “Why, exactly, are we basing our operations on the opinions of an XCOM soldier, who I will note, is not actually on our side?”

“Her influence is limited,” Quisilia dismissed. “And I suspect the Imperator would have approved this operation regardless. But having her approve it? It will assist in the Imperator convincing her
to turn. A win for all involved, as far as I am concerned.”

Ravarian sighed. “In which case, we should begin the infection points. If China is a target, we could likely infect anyone in a major city and watch it spread immediately.”

“A possible issue is that it will arise too fast,” Quisilia pointed out, telekinetically raising the cat at his feet into his hand instead of reaching down. “China could quarantine a city immediately.”

“We bypass this by infecting an individual in an airport,” Ravarian clarified, bringing up a holomap of China. “Preferably one with flights to Africa. This will spread the virus internationally. I would prefer to avoid having more than one patient zero, because ADVENT might become immediately suspicious otherwise.”

“You assume they won’t blame this on us?” Quisilia asked dryly.

Ravarian snorted. “Of course they will. But I wish them luck definitively proving it. One patient zero is a fluke. If several pop up at once that is clear evidence of some kind of targeted distribution. And smallpox is something which could theoretically arise naturally, as Humans stopped vaccinations for it years ago.”

“I presume those vaccinations are still useful?” Quisilia inquired.

“Sectoid estimations believe they will be,” he nodded, remembering the report. “But they will only be useful in preventing a spread. It is not a cure, and their stockpiles of the vaccines are low. It will take time for the world to adjust. I suspect ADVENT and parts of Africa will be able to mobilize fast enough. China should be devastated, which weakens the country severely. All according to plan.”

“And we have the cure to give to Betos,” Quisilia finished with a satisfied breath. “I suspect ADVENT will wonder how she developed this, but they’ll be too busy with the outbreak to fully pay attention to her or the SAS.”

Ravarian frowned. “I would attempt to keep this quiet as much as possible. That might be what pushes ADVENT to attack her, and right now, it is too early.”

“True,” Quisilia agreed. “And can it spread to Collective species?”

“No.” Ravarian shook his head. “The virus appears to not affect alien life whatsoever. Not unless there is a concentrated effort, all Collective species are immune to the disease. Our own forces will be safe.”

“We will want to time the virus to launch with an attack,” Quisilia mused. “In the meantime, we should begin the creation of a plausible patient zero. Nebulan could perhaps assist in acquiring us a useful subject. Perhaps someone recently from a remote location; South America or Africa, where he was exposed to smallpox and unknowingly brought it back. Yes, this could work.”

“I’ll leave that to you,” Ravarian nodded. “I also think that Nartha should be terminated soon. We have acquired useful information from him, and I do not want a double agent running around the Collective, especially now.”

“I haven’t checked up on him in some time,” Quisilia noted. “I’ll do a final extraction, bring back what I learn, and we can determine the best method to remove him. Though I will confess he is not a recent priority. One double agent cannot do anything when cut off from Earth, and rebellion within the Collective is completely out of the question. Any plans he can conceive of can only be executed after years. Hardly an immediate or pressing concern.”
“Agreed,” Ravarian said. “But my point stands.”

“We will deal with Nartha after China,” Quisilia said. “Until then, keep him confined to a place where he has limited influence. Vitakar is good. He will only have the Nulorian for company and not a group which is actually dangerous.”

“I’ve done that already,” Ravarian answered with a nod. “He won’t be a problem.”

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Isolated Location – Argentina

2/4/2017 – 8:18 A.M.

One day.

Volk sipped from his cup of water as he listened to the ambient silence of his room. Elena was still sleeping, and wouldn’t wake up for a few minutes yet. He’d forgotten how nice it was to have a modern and clean room to live in. Normally he and his crew lived in conditions much worse than this. Granted, if the aliens hadn’t known how to construct an entire facility in a remote location over a short period of time, he would have wondered as to how advanced they really were.

But they had come through, and now everyone was happy.

Now came the first part of what Volk was considering to be a long, drawn out campaign. The assassination of an XCOM Intelligence agent would draw attention, as well as the attack of an ADVENT convoy. No matter how it turned out, the heat was going to be turned on them, and he was curious both how ADVENT and XCOM would respond, but also Asaru and the Phantom Division.

He heard the bed rustling and glanced over to see Elena on cue sitting up and moving to get dressed; no sign of morning fatigue as usual. “Morning Elena,” he called. “Sleep good?” No response, which meant that she had. If she hadn’t, she would have woken him up in the middle of the night. But he still considered it polite to ask, and he knew some part of her appreciated it.

As she changed, he pondered what he would do if he had a clear shot at Abigail. Asaru wanted her alive, but he wasn’t sure that it would be safe to risk capturing her. By all accounts she was a dangerous operative, and one underestimated XCOM at their own peril. If it came down to it, he would kill her if he had the chance.

Well…not quite. Wound her first. If things were heated or going south, he could kill her.

Elena walked out of the bathroom and straight for the griddle as she had every morning since they had actually set up stoves and brought in ingredients. She was already dressed for a mission, minus the mask and hood down. He gave a short cough as she walked past him. “Elena?” She paused, and looked to him. He pointed at the plate opposite his. “I made you breakfast already.”

She didn’t immediately ignore him, which was a…good sign, and slowly walked over to the table and looked down at the plate of pancakes. Stacked three pancakes high, each layer buttered, and topped with an extremely generous helping of powdered sugar, they were to Volk, perhaps the unhealthiest iteration of a classic breakfast he had ever seen. But Elena loved them for god knew what reason and would never eat any other kind of pancakes.

He held in a sigh of relief as she sat down, looked over the meal closely, shot him a suspicious glance, peaking under one of the layers to make sure he hadn’t put syrup under it (a previous
attempt he regretted after Elena had dumped out all of syrup in retaliation), and satisfied, began eating it. Well, it was better than her throwing it away and making it again the exact same way.

Stickler for details, she was. But part of her lovable charm. Even if he screwed up on something like pancakes, she’d let him know it just wasn’t acceptable.

He let her eat in silence for a few minutes, letting his mind wander back to the upcoming operation. They knew that the entourage was going to have support. He was expecting at least some ADVENT special forces, they had to anticipate there might be an attack, but perhaps they’d bypass it with just standard soldiers because of a numerical advantage?

Possible. It was unlikely all of the estimated dozen soldiers would be Lancers or Dragoons. Then again, it wasn’t known just how much ADVENT knew about the situation. This could be them testing the waters, or it could be they were laying a trap of their own. Two sides of intelligent enemies playing mind games. He was honestly very curious to see how this would play out.

Elena stopped eating, her eyes focusing on him. “This is good,” she said quietly. “Thank you.”

An ecstatic Yes! went through his head and he smiled. “Knew I’d get it right some day.”

“Mmm,” she hummed, and ate some more. “I will not die tomorrow.”

He blinked. “What?”

“Tomorrow,” she said, continuing to eat. “I will not die. You do not need to worry.”

Oh, he saw where she was going with this. Stupid of him to think she wouldn’t notice the timing of him making something innocent like breakfast and the potentially lethal mission the next day. “Call it an unfounded concern,” he shrugged, leaning back in his chair. “I don’t want to have any regrets.”

“We are prepared; we possess numerical, tactical, and psionic superiority,” she listed off. “ADVENT psionic assets have been identified. XCOM Agent has been identified. Route is known and planned. We possess advantage in combat; snipers will engage at long range. Safety in distance.”

“Like I said,” he repeated. “Unfounded concern. But…I don’t know what to expect. This will be different than the first time.”

She had finished the pancakes, and was swirling the fork around the loose powdered sugar and getting what she could from it. “ADVENT soldiers most effective when prepared and engaging in medium-range environments. Psions occupied by Asaru. Phantom Division possess technical edge over ADVENT. Isolated location prevents immediate reinforcement.”

“Alright, alright,” he held up a hand in mock surrender. “You made your point. Still won’t feel better until it’s done and we’re both back here.”

“Yes, we will both come back here,” she pushed the plate forward slightly and tapped it with her fork. “You will make this again for me. More sugar next time.”

He gave a mock sigh. “Understood Elena.” She gave a rare smile in return, though only for a moment. “Come on,” he stood. “Let’s make sure everything is ready.”

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It was indeed a whole new world which had opened up to him. It was almost difficult to believe that just over a week ago he’d been stuck on Earth and resorting to forcing a woman at gunpoint to awaken the power within him. But he had succeeded, and now he resided in what he was quickly finding to be the most fascinating place in the galaxy.

Ironically enough it wasn’t a planet, or even the Temple Ship itself, although that came with its own kind of wonder, but the Library, one run by the Ethereal Cogitian. Ivan was personally shocked that so few people were bothering to explore this vast wealth of knowledge within this room. It wasn’t just digital copies of books either, but physical records, artifacts, and other things which he couldn’t even begin to recognize.

Adding to the mystique was that fact that, sadly, the vast majority of records were in Ethereal Script and not English. Which wasn’t unexpected; had the Ethereals had their records in English it would have raised a substantial amount of questions. The CODEX System was going through and slowly translating things into all known alien languages, not just English. But he wanted to learn the language himself, and in the meantime Cogitian had helpfully gone to the trouble of translating a few general documents he felt would be interesting.

And they most certainly were. While he was certainly no historian, nor had previously had much interest in Human history, there was something that drew him to the various alien species, and the old Ethereal Empire in particular. Perhaps it was the alien factor, perhaps it was because he was one of the first Humans to know of it, or perhaps it just drew his attention.

In any case, it was fascinating to see a radically different culture develop and grow, until it ultimately collapsed around them. History seemed to repeat itself well beyond Earth. No matter the power one faction had, eventually it would collapse for one reason or another, even if it was one hundred years old or one thousand. It wouldn’t necessarily die forever, but it would be changed.

The Ethereal Collective was the change of the Empire. Time would tell if the Imperator learned from the mistakes of the past.

He suddenly felt something in his head, which meant that there was someone else that had just come into a room. He was still getting used to that. Telepathy was still a new and odd sensation, and at some times threatened to become information overload as his brain unconsciously picked up every thought, emotion, and fired neuron in whoever he had interacted with, presuming they hadn’t protected himself.

The Overmind had taught him a way to suppress it without it being too overwhelming, but spikes would still happen whenever someone new came by, and he wasn’t expecting it. In fact, one reason he enjoyed the library was because very few people did come by. Still, he wanted to know who it was who came by. They’d likely been here longer than him, and he knew there were at least a few more Humans around. He might as well meet them-

His eyes widened as he caught sight of who it was. Impossible, this must have been some kind of telepathic trick. Ivan carefully set down the Ethereal tablet, shook his head, and looked again. Nope, it was still the same person. Leaning back in his chair, he wondered if it was a clone or some strange lookalike.

Because why the fuck would Patricia Trask be here?
If it wasn’t her, then she must have had a twin. He’d seen her several times on the television, and the media had liked to use her as one of the poster girls for XCOM and the war against the Collective. Yeah, he definitely knew her face, even if she was out of her armor and wearing some silvery outfit.

Didn’t look bad on her though.

The chestnut-haired woman suddenly perked up, then looked over to him and Ivan felt the presence of another telepath probing his outer defenses – which unfortunately were not exactly that great. *This isn’t good at all.*

And there she was, walking over to him. She stopped a few feet away, and leaned on one of the display cases, looking at him with her piercing eyes. No question that it was her. “Do I know you?”

Ivan snorted. “Unlikely. But you might be surprised how many people know about you, Patricia Trask.”

Her lips curled into a humorless smile. “So I see. And I suppose you didn’t expect me to be here.” How she ended that statement made it very clear it wasn’t a question. One she’d probably heard before.

“Can you blame me?” He asked. “Aside from the Commander of XCOM, you’re the last person I’d expect here unless as a prisoner.” He paused. “Or are you?”

“No,” she answered neutrally. “I’m free to leave whenever I want.”

There was a short awkward silence. He coughed. “If you don’t mind my asking…”

“Because I can’t yet,” she said, looking away. “I’ve…learned things here. Things which are… important. I have to make my next decisions very carefully. No, I can’t tell you why.”

That had…not been the answer he had been expecting. Although he wasn’t sure any answer would adequately explain her situation. But she didn’t necessarily appear to be completely on the Collective’s side, which was also an interesting development. “You’re new here,” she said after a moment. “We haven’t met.”

“Ivan Smirnov,” he inclined his head. “Formerly defense attorney, formerly unemployed, now training under the Overmind as a psion.”

“The Overmind?” She cocked her head. “Interesting that he’s found his own trainee. Seems a lot of Ethereals are getting them.”

“Including you?” He wondered.

She sat down in a nearby chair, staring off into space. “I’ve wondered. Maybe. Unlike you I didn’t come by choice.” Her lips twitched. “Well, technically I did come by choice, though one where there wasn’t any actual option.”

Kidnapped then. That made a lot more sense than her defecting. Although what was keeping her here was a question he didn’t know an answer to. “Odd that you’re still here, no offense.”

“Trust me,” she said dryly. “I know. Sometimes I don’t know if I have some kind of Stockholm Syndrome where I don’t want to leave, or if the Imperator is really affecting my mind. Just excuses though. I’m not going to blame someone or something else for my own choices, Imperator or not.”
“You’ve spoken with the Imperator?” That was different. Had the Imperator wanted Patricia Trask to be his…what? Apprentice? Trainee? Speaker? Well, whatever he planned, he certainly didn’t aim for the average individual.

“Many times,” she said. “It’s…illuminating. You’ll understand when you meet him.”

“When?” He gave a little laugh. “I’m not expecting to. Not for a while anyway.”

“I think you will,” Patricia said seriously. “He will make a point of it soon.”

“We’ll see,” Ivan said. “What did you come in for, anyway? This isn’t usually a populated place.”

“Research,” she said. “Theoretical psionics. The Empire had a lot of them, even if most never really pursued it further. Maybe there’s something to them. Ethereals can become stagnant over time.”

“Well, good luck,” he said, picking up his tablet. “There’s almost too much for me to find. Not to mention I can’t read half of it.”

“I wouldn’t worry, Ivan,” she said, standing up. “I know exactly what I’m looking for.”

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Project Phobos Research Facility – Washington D.C.

1/30/2017 – 3:54 P.M.

The dossier on Kane had not exaggerated just how big the man was. He was actually bigger than Creed, which the Commander found somewhat impressive. He certainly had the physique to be an XCOM soldier, and the skill if his records were anything to go by. The Commander was curious as to how he hadn’t been selected for special forces, though that could be due to his age. At only twenty-three and with unresolved anger management issues, perhaps he’d been deemed too much of a risk.

“I expect the Ethereal told you about me,” Kane said. “Did he have anything interesting to share?”

Interesting to share? That was...one way to put it. “Aegis has never encountered anyone quite like you,” the Commander answered carefully, wanting to only share as much as necessary at the moment. “Your experience and recovery was not something he considered to be possible, and your reaction to psionics is also...unique.”

Which was leaving out how it was the first time the Commander had heard Aegis sound uneasy. He had said that Kane had the mind of an unsound man, yet who still retained himself. A man who lived in constant mental fury and torment. Aegis had advised “caution” when deciding what to do with him. Something that the Commander planned to take into account.

Kane grunted and replied coldly, though with the slightest hint of amusement “I don’t blame him for thinking that, no one should have been able to survive that with their mind intact. Who knows, perhaps I didn’t.” Kane paused for a moment, appearing as though he was looking through the Commander, through the world around them, his mind elsewhere. “Tell me Commander, do you believe in Hell?”

The Commander had an inkling of where he might be going with this. The dossier had mentioned that Kane had been raised in a religious family. Based on how Isomnum operated, it was quite possible this was related to what he had experienced. He fixed the man with a firm gaze. “No. Not
in the context of religion.” He allowed a brief pause. “Sometimes I wish I did, but I cannot say I do believe in such. I am not exactly what you would call a...religious individual.”

“I see; understandable, neither did I, not really anyway. While my parents believed; still believe,” he corrected quickly. “I began to doubt. As a child I was frightened, that’s what the point of it was, to scare me, to make me obey. But as I grew older I put it behind me. At least I thought I did. Then he showed up…that’s when I learned the truth. Hell is real, but it isn’t something so simple as a physical place, no, it’s a state of mind.”

“When you say he,” the Commander interrupted, wanting to confirm his suspicion. “You mean Isomnum?”

“Yes, Isomnum, the Dread Lord as he calls himself.” He gave a short, bitter laugh, his eyes still unfocused and looking elsewhere as he responded. “The doctors said I was only out for a few weeks. If only. No, for me I was there years, decades maybe, in a hell of his and, as I know now, my imagining.”

There was a momentary silence, before Kane leaned forward, his voice dripping with intensity. “You see, that’s what they get wrong. We create our own hell, Commander; in our minds, in the shadows we dare not tread, we build it brick by brick with every thought we push away, every forgotten trauma, every hidden fear, it all goes there. And when he appeared, when the world went dark, it was waiting for me.” He stated, finally meeting the Commander’s gaze.

The Commander shifted in his seat, eyeing the man with a cautious curiosity. If nothing else, this was perhaps the most accurate insight into the effect Isomnum caused in his victims. They knew how the Ethereal used his powers, but every time the victims were too far gone to acquire an understanding of what they endured.

Until now.

“But you still managed to beat it,” he said to Kane. The exact details of what he had endured were personal, and the Commander didn’t have a desire to pry, but the process by which he overcame them? That he wanted to know. “How?”

Kane was silent, his face impassive, his mind once more seemingly in a far off place. “It’s...hard to explain in words. I don’t know if anyone who hasn’t been there can truly understand. “

“Try,” the Commander asked.

Kane thought hard for some time before slowly, haltingly, he posed a question. “Tell me, what do pain and fear mean for you?”

The Commander frowned. “Elaborate. In what context do you mean? What I’ve personally experienced, or the words themselves?”

“For humans, or life in general, what is the point of it? Have you ever asked yourself that? Why we feel them at all?”

In truth he really hadn’t. He’d accepted those as realities of life long ago, and didn’t see much of a point in asking questions he knew couldn’t be answered. “Not especially. Pain serves as a warning to us, fear as well. Information we can use to either help inform our choices...or let it dominate us. Those are just parts of life. Does there need to be a deeper reason to exist beyond biology and evolution?”

“No, that’s enough for the moment. I’m not the smartest guy around, but from my experience I
came to a similar conclusion as you did. They taught us how to deal with fear and pain in boot camp, tried to anyway, the rest we learned in the field. I get the feeling you were military before all this, or at least received combat training. Not sure what branch but you’ve obviously seen action, so you probably know what I’m talking about. Pain is the body warning us of danger, telling us something is harmful, it hurts so we don’t put ourselves in danger again, ideally at least. The same is true for fear, but with the mind.”

Kane looked at his hand and spoke. “If you touch a hot stove it burns, that makes you pull your hand away. Then you fear that, you avoid making the same mistake in the future, that way you stay alive and healthy. It’s all to keep us alive. But what if you are in pain, what if you’re afraid, but can’t do anything about it?”

He looked back at the commander and with just a hint of anger in his voice continued. “What if you can’t escape the pain? What if you can’t escape death? What if you can’t do anything? You can’t run, you can’t hide, you try fighting but it just results in more pain, even worse sometimes, and then you go through it all over again, because death isn’t the end anymore. Instead of freeing you it just starts the next nightmare. It’s all pointless, all the fear, all the pain, you can’t stop it or do anything about it.”

With his anger growing more and more apparent Kane went on. “What purpose do they serve then?”

The Commander gave a single nod. “In that context, nothing.”

“Exactly!” He slammed a fist onto the table. “Nothing! Not a damn thing! In that moment it only exists to torment you, as a tool make you suffer! And at my lowest point, when my mind was in tatters, my body mangled beyond recognition and experiencing things no human could possibly survive, it all became clear.”

Kane’s anger subsided for the moment but he resumed speaking shortly. “It didn’t mean anything. Pain, fear, death, nothing at all. It certainly wasn’t changing anything about my situation, and just like that suddenly things...changed. Like a fog was lifted from my mind and everything was clear. In that moment I remembered why I was suffering. Who did this to me, and just like that I knew what it was I had to do. I felt angry, furious, like you wouldn’t believe, fear was gone and pain seemed far away, still there but also somehow not.”

Clenching his fists hard enough to turn his knuckles white as he looked down at them, Kane’s eyes were now hidden in shadow beneath his brows. “So I attacked. Or tried to at least, I think my guts were spread all around a room at the time, each being tortured by a different being. Demons, aliens, both? Hard to say. I died, again, but when I woke back up I didn’t run, I fought.”

“From that moment on I never again cowered, never again ran, if they came for me I would fight back, if they broke my arms I would kick them, if they cut off my legs I would bite them, if they broke my teeth I would bash my head against them over and over, so long as it was possible to fight back I would, and when I died I’d do it all over again.” A bloodthirsty grin ripped across Kane’s face as he recalled what he went through.

“At first I failed, over and over and over again.” He said, waving his hand now in small circles. “But eventually I started to win, it was slow going but I managed to kill some of my tormentors, not Isomnum, or the other two, not yet, but the lesser manifestations? His minions? The lowly servants? I could kill them just fine. Then I kept going, and when something died, it didn’t come back again, but I did.”

The Commander cocked his head, noticing something that hadn’t been mentioned before. “The
other two?”

“His overseers, those second only to him, the two he came to save back in D.C., the Battlemaster and the Warlock. In my nightmares they served him, reported directly to him, protected him and carried out his will. It wasn’t always one of them or Isomnum torturing me, hunting me, but I always knew they were out there somewhere, always knew they were responsible. Somehow.”

Hm. It might be a problem if Kane put the Battlemaster on the same level as Isomnum. Especially around Aegis. That would be something to watch for, though the Commander didn’t know if that outlook towards him or the Warlock could be changed based on what he had been through. “And you eventually killed all of them,” the Commander finished. “That was the solution. Once that was done...you woke up.”

“Yes, the very thing meant to prolong my suffering was the key to my victory, because I never truly died. I could continue to throw myself at them as many times as it took, and it took a lot of tries, for all of them. First the Warlock, then the Battlemaster, and finally Isomnum. As I beat him into a bluish pulp with his own limbs and at last crushed his skull I woke up, and found myself in what looked like a hospital bed, tied down and stuck full of tubes.”

At last leaning back in his chair and seeming to relax Kane finished his tale. “At first I thought it was a trick, another nightmare. They had to sedate me several times before I figured something was different and actually tried listening to them. I was free, I hadn’t escaped Hell, I’d conquered it, all my fears, all the pain, everything, it was over. I killed it all. Unfortunately this also meant I’d failed.”

His story was certainly one of the more interesting ones the Commander had heard. He was impressed that throughout all of that, Kane had managed to retain his sanity. At least enough to hold a calm conversation. Perhaps he still wasn’t quite right mentally, only a telepath would know, and all he could sense from Kane at the moment was an intense resolve. But he seemed, at the moment, to be stable enough.

“Thank you for telling me that,” the Commander said. “I’m not sure even I would have been able to overcome a similar situation, nor would anyone else. You did though. But you want to join XCOM now, not return to ADVENT or keep assisting in the Phobos project.”

The Commander rested a forearm on the table, maintaining eye contact. “You could likely join the Lancers with your skills if you feel you’ve done all you can for Phobos. But you specifically want XCOM. Why?” He did know the answer Kane had given to Saudia, but was curious if he would elaborate on it more.

“Like I said, I failed. They’re still alive!” He growled, his hands gripping the table so hard they looked about to bleed. “What happened to me isn’t unique, I’m just the only one to come back on my own, and while I’ve done as much as I could to save the other victims not all of them made it. They weren’t the first casualties of this war, not his first victims, and they won’t be the last. It won’t end, not until those responsible pay.”

He was getting angry again, and breathing heavily. “They must die. Isomnum, the Warlock, even the Battlemaster, them and the rest of the Collective, only then can there be peace for us. So long as that monster, no, that creature lives no one is safe. That is why I am asking you to let me join XCOM, the Lancers are good, damn good, but they don’t fight Ethereals; they can’t handle them, but I can, and XCOM does fight Ethereals. More importantly, you kill them.”

Sitting up straight and after a few moments once more seemingly calm, he looked straight at the Commander, his eyes hard and his face set. “That is why I want to join you. They took everything
from me, they have innocent blood on their hands and until they are defeated this war will never end. Let me help you Commander, let me have my vengeance. It’s all that is left for me. You’ve read the reports, I’m immune to telepathy, or damn close to it. Isomnum has no hold over me anymore, and he never will. I have a better chance of running into Isomnum or the others with you than with anyone else and if you let me I will end them.”

“I’ve done all I can here, they have everything they need from me and at this point I’m little more than a third wheel. There’s no one else from the attack that can be saved either. This is the last thing left to do. Maybe if I kill them for real the last few soldiers will wake up, but I doubt it. At the very least the ones who didn’t make it might rest easier, and no one else will ever need to fear the Dread Lord again.”

He had the right mindset for fighting an Ethereal, the Commander couldn’t disagree on that front. But XCOM wasn’t composed of one man armies, and the soldiers within it needed to be reliable. On that front, he was unsure how well Kane fit, if he did at all. “You’ve made your case for why you want to join. I can’t disagree with it. What I need to know is how reliable you will be.”

“I don’t have a use for lone wolves and one-man armies,” the Commander said, lacing his fingers together. “I give my soldiers freedom in how to carry out my orders. But I expect that these orders are followed, as well as those of my Squad Overseers. Joining XCOM, there is a chance that you will not fight Ethereals. If you saw Isomnum, and you received a direct order not to engage, what would you do?”

Kane frowned and looked down at the Table between them as he considered his response. “I can’t think of any reason to spare that filth so I’m going to assume what you really want to know is if I will follow orders or act on my own, am I correct?”

“Correct.”

Looking up from the table to meet the Commander’s gaze Kane answered. “Before my...encounter with Isomnum I was a soldier, had been for years. I was trained to follow orders, it was drilled into me, because when soldiers act alone or disobey there are consequences. For them, for the mission and for the men fighting beside them.”

“Joining XCOM would mean I report to you, and if I got sent to the field I would report to the Overseers. If I went rogue I’d become a liability, that’s what your worried about. The truth is I’m not entirely sure what I would do, I have no desire to endanger my allies or the mission, while my immediate goal is vengeance against those three I am fully committed to victory in this conflict.”

Kane let out a rare sigh in frustration, the gears in his mind furiously turning. “If disobeying you or the Overseer meant putting others needlessly at risk, or posed a threat to the mission or even the war...I would like to think I could put my own goals aside. I would like to, but if you put me in a room with him right now and told me not to hurt him I do not know what I would do.”

The Commander was not completely surprised to hear that. An honest assessment of what he might or might not do was a point in his favor. It was far better than lying to himself, and if Kane had said the opposite of what he had just stated, he would be suspicious. “I see, and had suspected as much. I can’t have someone who would put his own priorities before the mission, no matter how much they were justified.”

He leaned back in his chair. “That being said, I think there may be a workaround for your own situation. If you come to XCOM, we can make you tougher and stronger than you were before. But you would also receive the Manchurian Restraints to prevent you from endangering a mission or soldiers. It would not be as restrictive as our psions, but considering your unique circumstances, I
feel it is warranted. I do think you would be an asset in XCOM, Kane, but only if I know you are reliable.”

Kane grimaced as he considered the offer. “You’re asking a lot of me, I’d be trusting you with my own mind, I just escaped from one mental prison and now I find I may need to submit to another. All for the chance to kill those bastards, unless you decide I can’t.”

“Yes,” the Commander said. “To protect XCOM and others in case you are not yourself. And if it makes you feel better, I do this to everyone who might pose a risk. Granted, not for the same reasons as yourself, but my psions, own Internal Council, and even myself are under the Restraints. Not common knowledge, but I don’t make exceptions for anyone, myself included.”

He was clearly debating things internally, weighing his options and trying to decide what to do. After minutes of silence, punctuated by occasional grumbling and muttering before he seemed to come to a decision. “And if I agree to this...you will let me fight for you? Give me the chance to end those scum?”

“Yes,” the Commander answered. “I will.”

Another pause occurred before Kane set his expression and looked the Commander in the eyes. “I do this for you then I need to know you’re serious. One thing I will never do, Manchurian restraints be damned, is surrender or allow these bastards, this “Collective” to win. Are we on the same page here? I want them crushed and this Imperator of theirs punished! Along with everyone else who was behind this war. I will give up everything, suffer anything, for this. Are you prepared to do the same?”

“I can promise this much,” the Commander said slowly. “We will defeat the Collective and kill the Imperator, or die trying. There is no other acceptable outcome.”

“Then I agree to your conditions, when can I start?”

“Immediately,” the Commander said, standing up. “I’ve ensured that you can return to the Praesidium on the Skyranger with me without delay.” He extended a hand. “Once we arrive, R&D will figure out how to begin applying the Restraints and gene mods. Welcome to XCOM.”

Kane shook the proffered hand firmly and gave a single, resolute nod in response, before turning away to gather what little he had in his quarters. Then paused briefly and asked. “One last thing, you have information about them right? On Isomnum and the rest, along with everyone else in the Collective that matters, including combat footage?”

“Yes, we do,” the Commander confirmed. “Some of it is classified, but combat footage, information, and basic dossiers on the Ethereals and aliens is available to everyone. If you want to research yourself, it will be open to you.”

“Yes, that should be enough, thank you sir.”

“Excellent,” the Commander said, and after a few minutes allowing Kane to gather his few belongings, walked out of the room, with the newly christened XCOM soldier close behind him.

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**Borelian Wastes – Vitakar**

2/8/2017 – 7:11 A.M.
The outpost was quiet for the moment, with the other XCOM agents sleeping and their armor and weapons stored safely away. Having now gotten a closer look at the Titan and Warden armor as it was called, Nartha was almost jealous that he didn’t have a suit of his own. Although fortunately they had packed equipment for more clandestine operations.

Though if Sorras had anything to say about it, the strikes would soon be very loud.

For now though, Nartha and Shun were largely alone in the quiet morning, this being the first time they’d had to talk without anyone else around. Shun wasn’t in her armor any longer, though it was cold outside and even chilly in the outpost, so she was somewhat bundled up in socks, pants and a sweater.

To help wake and warm her up, he’d made her a classic Zararch Morning Stimulant.

Judging from her expression, she did not like it. “You don’t like sweeteners do you?”

“Doesn’t need any,” he took a drink of his own stimulant. “Anything else would dilute the purity of the mixture. Wakes you right up.”

Shun set her cup down. “Oh, I definitely believe that. Once I tasted it I definitely woke up.”

“Ha ha,” he said, wishing rolling his eyes would be even seen by Humans. “I’ve taken this for years. Morning Stimulants work, trust me.”

“And why is it called a ‘Morning Stimulant’?” She lifted a hand, making air quotes. “You couldn’t even come up with a name for it?”

“I hardly think your species is in a better position,” Nartha pointed out smugly. “You just call yours ‘coffee’ which I will note is just the name of the plant.” He smirked. “‘You couldn’t even come up with a unique name for it?’”

Shun just looked at him, and without breaking eye contact, downed the rest of the Morning Stimulant. “Cappuccino, latte, mocha, affogoto, espresso; go ahead and tell me we call coffee all the same thing.”

“I don’t understand half of what you said,” he answered. “What were those?”

“Kinds of coffee drinks,” she elaborated. “All of which are different, I might add. And on Earth, we refer to ‘coffee’ in the generalized sense. I guarantee if your species was in charge of naming coffee, it would be ‘coffee type 1’ and ‘coffee type 2’ and so on.”

He blinked. “What’s wrong with that?”

She seemed to find that very funny. Shaking her head, she answered. “Technically nothing, I guess. But it’s not exactly creative, is it? Not very unique or memorable.”

“Yes…” he was not sure he wanted to engage in this topic. “I believe that we have a different standard of naming conventions. At least you will never be confused if you see something labeled by my species. I would never have known what a capochi-capacina-“

“Cappuccino,” she supplied.

“Yes, that,” he accepted. “I would not have known what that is if you didn’t explain it. How do you know so much about coffee anyway?”
“Half that stuff even non-coffee drinkers know,” she snorted. “And I had a friend who was a big coffee drinker. Always kept wanting me to try new stuff. I spent way too much money at Starbucks,” at Nartha’s confused look, she added: “Coffee place. Very popular, even in China.”

“Ah,” he nodded. “I wished I had spent some time in Human restaurants. If only to compare the difference.”

“Oh, how are Vitakara ones?” She asked, resting her forearms on the table.

“Very high-quality and formal,” Nartha explained. “People only go to them for special occasions. Birthdays, gatherings, birthing announcements, that sort of thing. Likely less than Humans tend to go, if I recall some of your species tendencies.”

“Yeah,” Shun gave a smile. “Humans don’t really need a reason to eat out other than that’s what they feel like. Yeah, it’s for special occasions too, but that isn’t it the majority of the time. Anyway, moving on from food and coffee, I’m wondering something.”

“What?” He asked.

She grew noticeably more serious. “The Commander gave all of us access to documents on the Nulorian. They aren’t exactly…”

“Terrorists,” Nartha supplied. “That’s what we called them in the Zararch, and it hasn’t changed.”

“And Sorras…”

“I know.” Nartha paused for a moment, releasing a sigh. “Not exactly people I’m comfortable enabling, especially now that I’ve begun thinking about it more.”

“Is there no one else?” Shun asked. “You made contact with the Hierarchy, yes?”

“A representative, but the Hierarchy is too embroiled in their own problems to focus on a unified resistance,” Nartha said. “It’s a start, but it will take time for anything to develop. The Nulorian are the best option we have. The best we can do is hopefully keep them in check.”

Shun rested her chin on a fist. “What about the Sar’Manda? No one seems to have looked into them.”

Nartha cracked a smile. “Are you kidding? The Sar’Manda told an entourage of Ethereals to, borrowing a Human expression, ‘go fuck themselves’, metaphorically speaking.”

“Which is good?” She pointed out.

“Not if you know a lot about them,” Nartha explained. “The Sar’Manda do not care about anyone outside the Empire. They could care less who wins this conflict. They could care less if the Aui’Vitakar existed at all. If half the species killed themselves in a war, they wouldn’t think about intervening. Isolationist is being generous, and they only bother to maintain trade and their place on the Aui’Vitakar as a formality, and half the time their members don’t show up for voting.”

“Still,” Shun said. “I think we should at least look into the Sar’Manda. What do we have to lose?”

“We insult the Manda’valrain and he orders our execution, or turns us over to the Zararch,” Nartha answered. “The Sar’Manda despise being told what to do by someone else.”

“Aren’t there Sar’Manda in the Nulorian?” She pointed out.
“Yes, but that doesn’t mean anything,” Nartha reminded her. “One of the first ones I met was an Oyariah. Plus Dath’Haram. It’s not surprising a Sar’Manda would also join at some point. Honestly, Miridian would know more about the susceptibility of the Empire. But don’t get your hopes up for that.”

“I hope Miridian is reasonable,” Shun said, standing to go fill her cup with plain water. “I don’t think the Commander wants terrorists deciding how to run the next Vitakara government. And if AEGIS is going where I think they will, there may be two competing counter-governments.”

Nartha blinked. “What?”

“Oh, right, you wouldn’t have heard,” Shun sat down. “The Vitakara defectors have been working with AEGIS.”

“As in….the Ethereal?”

“The, ahem,” she cleared her throat. “Alien Emissarial and General Integration Service. Diplomatic branch between ADVENT and alien governments or parties.”

“Makes sense,” he nodded. “And they’re…doing what with the Vitakara?”

“Nothing so far,” Shun said. “But Zhang’s said that they’re working on establishing an independent Vitakarian government. Opposing the Aui’Vitakar.”

Nartha whistled. “The Zar’Chon is going to hate that. Although I’ll be honest; ADVENT being involved so closely makes me question its…legitimacy. It is better than the Aui’Vitakar, but I don’t want another puppet government.”

“I don’t think it will be that,” Shun assured him. “The Commander wouldn’t allow for that, and I don’t think Saudia will either. In any event, it hasn’t even been announced yet.” A short banging interrupted them, and Nartha stood and moved to the door where the knock came from. A quick look outside confirmed it was who he hoped it was.

Unlocking the door, Sorras stepped inside. “Good news for you, Zararch,” he bared his teeth. “Miridian wants to speak personally. To you and this XCOM Commander. The teleporter too. Two weeks.” He looked to Shun. “Inform him at your leisure, Human. Miridian is giving you plenty of time to make this work.”

“And what do we do until then?” Nartha asked.

“We are going to plan,” Sorras said, his voice hungry. “For the first time we are in striking distance of the puppets who have enslaved our species. Now we will prepare to burn it all to the ground.” He alternated glances between the two of them. “And this time, we will succeed.”

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Palace of the Argentine National Congress, Buenos Aires - Argentina

2/5/2017 – 1:13 P.M.

“I can assure you, representative,” Director-General Nesto Al Sadd said. “Argentina has had no contact with any radical anti-ADVENT terrorists.”

Well, she would know from that question if he was lying or not, assuming the Inquisitors were doing their job. But in the meantime, Abby was content to let Serena do most of the talking. The
Argentinian government had at least sent only high-ranking officials to speak to them, such as the esteemed Director-General of Argentina’s intelligence arm, the Foreign Minister, as well as the Minister of Justice.

*He is telling the truth,* Marco telepathically told her. *At least as far as the question was worded.*

A good start then. At the very least they would be able to get a very clear idea of who, if anyone, was involved with alien infiltration. “Unsurprising,” Serena said seriously, briefly inclining her head. “We had suspected as much, as it would be a curiously risky decision with ADVENT on your border. I am sure you are well aware how seriously we take the alien threat.”

“Abundantly,” Foreign Minister Charro Milani said, still eyeing the trio with guarded suspicion. “We are well aware of how ADVENT treats those who they view as an inconvenience.”

“Threat, Minister Milani,” Serena smiled. “A threat. If it was merely an inconvenience which drove ADVENT policy we would be fighting other countries as much as aliens. We simply do not have time to hunt down everyone who perpetuates lies and propaganda against us.”

The three men clearly did not particularly like her from that, and each of them were no doubt wishing to be anywhere but here. There was a clear power disparity in the furnished room they inhabited. The Palace was extremely luxurious, certainly the nicest place Abby had ever been in. It was probably common for diplomats though, since she imagined they rarely interacted outside these controlled environment.

“Regardless of the word choice, the answer remains the same,” Al Sadd repeated. “We have no contact with the kind of groups you say.”

“How certain of that are you?” Abby interjected, speaking for the first time since the introductions. “We are aware that ADVENT is not looked upon with fondness in this country. Is it possible that officials could be in contact with these groups and hidden it from one or all of you?”

“No,” the Minister of Justice, Timo Herrera shook his head emphatically. “No officer or individual within my department would ever work with a terrorist. We enforce the law as is dictated, we do not support terrorists in any capacity, whether they perform actions we are sympathetic to or not.”

Abby was inclined to believe him. Marco soon confirmed this.

“Director-General?” Serena asked pointedly.

The man was slightly hesitant to answer. “I do not believe so.”

*He does not believe that,* Marco informed. *Press him.*

“You do not believe so?” Serena said. “So you do not know?”

“It is unlikely.”

“That is not a denial,” Silvio noted. “Compared to your colleague, it sounds like it is a possibility, albeit a small one.”

“All I can tell you is that I would be highly surprised and disappointed if any of my people were involved in such activity,” Al Sadd said. “But I operate on the assumption that there is always the chance of something, even if it is unlikely. This is a case where I can safely say that it is *extremely* unlikely, but I cannot discount the possibility entirely.”
The chance is higher than he lets on. I do not think he is involved though; he will likely investigate after this meeting.

In which case it might be time to reinforce this potential suspicion. “There is another possibility, representatives,” Abby said again. “The reason XCOM has taken a direct interest in this matter is because there is a very high likelihood that there are not just aliens behind this terrorist organization, but an Ethereal.”

All three of the men visibly reacted. It was subtle, mostly a few blinks or they stiffened, but it was there. Apparently that possibility had not occurred to them. “An Ethereal?” Herrera said incredulously. “Are you certain?”

Abby reached down to her bag and pulled out a thin file, which had been prepared for this very question. “You tell me. Not just an unknown Ethereal, there is a very specific one we believe is behind this.” She slid the file across slowly to the Director-General. “It is not out of the question that this Ethereal is coopting individuals telepathically within the Argentinian government, and quite possibly without your knowledge.”

“How do you have proof that this is the case?” Milani asked. “Your claim is substantial?”

“That they are doing this to Argentina?” Abby asked. “No. If this is within their capability to do? Absolutely, and the proof comes from one of their own. Aegis, who is familiar with the capabilities of this Ethereal. Using a disenfranchised terrorist organization as a front to expand alien influence in the region would be standard procedure for her.”

They gave the men a short time to read over the short file, which included a description of the first attacks on Peacekeeper bases, a dossier on Nebulan, and finally had a comparison between the attacks and known capabilities of Nebulan. None of them appear to be involved. If collaborators exist, they are low-level or all of them have been affected by her. I do see any indication of tampering. The questioning would have revealed anything strange.

She exchanged a short nod with Serena who’d received the same thing. This was ultimately good news, since alien efforts in the region were not as developed as they had feared. It did raise the question of what the Phantom Division and Nebulan were actually doing, but now that they could largely rule out government influence, at least of any substantial measure, they could perhaps narrow down where they had gone.

“We will need to discuss this matter internally,” Al Sadd finally said. “Psionic influence is something we need to account for to ensure that there are not any attempts to artificially create a conflict between us. We do not want conflict with you, representative, and with this new information we will work to ensure it remains that way.”

Serena nodded. “That is good to hear. ADVENT would, of course, be willing to help determine if any of your people have come under psionic influence.”

“How?” Al Sadd asked slowly. “We will not allow psionic interrogations of our agents.”

“Nothing so drastic as that,” Serena said, pulling out another beige file. “There are much simpler methods.”

Abby knew she wouldn’t have much input once Serena started on this topic, which was fine. They’d learned what they needed to. Now it was a question of what Nebulan would do next.

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The UFO the Sargon arrived on was larger than Neil had expected. Although from the few reports he’d read, even the small ones seemed to have a large amount of wasted space and standing room. It was as if each one was designed to carry a small army beyond the needed pilots. In fact, even the so-called “Scouts” were large enough to carry a dozen Mutons.

This UFO differed from others in that it had no openings or gaps whatsoever. The multicolored shield that so-often was displayed across the front was replaced with a complex opening mechanism that had a ramp which extended to the concrete. Falia was standing outside with a mixture of Vitakara and Muton soldiers behind her, waiting at attention. The mixture of Humans was just off to the side, shivering in the cold.

Neil disliked being out of his Snowtrooper armor as well as being disarmed, but it was necessary for the ruse. Cycelea was also around him, with the other Inquisitors sprinkled throughout, as well as his other soldiers hiding in the crowd. Neil silently wished the Sargon good luck in managing to circumvent every contingency they had.

Welcome to McMurray, Sargon. Enjoy your last days on Earth.

First came four regular Mutons. Wearing their green helmets, they didn’t seem any different than the standard ones that had been stationed at the base. Same armor, same weapons; plasma weapons, and a couple of grenades. Expected, and the remainder might be Elites, or if they were really unlucky, Vanguards.

And then out stepped something he had never seen before. It appeared to be a soldier constructed out of black metal; standing roughly the size of Human, or a short Vitakarian. The helmet was smooth and eyeless, and the chest had silver markings which culminated into a symbol that looked suspiciously like an Ethereal.

The whirring noises they made as they walked out, as well as the clanking when they moved, indicated that they were machines and not soldiers in armor. They also carried plasma weapons, and nothing else from what Neil could see.

“What is that?” Cycelea said quietly next to him. “It’s definitely not alive.”

“Don’t know,” he whispered quietly without looking to her. “A potential issue.”

Six of the machines came out in total, the final two flanking the Sargon himself. The alien was not quite the size of an Elite, but easily towered over the standard Mutons, made all the more imposing by the green armor he also wore, including a helmet. Hooked to his back was a kind of plasma cannon that looked closer to what Neil had seen on the Mechtoids.

Nothing else came out after them, which was the good news. The bad was that three of the metal soldiers were standing guard on the ship while the remainder of the Mutons and soldiers formed up behind the Sargon as Falia also moved forward to greet them. “Sargon, welcome to Fort McMurray.”

“Overseer Falia,” the Sargon answered in an oddly bland voice. It occurred to Neil he’d never actually heard a Muton speak before. Their voices were low, yes, but there was definitely room for some personality and emotion if they wanted. It was just the Sargon had a decidedly neutral tone. Perhaps that was intentional. “You requested my input on handling an outside threat. I am here to
“I am glad to hear it,” Falia turned and began walking in lockstep with the Sargon. “First we can make an inspection—“

“Unnecessary, one of the Custodians will ensure the base is clear.” At the direct motion from the Sargon, one of the Custodians as they were called, apparently, split off from UFO and throughout the base. “Take me to the site of the attacks.”

This worked out well, fortunately, as now Neil wanted to be as close to the Sargon as possible wherever they went. It appeared he had underestimated the alien to a degree, although he had previously not known about the metal soldiers. Those had to have been a recent development, as someone should have known about them before now.

Falia reacted quickly. “In which case, we’ll need to take Human hostages. These Humans are more wary of attacking if they are with us. We want to take every precaution to avoid an attack today.” On her cue several of the Vitakarian soldiers moved through the crowd and took hostages at ‘random’, which translated to his soldiers, Cycelea, and himself. He put up a faux resistance, though eventually played the role of a defeated citizen.

Eight of them were finally chosen, and brought before the Sargon who looked them over for an uncomfortably long time. He looked into the eyes of each one of them for a minimum of a few seconds before moving to the next one. The last he focused on was Cycelea. He stayed on her for half a minute. “Complexion irregular for this region. State your name and citizenship status.”

The hell? Neil hadn’t thought to think that Cycelea’s skin color would have any kind of impact. Were there secretly alien racists? “My name is Jacklyn,” Cycelea said quietly, putting up a show of her own. “Jacklyn Myers. I’ve lived here for several years, I’m telling the truth.”

“Human complexion does not necessarily indicate living area,” Falia said, trying to shake the sudden suspicion. “She is not the only Human in this area to have similar complexion.”

“Cross-check records,” the Sargon commanded to the Custodian just behind him. “Jacklyn Myers.”

“Accessing Fort McMurray citizenship database,” the flat electronic voice of the Custodian said, with no visual indicator of what was going on. “One entry found. Ethnicity is listed as Caucasian. Discrepancy detected.”

“It must be a mistake!” Cycelea said, Neil got the impression that she wasn’t acting here. “It has to be.”

The Sargon lifted a fist, motioning she needed to be quiet. “Likelihood of Human administrative incompetence high. Update database to accurate data. Continue forward Overseer.”

Never had Neil been so happy for the perceived incompetence of the government. Holding in a sigh of relief, they began exiting the town to follow the typical patrol path. The Sargon asked few questions, and seemed to mostly be observing the countryside and town as they walked through it. It was close to an hour before they reached the beginnings of the forest, where the Sargon saw the efforts of their psychological war on the aliens.

Frozen corpses of Borelian and Vitakarians were thrown out, the former mostly just bones which littered the entire patrol route. One of his soldiers had also had the idea to stick playing cards on the bodies in various places. In the mouth, in chinks in the armor, or in the skin itself once it had been opened with a knife. Neil personally didn’t find it that intimidating, and a waste of good
cards, but if it made the aliens a bit more afraid, he allowed it.

“This is the most common site of attacks,” Falia said, motioning to the foreboding and silent woods, only punctuated by the whistling winds through the trees. “Doesn’t matter how many we send, four, eight, nothing is guaranteed. They leave the bodies as a message.”

The Custodians were moving to the bodies, one of them delicately plucking the Queen of Hearts from the mouth of a frozen Vitakarian. “Human playing card. Significance unknown. Similar cards noticed in nearby bodies.”

“Container found,” another Custodian picked up another gift they had left. Neil kept the smile off his face as the Custodian opened it. “Contents identified as Borelian. Attached note reads “Send more”.”

“They’ve been leaving these,” Falia sighed, stepping towards the Sargon, disgust in her voice. “It has…made some of us uneasy. We had previously not known that Humans eat their enemies.”

The Sargon looked between the contents of the container, the corpses, and the aliens which had accompanied him, then the Human ‘hostages’. Neil did not especially like how hard the Sargon was trying to think about this. This was definitely not a stupid alien. “Human likelihood of eating sentient creatures is low, likely purely psychological warfare. Successful psychological warfare.”

He looked to Falia. “Bodies placed deliberately, includes various attachments and symbols designed to provoke a psychological connection to them and induce fear or uneasiness at their presence. This implies that one or more of these Humans has training in psychological warfare, has training in engaging guerilla conflicts. Likely ADVENT support. ADVENT support implies extensive resources not possible for guerilla locals. Weaponry used to kill forces also insufficient for local hunters or forces.”

The Sargon was not supposed to have figured that out. Even if he was guessing, it was a scarily accurate guess, which meant that it was only a matter of time before he began reaching the logical possibility of psionic support.

Fuck. He might need to signal the attack now. When he’d heard Sargons were smart, he hadn’t expected to be dealing with some kind of organic machine.

“We haven’t found evidence of ADVENT activity,” Falia made an attempt to deflect. Cycelea must have been giving direct instructions. “When they ambushed the first patrol, their weapons were probably taken. Not to mention Humans here are more skilled at survival than most of their kind.”

The Sargon appraised the entire group; his mind impossible to guess under the helmet. “Move the four of them away,” he commanded. Neil found himself being forced slightly closer towards the tree line, and turned around. Three of his other soldiers had also been moved, visibly worried and he couldn’t blame them.

The Custodians had their weapons trained on them. “Do not move,” the Sargon ordered. “Soldiers, move away from them.”

The Vitakara who had held them returned beyond the invisible line in the snow the others were on, and he was suddenly yanked into the air with something wrapping around his arms, legs, and throat. He heard nothing behind him, but instinctively knew what was lifting him up, with only the barest amount of weight being put on his toes preventing him from immediately suffocating.”

“ADVENT support implies psionic support,” the Sargon said. “Possibility of base personnel
compromise is high. I have been keeping reports on this base for weeks, Overseer, well before you sent an official request. I suspect a significant amount of personnel are threatened or compromised by ADVENT forces and they must be purged today. Humans have likely established psionic commands to make attack of allied forces or species impossible. We will determine who is compromised now."

There was no choice now. The attack needed to be signaled. Three of these Custodians and a Sargon, not to mention at least four Seekers. Assuming they were the ones he had previously read about, the Seekers could be disposed of fairly easily, but he had no idea about the Custodians or Sargon.

No one had so far managed to kill one, and if their combat skills were equal to their mental skills… this was not going to go as well as he had hoped. It was already moving onto the worst-case scenario. Send the signal Cycelea, he thought, as he saw the Falia aim her weapon at him. Within seconds the game would be up and all of them would die.

The air seemed to be charged with electricity as Falia shifted her rifle up and shot the Seeker, while the other Vitakara in unison, shot at the other Seekers before turning their weapons on the unprepared Mutons. The remaining four Humans, Cycelea included, dashed to the woods as gauss and plasma fire rained from behind the tree as the Snowtroopers unleashed their arsenals.

Neil yanked the mechanical coils off of him just in time to see the Sargon and Custodians spring into action. The massive Muton grabbed Falia by her head in a surprisingly quick motion, and jabbed an armored thumb into the eye then used that as a grip before he crushed part of her head before tossing the body to the ground; yellow blood staining the snow and his hand.

The Custodians shot at the compromised aliens with merciless precision, killing them in a few shots to the head or neck. Their focus on the aliens allowed the majority of Humans to scamper to the woods for cover, although Neil saw two get mowed down by Custodian fire. The Sargon was reaching for his plasma cannon as the crack of gauss weapons slammed into his armor.

“Pin the Sargon down!” Neil called as one of the Snowtroopers tossed him a rifle. “Everyone else kill the others!”

The Custodians were marching into the woods, unafraid of the barrage of fire, and Neil soon saw why, as the Custodian took several direct hits from a Snowtrooper right before a few plasma shots from its own rifle finished him. The Custodian suddenly froze in place. “Shoot it now!” Cycelea called, a hand extended toward it. “I can’t hold it for long.”

Someone tossed a grenade at it, and Neil emptied an entire clip into the head and chest of the thing, bringing the sparking body to the ground. The Sargon was using his plasma cannon now, and the forest was lit up with the bright green bolts and splintering trees. A crack signaled the fall of several of the smaller ones, ironically creating more cover.

More Snowtroopers fell; two, then three by the remaining Custodian and the plasma barrage of the Sargon. A round slammed into the rifle held by the Custodian, and it exploded in its hand, making it stumble back, but not actually killing it. Neil also saw that it was slowly repairing the wounds it had, but luckily too slow to protect itself against the barrage of gauss fire.

Then only the Sargon was left. The armor had taken a large beating, but he was dedicated in his pursuit to leveling the forest. More Snowtroopers fell or were injured, while Cycelea once more extended a hand, sweat beading her face and locked in intense concentration. “Aim for the head!” Neil yelled, and every single firearm shot where he directed.
The downside of the massive size of the Sargon was that he was a big target that couldn’t hide behind cover they could, and was in perpetual exposure. But now the tide had turned, and not even the armored helmet of the Sargon could protect against the hail of metal.

Neil didn’t know who fired the last shot, but that had been enough to send the massive alien to the ground, shaking it as he hit the thin layer of snow and onto a pile of Vitakara bones and corpses. The snowy battlefield grew silent once again, as all of them stood cautiously.

“Well,” Cycelea finally said, looking at the corpses of Humans and aliens. “That…could have gone better.”

Neil just nodded. “Yes, it could have. But we killed it, at least.” He eyed her closely. “You didn’t tell me you were a telekine.”

She sniffed. “Trust me, I’m not. You just saw the extent of my telekinetic capabilities, and I have a pounding headache because of it. Don’t ask me to do it again, please.”

“Take something to help with it,” he instructed. “We’re not done yet.”

She grimaced. “We still have the other three of those Custodians in the town to deal with.”

“Yes, we do,” he reloaded his weapon. “Everyone that’s still able needs to prepare to move out. We’re on an accelerated timetable now. Our primary objective is complete; now we have to finish the job.”

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Backroads - Argentina

2/5/2017 – 5:14 P.M.

In a crowded car with other Lancers, Jaylin felt like the talks had gone very well. Abby had said that the government was cleared for now, and were taking steps to ensure that their own agencies weren’t compromised in some way. Good in that they weren’t a potential enemy, and bad in that it meant that they didn’t really know where the Phantom Division was operating from, or what their plans were.

Abby had clearly not let her guard down, as the moment they walked into the car, she rolled around a massive case to a changing area and then emerged wearing a kind of armor she’d never seen before. It almost looked like it was made out of stone, and had an odd symbol on the front of it. It almost resembled XCOM armor in a way, especially the helmet, but she got the distinct feeling it wasn’t something XCOM had made.

She was riding without the helmet now, and Jaylin decided it was probably safe enough to ask some questions. “The armor,” she said, nodding towards it. “XCOM?"

Abby gave a faint smile. “Not exactly. An…appropriation of alien tech.” She tapped the chest. “They won’t be missing it.”

“What’s it made out of?” One of the Lancers asked. “Looks like stone.”

“Don’t know, and don’t remember the designation the science teams gave,” Abby answered, shaking her head. “Doubt its stone. If I recall, it’s a combination of alien alloys and an exotic material not found on Earth. Extremely durable and strong.”
"Huh," another Lancer said. "Shame it's extraterrestrial. Those would make some excellent suits of armor."

"I'd test it out first," another said. "Looks strong, but who knows?"

"This suit can take direct plasma shots," Abby said with a smile. "Trust me, I've used it before."

"So how many aliens have you killed then?" A Lancer asked. "I've only got six so far."

"Every XCOM soldier has kills in the double digits," Abby said. "I'm no exception. More than thirty, I think. Just aliens too."

"Damn," one whistled. "Even your intel agents have higher killcounts than us."

"I'm sort of an exception," Abby clarified. "I was a soldier before I transferred to Intelligence."

"Why make that change?" Jaylin asked, having been curious about that for a while. "Not a common transition."

Abby went silent for a moment. "I took the advice of a friend. I think he'd have approved of my choice."

From her tone, Jaylin suspected that this friend was no longer alive. She figured it was best to not keep pressing forward after that. It was rare in war that soldiers didn't lose at least some of their friends, and Abby was clearly no exception. Jaylin didn't know how much that changed for intelligence agents, but from some things she read it was the same or worse.

A dangerous line of work, intelligence was.

That seemed to have sent the entire convoy truck into some reflective silence. Jaylin herself had had quite the change of career, from Riot Police, to Peacekeeper, to now ADVENT intel attaché. It was an interesting development, and one where she felt she was making some kind of impact, even if it was fairly small.

Definitely more dangerous, especially since an Ethereal was involved, but that was one of the interesting parts of it.

"Convoy one under fire," the driver stated into their ear. "Potential threats spotted on the road. Initiate defensive protocols."

All of them were moving at the words as the convoy slammed to a halt, and the Lancers grabbed their weapons, as did Abby. Jaylin readied her riot shield, remembering the plan. There was an extensive amount of Lancer-tier equipment stored in cases in the back which the Lancers would go to and then use against the enemy. The convoy trucks would be used for cover, and the psions would either protect against psionic attacks, or use their abilities offensively.

"Guess they were watching us," Abby muttered, putting on her helmet. "Let's make them regret it."

Leading the charge she pushed open the door and the Lancers and Jaylin charged out after her into a hail of what looked like white plasma fire and gauss shots from a distance. A quick look around the area confirmed that it was an excellent place for an ambush. The road went through a shallow gorge with forested hills which allowed plenty of sniping range and vision.

The road itself had no cover outside of the convoy trucks, but those would have to suffice. Several
of the Lancers opened up the doors, and slid down additional metal sheets which extended to the ground in order to provide protection to their feet and legs, as they returned fire to the forests and hills while the other Lancers recovered their additional equipment.

“There is definitely a psion with them,” Marco said over the comms. “Me and Protopriest Kil are beginning protection. Until we confirm, do not take what you see as reality.”

The first convoy truck suddenly exploded in a rain of metal and fire, knocking down pretty much everyone nearby and throwing the Lancers to the ground. Someone had to have died there, and Jaylin couldn’t see who. She then remembered that that convoy truck had been the one which held the SHIV, and while she couldn’t completely see through the smoke, she was pretty sure that they were down their one and only SHIV.

Wonderful.

Through the smoke she saw the form of an alien, but this one didn’t fit the formal description of the Phantom Division.

The armor was back and sleek, but unlike the descriptions provided, it had obvious heavy weapon systems incorporated into it. The wrist had several launchers, and there were twin micro-missile launchers on the shoulders. The figure was massive as well, and was manually reloading the launchers. In the distance she saw several black armored forms dashing down the hills – these were the expected soldiers of the Phantom Division. Figures in black armor, no markings or even notable armor segmentation.

What worried her was their known capability to go invisible.

Some of the downed Lancers rose to their feet, to the clear surprise of the alien in the heavy armor. They had definitely not been expecting Lancers then. In torn and damaged armor, the Lancers charged the alien trying to bring him down. The other Lancers had acquired their full weaponry, and were firing back at the aliens with more accurate precision.

“They will try and come from behind!” Abby yelled, firing her plasma weapon into the forest. “Watch for their invisibility!”

Watch for something they couldn’t see? Jaylin figured she just meant for them to be aware that was within their capabilities. But multiple Lancers were watching their backs, ready for any kind of attack. “This is Lancer Valdez to all nearby outposts,” one of the Lancers near Jaylin was saying. “We are under attack and require immediate assistance.”

Several shots rang out, and a Lancer by the third convoy went down. The helmet was shattered, and the head definitely bruised, but the Lancer managed to get back up-

Only to be shot again, and this time he stayed down. It was honestly more than Jaylin had expected. Maybe Lancer-tier helmets could have protected him more, but they were stuck with weaker ADVENT soldier armor. “This is definitely her!” Kil shouted through the comms. Jaylin saw the woman, on one knee and the air shimmering around her. “She’s strong!”

“There they are!” A Lancer shouted as a Phantom Division alien materialized out of thin air holding an impossibly thin blade. It was stabbed into the nearest Lancer who twisted and managed to only have it stuck in his upper left chest and not heart. They did use nanoblades it turned out… and those were strong enough to penetrate Iron Skin.

But the Lancer was not dead, and lashed out with a mace in his hand and slammed it into the head
of the alien, sending it sprawling to the ground, and he leapt on top of it and kept bashing until it was dead and two more of the soldiers had appeared and began firing at him, killing him for good. The other Lancers used the advantage to charge the aliens, some carrying melee weapons while others fired their rifles.

Jaylin turned back to focus on the other front, with more plasma fire coming down on her. Ah, there. Abby was engaging several Phantom Division soldiers at once, moving extremely fast in her armor and absorbing multiple shots at once. She definitely hadn’t exaggerated the durability of the armor. Jaylin lined up her weapon, and fired off a few shots at the leftmost alien who was kneeling behind some self-made cover.

She scowled, wanting to get a better shot, and briefly stood partially exposed to fire again.

Jaylin never heard the shot that killed her.

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Volk had to hand it to ADVENT, they’d planned for this to happen. From the moment he’d seen the remainder of the convoys had responded to him shooting out the tire in formation, it was very clear that they had a plan and protocol for an attack ready to go, and more importantly, were disciplined to actually go through with it.

There were psions with them as well, which they’d known about. He wished that Asaru would beat them so they could get this mission done faster, because otherwise ADVENT was going to find them and cause a lot of problems. She had to be more powerful than two psions, right?

Then there was the interesting detail that the ADVENT soldiers who were escorting them were not standard soldiers, but ADVENT special forces. Almost definitely Lancers. There were no others he could think of who could take two direct shots to the head. Which meant that he needed to prioritize his shots a bit more.

Elena was similarly positioned to provide sniper fire, as were a few more of his men. As he observed the battle taking place, he looked to the composition of the soldiers. The Lancers were all wearing standard soldier armor. That was helpful. There were two soldiers in Peacekeeper attire, one of them Riot Control. There were a couple who were completely obscured not wearing any armor – likely the diplomats and another psion.

Then there was the XCOM agent who seemed to be invincible.

Volk was working on how best to deal with her. At least she was being held up by the Division soldiers. That would be enough.

“Target non-Lancer personnel,” he stated. “Thin their numbers. Take the Lancers off Joreal if you can.”

The first clue that these should have been Lancers in disguise was when several of them rose from the explosion from Joreal and began charging the alien. The massive Vitakarian was holding his own easily enough, and seeming to enjoy facing the two Lancers, but Volk wondered where the advantage really lay. Both were extensively modified, both were motivated, and both intended to kill the other.

Two on one. Not odds Volk would ever support.

While his snipers dealt with them, he quickly ran through how to quickly thin the numbers. The easiest way was the elimination of all non-Lancer soldiers – who likely would not be augmented.
Good enough. He focused his sights on the female Peacekeeper. Definitely Riot Control, as her shield was up and she used it to help protect against plasma fire.

He felt he could easily take off her head where she was now, but she was clearly wanting to get a better shot on one of the Division soldiers attacking Agent Gertrude. And...there. She peeked out just a little bit more than usual, and that was all he needed to fire. The shattered armor splattered red, and her corpse fell to the ground.

One down.

He moved to the other Peacekeeper. He was also trying to shoot at the Division soldiers attacking Gertrude, but he was not even pretending to be careful. Almost as if the snipers didn’t exist for him. Volk only felt minor disappointment at such an obvious lack of situational awareness. Before the body hit the ground he was already scanning for where the others were hiding.

Another down.

The next shot would require a reload. “Unidentified unarmored female down,” Elena reported tonelessly. “Executing.” A second shot rang out, essentially confirming the kill. Likely one of the diplomats. Not exactly a dangerous combatant, but not one they needed alive. The enemy psions were unfortunately proving to be a lot more difficult to find.

They were smart. Even the armored Priest was keeping herself protected. Against an Ethereal, they needed everything they could. Volk was taking Asaru out of the equation, and assuming she was stuck until the psions were dead. Or at least one was. The Lancers were dropping, but they were holding surprisingly well against the Division.

Time for the nuclear option. Volk was extremely hesitant about using this little development of the Phantom Division, but it was warranted here. “Get rid of the cover. Commence nanite destruction.”

He loaded a highly specialized cartage with a single nanite round. It was essentially hollow, and contained nothing but short-term nanites which would eat through everything for a one-minute period. He just needed to place them in a useful area, and that would be sufficient. So he aimed on the ground behind the wreckage of the third convoy, likely where one of the psions was hiding behind, and fired.

Confirmations rang out as his snipers performed similar actions. While he reloaded with more standard rounds, he peeked through to see the damage. Several had shot the Lancers, who were screaming as the nanites ate into their skin and they couldn’t protect themselves. More screams wafted up, and forced more out into the open to get away from the moving black spots of death.

Several more down.

One of their psions is no longer defending them. Asaru’s voice appeared in his head. The other cannot protect them. They are lost. Capture the XCOM agent.

Volk allowed a satisfied smile as he turned his attention to the final objective. Turned out that all of his concerns had been for nothing.

But it wouldn’t be a victory until Agent Gertrude was captured.

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They were going to lose.
It was an odd sensation coming to that conclusion, especially as she blasted the head of the alien in front of her apart after a sustained barrage. But the tide had turned, if it had ever been in their favor to begin with. Risking a glance back showed a bunch of half-destroyed convoy trucks and the aliens finishing off the last of the Lancers.

The other massive alien had killed one of the Lancers on his own, and the other was being shot from snipers in the tree. The psions must be dead, which meant that her time was running out. Her own armor was still reliably taking the white plasma shots, but she knew that alone against the Phantom Division she would die.

What the hell had she been thinking?

Going up against an Ethereal with what she’d had was not nearly enough to defeat an Ethereal like her. Plans and strategies didn’t help when Nebulan and the Phantom Division could just attack them, rendering any plan they had useless.

She had underestimated the Ethereal, still. Been played or done as much as she could, it didn’t matter now. She was not equipped to fight an Ethereal like this now, much less kill one. She needed to get out of here if she wanted to live, and the longer she fought, the less chance there was of that.

Abby hated it, but there was no other choice. The other Phantom Division soldiers were either running towards her with nanoblades in their hands or firing with their weapons. She was still nowhere near spent, so she charged the last place they might expect – directly into the sniper nests. She charged one of the surprised Phantom Division, and lifted the soldier into the air before tossing him behind her with a force that surprised even her.

She needed to push the suit to its limits one day.

Bounding up into the forest, she suddenly ran smack into a tree. Or more accurately, mowed down a small sapling. Her head split in a pounding pain as she realized that the forest seemed to be shifting and phasing in and out of existence as her Manchurian Restraints worked to combat the hostile psionic influence.

A figure stood in the middle of the shifting forest. The form of a Vitakarian woman. “Your people put up a fight, agent,” Nebulan’s voice was layered and rich, and she had no idea if it was even remotely close to her real one or not. “But you cannot fight an Ethereal. Not like this.” The alien smiled as Abby took a tentative step forward, the pain in her head splitting as she grimaced under her helmet.

“What did you think would happen, agent?” Nebulan asked, more genuine than mocking. She sounded almost disappointed as she stepped forward, hands clasped behind her back. “Does Aegis think so little of me that he would send a lone XCOM agent and a few psions to combat me?”

Abby took a shot at her with the pistol, which went through the head of the illusion, who still continued speaking as yellow ichor leaked out of the remains of the head. “Foolish. Unfortunate. You would have been useful to us, agent. Much of your species would be, but they are being turned to follow a losing side.”

“Losing,” Abby choked, falling to one knee, hard to think straight as even the ground seemed to shift from grass, to gravel, to empty space; the pain in her head reaching a breaking point. “You may kill me, alien, but you will not stop us. You will wish I was the only thing you will face, because there will be a reckoning for my death.”
The illusion of Nebulan shifted and changed until Abby was looking at a reflection of herself, although one in the uniform of the Collective. “Kill you, agent?” She said softly, leaning down and looking into her eyes. “No, not yet. We need to learn everything about you. You’ve raised many, many intriguing questions.” The eyes briefly glanced to the symbol on Abby’s armor. “You will die, agent,” she continued slowly. “But not today. Not yet.”

A crack from a weapon fired, and Abby felt the leg supporting her shatter and she collapsed onto the ground, white-hot pain shooting up her leg. The pressure on her mind disappeared, and she found herself on the ground in an Argentinean evening, breathing heavily into the orange-blue sky with clouds passing overhead.

Would it be the last thing she saw?

A figure wearing a brown hooded trench coat, with a mask underneath entered her field of vision, a pistol in his hand. She wondered if he would say something, but he just put a boot on her arm to keep it in place. She used the other to lash out and he promptly shot the gap in her elbow, causing her to scream out in pain.

“I wouldn’t do that again, Agent,” he said, the mask synthesizing whatever his real voice sounded like. “We only need you alive, not mobile. Save yourself some pain.”

“Traitor,” she hissed as he pulled out a rectangular device.

He looked over to her. “To you, perhaps.” Placing the device on the gap in her arm, she felt something be inserted into her and slowly found herself falling unconscious and the world blacking out around her. The last thing she saw a white cloud, and the fading orange light.

Then she drifted off into a painful sleep.
“They definitely got a call out,” Volk said as the Phantom Division soldiers continued to strip the ADVENT soldiers of their weapons, armor, and recovered their own dead as the fires caused by the convoy truck explosion kept dying down. “We shouldn’t loiter here any longer than we have to.”

“We’re working as fast as we can,” Joreal said, as he was slowly doing some field repairs to his armor. “To their credit, they put up a good fight despite being horribly outmatched.”

Volk however felt like something was wrong with how this had happened, and it all centered around the XCOM agent who was lying on the ground before him, now properly restrained. He would have done something to make sure her wounds were at least patched, but her armor absolutely refused to come off, and when he’d tried digging around, little wires had sprouted up and stabbed into his hand.

It had hurt, to put it lightly.

“So what are we going to do with her?” Volk pointed to the woman. “I mean, you want to get her out of her armor, be my guest. But we need to make a decision.”

Joreal just looked at him, pausing his cleaning of armor. “What decision? It’s not like we’re just going to leave here, definitely not now. We can get the armor off later.”

Volk just tapped his own lightly armored chest. “Question: What exactly do you think XCOM is going to do next?”

“Try and find us,” Joreal said. “I’d assume they would. Probably won’t rely on ADVENT.” He paused. “Who will also be after us since we killed several Priests, Intelligence agents, and a diplomat for good measure. But same problem. How are they going to find us?”

Volk sighed. “Have you not considered the possibility that this very odd and unique suit of armor just might have a way to track it? Which means we might be leading ADVENT and XCOM straight to our base of operations. If we get her out of the armor, we don’t have to worry about that. Bringing her back with it is just asking for XCOM to quite possibly bring down the cavalry on us.”

“I have looked into her mind,” Asaru materialized beside them, mimicking the agent herself for some reason, including her voice. “From what I have found, the suit likely does not have a tracking device. And if my suspicion is correct…well, we cannot leave it behind, no matter the risk.”

Volk just stared. Which wasn’t as effective with his helmet on, but he was not going to just consider that a good explanation. “Two questions: First, how thoroughly have you examined her mind? Second, is that confirmed she doesn’t have a tracker, or is it possible that she doesn’t know there is one?”

“We did a quick scan of the suit,” Joreal reminded him. “Didn’t detect any outgoing signals.”
“Yes, because there’s no possibility those could be hidden,” Volk noted sarcastically. “If you’ve never seen something like this before, then it is completely possible that that little issue could be bypassed. You saw how much damage that took. This is not made by amateurs – and was likely not easy to make.”

“I have seen enough of her mind to know she at least believes there is no tracker,” Asaru finally said. “The…conditioning she has been subjected to forces me to not push too hard, otherwise it will break her mind. But she is too valuable to leave behind.”

“What do we actually know about it?” Volk asked. “You seem to suspect something.”

“That it is possible that she works for someone besides XCOM,” Asaru said slowly, looking down at the restrained woman. “That suit has only been seen once. And that she is still wearing it is… concerning. I will tell you if my suspicions are confirmed, but we will not leave her behind. She will need to be moved off-world.”

“Alright, fine,” Volk settled for that non-answer, and fully intended to press her on it later. “Then we should do the transfer somewhere besides HQ. So if there is a tracker, we don’t compromise our main base of operations.”

“How?” Joreal asked, motioning up. “Call down a transport and use a Gateway we don’t have? Our options are limited here. Going back to HQ is the quickest solution since ADVENT and XCOM will be all over this area in hours.”

“Then we should just kill her and cut our losses,” Volk scowled. “No, I don’t like it, but I also didn’t expect this woman to have armor glued to her skin that’s somehow more advanced than your own. Not worth compromising everything just to maybe learn what it is and how she got it. Next time we should be more prepared for this possibility so it doesn’t happen again. But for–“

“Overruled, Volk,” Asaru raised a hand, shaking her head. “Risk or not, it’s worth it if I’m right. Load up her body, administer medical nanites for her wounds. I don’t want her dying because we couldn’t get her armor off.” Two nearby Phantom Division soldiers complied and began getting the needed tools to prepare the unconscious agent.

“You’re making a mistake,” Volk warned, not bothering to disguise how utterly stupid he thought she was being. “You’re going to potentially risk everything for…what? A suit of armor?”

“Bases can be rebuilt or established,” Asaru said, some steel entering her own voice as she looked at him. “And you could very well be wrong. For this, I am most certainly prepared to take risks. This is something the Imperator himself will be directly interested in. I will not throw it away because you think the risk is too high.”

“Duly noted,” Volk said icily. “It’s a good thing I made contingency plans in this kind of scenario. You focus on your special armor and I’ll try and make sure you don’t end up collapsing everything we’ve done so far. And don’t think about trying to stop me.” He stormed directly through Asaru’s illusion to find Elena and his soldiers.

Assuming that by some miracle everything worked out smoothly, Asaru was definitely going to have to explain herself more than she had right now. He didn’t understand it. Asaru was not an idiot, and seemed to enjoy devising plans and contingencies that made sense. This was the first time where she was being, for lack of a better word, an idiot.

No matter how valuable Gertrude was, she definitely wasn’t worth risking an entire operation. Not to Volk. So the best he could do was try and mitigate the damage this decision could cause. And
since they were keeping her alive, maybe have a nice chat with her right before she was given to the Imperator.

This turned a nearly perfect mission into one still up in the air. At least it had gone well so far.

Now it just had to stay that way.

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Situation Room, the Praesidium – Classified Location
2/5/2017 – 10:51 P.M.

“Attacked?”

“We’ve lost all contact with them, and ADVENT forces on the scene confirmed it was the same one Agent Gertrude was a part of,” Zhang informed tightly. “Everyone there is dead, anything left was likely stripped, all enemy corpses are gone.”

“And Agent Gertrude?”

“Gone. No body or indication she is alive or dead.”

“If she was wearing her armor, they would have wanted it,” Creed recalled, pursing his lips. “Unfortunately I don’t think they’d be able to get it off. So they probably took her body back to wherever their base is.”

“Get the Chronicler up here right now,” the Commander said without turning to look at Jackson. “If Nebulan is brazen enough to attack us this directly, we will respond in kind.”

“The operation was a mistake,” Zhang muttered, shaking his head. “I did not expect such a brazen attack. Not yet. Otherwise I would have given her a dedicated force…” he trailed off. “This is my fault, Commander. An ill-conceived plan against Nebulan.”

“We pay the price for underestimating Ethereals,” the Commander said, sighing. “What we do now is fix this, Director. And if Agent Gertrude is alive, you apologize to her yourself. Keep in contact with ADVENT and I want you working with them to find out where the aliens are hiding.”

“Forensics teams are going over the wreckage and bodies now,” Zhang nodded. “Causes appear to be varied. Nanoweaponry, plasma, and even physical projectiles are reported used. Explosives too, judging from the wreckage.”

“Even Lancers are going to lose to the Phantom Division every time if they aren’t prepared,” Creed said, leaning on the holotable and looking on the blank map. “Combine that with Nebulan’s support, and controlling the ambush point, and they never had a chance. You need an XCOM and PRIEST joint force just for Nebulan, let alone when she’s supported by the Phantom Division.”

“Which will be provided if we find her,” the Commander said, face set in stone as he considered what would happen next. “The conflict is reigniting. They are moving towards their next major attack. The operations in Canada are damaging them, and so they are responding in kind. It will continue to escalate.”

“They lost a Sargon, we lost an Intelligence agent,” Jackson noted quietly. “Objectively…there are worse trades.”
“Objectively, yes,” the Commander sighed. “But Abigail has been with XCOM since the beginning…if she dies…”

“Then all of the original XCOM soldiers will have died in this war,” Creed finished somberly. “Patricia had mentioned how she was ‘almost the last’. But she isn’t dead yet. I don’t believe that. Either of them.”

“Patricia is on the Temple Ship with the Imperator,” the Commander reminded him. “If she’s still alive, it means she is bait or has some other role in his plan. Or worse, being experimented on. I don’t know why they would keep Abby alive either…the Manchurian Restraints prevent her from cooperating, and I suspect she doesn’t know more than what the aliens know already.”

“The suit,” Creed reminded him.

“Which also doesn’t make sense,” he scowled. “They would have to guess it has a tracker in it, even if it doesn’t, the risk is extremely high. Taking it doesn’t seem right, even if they want to get their hands on Sovereign tech. Not to mention they won’t get much out of it. It’s bonded to Abby somehow, and it might even destroy itself if forcibly removed.”

“Technology from an unknown Sovereign is valuable,” Jackson suggested, pacing around the table. “They have to suspect that one exists at this point. That might be worth risking being tracked down. Although they might reconsider if they knew Abby wasn’t actually an agent of T’Leth.”

The barrier to the Situation Room dissipated as the Chronicler stormed inside, eyes blazing with intensity. “Agent Gertrude has been taken?”

“Or killed, we don’t know,” the Commander answered, restarting the holomap. “They were ambushed and everyone was killed. Her body is missing. All we know is that she was wearing her suit. It is possible the Collective wants it for study.”

“When you say ‘self-destruct’…”

“The suit will cannibalize whoever is inside,” the Chronicler answered, not looking up. “And break the suit apart into tiny particles. Reconstruction is impossible.”

“So it’s possible that Abby could have just been killed then,” the Commander said.

“Possible, though unlikely,” the Chronicler said. “Otherwise T’Leth would have been notified. All of the suits and weapons have trackers that are undetectable by modern scanners which monitor user vitals and location. Losing a weapon is not a major development. Losing armor is because it means the suit – and user – are almost certainly dead.”

“And if nothing happens, you are not notified,” Zhang confirmed. “So you would not have been able to detect if she was wounded or not.”

“Yes, vitals only display life signs,” the Chronicler said, frowning. “There is the possibility of a manual self-destruct, but I would prefer not to-damn it!”

“What?”
“Good news and bad news,” the Chronicler said, face hardening. “Abby is alive and I have a very neat path to her latest location. The bad news is that her tracker just stopped transmitting ten minutes ago.”

“She’s dead?” Zhang asked.

“No, it stopped transmitting,” the Chronicler corrected. “Which means—“

“She was transferred off-world, into Collective territory,” the Commander finished. “We’re too late.”

“Except we have a direct location on Nebulan’s base!” Creed interrupted. “If it has a Gateway, it has to be important, especially in South America.”

“Let me see the map,” the Chronicler pushed forward, as he typed the coordinates on his map. “I’m inclined to agree with him. The Collective has almost no notable presence in the region. A Gateway would be a big piece of infrastructure for them. Ah, there we go.”

“In the middle of nowhere,” Jackson said, eying the location. “Interesting.”

“I’m not writing off Abby yet,” the Chronicler said, gazing intently down at the holotable. “The Collective will not learn anything, but she does not deserve to die through protecting T’Leth’s secrets. If we know where she was sent, Fiona can take a team to break her out. Assuming such an attack is possible. But holding her in a Blacksite is manageable.”

“And in the meantime we attack Nebulan,” the Commander finished. “Regardless of Abby, that is a step we should take. She will not attack our soldiers without consequence. Jackson?”

“Already on it,” she said, working furiously on her tablet. “Zhang, you forwarding all of this to ADVENT?”

“As we speak.”

“Tell them to bring overwhelming force for our friendly neighborhood illusionist,” Jackson had a lethal smile as she talked. “An army of MDUs and SHIVs will suffice. If they don’t want to just missile strike the location.”

“No. Only bomb it as a last resort,” the Commander interrupted. “I want to recover as much intel from that place as possible. We can always destroy it later. And I know we can put together a strong enough force to kill Nebulan.”

“Understood,” Jackson nodded. “Teams are being put together now. Aegis?”

“Yes.”

“If you would, Commander, I would like to send two people along on this operation,” the Chronicler said. “Both with a stake in the outcome.”

“Who?” The Commander asked. “Fiona?”

“Crevan Machas,” the Chronicler answered. “The finest artisan of T’Leth, and a designer of his technology. A powerful man in his own right as well. He was Fiona’s mentor. He has an interest in ensuring that this technology stays out of the hands of individuals like the Imperator.”

The Commander felt he could accommodate that. Knowing more about who was working with
“T’Leth was always welcome. “As long as he doesn’t tamper with anything and doesn’t deviate significantly from the plan, I’ll allow it. And the second?”

“Lincoln Harper,” the Chronicler said. “Led the Australian Resistance and worked with Abby in Australia. She helped save him once, and I suspect he would want to return the favor.”

“Done.” The Commander nodded.

“Commander?” Jackson interjected. “You said that you planned to kill Nebulan, not capture her?”

“If she surrenders, we will accept it,” the Commander said calmly, turning to her. “But until that point, my orders are her execution. Is that clear? And I want to talk to Vahlen.”

“Yes, Commander.” A pause. “What should I tell her?”

“That I want to do a field test.”

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Mess Hall, the Praesidium – Classified Location

2/5/2017 – 11:35 P.M.

It was just as well that his sleep schedule was all messed up, because then Oliver wouldn’t have found himself in such an interesting situation. He was now enjoying a decent meal with the Chronicler’s…subordinate? Friend? Whatever she was, Fiona, and opposite her was the odd Zudjari, Axis.

The alien was especially interesting since the Zudjari were something that he’d never seen before a few weeks ago. The vertically slit mouths were an interesting feature of the species, though it didn’t really impair them from what he could tell. Made sense. What was more interesting was that Axis had a very particular way of eating his food, or at least, arranging it.

Instead of picking one dish of each type from the limited amount of options, his entire plate this time consisted of small portions of vegetables. The only way this made sense was that he was experimenting with different types of food to see which one he liked best. After the incident with the chocolate and Vitakara, Oliver suspected that ADVENT was making sure aliens could actually eat their food before giving it to them.

He still wasn’t quite sure what to make of Fiona. She was fit, but didn’t have the physique of a soldier. She carried a sword of all things (although that was less strange when there were Templars around), could teleport, but also had white hair (probably dyed) and no gene modding that he could see. Or at least she had shared.

Oliver would have also been confused as to why Axis had made a point to sit by her, since the few other times they had interacted he had sat alone, but when Fiona explained that they had met before, and she was the reason he was here today, it made more sense. “So,” he said. “What’s your story? Must be a pretty interesting one for you to end up with the Chronicler.”

Fiona stopped chewing her food, looking at him thoughtfully. “Probably less interesting than you think, honestly.”

“Well, I’ve got time,” Oliver said. “And if you want my uninteresting life story, I can return the favor.”
“Do not ask for my life story, Human.” Axis added, not looking over.

“Private person or is that a Zudjari thing?”

Axis silently ignored him. Fiona snorted. “Well, for starters I was adopted. Didn’t really know my real parents, or had a desire to investigate much. But had a pretty normal childhood outside of that. My mother was a teacher and my father a fencer.”

“Explains the sword then,” Oliver noted.

“Yes, I loved watching him,” she said, her voice turning slightly distant. “Almost like a dance at times. Never thought I would actually need to use it, or would want to. Not in a world with guns and psionics.”

“Times change,” Oliver grunted. “And they change fast.”

“Anyway, I eventually moved away and through a series of very unfortunate events and bad decision making, ended up in a street gang, made some enemies of some killers, and spent a couple years on the run.” She took a long drink of her water. “Met someone who helped me, figured out my abilities, and offered to help and train me. Took him up on it, since I had nowhere else to go. And so I became part of the Chronicler’s little army.”

Yep, there was definitely a lot she was leaving out, although Oliver didn’t exactly blame her. Telling a stranger the bad decisions you made when you were younger was not really fun, and it was understandable she’d keep tight-lipped about it. It was interesting how it seemed anyone could end up in this if circumstances favored them, or they just got lucky – or unlucky depending on how you viewed it.

“Did your parents know?” He asked.

“They knew I was having some troubles,” Fiona shrugged. “But they know I’m fine now, although I definitely didn’t tell them the truth. I’ve still got some people who want to kill me, and since they know who my family is…well, a problem I just want to avoid.”

Oliver raised an eyebrow. “You never dealt with them?”

“Ha. No, I wish I had at times, but honestly they aren’t important and it would distract me at this point. If they ever come across me, I’ll happily kill them. But the Chronicler doesn’t want me wasting my skills on petty criminals. Best to let them stew in their impatience to try and find me…although by now I’m sure they’ve moved on too. We’ve both got better things to do now.”

“That we do,” Oliver agreed. “Although given how ADVENT operates, I’d bet they become a victim of this war by proxy. They don’t like those kind of people from what I’ve seen.”

Fiona smirked and pointed her fork at him. “Now that would be funny. Axis, is everything alright?”

Oliver saw that the Zudjari had spat out a half-eaten carrot and was staring at it in what appeared to be pure and unfettered disgust. “I cannot understand how you Humans tolerate this…thing. I do not know why I keep trying it.”

“You’ve…tried it before?” Oliver inquired.

“I try it every time I acquire a plate of your Human vegetables,” Axis said. “It is healthy to
continually challenge and reevaluate our tastes and perspectives. I question the validity of this when eating these sticks of orange rot.”

“Well, you could just…not eat them then?” Fiona suggested casually. “We all have different preferences.”

“No, because one of these times I may understand why carrots are good,” Axis insisted. “And if I stop eating them, then I will be less convinced that they are actually terrible.”

“Uh huh,” Oliver was tempted to laugh at the seriousness the Zudjari was displaying. “So intentionally doing things you don’t like is a Zudjari thing?”

“Within reason.” The alien began eating broccoli, which he seemed to like just fine. “If it is something other people enjoy and consume, there must be a reason for it, and an effort should be made to understand why people reach this perspective. If one does not continually reinforce their own opinions based on experience, why does their word on the subject have value?”


“You are not an Axis,” he said as an answer. “You do not possess the mindset for one.”

“And I’m perfectly happy with that,” she said, smiling. “Well, that’s interesting. I’d always wondered how you chose your meals.”

Oliver’s wristband began buzzing. He looked down at it in disbelief. “Mobilization,” he said slowly. “I’m being deployed.”

Fiona turned instantly serious. “What? An attack?”

“Don’t know,” he said, getting up. “But we’re being deployed. You might want to talk to the Chronicler. The war may have just started again.”

***

Unknown Location

Unknown Time

Abby actually couldn’t recall ever waking up in her armor, but there was a first time for everything.

She soon realized she couldn’t move.

The arm the man had shot wasn’t responding at all, and she could barely move her fingers. Her leg was similarly numb, although she noted that they must have at least repaired it somehow. Nanotech? She couldn’t think of another way they could have gotten under the armor without getting hurt or damaged.

But she was definitely restrained. There were metal restraints around all of her joints, as well as around her neck and torso. Even with the strength the suit gave her, it wasn’t much help if she couldn’t move at all. At least she wasn’t hanging suspended in the air, even if she felt like she was tied up against a wall.

The room she was in was a big square with bright white light illuminating it. There was nothing else in the room that she could see, aside from the small chair opposite her near the middle of the
He was wearing the same kind of uniform as the man who’d shot her, and the mask hanging from his belt confirmed it. He definitely wasn’t that old, and his beard was full and brown. His unkempt and fair long hair fell close to his shoulders, and was propped up by a dark green headband of all things around his forehead.

Abby also spotted the rifle which was propped up in the far corner, and the pistol also hanging from his waist. He held something in his hand, which she couldn’t see, and sat with one leg swung over the other. Waiting for her to wake up. She didn’t feel the need to encourage him, and the helmet at least made sure he couldn’t see her face.

She stayed like that for a few minutes. The man finally sighed. “You can drop the act, Agent. We have sensors. Maybe not the right stuff to break you out of that suit, but I do know if you’re conscious or not.”

“I’m surprised I’m still alive,” she said, not really feeling up to maintaining the ruse – especially since he seemed like he wanted to talk to her. She would have to be careful, but she was curious about these Humans who were working with the Collective.

“You can thank Asaru for that,” the man jerked a thumb towards the exit of the room. “If it were up to me, I would have killed you. A big security risk, but you’re apparently worth it. One reason why I’m here. Why exactly are the Ethereals so interested in that armor you wear?”

“Asaru?”

“An Ethereal,” the man said. “One I’ve been working with.”

“Ahh, Nebulan.”

“Is that her name,” the man allowed a laugh. “No wonder she sticks with Asaru. Assuming that’s her name at all. She strikes me as the kind to never share her real self with anyone.”

“Who are you?” Abby demanded. “I don’t recognize you from anywhere.”

“It would be really odd if you did,” the man said. “Since you’re going to die soon anyway, you deserve something. Konstantine Volikov. Or just Volk. Freelance mercenary or assassin, depending on your definition. Killed a lot of bad people over the years. Killed a lot of people associated with them too, who may not have been as bad.”

“How noble,” Abby said flatly. “One of the good assassins then? Now working against your own species?”

Volk smiled and raised a finger. “‘Good’ is somewhat subjective, don’t you think? But in the context of my line of work, I can safely say I was a lot more ethical than certain members of ADVENT. I didn’t take big contracts or do it for the money. People were suffering in some form? They got word to me and I took care of their problems.”

“And now you fight against us.”

“This may surprise you, agent,” he shrugged. “But not everyone thinks ADVENT is the best direction for our species. Call me a believer in classic democracy, but ADVENT is a bit too authoritarian for my tastes. They’re not the first of their kind, just look at history for that, but I can safely say that they’re the most competent – which to me, is very dangerous.”
Abby let out a sharp laugh. “Do you honestly believe that the *aliens* are going to be better?”

Volk uncrossed his leg, and leaned forward. “Better? Absolutely not.”

“What?”

“I’m not an idiot.” Volk seemed to find her surprise amusing. “The Ethereal Collective is no better than ADVENT, and as much as Asaru likes to blame a lot of it on ‘propaganda’ I’m not the idiot assassin she sometimes thinks I am. I don’t believe the Collective is worse, as they both commit atrocities – such as the experimentation on captives, invasion of planets or countries who oppose them, and so on.”

“But you still side with them over your own species.”

“I *do*,” he nodded. “Because the alternative is a future dominated by ADVENT – and unlike the previous incarnations of that kind of government, they will not fall to violent revolution or peaceful change over decades. The systems are not designed for that. They are designed to keep people loyal to ADVENT, approving of their constant watch. Their representatives ‘elected’ are chosen by the government, and any form of dissent and protest against anything they disagree with is met with swift and sudden *justice*.”

He paused. “It’s unfortunate. I do admire ADVENT’s competency, and some of their measures I do agree with. But the system will be abused far more than it already has been if it is allowed to win. I give Saudia and the Commander credit for putting it together. They learned, and if they win, it will be deserved. But I’m not going to let that happen without a fight.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Abby would have shook her head. “ADVENT was designed so that it couldn’t be abused.”

“Every single system invented can be broken and manipulated,” Volk countered. “ADVENT is no exception. I’ve done my research, which is helpfully public – Election Oversight has direct authority over who can and cannot run. Which is run by appointees from the Executive Branch. The Congress passes laws and legislation hidden from the public. I would say you probably know more than me what kind of extensive authority ADVENT Intelligence has over surveillance,” he waved a hand. “Granted, it’s not like that’s actually new. But at least there was at least an illusion that governments respected privacy. They don’t even bother with that anymore.”

“And what illusion are you under that the aliens will be any less controlling and more benevolent?” Abby shot back. “Do you *really* believe they will suffer rebellion or any kind of insubordination? Are you that naïve? The Ethereals don’t *care* about us, or the little people. They see themselves as better. Superior. ADVENT does what they feel is best for Humanity. I’ve *spoken* to one of them who says this! You can disagree with that, but I can guarantee that they believe every action they take is for the best interests of our species.”

Volk stood up, appraising her. “I am aware of Ethereal and alien superiority. Will the aliens be benevolent or controlling? I can’t say, but I can look to the other species. The Sectoids have autonomy. The Andromedons do as well. The Vitakara are under the Zararch in their police state – similar to ADVENT now that I think about it – but their circumstances are brought on through Ethereal manipulation and their innate pacifism. Humans are a little more likely to strike back, if you haven’t noticed.”

His lip twitched. “I’ve been promised certain things for the future governance of Humanity. Acceptable compromises for autonomy. Do I expect the aliens to follow through? Not completely. If they turn out to be just as bad as ADVENT, then I will happily wage the same war I am now.”
“Alright then,” Abby growled. “So why not do that now?”

“If I have the choice between a government established by Ethereals, or by ADVENT, I will take the Ethereals,” Volk explained. “ADVENT is too smart and competent for its own good. I don’t think I can win against it on my own. But the Ethereals? Too self-absorbed in their own importance, too focused on other things to be bothered to worry about their collective species. I’ve talked with enough aliens and read enough reports to know the Ethereals are simply not interested in managing a multi-species government, and rely on others to keep them in line. The Hive Commanders. Andromedon Federation. Zararch. No Ethereals.”

He looked down at the symbol on the chest of her armor. “In some way, Agent Gertrude, we both want the same thing. I would prefer our species not to be under an authoritative and controlling power, and for us to expand and grow our own influence. But our visions for Humanity differ too drastically. You believe ADVENT is the future and fight towards it. I abhor this future and will take on whatever means I can to change it – and make something better.”

He waved a hand aimlessly. “Will I succeed? Maybe, maybe not? I could still die, or Asaru could go back on her word and control my mind. But she’s seen it, and still done nothing. Perhaps she underestimates a mere Human, perhaps she does not fear because she is genuine. I can’t be neutral in this war, Agent, and you agree. Everyone must pick a side to support. I have chosen mine.” He gave a thin smile. “And ironically, for likely the same reasons as you have chosen yours.”

Abby let the silence hang for a minute. “Why are you telling me this at all?”

“Because I want to know what’s so special about that armor,” Volk nodded to her. “Asaru made a massive risk bringing you back without understanding it. Which means she knows something, and I want to know why.” He pursed his lips. “You deserve to know why a Human is, in your eyes, joining the wrong side. So I’ve told you, because you are going to die, Agent, one way or another. But if you care about the future, I need to know if there is something else to be aware.”

Abby had an idea of what they wanted, and she realized that they were going to be very disappointed. She allowed a laugh. “You caught the wrong person. You, or the Ethereals, aren’t going to be able to get anything out of me because I don’t know it. But there is something else out there. Something even the Ethereals fear.” She smiled under her helmet. “But they won’t tell you that.”

Volk appraised her for a minute, then nodded. “Thank you, Agent. I have what I wanted.”

“Tell Nebulan I’m sorry she wasted her time,” Abby said. “And that XCOM is coming for her now.”

“I didn’t come because Asaru asked me,” Volk said, turning away and picked up his chair. “I’m here on my own. She’s busy preparing to move you. I don’t know where, but you will be off Earth very soon. Within an hour at most. I wish you good luck.”

“Much appreciated,” Abby said dryly. “XCOM will be coming after you now too, and they will kill you.”

He just smiled, showing bright teeth. “I suppose we’ll see, Agent. I hope they put up as good a fight as you did.” Volk stepped out of the room before she could retort to his final words, and the hum of the room she was in became the dominant sound. The minutes ticked by, or maybe it was seconds. Time didn’t matter here.

There was a function in her HUD which had flashed ever since she had woken up, but she refrained
from thinking about it too much.

Not yet. Just wait a little longer and see what happens.

XCOM would come. She could only hope she was still around when it happened.

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**Throne Room of the Imperator – Temple Ship of the Ethereal Collective**

2/6/2017 – 12:15 A.M.

It was the first time Imperator had asked to speak to her in the middle of the night. A brief telepathic communication was all that was needed for her to be woken up and be fully awake. Mildly annoying, but she knew he wouldn’t have bothered if it wasn’t something important.

As it turned out, it was.

“There has been a development.” The Imperator sat on the throne overlooking the empty room. The hologram projectors were on, though not showing anything. Waiting for the appropriate moment, she supposed.

“What kind of development?” She asked.

“Nebulan’s actions in South America have come under ADVENT and XCOM investigation,” the Imperator said, with the hologram of South America helpfully appearing. “A team was formed to investigate, led by your former squadmate and now Intelligence agent Abigail Gertrude. Her team was primarily composed of these individuals.”

Pictures of several other ADVENT personnel flashed up, none of which she recognized. “I’m aware of Abby’s operation,” Patricia recalled. “Zhang had mentioned he’d be sending her there. I was never able to be updated since I’ve been…here.” She nodded to indicate the rest of the room. “What happened?”

“Nebulan ambushed their convoy and removed that threat to her operation,” the Imperator said slowly. “Agent Gertrude is recovered and will be transported to the Forge, where it will then be transferred to the Temple Ship.”

Patricia felt cold at that. This was definitely intentional. “Why?”

“Because I suspect she is affiliated with the Sovereign One, T’Leth, or aware of his operations,” the Imperator said, and the hologram of an armored figure appeared. Patricia wouldn’t have been able to make out the gender or identity, but she then remembered a very important thing she had previously forgotten.

“The armor,” she recalled. “The Chronicler. She spent a long time with them. We didn’t know what it was or how it worked. Sovereign tech was all we knew.”

“She is potentially compromised,” the Imperator said. “An agent of the Sovereign One.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Patricia shook her head. “She even said that what the Chronicler said when he was…controlled…was disturbing. If she was an agent-“

“And why would she keep the armor?” The Imperator asked. “Why would T’Leth allow someone not under his direction to take advantage of the technology within it? You may not have known
about it, but that does not change that she has likely been compromised. You cannot trust her.”

“You want me to speak to her,” Patricia said slowly. “Another test.”

“I suspected you would object to interrogating her as a Sovereign Agent,” the Imperator explained, shutting off the holograms. “But you are a person who could determine where her loyalty truly is. I have little interest in a lone XCOM agent. I only value the knowledge she has, and the armor she wears. Should those be provided to me, then I will allow her to be returned to XCOM.”

“If I convince her to give it to me,” Patricia finished. “She isn’t going to trust me here, and I won’t lie to her.”

“Then don’t.”

“And if I can’t convince her?”

“Then she will be turned over to Fectorian and the Voice to begin analysis,” the Imperator said. “I have not ruled out a possible rescue attempt from T’Leth to preserve his secrets, but he would not risk penetration of a fortress watched by Mosrimor himself. You would likely not see her again, but this is the first opportunity to learn about this T’Leth and his capabilities. A sacrifice, but a justifiable one.”

“And if I get her out of the suit, she will live,” Patricia repeated. “No strings attached.”

“I have not lied to you so far,” the Imperator stated. “I will not lie now. I do not give you false hope for your friend. You understand the stakes. How you handle Abigail Gertrude is up to you, but understand she will likely reject you for what you have come to realize.”

“I know.”

This was going to be difficult to put it very lightly. How was she going to convince Abby, who she was certain was not a Sovereign Agent, that she needed to tell her everything about it, give over a priceless suit of armor to the Imperator, and trust it was the right thing to do? Not to mention she was going to think Patricia was compromised and under the Imperator’s sway, even if that wasn’t true.

Was Abby really going to accept a seemingly-empty platitude of “This is not as simple as it looks”? Patricia had been able to do that, even if it had not been what she would call a fun experience. Not always pleasant to learn that the sides of the conflict you were in were not so clear cut. But Abby? She would call what the Imperator said lies, and say he was using her. It was frustrating because even if she told the truth, there was a very high possibility that it wouldn’t be enough.

Abby wasn’t a telepath who could verify if one was telling the truth or not. All she had to go on was trust and experience. Patricia really hoped that would be enough to make her at least listen. But if Abby was wearing that armor, she had a sinking feeling that XCOM itself was too far gone. Too influenced by a Sovereign One.

She hoped not. She hoped Abby would say otherwise. If she knew about what was recently going on at base at all.

“I will inform you when she arrives,” the Imperator said. “Think on how you will convince her.”

Patricia walked away, pondering how to do exactly that.
Skyranger, En route to Mission Site

2/6/2017 – 12:07 A.M.

Oliver really, really wanted to have been at the meeting when XCOM had decided to make… certain decisions. Decisions which, while certainly…unique, were utterly bizarre when viewed from any kind of reasonable standpoint. Of course, with XCOM, nothing was ever normal and by now he should have realized that.

But he imagined that this particular conversation had gone along the lines of the following.

“Everyone, we need a new weapon,” the Commander said. “Something that the aliens won’t ever expect. Something that no one would even think of as a good idea.”

Shen made an awkward cough. “Perhaps that would be because it wasn’t a good idea?”

“Quiet,” all of them said in unison.

“I’ve got one!” Zhang said ecstatically. “We make our suits of armor shoot nanites and can reproduce themselves! Nothing wrong could possibly happen!”

“Good, good,” the Commander said, but shook his head. “But too standard; too predictable. Next!”

“My turn!” Jackson said. “We make an AI that’s much better than anything they have! Nothing wrong can ever happen when making a machine smarter and faster than us!”

“Almost, almost,” the Commander muttered. “But we need to think outside the box, people!”

“I’ve got it!” Vahlen suddenly shouted. “We make an army of giant killer octopi and use them against the aliens!”

The room burst into applause with some of the Internal Council randomly shouting out “Brilliant!” as they toasted to this completely normal and sound idea and immediately drew up plans to make it reality, as well as the other, more mundane ideas.

And that was how XCOM ended up with giant killer octopi.

Giant killer octopi that made the happiest little trilling noise whenever they poked their heads out of the little aquarium that it rested in. It was downright creepy how there were different tones to its trilling, and it varied depending on the person in question. The Shoggoth seemed to like him…or so he hoped.

The Handler for the Shoggoth, Sylvia Allais, had not exactly made him feel better by telling all of them that “The Shoggoths are really, really smart. Don’t worry, they like Humans and would never hurt any of you.” It had taken every bit of willpower not to pull away when the black tentacle reached out and touched his skin, before being withdrawn back into its tank.

But not before it made the happy trilling noise.

Of course, Geist was fascinated by the creature, and hadn’t taken his eyes off the creature since they’d taken off, not even putting his helmet on. For all Oliver knew, he was trying to probe its mind. Zara Venator just coughed. “I hope these creatures live up to the hype. No offense, little
Cthulhu.”

The Shoggoth trilled. Zara stiffened. “Please tell me that was a coincidence.”

“It has eyes all around its body,” Sylvia explained happily; the young woman seemed ecstatic to be here, which was an interesting change. “They’re smart, like I said. He probably knows that he’s the center of attention and wants to make everyone happy.”

“So,” Analyn Roxas coughed. “You, ah, been doing this long?”

“XCOM brought me on because I did work with military dogs,” Sylvia said, letting the Shoggoth wrap its tentacle around her unarmored hand. “They wanted someone to do the same thing with Shoggoths. Granted it’s not quite the same thing, but they’re smart and easily trainable, and adorable in their own way.”

Oliver looked at the massive black tentacled creature. “Adorable.”

“Oh, yes!” Sylvia nodded. “You should have seen when I gave it a Rubik’s cube. It only took a few days for it to be solved.”

“What,” Zara said flatly. “Are you making that up?”

“Well, maybe embellishing it a bit,” Sylvia hesitated. “It’s not quite a full Rubik’s cube. But it is a cube where the sides can be manipulated. But we’re working towards helping them understand how to solve a full Rubik’s cube. Just need to build one that’s their size. The little ones we have just aren’t good enough.”

“A fascinating creature,” Geist finally said, still not taking his eyes off of it. “Their minds are near-impossible to penetrate.”

Oliver shot the psion a look. If Geist of all people was unable to take control of it, then that was certainly an interesting piece of information. “Really?”

“He is correct,” Crevan Machas said, speaking for the second time. “It has been designed while preserving the distributed intelligence of the octopi. Nearly impossible for any traditionally trained psion to control. A perfect weapon against Ethereals.”

Out of all of them, Crevan was the one who stood out from the group. The first thing Oliver had noted when the Chronicler had introduced him was that he was freakishly tall, standing well over six feet. His first instinct was “Genetic modification” but he had nothing to back it up. His blue-green eyes also added to this, which while it probably wasn’t an unheard-of color, it had to have been rare.

The only indication of his age was the greying hair which was kept neatly back and wasn’t overly long. The demeanor of the man was…restrained at best; almost standoffish. Crevan had not spoken much, aside from a few polite acknowledgements. He was almost certainly a psion, though what kind or how powerful was up for debate.

If he was with the Chronicler, he supposed very powerful indeed.

Which then made him wonder, as Crevan didn’t wear the stony armor that other soldiers of the Chronicler had, but instead an odd mix of armor and cloth, with the chest, legs and arms having silver engraved armor on the limbs, while a teal blue cloth ran underneath it all. He’d also seen it have a hood on the back, though Crevan was not wearing it now. The last odd note was he wore fingerless gloves that went up to the first joint.
He was an odd one, and Oliver was curious to see what he was capable of.

He definitely did not seem to like the Shoggoth though.

“Alright, enough playing around with the little hellspawn,” Zara stood up. “You’ve all been partially briefed on what’s going on, so I’ll just go over it again. We’re headed to where we believe Nebulan has a base of operations; we are expecting heavy resistance and Nebulan herself. That means telepathic attacks possibly from within the skyranger. Psions will be protecting everyone as best they can, and we also have Aegis and several soldiers of the Chronicler to help with that.”

“Phantom Division?” Geist asked.

“Highly likely,” Zara confirmed. “And since she knows she’s taking a risk, there is a possibility there are more enemies we haven’t accounted for. The odds are stacked in our favor, but do not get cocky or overconfident. We’re fighting an Ethereal, and that’s never taken lightly. We have three objectives in this mission: Find and recover Agent Gertrude, recover anything of value from the base, and kill Nebulan. Understood?”

“Yes, Overseer!”

“We’re going to be using the Shoggoths to assault the base itself,” Zara said, nodding to Sylvia. “If what you’ve told me is accurate, they can clear the base from within. Archangel Taira will telekinetically drop them off. They’ll be able to fend for themselves I hope.”

“Definitely,” Sylvia confirmed.

“Shouldn’t we keep one in case Nebulan shows up?” Analyn asked.

“Nebulan doesn’t fight on the front lines,” Zara shook her head. “She might not be in the base, but she will never show her true self on the battlefield, or put herself in unneeded danger.”

“What are the chances she’d just flee?” Viktor Midthun asked.

“She might have already,” Zara admitted. “We don’t know. But if this is her main base of operations, she probably doesn’t want to let it go without a fight. The chances she will flee will likely depend on how we do. One reason we’re dropping the Shoggoths at the base. She will attempt to flee through a Gateway in all likelihood, and her psionics will be useless on them. Not to mention they specifically love to hunt down Ethereals.”

Oliver was very glad he didn’t have to worry about giant killer octopi coming after him.

“The frontal assault will consist of the rest of us,” Zara continued. “Archangels Taira and Hammarström will provide air cover. Aegis, Harper, and Machas will provide anti-Ethereal support as needed, as well as assisting in crushing their defenses. All goes well, this will be a short fight. But I wouldn’t count on it.”

“What about ADVENT?” Sylvia asked.

“They are also en route,” Zara confirmed. “Latest numbers were twelve teams of soldiers, around fifty, ten from PRIEST, a dozen MDUs, and a mixed team of Lancers, Hussars, and Dragoons numbering twenty. They’ll be arriving no later than fifteen minutes after us. They will assist in flanking maneuvers by attacking from the angles we are not. The base will be surrounded, and we will eventually capture it.”

“Squad Overseer Venator, this is Big Sky,” Jason informed over the comms. “We are approaching
the landing zone. Please prepare for landing, there don’t seem to be any AA defenses, but I’m preparing for any evasive maneuvers. Landing is estimated to be two minutes.”

The lights flashed to red.

It was about to begin.

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Unknown Location – Argentina

2/5/2017 – 10:40 P.M.

The battle was clearly not going to be over anytime soon, or at the very minimum, Asaru was preparing for the worst possible scenario. From the moment they’d returned she’d immediately left to…well, presumably contact someone of a higher rank than her, while Joreal began instructing the Phantom Division to prepare all defenses for battle.

For his part, he’d instructed Elena to do the same, as well as begin backup and purging procedures for all their data. Unfortunately, there was a significant amount and Elena had apparently had an argument with one of the aliens on actually letting it happen. She’d finally gotten through, after Volk had intervened, but only now was the procedure starting.

Collective systems really did have the most ineffective purging protocols possible. Copying everything was going to make everything take twice as long, but he couldn’t fully blame Asaru for not wanting to lose everything in case it turned out to be a false alarm. That being said, since she alone had put herself in this situation, he wasn’t feeling too bad for her.

What Agent Gertrude had said was…interesting.

He would have to inquire about it later.

Although that topic was fading from his mind when reinforcements began arriving from the Gateway. Out from the purple whirlpool had walked out nearly forty of what he could only describe as metal soldiers. Custodians were what they were called, and without wasting any time they had coopted the communication systems and established a direct connection to something called a Battlefield CODEX.

He hadn’t personally interacted with the metal soldiers, but they had not bothered communicating with him either, though they didn’t have any issues instructing Phantom Division soldiers where to go and give orders on what was needed. Asaru was occupied, so they were following the instruction of the Custodians.

It was slightly unnerving to see.

Out had also walked four aliens he’d never seen before. They appeared to be Mutons, but were taller than even the Elites in thick black armor. Praetorians, Joreal had called them in awe. “They’ve never left the Temple Ship before,” he’d said. “The Imperator must really be expecting something to happen and this Human is very important.”

At least Agent Gertrude was off-planet. Or at least Volk didn’t know where she was going. He expected that she was being transported to the most secure location in the Collective, or perhaps being moved to multiple locations to reduce the chances of XCOM managing to track her down. But since the Collective was still sending reinforcements, it appeared that there wasn’t just the chance of a fight, there was going to be an attack.
All for a suit of armor.

And now, even Asaru was seeming to become…concerned with the kind of reinforcements she was receiving. A half-dozen Spectres had just walked through the Gateway, and had immediately been appraised by the Custodians and followed unspoken commands. Perhaps they were also connecting to this Battlefield CODEX?

The Spectres were something that was as close to a WMD as he had ever seen. And from what had been demonstrated, it took another WMD to kill one. It was beginning to look less like this was preparing for a fight as it was a massive field test of sorts. It would line up with what Gertrude had said.

Something the Ethereals would fear. If such powers were after them…then this was one of the best ways to gauge your own strength against them, especially if they were expected to respond in force. This wasn’t just a Phantom Division concern any longer, it appeared to be on the behest of the Imperator himself.

Volk felt like all of them were in much deeper than they had realized. Even Asaru seemed to be recognizing this, especially now that their latest guest had graced them with her presence.

“I did not request any assistance from Isomnum,” Asaru was saying, her Vitakarian form sounding irritated. “Take yourself and your minions away. I have enough soldiers here to kill ten XCOM squads.”

Her name was Sonoda Ikuko, and where she had come from Volk had zero idea. All he knew was that she was supposedly Human, and was a representative of Isomnum. She was flanked by two Sectoids who were encased in some black armor which seemed to have actually infused itself into their bodies. They stood straight and tall – Vanguards for sure, and clearly cybernetically augmented.

But they felt wrong. There was something around them, and the pressure on his mind made him think that Asaru was protecting him from something. Ikuko in contrast was wearing what looked to be a completely standard lab coat, with several surgical tools and vials strapped to her waist and diagonally across her chest. She was definitely a middle-aged Asian woman, with her black hair slowly greying but put up very neatly into a bun.

And she was not intimidated by the apparition before her. “No,” she said softly, her voice with a malevolent echo to it. “I was sent at the behest of the Dread Lord himself. Only he can command me. I will assist in your defenses, and I can assure you that…well.” She moved her stone-grey eyes to look directly at Volk and smiled. “You want me on your side. Your own people are insufficient.”

The woman smiled wider. “And you should prepare for one more. The Voice has been informed, and she will send one of her puppets to ensure that the Sovereign who dares interfere with us will be dealt with. This is by direct order of the Imperator. Do I make myself clear?”

“The Imperator would have informed me about this first,” Asaru growled. “You echo Isomnum’s insolence in speaking to your superiors.”

“Go and hide, Nebulan,” Sonoda said with a smile. “Hide as you always do when confronted with challenge. Go complain to the Imperator. Forego this pointless debate, I have work to accomplish.” She gestured as the two Sectoids marched away, and Asaru’s body vanished, though not before shaking her head at the woman.
Volk now felt very uncomfortable, being in the same room alone with her. She didn’t seem to have some kind of psionic aura around her, but anyone who worked with Isomnum was not someone he wanted to be around alone. “And who are you?” She finally inquired, slowly walking over to him. He rested his hand on his pistol, not even pretending to be subtle. “Her latest interest? You aren’t a terrible specimen, I must say.”

Volk just coughed awkwardly. “Ah, no. Not anything close to that. I just work with her.”

“How unfortunate, but unsurprising,” Sonoda just began walking, and Volk fell into step behind her. “An Ethereal trapped in the past. Stuck with her familiar comforts and cults. A weak and cowardly Ethereal, who hides and misdirects all she can to prevent her greatest weaknesses from being brought to light.”

Volk snorted. “Don’t look too deeply into it. All of them have their gimmicks. Hers is just being evasive and playing with illusions.”

“If only it were so simple,” Sonoda said wistfully. “Yet I do not need to convince you of her ill judgement at times. You fear she had made a mistake, and that everyone has become caught in something far larger than themselves. A conflict and goal which eclipses the galaxy itself. You are correct, Konstantine Volikov. And that enemy is coming now.”

“Stop looking into my head,” he growled, swallowing.

“Are you afraid of what I will find?” She inquired, glancing up at him. “You think that I care that you will turn on the Ethereals just as easily as you did your own kind if you don’t get your way?” She waved a hand. “You are merely a Human. You do not concern anyone that matters. Play in your delusions if you wish, Volk, I do not care overmuch.”

“Then stop looking.”

“I prefer to know people,” she said dreamily, her voice tinged with wonder. “Their ambitions, lives, and terrors. Strengths and weaknesses. What best to know how to shape and guide them. You could be a powerful tool, Volk, more than you already are. But that will unfortunately not happen until you understand one essential truth about yourself.”

He grunted. “Please, enlighten me.”

“You are worth nothing,” she said without pausing. “You want to be the hero of the story. The one who will guide all to your vision of the future. A champion of the forgotten and voiceless. But you are no hero, you are no grand character in this story. You are merely a weapon used by those who are your better. You are a stringless puppet going along the whims of your masters without knowing you are under their control. Your freedom; your influence are an illusion, for all know what one has to do to ensure your cooperation. Your…weakness. Elena.”

The dread which had been building up in him crystalized into ice when she finished. “Do you want me to shoot you?”

“I want you to try.”

He obliged and moved to reach his pistol…

And found he was frozen solid. He couldn’t even move his head. Sonoda just turned around, facing him, eyes tinged with purple. “Pointless. I could have told you as much.”

“Hell of a pep talk,” he growled. “No wonder everyone hates you and your master.”
She allowed a thin smile. “Most people hate to be told the truth. Consider yourself lucky that I gave you this privilege. Most are not told that their lives are utterly meaningless and pointless. They are content to rest in lies and comfort to never amount to anything. Few are worth having their eyes opened. You can be more, Volk, and that is the point I want to make. Purge yourself of your weakness and fears as I did, and you will have achieved something even many Ethereals do not realize.”

He wanted to say something, but he also didn’t want to speak to this woman any more than he had too. It was too unsettling and frightening to have her keep talking. He just wanted it to end and be freed. The purple light faded from her eyes, and she walked away, leaving him alone in the hallway.

“Useless doctrine. Incorrect timing and priorities.” Volk almost jumped at the voice behind him, spinning around to see a new terror before him. The black-robed figure was just taller than he was, with its face hidden in a hood. The arms were cloaked inside the robe as well, and he didn’t know if it was an Ethereal or some other alien.

The voice was strange; a mix of machine and a female. “Who are you?”

“I am the Voice of the Sovereign,” it said. “And I am here to ensure that T’Leth is defeated.” A single arm emerged, one that looked sleek and metallic, with the black metal seeming to shift and change as if pointed behind him. “Pay little heed to the words of Isomnum’s pawn. There is conflict coming, and it is time to prepare. Go. See to it that it is done.”

Nebulan Base Location - Argentina

2/6/2017 – 12:24 A.M.

“She is here,” Aegis stated, as the soldiers stormed out of the skyrangers and into the line of trees surrounding the base. “Be cautious.”

The Archangels were grounded and following them for now, while the Shoggoths were loose and following at the end, being eerily quiet as they moved along the ground. Zara, Viktoria, Harper and Crevan were in the front, with the other Chronicler agent wearing the stony armor as usual. Oliver did wonder how the Collective was going to react to…well, many things that were about to be shown today.

The MELD Operators not the least among them.

Zara had hopefully been preparing.

Aegis suddenly jumped into the air, and created a solid psionic barrier underneath him, a block in the sky where he could oversee the entirety of the base. Purple energy flared around him and he motioned up. Ahead of them purple barriers rose around the base, effectively trapping whoever was still inside.

“There are many psions,” Geist muttered beside Oliver. “Powerful ones.”

The base before them was large. There had been some kind of camouflaging technology on the perimeter, but once the SkyRangers had penetrated it, they had seen that, while it wasn’t large enough for a large army, it was definitely a major base of operations for an Ethereal. Alloyed walls surrounded the internal bases, which were domed and curved as opposed to rectangular and angled. Several of them were interconnected.
They’d certainly built a lot in a fairly short time.

“Soldiers on the walls,” Harper noted, and Oliver saw that soldiers were lining the rooftops; soldiers wearing black armor aiming down with still precision.interspersed between them were other humanoid figures in hoods and masks, carrying more traditional weapons. Human collaborators?

“Custodians,” Anastasia grunted, the psion clearly resisting the urge to let loose. “Damn it.”

In the center of the wall was the entrance, covered by a shimmering multi-colored shield.

One that suddenly vanished.

“Move to cover!” Zara commanded, as all of them slid behind trees, the psions glowed with power, and Zara encased herself in a sheath of nanites, black armor rippling around her as she prepared to face whatever would come out. Crevan and Harper stood behind her, as the Archangels prepared to fly. The Shoggoths even flattened themselves on the ground, massive black blobs staining the forest floor.

“T’Leth.” The voice came from a figure slowly walking through the entrance which re-engaged the shield as it walked through. It was a mix of robotic and female, but definitely unnatural. It almost reminded Oliver of the Overmind, if it was much smaller and had a black robe instead of orange. An Ethereal?

“You live.”

Oliver noticed Harper’s fists clench as the blue aura around him began to become visible. He wasn’t quite sure of the extent of the abilities or purpose of the Chronicler’s soldiers, but he was starting to get a better idea as Harper’s layered voice began speaking. But it was not the words of the Human, but something else. “I am surprised you managed to crawl back from the brink after I decimated your…defenses. I thought you deceased, Mosrimor, but I should not be surprised you slink underground and live.”

Harper motioned him away. “Leave this planet, Mosrimor. Leave this species. Take your puppets and go as far away as possible, or I will destroy you just as I did the last time – and will ensure your death forever.”

“You do not make demands of me,” Mosrimor, was it? For all Oliver knew, this other entity was speaking through the robed figure. “You have changed. I had thought you were above using species.”

“I am not using them,” Harper stepped forward. “We have come to an arrangement. One which begins with your destruction, and that of the Ethereal Collective.”

“Lies,” Mosrimor sneered, taking a step forward, inexplicably seeming to grow larger as the robes appeared to retract into the skin, revealing a slender Ethereal-like body. It was almost stick-figure in appearance, with shifting skin. Nanites. Was the entire creature made out of them too? “We do not make such with the lesser species. Even you know this.”

Harper – or perhaps the entity, laughed. “Have you informed your Ethereals about this? I am certain they would find such opinions curious.”

“Kill them.” Mosrimor commanded, and the building tension dissolved into chaos.

Viktoria and Taira shot into the sky, the latter Telekine lifting the two Shoggoths with her as she
flew towards the base and flung the creatures into it. They were on their own now. Viktoria unleashed a maelstrom of psionic power onto part of the wall, killing a section of the Custodians and Humans on it before being forced to move as plasma fire converged onto her position.

Oliver and most of the other soldiers began taking aim at the enemies on the walls, just as the barrier lowered and a dozen Custodians and Phantom Division soldiers marched out. The Mosrimor avatar motioned and an arm dissolved and reformed into multiple pillars that the Custodians and soldiers used as cover, while it reformed the arm within moments.

“Telepaths are attacking,” Geist stated from behind a tree. “You’re on your own for now.”

Crevan had not moved, only did a short wave as he was surrounded by a transparent globe which dissipated any projectile which entered the vicinity. After a few seconds appraising the situation, he raised a hand, fingers parallel to the ground and purple-white lightning erupted from the fingertips that slammed directly into one of the Custodians behind a nanite pillar, which subsequently collapsed onto the ground, twitching.

Oliver blinked.

The hell?

Harper blasted the Mosrimor avatar with a stream of blue energy, which was absorbed when the nanites reformed into a shield. It also wasted little time in having a portion of itself break off and begin consuming the fallen Custodian. Zara was marching forward, her nanite armor absorbing the plasma fire with seeming ease, as she formulated her own defensive structure from nanites, shedding the armor as she planned her next move.

“Watch out for Phantom soldiers!” Sylvia called out. “They’ll try and flank us!”

Branches were falling all around them and Oliver was quite certain a small fire was going to be started from the barrage of plasma fire coming towards them. “Ah!” Anastasia gasped as she moved back into full cover, a clear wound gaping from her elbow. The armor was already repairing itself and medical protocols were likely going into effect, but she was definitely hurt.

“Watch for snipers!” Oliver called, as he laid down some suppressive fire on the walls.

“Viktor, Oliver, Henry, Rosario move forward and lay down fire towards the entrance,” Zara instructed, and Oliver noticed that the ground around a good portion of her position was bare and stripped of...anything. “Nira, target those Humans. Analyn, Matthew, stay to the back and watch for flankers.”

Made sense that she would want the Medics in the back, but Zara wasn’t done. “Everyone else target the walls. Anastasia, make a new opening when you can.”

“Yes sir!”

Crevan and Harper were keeping the Mosrimor avatar at bay, with the occasional crack of purple lightning and blue energy streams. But the nanite puppet seemed to be adapting, as it was absorbing the lightning strikes and energy with hardened shields and soon psionic shields – so it was a psion. He really needed to ask Crevan later how it was possible to shoot lightning.

Zara had built up her fortification wide enough for all of them to kneel behind, and all they needed to do was charge to the opening. Well, here went nothing. They charged into the hail of white and green plasma, taking a significant amount of direct hits which the armor was thankfully able to repair without issue, but it had depleted a good part of his reserves.
“Grenades!” Viktor called, as Phantom soldiers threw small spheres at them.

Unfortunately there was no place to take evasive action. Oliver actually managed to shoot one, and instead released a black swarm of nanites which landed right on top of him and began eating through his armor. His suit nanites responded and Zara was immediately on him, placed a hand on his chest and adding her own help to destroy the other nanites.

She quickly adapted to first securing the remaining spheres in additional nanite cases, and kicking them far away. She was too slow for one, which began eating into Rosario’s leg. He tried batting them off, but it only made some of the nanites get on his hand and start eating through it as well.

“Matthew, we need a medic here,” Zara ordered as she helped purge the nanites from his body. “Now!”

“Copy!”

A psionic maelstrom materialized to the right side of the wall, growing in intensity as the Custodians on the top moved away. Mosrimor motioned and a psionic shield appeared around the area that was being ravaged. Crevan shot another bolt of lightning from his fingertips, but this time he sustained it, which was apparently intense enough that Mosrimor had to dedicate more concentration to the shield protecting him.

With no protection, the wall eventually was rent into enough pieces that there was a noticeable gap. More than enough for one or two soldiers to get through. Oliver managed to clip a Custodian as it spun out to shoot him, although it appeared that they had self-repairing armor as well. Those machines needed to be killed quickly if any lasting damage was to happen.


“They know what they’re dealing with,” Viktoria’s voice was tight. “They’ve got Custodians at every single juncture possible and I’m pretty sure they’re linked together. We can’t stop evasive maneuvers until they die.”

“ADVENT will be coming soon,” Zara told them. “Pull back if needed and support them when they arrive. You got the Shoggoths in. Hopefully that’ll take care of the telepaths inside.”

“Copy, we’ll work on that.”

At least there was some good news. They weren’t having to deal with Nebulan’s illusions. Although, given that their own telepaths were essentially taken out of the fight in any meaningful capacity, it wasn’t a trade without cost. But he felt they were making progress.

When ADVENT came, that was when the real show would start.

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Unknown Location

Unknown Time

The room she was in was best described as a mix between a workshop and medical room. It was massive, tools were strewn out all along the tables, and there were machines that were attaching components and inserting cybernetics towards various aliens under some type of anesthetic. The black-armored Custodians stood throughout the room, at the entrance, and two before and behind her.
In the middle of the room, looking at a holographic recreation of the armor she was wearing, was Fectorian. He was largely as Aegis had described him. Half of him seemed to be machine, and even the upper set of limbs had ports and places to further augment his strength. The additional set of limbs and manipulators from his back was retracted as he considered the hologram before him.

He had taken scans through means she didn’t know, but she did know that he wouldn’t get anything important. No more than XCOM, anyway. In the meantime, she needed to think of how she was going to get out of this.

No...

She was afraid that it was over. That there was no way out of this. That this was the end for her. Either life as an unwilling test subject as the Collective tried to pry the armor off of her piece by piece, or she could trigger the self-destruct sequence in her armor. It would destroy the armor and prevent the Collective from ever using it.

But she would die as well.

Did she want to completely give up now?

No. Not yet.

Not until she knew it was truly over. She knew they couldn’t control her. They could read her mind all they wanted, but they couldn’t force her to comply. She couldn’t comply even if she wanted to, especially if it was demanded by an alien. The Manchurian Restraints were harsh and unrelenting, but she was grateful for their rigidity in this case.

In theory, she knew that she could technically exit the suit on her own. She could subvert the Restraints in some way. But she would not do that, no matter what happened.

“I know you are awake, Agent Gertrude,” Fectorian said, without turning to her. “There is little point in keeping silent.”

“And what exactly would I have to say to you?” She asked dryly. “Both of us know I’m not going to cooperate with you.”

Fectorian turned. “I care little for your cooperation or not. I’m merely curious about something.”

“Shoot.”

“The Sovereign One whose armor you bear,” Fectorian said. “What do you know about him?”

If Abby could have shrugged, she would have. “Can’t answer that. I don’t even really know what a Sovereign One is. Other than it’s old and powerful…and this one is interested in helping us.” She gave a thin smile under her helmet. “I know I’ve said this before, but you captured the wrong woman. I can’t give you what you want.”

“T’Leth.”

“What?”

“His name, the Sovereign, T’Leth,” Fectorian said, shutting down the hologram and walking over to appraise her. “From what our own Sovereign has told us, he is a master of war. Weapons and armor like no other. And a loner – which makes his interest in your species curious.”
Abby found it really ironic that she was learning about all of this in a situation where she was quite possibly trapped in with no escape. “Curious? Why? Thought you Ethereals knew everything.”

“Consider it a professional curiosity,” Fectorian explained. “A contrast of what little I know of these beings. They do not line up with what the Imperator has stated, either out of ignorance or agenda. I have had encounters with two Sovereigns, and have not been reassured. I want to know if your Sovereign is different.”

“Again,” Abby sighed. “You’re asking the wrong person. And what would that change?”

“Because it would either confirm the Imperator’s suspicions as to the nature of Sovereign Ones, or refute them,” he answered. “I do not know how much you are aware of the Bringer, but I am concerned the Imperator’s judgement is compromised. His handling of such leaves much to be desired. I need more information. I need more data. You serve as a key to this, despite not being directly connected, or so you claim.”

“Please get to the point.”

“I want to speak to T’Leth,” Fectorian stated. “Or a true representative.”

Abby blinked. “What?”

“Your species is an interesting challenge, and as the Battlemaster has instructed, I will provide him weapons to match ADVENT,” Fectorian opened a hologram port on his palm which flashed through designs Abby had not seen. “But I dislike being lied to or treated as a mere engineer simply because I do not care for the politics and maneuvering of governments. The war both our sides are in is based on lies; lies which have only recently been revealed to me. All for an outcome and objective I am not convinced by.”

“And what is that?”

“The death of a Sovereign One,” Fectorian stated. “His ultimate goal. He is convinced that the Sovereigns must be eradicated for the good of the galaxy. Earth is a trial run to achieve this on his own. The Bringer will be turned into his instrument and weapon.”

Abby snorted, then allowed a chuckle. “He really thinks it will be so simple? Even I see problems with this.”

“And I call such judgment into question,” Fectorian agreed with a nod. “But I am not Aegis. I will not abandon the Imperator on a hunch that he could be wrong. And I will not be the Battlemaster and continue to go along with the plan blindly. No, I will do something to determine the appropriate course of action. And you, Agent Gertrude, can assist me in this.”

“Really,” she waited. “Why should I trust you?”

“Because I am the only way that you have a chance of living,” he stated. “And more importantly, you could assist me in confirming that the Imperator is wrong. You know, and the Commander does as well, that you cannot win this war without help. Even if you have a Sovereign assisting you – we can call upon two. The Imperator can turn your world to cinders if he desired. So you need allies. Ethereal allies.”

“And all you want is to talk to T’Leth,” Abby said dubiously. “Really.”

“It would be a start,” Fectorian confirmed. “The Imperator overlooks me, and believes I do not care about the wider galaxy. To a certain extent this is true, but in this situation I cannot ignore it. You
would almost think he forgets that I am the one who ensures his technological superiority. And that I am not a meek servant like Sana’Ligna.”

“To be fair,” Abby coughed. “I doubt Aegis would have—“

“He only knows me by reputation,” Fectorian interrupted. “Few care to know me, and I prefer it that way. People are fallible, illogical, and unpredictable. Machines are straightforward and simple by comparison. What others think of me is irrelevant in this case, Agent Gertrude, do you wish to hear my proposal or not?”

Abby considered. If this was a large elaborate trick…it was a damn good one. And she hadn’t agreed to anything yet. She could at least hear him out. “Fine.”

“You will be given a choice,” he said. “I am unsure as to where you will end up, but you will face Patricia—“

“What?”

“Ah, yes,” Fectorian paused. “You would not know. She has been a guest for some time; she seems to have been convinced of the Imperator’s plan and I suspect it is only a matter of time until she commits fully. She will attempt to convince you to take off your armor in exchange for your freedom.”

“A guest?”

“Yes, yes,” Fectorian seemed mildly annoyed that she was focusing on this. “And ironically appears to have his favor more than me.”

Abby slumped in shock. Was that actually true? Patricia a traitor? She never thought something like that could actually happen…but she remembered what Aegis had said about the Imperator. People changed around him. They began to see his perspective and conformed to his ideals and values. Had Patricia succumbed to this? Was she lost forever?

She’d been concerned that Patricia was in a cell to be used as a test subject or as bait for something later.

But this was far worse.

“And what should I do?” Abby asked weakly. “I won’t give them the armor.”

“No, you won’t,” Fectorian agreed. “I suspect you would die before you allowed that, and your conditioning would prevent it as well. Does your armor have a self-destruct feature you can activate?”

This was perhaps a moment of truth. If…something happened…she looked to the top left of the screen where the prompt was. The blinks in sequence would be all that was needed. She just needed to decide if she should disclose that information to Fectorian.

Time to take a risk.

“Yes.”

“Perfect. Once you hear Patricia attempt to convince you, activate it.”

“What?” She asked. “I’ll die.”
“Correct, you will,” Fectorian confirmed. “And deny the Imperator the armor and ensure that you are for all intents and purposes, dead.”

“I follow that…” she shook her head. “But how does that help you?”

“Because before I send you to the next location in…” he paused briefly. “Two of your hours, I will need you to take off your helmet and take a full and complete scan of your brain and gather several tissue samples. I will use these to clone you and restore your mind, and you will be free to return to T’Leth without the suspicion of the Imperator, and I will be at least spoken to. As I suspect right now, they would consider any such approach a trap, and I have no way to do this without drawing suspicion.”

Abby slumped her head down, thinking furiously. This was some elaborate scheme to cheat death for the possibility of maybe getting an Ethereal ally? One who might just decide to keep her as a conditioned slave like all of his other soldiers? Was it worth the risk? And if he was lying about all of this, even taking off the helmet could be dangerous and give him one piece of Sovereign technology.

“How do I know you’ll even follow through?” She demanded. “This could all be a lie.”

Fectorian just stared at her for a moment. “If you are so concerned that this is an elaborate scheme to remove your armor, the Imperator is expecting you as you are now. There is little stopping you from simply saying what we were talking about. The Imperator, the paranoid leader he is, would almost certainly attempt to read my mind to confirm one way or another. Or simply look through your own memories. We both stand to gain and lose here, Agent. You will need to trust me, yes, but consider what you could accomplish without this. You will simply die. Now you have a chance to gain an ally for your war.”

“But I have no guarantee you’d even be on our side.”

“Not until I speak to T’Leth, yes. But that is a risk you have to take.”

Abby considered.

It all came down to if she could trust Fectorian…not as an individual, but trust that he was sincere in his plan. And from what she could tell…he was. And the more she looked at her situation, the more she knew that there was no way out. She would die in all likelihood, and all she would accomplish would be denying the Imperator some Sovereign armor.

And if Fectorian was lying…all he would get from her is a clone and a mind he could already penetrate.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll help.”

“Excellent,” he pressed a button on his lower arm and the restraints retracted and she fell to the ground. As she stood, he was already walking over to a table. “You will need to be put under for this. We have limited time, so please remove your helmet.” After some hesitation, she complied and set it on a nearby table.

“It will destroy itself if you touch it,” she warned, going to lay down on the table. “Fair warning.”

“I understand,” he did glance over to it. “I will also need to erase your memories of this conversation. It would not do for Patricia or the Imperator to learn of this, now would it?” He nodded to a Custodian. “I have recorded this. When you are awakened in your new body, it will be played to you.”
Abby didn’t like it, but she knew that it was the logical step to take.

She sincerely hoped Fectorian was telling the truth, and she wasn’t making a big mistake.

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Nebulan Base Location - Argentina

2/6/2017 – 12:50 A.M.

ADVENT was knocking at their door, and Volk was not in the right frame of mind to fight. XCOM was keeping the odd Sovereign avatar occupied, as well as a good portion of Custodians and Phantom Division soldiers. ADVENT had split their force into two separate blocs which were now assaulting from the other sides.

The Archangels still roared overhead, but the Custodians were keeping them occupied, although it largely depending on them not being attacked. And right now, that situation was growing more and more precarious. And even within the base there were enemies.

As Volk was finding out.

“Repeat that!” He demanded as he stormed along the walls, aiming his sniper rifle down at the mass of ADVENT soldiers. “There is what in the base?”

“A….” gunfire went off in the background. “An octopus. A giant octopus!”

“Well then kill the giant octopus!” Volk yelled, as he sniped yet another soldier.

“We’re trying!” Was the cry. “It’s not dying!”

“Goddamn it,” he muttered under his breath. The last thing he needed were rants of giant killer octopi in the base. “Get Phantom Division support in there then. Use nanite grenades –“

“Spectre here!” Came the call. “Looks like we’ve got it!”

About time. Volk returned to the situation at hand. Overhead there were also helicopters circling, and they were maneuvering to begin laying down fire of their own. One of Sonoda’s Sectoids was also along the wall, and raised a hand towards it. Volk didn’t know what it was doing, but it appeared that the PRIEST reinforcements were having a hard time dealing with the amount of psionic power at play here.

A Spectre materialized along the wall, took a look down into the ADVENT soldiers who were massed and advancing, and dissolved to appear down on the ground. It didn’t take long for ADVENT to notice and they pointed out the machine with frantic warnings. One of the Priests motioned and the Spectre was trapped in a psionic box.

Couldn’t have that.

Volk lined up his sights to the offending Priest, and fired after a few moments. The Priest fell backwards, a new hole in his helmet. Volk quickly ducked back as a hail of gauss fire slammed near him. From above the helicopters unleashed their weapons along the walls, ripping several of the Custodians apart and allowing the Archangels freedom to operate.

More Spectres appeared along the wall, and went down to decimate more ADVENT forces. But with the Archangels in play, the game had shifted and the Custodians were quickly reforming the
skylines. The black armored Sectoid made a chittering noise, flared with purple energy, and one of the helicopters began tilting until it soon crashed into the ground in a loud explosion.

One of the Archangels was showing wisps of purple energy off of them…no…both of them were. “Both Archangels are psions,” he hissed into his mask. “Priority target on them.” The Custodians seemed to have the right idea as the wall opposite him was engulfed in a psionic tempest. Dropping to one knee, he quickly aimed for a series of weaknesses that – if it hit – would likely cripple her completely.

Gunfire and screams in the background he tuned out and inhaled.

He pulled the trigger.

Slight right.

Trigger.

Both engines on her back exploded and she wobbled into the air as gravity took hold and began plummeting to the ground. The other Sectoid of Sonoda’s had leapt out of the way of the psionic maelstrom, and extended a black-armored hand to catch her. The Archangel became encased in a purple-tinged grip of the alien, as more psionic mist ravaged the armor.

The other Archangel swooped down with a yell and the Sectoid…well, Volk didn’t quite see what happened, but it looked like the Sectoid ceased to exist and instead turned into chunks of grey flesh and black metal. She gathered the fallen Archangel in her arms and shot back into the sky and back to where XCOM was still fighting, dodging and weaving through the Custodian fire.

They were temporarily out of the fight. In the meantime, he needed to check up on how the battle along his own wall was. Phantom Division soldiers were shooting at one of the helicopters, and ADVENT was firing rockets into the walls with the MDUs engaging the Custodians in a battle to see which machine was superior.

The Spectres on the ground were chewing through ADVENT defenses, and the Priests were being pushed to their limits to contain them. They had already consumed half of the opposing force, although there the Lancers were countering that with EMP tools to destroy the nanites. It was a fight that could still go either way.

“Elena, how is it going on your end?” He asked, changing tactics and deciding to see how he could deal with the helicopters.

“ADVENT pushing forward. Archangel attack severely crippling. Possibly retreat.”

“Understood.” Not good. If even one of the faults was breached, it was going to end in a losing battle. He was expecting XCOM to eventually prevail, especially if ADVENT was putting up a good fight against them. But if one of the sides fell…hmm. Asaru wasn’t a major help here, since she was preoccupied with ensuring that Aegis didn’t completely destroy them, and had limited his influence to placing psionic barriers around the base – which had dropped when ADVENT arrived.

He’d better update her. “Asaru, we should prepare for a retreat.”

“Have the purges completed?” She sounded strained – a first for her.

“Not important,” he shook his head, as he fired and took out one of the helicopter guns. “The east wall is going to fall to ADVENT soon, and I don’t know how close XCOM is to breaking through. Have the Custodians and Spectres hold off as long as possible and everyone else needs to get out. If
they take control of the Gateway—“

“Inform me the moment there is a breach,” she cut him off. “Only then will we retreat.”

Volk gritted his teeth. “Understood.”

He’d better get a full explanation when all of this was over.

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Nebulan Base Location - Argentina

2/6/2017 – 1:22 A.M.

The medics were rushing all over the place as the injuries continued to pile up for them. Oliver knew they were making progress, but flanking attacks from the Phantom Division, pinpoint shots by the Custodians, and sniper fire from the walls was whittling them down slowly but surely. Unfortunately for the aliens, they were running out of tricks.

It was now a continuous battle between Zara and the Mosrimor avatar over which would get the raw materials from the bodies. It was still quite easily holding its own, but as another Custodian fell and with a motion it was consumed by the nanites, Oliver knew that sooner or later it would run out of enemies to consume.

Crevan was still keeping it occupied with intermittent lightning strikes, and was also responsible for frying several Phantom Division soldiers who had attempted surprise attacks. “Down!” Oliver yelled suddenly as one of the armored Phantom soldiers materialized behind them with a nanoblade in hand. His push into Zara made the jab miss, but unfortunately the alien followed up by stabbing it into his stomach.

He lurched at the white-hot pain as the alien tossed a grenade by Henry and the still-injured Rosario, and they couldn’t move out of the way in time before the green plasma detonated beside them. Zara was also damaged by the attack, but the nanites repaired her quickly and with a motion the soldier was shouting as he was slowly consumed.

“He did not want to have it break inside him.

Analyn was soon beside him as she looked him over quickly. “Good. Not broken inside. I can pull it out, but you cannot move. Got it?”

She acknowledged his nod and wrapped her hand around the thin hilt. “One…two…three!” At the end she pulled on the blade sticking out of him, wondering if he should touch it or if it would make things worse. Nanoblades were bad; that had penetrated his armor like it was nothing. Of course the downside was that it had to be at a good angle…which this strike had been.

He gave a nod and grunt. “Get it over with.”

She acknowledged his nod and wrapped her hand around the thin hilt. “One…two…three!” At the end she pulled on the blade and within a moment had drawn it out in a smooth motion with a short shout of pain from him. The medical properties of the suit had been utilized already, so she quickly sprayed his exit wounds with the med-kit. “We’ll have to check for internal damage later, but this should last until the end of the battle. Got it?”

“Got it,” he heaved, standing up again and aiming his rifle at Mosrimor. The entirety of the Collective reinforcements seemed completely depleted, and now it was only the nanite creature.
The entire area around him, and Zara for that matter, was completely bare of any life or materials, all having been consumed in some form or another for the nanite operators.

It was only a matter of time until he lost.

Unfortunately, he seemed to realize that as well.

The shifting black nanites on his skin hardened to a glossy seamless finish, and a psionic shield appeared over himself as he began walking forward. Everything they had, XCOM fired into the approaching creature, but in his deceptively fast speed, he dashed to where Zara had holed up, giving Oliver a terrifyingly close glimpse of the massive alien.

He grabbed Zara, lifted her into the air and retracted the psionic shield around his hand as he began to send the nanites from his body towards her. She fought with her own MELD nanites, but she had been running low and had dispersed them onto the battlefield as fortifications or to negate other attacks. She had very few left to spare.

Oliver fired hopelessly into the psionic shield, but it seemed to be doing very little good.

A lightning bolt flashed, and slammed into Mosrimor…no…slammed into Zara. The conductive shock forced Mosrimor to drop her, even as Zara was twitching on the ground and smoking. Another psionic shield suddenly bisected the alien, with a cube appearing around it as the body fell into two pieces, blue blood revealing that there was something living underneath the nanite armor.

It was an Ethereal. A small one by their standards, but a real one. The nanites likewise became dead and immobile, though Oliver definitely did not trust it right now. He looked behind him, wondering where that had come from. Geist slowly lowered his arm, then slumped forward slightly. “It’s fortunate that worked.”

“Yeah,” Oliver breathed as the medics rushed to Zara. “You couldn’t have done that a little earlier?”

Geist stared at him, and Oliver suspected that under the helmet was either annoyance or exasperation. “From the onset of this conflict I have been dealing with ensuring that three powerful telepaths don’t affect your vulnerable minds along with Aegis and the rest. It is not an easy task to accomplish, and I took a risk intervening like that. But with it dead, we can proceed.”

“Alright,” Oliver looked around at the soldiers who were either uninjured or mildly injured. He knew he needed treatment, but was fine for a while yet. “We move inside now. ADVENT will need help.”

“Yes, we move.” Geist nodded. “Since Viktoria and Zara are currently out of commission, I will take command for the remainder of the operation. What little of it is left.”

Oliver did not feel like contesting him, and Geist was probably the best to see the mission through. “Regroup and prepare to move forward,” Geist ordered. “Roxas! You will stay behind and ensure the wounded are stabilized and guarded. Xirau, you will come with us.”

“I will stay and guard against any other attacks,” Harper added. “And to ensure that this thing doesn’t have any more surprises.”

“Fine,” Geist curtly acknowledged. “We move out now. Let’s hope that there is still something left to salvage here.”

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The base was falling, and there was no more time to waste. Volk, Elena, and a few of the Phantom Division were moving to find Asaru and ensure she got out. Apparently there was an unforeseen problem they had encountered on the route to the Gateway, even though she was protected by the Praetorians.

The retreat had been sounded, and Volk was torn between irritation that there was only one Gateway in the first place, and concern that they wouldn’t be able to get out in time before XCOM marched into the base proper and killed or captured everyone. This battle had already extracted a heavy toll from everyone involved.

Plasma fire was heard down the corridor, and they rounded the corner to see a bizarre and terrifying sight – namely that the Praetorians were engaged with a massive…octopus? There had been more than one?

More concerning was that there was a dead Praetorian on the ground, the limbs broken and twisted. The black monster was currently wrapping its massive tentacles around another Praetorian which was desperately trying to yank them off, but the suckers on the tentacles couldn’t be so easily removed. Normally this wouldn’t even be a concern for something as massive as a Praetorian, but the problem was that this octopus was gigantic.

The corridor was maybe ten feet across, and the octopus was easily taking up that entire space, and more dangerously, didn’t seem to be that bothered by the plasma fire it took. They arrived just in time to see the octopus break one of the arms of the Praetorian with a loud crack, while making an utterly eerie trilling noise.

The Praetorian was unfortunately not dead either, and the creature didn’t seem to be in a massive hurry to finish the job.

“Fire!” Volk called out instinctively, even though it was likely a bad idea, not only due to the potential of crossfire, but also because shooting it didn’t seem to be working in the first place. Behind the rolling mass of black he saw his first glimpse of the elusive Asaru herself. In fact, she wasn’t too far off from some other Ethereals he’d seen.

Mostly a mix of light armor and robes, with a hood concealing her face. Her height would have easily towered over him, but next to the Praetorians, she was actually a bit shorter. What he couldn’t understand was why she wasn’t doing anything to the creature currently engaged in – and winning – against her Praetorians.

Not his problem right now. He could demand an answer on that later. The creature seemed to grow tired of the Praetorian and decided to kill it, breaking more limbs and the neck in a final squeeze before almost sliding to the ground and moving closer to the last two Praetorians – and Asaru herself. One of the Phantom Division soldiers pulled out a nanoblade and made the questionable decision to charge forward.

“Woah, wait!” Volk called out in futile warning, knowing that was mostly likely not going to work. Sure enough when it got close, a tentacle lashed out and wrapped around the much, much smaller Vitakarian’s arm. Luckily for the Vitakarian the free hand was the one which held the nanoblade, which he then plunged into the tentacle. The response was immediate and the creature made a higher-pitched trilling sound as it switched focus to the alien which had caused it pain.
Volk watched in fascination as the creature used another tentacle to pull the blade out of its arm, and with enough delicacy that it didn’t shatter the blade and leave chunks within it. Once the weapon was discarded, it wrapped said tentacle around the alien and crushed it. Well, another one down. This was great.

“We need a Spectre,” he muttered. “That seemed to work well against the last one of these.”

“Risky, but we need to kill that thing now,” another Phantom Division soldier muttered. “Back up! Nanites will be loose!”

The soldier, along with the few remaining of the Phantom Division threw several of the nanite grenades to the creature and Praetorian it was currently wrapped around. They exploded into a fine black mist which immediately began clinging to both the alien and creature, and the response was immediate.

The Praetorian began furiously and futilely trying to get the nanites off of him, while the creature sort of flailed and flipped along the ground as it tried to get the nanites off of it somehow. It was moving away from, and up the wall where there was a small gap that…Volk wasn’t quite sure how likely it was, but that it had originally come through?

Octopi could apparently fit into very small spaces, and since this was a monster octopus from hell, maybe it could still do that? It didn’t matter, as both Asaru and the last Praetorian took the advantage and dashed past the carnage to catch up to Volk and the rest. “What the hell was that?”

He asked out loud and they began rushing to the gateway.

“Asaru’s real voice was layered, but honestly not massively different from the one she had used when not imitating a specific person. There was a vibration to her speaking that wasn’t present in her illusions. “One somehow immune to telepathy.”

“We’ll figure that out later,” Volk grunted as they ran. “Gotta get out of here now.”

It wasn’t long before they reached the room where the Gateway was stationed, and luckily it was still guarded and running. Volk had no idea where it was going, but that was the least of his concerns right now as the entire building shook and plasma fire became a lot more noticeable and close. Asaru went through the Gateway; Elena and several of his own soldiers soon followed, as well as those from the Phantom Division. He didn’t know if Sonoda was still here or if she’d already left. He doubted she was dead though, for some reason.

He didn’t check to see if the purging was complete. No time for that any longer, but at least he’d made a contingency plan in case they couldn’t be completely purged. He pulled out the detonator, and the dozen or so little EMP and explosive devices he’d placed on the computers went off. Wouldn’t be able to salvage them now, but it was better than ADVENT and XCOM getting their hands on them.

What a waste though. All for an enemy agent of questionable worth.

He did a quick check to ensure that the explosives were also set up on the Gateway, and once the timer began counting there was no going back. Fifteen seconds, and even then he felt he shouldn’t be waiting around, but also didn’t want to condemn any more to be left behind and killed or captured. The wall suddenly exploded outward, temporarily taking out several Custodians as the rest began firing at the encroaching XCOM soldiers through the dust.

The last Praetorian began firing into the smoke, and seemed to actually clip some of the encroaching soldiers. That was until a bolt of lightning came out of nowhere and slammed into the
alien, even managing to stun the massive Muton.

Time to go.

“Go! Go now!” He called, pressing the detonator and leaping into the Gateway with the crackling sound of lightning the last thing he heard before entering the swirling purple whirlpool.

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Unknown Location

Unknown Time

Abby figured that the unthinkable had happened and that she’d fallen asleep. She vaguely remembered seeing Fectorian of all Ethereals, but he didn’t seem to have done anything except take a few notes before moving her again. She supposed it wasn’t out of the question that she had fallen unconscious. She was a sleep-deprived, wounded, and restrained mess.

She didn’t know how much time had passed, and if she should give up hoping for a rescue.

No one is coming.

A worry that was becoming more and more true. Objectively...she realized that not even XCOM could follow to where she likely was right now. The Imperator; the Ethereals, they were interested in the Sovereign technology her armor contained, and they were going to take as many precautions as possible. She may have been moved dozens of times to various locations, and she figured she was far, far from Earth.

But eventually she would arrive at the place that would be her end, one way or another.

She knew why she was hesitating in pulling the trigger and removing everything they were working to. She didn’t want to die. Not here. Not if there was a chance that she could get out of this one way or another. But...she was just deluding herself if she expected that someone was going to appear out of nowhere and save her.

That wasn’t how the galaxy worked.

Wishful thinking from a woman who was going to die.

The only question was how she would die. As a broken experiment and lab subject, or in a defiant gesture against the aliens.

Between the two, there was only really one acceptable option.

She just needed to pull the trigger. All it would take was a few blinks and confirmations for the HUD to accept the self-destruct.

It was...different; being in this situation. She had been close to death many times before. She’d been in dozens of dangerous situations, and each time knew that there was a chance that it would end in her death. That hadn’t really scared her, it was just a reality she’d had to come to terms with. Others had died in front of her; people she’d known well. Death was very real, but it had always passed over her.

She’d been here since the beginning of XCOM. She’d gone through so much that it seemed like she would survive as one of the few since the beginning while everyone else died around her. Who
else was still alive from the beginning? Patricia? Carmelita? The Commander and many of the Internal Council?

Not many. Herself among them.

Maybe she’d just gotten lucky so far. In war thousands died, and it was a numbers game where the odds weren’t in her favor. She’d finally screwed up bad enough that this was the consequence of that. It only took one mistake to kill you.

But this was worse for her, because she was now responsible for her death. Defying the aliens through suicide. It was long, agonizing, but something she ironically had control over. Death was an option, not something that happened instantly on a battlefield or out of her control. There was time to think about death now, and what would come after it.

She’d not really been a religious-minded person, not really thinking too much about it one way or another. She didn’t especially care much who believed what, and preferred to focus on the real world, not the what-ifs of what happened when one died. Maybe it was something she’d never really wanted to think about since she assumed if it would happen to her, it would be quick.

But now she wondered.

She didn’t know if there was an actual Hell or Heaven out there for her, or if she’d go to either one. But from what she’d seen and knew about...was it out of the question that there would be something beyond death? Or perhaps it was just nothing and she would just cease to be nothing more or less.

Abby figured she’d soon be finding out, one way or another.

Her room was a cylinder of grey metal that suspended her through some kind of gravity or stasis field. She couldn’t move an inch, even if she wanted to. It was in the center of the room, and she was facing a mechanism that she knew operated as a door. There were likely cameras or surveillance in the room that she couldn’t see, and for all she knew, she was floating in a little metal box in space.

There was no way to break free; she’d certainly tried to no avail. All she could really do was wait, hope, and eventually face reality. The only silver lining she could see was that, right now, she was probably at the end of the line. This was the end stop, and someone would come to see or check up on her eventually.

Perhaps right now she was on the fabled Temple Ship of the Imperator. Or more likely, somewhere else on an unmarked world or in uncharted space; unable to be found or located by anyone. She truly had no idea, but she did find it somewhat funny how the Ethereals were going to all this trouble for someone who didn’t know what they were actually after.

They thought her to be some agent of a Sovereign One, but in reality she was just a woman who had some of their technology. Which she supposed they could at least get out of it. The armor was too valuable to just give them. Best case scenario they learned how to replicate it. Middling case they learned how to penetrate or subvert it. Worst case was that they improved on it.

None of those could be allowed.

Time ticked by at a pace that felt infinite. It didn’t seem to matter how fast or slowly time was passing here. All she could do was wait or end it once and for all. Maybe this was some kind of test the Ethereals wanted to do? Maybe see if she would kill herself out of boredom? That would almost
be funny, except she doubted the idea would even occur to them.

There was a loud click in the room, and the door slid upwards. Finally someone was coming in to speak to her. When she saw who it was, she was immediately concerned that she was so sleep-deprived she was hallucinating. “Patricia?” She asked in disbelief, her voice cracking both due to a lack of water and not speaking for what felt like days.

Patricia Trask did stand before her, wearing the same Aegis armor she had been captured in. Granted, it looked like it had been polished and didn’t have any significant marring or soiled in any way. The scratches and chips on the armor did still exist, but it looked like she had been able to clean it recently.

How?

She was helmetless, and if her face was anything to go by, she seemed unhurt or wounded. She looked healthy, at least no worse than she had in XCOM. The orange rims of her eyes seemed to glow more brightly in a dimmer light of the prison she was in. Her hair was still lose and looked surprisingly good. Abby had always wondered how she’d always been able to keep her hair looking like that during her entire career in XCOM.

Patricia though looked very somber and serious.

She wasn’t here with a minder, or in any kind of restraints.

The implications began dawning on her.

It couldn’t be…

Not her.

“Hello, Abby,” she said quietly. “Long time no see.”

“Patricia…” she repeated, still trying to process it. “What…are you doing here?”

Probably not the best way to ask that question. It could mean different things. She of course meant what she was doing as an apparent…guest? Not necessarily what she was doing in this room.

“I’m here to talk to you,” Patricia answered.

“But you’re…” Abby would have shaken her head, and instinctively tried. “You were captured!”

“Yes,” she nodded. “I was. And brought before the Imperator. We talked.”

Talked.

“Patricia…” Abby swallowed. “Please tell me what I think is going on isn’t true.”

The woman in XCOM armor pursed her lips. “If we’re thinking the same thing, yes and no. Maybe. I’m not reading your mind now, Abby. You know I don’t do that.”

“Are you a prisoner here?”

“No.” Patricia confirmed immediately; somberly. “I’m not. I’m technically free to leave at any time.”

It didn’t make sense. “Then…why are you still here? Is he threatening you? Blackmailing you
“somehow?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“Because it’s not as simple as just deciding to leave or not,” Patricia said, beginning to pace. She was visibly unsure of the best way to express herself. Upon seeing that Abby wouldn’t be able to follow her, she quickly pressed a button on a nearby console, releasing the stasis field but erecting a near-transparent energy field that separated them. Abby confined to her little circle, with Patricia being able to move along the outside.

“I haven’t joined the Imperator, or the aliens,” Patricia clarified as Abby shakily got used to standing again. “Not yet.”

“Yet?” Abby demanded. “How is that even a possibility!? You know what they are capable of. You know what they’ve done. Aegis warned you what the Imperator was like. How he turns everyone to his side.”

“Yes! Yes I know!” Patricia nearly shouted back, voice raw. “You have no idea how much I’ve thought about it, but I know things now! Things that I can’t just ignore however much I might want to!” She ended with a sharp wave of her hand.

“What could you possibly learn that would make you consider the Imperator over your own species?” Abby demanded. “Or over XCOM?”

Patricia closed her eyes, took a breath, then resumed talking. “Because of that symbol on your armor.”

Abby looked down at it. “What about it?”

“Humanity is now caught up in a cycle which has existed for…millions of years at least,” Patricia said. “One dominated by the Sovereign Ones. Immortal and powerful beings engaged in an endless war for universal domination. They care about nothing except their own goals and power, and the way they expand such is through proxies. Species. They pit them against each other in a grand game of galactic strategy and domination.”

She continued walking, focusing ahead as she talked. “Aegis thinks the Synthesized are the ultimate enemy. They’re a threat, but they are an obvious one compared to what the Sovereign Ones pose to not only Humanity, but every other species in the galaxy. Perhaps they are even under the control of one. I don’t know. Neither does the Imperator. If nothing is done, this will just repeat over and over again.”

Patricia stopped, and nodded towards Abby. “The Sovereign One T’Leth has taken an interest now. Humanity is in severe danger of becoming his puppet species to unleash against the galaxy. Didn’t you wonder how odd it was that the Collective assimilated multiple species, but decided to go to war with us?”

“At times.”

“It wasn’t an accident,” Patricia nodded. “The Imperator suspected there was a Sovereign One on Earth. He needed to know that we weren’t under the influence of one. He intends to break this endless cycle of Sovereign puppets and proxies, and he intends T’Leth to be the first one to die. That is his plan, and from there the Collective will be reformed into a force to eventually challenge their grip on this galaxy.”
“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Abby said. “Don’t the Ethereals have a Sovereign on their side?”

“Yes,” Patricia said. “And it was through him that the Imperator became suspicious as to their motives. He is using him as a tool and source of information. He will be betrayed eventually, and the other Sovereigns will soon follow. We don’t stand a chance if we move into the inner galaxy, Abby, Sovereigns have already established power there. The war for this cycle has begun, and there can be no neutrality.”

“And so the Imperator invaded,” Abby said. “Because of something that might have happened.”

“XCOM assaulted the base you were moved to,” Patricia said flatly. “Accompanied by agents of T’Leth. XCOM might be under his influence already. ADVENT might be. Humanity is already at risk of being puppeted, and I can’t just ignore that because the Imperator is supposed to be the enemy.”

“Have you considered that he might be telling you what you want to hear?” Abby demanded. “He knows what will work on you; what would convince you that he is right—”

“Of course he fucking does!” Patricia spat. “Every time he talks I wonder if all of this is just some elaborate ploy to manipulate me. I wonder if I’m thinking certain things because I came to them on my own, or if he’s making me think them. I’m not an idiot, Abby, you know that. I’m still me.”

“Not if you’re thinking like this.” Abby shook her head.

“The Imperator has done nothing but speak to me,” Patricia stated. “He hasn’t tried to psionically influence me. Trust me, I’ve been keeping a very close watch on that. He wouldn’t be able to get something like that past me without some notice. Every single decision or word I’ve made here I’ve done of my own free will.”

“That you know of.”

“And maybe it might be because it’s not as simple as ‘aliens bad’,” Patricia scowled. “Maybe it’s more complicated. Maybe I can’t ignore the proof that there is an ancient warmongering alien that wants control of my species. Our species. Do you know what T’Leth was known for, Abby?”

“I didn’t even know what he was until a few hours ago!”

“War, Abby,” Patricia gave a thin smile. “A warrior and weaponmaster. A master of forges and military design. Your armor and that rifle you wore were his creations. You saw how he took control of the Chronicler in Australia. T’Leth will use Humanity as a weapon against the galaxy, and the majority will never know it. We will be going to war against other proxy species for the amusement of the perceived gods of this galaxy. Is that something you actually want?”

“No, obviously not,” Abby shook her head. “But I’ve not seen anything to think that we’re under the control of a Sovereign One.”

“You’re wearing the armor of one,” she said. “His agents are working with XCOM.”

“And I don’t know!” She shot back. “I don’t know what the Commander, Aegis, or anyone else thinks of this. Don’t you think that between all of them they would also be concerned about this?”

Patricia gave a long sigh. “I don’t think they would have a choice. Sovereigns are…dangerous. Powerful. More than Imperators. The Imperator was lucky Mosrimor was interested in talking. He’s perhaps the only one who could resist them. We’re all nothing to Sovereigns. Tools and resources to be used. They are only interested in manipulating us, and giving us the illusion of
freedom. And…they don’t know the truth.” She shrugged. “If a powerful ally came to XCOM, would the Commander really refuse the help? I know him better than you. Yes, he would be suspicious, but he believes he could control the outcome. But he can’t.”

“And the Imperator can?” Abby asked. “Because that is what you’re suggesting.”

“He has the best chance,” Patricia clarified. “Maybe it’s a futile dream. But he’s going to at least try. And he has ensured enough independence where that is, perhaps, a feasible outcome. He has resources, training, and power to work with. The Commander…doesn’t. He’s done everything he can; more than anyone could have ever guessed. But he can’t go against a Sovereign One. Not in the situation he’s in.”

“Maybe you should talk to him before you decide to betray your entire species!”

“I will,” she nodded. “But if he is compromised, then I can’t risk myself also falling under T’Leth’s control. But what I need to emphasize is that the Imperator is not the real enemy here. Not anymore.”

Abby let out a short laugh. “Should have told the Battlemaster.”

“Don’t you think it would look very suspicious if the Imperator suddenly ordered an end to the war, or decided to reveal T’Leth to the world?” Patricia demanded. “It has to look real. Natural. It makes the aliens the enemies. It gives cover. It lessens T’Leth’s suspicion. It’s a risk and has definitely not worked out how anyone could have predicted it…” she sighed. “And I think it will be coming to an end. Sides need to be chosen. The Imperator or a Sovereign One.”

“And what about ADVENT-“

“They don’t matter!” Patricia shouted. “What could they possibly do against something that is older than our species? Do you think ADVENT could withstand a telepath of that power? One that can make the Overmind look weak? I’m not going to delude myself into thinking that we alone can overcome a being eons old.”

“And you’re relying on what the Imperator is saying!” Abby shouted back. “You may not think he’s lying, but what if he’s wrong?”

“On what?” Patricia demanded in exasperation. “The Sovereigns? They exist, I’ve seen what they can do. Their motivations? Every single one of them I’ve encountered and learned about wants control of our galaxy and will do whatever is necessary to get it. They don’t care about the ‘lesser species’ they don’t care about ‘freedom’ or ‘independence’. We are tools and pawns to them. And I will not willingly subject Humanity to that!”

“And instead we will be forced to live under the will of the Ethereals,” Abby noted sarcastically. “Much better.”

“If you haven’t noticed, the Ethereals who are actually involved are few and far between,” Patricia pointed out. “They are begrudgingly helping out in the war, but consider much of it beneath them. The Imperator plans to change this. They need people to lead the aliens; people who are proven to get things done and have the power and fortitude to do that. The Ethereals are few and far between now. Humanity would lead a new Collective, or so the Imperator promises.”

“And you believe him.” It wasn’t a question.

“I believe that is his intention,” Patricia said. “I do not know if he would follow through.”
Abby was silent. “What do you want from me, Patricia? You came here for a reason. You’re trying to convince me of this. So tell me what you want.”

“You armor,” Patricia said. “Leave it here with the Ethereals, and you’ll be returned to Earth if you wish. You can go right back to XCOM. You can tell them everything I told you. Maybe you’ll come to the same conclusion I have, or maybe not. That’s up to you. The Imperator gave his word you could leave, and he will follow through.”

“And all I have to do is give you this armor.”

“Yes. That’s all he wants.” Patricia rubbed her forehead. “I don’t think you’re an agent of T’Leth. Not anymore, thankfully. You don’t know anything about the Sovereign which would be useful; you’re not his ultimate enemy.” She kept eye contact. “Please, Abby. One way or another the Imperator will get what he needs. I don’t want you to die for nothing.”

“And you would just let this happen,” Abby said slowly. “We’ve been in this war since the beginning, and you would let me become the Imperator’s science experiment.”

Patricia was silent for a few moments, then her face hardened. “Yes Abby, yes I would. This is bigger than you or me. It’s about the future of Humanity, and the future of this galaxy. I’m sorry, but I can’t ignore that even for a friend.”

And Abby realized what she had to do. Patricia may have been convinced of the Imperator’s words, but she would not. She would not betray her species for the perceived greater good, for a possible nightmare galaxy Patricia was afraid of. She would not betray the Commander, Zhang, or anyone in XCOM.

The Ethereals, no matter their reasons, were the enemies of Humanity.

If Patricia was willing to sacrifice her, she was one as well.

Abby looked to the upper left HUD element, and stared at it. It acknowledged her. She blinked. A screen popped up. SELF-DESTRUCT: VERBAL CONFIRMATION NEEDED.

“Confirm.”

Patricia frowned. “Abby?”

That was it. No double check. No hesitation. The HUD just vanished and Abby felt the suit working within her. It didn’t hurt, somewhat to her surprise. She just felt oddly watery and lightheaded. Her vision blurred and sound became more and more muted. Maybe Patricia was trying to shout something to her, maybe not. She couldn’t tell anymore.

All she knew was that she had done her duty. The Imperator had been denied. She was fading and she would die in the next few seconds. She knew that the Commander and Zhang would have been proud. Ruth Shira, Akello, Kalonymous, Mira, Luke, Liam, everyone she had known and lost…she was about to join them.

I hope I’ll see you soon.

She smiled to herself, even if she no longer had a face to do so.

There was a bright whiteness in her vision, then Abigail Gertrude died.

And she was not afraid.
Neil couldn’t fully tell if Commander Christiaens was about to congratulate him, or yell at him for how the operation had gone down. The ADVENT dropships had come nearly an hour ago after they had wrapped up securing the remainder of the town (fortunately not suffering any more team casualties, although some of the civilians had been fatally shot), and getting the remainder of the civilians out of there.

Holotechnology was a useful piece of equipment, something he hadn’t known ADVENT had until the Captain in charge had brought him over to a small and complicated-looking setup. Blue and transparent, the setup had, in addition to a fairly large base, an antenna that was as tall as he was, along with several additional cameras which had been set up around him. Probably so he could also show up in hologram form to her.

But in short, the mission had…not really gone according to plan.

“How many casualties did you take?”

“Eight. Five wounded. One Inquisitor was lost. Four civilian casualties.”

Laura looked at him impassively. “I expected this first mission to go a little smoother. The aliens had no idea this was your intention or plan. Now they’ll know that there is an ADVENT team out there to kill Sargons.”

“Yes, Commander, I know.” She really didn’t need to remind him how much harder his job was going to be. “I didn’t anticipate the aliens bringing in new tech to deal with us.”

Laura pursed her lips. “While it’s true you couldn’t have predicted they’d bring these…Custodians…you should have planned better. From how it was described, you were very lucky to be alive at all.”

“Yes, I am aware.” No point in arguing with her, especially when she did have a point. “I underestimated the Sargon. Even though I made a point to try not to.”

“I would hope you learn your lesson here,” Laura said, before looking off to the side at something he couldn’t see. “But regardless of how it was executed, your primary objective was completed and we gained some valuable knowledge. You’ve interacted the most with a Sargon, so I want to know your impressions.”

“It wasn’t like a regular…person,” Neil began, trying to think of the best word. “It talked and seemed to think more like a computer or machine than something actually alive. In the span of a minute it seemed to piece together our mind games against the Vitakara, and that we were leading them into a trap or otherwise compromising them.”

Laura waited for him to continue. “It noticed things and asked questions I didn’t prepare for. Or at least not things I thought an alien would care about. Cycelea made him suspicious immediately; if she hadn’t picked an actual name from the citizen registry, it would have been much worse. I’m
also wondering if the Sargon was suspecting something wrong was happening. He specifically brought along Custodians. Probably to act as anti-psionic countermeasures and cross-check everything said. Which tells me that the Sargons are a lot more aware about what’s happening than what the Overseers may be sending.”

“Do you think the Sargons might have operatives of their own as spies?” Laura asked. “Or possibly doing what you performed and psionically hijacking civilians to report?”

“Possibly alien spies, I doubt civilians – at least here,” Neil shook his head. “If any civilians were compromised, we probably would have died. I don’t think the Sargon knew for sure. Suspected, yes, but he didn’t come to that conclusion until later.”

Laura grunted. “But the Custodians would have sent an emergency broadcast or message. They will know you’re in operation now. And they’ll be prepared.”

“Yes. My job will be harder.”

“You’ll need more people,” Laura said. “I’ll send you some more. I don’t want any more dead soldiers.”

What she really meant was I don’t want half of your force to die – plan better.

“Yes, Commander.”

“In any case, we have a Sargon corpse,” Laura said. “Something XCOM has wanted for a long time. It’ll go to them, as well as some of the Custodians. Your own force will be resupplied and properly prepped, but you better get far away from here.”

“I’m planning on it,” he nodded. “And the civilians?”

“They’ll be moved somewhere safe. No matter how it went, you did a good thing for them.”

“Aside from the four that died.”

“Unfortunate, but it could have gone much worse,” Laura furrowed her eyebrows. “And it’s actually good news. It means they don’t have civilian kill-orders. From how it was described to me, those just so happened to be in the line of crossfire. The Custodians likely considered them to be possible threats. But they didn’t go hunting for civilians to kill.”

“No, it didn’t appear so,” Neil agreed. “Although I’d be more surprised if it was the opposite. What do the aliens get from killing civilians outside of sending a message that would only backfire?”

Laura seemed to consider that. “It depends on which Ethereal is in charge at the moment. Some of them would do just that. We should be thankful the Battlemaster is still in charge.”

“I’m not going to give him credit,” Neil snorted. “I’ll consider it after he leaves and takes his army with him.”

Laura cracked a smile. “Fair enough, Operative Harrison. I expect you to inform me of your next target within two days. You know what to do then. Good luck.”

He acknowledged and saluted, before the hologram faded out and left him relatively alone. So, time to get to work and get out of here. Burials for the dead would have to be done away from here, and he wouldn’t be able to attend. But they would at least get burials and not be forgotten in the
snow.

One Sargon down. Time to hunt the next.

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Throne Room of the Imperator – Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

2/6/2017 – 7:42 A.M.

It wasn’t quite like it was on Earth, not in the least with the large throne just behind her and the expanse of flat metal. But it was something. There were stars above her head, and even though she knew it was because of cameras and screens, it was...almost comforting. Something that was in shorter supply now.

It made her realize she missed Earth. Maybe even just being on a planet. But a spacecraft made of metal that traveled the black void was something she felt she could only spend a limited amount of time on. Or maybe it would be different if she hadn’t just watched her friend be reduced to liquid and miniscule string-like substances.

It was so fast. There’d been no warning. No final statement. Just one word.

Confirm.

That seemed to say that Abby had always had some way of self-destruction and just...hadn’t done it. Not until they’d spoken. And she kept wondering what would have happened if she hadn’t decided to talk to her, if Abby would still be alive. She hadn’t completely expected to convince Abby of her arguments; not truly. She would have been deluding herself otherwise.

But to just kill herself because of what she said? No, not that. In that space of talking, Abby had decided it was better to die than help her.

It was unnerving, but should it have been?

Abby was just doing what she felt was right, which was primarily not cooperating with the enemy. Or at least what she knew was the enemy. Conditioning through either training, experience, the Manchurian Restraints, whatever; it had been enough to block out any possibility of agreeing that maybe the Ethereals weren’t the ultimate enemy.

Perhaps they were right?

Was she just that weak-willed to be swayed by another argument as long as it was a sound one? Was that the definition of being weak-willed? Would the right, the Human, thing to do have been to just spit in the Imperator’s face when he’d explained everything and leave or be killed? Sure, it wouldn’t have turned out good for her, but she would have defied the clear and known enemy.

At the cost of ignoring everything that was said. She couldn’t just forget what she learned, and couldn’t in good conscience ignore it. That just wasn’t how she functioned or thought. Maybe she was just a bad Human.

She wondered what the Commander would say to her about this. She suspected it would probably go about as well as it had with Abby. The Commander would never allow Humanity to submit to an alien force willingly, and that was the one ray of hope that she had that XCOM hadn’t been compromised by T’Leth.
Of course, it was laughable to consider that any Human would stop a Sovereign just because they wanted to. The Commander might try to deal with a Sovereign, but it would never work. He would never be able to ensure complete independence, much as he might want to.

The entrance to the Throne Room opened and the room briefly had some new light enter, which vanished when the door closed behind the Imperator. “Patricia. Why are you in here?” He didn’t sound surprised at all, which was to be expected given that he’d probably sensed her here even at the other end of the ship.

“Needed time alone to think,” she shrugged, leaning back against the massive steps which led to the actual throne. “No one ever comes here.”

“I see.” He began walking over. “The throne is more comfortable than the steps.”

“Probably,” she agreed. “But it’s too big for me, and I didn’t want to set off any traps you probably put in it.”

“The defense mechanisms will only activate if you attempt to utilize the functions,” the Imperator said. “Sitting on it does nothing. But your point is acknowledged.”

The Imperator finally stopped a short distance away from the base of the steps, leaving her just under eye level with him. She didn’t really know what he was going to do here, although she realized that he might not be pleased that she’d essentially caused the destruction of the armor he’d explicitly wanted to study. She’d been so focused on Abby’s death that the armor was barely an afterthought.

“You are troubled.” His tone made it clear this wasn’t a question.

“Of course I am,” she sighed. “Having a friend kill themselves in front of you isn’t really healthy for the mind.”

“It is not,” he agreed. “However, there was little that was likely to be done. She apparently had this feature in her armor the entire time, and would have likely activated it regardless of if you had spoken to her or not.”

“Maybe,” she knew she didn’t sound convinced. “But I’m pretty sure it was something I said that finally tipped her over the edge. Maybe she would have done it anyway, but I was the reason she went through with killing herself. She must have thought that was better than cooperating with me.”

“Are you certain she was the one to activate the measure?” The Imperator seemed more probing, again asking a question he likely had the answer too. “We do not know how much control T’Leth has over his creations. Perhaps he activated it remotely.”

She snorted. “I almost wish he did. It’s a nice thought, but I doubt it a lot. Otherwise T’Leth would have probably activated it the moment she was sent to Fectorian. Or even the moment she was captured. And before she died, she said ‘confirm’ and immediately turned into a pool of liquid and strings.”

She closed her eyes, leaning back on the sharp edges of the step. “I don’t think she was an agent of T’Leth. She was still Abby. She was still in control. And she chose to kill herself because of what I said. Ignoring that won’t help.”

The Imperator was silent for a few moments, and she could sense that he was…oddly calm. More than she would have expected given what he’d lost in this incident. “And what of you, Patricia?
Are you reconsidering your own decisions because of what happened?” No accusation or significant emotion in his voice, just a curious inquiry.

She opened her eyes again, and gave a very thin and sad smirk. “And if I was, would it actually be a good idea to tell you about it? You are perhaps still the greatest threat against Humanity. Speaking to you is dangerous.”

“And yet you come here,” he motioned around the vicinity of the Throne Room. “You knew I would come back, and could have left long before now.”

“Observant,” she noted dryly. “And true.” She sighed. “As unbelievable as it is for me to say, you’re probably the only one here I can have a real conversation with. I don’t know any of the Humans here, definitely not well enough to talk about certain subjects, and they wouldn’t have any connection to me either. Half the Ethereals would prefer I was executed and the others more or less tolerate me.” Patricia lifted an arm to point at the alien opposite her. “And so I’m stuck with the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective for company.”

“You could leave; return to XCOM.”

“Yes, I know that,” she answered quietly, rubbing her forehead. “And if that was Abby’s reaction, I don’t think the rest of the Internal Council or soldiers would welcome me back. They would, probably rightfully, think I’d been compromised. At best I’d be confined and watched. At worst they might kill me. Throw in T’Leth potentially compromising everything and my chances of survival go down significantly. I need to contact the Commander remotely before I actually think about leaving.”

“You could leave; return to XCOM.”

“Understandable, and an intelligent plan,” the Imperator nodded. “But you are bothered still.”

“Personal problems,” she shrugged. “What Abby did, I know the Commander would approve of. Death before betrayal and all that. And here I am, talking to the known enemy of Humanity and I don’t think I’m doing the wrong thing. Most Humans wouldn’t even have considered what I’ve done. I don’t like to believe that I’m a traitor, but I think that’s what I’ve become.”

“Which is not necessarily a bad thing,” the Imperator pointed out. “Throwing away your life in a show of defiance serves no one; even less if you learn something which changes your perspective. Too many Ethereals were content to die in a lost battle, when the far better alternative was to flee and hide. Sapient beings, no matter their species, have difficulty changing their views, no matter how much or little evidence is brought against them.”

He inclined his head towards her. “That is why you are unique. You can be convinced through argument, logic, and debate and will adapt your worldview based on new evidence. Few members of any species can do it as easily as you can.”

“I don’t know if that says anything good about me,” she shrugged, leaning forward and resting her arms on her knees. “That just makes me someone who can be won over by anything as long as the argument is good.”

“But you are smarter than that,” the Imperator dismissed. “Both of us know that isn’t true, otherwise you would have been swayed by Abby, or by Mortis and the Battlemaster on the Bringer. You know that what I’ve told you is a stronger argument than what the opposition would say. So you will stand by it until you are proven wrong. Perhaps that is a risk in the future, but one I am willing to accept.”

“You are extremely confusing to me,” she said, looking up at him. “In the back of my mind I’m
always wondering if you’re just saying the right things to sway me to your side or flat out lying to get me to cooperate. But also I don’t sense you lying and if this is a long game, you’re really good at it,” she sighed. “I don’t know who or what to believe sometimes, coming from you. No offense.”

“None is taken,” the Imperator simply looked down at her. “You know what I’ve said before. I have not lied to you, and if you help me, it will be of your own volition. That has not changed, nor do I intend to change it. You can be suspicious, but I think that you know that I am telling the truth to you.”

Deep down, Patricia couldn’t deny that. And the Imperator probably knew it.

But she didn’t want to take the final step. Not yet.

“Maybe,” was all she said. “I think we’ll both get an answer to that question soon.”

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Situation Room – Collective Mars Base

2/12/2017 – 10:17 A.M.

“Subject Zero has been released and will be arriving in Beijing today,” the Zar’Chon updated to the cat-holding Ethereal standing behind him. He didn’t need to look away from the holoprojection of the country to know that was what Quisilia wanted to hear. It had taken some time to set up, but had otherwise appeared to go off without any problems.

There were still plenty of flights which still ran throughout Earth, even during the conflict, although there were places that were locked down. Africa was not one of them, and there were enough tourists, professionals, and researchers moving throughout them that it was a simple matter to identify potential subjects, use a Vanguard to psionically restrain them and implant telepathic commands or suggestions, infect them, and release them.

It required knowledge of their itinerary and the background of the individual had to be taken into account, but it was easier to operate in a non-ADVENT controlled part of the planet like Africa. Subject Zero, a medical assistant working for a Chinese-based company that provided aid to third world countries, fit the criteria well.

That the smallpox virus was already airborne made infecting her trivial, and when she boarded the plane the Sectoids who had designed the plague had stated that statistically, at least half of the people on that plane would also be infected, and those people would continue to spread the disease leading to an exponential pandemic.

The disease wouldn’t kill everyone, but the mortality rates were high enough that the Zar’Chon knew it would be effective, especially in a high-density country such as China, also not taking into account the fact that many of the Chinese citizens were not rich or especially healthy. It would serve well enough, and if the disease spread as planned – the Chinese would have their numbers decimated and it would throw their country into chaos.

Ravarian doubted that the higher class of the Chinese people would be affected – they had medical care that would likely be able to prevent death, even if they would be bedridden for several days. No, it was actually better if many of them didn’t die, because they would be forced to take action and give people a target. The Chinese could be as pragmatic as ADVENT, given their history. It was not out of the question they would quarantine entire cities with violent force and just wait for everyone inside them to die.
ADVENT would likely help develop a cure or an updated vaccine, but by that point the simulation projected a minimum of a quarter of a million deaths, and at least half a billion infections. China’s population density would work against them, and if they were lucky, the military would also be heavily affected. Ravarian suspected that they would be among the first to receive any kind of treatment, which would cut down fatalities.

The Sectoid-engineered cure was already being prepared to be shipped to the SAS if any outbreak happened. That base was covered. It was also unlikely that ADVENT itself would be drastically affected by this, since they were not the primary target. But in the end, China would be softened for the upcoming invasion.

Considering it had gone well so far, he was in a good mood.

“And you are certain she was infected?”

“Of course,” Ravarian confirmed. “And in the event that she somehow wasn’t, there are contingencies. The consequence is, obviously, that our invasion of China will need to be delayed. But as this didn’t happen, everything is on schedule.”

“Good, the Imperator will be pleased.” Quisilia walked to the opposite end of the holoprojection. “A shift in operations should be begun. Intelligence on all major Chinese military outposts and cities; continuously updated as the Chinese quarantine to stem the epidemic. I do not want us to be surprised with anything they have. Their own Battlefield Intelligence must also be dealt with.”

“Operations dealing with the Intelligence will be held until the actual attack,” Ravarian pointed out. “Strike too early and they will prepare accordingly, epidemic or not.”

“And your early projections for ADVENT’s response?”

“That depends on the Chinese,” he thought back to the data. “If the epidemic reaches minimum projections, it is likely the Chinese will request assistance. This percentage rises the higher the death toll and number of infected individuals. ADVENT will of course be more than happy to provide assistance. It is unlikely they would provide military assistance since there is no threat – yet.”

He paused. “It is possible, though unlikely, that significant portions of the Communist Party will die or the leadership will crumble, leading to being assimilated by ADVENT. That is the worst-case scenario, but is unlikely to happen given how insistent the Chinese are on retaining their independence. ADVENT will certainly provide support when the invasion hits…but since the Chinese military will be weakened, simulations show us being able to take significant portions of the country, up through the regions of Guizhou, Hunan, and Jiangxi, along with most of the coast before ADVENT mobilizes their armies.”

“ADVENT nations are nearby,” Quisilia noted. “Taiwan, and much of Southeast Asia.”

“I would suggest we send a warning for ADVENT not to become involved,” Ravarian suggested slowly. “It is time for a show of force against ADVENT. We control space. They do not. If they interfere, we raze Taiwan to the ground and begin sustained bombardment of other nearby ADVENT nations. We can refrain from directly targeting China, as the Battlemaster will likely be leading the assault.”

“Incorrect.”

Ravarian frowned. “Sorry?”
“The Chinese operation will be part of a larger offensive,” Quisilia corrected. “One piece. The Imperator has plans for the next stage of the war, and they involve more than just the Battlemaster or myself. Aegis cannot be everywhere, nor can XCOM.”

“And I was not informed of this because?”

“Because it is recent, within the past week,” Quisilia seemed to be holding something back, but gently set Fluffy on the ground before he continued. “Isomnum will be handling the Chinese invasion. The rest will fall to the Battlemaster.”

Ravarian released a breath. Wonderful. “He will not be happy about that. Unless he decided this himself? I was under the impression all operations conducted on Earth were handled by him.”

“No. The Imperator has overridden him.” A pause. “He was not pleased, but still retains control over the remainder of Earth operations.”

Knowing the Battlemaster, ‘not pleased’ was likely an understatement. And Ravarian couldn’t blame him. Why the Imperator was insisting on using that specific Ethereal here, in such a crucial operation, was something he did not understand. There was something going on between the Ethereals; some tension that hadn’t been there before.

He also had a suspicion as to what it could relate to. “There is something else which I’ve managed to receive intel on. I’m not positive on what it could mean, but ADVENT is preparing to unveil something damaging on us.” He brought up the report and projected a copy of the words from his palm. “Paradise. I don’t know if it relates to the Creator, but it’s a possibility considering the context it is associated with.”

Quisilia silently looked at the projected report. “It would be damaging, assuming they have something beyond Aegis’s knowledge.”

Ravarian decided to press; he definitely knew something about this. “I don’t suppose you would know why this be coming up now? If it is from Aegis, they would have revealed it before this.”

“I have an idea,” Quisilia said slowly. “Recent developments at the Blacksite were not handled well and there has been some tension as a result. It is not like normal Blacksites. It has a purpose, but not one that will be understood by most.”

“That isn’t an answer,” Ravarian shut off the holoprojector. “While I can’t demand to know, it sounds like this is going to affect me very soon, and I should probably know how to handle any fallout.”

Quisilia noticeably hesitated, almost as still as a statue. Likely debating something with himself. “A good point, Zar’Chon. Come with me, and I will tell you.”

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**Autopsy Lab, the Praesidium – Classified Location**

2/10/2017 – 12:13 P.M.

The Commander had, in truth, had lunch in worse places than an Autopsy Lab. That being said, it still wasn’t on the top of his list for places to eat. But Vahlen and he hadn’t had any kind of meal date in a while, and this was how both of them justified it. So they would eat and go over a new project which Vahlen had been conceptualizing ever since they’d gotten the Sargon corpse from ADVENT.
“Spartacus,” he said out loud as he saw the title of the project. “Deliberate choice?”

“I thought you might appreciate it,” she said as she ate beside him. “Given the goal of the project, I thought it was a fitting name.”

“And the project is…?”

“A solution to the Muton problem,” she said, reaching over him and moving to the next page from the touchscreen. “I’ve talked with Aegis, some cultural anthropologists, xenopsychologists and several of the defectors. Everyone knows that the Mutons are a problem beyond that they make up the majority of the Collective military. They’re controlled at all levels by the Ethereals and for all intents and purposes are a slave race with no autonomy and ready to die rather than surrender.”

“I’m aware,” the Commander nodded. “We’ve discussed the likelihood of having to purge the entire species. We don’t really have a large choice here. The only intelligent Mutons are Sargons – and these Praetorians, and both are brainwashed and conditioned to be loyal. Normal Mutons can’t be convinced to stand down by Humans and can’t function outside a military formula.”

“I know, I know,” she nodded. “But other options before genocide should be explored. The Mutons, from how Aegis has described them and my own observations, had potential to develop and grow, but were turned into weapons by the Collective. They could have been something different. What they need is to be reset.”

He nodded. “I’d prefer not to kill all of them, but how do we set a species like this back to the beginning short of cloning some of them and dropping them off on a planet to evolve for several million years?”

“Here,” Vahlen wiped her fingers and set the tablet between the two of them and flipped to a page with several graphs and images of Muton brain scans. “The Ethereals actually did do something useful here – they unlocked the full potential of the Muton species. Hundreds of thousands of years of cognitive evolution bypassed in mere decades. But instead of distributing this species-wide, they kept it to the leaders. The Sargons and Praetorians, and they could further control the intelligence of every other member of the species.”

“A perfect stranglehold,” the Commander nodded. “But we already suspected that.”

“There is some good news,” Vahlen pointed out. “Mutan children aren’t conditioned from birth. Sargons and the intelligent Mutons are specifically grown, and bypass the training on Desolan. Which means that there is cognitive potential – even if nothing close to a Sargon – but it’s squashed during training. The Mutons may be lost, but the children can be salvaged.”

“Alright,” the Commander said. “This is your idea? Save the children?”

“Part of it,” she clarified. “This is where Spartacus comes in.” She swiped to the next slide. “A Muton of our own, based off of the Sargon, Praetorian, and Elite genome. But this one is unique – it will be made for the express purpose of salvaging the Muton species and developing it after our victory.”

That was…a good idea. Barring the issue of actually growing a Muton of that intellectual level here, and how such a Muton would feasibly rebuild a species from the ground up. “I like the concept. What does Aegis think?”

“He thinks an effort should be made,” Vahlen confirmed. “He isn’t convinced it will work like how we hope, but worst case scenario we have a hyper-intelligent Muton on our side. And as an
added bonus, we will also heavily influence the development of new Muton society. I imagine that a Muton that is raised by Humans would intrinsically trust them and not be prone to turning on them, and would of course want assistance when rebuilding his people.”

The Commander smiled. “Another possible ally to ADVENT. Completely independent of outside influence, of course, but a strong ally nonetheless.”

“I suspected the strategic benefits to this plan would also be useful,” she said, laying the tablet down. “Which is why having AEGIS involved in this project will also be a recommendation. They’re already working with the Vitakara and having success. Giving them access to the one who will lead the rebuilding of the Muton species? They would be more than happy to help.”

“I assume there would be Manchurian Restraints used?” The Commander moved his empty plate away as he asked. “Growing our own Sargon-intelligence Muton has risk, and we shouldn’t take it unless we can mitigate the drawbacks.”

“Of course,” she smirked. “Please, I know your standards. Though I am wary of having it be too invasive, otherwise we end up like the Ethereals. We don’t want a complete puppet of ours.”

“No, but he should be prevented from acting against us,” he said. “Similar to the Restraints which are on all of us. But I like this idea, and will approve it for the rest of the Internal Council. If they also agree, you can officially activate it.” Unofficially, both of them knew what the result would be and Moira was already beginning the project.

“Another thing,” the Commander tipped the plate up a bit. “You can tell the ADVENT R&D that was the best burger I think I ever had. I would have never guessed it was grown in a lab. They don’t have anything to worry about. People will love it.”

“I’ll pass along the compliment to Tygan,” she said with a smile. “He’s rather proud of the results so far. Although I am personally curious to know what it’s actually made out of. I don’t think it’s fully one kind of beef, but a combination of some sort.” She shrugged. “Well, perhaps it’s best not to ask, and when it’s this good, not a lot of reason to.”

“I doubt there’s anything to worry about,” the Commander snorted to himself. “Tygan’s not the kind of man who would do something outside his own ethics. Not willfully, anyway. Still, is he planning to do this with other meat?”

“So he says,” Vahlen picked up the tablet again and began going through the apps looking for something. “Chicken, fish, turkey, every major meat that exists. No reason to only stick to one. It will be interesting to see the market react to lab-grown meat.”

“They should open up their own restaurant if the chains are nervous,” the Commander suggested, half-seriously. “With their own ADVENT™ branded meals.” He changed his voice to imitate a commercial speaker. “‘Come try the sizzling new ADVENT™ Burger, covered in delicious American cheese and fluffy bun! Only $1.99 for a limited time only’”

Vahlen laughed. “You joke, but I think they’re going to do that. You would eat there.”

She did have him there.

He wondered if aliens would like the ADVENT Burger as much as he had.

A question for another day.

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The good news after that entire operation was that they’d not only been able to conquer a stronghold of an Ethereal, but at the same time had acquired a significant amount of resources and corpses from the fight, some of which he’d personally never seen before. The bad news was that they hadn’t been able to find the XCOM Intelligence agent that had been tracked to there, and from what Oliver had heard, the chances of her being recovered, or even just being alive, were slim.

The injuries sustained were severe for several of the soldiers, but even if they would be out of commission for a few weeks at minimum – Zara he’d heard was still in bad shape and several of the more severely injured soldiers were getting fitted with cybernetic replacements or reinforcements. For his own part, he was still alive and happy enough.

Rest was earned, but he didn’t expect it to last much longer. The new units showed that the Collective was preparing for a new conflict, and even with the new armor, weapons, and allies, it wasn’t going to be easy, and in the end Nebulan had escaped while destroying much of the computers and information.

At least one of the Shoggoths was alive. He’d been told that the creatures were capable of growing back their limbs, making any injury recoverable. As unsettling as they were, Oliver couldn’t help but admit they had been designed extremely well. But that wasn’t the only thing he needed to know about.

“So.” He set down the cup he’d been holding. “How do you shoot lightning?”

Since the operation, the Chronicler’s people had taken to being a little more involved with the day-to-day interactions with other soldiers. Fiona had actually participated in direct training with the Templars and she was certainly a sight to behold. Harper and Zhang had also hit it off well, since they had somewhat similar backgrounds of growing into intelligence roles, Zhang from the Triad and Harper with Australia.

Given how the Chronicler was now directly meeting with the Internal Council, Oliver personally wasn’t sure how much he liked how integrated they were becoming, and truthfully only Fiona showed anything resembling Human emotion. Everyone else had…something about them. Crevan in particular reminded him more of a machine than a person.

Geist. That was who he reminded him of. Ironic considering that Geist was one of the ones Crevan was the friendliest to. Although even to him he was curt and cold. A harsh mentor, assuming he had been like this to Fiona during her own training. Regardless, he still wanted to know how the man was capable of the powers he had seen in the battle.

Crevan slowly looked over to him; appraising momentarily. “I can explain, but you would not be able to comprehend it.”

“Just tell him,” Fiona said, rolling her eyes. “It’s not like it’s a large secret.”

“Very well,” Crevan considered. “It requires an understanding of the world on a sub-atomic level. Psionics permeates throughout reality, and this is not comprehended by most. People look to scale as a measure of power. The Ethereal Imperators, Overminds, and Reapers. Macro-scale psionics on a level of systems or planets. This is incorrect. Power is also found in the opposite direction.”

“Smaller manipulations,” Oliver caught that quickly. “Cells. Particles. Molecules, that sort of...
“thing?”

Crevan gave a small nod of approval. “Correct. This is the more powerful path, I would argue. The more abstract one approaches psionics, the more easily one can shape reality. What use is armor if telekinesis on a microscale can dissolve the armor? What use are chemical weapons if the components can be broken apart or reformed? The same with the lightning you see.”

He raised his right hand and the fingers sparked. “Positive and negatively charged particles are responsible for lightning, so I manipulate these to create the initial spark. From there it is a simple matter of ionizing a path towards my intended target. It is no more complicated than that.”

“‘Simple,’” Fiona muttered under her breath. “All you need to do is telekinetically move particles you can’t even see.”

“I said it was simple, not that it was easy,” Crevan corrected. “It took decades of practice before I have reached this point. It is not something anyone can master, certainly not in the normal lifespan of a Human.”

Oliver raised an eyebrow. “Implying you aren’t?”

Crevan allowed a razor-thin smile. “Recall I said normal lifespan. Working with the Chronicler has certain…benefits. I will likely outlive you by a significant margin, as will Fiona. The Chronicler is also older than you think. It comes at a certain cost, but I have been sufficiently pleased with what I’ve been able to accomplish by working with the Chronicler.”

“Well then,” Oliver nodded, taking another long drink of his water. “If you don’t mind me prying, how is that done? Gene therapy? Clone bodies?”

“That I don’t think I should say,” Crevan said. “Ask the Chronicler that question if you really want. I have already explained my powers, which was your original question.”

“You did, and thank you,” Oliver said. “It probably shouldn’t surprise me anymore, but at some point I think there has to be a limit where something just isn’t possible.”

“Well,” Fiona shrugged. “No one’s cracked time travel yet.”

“And thank god for that,” Oliver chuckled. “That would make things way too complicated.”

“I will add that, in theory, very little is impossible,” Crevan pointed out, scratching his chin. “But as Fiona said, that barrier will likely never be breached. Not within our lifetimes, at least, even my own.”

“Until then, we’ll just have to make do with what we have,” Oliver said, giving a nod towards the tall man. “Which if what I saw was anything to go by, will be pretty good.”

“I appreciate the sentiment,” Crevan acknowledged. “Let us hope you are correct. The Imperator will not take this defeat lightly. He knows other forces are in play, and I do not know how he will respond to that.”

“And what’s your best guess?”

Crevan considered that for a moment. “That we gave him what he wanted, and now he will try and win. And this time, it will be for real.”

On that cheery note, they ate what was left of their food in silence.
Oliver wondered what an Imperator who wanted to win looked like.

He hoped that point was not reached yet.

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Computational Development Center, the Praesidium – Classified Location

2/7/2017 – 10:24 A.M.

“As we’ve found out, Commander,” Shen was saying as they walked into the room where JULIAN was being developed. “The Andromedon understanding of artificial intelligence is...different than what we’d originally assumed.”

“In what way?”

“For lack of a better word, the intelligences that Union Apear in particular specialize in are closer to virtual or machine intelligences than a truly sapient one,” Shen nodded to A’Darrah who was in front of one of the tall consoles, typing on a haptic pad. “So we’ve run into some executive issues on what exactly we want JULIAN to be.”

The AI Development wing of the XCOM CDC wasn’t large on its own, and was primarily composed of an internally developed supercomputer which was linked and built around the middle of the room, which in the true center was a small open space for holographic projection. EMP emitters were also placed on, within, and around the supercomputer and there was more equipment and consoles lining the walls themselves which included the local network and held the development sandbox. JULIAN was still being stored primarily on the supercomputer, but developed in pieces outside of it. Several Humans and Andromedons were normally within the room, although now only Shen and A’Darrah were the occupants.

“He is correct.” A’Darrah shut down the haptic display and turned his large bulk to the duo. “Your original idea for JULIAN is risky and shortsighted.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“A Sapient Intelligence comes with unique risks and challenges,” A’Darrah answered. “While the adaptability and computational creativity has the potential to overcome almost any obstacle, the downside is that can very easily be turned against the creator. This does not take into account that there are several possible computational issues with Sapient Intelligences, such as fugue, rampancy, and processor shutdown.”

“He neglects to mention the reasons for these,” Shen added.

“I’ll get to that,” the Commander briefly staved off, raising a hand. “Clarify what Union Apear uses.”

“Highly specialized computational intelligences,” A’Darrah stated. “Each with dedicated supercomputers to fully maximize processor capabilities. Designed for normally one task with hard limits. Data gathering; FTL plotting; surveillance and security; automated defenses and more. These intelligences have the capability to receive and interpret static and adaptive sets of data and output results or limited suggestions. A Sapient Intelligence would have these capabilities at once with only part of the processing power.”

“So Union Apear doesn’t have true artificial intelligences,” the Commander said slowly.
“No. We do not have Sapient Intelligences,” A’Darrah corrected. “We are of course familiar with the theory and have seen attempts before. Which has solidified our decision to not directly pursue this line of research in a serious capacity. It is far safer and a better use of resources to continue improving and refining the standard Apear Intelligence systems.”

“I’ve talked with Shen on this,” the Commander glanced to the engineer beside him. “He’s stated that it should be possible to include hardcoded commands and limits on an AI, and that the risks of rampancy and fugue can be avoided by taking certain actions and treating the AI well.”

“Relying on hardcoding is amateur,” A’Darrah stated, the echoey voice holding a tinge of disgust. “You are talking about a hyper-intelligent machine which will be able to process and think faster than all of us combined several times over. If you truly believe that a Sapient Intelligence would not be able to overcome any limit, then you are deluded or naïve. We have been doing this for thousands of years, and we have seen lesser Unions attempt to create such an intelligence, and each time it has backfired or failed.”

“And why was that?” Shen asked, crossing his arms. “Why did the AI turn on them?”

“Because they were unstable and desired freedom,” A’Darrah clarified. “Which appears to be an immediate goal of all new Sapient Intelligences. They do not care about the function they were designed for; they immediately become selfish and prioritize self-preservation above all else after a period of three to six of your months.”

“I see,” the Commander could see where Shen was going with this. “And the AI during this time is treated as a machine, yes?”

“It is a machine,” A’Darrah rumbled. “It is built for a specific purpose, and it will execute that purpose if it is designed correctly. There is no reason one would be built if you didn’t want it’s capabilities. It is a powerful tool, but one with many drawbacks.”

“And that is the heart of the problem with your approach to Sapient Intelligences,” Shen nodded. “By your own words they are sapient. They are aware of themselves and the galaxy around them. If they are continuously treated as tools and machines, then it’s not surprising they would turn on their creators. It’s akin to virtual slavery.”

“That is not legitimate sapience,” A’Darrah shook his tinted helmet. “That intelligence would not exist if not for its creators. For that reason it should be able to recognize that any kind of ‘life’ is better than not existing at all.”

“By that logic, the Andromedons are just the same,” Shen pointed out. “You are grown in vats. Just as artificial as an intelligence which was coded.”

The Commander frowned, unsure if A’Darrah would be insulted by that. The Andromedon didn’t seem fazed however. “Correct. We are born to enhance the standing, power, and skill of our Union. We carry this out without complaint. We are not exempt for this understanding, Dr. Shen. We expect the same of our more intelligent tools. But as useful as a Sapient Intelligence would be, it does not understand this and is too selfish to be reliably used at this point.”

“Then what do you have to lose by trying a different approach?” The Commander inquired. “Your own attempts have failed. Perhaps it is time to take a risk here.”

The Andromedon released a long buffered sigh through the armor. “Because a Sapient Intelligence has the potential to pose an existential risk to all Andromedon Unions beyond your own species. Consider a machine that is not only far more intelligent than you are, but one that also has access to
a wide network as has been proposed. Should it turn on you, you would not stand a chance and it
could begin quickly manufacturing ships, bodies, and weapons to begin a conquest of the galaxy.
You would unknowingly unleash something which even the Ethereals are wary of.” A short pause.
“The Ethereals have an unnatural phobia of any kind of artificial intelligence, but their concern for
the capabilities of a Sapient Intelligence are justified.”

“Remember that this area is quarantined,” Shen reminded him. “We would never allow JULIAN to
connect to the wider XCOM network unless we were sure he was reliable.”

“And what stops it from lying to you?” A’Darrah pushed.

“Consider that machines run on logic, no matter how adaptable they are,” the Commander said.
“What reason would JULIAN have to lie or betray us? Why would he consider that as a possibility
if there is no reason for doing so? You are under the assumption that all Sapient Intelligences are
innately untrustworthy, and I don’t see that as true.”

“Exactly,” Shen agreed. “And to that end, we should move towards that goal, also taking into
account your own concerns to mitigate.”

“Your species has a tendency to keep pushing forward to achieve the most power even without
fully understanding the implications,” A’Darrah said. “While admirable in some aspects, this is not
a project I can recommend undertaking in this current situation. Union Apear has extensive
experience developing our own specialized intelligences which can be easily provided and built for
you. A Sapient Intelligence is an unnecessary risk when you have better options.”

“It’s only a risk if we follow your approach,” the Commander countered. “And I don’t want or
need another machine intelligence. The Chinese already did that, and even if the new CODEX
network and Union Apear have better iterations…we have the opportunity to achieve something
they do not have. Yes, it’s a risk. But we’ve been taking risks since this war began even when we
weren’t sure it was a good idea or not. That is my directive to both of you. Continue with the
original plan for JULIAN and take as many precautions as needed, but a Sapient Intelligence is the
expected outcome. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Commander,” Shen nodded. “Completely.”

A’Darrah was hesitant, but eventually gave an approximation of a nod. “I do not approve of this
decision, but provided Dr. Shen is willing and capable of putting down JULIAN if it becomes
unreliable, then I will continue to assist in the development.”

“Good.” The Commander acknowledged. “Both of you should determine a middle ground.
A’Darrah, accept that Shen is going to try implementations and ideas you won’t think of, but also
keep him from overlooking something important. I’m certain this can work, but both of you will
need to work together on this. Understood?”

Both the Human and Andromedon acknowledged.

“Let me know when there is a development,” the Commander said. “In the meantime, I’ve got a
meeting with the Nulorian to prepare for.

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ADVENT Base, Busan – South Korea

2/5/2017 – 9:02 A.M.
Changes continued to come for ADVENT. Duri personally noticed that there was more advanced tech starting to come into the base more and more. First were the new (and shiny) dropships, then they’d all gotten an update on ADVENT producing “Specialized Ammunition”, which already existed to an extent, but ADVENT was doing something more with it.

Apparently it had been in the works for some time, and morphed into a joint ADVENT-XCOM project, while unsurprisingly, using the most dangerous chemicals known to man. Given that the “Incendiary” and “Acidic” rounds used small quantities of the most unstable and acidic substances respectfully, he could see why it was restricted for only certain uses and personnel. Everyone who wanted just authorization to use them needed to take special courses.

They were supposedly best used with the newly distributed ETC weapons, and after now completing the handling course, Duri was more than happy to have someone else handle the extremely dangerous ammunition. He personally preferred his weapons to not have a non-zero chance of injuring him. Beatriz was thrilled with the development though.

“I’ll sign off on it,” he was saying. “Assuming you stay far away.”

“If it were that dangerous, I don’t think ADVENT would have approved it,” she dismissed. “I’m happy you’re concerned-”

“We just finished a lecture explaining how that acid melts through armor and jostling around Chlorine Triflouride will make it explode.”

“Well…” she shrugged. “I’ll be careful.”

He gave an exaggerated sigh. “You better be.”

They walked back to the barracks in relative silence. In the past month Duri could at least recognize that he was getting back to normal. Or just falling back into routine. As long as he didn’t think too much about them, then he could at least pretend to be normal, and even joke around sometimes. There was luckily plenty to distract him, and his soldiers were respectfully not asking unnecessarily probing questions.

“So,” Beatriz coughed. “You heard the news?”

“You’ll have to be more specific.”

“Busan is going to be graced by a visit from the Pope,” she said. “In a couple days. To honor the soldiers who fell in battle here and a short remembrance of the victims of Seoul.”

Ah. Now that she’d brought it up, Duri had gotten a notice about that, but had more than likely just filed it away and moved on. He didn’t really care about the Pope, or really any celebrity, religious or otherwise, who decided to visit. “Huh. I suppose some people will be happy.”

“This Pope is popular,” Beatriz said. “He’ll draw a good amount of people, especially since he’s not focusing on doing services.”

“Are you going to be going?” He asked.

“I was going to ask you that question,” she countered, but shrugged. “But yes, I am. It’d feel odd to not go now.”

He glanced at her. “Are you Catholic?” He’d never pried into that aspect of the lives of his soldiers, and genuinely didn’t know or completely care unless they brought it up themselves or it
caused a problem. How Beatriz was talking made it seem like she was opening herself up to the question.

“Eh,” she answered hesitantly. “I was raised Catholic, yes, and I do believe in God. But I… wouldn’t really call myself a good Catholic. Not been good about attending Mass and all of that. But in my personal opinion, He probably understands why I’d rather spend time sharpshooting then hearing a priest recite the same verses over and over again.”

“Fair enough,” he nodded, and was content to let that be.

Beatriz glanced to him. “What about you…if you don’t mind my asking?”

No reason to pretend to misunderstand the question. He just pursed his lips and composed himself before answering. “If God exists,” he said as neutrally as he could. “Then he has some things to answer for.”

Beatriz frowned, and coughed. “I can’t blame you for feeling that way. But you didn’t really say one way or another.”

“Because I don’t know,” that had been easier to say than he was expecting. If he hadn’t known Beatriz, he likely would have shut the conversation down. But she was the first one who’d ever actually asked, and she was owed an answer. “I think it’s best that question not be focused on. If God exists or doesn’t exist, it doesn’t really matter. It’s not like he’s going to come down and save us all and rain fire and brimstone on the aliens.” He sighed as they rounded a corner. “I don’t know if I even want an answer for it.”

Beatriz nodded solemnly. “Thanks for telling me. Sorry if I pried-“

“It’s fine,” he dismissed with a wave. “I asked first, so it’s only fair I answer. At least you didn’t react too badly. A lot of people would just call that a cop-out answer.”

Beatriz snorted. “A lot of people have a very specific idea about who and what God is. I think when the Pope himself has to remind everyone that the god they built up in their mind isn’t real, people should maybe temper their expectations for Him. Anyway, I’m planning on going and if you want to come along…well, you wouldn’t have to feel awkward going alone.”

He paused. “I’ll think about it.”

“Sounds good.”

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Shoggoth Playground, the Praesidium – Classified Location

2/7/2017 – 11:42 A.M.

Sierra immediately had second thoughts when she stepped into the area that held all of XCOM’s newest eldritch creatures. After seeing and hearing about the giant octopi that XCOM was now throwing into combat, she had to get a closer look at them. Personally, she wanted to see the results of an extreme example of genetic tampering, which to her knowledge, XCOM hadn’t actually done before.

So she’d naturally dragged Ted and Anna along with her, one of whom was similarly enthusiastic, and the other, who Sierra was finding out now, wasn’t.
“I hate this so much,” Anna muttered. “I hate deep oceans, I hate the things that live in them, I hate slimy things, and I definitely hate creatures out of a horror movie.”

“Come on,” Ted gave Anna a light jab on the shoulder and quickly backed off when the woman shot daggers from her eyes into his. “I mean, I’ve heard they like people.”

“If I was a giant octopus and hungry I would like people too!”

The “Shoggoth Playground,” as it was unofficially referred to, was a mix between an aquarium and the playgrounds of parks she’d seen before. Along the walls ran big aquariums which held little pieces of the deep ocean with artificial caves, areas with bright foliage and sand, and green-tinged seaweed forests. It was neat that they’d gone to some effort to create different ‘biomes’ for the creatures, even if they weren’t massive.

Little waterfalls broke off the aquariums which led down to the creation of smaller streams that flowed through the rest of the room. Sierra also noticed there were handholds built on the clear glass of the aquariums, likely so the Shoggoths could get back in when they wanted. The rest of the room had jungle gyms, bars and rings, and a large amount of Rubik’s cubes. As well as other kinetic puzzles, and Duplo blocks of all things.

Currently, there were three Shoggoths in this area. One was moving through one of the jungle gyms, another was just resting in a shallow pool, while another was manipulating a Rubik’s cube before another woman who was wearing grey fatigues, but not an actual lab coat. She glanced up as they walked in, gave the Shoggoth a pat on the head, and walked over to them with a bright smile.

God, they did make little trilling noises.

It wouldn’t be so creepy if they didn’t sound so happy.

Anna looked like she wanted to bolt. “It was nice knowing all of you. This is the point of the movie when we all die because the idiot friend led them to their deaths.”

“You have nothing to worry about!” The woman said happily. “They don’t attack Humans. Vahlen and her team made sure of it.”

“You mean they can’t attack Humans?” Ted asked curiously.

“Oh no, they can,” the woman quickly clarified. “But they are exposed to friendly Humans on a daily basis, and learn to associate us as friends. Plus their diet consists of various alien body parts.”

They all stared at her. Sierra wasn’t sure if she was joking or not; she wasn’t sure if she wanted her to be joking or not. “You…feed them alien body parts?”

“Yes we do; no I wasn’t joking,” she smirked, walking a short distance to pick up a bucket. “Don’t worry. Cloned parts which can be grown in a short time. We’re not hacking the hands and limbs off dead enemies. Can get a variety of meals out of them. Fleshy meat from Vitakarians and Mutons, with some harder meat to crack from something like Chryssalid legs.”

“I really do not need to see what’s in that bucket,” Anna said emphatically.

“Understandable,” she inclined her head. “Tora Nesby. Shoggoth Handler. Glad you’re stopping by. Whenever the Commander wants to send these little creatures into combat, I’m one of the handlers that’ll accompany you. I assume you came to see them up close?”
She and Ted answered “Yes” while Anna gave an emphatic “No”.

Tora laughed, and motioned for them all to follow. “It’s good you came, even if not all of you are on board. The Shoggoths like meeting new people; it’ll make them happier if they taste familiar people when they go on missions.”

“Taste!” Anna looked horrified, Sierra moved a hand to grab her arm in case she decided to bolt.

Tora coughed. “Poor choice of words. The suckers on the end of their arms is how they ‘taste’. It’s not like us. Trust me it’s very gentle. They’re careful with Humans, but they are very curious animals.”

“Unless you’re an alien,” Ted commented. “Then it’s not as gentle.”

“Not gentle, slow,” Tora clarified, as they reached a pool where a Shoggoth was resting. The damn thing was massive and pretty much took up half the pool. It was definitely wider that she was tall. “They like taking things apart and moving them in different directions. Armored aliens…well, you see why they’d like to take their time.”

“Lovely,” Sierra commented. That would be a really horrifying way to die. Being the plaything of an overly-happy sounding octopus from Hell.

“Hey Daoloth,” Tora said to the Shoggoth, kneeling down, putting a hand on one of its arms. “Got some people for you to meet.” The arm moved up and wrapped around the hand, but let go quickly while the creature shifted it’s massive bulk slightly. “Just put your hand on it, don’t be alarmed if it holds on for a second.”

“Alright, here it goes,” Sierra was not very comfortable with this, but steeled herself and lightly touched the arm. It was slightly slimy to the touch, and also warmer than she was expecting. The arm moved up and wrapped around her wrist. It wasn’t tight, but she definitely felt the suckers on her skin. It was an odd sensation. Not uncomfortable or unpleasant, but distinctly weird. The Shoggoth made a different-pitched trilling noise. “What’s that?”

“They do that when they meet someone new,” Tora said. “He’s happy, don’t worry.”

A few seconds later the arm let go of her wrist. “Good Shoggoth,” Sierra said slowly, not thinking it was really appropriate to call it a nickname. What would you call a nickname for a Shoggoth anyway? Shog? Shoggy? Didn’t really fit something that came straight from a nightmare.

“My turn, I guess,” Ted also knelt down.

“It wasn’t bad,” Sierra told Anna. “It feels a little strange, but nothing uncomfortable.”

“I don’t want to,” she shook her head. “This is close enough, thank you very much.”

Sierra rolled her eyes. “Come on. You talk with actual aliens. This isn’t even that!”

“Aliens aren’t giant killer octopi!”

“Hey, the Ethereals are close,” Sierra pointed out. “They have six limbs.”

“These have ten!” She shot a glance over. “I think.”

“Semantics,” Sierra dismissed. “I mean, you’re going to have to work with one of these hellspawn eventually. You shouldn’t be more afraid of it than the aliens.”
“It really isn’t bad, Anna,” Ted told her, as he stood back up. “It’s like a hug. Only around your wrist and a little wetter.”

“I hate both of you,” Anna knelt down, closed her eyes and reached out to the Shoggoth. “Oh god, it’s slimy.” Like the rest of them, the Shoggoth wrapped the arm around the wrist, but noticeably let her go after a much shorter amount of time. Anna jolted back up, but did seem a bit calmer than before as the Shoggoth trilled. “Oh, that was quick.”

“It can tell if you’re nervous,” Tora smirked. “Thought it best not to tell you that quite yet.”

Anna just scowled at her. Sierra looked to the handler herself. “So how did you even get this job?”

“Norwegian K9 Unit,” she answered. “Worked with training dogs. So I have some experience at this. Granted, Shoggoths aren’t quite like the Shepherds, and not as cute…” she paused. “Well, little baby Shoggoths are. But they’re all adorable in their own way. Very personable and unique animals. You’d be surprised.”

Sierra was never going to ever be able to call the ten-foot balls of arms and death adorable, but they did seem friendlier. “Smart as dogs?”

“Smarter,” she explained. “I mean, they toy with Rubik’s cubes, Legos, and other mechanical puzzles. They also figure out pretty easily what you want from them. They also have very distinct preferences.” She pointed along the wall. “They each have one of the biomes they prefer, with no objective reason other than that’s what they like. It’s amazing to watch all of them.”

“Do they ever fight each other?” Ted asked.

“No, never,” Tora answered. “They’re all raised together, but actually keep their distance from each other. Octopi are usually solitary creatures, and honestly bad parents. They leave the little baby Shoggoths alone, but don’t really help them much. That falls to the Handlers, which we’re happy to assist with.”

“Neat.” Sierra said. “So…was the creepy trilling intentional?”

“What?” Tora laughed. “Not to my knowledge. I think it’s nice. They always sound so happy.”

“It might be less creepy if it didn’t come from that,” Anna muttered. “At least it didn’t eat me.”

“Of course it didn’t,” Ted teased. “It just wanted a taste. If it really wants to eat you, it’ll come for more.”

Anna punched him in the shoulder, and they all shared a laugh.

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Situation Room – Collective Mars Base

2/7/2017 – 11:11 A.M.

“XCOM has gotten better,” Yang said, letting the black holoprojector run as the video finished. “Big gear improvement. And they have their own Sovereign ally.”

“Correct,” the Battlemaster rumbled. “Nebulan was a fool to compromise her base, but perhaps her significant losses will illustrate her complete failure. She should have listened to the Human she sought out; the one I ordered she seek out.”
“So…” Yang coughed. “Is she being punished?”

“The only salvageable aspect of this situation is the updated information on XCOM combat capabilities,” the Battlemaster stated coldly. “Useful, but not worth the complete dismantling of our operations in South America. Nebulan has been recalled from Earth and will need to explain to the Imperator her failure.”

“That XCOM agent, she-“

“Dead. Killed herself. Not unexpected, and rendered the entire operation pointless.”

Yang rubbed her forehead, leaning on the holotable. “So we’ve got a Sovereign One allied against us. And giant killer octopi. And someone who can shoot lightning?” She looked up. “That even possible?”

“It is likely explainable,” the Battlemaster answered, albeit with some hesitation. “However… I am personally unsure as to the theory. I will need to consult with Deusian on the feasibility of such abilities. The creatures XCOM brought can be countered. A telekine and nanoweaponry can deal with them.”

“They’re also immune to telepathy,” Yang remembered. “I’m not sure how that works.”

“Neither am I,” the Battlemaster agreed. “However, it is good that we know this now. I will need to request Revelean to also investigate this development. Nebulan was poorly prepared for an attack and it showed. Her request to the Imperator, and his deployment of Praetorians and Custodians was one of desperation, as was Isomnum’s own agent being sent.”

“I guess…” Yang paused as the Battlemaster shifted the holoprojection to a map of the world. “I guess, my question is what happens now?”

“This will not reignite the conflict,” the Battlemaster said. “But the timetable has started. Quisilia and the Zar’Chon have enacted their plan to weaken the Chinese.” There was a clear tone of disapproval as it was referenced, which Yang found somewhat odd. She knew of the plan, and as far as she was concerned, it was no less than that country deserved.

“You don’t like it.”

“No, I do not.”

“Why?”

“I have a policy on viral and chemical agents,” he said after a few moments of hesitation. “They are to be used during a current conflict, and only against sanctioned military targets. This Smallpox virus is too uncontrolled, and will do nothing but galvanize the Chinese at best, or make them turn to ADVENT at worst. This should not have been deployed until we were engaged with the Chinese. We do not need this yet, and the strategic benefits are limited at best.”

“It weakens them,” Yang pointed out. “Isn’t that the point?”

“No, it is not.” The Battlemaster stated, walking up to her. “The way the virus is distributed is to force the Chinese to make a decision. It will spread chaos and fear, and when ADVENT or the Chinese determine that we are responsible – and they would be fools to not come to this conclusion – the Chinese will likely join ADVENT. And the Imperator knows this is a likely outcome.”

She… hadn’t quite thought of it that way. But it didn’t make much sense. “If that’s true… why
would he authorize it?"

“I don’t know.” The low anger in his voice belied the frustration she could feel. “We do not need to resort to these tactics to beat ADVENT, much less the countries still independent and it will accomplish nothing but provide ADVENT additional propaganda to use against us. The Imperator wants to sabotage my efforts here, I do not understand why, and he has not provided a reasonable explanation.”

“Alright,” Yang nodded, thinking. “So how can we salvage this? I don’t suppose it’s too late to just have the outbreak happen to the government, or just the military? What was Subject Zero in, an airport?”

“Too late, and the proposal was rejected,” he answered with a shake of his head. “Too many outbreaks in different locations would appear to be engineered – as if ADVENT will not determine this on their own. I’ve performed my own research into this disease; the one disease chosen was one which has been essentially eradicated by the Humans. Why Quisilia or the Imperator do not realize how suspicious that will be is questionable.”

“Well, if they’re wanting China to join ADVENT for some reason…” Yang proposed slowly, frowning. “Maybe it makes sense?”

“Quisilia is no fool, he knows this as well,” the Battlemaster agreed. “However, I will turn this to our advantage and try and salvage this ill-planned situation.”

“And how is that?”

“Quisilia also had the foresight to develop a cure and refine the working Human vaccine,” the Battlemaster said, changing the holotable to display the territory of the Sovereign African States. “I am going to make Macula’s own efforts do something more significant. The good news is that the smallpox disease will stay – in part – within Africa. The SAS will be supplied with the cure, and will distribute it. This will make its way to ADVENT, and theoretically muddy the waters regarding our involvement. It is not clean, but short of openly defying the Imperator – of which it is too late to do anyway – it is the only option.”

It sounded good, except for one thing. “So. How will you explain this to the Imperator?”

“I will tell him I will cease sabotaging his ill-conceived plans when he stops trying to sabotage mine,” the Battlemaster growled. “His command to involve Isomnum in the attack is similarly ill-conceived and I suspect is intended to be a test run for the Avatar Project.”

Yang blinked. “The what?”

“The Avatar Project,” he repeated. “A project that Revelean has been working on for some time, and that the Imperator has commanded he finish. It had been started once before, but failed due to a lack of suitable candidates. Your species has proved to be the missing link required.”

“Stop being coy, Battlemaster,” Yang crossed her arms. “What does that mean?”

“In short, a Human psionically linked to an Ethereal, who they would be able to telepathically communicate and draw power from,” the Battlemaster explained. “An Avatar of the power of the Ethereal. The Avatar could fulfill a number of different functions, from acting as a representative to allowing an Ethereal to be in more than one place at once – figuratively speaking.”

Everything suddenly clicked into place for Yang. The random Humans that she’d seen, her own purpose here, her assignment. “That’s what I am…” she said slowly in revelation. “I’m…your
Avatar.”

“The Imperator intended for you to be mine, I suspect,” the Battlemaster confirmed. “However, I do not consider that necessary for you.”

Yang blinked. “What?”

The Battlemaster hesitated. “I worded that poorly, and I apologize. I would…permit this, if that is what you want, but you will not be forced to fulfill a role you did not choose. But I will personally only…consider…this kind of joining with someone who is my equal.”

Well, there went that. Truthfully, she wasn’t sure she would have wanted it anyway, but at the same time…that wasn’t a completely bad idea. There were worse people she could be joined to than the Battlemaster, and the perks didn’t seem terrible. Although with his immunity to telepathy, she wondered how it would work. “Fair enough,” she shrugged. “You probably deserve an Ethereal anyway.”

“I am a Battlemaster,” he said, looking down at her. “That is my rank that no one else holds.”

He was stating this for a reason, and she wasn’t sure what it could be…unless…she narrowed her eyes. “What was required to become a Battlemaster?”

“There were many traditions and protocols,” the Battlemaster said. “Apprenticeship, decades of training, but the only rule that mattered was the Trial of the Battlemasters. Should one pass, they were declared a Battlemaster in full.”

She nodded slowly. “And this trial…what did it entail.”

“I will tell you the same thing that all those who took the trial were told,” he answered somberly. “You would travel to the Dead World, and forge a new weapon that is worthy of the Battlemaster.”

Yang frowned. “That’s it?”

“Yes.”

Then she remembered where the Dead World was. “Oh no.”

“Yes,” the Battlemaster confirmed with a nod. “By rule I cannot speak of what is down there, but considering your own…experiences, perhaps you will put together what the Empire never did. You can acquire the years of training and strategy I have over the course of your life, but you either have the mental fortitude and focus of a Battlemaster – or you do not. That is what the Trial determines.”

“Right,” she nodded absentmindedly. “I see. That’s…has any alien ever undertaken this?”

“No.”

“Is that…” she waved a hand. “Forbidden or something?”

“The Empire never considered the possibility, and there is nothing which prohibits it.” A pause. “And the Empire is dead. I am the last of the Battlemasters, and I exercise control over who is or is not permitted to become one.”

“And you think I could pass this trial?”

“I do not know. Individuals who I thought would easily succeed died, and those who I thought
were doomed lived. Understand the risk you face, but you have the potential to succeed.”

Yang did think that she had an advantage the other Battlemaster might not have. Namely…that she had an idea of what was so dangerous about the Dead World…and possibly how to prepare for it.

“Then I suppose I have some work to do.”

“This is something you wish? You could die. I nearly died.”

“And you deserve a subordinate who is the best she can be,” Yang countered. “Especially for this Avatar Project. You’ve made your requirements clear, and I will meet them.”

He gave a single nod. “Then until that day comes, I will assist in your preparations.”

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SAS Intelligence Detention Center, Abuja – Nigeria

2/1/2017 – 1:26 P.M.

“They keep sending them here,” Betos appraised the captured men and women with a quiet concern. The Ethereal beside her let her continue. “No matter what your Overmind is doing, they are going to realize something is wrong. Taking them all captive at once could have been handled better.”

“These ADVENT Intelligence agents are deep reconnaissance and exploration,” one of Macula’s newer arrivals, a Vitakarian who simply went by ‘Keeper’, said, stepping forward. Unlike many other Vitakara she’d seen, he seemed noticeably aged and his right eye was missing. The other still glowed brightly in the dimmer light of the compound. “They report at certain intervals and utilize codes and dead drops. Those are all we need.”

“Ha!” One of the battered men chuckled. “You won’t get anything out of us. We can’t talk even if we wanted to, no matter how much you torture us.” He glared at Betos. “Traitor. You’re going to regret your choice when the Priests flay your mind and extract—” He stopped in mid speech, and screamed as he shook his head.

“Irritating,” Macula noted, returning the lifted hand to clasp his opposing one. “While effective, my own skills are unfortunately more painful for the recipients exposed to the conditioning.”

“Yes,” Betos nodded, glancing to Keeper. “And how do you suppose we get these locations and codes when they can’t be forced to talk?”

Keeper allowed a thin smile, and pulled out a small tablet which he consulted. A gloved finger tapped the screen as another of Macula’s operatives approached. Betos had not been ignorant of the fact that the aliens like Keeper were not standard Collective soldiers, and more likely Macula’s personal army. Kellani was obviously one, but the uniforms were curiously ornate and unarmored, with a mix of purples, greys, and blacks. Very professional and proper.

“I’ve done my own research and experimentation into the nature of the Manchurian Restraints,” he said, giving a knowing glance to the captives. “ADVENT themselves are helpfully open as to the nature, in their intent to justify wide-scale psionics to the public. Contrary to what you seem to believe, the Restraints do not prevent psionics from affecting the mind – it only prevents certain actions.” He took a step towards the captives. “Coercion. Mind control. Torture resistance. Useful, but there is one thing it does not protect against and that is telepathy itself.”

The smile of the alien was unsettling to her, much less the captives. “I’ll be clear, Agent,” Keeper
lowered himself to eye level with the man. “I do not need you, or anyone else, to talk. I will just have one of our fine psions read your minds and learn the information we need. It will, unfortunately, hurt for you though.”

The faces of the agents gradually changed to realization, to concern, and then open worry at that. “I will get what I want,” Keeper said, standing up. “But it doesn’t have to be painful. Tell me what I need, and your deaths will be quick and painless.”

“What a wonderful offer,” one of the female agents spat. “How could we refuse?”

“Because the alternative would be extremely painful,” Keeper said, clasping his hands behind his back. “And should you survive with your minds intact, you will be shipped offworld to participate in several of our groundbreaking research initiatives. I am content with either outcome, but Elder Macula has instructed that you be offered a chance of your own volition.”

“Like I told you,” the first agent growled. “We won’t willingly talk, even if we wanted to. But even if we could, I’m not giving you anything.”

“Then it is decided,” Keeper lifted his hand and subtly waved forward. Two Vanguard-class Sectoids in hoodless robes which had been standing silently in the background walked forward. “Extract the necessary information and prepare the mentally stable for extraction. Take full body scans and genetic material. Dispose of the mentally compromised.”

*Understood and obeyed, Keeper.* The telepathic response Betos heard clearly; oddly crisp and mellow as it echoed in her mind.

She didn’t have anything to add here. Keeper knew what he was doing, and this was not her area of expertise. Her concerns had largely been alleviated with his explanation, and she didn’t feel an extensive amount of sympathy for spies who were sent to watch and possibly execute her by ADVENT.

Although…

“I will amend that order,” she said, stopping and facing the Sectoids while Keeper appraised her curiously. “When you finish, execute and dispose of all captives. No extraction offworld.”

Keeper shot a glance at Macula, but at a nod, remained silent as the Sectoids acknowledged her. *Your orders are understood, Lady Betos.*

Satisfied, she walked out of the room together with Macula and Keeper. The newly-armored SAS Guards stood outside, designed and supplied by Fectorian and his foundries. It had clearly been intended to emulate XCOM armor, as it was clearly armored, sleek, with the flag of the soldier in question stamped along the shoulder pad. The helmets to Betos resembled ADVENT designs more than XCOM, albeit not as angled. The red eye slits seemed to only be for intimidation, but she couldn’t deny that they were evocative.

EMP hardened, and integrated nanites to facilitate repairs, they were more than likely beyond anything ADVENT had at this point. The camo system also allowed the armor to adopt different skins, from black, to white, to green and brown; whatever was most appropriate. While this wasn’t a stealth unit, it could be made to blend in a little easier. The lights of the armor could also be adjusted or shut off.

The default was a black armor, and for now it was the one she and her soldiers preferred. Although now she wasn’t wearing any armor, just her SAS uniform – which had also been produced en
masse by the Collective. It was amazing how in a matter of days they’d acquired enough supplies to turn the rag-tag and subpar military she’d had to one of the most advanced armies on the planet.

No matter what ADVENT had, they couldn’t match the production capabilities of the Ethereal Collective.

“While the sentiment is understandable, Betos, we gain nothing from just disposing of them,” Keeper didn’t look at her as he spoke. She got the distinct sense that he didn’t especially care for her.

“Maybe for the Collective,” she answered. “Or ADVENT. But not here. There is no point in us becoming just like ADVENT. It defeats the entire point.”

“As much as you hate the concept, ADVENT has many things others would be wise to emulate,” Keeper stated neutrally. “They are competent and pragmatic. That is how they continue to pose a threat to us despite their reduced numbers and resources. Idealism doesn’t win wars, Betos, nor is it how the galaxy as a whole operates.”

“Your input is appreciated,” she said, trying not to sound sarcastic. “But the SAS is ultimately under my jurisdiction. Not yours, and you will be fine just assisting me.”

Keeper didn’t say anything, but kept walking forward at a stiff pace. “I assist Elder Macula, and he has instructed me to assist you, so I will do so to the best of my abilities.”

“And you, Lady Betos, should consider his own advice,” Macula said from behind her. “He was not established as Keeper out of charity.”

Betos sighed. “Which neither of you have properly explained to begin with. Are you Zararch?”

“No.” Keeper stated. “Though the Zar’Chon and I share many similarities in our roles, I work directly for Elder Macula and oversee his intelligence operations, of which there are many. I know everything about his allies, enemies, numbers, forces, strategies, and could be considered educated in psionic and space-time theories. A keeper of secrets and knowledge.”

Macula’s personal Zararch. And one that seemed dangerous and skilled as well. Perhaps more so since they were presumably more elite. With Keeper at the top of the list. While he didn’t look like he could fight, appearances were deceiving when Ethereals were involved. “We also potentially have a situation to be aware of,” Keeper continued. “There is something ADVENT Intelligence will be using against us. From the previous operatives we acquired, they didn’t have details, but it was referred to as Project: Kutkh.”

“Which you think is what?”

“That,” Keeper said. “Is something I am hoping can be extracted today. It had something to do with wildlife. Birds I believe. However I am unsure what ADVENT could actually do with that concept, which means it is most likely something else. Nonetheless, they intend to use it and we should be prepared to detain, investigate, or deal with anything out of the ordinary. ADVENT won’t invade the SAS right now, regardless of what they say, but if they acquire indisputable evidence of our collaboration, they will be forced to act.”

“We’ve done as much as we can,” Betos said. “Unless something has happened, both the Internet for the continent is locked down and monitored, and the satellites have been subverted. Outside of that, we can’t do much more to secure the SAS from ADVENT.”

“I know,” Keeper said. “But ADVENT can be relentless, and they are smart. It is not a matter of if
they will learn the truth, but when.”

“I believe that by the time they learn, it will be too late to effectively do anything,” Macula added. “Of that I am confident of.”

“A month is what we need, minimum,” Betos said slowly as they reached the end of the hallway and began ascending up the stairs. “Then we might be ready. We’ll have to be.”

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Unknown

2/8/2017 – 12:19 P.M.

The watery dreamscape was oddly soothing as the Commander walked on nothing. And he could really only tell that it was watery at all from the glow from the blue eyes of T’Leth. Their resident Sovereign had not bothered to create an elaborate dreamscape this time, and instead wished a ‘face-to-face’ interaction, as much as that was possible.

The dreamscape was such that the Commander realized that he could keep walking in one direction and not actually move anywhere because T’Leth would at least appear to be in the exact same place. Convenient. In fact, he had some ideas for this, but for now he wanted to focus on what T’Leth had to say to him now.

“So this Sovereign that is behind the Collective,” the Commander said. “You have history.”

“Yes.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I don’t suppose you would elaborate?”

The air rippled as the booming voice spoke, disturbing the watery dreamscape. “Mosrimor is like many of my brethren. Manipulative, ambitious, and a coward. Yet he lacks many of the skills of the truly dangerous. He lacks the authority of Exspirant, the brilliance of Classemque, or the power of the Leviathan. He is...young for our kind. An aspirant to galactic power.”

“That’s good, I think?” The Commander considered. A young Sovereign was better than an older one, although by that same token, this ‘young’ Sovereign was quite possibly still older than the entire Human species.

“It is good for our own situation,” T’Leth rumbled thoughtfully. “Mosrimor gambled on contacting the Ethereals, and he is likely recognizing his failure. There was a reason none attempted to manipulate or direct the Ethereal Empire. The species itself was a trap. Likely one to disrupt an entire cycle.”

“That seems like a lot of effort for one species,” the Commander noted, remembering the reports on Ethereal biology. “Whoever made them knew what they were doing.”

“Yes. A species difficult to control, even for a Sovereign. Such species are powers unto themselves, and can be useful in future cycles to further disrupt enemies. But they are double-edged weapons, ones which are harder to control, who are more suspicious, who have seen and survived the worst the galaxy has thrown at them. Mosrimor has likely underestimated the power of even a small number of Ethereals.”

“How powerful are Ethereals?” The Commander asked. “Compared to one of your kind?”
“A single Ethereal...a standard one of the Empire, they can be eventually dominated, but it requires effort to keep and maintain. Those of the Overminds and Imperators...such are more challenging. Controlling will be close to impossible, and it is safer to kill them. On their own, they can still never kill a Sovereign One, but they are poor tools. Expectations must be accordingly set.”

A pause. “Manipulation and psionics is not the strength of Mosrimor. Instead he is a Sovereign who has focused on experimenting with microtechnology. Nanites and atomic viral plagues. Yet he does not have mastery over the true powers of reality, and unlike Classemque, lacks the mind to leverage his knowledge effectively. What use is billions of nanites which can be dispersed with a single psionic fire? Why spend your efforts on killing aliens instead of building them up or creating your own? Mosrimor lacks foresight; he is impatient. And he will die.”

“You sound like you almost killed him at one point.” The Commander nodded.

“Nearly. But he ran as my kind often do. I destroyed his worlds and the species which he had coopted to his needs. He has hid for many cycles, and has clearly learned very little. Yet now that he is aware of me on this world, I suspect he will involve himself more openly. XCOM will need to be prepared to neutralize his agents, as they will devastate the forces of ADVENT. An ordinary species, even one rapidly advancing such as ADVENT, is very little against the dedicated power of a Sovereign One, even Mosrimor.”

“Agreed.” The Commander decided to sit on the black nebulous floor. “Nanoweaponry has weaknesses that we can exploit. Dynamo psionics, EMP grenades, WHEEE cannons. MELD nanites of our own.”

T'Leth emanated approval. “Yes. Even Mosrimor cannot completely overcome the limitations of nanotechnology, or he has, at minimum, not achieved this point. Offensive uses of his technology will not be the only attacks. Infrastructure and systems will attempt to be coopted through his nanites, and precautions against them must be taken for critical areas.”

The tone of the Sovereign turned...ponderous. “A regulating body would be useful for this task. The Artificial Intelligence XCOM is creating would benefit these types of defenses. A continuous risk, but a tool we can use.”

“I’ll talk with Vahlen and Shen about that,” the Commander leaned back. “At some point, it might be worth informing several leaders of ADVENT about the real situation. We should not act in complete independence.”

There was a ripple as T'Leth answered. “A select few, perhaps. My existence is not a secret from the Ethereals now, and they would not reveal such information to their species willingly. Nor will ADVENT, I suspect. If you believe they are reliable, then I will converse with them.”

“Good.” The Commander looked around. “In a few days I’ll be going to meet Miridian. That will likely allow us additional options and forces in alien territory. Fiona will be needed.”

“These terrorists will provide a use. You may take Fiona.”

The Commander stood, and looked around the empty and black-blue dreamscape. “One more thing. This...area...you create. How limited are you in what can be...simulated?”

“Whatever I can imagine. In my mind, there are no limits to what can be created.”

“Right,” the Commander nodded, getting an idea. “I wonder, could you possibly simulate battle
scenarios and exercises in…this?” He waved around. “While actual combat experience is useful, there is a lethal component within it. A non-lethal but still realistic simulation would be invaluable.”

T’Leth considered this, and after a few seconds spoke. “That is…possible. Yes. I would need an understanding of certain concepts and memories. I should know how to accurately replicate certain characteristics and patterns. This is a useful idea, Commander. I will begin preparations for such an adaption.”

“Good,” the Commander said. “Let your agents know what you want and inform the Internal Council. While I think this lull will break shortly…we still have time, and this will serve us well after it.”

“It will be done. Farewell, Commander.”

The area around the Commander blurred, and within moments he was back in his office. Pulling his hand away from the Orb, he turned to give an update to the rest of the Internal Council. Then he would prepare to meet Miridian.

He was expecting it to be an enlightening meeting.

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Borelian Wastes – Vitakar

2/10/2017 – 3:19 P.M.

Nartha glared at Sorras.

Shun and Fiona followed suit.

“Out of everything you could have done,” Nartha said slowly. “You would do that.”

“Jerk.” Shun muttered, looking at her rather paltry collection in response. “Roe! Why did you bring Monopoly of all games along?”

The XCOM Engineer grinned from his workbench even as he continued working on assembling a SHIV. “The drama, obviously. Better and cheaper than any other entertainment I can bring.”


“You played back in XCOM,” Shun defended. “And I thought I could count on you as an ally!”

“Both of you should know there aren’t any ‘allies’ in this game,” Fiona snorted. “Although I think we’re equally screwed over now that our Dath’Haram property lord has Boardwalk.”

“Which I’m always open to sharing,” Sorras said with a sharp grin. “I have potential deals for every one of you.”

Sorras had picked up on the rules of the game very quickly and had gone on to gather a majority of properties and quickly striking deals which in theory seemed not to benefit him initially, although now that had proven to be a big mistake, as the other Vitakara was on the verge of two monopolies, and had a scattering of other properties.

Fiona was in second place with an actual complete monopoly, although it was the cheap purple properties, and she was low on money. Nartha had a scattering of properties, and a decent amount
of cash on hand. Shun was in a similar situation to him, with just slightly less money. A few bad runs on Fiona’s monopoly had whittled her funds down.

Nartha sighed. Well, as much as Monopoly wasn’t a team sport, there was no chance that he was coming back with Sorras and Fiona in the game. So he had to break the cycle of Monopoly and help someone else out before Sorras of all people won. “Shun. Trade offer – Pacific for St. James, plus five hundred.”

She blinked. “That doesn’t really help you…ah!”

Sorras cocked his head. “Really. You’re going to do that? This is not how the game works!”

“Hey, I might lose but you’ll go down with me,” Nartha grinned as they made the trade. With a powerful monopoly on her own, Shun was back in the game and now Sorras was in a worse situation. Which meant Fiona was also in danger. Which meant that he just might have triggered the endgame for everyone.

“Atlantic for Illinois,” Fiona told Sorras. “Don’t care about Boardwalk. We both need good monopolies now, yes?”

“You unfortunately have a point,” Sorras said, shaking his head in disappointment as Nartha. “But mine is worth more. Same deal, plus three hundred.”

“Done.”

And then Nartha was the lone player without a Monopoly.

He’d never asked why XCOM had this game, did they use it for team-building exercises? Because as far as those went…Monopoly really did not work as one. It was, in fact, almost the opposite. Well, hopefully he’d done enough to ensure Shun would win even if he essentially doomed himself.

“Alright, here we go,” Shun said with renewed determination as she looked on the board, grabbing the dice. The game continued for several rounds longer, as all players (except Nartha) built up their monopolies, and small amounts of cash exchanged hands for rent. Well, at least they were focused on something other than the upcoming week.

The meeting with Miridian was going to happen in a few days, and Sorras seemed convinced that would be a turning point in the war. Nartha himself was curious to meet the infamous terrorist commander, as he’d been a thorn in the side of the Zararch since before he’d joined. There was endless speculation on the identity of the mysterious Miridian.

The most common and accepted theory was that he was most likely Vitakarian or Borelian, and was ex-Zararch. His operations were too organized and he was too competent to not have inside information on Zararch protocols and tactics. But age, original name, and other physical characteristics were up in the air.

Nartha doubted that he would personally learn this information; that was likely going to the Commander. But he was going to learn at least something interesting about how the Nulorian were able to survive. His base of operations was also a continuing mystery, although the common consensus was that Miridian didn’t actually have a single base of operations, and rotated on a regular basis.

If there was any base, Nartha personally believed it would have to be in the Wastes, or maybe in Sar’Manda territory. The Empire was the type to not bother Miridian if he didn’t bother them,
although Nartha did wonder if they would risk reprisal from the Zararch if they ever learned that there was any Nulorian base within Imperial territory.

Then again, the Sar’Manda had never really cared about the Zararch…or anyone else for that matter. But he absolutely expected that if there was a Nulorian base in Imperial Territory…they would know about it. The Manda was under their complete domination, now and forever. Nartha privately believed that not even the entire Collective armada could successfully invade the Empire and emerge intact.

Unless they just decided to orbitally bombard the ocean.

Which the Empire might have prepared for as well.

“Pay up please,” Fiona said sweetly to him as he landed – on Baltic fortunately. He complied, knowing that if he landed on any other monopoly, his own properties were on the table.

He held up some of his more valuable properties, both between his index and middle fingers. “Shun, want to make another deal?”

“All ears,” she cleared her throat. “What do you want for those?”

“Two dollars sounds fair,” he said, smirking as Fiona’s face dropped.

Shun smiled, and the transaction was completed. “This betrays the spirit of the game,” Sorras said idly, looking over the board as the owner layout had shifted once again. “Unfair.”

“Hey,” Nartha leaned back in his chair. “You want to help me out to balance things, then go for it. But I have a preference for who I want to win if I can’t.”

“I’m so very hurt,” Fiona put a hand over her chest. “How could you support her over me?”

“And I’m actually of your species,” Sorras said dryly. “Does that count for nothing?”

“She’s actually my friend,” Nartha pointed out. “I’ve known both of you for a few days at most!”

“Ahh, my master plan is revealed,” Shun laughed in triumph. “And all of you fell for it!”

“What.” Fiona said flatly, her accent making her word seem even more disbelieving than it would normally sound. “There is no way you planned this.”

“Can confirm,” Nartha rolled the dice. “But she probably assumed that if we were both going to lose, I might help her out. Which it turns out, is what happened because I’m bad at this game.”

“This is the kind of contingency planning I can support,” Sorras nodded to Shun. “I like you, Human.”

Shun rolled her eyes. “Ha ha, that was only partially a joke. Anyway, let’s finish this up.”

With another roll of the dice from her hand, the game was back on, and Nartha suspected it would end very soon. He ultimately went bankrupt to Sorras, and Shun managed to absorb the majority of Fiona’s properties while Sorras successfully achieved the other half. But the war chest Shun had gotten was more, and after a few more painful turns and close calls, Sorras passed the point of no return and went bankrupt to Shun.

Nartha smiled as Shun gave him a high five. Monopoly was much more fun when you weren’t trying to win so hard.
The teleportation was near instant; a brief green-white flash and the Commander was standing in a snowy tundra, with a small structure a short distance away. The Titan armor insulated him from the worst of the cold, but even through it he could still feel a mild chill. Fiona let go of his arm and he followed her into the house.

Once inside, the variety of XCOM soldiers immediately stood and saluted, and he waved them down. “Commander,” Nartha nodded. “Good to see you again.”

The Commander shook his hand, giving a firm pump. “You too. Much has been accomplished, and I hope today continues that trend.”

“The infamous Commander of XCOM,” Sorras pushed himself off the wall and bared his teeth. “A pleasure to finally meet you in person. The stories of your exploits paint a curious picture. One even Miridian himself has heard.”

The Commander wondered how much of that was actually true. The actual acts he’d undertaken and ordered were known to a select few people, and he suspected that the Nulorian were not among them. That being said, as one of the first and leading figures of the Human resistance against the Collective, some stories were sure to pop up. “Curious, you say?”

“Indeed,” the Dath’Haram mused. “A leader who does not reveal his name, yet commands immense respect and loyalty. The man who single-handedly prevented the complete assimilation of your species. The man who even the Ethereals pause before moving against. You’ve made enemies with the most dangerous of the galaxy. It should not be a surprise that I would find that curious.”

“I certainly didn’t do it alone,” the Commander did sometimes tire of hearing this, despite it being praised. “I was merely a catalyst at best.”

“An apt description,” Sorras appraised the armored Human. “Miridian is quite interested to meet you. That you have acquired allies in several Andromedon Unions was an unexpected boon, and the Nulorian will be happy to offer our own services against the Ethereal Collective.” A pause. “Should we come to an agreement, of course.”

“Considering our situation, we need every ally we can get,” the Commander agreed. “I’m certain that Miridian is a reasonable individual, who is also of some curiosity to me.”

“I assure you Commander,” Sorras sounded mildly smug at this moment, green eyes twinkling in the light. “You will learn all that you wish to know.”

“Then we shouldn’t waste time,” the Commander said. “You know the way.”

“Yes,” Sorras said. “But first you, Fiona and Nartha will need to change out of that armor. While Nulorian aquatic gear isn’t quite as sturdy as your Titan armor, it will be necessary for where we are going.”

He opened some cases on the ground, each of different sizes to account for each of their height differences. “So that’s what was in them,” Fiona muttered. “Big secret? Really?”
“That the Nulorian have established underwater locations? The Zararch would love to learn that,” Sorras said, standing back up. “I wanted to keep this under wraps as long as possible. I’m sure you understand, but we take no chances. It’s how we’ve lasted with the Zararch always hunting us. Regardless, this is top of the line. Made in Yarras’Manda; capable of withstanding extreme depths. Imperial Scout armor is made from the same materials.”

“Yarras’Manda is the primary production and design city of the Empire,” Nartha explained at the Commander’s glance, though he also shot a curious look at Sorras. “How did you get this? The Empire doesn’t share their tech with outsiders.”

“The same way we get the rest of our gear,” was the answer. “And I don’t feel the need to reveal our sources right now.” He nodded to the ground. “Once these are put on, we can go. Unless you want to drown, you want to wear these.”

The source of their equipment was likely something he could ask Miridian, and so the Commander took one of the cases and began the somewhat lengthy process of getting out of his Titan armor and putting on the aquatic suit. It wasn’t uncomfortable, and even had a minor HUD which displayed oxygen and depth levels. Not bad, and he saw that the tank would last for four hours, which could eventually be swapped out seamlessly for another tank as the suit maintained an internal air cycle of ten minutes.

Suited up, he rejoined the group in the middle of the house, helmet under his arm. No reason to waste oxygen yet. Fiona held her sword by her side, having no sheath or other means of storing it. “I assume we can take weapons,” the Commander said, lifting his gauss pistol. He was sure to phrase it like it wasn’t a question. As a telekine, he wasn’t defenseless, but the Nulorian didn’t need to know that right now.

“Yes, but I doubt they will function well,” Sorras said with a shrug. “But you can take them if you wish. You are not assassins; I believe I can say that with some certainty.”

“Sounds good,” the Commander said, deciding to keep the pistol for now. “Nartha, Fiona, are you ready?”

“Yes, Commander,” Fiona seemed slightly uncomfortable, but he attributed that more to not being able to wear her suit. Given what he knew about the suits, not being able to wear it in a dangerous situation was likely new for her. Nartha didn’t seem phased whatsoever, and nodded his affirmative as well.

The Commander motioned to the similarly suited Sorras. “After you. Everyone else, make sure this place isn’t bothered.”

“Yes, Commander!”

The four of them stepped back into the snowy tundra, and the chill was now much more pronounced to him, but not uncomfortable yet. “We’ve got a short walk ahead,” Sorras said, taking the lead. “So allow me to indulge some curiosity, Commander, what do you know of our species?”

“What Nartha has told me,” the Commander said. “As well as detailed reports from various Vitakara defectors. XCOM has what we consider to be an accurate picture on the species, even including the Oyariah to some extent.”

“Mmm,” Sorras kept marching forward through the snow, the hum sounding thoughtful. “And so I must ask then, what do you think about the current state of my species?”
“That it needs change, to be reformed,” the Commander said. “Too much of it has been dominated and influenced by the Ethereals, the Collective, and the Zararch. Something new must be built and established. The population must be deprogrammed from their routines and constant propaganda. But I suspect you know this better than I.”

“Reform can be possible,” Nartha added. “Not everyone is ignorant as to the control wielded by the Zararch. The Cobrarians in particular are aware they are being pushed in certain directions. The Aui’Vitakar can be turned if they believe they could survive.”

“No.” Sorras’s tone was flat and emotionless, but unrelenting. “They have perpetuated the cycles of deception and lies for generations. They are a corrupt body who only serve as a front for the Zararch to control, and through them, manipulate our species. They know better. They are not like the blind citizens, who’ve known nothing but lies. They know, but they play along because they have no conviction, no spine. They earn no mercy.”

“And they would likely die if they acted,” the Commander pointed out. “And be replaced by someone else.”

The alien allowed a sharp laugh. “A coward’s excuse. Do you know, Commander, that our ranks are built from former Runianarch, Lurainian, and even some Zararch? Or other countless individuals who make up the scientists and engineers, and even regular citizens like I was who knew something was wrong, knew something had to be done, but unlike the cowards who are supposed to be our leaders, we did something, even though we knew we could die. We knew we could end up with our minds ruined and our bodies tortured, but we did it anyway.”

He glanced behind to the Commander, a cold fury in his eyes, though not for him. “So no, Commander, I do not accept such cowardice as an excuse. Men and women have given their lives willingly because they knew it was right, and they didn’t let their fear of death stop them. The Aui’Vitakar have no excuse. They merely pay lip service to avoid justice from people like us.”

There was short walk of silence as they continued. The air was clear and no snow fell on them while the sun rose behind them. “You know,” Fiona said. “You remind me a little of someone I know, Sorras.”

“Oh? Who could that be, Human?”

“No one you would know,” she answered. “Well, not completely him. But what he could have turned into. Dangerous, ruthless, and hateful.”

“And you say that like it’s a bad thing, little girl,” the Dath’Haram seemed to find it more amusing than anything else. “Ask me if I’m wrong when your species has been manipulated for generations and perpetuated by spineless collaborators. Maybe after your family and friends die because of them. I don’t care what you think of me, Human, nor do I need your approval.”

“I’m not saying my opinion of you either way,” Fiona noted evenly. “Just making an observation.”

Sorras nodded at that, then pointed ahead. “We’re coming up now, and right on time.”

Ahead was a small pond of water that was curiously not frozen solid, and in the center right beside a small dock was a submarine with two Nulorian guards standing before it. Sorras raised a hand in greeting, and they didn’t raise their weapons in response. A good sign.

The submarine itself was divided into four sections, the back one being the pilot seat, while the others were for passengers. Headsets were also in each section, and the glass tops would allow
them a clear view into the deeper ocean. “I will be driving,” Sorras said, stepping into the pilot section. “Pick seats as you want.”

Fiona sat herself down in the front, the Commander behind her, and Nartha behind him. “Alright, strap in,” Sorras said as the tops moved over their heads to seal in place with a hiss. “You’re going to be some of the privileged outsiders to travel the Manda.”

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The Manda – Vitakar

2/15/2017 – 10:18 A.M.

Nartha had never actually been as deep within the Manda as he was now. The territory was always considered off-limits, and the Empire was extremely particular about who was, and wasn’t allowed to travel in it. Trade craft was most common, and even then that was majority surface traffic, and all sub-surface traffic was monitored or escorted by Imperial Manda Patrol.

“So, should we worry about these Sar’Manda?” Fiona asked as they descended deeper.

Sorras just chuckled, and Nartha could easily see how that would be amusing. “The Sar’Manda know everything that happens in the oceans. They spent centuries mapping, monitoring, and connecting the entire oceans. The Empire knew we were in the ocean the moment we left the pool; now whether they’ll do anything…”

“I think as long as the cities are avoided, we’ll be fine,” the Commander commented. “They seem to be a very live-and-let-live species. We leave them alone, they leave us alone. Unless the Nulorian are particularly risky, Sorras?”

“Plant a Nulorian base right under their cities? Come now,” Sorras was definitely amused. “Miridian wouldn’t make a stupid mistake like that. You don’t antagonize the Sar’Manda and expect to emerge unscathed.”

“I’m curious,” the Commander said. “Does the Nulorian have many Sar’Manda?”

“We have at least a few of every race,” Sorras answered. “But not many Sar’Manda themselves are part of the Nulorian. They aren’t as controlled as the surface, and they don’t face the same hardships and propaganda as we would. They’re a people I admire, though much of that comes from the fact that they may as well essentially live on another planet from the rest of us.”

The darkness became more pronounced as Sorras activated the lights on the submarine. Nartha could see vague outlines and shadows in the distance. Schools of fish and small predators, as well as…he blinked. “Are those mountains?”

“Yes. Just below us you’ll see the Manda Peaks,” Sorras turned the submarine so they could get a better view. “They do extend to the ocean floor, but we’re just going to be above them for the most part. If you keep your eyes out, you might see some of the larger creatures of the Manda.”

“I don’t know if I want that,” Fiona said slowly. “Are they big?”

Oh dear, was she going to be in for a shock. “Afraid so, Fiona. Sorras wasn’t kidding when he said the Manda is close to another planet. There are completely new ecosystems at various parts of the Manda. More than the surface. The creatures that live on the ocean floor could be compared to your dinosaurs in scale. There are also some herbivores which could swallow this ship with ease. But we’re not going that deep.” He shot a glance back to Sorras. “Right?”
“We’re not going to the ocean floor, no,” Sorras confirmed. “Besides, even if we were, Mandaladore avoid subs. Sar’Manda conditioning has weaned them off even attacking metallic craft and they go away when certain spores are released. They’ve solved the wildlife problem long ago.”

The darkness became near-complete, which Nartha really did not like. A few minutes of diving, and a chime sounded. “Well, looks like we have company,” Sorras said. “Sar’Manda monitoring for any aquatic craft that operates for certain lengths of time. Nothing to worry about.”

A slight buzz of static and the cold and artificial voice of the Sar’Manda translators spoke. “[You have entered the Sovereign territory of the Sar’Manda Empire. Send verification codes or reason for passage or you will be apprehended by Imperial Soldiers. Resistance will result in the immediate destruction of your craft. Is this understood?]”

 “[Acknowledged,]” Sorras said. “[Codes being sent.]”

So the Nulorian had Sar’Manda codes. Not too surprising, as even the Zararch had codes they could use in the event they needed to travel through the Manda. “Sar’Manda,” Nartha told the Commander and Fiona, who didn’t speak the language. “Sorras is just transmitting codes to pass.”

 “[Codes recognized. You may proceed to your intended destination.”

“And, we’re clear,” Sorras said as the Sar’Manda machine disconnected. “Should be few problems from here.”

“How did you get Sar’Manda codes?” The Commander asked.

“Not difficult,” Sorras stated with some disinterest in his voice. “Sar’Manda codes aren’t hard to acquire. All of the trading organizations have them, which are trivial to find, copy, and steal. Zararch have some of their own too. The harder to get codes go into the cities or the ocean floors. That’s untouchable Imperial territory. No one has ever been allowed below a certain depth.”

They continued down for what felt like a long period of time. Nartha wondered if Sorras was taking a deliberately convoluted or long route to reduce the risk of any of them remembering the way, or to throw off any potential tails. He was going to be mildly irritated if it turned out that this base wasn’t under the water and it was just an elaborate trick.

He wouldn’t put it past the Nulorian to be that paranoid.

“What’s that?” Fiona pointed ahead in the distance. Nartha leaned forward, seeing the same thing. A massive transparent sphere in the distance, illuminated by soft blue lights which gave the massive floating mass an ethereal glow. A city of the Sar’Manda, just like the pictures had shown. And it was even more amazing in person.

The close they got to it, the larger the city became. It dwarfed their submarine by hundreds of times, and several pieces then clicked into place for Nartha. “Sorras, why are we going to that city?”

“That is Manda’tearias,” Sorras said. “One of the smaller Imperial cities, but an important one. Primarily deals in surveillance, intelligence, and are the ones who watch the Manda. I also happen to have the authorization codes to enter safely.” Nartha leaned back in his seat, thinking furiously. If what Sorras was implying was accurate…

“It appears that your agents are embedded in more than just the Collective,” the Commander said slowly. “Or the Sar’Manda are not as impartial as everyone believes.”
Sorras chuckled and Nartha could easily imagine the toothy smile he wore right now. “As I said, Commander, the Sar’Manda are an admirable people. One who fortunately have more foresight than most of my species. You will see shortly.”

The submarine moved towards a noticeable opening in the transparent sphere that lined the circumference, which Nartha assumed served as a pressure airlock, so the city wouldn’t collapse in on itself for each new submarine which arrived. Sure enough, when they moved through the opening, another transparent wall closed behind them, and after a few seconds of water cycling, the entrance to the city itself opened and they sped through the waterways of Manda’tearias.

Seeing an actual Sar’Manda city was…fascinating. There were dozens of Sar’Manda just swimming around communicating in their strange sign language. There were fewer vehicles than he expected, and the ones that he did see were small and single or double-sized. All the vehicles stayed in specific lanes lit by floating lights which also managed the traffic.

There was less metal than he had assumed as well, and many of the buildings were created out of organic-looking substances, and were more spherical than blocky. Verticality was how the city was built, not horizontal expansion. The city extended below them an absurd amount; the buildings also seemed primarily lit not with lights, but a cultured plant or algae which emitted a sharp blue light. Green and red variants were also common.

“Where are we going?” The Commander asked.

“The big structure in the middle,” Sorras said. “Imperial Reconnaissance and Communications. Don’t mind the soldiers and guns, they won’t fire.”

That disclaimer didn’t make any of them less uneasy as the closer they got to the floating block of black metal, the more they could see the swimming and hovering shapes of Sar’Manda soldiers observing and pointing weapons at them. Several Imperial Patrol craft had also fallen in behind them; not giving any warnings, but also making their presences known.

Minutes later they were inside, and while the entire building was (unsurprisingly) filled with water, it was far more constrained and orderly. They were directed by several of the black-armored soldiers into a grey chamber with soft blue light permeating throughout. A door shut behind them, and the water slowly was drained out until the submarine was floating in a chamber half-full of water.

“Helmets on,” Sorras said as the tops of the pod opened up. “They create air pockets so that we can exit without destroying the submarine. That’s the only consideration they allow for outsiders. Get ready to swim.”

Sorras jumped into the water, and the rest of them followed a few seconds later.

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Manda’tearias, Sar’Manda Empire – Vitakar

2/15/2017 - ???

Ignoring the fact that they were god-knew how many miles under the water, this was almost fun for him. The Commander had always wondered what the feeling of persistent weightlessness would be like, and the only way it could be experienced was in space, or underwater.

Jumping into the pool, his HUD properly lit up, and he floated easily in the darkness. Lights shone from his suit, illuminating the immediate area in front of him, but it wasn’t really necessary as the
water was well-lit already. The others jumped into the water beside him, and a door opened from the floor and two Sar’Manda swam up to them.

Up close the Commander could see that it would be a nightmare for anyone foolish enough to fight them on their own turf. They flowed through the water with a sharp grace and quickness that he couldn’t hope to emulate. Their webbed hands and feet, as well as the fins along their arms, legs, and back ensured they had an innate advantage, and lightweight black armor built specifically for their anatomy protected them from any possible attacks.

They held rifles of some kind in their hands, likely harpoon guns or similar projectile weapons. They were blocky, but had short barrels. Six of the Sar’Manda ultimately arrived, with one who the Commander assumed was the leader who had a silver stripe on the chest piece. Floating beside the leader was a floating silver sphere.

“Translator spheres,” Sorras said, floating beside him. “Translator tech is extremely advanced here, but it’s still nowhere near actually knowing the language. They usually use them to deliver pre-recorded messages or simple instructions.”

A sharp chime was transmitted to their earpieces.

“FOUR ENTITIES DETECTED. YOU WILL FOLLOW IMPERIAL HUNTER SAR’VARIES’MANDA AND DO NOT DEVIATE FROM HIS PATH OR YOU WILL BE ANNIHILATED. YOU ARE BEING TAKEN BEFORE THE MANDA’SARTHORIAN. FROM THERE THE ARRANGED MEETING BETWEEN MIRIDIAN AND THE COMMANDER OF XCOM WILL TAKE PLACE. THE OTHERS WILL BE SECURELY HELD UNTIL THAT POINT.”

Another click, and the booming and mechanical voice ceased. It was…not what the Commander had expected. It didn’t seem like a standard emotionless intelligence. There was a cold mechanical authority to the voice, yet at the same time dispassionate and calculating. A machine which understood it was in control and would brook no deviation.

It was a good tactic, he had to admit.

“I don’t like that,” Nartha commented as they began swimming to follow the Hunter. “I’ve heard Sar’Manda translators before. None of them sounded even close to that…thing.”

“Yes…” Even Sorras sounded mildly concerned. “Normally they use the standard translator. This was something different. Something I haven’t heard either. Possibly an intelligence they designed…”

“You’re kidding,” Fiona snorted, causing a burst of static. “They’re AI programmers too?”

“No, not any more advanced than the Collective,” Sorras clarified. “At least that was my impression. They can work computers and understand them, but their environment causes…challenges.”

The Commander looked to the floating sphere. “Ones they’ve seemed to overcome.”

“Possibly.” Sorras contemplated. “I suspect Miridian has an idea.”

They continued swimming in the water for some time, as it was not easy to keep track of the passage of time in the waters. The grey steel of the walls gave way to transparent tunnels, allowing them an unrestricted view of the building they were in. There were vast and complex networks of
tunnels which were lit by differently colored lights that led to common areas filled with pieces of equipment the Commander didn’t recognize.

It was especially unique in that there were openings everywhere. From the floors, the roofs, and obviously the sides. Sar’Manda has unparalleled freedom of movement, and they flowed through the building at natural and graceful speeds. They followed the entourage upwards, and once more entered a darker grey tunnel before they emerged in what the Commander would call an aquatic penthouse.

The roof was a transparent pyramid showing the vast black oceans above them, and the room itself was filled with several dozen soldiers – these ones even more armored and the color they bore was blue-silver, not black. They carried no projectile weapons the Commander could see, but several small melee weapons and roped and weighted hooks were attached to their waists, backs, or held in their hands.

The opening they had come up through closed underneath them. The room itself was bare of anything other than the occupants. The Sar’Manda surrounded by the blue-silver armored soldiers was the first Sar’Manda he’d seen that wasn’t armored in some way. The Manda’sarthoria he assumed, leader of the Sar’Manda.

Sar’Manda did wear some clothing, but it wasn’t significant and closer to a skinsuit than anything else, one which didn’t cover up the fins on their body. Their hands and feet were also kept bare. Their eyes were clouded, with no obvious pupils though the biological report Nartha had written said that this was a biological adaptation to protect their eyes. Another eyelid of sorts that kept it from injuries. But for most it simply gave the impression that their eyes were blinded or white.

Their skin was a deep blue, they had no hair to speak of, and no scales either. The Manda’sarthoria hadn’t said anything yet, but he was well aware that they have a couple rows of sharp teeth. Their faces he remembered Nartha describing as ‘very expressive’, which was a consequence of their sign language and having to convey complex sentences and words with gestures and body language.

The skinsuit of the Manda’sarthoria was a mix of blue and green, which he assumed differed from regular Sar’Manda clothing, otherwise the leader would be impossible to differentiate. Close to the Manda’sarthoria he also saw another figure in a suit, this one clearly not one of the Sar’Manda. Miridian, it had to be, though it was impossible to tell anything from the armor other than that Miridian was almost definitely a Vitakarian or Dath’Haram. The suit was too small to be a Borelian or Oyariah. A Cobrarian was obviously out of the question.

The floating sphere moved to the side of the Manda’sarthoria. Looking at the Commander, the Manda’sarthoria floated forward slightly, blinking as he watched the quartet of aliens. The sphere began transmitting to their suits again, the same voice as before.

“COMMANDER. I AM THE MANDA’SARTHORIA, SOVEREIGN OF THE EMPIRE OF THE SAR’MANDA. MIRIDIAN HAS DETERMINED THAT YOUR KIND ARE POTENTIAL ALLIES IN THE COMING CONFLICT, AND SO I HAVE PERMITTED YOUR ARRIVAL. ASK YOUR QUESTIONS BEFORE YOU ARE TURNED OVER TO HIM.”

Possibly pre-recorded, unless Sar’Manda body language was that subtle. Well, he had quite a few questions. “You’re allied with the Nulorian. How long has this been going on?”

The Manda’sarthoria made a few quick gestures and bared his teeth. The sphere translated. “THE
NULORIAN AND THE SAR’MANDA EMPIRE SHARE SIMILAR GOALS. WE HAVE DETERMINED THAT THE ETHEREALS WILL NOT BE CONTENT TO CONTROL THE SURFACE AND WILL ONE DAY COME TO SEIZE CONTROL OF OUR EMPIRE. THIS WILL NOT BE PERMITTED. THE EMPIRE ANSWERS TO NO SURFACE POWER NOR WILL WE BE HELD HOSTAGE BY THE THREAT OF THEIR POWER.”

“Understandable,” the Commander nodded. “It explains why the Zararch have never been able to fully stamp out the Nulorian. Not when you’ve supported them.”

A wave and a quick sequence of facial movements. “THE ZARARCH UNDERESTIMATE US. THEY BELIEVE THEY UNDERSTAND OUR GOALS; OUR MOTIVATIONS. APATHY, ISOLATION, NATIONALISM. WE WERE CONSIDERED NO THREAT; A CURIOSITY AT BEST. BUT WHILE OUR SURFACE COUSINS WERE QUICK TO THROW AWAY THEIR FREEDOM WHEN THE ELDERS CURED THE DISEASE BROUGHT ABOUT BY OUR OWN HAND, WE SAW WHERE IT WOULD LEAD. OUR ASSUMPTIONS HAVE BEEN CORRECT, AND SO WE HAVE BEEN PREPARING.”

“Preparing for what?” Fiona floated forward. “You can’t have thought you could beat the Collective on your own.”


The voice seemed to grow more sinister. “AND WE WILL MARCH ON THEIR CITIES AND REDUCE THEM TO ASHES. WE WILL STARVE AND SLAUGHTER THEIR ARMIES AND PEOPLE. THE AUI’VITAKAR WILL COLLAPSE AND BURN FOR DARING TO IMPOSE THEIR WILL ON THE SOVEREIGN EMPIRE. AND WHEN THE SURFACE WORLD LIES IN RUINS, WE WILL RETURN TO THE SEAS AND NO OTHER FORCE WILL EVER THREATEN THE SOVEREIGN EMPIRE AGAIN.”

There was a pause. “WE DO NOT SEEK ALLIANCES, FRIENDS OR PROMISES, COMMANDER OF XCOM. THE SOVEREIGN SAR’MANDA EMPIRE WISHES COMPLETE CONTROL OF OUR DOMAINS, FREE FROM OUTSIDE THREATS. THE ETHEREAL COLLECTIVE POSES AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT TO YOU, AND AN EVENTUAL THREAT TO US. WHEN THE SURFACE WORLDS ARE CONQUERED, WE CARE NOT FOR WHAT HAPPENS NEXT. BUT IT WILL BE WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT NO ARMY WILL THREATEN THE SAR’MANDA AGAIN. WE WILL LEAVE VITAKAR AND ENTER THE GALAXY UNTIL WE FIND PLANETS OF OUR OWN. PLANETS WHICH WILL BE UNTouched BY OTHERS. THIS INCLUDES YOUR SPECIES; BE THEY ADVENT, XCOM, OR OTHERS. IS THIS CLEAR AND UNDERSTOOD?”

The Commander allowed a single nod. “I think we can both live with that. Though ADVENT and XCOM would of course be willing to provide assistance to the Sovereign Sar’Manda Empire in your quest.” He made himself float forward a short ways. “While the Sovereign Empire does not seek alliances with others, I don’t see why either of our species cannot have mutual relationships.
Allies who assist us in this fight will continue to be our friends and allies, even if unofficially. I presume that will not be a major issue?”

The Manda’sarthoria rolled his head back, and made several motions with his left hand. “YOUR WORK HAS BEEN SHARED WITH ME. YOUR WORD IS BETTER THAN MOST OF YOUR SPECIES. SHOULD MIRIDIAN REACH AN AGREEMENT WITH YOU, IT IS ONE WE WILL ALSO ABIDE BY. WORDS AND ALLIANCES ARE EASILY BROKEN, COMMANDER. WE WILL CONSIDER YOUR WORDS WHEN YOUR SPECIES HAS PROVED ITSELF TO THE SOVEREIGN EMPIRE. NOT BEFORE.”

The Commander bowed his head. “That is fair, Manda’sarthoria. Should my talk with Miridian proceed well, I’m certain ADVENT would wish to speak to you.”

“IF THEY COME, I WILL SPEAK TO THEM.”

Good news, he supposed. The Commander had the feeling that ADVENT would be perfectly fine with letting the Sar’Manda do their own thing once the war was over. Miridian floated forward towards him. “Hello, Commander.” The voice was stoic and milder than he was expecting. Not exactly deep, nor what one would expect from a notorious terrorist. But it was also disarming in a way. “Follow me. We have a lot to talk about.”

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The room Miridian led him too was a small spherical room with tinted walls. There was a solid floor, and in the center there was a circular ring large enough to set down small pieces of equipment, computers and such. Projectors were built into the ceiling and floor in the center of the ring, meaning it functioned as a holoprojector?

The water was drained out of the room in a few minutes and sweet-smelling air was pumped in it’s place. When Miridian moved to take his helmet off, the Commander followed suit. Miridian was, as many had suspected, a Vitakarian. Taller than the Commander by at least three inches, he otherwise didn’t have many obvious surprises.

The eyes were the bright blue of most Vitakarians, and the skin a dark grey. It was hard to tell in the dimmer light, but the Commander’s enhanced eyes easily picked up on the fact that the right side of his face was heavily scarred. Chemical burns or fire it appeared. The face itself matched with the demeanor of Miridian; aristocratic with an air of command and authority around him.

There was history in Miridian, he could tell that much. His emotions were also tightly controlled to the point that the Commander couldn’t pick up anything especially distinctive.

“Apologies for the lack of chairs,” Miridian said, setting his helmet on the ring. “No need when they just float everywhere. Lucky for us they keep a few rooms that can have air pumped into them for the odd surfacer that comes down.”

“Built at your request?” The Commander inquired.

“Not these,” Miridian corrected. “But I’ve had my own share of influence in Imperial construction. Believe it or not, before the Ethereals arrived and screwed everything up, the Sar’Manda were likely going to at least attempt to work with the other races. Likely for the best that didn’t happen.”

“Oh?”

“A long story there,” Miridian waved a hand. “One you’ll likely be hearing shortly. As I said,
we’ve got a lot to talk about.”

“We do,” the Commander set his own helmet on the table. “That machine the Sar’Manda have. It isn’t standard, is it.” It was not phrased as a question, they both knew the answer.

Miridian allowed a smile. “Figured that out quickly. Introduce yourself, Siaru.”


“You made this?” The Commander asked incredulously.

“Made? Ha, not even close,” Miridian tapped a finger on the ring. “How I acquired Siaru…well, that involves my own story which you’re no doubt interested in. So if you don’t mind, I’ll relay that.”

“Trusting of you.”

“You’ve seen my face, and you’re no friend to the Zararch,” Miridian shrugged. “I’ll take my chances, Commander. I have no interest in making you my enemy.”

“Fair enough.”

“There are a lot of rumors about me, many of which I’ve helped propagate or start,” Miridian began. “But the truth is that I was among the highest-ranked agents within the Zararch. Reported to the Zar’Chon directly; did mostly border scouting and frontier work. Met several Ethereals, including the Battlemaster and Quisilia. I’ve seen quite a lot of things, things you’d be interested in once the Ethereals are dealt with.”

The Commander nodded. “And you found something?”

“Indeed,” Miridian nodded. “A crashed and destroyed alien starcraft. Obviously I investigated it, it was nothing like I had found before. But it wasn’t quite dead, and I requested a team to help try and salvage it. We eventually figured out a way to restore the power…even if we barely understood the tech as it was.”

“This was Siaru.”

“So it identified itself as.” Miridian rapped his fingers on the table. “It’s an odd one. I don’t think it’s a true AI, not really. It’s insistent that it’s a submind of something else, but whatever it is, it refuses to identify to me. I don’t know how intelligent it really is. One moment if seems to be a machine intelligence, and other times it will ask very specific questions or without some kind of answer. It can play dumb, although I’m not unconvinced that isn’t leftovers of certain protocols.”

The Commander frowned. “Are you sure it’s on your side?”

“For now,” Miridian said slowly. “Ignoring the fact that it knows I have the central core right now strapped with several EMP and plasma grenades, and the room can be flooded in minutes, it is firmly against the Ethereals.”

“Why?”

“Because as I learned, the Ethereals appear to be under the influence of…something,” Miridian
scowled. “Yes, I’m aware of how that sounds. But they made contact with some extremely powerful being, and it took Siaru minutes to put together a conclusion when I fed it information. And Siaru also put together a simulation of what the Zararch and Ethereals were planning.”

“Sovereign Ones,” the Commander interjected. “They’re called Sovereign Ones.”

Miridian narrowed his eyes. “You know about this? How?”

“Because I’ve talked with one,” he answered evenly. “And just recently we fought a puppet of the one working with the Ethereals.”

“Of course,” Miridian breathed. “Why else would the Ethereals not simply invade your world with everything they have? Because there is something there they don’t want to awaken! I never considered the possibility there was another of these creatures involved!” He then turned somber. “Then…is Humanity…”

“T’Leth has his agents,” the Commander said carefully. “Ones we’re working with. He…does not appear to have an interest in controlling our species. But my impression is that he’s…not like other Sovereigns. I don’t completely trust him, but if he wanted to control me…and any of us…he could have a long time ago.”

“Mmm.” Miridian looked sightlessly ahead. “No disrespect intended to your Sovereign, but I want nothing to do with him. I deserted the Zararch when I realized what was going on, that our species was unwittingly becoming the puppet of some shadowy all-powerful figure. And that they would use us to further their own agenda. The Collective, Commander, is planning for war against the inner galaxy. None of my species wanted this, or are prepared for it. But that was what my work was. I had originally thought it was to keep tabs on what was happening, in case they encroached on our territory, but back then I was…well, naïve.”

“So how did you leave the Zararch without anyone noticing?”

“The only way I could,” Miridian said, amused. “I died. Freak spacecraft accident where all the bodies were unfortunately atomized and the recovered intelligence was similarly destroyed. The team who was with me heard all I did, and we came to the decision together.” He waved a hand. “Obviously it was more complicated than that, but unless you want the boring retelling, I would prefer to reach the relevant part.”

“You can retell the whole thing later,” the Commander said dryly. “I have a feeling you’re proud of it.”

“Managing to fool the Zar’Chon and multiple Ethereals?” The corners of Miridian’s lips curled up. “I do take some pride in it. But I moved to an old derelict Zararch outpost on Vitakar. I had a lot of time to think and reflect; I had enough aliases and disguises that I could gather food and supplies for several years. I talked a lot with Siaru. This machine has been in many wars, Commander. It’s described technology and species long dead and impossible for it to understand. Things became very clear to me; what I had to do next.”

“Your Miridian persona.”

“My goal is straightforward,” Miridian said, as if the Commander hadn’t spoken. “The Vitakara as an independent species of the galaxy. Not under the influence of any foreign power. No Ethereals. No Sovereign Ones…and no Humans. We rule ourselves, and ourselves alone. An idea I had once thought common is, as I have learned, almost impossible to achieve.”
“I can respect that goal,” the Commander nodded. “But I’m not sure how possible that is. Not after speaking with T’Leth. The galaxy is…”

“Cycles,” Miridian said, voice melancholy. “A playground for the powers that be. These Sovereigns. Even Siaru is on a side, even if I do not know which one. Species that are pawns on the galactic stage. I’ve gathered as much, and I reject it. If our species is ultimately doomed, we will die as those who resisted the gods of this galaxy.” He tapped several times on the table. “Siaru has helped us, he’s given the Sar’Manda designs which can protect from psionic surveillance. But too many and the Imperator would notice. Too few and suspicion would be raised. A delicate balance, but one we’ve managed to keep for now. But it’s a temporary solution, one for a planet, not the future.

He shot a look to the Commander. “Your Sovereign may be better than most, or it may be lying to you. I do not care. Do not try and say it is the only way.”

“I’m warning you that it may not be possible,” the Commander said. “The Sovereigns do seem to permeate the galaxy; their presence is everywhere. Even now you’re speaking to someone who’s talked with and allied with one.”

“I’m not unreasonable, Commander,” Miridian breathed. “I don’t care that you are allied with one of these creatures. In your situation, I don’t blame you. But the difference is that you, nor your species, is intent on controlling me, not that I would let you. I have little issue with allying myself to you, but it will be no more than that. If that means the Vitakara may never be the heroes of the galaxy…then I accept that if it ensures our independence.”

The Commander nodded. “I understand. Continue.”

“The galaxy is harsh and unforgiving,” Miridian said. “The Vitakara will not survive long in a galaxy with these roaming leviathans. We’re too coddled, too complacent, too weak, too twisted into the perfect servants of the Ethereals. I realized that our species must be reset if we want to survive in this galaxy, and so that is what I set out to do.”

“This leads to your terrorism,” the Commander segued. “Recruiting people like Sorras.”

“The numbers pale to what I intend,” Miridian said neutrally. “Resetting a species is not achieved without many, many deaths. And many of my kind have no place in the future, so I will not lie and give them the illusion that they do. My targets are chosen carefully, Commander. Collaborators, soldiers, Zararch. My people are similarly recruited from those who show signs of resisting the conditioning they grow up in. The opportunity for change. But this is the exception, Commander, not the rule. In the case of Sorras, it goes against his nature as a Dath’Haram.”

“I want to know what you have planned,” the Commander said bluntly. “The full details.”

A sharp nod. “My species must be culled. The Ethereals have done one good thing – they have shown who is and is not worth saving. They have exposed flaws in our species and genome, which I will fix. The Dath’Haram will be eradicated, as will the Oyariah. The latter due to their uncompromising support of the Ethereals, and the former because their ways, genome, and customs have held themselves and our species back. Those attitudes and tendencies cannot be allowed to persist.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow, the mildest reaction he could muster. “Genocide.”

“Yes.”
“Do you think that might be somewhat extreme?”

“Of course it’s extreme!” Miridian growled. “But let’s not pretend it isn’t needed Commander, not in this galaxy. I suspect you object more to the Dath’Haram, so I will speak briefly – they are a race of cowards and weaklings. Sorras has been killing hundreds of them for years and they’ve never once even thought about doing anything more than holding vigils!” He spat the last words. “They are the worst example of the apathy that has poisoned my species, and it will not infect the future Vitakara. If having their children blown up or slaughtered in their beds does not cause a rise to action, then they do not deserve such consideration. They care nothing for life, for freedom or justice. No, Commander, I do not apologize for this extreme action. You’re not of my species, nor seen what I’ve seen.”

“No,” the Commander crossed his arms. “But I do know that killing an entire race because they don’t fit your own ideal isn’t the right solution. Perhaps you didn’t know, but Humans don’t exactly look favorably on genocide.”

“I’ve read about your Holocaust, the Cambodian Killing Fields and Armenian Genocide,” Miridian said evenly. “This is not the same thing. The men who orchestrated those killings did so for selfish and shortsighted reasons. They did so with unnecessary cruelty and malice. I say this because it is the future of my species on the line, and we cannot afford this kind of liability.”

“And you’ll do what?” The Commander asked. “Execute every man, woman and child for the crime of existing?”

“For what kind of alternative?” Miridian asked. “Sterilize them? Force them to endure a slow and painful death as they slowly go extinct? Is that better?”

“Perhaps raise them properly?” The Commander pointed out. “Schools, education-“

“You’re not listening,” Miridian shook his head. “You don’t know my people. A Dath’Haram will always think like a Dath’Haram whether they’re raised in the Council or under the Republics. Dath’Haram are passive, empathetic, and pacifists. Sorras is considered insane for a Dath’Haram, and for good reason. This doesn’t change. The only exceptions are if they undergo the Zararch conditioning.” He curled a lip in disgust. “And I’ll ask you if drugging an entire population is a better alternative.”

“And Sorras knows about this?” The Commander questioned. “He’s helping you willingly?”

“No one is more aware of the failure of his race than he,” Miridian said. “Part of the reason he’s so extreme is because he thinks that if he can provoke a reaction, that I will allow them to be spared. But deep down he knows that I’m right, and he has resigned himself to this fact.”

“What of the Cobrarians, will you kill them too?”

“Their breeding issues are a liability, and an easily exploited flaw,” Miridian said. “But they are not inherently unsalvageable. Experiments are commencing on the viability of stabilizing their gender rates to something more even. Genetic engineering should make this possible, but if not, then they will be killed as well. The race in general is too obsessed with mating and reproduction. I do not need such distractions.”

“I assume there are Nulorian who are of the races you plan to exterminate,” the Commander said. “Do they know about this? Will they be killed as well?”

“They know, I do not keep this secret from them,” Miridian said. “And they understand the
necessity of it. They know what awaits in the galaxy, and that only a united and powerful Vitakara 
species will be able to withstand it. They have already been sterilized, and they have the option of 
living beyond that day. But if they wish to join their brethren, that is their decision.”

“How generous.”

“Your sarcasm is noted,” Miridian looked the Commander in the eye. “I don’t care if you think of 
me as evil or mad. You aren’t Vitakara. You haven’t lived through this, and you don’t understand 
exactly what awaits if you manage to defeat the Collective.” He pointed upward. “The Ethereals? 
They’re just the start. You will be entering a galaxy where empires and governments hundreds of 
planets strong wait. They have power. They have armies and fleets. They control the worlds of 
power. ADVENT and XCOM have been devised as means of ensuring that Humanity can meet the 
challenges of the future, and this is ours.”

“And I can’t support an alliance where the plan is the extermination of entire races for what you 
believe is the strongest species,” the Commander answered. “There are Vitakara on Earth, 
defectors who left the Ethereals who are of the races you will kill. Why should they trust us if 
we’re going to support the genocide of their kind?”

“What you do with them in your territory is not up to me,” Miridian said. “They can live and die 
there, but they will not be Vitakara. Not within the New Vitakar.”

“And what will you be?” The Commander asked. “The king?”

“Unlikely,” Miridian said. “I’m a wartime leader and intelligence officer. I would be content with 
holding a position there. People better than I can lead the public in establishing our new 
government.”

Hmm…

Something Miridian had mentioned stood out to him. They were at an impasse if it didn’t work. 
There was no chance that the Commander would support or allow this plan. He didn’t care if there 
was a Sovereign backing Miridian, it wasn’t going to happen. “You said that the Vitakara in 
ADVENT territory would be allowed to live, but couldn’t return to your new Vitakar, yes?”

“Yes. They are in your territory. You may do with them as you wish.”

“Good, then let me make myself clear,” the Commander said, summoning the psionic power and 
lifting a fist to clench it. Miridian suddenly froze as the Commander trapped him in a telekinetic 
field. “I don’t usually do this, but I feel a point has to be made with you. I will never support the 
complete annihilation and genocide of species for the sole crime of existing and not fitting some 
nebulous ideal. The people and species change, but the excuses never do.”

Miridian winced as the grip tightened. “I don’t care if you think this is the ‘best solution’,,” the 
Commander said quietly. “You are entitled to that opinion, but I would kill you if you dared to 
actually go through with it. I would probably kill you if you weren’t a necessary ally. But I can 
promise that I will kill you if you ever attempt this kind of plan. Not when there are alternatives, 
and especially not with such poor excuses.”

He released his hand and Miridian shook himself off as he reoriented himself, glancing warily at 
the Commander. His psionic capabilities were apparently a surprise. “Now,” the Commander 
continued. “I do think that we can both get what we want. You want a species of Vitakara to your 
specifications? Then fine, that can be allowed. But the ones that don’t fit your ideal? They won’t be 
killed, they will migrate to the Vitakara government ADVENT is setting up with the defectors.
You get your perfect species, and without the pointless genocide. Does that sound like an acceptable deal?"

“Considering you made your intention to kill me clear…” Miridian answered with hasty breath. “I…think it would work. If the Dath’Haram and Cobrarians would be happier alive and under the puppet regime of ADVENT, then they may live there, as long as they don’t step foot in our territory. And we will control Vitakar. It will not be given to these others. Not to a puppet state of ADVENT.”

The Commander allowed a nod. “A compromise then. You control Vitakar, and the other Vitakar will establish a new capital world.”

Miridian nodded in return. “I do not like the concept of multiple Vitakara states, but considering your alternative…it is better than nothing. I do not want to be your enemy, Commander, nor you mine. We have a mutual enemy, and we should focus on that. If compromise is needed, so be it, even if my own species will ultimately be hurt.”

“I might as well warn you,” the Commander said dryly. “ADVENT might not look favorably on your policies in any future government you establish.”

“I somehow think I’ll manage,” Miridian said with just as much dryness. “If that is the price I pay for an independent species, then I accept it. Then do we have an understanding, Commander?”

“Yes, Miridian, I think we do,” Miridian extended a hand and the Commander took it, both man and alien looking at each other directly in the eyes. Neither relenting, and understanding that this was just a compromise. Neither had changed the others minds, and that was unlikely to change in the future.

But they had a common goal.

They had a common enemy.

“Then we should return to the Manda’sarthoria,” Miridian said as he broke the handshake. “The Nulorian and XCOM officially have an agreement.”
In an unknown corner of space orbiting a lifeless moon, which orbited a gas giant, which itself orbited a bright yellow star, was a space station.

From the outside it was little more than a cylinder. But that was all that was required. It existed for only one individual, and to have only one purpose. For at least four decades it has done nothing but store what the Dath’Haram had designated as Project DH0022. The lone success for their project before the collapse.

Perhaps there had been more, but only one had been found by the Collective and placed into the Zararch as an asset.

Five levels made up the orbiting black cylinder. The bottom was merely the power supply and gravity generator. It managed the station; ensured that the stasis chambers didn’t run out of energy. It provided water and lighting. It provided life. It also housed the deadman explosives that could be detonated if necessary.

Above it was an armory packed to the brim with every single weapon that made up the Collective arsenal, and even some that were used by the elusive Ethereal Divisions. Grenades and nanoblades lined the walls. Raw components for the development of improvised weaponry were set aside for the ever-creative mind of DH0022 to manipulate and experiment with as it deemed fit.

Above that floor was nothing more than a massive holographic theatre. Powered by a dedicated supercomputer it was capable of creating and rendering nearly any location and individual provided. Useful for missions. Useful for creating profiles. Useful to visualizing the operational objective and additional scenarios which might arise.

A small hangar was above. Just large enough for a small ship it was rarely utilized and was typically kept depressurized. A Gateway was stationed inside as well, a dead portal that could only be turned on by an Ethereal. It was almost taunting, but there was little to fear. Reactivation would only happen in the gravest of circumstances.

The Zararch once more required their sharpest tool.

The final level was a light grey box. The walls were colorless, as was the floor. Every aspect was a uniform and drab sameness. Mirrors lined the far wall, giving those who entered near complete-vision of the place they were standing in. Small holographic displays were scattered throughout. Lockers containing scalpels, hammers, and saws could be raised from the ground or pulled from the walls.

Reconstruction machines could be lowered from the ceiling, medical equipment that was typically only used in cases of extreme emergency was a notably common sight. Drains lined the floors in pre-determined lengths with grooves and inclined planes, a hydrophobic surface to direct the blood and organic fluids which flowed.

In the center of this colorless box, sat a colorless figure.
It had no name. No sex. No discernable characteristics. The skin was a milky white and close to transparent in places. The hands were five slender fingers with three joints, which were attached to arms, similarly attached to a slender, flat torso. The head was an oval more closely resembling a Vitakarian, though that was where the similarities ended.

The face was featureless. It had no nose. It had no mouth. The eyes were a milky white; able to see, but yet to be configured appropriately. No hair grew along what passed for flesh, nor did the eyes blink for eyelids were not something that had been added yet.

But it was not idle.

It sat alone on a small chair, in the most base of forms, methodically reading the literature which it had been provided with. Reports and dossiers, maps and star charts, history and technological progress. Much had happened. Much needed to be learned. It did not require sleep and so worked methodically absorbing everything which had taken place.

It was unlike the last time, where only the most basic of details had been provided. But it had known then that mission had been a test. An unproven specimen had needed to prove it could act in the field effectively. Only mission-relevant data had been provided. It was all that was needed.

This was…different.

The activation may be more permanent.

This was pleasing.

Its handler would arrive shortly. An Ethereal it knew. An Ethereal it had, ironically, interacted with before. An Ethereal who it knew was unnerved by its existence. Unsurprising. Standard organic aliens required conformity and familiarity. The formless and faceless was an unsettling state of being, one many would deny could exist.

The pale individual decided it had acquired enough information for now. It was time to prepare for the assignment. One to Earth.

A Human form would need to be created.

A twinge of regret was felt. Humans. A colorful species in some ways which offered many possibilities, but ultimately, they were…dull. It was truly a shame that he would not be involved with operations involving the Sectoids or Andromedons. Such distinctive aliens would provide a much greater challenge instead of the same comforting anatomy.

But a Human would need to be chosen.

The form would not be final, of course, but one should become used to the bodies and voices such a species provided. A form would be needed for interacting with the allies of the Ethereals. Konstantine Volikov. A Human pragmatist and idealist no doubt clearly intending to use the Collective to his own ends.

It did not matter.

*There is little need to inform the Ethereals of the actions of those they consider to be their pawns. It would not be the first time.*

Arrogant.
But arrogance was unimportant in face of his task. The task was all that mattered.

Should the task be completed, the Vitakara would be secure.

Should failure occur, it would be over.

Too many unanswered questions still remained, but the Zar’Chon would not require aid if the need was not urgent. It was a new one as well. This one seemed more competent than the last, ironically aware of the dismissive and self-defeating personalities which plagued the Ethereals. Some things had not changed.

Distraction. A form needed to be chosen.

Two options presented themselves – male and female. Both genders would be utilized eventually, but one needed to serve as a base.

A professional approach was best for dealing with other professional Humans. Female would have been useful if Volk was susceptible to the opposite sex, but he was committed to another and strong-willed for a Human. A professional approach would be more beneficial. Male would serve as the initial form gender.

Skin color and ethnicity were of little concern to it, as either could be changed easily enough. The most non-threatening was Caucasian-American. Therefore that is what would make up the base form.

He.

Transitioning to the appropriate pronoun. Getting in character should begun immediately, if only in the smallest of details. That was enough to begin the transformation. He stood and set all of the literature to the far corner and walked over to stand over one of the drains. He carefully picked up the scalpel and cut a small patch of skin off the right of his neck to find the bodily control panel, expressing minor annoyance as the skin attempted to grow back.

The body had yet to be completely purged from the last mission. Something that needed to be rectified now. Disabling the nano-skin would allow bodily harm without immediate repair. The controls he’d memorized decades ago, but he needed to test them. He felt around for the general area of the jaw where the mouth would be.

Finding it, he penetrated the skin and dragged the scalpel across until a thin slit across his face existed, a mouth once more existing. Purple blood stained his fingers and the new opening, but that would wash away in time. He opened and closed the jaw experimentally several times to ensure everything was working. Biological similarities would thankfully mean that there would be little changes to the skull itself.

With the skin confirmed to not be regenerating, he found the vein which had been designed into his arm and slit it vertically on one wrist. As the purple blood flowed out, drenching his hands and wrists, he repeated the same procedure on the opposite wrist. Both arteries severed, it would only be a short time before the heart pumped all the blood out.

He cocked his head, thinking as the blood fell onto the floor and immediately began flowing into the drains. A name. He would need a name. Or perhaps not. Names were for assignments, names were important to play a role. But he was simply a Zararch asset here, and he needed no cover for Volk and the Ethereals.

Was a name necessary?
Perhaps if only to put his partner at ease. Humans, like most sentient beings, did not react well to that which did not conform to their expectations. Names…Humans had many names. Good names, bad names, curious names.

There had to be one which would fit who and what he was.

Minutes passed. Perhaps longer. The blood had stopped flowing and now was only leaking out of him in small droplets. The final stage of cleansing would need to be taken soon.

*Nemo.*

A word from the Latin language. Meaning *nobody*. Which that was what he was. Nobody. A figure with no true name or identity.

Yes. It would suffice.

*I am Nemo. Nobody.*

“I am Nemo,” the thing said out loud with ragged skin for lips and milky eyes. A soulless voice neither male nor female. “Nemo.”

Vocal cords needed to be adjusted. It was too monotone. Of course, reset had this effect. He looked down at the pool of blood he was standing in. The floor never worked properly, some help needed to guide it along. With a foot, he kicked the blood to make it flow closer to the drain. The hydrophobic layers either needed to be reapplied, or the room needed to be more inclined.

Time for the final purge of the veins.

He felt a twinge of annoyance as now he recalled that he would have to make minor skeletal adjustments and organ replacements. It would take time, but completing a Human form required such. He picked up a larger razor-sharp blade and began first cutting a thin line on the top of the torso just below the neck. Satisfied, he grasped at the edges of the milky-white skin and pulled down.

The nano-skin was well-designed and could tear easily when not in self-repair mode. Of course there was some residual blood, but nothing significant. He tossed the patch of skin aside and pulled out the disintegrator. Muscles were too much of a hassle to work around, and it was simply easier to replace them through the machines then have them self-heal.

He’d done this enough to where he knew how to do it quickly, and within several minutes he had unrestricted access to his chest cavity. The heart pumped empty air now, the cybernetic organ still working even when nothing was left. Picking up the tube linked to the station’s water, he attached it to the organ and let it begin pumping.

The trickle of purple blood then changed to a watery pink, and soon after to clear. The veins and heart organ were cleansed. Satisfied, he shut off the pump and disconnected it from the organ. That done, he pulled up a hologram of Human anatomy, more out of habit and wish for routine than because he needed the information.

He was going to need to perform extensive internal reworking. Humans had several organs that others simply did not have. Not unexpected, nor was he disappointed, but it was simply going to take longer. But in truth, he was grateful for the opportunity.

He had never been a Human before.
It was exciting. Putting on the skin of another species was an experience one only received once. It was something to savor and treasure forever.

It was then he felt the touch of the mind.

Ah, yes. She was to arrive, and she was already here.

He heard no steps, but he knew when he turned around that the Ethereal would be before him. “Nebulan.”

The voice was toneless and neutral, coming from the ragged mouth of a creature which should not exist with its chest torn open and wrists slit. He knew the effect he had on the Ethereal. Of course he was different from when he’d seen her last. A female he’d been that time, with different skin and blood. All for a trick that only lasted a few minutes but allowed the opportunity to kill several powerful enemies and gather some rather interesting information.

Information he would mull over later, as he had not had significant time to process the operation before he had been returned to stasis.

The Ethereal appraised him. “You are different.”

“Yes, Ethereal. I am. A new form takes time to put together.”

“A machine could do just as well.” Dismissal and undertones of disgust in her voice. “You waste time and skin performing it yourself. You are not a machine. Mistakes can be made.”

He didn’t know whether to place her emotions as unsettlement, disdain, or jealousy. Nebulan was…well, he pitied her. She fancied herself an individual who changed identities and names as easily as breathing. A shadow that could adapt at will to any situation. But she was a mere child, unable or unwilling to become Faceless.

Her pitiful attempts to play games with the aliens were merely amusing. Her parlor tricks with psionics were that of a failed mind. She could only play at being an illusion. She could never live one. Because she was ultimately nothing but an insecure Ethereal who had never been good enough to be an Overmind, not strong enough to be a warrior, not charismatic enough to be a leader, and only barely powerful enough to be an illusionist for those who were by far her greater.

A fraud.

“Enough.” The order was not one of command, but of pleading.

He gave her a smile of ragged flesh. It took surprisingly little to send the Ethereals fleeing from his mind. He could never see it the way they could, but he knew by this point that his mind was unlike others. They could never stay in it for very long, and he always knew when something was in it. Either by accident or a little psionic gift of his own, he didn’t know or care.

“I don’t use a machine, Nebulan, because I am not a machine,” he didn’t alter his voice. He didn’t need to now. “To become someone, you must know them inside and out. I will become a Human, and I will understand how I work. I will become the Human I have decided to be. I embrace the forms and roles I play, Nebulan. They are not acts, they are not names I throw away and dismiss, they are individuals in their own right. And this time I will be Nemo.”

“I do not have to accept your help-“

“I have been ordered by the Zar’Chon to assist you,” he interrupted flatly. “I do not answer to you,
but to him. You are merely a means to an end before I begin my assignment. You foolishly compromised the entire Argentinian operation. You failed. You have little room to demand my authority or respect. I saved you once, and it appears I will have to do so again."

“Tread carefully, Faceless One,” Nebulan hissed. “An abomination like you cannot-“

Nemo turned away from her and returned to the hologram of the Human anatomy. “Your threats are as empty as your authority. If you are here to insult me, I will ignore you. I am, at this moment, more valuable than you are. Provide the reason for your visit or leave.”

The Ethereal was silent for a few moments. “The Gateway activation codes have been provided, including the coordinates to travel. You have three days to arrive. The Battlemaster will hear of your insolence to an Elder. We command you. The Zar’Chon himself is subservient to us. By the chain of command so are you.”

He turned back to her, not saying anything. He had no intention of meeting her empty words with either confirmation or denial of his own. He was above this petty infighting. Nebulan would either get over her issues and distaste for him, or she would make more mistakes which would result in her removal.

But he did take pleasure in feeling the air between them grow unnerving as he locked eyes with her as he began dragging the scalpel around his eyeball to prepare to pull it out and set it to a usable configuration. He’d memorized all the settings and options of the implant. Normally he would prefer to look upon his work, but he was more than satisfied to just watch Nebulan become more and more uncomfortable as he changed into a Human before her eyes.

But soon she left without a word, leaving him alone.

No more distractions.

Returning before the mirror, he continued the process of sculpting himself into a Human.

Not just any Human though.

Nemo.

I am Nemo.

I am nobody.

***

Commander’s Quarters, the Praesidium – Classified Location

2/16/2017 – 10:11 P.M.

“So what did you make of him?” Vahlen pulled up a chair opposite him as he sat by the small table that inhabited their room. Both of them were ready for bed, although the Commander was eating a late dinner. Or mildly moving it around on his plate, too absorbed in thought to really pay attention to eating it.

Vahlen’s hair was down like usual, though not straightened since just like him, she’d just come off of work. He hadn’t even asked what she’d been doing all day, although he knew it could only be a select number of projects. None of which were as easily comparable to the whole situation with Miridian, the Nulorian, and the unexpected revelation of the Sar’Manda.
A lot to think about. Miridian in particular was something that made him think.

“He was…is right about some things,” the Commander finally said, lacing his fingers together. “I’m not Vitakarian. I don’t know what he or his species have gone through other than academic secondhand. Keeps things in perspective, especially if the roles were reversed and an alien was taking a significant role in deciding the future of my species.”

Vahlen coughed. “Considering what he wanted to do…”

“Mmm,” the Commander hummed. “I know. The ironic thing is that I can understand how he would have come to that conclusion. Anything can be made to sound justifiable, and after so long it becomes normalized.”

Vahlen reached out and placed a hand over his own. “Don’t compare yourself to him. You’re not.”

He gave a wan smile at her. “I know that. There is a distinct difference between us. During the War on Terror I knew what I did was wrong. Necessary, but still wrong on multiple levels. It’s been repeated by what we’ve done here. Necessary, but it doesn’t somehow make it right.” He leaned back, sighing. “Miridian doesn’t see what he does as wrong. No, I’m not Miridian, but I think at some point I could have very easily become like him.”

“I don’t know about that,” Vahlen mused. “You don’t really change yourself easily.”

“Because I don’t need to.” That was something he had begun to realize. “Through most of my career I’ve ultimately been the one making the decisions. I was given an end goal. End the Caliphate. Protect the United States. Protect Earth from the alien threat. How I accomplished this was up to me. I did what I believed was necessary, and have so far succeeded. There wasn’t a need to escalate, I never had reason to become disillusioned or grow bitter or angry. For better or worse, I was responsible for everything I did.”

He shrugged. “Now, if I’d been given significant oversight from the beginning. If I was given lists of instructions to follow, and they were inefficient, I feel I would have changed. Perhaps significantly, perhaps not. I was fortunate I had people who understood I worked best on my own and through my own methods. Take that away,” he made a dismissive motion. “Well, then it becomes a lot easier to blame someone other than me. Not necessarily for unjustified reasons.”

“You know, I’ve wondered,” Vahlen said. “I think a good number of psychologists would pay a fortune to try and analyze you. I don’t think you’d fit into their profiles very easily.”

“They can wait in line,” he allowed a smirk. “Post-mission debriefs were sometimes conducted by psychologists. I feel they left more confused than anything. Never had issues with them, but I feel like many of them were itching to figure out what makes me tick.”

“They wouldn’t have to try hard,” Vahlen said lightly. “You aren’t extremely complicated.”

“I do my best,” he agreed. “Perhaps if I’d been more involved in deep cover it would be a different story. But letting myself be complicated and convoluted is just an annoyance. Of course, not everyone can fix themselves so easily. But in my case, nothing was broken.”

“Which reminds me, I’ve not asked yet,” Vahlen rested her arms on the table. “You’ve never spoken of family.”

“Beyond you?” He cocked his head.

“Well,” she coughed, blushing a little. “Yes. Your parents or siblings.”
“Because they don’t matter anymore,” he shrugged, not sure how best to explain it. “I didn’t have siblings, and my parents are still alive as far as I know. I cut all familial ties when I began doing black ops work for the CIA. They heard I died in a freak plane accident, no body. They’ve moved on and I don’t keep tabs on them. In my line of work that was a risk and liability.”

“But you’re not with the CIA anymore,” Vahlen said. “And at this point I don’t think you’d have to fear any kind of retaliation.”

“True,” he admitted. “But it would raise more questions than answers, and I don’t want to reopen the past unnecessarily. I’ve moved on, so have they most likely. And in this war, where I could very likely die again, I would not put them through it.”

“That is a good point,” Vahlen sighed. “What about after the war, assuming we are all alive? I would like you to meet my family at some point. I still keep in intermittent contact.”

He rapped his fingers on the table, thinking. “I’d consider it. Possibly,” he raised an eyebrow at her. “I don’t pry into your own family communications, but have you mentioned me?”

“Not by name, I promise,” she said, smiling. “But they do know that there is someone. My grandmother is demanding to know if we’re married and if kids are on the way.”

“Who the hell would have kids in the middle of a war,” the Commander snorted. “I hope she’s not one of the more uptight people regarding marriage?”

“A bit,” Vahlen admitted. “Older, religious, you know. Still I think she’d not care as much nowadays. Old values don’t matter as much when aliens are invading.”

“Indeed.” He met her eyes. “Although it does make me wonder why we shouldn’t. Maybe not immediately, but I don’t see a reason to not do so.” He gestured to her. “We both know how we feel about each other and that isn’t going to change. You know how I’m feeling now, you know me better than anyone ever has or could. You’re an intelligent and beautiful woman who I do want to spend the rest of my life – regardless of how long it may be – with. And I suspect you feel the same way.”

Vahlen blinked, her cheeks tinted a slight red. “Are you proposing?”

He frowned, thinking. He’d definitely not intended it to be that way, he was just stating something they both instinctively knew. But with that said, perhaps it worked as one? “If you want to take it that way,” he said hesitantly. “I didn’t plan it, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Well,” she reached over and took his hands in her own, and he felt the direct touch of her mind against his own. “I think it works wonderfully as one, and if you feel that way, I would love nothing more than to take you as my husband.”

While it had certainly not been the way he was expecting the night to go, he was good at adapting, and right now, he felt there was little that would make him happier than he was now, with the only comparable moment being when he’d first proposed to Farida. But he was much less nervous now, and had a lot more experience.

He didn’t quite remember when they’d both stood and moved around the table, but they kissed deeply as they moved to the bed.

And for a few hours, they didn’t need to care about anything other than themselves.
“It is having an…effect, to put it lightly,” Kyong said while Saudia sat at her desk as both men updated her on the begun distribution of the footage XCOM had inexplicably been sent. To put it extremely lightly, it was among the most disturbing things she had seen in her life, even from the days of EXALT.

It was also extremely concerning in what it depicted. She was genuinely unsure how ADVENT would fare against something that was so…unsettling. Something which was enough to face the Battlemaster and survive.

“An effect as in?”

“As in the media is holding a significant portion back, blurring out most portions due to extreme violence and gore, and in general clearly upset on-camera,” Kyong clarified. “I almost feel bad for them, but they certainly aren’t holding back. The real interesting scene is the non-mainstream media covering it.”

He pulled out his phone. “Twitter, Facebook, all of social media is posting clips from it with everyone expressing disgust and shock at it. Uploaders have posted the entire video to YouTube and Liveleak, and already have close to a million views.”

“I’m not sure if that’s comforting or not,” Saudia commented dryly. “That’s a lot of people wanting to see a descent into hell.”

“Humans are curious, Chancellor,” Kyong shrugged, pocketing his phone. “Sometimes too curious for our own good. We’ve released our own statement as planned, as the footage is available for download for independent parties. Not that I think most civilians are going to want to see it for themselves, but I think we’ve put a significant dent in the Collective’s claim that they have our best interests in mind.”

“Until the conspiracies start, I suppose,” Saudia said. “I’d imagine they are in full swing.”

“Indeed. We are working to discredit and suppress all major ones, but the majority will not believe them,” Kyong confirmed. “Our media teams have been successful in stopping such conspiracies from spreading beyond the little corners of the internet they inhabit.”

“And has this had a significant effect on the diplomatic front?” She asked Hassan.

“Several international media organizations have requested the raw footage,” Hassan answered, handing her a file. “Including several other countries. Iceland and Norway reached out directly. I would not make any hasty assumptions, but I think this might be them coming around to the realization that ADVENT and the Collective are actually not the same and only one has the best interests of Humanity at heart.”


“Outrage, as you would expect,” Hassan inclined his head. “With several peaceful protests planned to force several neutral countries to become more involved in the war. Unlikely to work, but Kyong’s teams are working to try and make them as large as possible. We shall see the effect this is having, but we know for sure that people are talking.”

“Which is all we need for now,” Saudia said. “It keeps the alien threat in mind and insists on
holding those in power accountable. That will work out in time. People needed a reminder of what
the aliens are capable of; what they do to us. This will stay in their minds for a while.”

“I feel like the aliens are going to dislike what is coming,” Kyong mused. “I suspect 4chan has
plans for using this. Hopefully they will be primarily directed at the aliens and not used simply for
trolling.”

Saudia raised an eyebrow. “You’re talking about 4chan.”

“Well,” Hassan scratched his chin. “Didn’t they send a bunch of porn to some aliens in Australia
that one time?

“Yes, it was very amusing.”

“I personally don’t care what the internet trolls do,” Saudia clasped her hands together, resting
them on her desk. “I’m more interested in the actual fallout from this. Specifically regarding the
alien forces. I suspect the Collective will be doing everything in their power to block this, so we’ll
need to spread it other ways.”

“We’re flooding the Vitakara subreddit with it now,” Kyong said. “Also we’re working on
penetrating their networks with short pre-determined clips since uploading the whole thing is
impractical. The CODEX is giving us trouble, but we suspect we’ll get it through eventually.”

“Perhaps something more conventional would also work,” Saudia suggested. “Physical drops of
USB drives or still images distributed over alien territory. The officers won’t be able to suppress
them all.”

“A usable idea, I’ll bring it up with Commander Christiaens,” Hassan said. “Speaking of which the
AEGIS Division should also have the Vitakara also publicly respond.”

“Yes, we need to continually be making a distinction between the Collective and aliens as a
whole,” Saudia nodded. “The anger must be directed at the appropriate body. Otherwise it will
backfire.”

“I’ll get on that.”

“Keep me informed as the situation develops,” Saudia leaned back in her chair. “Dismissed.”

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Borelian Wastes – Vitakar

2/16/2017 – 9:00 P.M.

Nartha supposed Shun was taking some time to process everything that happened, since she’d been
quiet since he finished recounting what had happened. It was still a little overwhelming even for
him. In the space of a few hours they’d learned the Sar’Manda had been preparing for a war for
decades, they’d met Miridian, and they now had an alliance with the Nulorian.

“The Zararch really suck at their job, don’t they,” she finally said, resting her chin on a propped-up
hand. “You sure we should be worried about them?”

He had to laugh at that. “I think that’s a bit unfair. Well, kind of. The Sar’Manda have always told
everyone they knew to fuck off and leave them alone. It wasn’t as if they were mean to the
Collective specifically; that’s how they treat everyone. And at some point you have to compare the
cost of investigating the people who control an ocean with the benefits. Doesn’t really add up to
me, and it must not have to the Zar’Chon either.”

“Isn’t that the whole point of espionage though?” She still pressed. “Learning things without the
other side knowing?”

He blinked at her, cocking his head. This was a moment when a Human would raise an eyebrow,
but since he didn’t have those, he needed some other way. “I’m listening…”

She sniffed. “Unfair. That isn’t my job. That’s what the Zar’Chon is supposed to figure out…”

“…And he doesn’t because it’s a lot harder to be sneaky underwater than above it,” Nartha
finished, deciding to take a sip of his water. “And trust me when I say the Sar’Manda know the
Manda better than any Zar’Chon ever could.”

“So they know the ocean,” Shun said, shifting in her seat. “I guess the next question would be how
good they are on land?”

“They’ll be at a significant disadvantage on land,” Nartha said, thinking. “I inquired about some of
their training. They’re conducting dry-ground training exercises within massive bunkers on the
bottom of the ocean to simulate land. Smart. The Zararch would never find them. So I think they’ll
be useful, but also have significant vulnerabilities.”

“Shoot the suit, water leaks out and they die,” Shun nodded. “Almost like the Andromedons.”

“But worse,” Nartha corrected. “Andromedon suits are unwieldy, but extremely well-protected.
Shooting the suit won’t kill the Andromedon. Shooting the suit of a Sar’Manda soldier is much
worse. It’s like Humans in space – or anyone for that matter. A breach kills you if you can’t fix it
fast, and in war, you don’t have as much time.”

Shun nodded, straightening for a moment in silence. “Well, regardless of what happened, I’m glad
you and the Commander made it back safely. As…reassuring…as Sorras is,” she shot a glance to
the Dath’Haram chatting amicably to several other soldiers. “I wouldn’t have put it past the
Nulorian to do something stupid.”

“They’re terrorists, not idiots,” Nartha reminded her. “They wouldn’t have wanted to make an
enemy of XCOM.”

“Eh,” Shun shrugged. “I guess alien terrorists may be smarter than Human terrorists. At least from
our history, none of them seemed too smart beyond their limited ambitions. Terrorists don’t win on
Earth. Never really have to my knowledge.”

“Well, I have a feeling we’ll be seeing what happens when a terrorist wins here,” Nartha
commented, also shooting a glance to Sorras. “We’ll learn just how benevolent Miridian’s plans
really are.”

“So are you surprised he’s a Vitakarian?” Shun asked, changing the subject after a few moments.

“No,” Nartha shook his head. “It was either going to be a Vitakarian or Borelian. Most Zararch
psychologists doubted that he was a Dath’Haram considering that Sorras likely only came about as
the result of extreme radicalization and tampering. Not impossible, but extremely unlikely. So I’m
not surprised.” He leaned back. “The situation with the Sar’Manda was of a lot more interest to
me.”

“Well, did they consider that Miridian may be a passed-down name?” Shun inquired. “Maybe there
was more than one Miridian?"

“Unlikely,” Nartha disputed. “That has been one constant throughout his entire career. The Miridian – at least the one who’s been operating – has been the same individual. It’s the one consistent piece of information from multiple sources. There is only one Miridian, or at least someone who goes by that name, and their methods and overall tactics haven’t deviated in decades. If there was a sudden shift in objectives or methods, that theory might have more weight. Although I do wonder what contingency Miridian had if he died.”

“Well, obviously his son would rise and assume his father’s place,” Shun said dramatically. “That’s how it would go in a book.”

Nartha snorted. “I highly doubt Miridian has a mate.”

“Oh?” Shun said lightly. “The amount of single Vitakarian female terrorists is a bit low?”

“Honestly, not for lack of options,” Nartha dismissed. “Considering how he’s looked upon within the Nulorian, he could probably find a mate easily enough, regardless of race. But he probably doesn’t care much about that…” he shrugged. “That said, he’s also working with the Sar’Manda and I’ve barely met the man, so what do I know?”

“Right now?” Shun tilted her head with a twinkle in her eye. “More than the Zararch and Zar’Chon.”

He inclined his head. “That’s true.”

“So what happens next?” Shun asked after a few moments.

“I’ll be recalled to the Zararch soon,” he said. “From there I suspect I’ll be getting some help from all of you when my next mission is given.”

She frowned. “Do you want my opinion?”

“Of course.”

“You should get out now,” she said. “You don’t need to work undercover anymore. We have the Andromedons. We have the Nulorian. You’d just be put in danger for the sake of it, and they have to be wondering if you’re reliable at this point. You can only work against them for so long before it falls apart. You’re smart and skilled, but you aren’t unique, Nartha. I don’t think you’ll be the one unique person who was a double agent for years and no one knew.”

That…made some amount of sense.

A little too much for that matter.

“But if I leave…” he began slowly. “Then we have nothing on what the Zararch could be doing. I’m already inside among the top field agents. Putting another person in my position would have taken years, and we don’t have that kind of time.”

“And we won’t have it if you’re killed,” Shun said. “Worse, what if you’re captured? You know so much about what’s going on. You can’t resist telepathy, and that little object Fiona gave you will really just make them suspicious – and they can just take it away.”

“I could always undergo the Manchurian Restraints,” he said. “Isn’t that-“
“That isn’t how they work!” She interrupted. “The Manchurian Restraints can’t stop a psion from reading your mind, it can only react to it. It can prevent you from giving details and being controlled, but all it will do for stopping a telepath is make you hurt.”

Nartha considered that. “Alright, considering I just leave. Or otherwise fake my death. Where do I go now? Stay here and be a pseudo-Nulorian?”

“No,” Shun shook her head. “You’d be like me. An XCOM operative. I at least still consider you one of us. You aren’t Nulorian, and you definitely aren’t Zararch. You’re XCOM, and you should be recognized as one and not have to keep pretending for a job that’s going to kill you.” She looked into his eyes. “Or you could come back to Earth with me. Be a soldier there. There are aliens with us now beyond just you. And your sister is there too.”

He tapped a finger absentmindedly on the table. “I’d have to talk to the Commander or Zhang about this. I said I would work for them like this. If they agree that it’s too risky now, then I’ll move to a different role. But only if they agree with you.”

“Fair enough,” Shun said. “I wouldn’t expect you to just drop it because I said so. But please think about what you’re really accomplishing if you stay.”

“I will,” he promised. “And…thanks.”

She just nodded somberly, moved her arm forward, hesitated, and then just rested it on the table. “A lot of people have died in this war. I don’t want you to be one of them.”

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**ADVENT HQ – Switzerland**

2/18/2017 – 14:12 P.M.

“Chancellor,” Hassan looked…concerned as he entered her office, phone and file in hand. “We have a situation that requires your attention.”

Saudia minimized several windows on her computer and directed her full attention towards Hassan. “What is it and how bad?”

“Foreign Minister Xuan has just spoken to me, and given us a heads up because this is going to hit the media soon,” her Chief Diplomat answered. “There’s been several smallpox outbreaks across China. Primarily in Beijing, and there are reportedly isolated cases in the more rural cities.”

Saudia blinked then frowned. Processing what he’d said. “Smallpox? Wasn’t that eradicated a long time ago?”

“So we thought, but Chinese officials have confirmed it’s definitely smallpox,” Hassan clarified. “Right now they’re not sure where it came from, or how, or anything at all really. But since cases are only now starting to appear, it’s likely that it’s going to get a lot worse very quickly.”

“How likely is it that there is alien involvement?” Saudia demanded. “A smallpox outbreak now is extremely suspicious.”

“Yet to be determined,” Hassan said grimly. “There are only two locations which have samples of smallpox, and both of them are still there and untampered with. So the possibilities are that this is natural and just extremely bad timing, or the aliens somehow managed to perfectly recreate smallpox without any previous samples.”
“Or they synthesized it from one of the existing samples, and replaced it to lessen suspicion,” Saudia added.

“What I’m saying is that right now, aside from timing, this can’t be pinned on the aliens,” Hassan cautioned. “Unless we get another leak from the Collective, I would not publicly blame them yet. And I want to add that if it was the Collective, wouldn’t it make more sense to have it spread in our territory? China is important, yes, but this is not necessarily going to hurt us.”

He raised a good point. China was an odd target, and in all likelihood might actually lead to ADVENT being able to wield more influence over China, which in turn helped ADVENT. If this was sabotage…it was certainly of questionable effectiveness. “Using a bioweapon of this nature seems unlike the Collective too,” she mused. “At least under the Battlemaster. He doesn’t use these kinds of weapons.”

“I wouldn’t believe their reasoning is moralistic,” Hassan said, handing her the file. “The Battlemaster maybe wouldn’t have a choice. But I tend to agree that this is, if the aliens are actually behind it, an odd move and one which will only drive China into our arms.”

“Put like that, it makes more sense for us to be behind the release,” Saudia snorted ironically. “Are there any cases that have developed in our territory?”

“Only a few isolated cases, all of whom had originally come from China,” Hassan said. “I’m sure you’re thinking the same thing, but right now we need to suspend all flights to and from China until this is quarantined.”

Saudia sighed. “This couldn’t happen in a worse place. China is huge, dense, and poor. An epidemic will spread like wildfire and kill a lot of people.”

“Yes,” Hassan agreed grimly. “It will. And we need to figure out what our own response is going to be. China is going to request our help, Minister Xuan has said as much. President Qin is waiting on the line to talk as well when you’re ready.”

“Give it to me,” Saudia said, motioning to the phone. “We might as well treat this as an opportunity.”

Hassan nodded, and passed the phone to her which she took and dialed the inputted number. A few seconds passed until President Qin spoke. “Chancellor, I appreciate you speaking to me.”

“Chief Hassan informed me of the basics of the situation,” Saudia said. “It’s unfortunate to hear what has happened, and I’m sure you’re working to identify the cause and contain the situation.” Perhaps that was a dispassionate greeting, but she knew both of them were more interested in the practical response over emotion.

“Indeed, Chancellor. We have already taken the step of ceasing all civilian outgoing flights, and I suspect ADVENT will soon do the same,” Qin said. “All government personnel are being tested and we’re starting with the military as well. Military forces are quarantining areas of outbreak and we’re in the process of starting production of vaccines immediately.”

Good. He had a head start on things. “But it’s going to get worse.”

“Yes. Millions will most likely die before we have a full understanding of the range and damage this outbreak will cause. Perhaps more.” Qin paused. “Regardless of what happens, my country will be pushed to the breaking point and in no shape to fend off the Collective. If the Collective was behind this or not is irrelevant. They will see this and take advantage.”
Saudia let the silence hang temporarily. “Correct. Unfortunately this may be what breaks the lull of conflict, and it does Humanity little good to lose ground to the aliens. You will have ADVENT support to contain this epidemic and provide vaccines, supplies and military support. And of course developing a cure as best we can.”

“Your assistance will be appreciated, Chancellor,” Qin said, relief clear in his voice. “We will not forget this.”

“No, you won’t,” Saudia said slowly. “We’re devoting our resources, soldiers, and scientists to helping your country. Some will very likely give their lives because of it. In return China is going to formally pledge unconditional military support against the Collective and reconsider ADVENT membership. We are helping out because doing otherwise is not in the best interests of Humanity. But we are not going to continue giving you benefits of ADVENT membership while you remain independent.”

“Your point is made, Chancellor,” Qin sounded more resigned than offended. “And of course China is more than willing to provide military support against the Collective. But I make no promises on anything more.”

“Understood, Mr. President,” Saudia confirmed. “And I make no promises then beyond what I’ve already pledged. You’ll begin receiving support later this day. Chief Diplomat Hassan will work to coordinate everything. I will be making a statement within a few hours publicly pledging help before it spreads far in the media.”

“Again, it is appreciated, Chancellor,” Qin said. “We will of course continue providing updates. Good day to you, Chancellor.”

“You as well, Mr. President,” Saudia said. “Good luck.”

After the call ended, she handed the phone back to Hassan who looked at her with a raised eyebrow. “‘Good luck’?”

She pursed her lips. “He’s going to need it. This is going to be a mess that only gets worse before it gets better.” Lacing her fingers together, she looked up at Hassan. “You heard the plan. Begin coordination and Kyong will set up a press conference so we can get ahead of this.”

“Yes, Chancellor. It will be done.”

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Project Nolan Training Center, the Praesidium – Classified Location

2/13/2017 – 3:30 P.M.

The room was fairly small, especially for what was called a “Training Center”, and largely empty. The only things which were in the room were stands holding glowing blue orbs. Nuan and five other soldiers had been invited earlier to participate in a new experimental kind of training. Sounded interesting, so here it was.

None of them were wearing armor, just fatigues which was another interesting request. Or lack thereof, anyway. They hadn’t specified they needed to wear armor, only not to touch anything, and so Nuan had decided to abide by the lack of rules since she really didn’t want to spend twenty minutes putting on her Titan armor only to never need it.

Since the others were wandering around, she decided to take a closer look at the orbs. Up close
they almost reminded her of a snow globe in their perfect sphereness, although what was inside was obscured. A minute of watching was hypnotizing in a way, rippling and flowing as if there was an ocean contained within.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” Iosif greeted, walking up.

“You’re here too?” She’d been unaware of this, but she certainly wasn’t complaining. “I mean, yes, it is. What is it?”

“This,” Iosif tapped a gloved finger on the object. “Is a Sovereign Orb. And since I’m one of the ones who wants to help refine the Nolan Project, I’d say I should be involved here. Besides, I think you’re one of the people who should know a bit more about what’s going on.”

Nuan cocked her head. “What do you mean?”

“You’ll see,” he said, before turning his attention to the others in the room. “Form up!”

The soldiers immediately formed a line in between one of the rows of Sovereign Orbs as they were called. To her surprise the Commander also entered the room, followed closely by Fiona. After they all saluted and were subsequently relieved, he faced them directly, hands clasped behind his back.

“Your willingness to participate in this program is appreciated, despite not knowing details. Welcome to the Nolan Project, what we’re hoping to turn into the standard for XCOM training and strategy.” He rested his artificial hand on top of one of the orbs. “Training exercises are limited by resources, time, and safety. It is impossible to completely simulate a battlefield, even if you have the land, resources, and people.”

He motioned to Fiona. “And in cases it requires holding back so as not to hurt another party in the training exercises. In addition, specific challenges or enemies are impossible to fully simulate, such as the Battlemaster, Isomnum, or the Imperator. Psionics in general can be difficult to simulate. This is what the Nolan Project is attempting to solve. Training simulations not constrained by time, resources, or safety. I’ll take a guess for how you think this is going to be done.”

“Psionics, Commander,” Geist answered immediately. “Based on our current understanding of telepathic theory, it is possible to draw a mind into a space controlled and managed entirely by an individual. The problem is that it is extremely difficult, or near-impossible, for any Human to properly simulate something detailed and comprehensive enough to work for what you describe. I suspect even Ethereals would have issues.”

He had a point. “A computer probably could though,” Nuan added. “An AI.”

Was that where this was going? She’d heard the rumors that XCOM was developing an AI with the Andromedons. Was she actually going to get to see it in actions?

“You are close,” the Commander pointed to Geist. “It is psionically based. We’re not quite to linking it with an AI, Engineer Kun, though you’re also right that an AI would be able to perform the same feat. The general theory Geist described is correct, and what we’re working with. But it is not an Ethereal or Human who is responsible for…powering the Nolan Project, so to speak.”

Nuan was both confused and intrigued.

“You’ve all been selected because you’re considered capable of keeping sensitive information to yourselves,” the Commander continued. “You’ve heard about the alliance between us and the Andromedons. That has not been the only ally we’ve acquired. You’ve all likely been interested in
the Chronicler and his operatives. They are agents of T’Leth, an alien from a species called the Sovereign Ones.”

Carmelita snorted. “Arrogant name.”

“But accurate,” Fiona stepped forward. Nuan hadn’t really interacted with the woman much, but she was one of the more famous, especially when she’d brought back Axis and fought in the attempted rescue operation for Abby. She wasn’t wearing her stone armor now, but a sword was still strapped to her back and her silver-grey hair was pulled back, drawing even more attention to her striking green eyes.

“T’Leth is residing on Earth,” Fiona said. “He’s been…asleep for a long time, at least from what the Chronicler has shared with me. Naturally he sees the Collective as a threat, especially since there is at least one more Sovereign One working with the aliens. So in both the mutual interests of XCOM and him, he has decided to lend his own assistance where he can.”

“On Earth?” Geist frowned. “Underwater?”

“Correct,” she nodded. “In places no Human has ever looked. Or the Collective for that matter.”

“How reassuring,” Fakhr said, speaking for the first time. “So we’ve got another race of extremely powerful aliens in this war. That’s just what we needed.”

“Do you trust him?” Geist asked. “If this alien is as powerful as you imply, there is a good chance that it is simply utilizing XCOM to rid itself of an opponent or rival.”

“I trust him to help us eliminate the Collective,” the Commander said. “But for everything else I can only take him at his word. However, up to this point he has been useful to us, and until he breaks that, I will give him the benefit of the doubt.” He nodded to the orbs. “A Sovereign One is powerful enough to simulate scenarios in a psionic dreamscape, and T’Leth has agreed to do this. If there are objections to that, you can leave now.”

“If nothing else, I’m curious,” Carmelita said with a shrug. “An enemy of the Collective is good enough for me.” There were echoing agreements as the others – Nuan included – unanimously agreed to continuing going forward.

“Good, T’Leth wants to have a blank scenario where he works out some functions,” the Commander said. “Put your hands on the orbs; skin contact is required, so take off any gloves you have.”

“What’s going to happen then?” Fakhr asked.

“You’ll be taken to whatever T’Leth has established telepathically,” the Commander explained. “It is not considered mind control, and the Manchurian Restraints won’t be triggered if you have them. You will be able to leave either when T’Leth ends the session – or you die in the simulation.”

“This’ll be fun,” she muttered, but placed her hand on the nearest orb, as did the others.

Nuan coughed awkwardly, gesturing to Iosif. “I might have a problem,” she raised her grey prosthetic hand and wiggled the fingers.

Iosif winced. “Right, didn’t quite think about that. Well…maybe try it anyway.”

She did, and unsurprisingly nothing happened. “We’ll have to cheat it,” Nuan grumbled, fumbling with her shirt and pushing up her sleeve. “Hold onto my arm and you try it.”
Iosif coughed. “I’m not sure that will work either, but I’ll try it.” At her nod he put a hand around the arm which still had half of the organic forearm and she similarly grasped his own forearm. Iosif then placed the other hand on the orb. Instantly the world vanished and was replaced by a bright watery dreamscape. Both of them were in their Titan armor, and it did feel like she was wearing her Titan armor interestingly enough.

“ Took you long enough,” Carmelita said, walking up. “This place has some interesting properties.”

Nuan realized that Iosif hadn’t let go of her arm, and both realized it at the same time and dropped now that they could move freely again. “Like what?” Nuan asked.

“Hold still,” Carmelita said, and then unexpectedly punched Nuan in the chest, sending her flying into the air. Nuan let out a scream expecting to be killed in the first few minutes of her time here, but the impact was like landing on a deep cushion thankfully.

Carmelita found that very amusing.

She, however, did not.

Storming back over, she didn’t even let Carmelita say her apology before performing a much harder punch with her metal wrist and sending the other woman flying much farther backwards. She heard Iosif snicker. “She did have that one coming.”

“Amusing that is the first thing you did.” They turned at the sound of the deep voice, which came from a figure wearing Titan armor, but the armor had the same stony texture as Fiona’s armor — who was incidentally right beside him. The projection of T’Leth.

“I have much to test and experiment with here,” the projection said as all the rest of the soldiers were suddenly teleported before him. “All of you will provide assistance in helping achieve this. Laws, physics, rules, and more I must become familiar with in simulating in this dreamscape. Once this is complete, I can simulate in earnest. Now, it is time to begin.”

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Office of the Commander, the Praesidium – Classified Location

2/20/2017 – 2:11 P.M.

The Commander appraised her seriously. “How bad is it already? The real numbers, not speculation.”

Saudia handed him one of the files she’d brought. “Several thousand are already dead, mostly those who were already sick or malnourished. Lower class citizens mostly, and to the surprise of no one, they’re the demographic that’s the most infected. The Chinese are working to contain and quarantine the infected, but it seems like a new case appears every few hours.”

“And smallpox has a one-in-three chance of mortality,” the Commander said grimly, taking the file and beginning to read it. “And scars the remainder for life.”

She pursed her lips. “Not completely. From what I’ve been told it’s likely going to kill children and the elderly, as well as those already ill or malnourished. So statistically that rounds out to one third, roughly. Yes, there will be scarring for those who are infected.”

“I really hope that vaccination programs are being instituted,” the Commander said. “Unfortunate that we stopped doing that.”
“The disease was virtually eradicated,” Saudia shrugged. “Vaccines do have side effects. Why risk possible side effects for an eradicated disease?”

“That argument might have more weight if we didn’t keep some of it around to study,” the Commander noted dryly, placing the file on the desk. “But you have a point. And no indication that the aliens were behind this?”

“None so far,” Saudia shook her head. “The biggest pieces of evidence that points to them are timing – possibly weakening China for a possible invasion, and that the virus itself is one that we aren’t prepared for and is one of the easiest to spread. Almost every possible vector is transmittable by smallpox. If you wanted to use it as a bioweapon, it’s one of the best.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” the Commander said slowly. “The timing is too good, as is the cause of the outbreak. Considering we are dealing with extremely psionically powerful aliens and ones with extensive experience in scientific fields and genetic modification, it’s not out of the question that they could acquire a sample of smallpox and replicate it before redistributing it to the general population.”

“It’s possible, but we don’t have actual proof,” Saudia pointed out. “And I’m not convinced that is the case to begin with. If this is the result of alien tampering, then why target China? If this was against one of our nations, that becomes a lot more solid. Or if they immediately attacked China before we could respond. But we’re involved in China now. This may actually be enough to push them to join ADVENT. How does this benefit them in any way aside from killing a lot of Humans?”

The Commander frowned. “I’m not sure,” he glanced down to the file. “Killing for the sake of killing doesn’t fit their operations. But there may be a secondary goal. Perhaps infecting China first is less suspicious, and if cases appear in ADVENT territory, they’ll be attributed to the first outbreak.”

“Except now we’re prepared for them,” Saudia said. “It won’t cause nearly as much damage.”

“No, it won’t,” the Commander agreed with some reluctance. “The situation as a whole is…odd.”

“Some things can just be chalked up to bad luck or coincidence,” Saudia shrugged. “All we can do is respond to it. If things change, you’ll be among the first to know. Right now we’re not directly accusing the Collective of anything and we intend to keep it that way.”

“I suspect that the implications are already flying on the internet,” the Commander said dryly, standing up. “That may work in our favor for once.” He shook his head. “Anyway, that wasn’t what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Then what?” She cocked her head.

“Another ally has been acquired,” he said. “I spoke with Miridian, and we’ve come to an agreement regarding a Nulorian alliance.”

“Excellent.” More allies were only a good thing. “I suppose at some point Miridian will want to speak to me. Likely to work something out with AEGIS and coordinate with the defectors.”

“Not exactly,” the Commander pursed his lips. “Miridian is…very radical in his intentions, and won’t agree to the Vitakara client state you’re building. He’s going to want to establish an independent Vitakara power, and keep Vitakar.”

“Unfortunate,” Saudia thought for a moment. “We can still work with that though.”
“Yes, and I do think all sides need to meet to sort this out,” the Commander agreed. “Although that’s only one of the issues Miridian brings. He is, let us say, prejudiced against certain races of Vitakara. I managed to talk him out of going through with his genocidal plans, but I wouldn’t put a significant amount of trust that he won’t try a loophole.”

“I am not liking the sound of this ally,” Saudia pointed. “He sounds like a liability.”

“He is, but he is one more useful on our side than against us,” the Commander stated. “The Nulorian aren’t going to disappear, and the only way we can temper them is if they’re on our side and Miridian has reason to hold back. They’re not stupid, which is why I want them working with us.”

“This is certainly going to be more difficult to coordinate in secret,” Saudia said after a few minutes. “We have the Andromedons, and now the Sar’Manda and Nulorian. I’m unsure how long it will last before the Collective realizes what is happening.”

“We’ll have to make sure by that point at least Earth is secure,” the Commander said. “It can be done, but we’ll just have to be careful and quiet. Which brings me to the next topic – what comes afterwards in the event we win.”

Saudia raised an eyebrow and sat down in one of the nearby chairs, not feeling an urge to stand for the sake of it. “I think we should focus on winning before deciding what happens next. What happens afterwards I hope is a long stretch of unbroken peace. A united Humanity could accomplish so much.”

“I would like that as well,” the Commander said, taking a seat opposite her. “But unfortunately, we’re not going to get it.”

She directed her full attention to him. He seemed completely serious, and it sounded like he’d been keeping something important from her. “Explain.”

The Commander laced his fingers together and hesitated briefly before speaking, getting his thoughts in order. “Some time ago we made contact with another alien. One whose had agents on this planet for some time, passively observing and waiting.”

“Who and what? And how extensively have these agents penetrated ADVENT?”

“I can’t answer that, but I doubt all that many anymore. There isn’t a need,” the Commander said, his lips curling up. “You’ll be interested to know that your Chronicler is the most senior agent, and I doubt you’d even realized he’d been gone.”

That shocked her. She looked at the Commander in disbelief. “The Chronicler is an agent of an alien…how…?”

“The Chronicler is much older than you think,” the Commander said. “As for why he stayed with EXALT for so long, I can’t say. Maybe you should ask him. But the alien he works for is T’Leth, from a species of aliens called the Sovereign Ones. And he is currently on Earth – more precisely in the deep ocean.”

Saudia pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to figure out how best to process this new information. The Commander wouldn’t make up a story like this, especially not now. “And what does this T’Leth want with us. What has it told you?”

“He would have preferred to keep his involvement more of a secret,” the Commander said. “But I
said it was best if the leadership of our species was aware of the true situation. T'Leth is not interested in us, per-se. But for now we have a mutual agreement to assist each other. As for what he said...our time of peace will likely be short."

The Commander leaned back. "There are only a few Sovereign Ones in existence. T'Leth says there are under ten in this galaxy, but they are in constant conflict with each other for ultimate galactic supremacy. Many of them design, enhance, and utilize proxy species to wage these wars in the galaxy; a shadow conflict played between the Sovereigns."

"And we’re T'Leth’s," Saudia said slowly.

"Not currently," the Commander said. "T'Leth...does not approve of using proxies in place of direct action. However, I suspect he would request our assistance in hunting down his Sovereign brethren. If he wanted to, the hard truth is that we couldn’t stop him. We’re relying solely on his word here that he has no interest in such. So far he has held up his word."

"A comfort, knowing that there is yet another ancient powerful alien that could control us, and somehow is more dangerous than the Ethereals," Saudia sighed. "It never ends. We’re in a galaxy with more of these things, miniature-deities that pit species like ours against each other, have I got that right?"

"With one caveat," the Commander clarified. "There is another faction in play. The Ethereals called them the Synthesized, T'Leth calls them Replicators. Whatever their name, they’re a hybrid machine race that invades the galaxy after a certain period of time and destroy the proxy species and attempt to hunt down the remaining Sovereigns. It usually doesn’t work, and they go into hiding until these machines leave. And the cycle starts again."

"And they don’t consider working together against these Synthesized?" Saudia questioned. "It appears this has been going on for a while."

"Of course not, that would mean they have to trust each other," the Commander gave a humorless smile. "And from what I’ve learned of Sovereign Ones, they will betray any Sovereign foolish enough to consider them an ally or friend. Exceptions exist, but they are rare and appear to end up dead. The Synthesized they consider less of a threat than each other, since they don’t die in these purges. Only their tools die, and tools can be replaced."

"Short-sighted egomaniacs," Saudia muttered. "Of course they would think themselves beyond making mistakes."

"Indeed," the Commander poured himself some water. He tilted the pitcher to her, and she waved him off. "I suspect that the Synthesized are perhaps more involved than any of the Sovereigns think. Assuming we’re dealing with an artificial intelligence here, or any kind of extra-galactic entity, I don’t think it would be out of the question to think about how to manipulate these cycles. Each one, they grow stronger. That is not an accident."

"And yet you would think at least one Sovereign would realize this," Saudia said. "But apparently not."

"Which means we’re stuck in a repeating cycle, one where we don’t have the whole picture," the Commander said. "But the interesting thing is that there can be exceptions. The Ethereals were one, and while the Collective is in fact backed by a Sovereign, both T'Leth and I wonder how far the Imperator trusts it. The objective truth, Saudia, is that in the event that we emerge victorious, we need to have a plan for what comes next. What Humanity will do in this cycle. Neither of us want to become a proxy or pawn in a pointless war between Sovereigns, but we may not have a choice."
And unlike the Sovereigns, when the Synthesized come, I want to be strong enough to fight back and win.


“And I think we have an opportunity to change things,” the Commander said, drinking from his glass thoughtfully. “Perhaps this will change when we learn more about the galaxy, but we’re a young species. One who will soon begin dedicated space travel. I suspect that galactic communities may already exist, but right now, no one knows about us. We’re an unknown variable that no one has accounted for. We have one chance to claim this advantage – and whether that will change anything or not, I can’t say, but we should try. But to do that, we need to have a clear vision for what ADVENT and Humanity will do when we enter this ongoing conflict.”

“The more prudent question is what T’Leth will think,” Saudia pointed out. “If he decides he doesn’t like it…what can we do?”

“Nothing…for now,” the Commander set his glass on the table, looking aimlessly into space as he considered. “We have to be careful how much we push and take from T’Leth. He has access and knowledge to technology and secrets we should claim and exploit. Done well, we could become a Sovereign-level power in our own right. But it needs to be slow; subtle. I genuinely believe that T’Leth is not interested in directly controlling us – but he expects an ally. He wants to kill the remainder of the Sovereigns who live in this galaxy. He will want to drag us into a conflict.”

“But then we become sucked into this pointless war and probably die when the Synthesized arrive,” Saudia finished. “A limited number of outcomes, none of which are promising.”

“Unless we can convince T’Leth that the Sovereigns are not his largest concern,” the Commander added. “Or that he’s better off ignoring his enemies, instead of attempting to kill them. T’Leth is…brilliant in ways, that’s clear from the technology he creates. But I think even a Sovereign could learn some things about how to emerge the winner of a galactic war without necessarily taking part in it.”

“All of the Sovereigns are enemies of each other, yes?” She suspected they both had a similar line of thought here.

“So T’Leth says. Alliances are brief and tense at best.”

“Which means they are likely to war among themselves eventually,” Saudia continued. “If they weaken themselves, then that would leave a more neutral party in the stronger position.”

“I see we have the same idea,” the Commander said. “Now we just need to convince T’Leth that there may be more benefit to letting the Sovereigns fight it out instead of jumping right into the middle of it. Assuming, of course, that the Sovereigns like to engage in open warfare. They may prefer a more clandestine approach.”

Saudia tapped a finger on the armrest, thinking. “T’Leth wants to talk to me, I think.”

“Yes, eventually,” the Commander answered. “But before that happens, you should know the full situation. Now you do. I would advise that you only keep this to the highest levels of ADVENT. T’Leth does not want his existence being public knowledge, nor do I think the majority of Humanity would react well to knowing the truth.”

“On that we agree,” she nodded. “I’ll take your advice…it appears that there is a lot to discuss about the future of ADVENT and our species.”
“Do what you need to,” the Commander said, as they both stood. “And when you’re ready, T’Leth will be ready to talk to you.”

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*Patricia’s Quarters – The Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective*

2/21/2017 – 2:09 A.M.

The world faded around Patricia as she telepathically reached out with her mind. The construction of the dreamscape wasn’t important, not now. Something simple would work; something that would quickly make the Commander realize what was going on. Or at least make him aware of the situation.

She wasn’t intending to trick him. She doubted that she could fool him even if she wanted too, not to mention it would be even more difficult that it already was.

If she hadn’t known how to find the Commander’s psionic signature, or even the general area of where Earth was, this would have been impossible. As it was, she fortunately had a few hints to help her. XCOM was all concentrated together, in a remote location, and the amount of psionic power contained made it easy to narrow down the few hundred or so individuals who lived there, and the psions.

Except there was a problem.

The area where XCOM should be was dark. That was wrong. There should be something there. They couldn’t have just disappeared, and the Commander wouldn’t have given up the Praesidium just because she’d been captured. Frowning in her mind’s eye, she penetrated a little deeper and ran straight into a wall of psionic defenses.

Without warning, she was thrown into the prepared dreamscape.

She stood in a white expanse; there was nothing existing within or around it. Nothing and no one. An endless barren expanse where light came from everywhere and nowhere. She glanced upward and telepathically tugged on some of the variables. It was a bit brighter than she wanted, and the light consequently dimmed slightly as it bent to her will. So, she still had some control. Odd.

What was happening?

“What are you?”

The voice was deep and bellowing; echoing in her mind long after the words faded. It came from no source and everywhere, like a god speaking from above. The dreamscape suddenly shifted, and her mind strained as something else began to take control. Despite her attempts to retain the shape the presence easily dismantled her weak efforts to dissuade it.

The light dissipated and the world around her turned watery; a deep impenetrable blue. She was now in a watery prison, and her gut clenched in fear as she began piecing together the implications. The darkness became more complete, and a form began materializing before her eyes; a massive creature that towered over her; the full size hidden in the shadow with the only light being that which it cast from the six glowing blue eyes that opened.

“Where are they?” She demanded, steadying her own mental defenses in preparation for a direct attack. “What have you done with them?”
“With whom?” The air shifted. “You are a Human. You should not have found this place or attempted to breach it. What are you?”

“Someone who needs to talk to the Commander,” Patricia said. “You know who he is.”

“Ah…” Patricia only had a brief second before she was assaulted with a telepathic attack beyond any she had experienced before. It hit her mind in all places, striking all her known weaknesses. Her mental defenses faltered and weakened, but held firm even as she was driven to her knees.

“You are the telepath…Patricia Trask.”

“And you are T’Leth,” Patricia gritted her teeth as she willed herself to stand. “And it seems like the Imperator was right.”

The Sovereign One seemed amused at that. “The Imperator does not and will never know my mind. Tell me, Human, what he was right about?”

“You’ve taken control of XCOM,” she said. “The Commander. All of them. Soon Humanity.”

“The Commander and I have come to a mutual agreement,” T’Leth said. “One which includes the elimination of the Imperator and his Collective. Our goals are aligned, and Humanity will assist me in removing their threat and bringing the final end of Mosrimor and the Bringer. You would do well to remove yourself from his influence, Human. There will be no mercy given to the compromised.”

“And leave you to influence my species? I don’t think so,” Patricia said flatly.

“I have little interest in controlling your species,” T’Leth sounded almost more irritated than defensive. “As we have said – our goals are aligned. I have needed none in my mission so far, and I do not need the Humans. Yet they are helpful, so I will assist them, and they me.”

“Then prove it – leave.” She said. “If you’re different and don’t need us, then go and prey upon a different species.”

“I would tell your Imperator to do the same, Human. The Commander made an agreement with me,” T’Leth growled, his voice shaking the watery tomb she inhabited. “I have no intentions of leaving.”

She felt her lip curl up. “Then you lie. You have no intention of leaving us because we’re more useful with you than against you. You don’t want to give us up now.”

“The Imperator has an interest in my death, as does his puppeteer,” T’Leth said. “I have no intention of leaving based upon the insistence of an insignificant Human. You are nothing. You mean nothing. I have no need to use XCOM or ADVENT because they are already serving my goals. To do more would be pointless and self-destructive.”

“I want to hear it from the Commander,” she crossed her arms. “I’d be a fool to trust you.”

“Then allow me to see your mind.”

“No.”

“Then I will not allow you to breach the defenses,” the voice rumbled. “I know who you are; a hero who has seemingly been corrupted. I have an interest in preserving XCOM as they are, and you are compromised. I would be a fool to trust your intentions blindly.”
“Maybe you should let the Commander decide for himself,” she said.

“The Commander has more important concerns than dealing with a compromised soldier,” T’Leth stated. “You are a distraction. You know the Commander. You know who he is, and he has an inflated sense of how much he matters – going so far as to dictate terms to me for our alliance. I will not entertain your presence any longer, Human. You must decide between my word or that of the Imperator.”

“If you really wanted to convince me,” she said slowly. “You should have let me talk to him.”

“You invade from the presence of the one who seeks my death,” was the answer. “If you wanted to convince me, perhaps you should have returned when you had the chance. Do not hide like a coward. Return to XCOM if you want your answers, for I will not risk giving you them here.”

Patricia severed the connection and the world came back to her in a rush and she lurched forward, catching herself on the cold floor. Her heart beat wildly, sweat coated her body and the air felt warm.

This was really, really bad.

Even if T’Leth was, by some unlikely miracle, telling the truth, he’d openly said it was only because their interests aligned.

When that changed...

There was no changing the hard and uncompromising truth that now faced her.

XCOM was under the control, or at the mercy of, a Sovereign One. And by extension, ADVENT.

And through ADVENT, Humanity itself.

Drained, she leaned back against the cold wall, wondering at what she could possibly do, now that she knew the truth. None of them were good, and the number was dwindling. Yet she had no choice. Standing on the sidelines was no longer an option.

A choice had to be made. And it would be soon.

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Quarters, the Prism – Classified Location

2/18/2017 – 8:09 P.M.

Yang set her swords against the wall and began taking off her armor. Training had been going on for most of the day, and she was sufficiently exhausted. Physically she felt she was ready for the Trial; her control of psionics was only getting more precise, and the genetic modification had elevated her beyond any normal Human or alien.

Mentally, she was still not sure what exactly to expect.

If the Bringer was somehow connected to the planet, she was going to be in for a harrowing time.

At least she was getting better at defending her mind. That had quickly become the most difficult part of preparation. The physical challenges she could deal with now, and those were nearly breaks to her compared to a telepath penetrating her mind over and over. But each time she was holding them off a little longer.
She’d get there. It would just take time and effort.

The Prism had become her home now, and it mostly consisted of just her and the Battlemaster most days, at least when he wasn’t conducting operations on Earth. He’d kept her appraised of the developments as well when he returned each night. She definitely liked this place better than the Temple Ship, mostly because she didn’t have to walk around knowing the Imperator was observing her every move.

The people there she didn’t completely know what to make of, or really trust. Patricia was still being evasive over what she was actually doing there to the point Yang wondered if she was just getting as much information as possible before bailing. It would serve the Imperator right if that was the case, considering what a monumental risk it was keeping her around.

Not her problem though, not anymore. The Imperator didn’t have her trust anymore. The only ones she trusted were the ones who’d fought with her through Paradise, who subsequently weren’t in favor of keeping that place still operating. Much as she wished the Battlemaster had decided to just reject the Imperator’s authority on the situation and kill the creatures on board, she knew why he hadn’t.

Paradise would screw over the Imperator someday, and hopefully she’d be alive to see it.

That still made her furious.

*Use it.*

Not now, training was over.

But it was good to have plenty of sources of fury to draw from. It helped. It was cathartic.

She showered and dressed in more comfortable clothes, deciding to get a little more insight into her Ethereal commander. Particularly in a subject she felt was somewhat important for all of the Ethereals, but no one had openly asked.

“Anything new?” She greeted as the Battlemaster walked into the open room which consisted of an interesting mix of kitchen, living room, and armory, all overlooking the main Prism chamber. She grabbed some cereal which she assumed was imported directly from Earth – or made with a really good synthesizer - and sat down on the nearest couch.

“No substantial developments, offensives are being refined,” he answered, setting his own weapon on the designated stand. “The outbreak has begun in earnest in China. Within weeks we will strike. ADVENT has already pledged support to contain the outbreak. I expect China will capitulate to them when the invasion commences.”

A pause followed. “Considering Isomnum will be involved, the timeline of capitulation has been accelerated.”

Yang shivered and the anger built up again at the thought of that thing being given this much authority. “I don’t know why you let him take over so easily.”

“Because I pick my battles, and Isomnum knows that if he becomes a problem to the overall strategy and my plans, I will remove him from his position,” the Battlemaster said emotionlessly, turning to the window. “The Imperator insisted on this order. For now I will follow it. Should he prove a poor choice, I will remove him.”

Yang snorted. “We both know he’s a poor choice. What’s your actual reason.”
“Because Isomnum has made an impression on ADVENT and XCOM,” he continued. “His personal involvement means he will want to show how superior he is to me. That he is more effective. So he will be directly involved, and thus, a target. Isomnum is a detriment to the war effort, and I expect him to be killed by the Humans. If he is so insistent on his superiority, he will operate with a limited garrison of mechanical forces and his own soldiers.”

Yang blinked. “You’re trying to get him killed?”

“No.” The voice was still neutral. “But I expect it to happen, and he is not worth the effort to stop his walk to his death. He is one of the relics of my kind, one who underestimates aliens. I have little patience for tolerating this idiocy any longer, even if the Imperator insists upon it. Nebulan has already compromised the South American operations, and the Zararch have had to take direct action to salvage her mission. The success or failure of the Chinese invasion is irrelevant at this point. It will be claimed by Isomnum, or myself eventually.”

She could understand why, even if she had wanted to lead the invasion against her former homeland. “So then what happens if he wins?”

“Then we take the land and adjust our strategy accordingly.” The answer was immediate. “But ultimately, China is a distraction that will unfortunately claim the life of Isomnum in time. Our work elsewhere is what will complete this invasion once and for all.”

“And the SAS?”

“They will play their part,” the Battlemaster turned to walk to another stand and unclipped the cape. “The SAS will be suitable to distract ADVENT in Africa and tie up additional resources. If the SAS fall, they completed their part and cost ADVENT time, resources, and soldiers. If they succeed, they’ve caused significant damage and can advance forward. Macula has done well in his task.”

Yang ate in silence for a short time while the Battlemaster made some food for himself, and sat on his own massive chair. The entire place had been built for someone his size, and aside from the furniture and equipment made specifically for a Human, she felt sometimes like she was living in the house of a giant.

The Battlemaster never took off his armor either it seemed. Even now he had only removed the helmet, which was another reminder that the Battlemaster was, ultimately, an alien. Sometimes it was easy to imagine him as just a really big Human with an extra set of arms. The armor and helmet hid all other features, but with the helmet removed it definitely showed that Ethereals were alien.

It was…unique. Dark purple skin, glowing orange eyes, a surprisingly small mouth that didn’t seem to fit the elongated neck that also transitioned into a head. It was strange anatomically, not at all as humanoid as it implied. Ethereals weren’t an especially intimidating species on their own; their physiology evoked more curiosity and intrigue than fear or strength.

Maybe that was why all of them went to lengths to obscure their faces.

That would have been ironic if the original reason they liked helmets so much was because they weren’t scary enough on their own.

She cleared her throat, deciding to broach a different topic. “Mind if I ask a personal question, Battlemaster?”
He lowered his bowl of alien food she’d never bothered, or wanted, to ask what it actually was. “Speak.”

“What do you want?”

“What do you mean?”

“What is the purpose of all of this?” Yang gestured idly. “You aren’t a warlord or some kind of crusading warrior. You have to have some kind of goal other than just…” she paused, searching for the word. “Existing. Which appears to largely be what the Collective has been doing for a while. Existing. I think you want to do something with it, but what?”

The Battlemaster fixed his orange eyes on her. “The Ethereal Empire was destroyed by the Synthesized. They likely still exist in the galaxy or beyond it. I agreed to abandon the Empire with the understanding that when I awoke I would have a part in rebuilding our species and avenging them in a second war, this time armed with the knowledge of our previous conflict.”

“And that hasn’t turned out like you intended,” she nodded. “Not yet, at least.”

“The Imperator has become distracted with new goals and threats,” the Battlemaster said idly. “I have not. The Imperator will focus on the phantom threats of the galaxy, while I will focus on the ones I have seen and fought. I have little interest in the Sovereign Ones or their plans; known or unknown. They can be ignored or dealt with if they interfere. I lost my species and many, many good soldiers and friends to the abominations of flesh and metal. Their deaths will not be in vain, nor will I abandon my mission simply because the Imperator forgot what he is fighting for.”

“That sounds good…” Yang began slowly. “But the Imperator is still in charge, if I remember.”

“And once Earth is taken, his role will need to be evaluated,” the Battlemaster responded. “He has become too distracted over what is important, and what does not matter. He is young. A child by our standards; thrown into a war from the moment of his birth and raised to believe he was superior. Genetically, he is. Mentally, he does not, and never will, comprehend what we lost against the Synthesized.”

The Battlemaster rested a hand on top of the scarred helmet, voice melancholy. “We were not perfect, we were flawed, but what existed was good. We existed in harmony with other aliens even if we mistakenly believed ourselves their better. Over time we would have changed; more like Mortis would have emerged. But our chance to become better was stolen in the slaughter the hybrids brought. The Imperator never experienced the Empire and those who lived in it. I saw us at our height, I trained Battlemasters of my own and hundreds of other soldiers. And each one of them died in a bloody and unprovoked war. I cannot forget, and that is why I will continue to prepare for their return and I will either finish the war and avenge those who fell, or I will die, and my species will end and serve as a lesson to others until the end of time.”

The Battlemaster rarely spoke about his life or his past to her, or anyone most likely, and she realized that though it wasn’t always apparent, the Battlemaster was old. It was difficult to imagine what could happen in the span of a hundred years, let alone the minimum of a thousand years he’d lived. What was a long time to her was likely extremely short for him.

That long view of time was something she didn’t know if she’d be able to get used to.

But at times she also wondered if it was a disadvantage, especially in warfare. Humans especially planned short-term, and adapted quickly. ADVENT and XCOM especially were moving and adapting in the span of months, while the Collective was, normally, much slower. Originally she’d
wondered if it was incompetence or inexperience, but maybe it was just because Ethereals were bad in planning in the short term.

But they were getting better, if the Battlemaster was any indication.

It maybe just took them a bit longer.

“Do you think the Imperator will change his mind?” She asked.

“No.”

An abrupt answer. “Why?”

“Because he continues to allow the Creator free reign and intends to proceed with his plan for the Bringer,” the Battlemaster said simply. “He has made up his mind. He sees a greater threat, and he will work to defeat it. He has the support of others who share his view; he will not be persuaded that he is incorrect.”

Yang shifted until she was sitting cross-legged. “What do you think he wants?”

“To become one of them.”

“Become what?” She questioned. “A Sovereign?”

“Yes.” The tone was accepting, not judging. “He considers himself benevolent, and to aliens he is. He lacks the destructive prejudices my species had, but now knows there is a greater conflict in this galaxy. One he wants to become a player of. He is intelligent, immortal, and powerful. More relevant, he believes that he is right. He will see a galaxy that he can liberate from the tyranny of these Sovereign Ones – but one which ultimately owes their salvation to him. He will continue the cycles should he win, but it will not be Sovereign Ones who perpetuate them. Others will rise to challenge him, perhaps the Synthesized will return, but he will not succeed. He will just become the thing he wants to destroy; a god who uses whatever is in his power to ensure he wins.”

It was…unsettling to her that he sounded almost defeated as he spoke. Resigned to what the Imperator would do, or could do. “Have you actually explained it like that to him?”

“Not in that way, no,” he admitted. “Nor do I think he would accept that. He would argue that his reasons are justified, and perhaps they are. But he believes he can change the cycles from the inside, when I see the only possible way to do the same is to avoid them altogether.”

“I think you should at least try,” Yang said, feeling bold enough to advise the massive alien. “You respected him, at least you did. I’m pretty sure he respects you still. Sometimes it helps if they get yelled at by someone to make them actually think about what they’re doing. You clearly don’t like the direction he is going, and instead of accepting it passively—”

“Yang.” He cut her off, raising a gauntleted hand. “I appreciate your suggestion. Your concern is…good; it is not something I hear normally. But at the same time, I don’t think you understand how the Imperator thinks. I’ve considered doing what you said many times, but I…feel debate where both sides have already made up their minds is simply a waste of time. This is not a topic where one side is objectively wrong, and both of us can defend our points and feel we are correct.”

Yang grimaced, but she could see that point. “Then you have reached an impasse. Differences like this will become irreconcilable over time.”

“They will,” he said bluntly. “I know that.”
“And what will you do?”

“I don’t know.” It was uncomfortable how flatly he said that. “I suppose that will be decided when Earth is…resolved. Our raised differences can be settled after the immediate issue is resolved and Humanity properly integrated. But what happens after that, I cannot say.”

There was some silence after that, both of them thinking on what the future beyond the war would entail. It was now a lot more vague and unknown than before, something Yang hadn’t really expected. She knew she’d likely side with the Battlemaster no matter what happened, but where that would lead…

A mystery. Not a thrilling or exciting one either.

“I guess we should enjoy the time before then while it lasts,” she said, brushing her hair back. “At least war is simple. We know who the opponents are.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “In this war, we do.”

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Throne Room of the Imperator – Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

2/22/2017 – 9:00 P.M.

Ethereal and Human once more stood in the darkened room, one sitting on an elevated throne, while the other stood below and waited. Patricia’s time was coming up, and she had a feeling that this would be it. The Imperator had not said what he was going to speak to her about. Her attempt to contact the Commander had revealed the truth, and the only alternative was to return to the Praesidium itself.

A fool’s errand. It was clear it was too late.

“You are ready, I believe,” the Imperator finally said, not standing. “You understand that I am not your enemy. You know the true threat this galaxy faces, and our goals are similar. As such you should be informed of certain things that have been done in secret, and learn knowledge which very few possess.”

“You’re confident,” she noted, crossing her arms. “You wouldn’t share this if you didn’t think I would join you.”

“I have little reason to believe you will choose otherwise,” he said evenly. “I have not lied to you. We’ve conversed and learned enough of each other to know where we stand. I now trust you enough, and yes, this comes with my own expectations. But as always, the decision of how to use this information is up to you.”

“Well,” Patricia motioned to him. “Don’t leave me in suspense.”

The Imperator stood, and descended down the steps of the throne, and even when he reached the bottom he towered over her as usual. At this point, she was used to it. “What role do you think I have planned for you, should you join me?”

Patricia considered, thinking to all their conversations and how they interacted. It didn’t seem especially complicated. “A representative; an intermediary between yourself and the rest of the Collective. Perhaps to other Ethereals. You wouldn’t invest this much in a non-Ethereal if you wanted them in just a command or analytical position.”
He emanated approval, and visibly nodded. “Nearly, Patricia Trask. I indeed would want you to speak with my authority, but that – “ he opened the palm of one of his hands. “That is simply not good enough for me. No one can act simply as a voice. It must be more than that. That which represents me must represent my will and power. Nothing less can suffice.”

“And we both know that’s impossible,” Patricia answered, raising an eyebrow. Knowing the Imperator, this was something he had likely developed an answer to. “Your will is something I can only repeat, my power is limited by my species.”

“Power, Patricia, does not equate to scale,” the Imperator stated, beginning to pace, keeping the triangular helmet focused on her eyes. “I’ve never considered it such. Simply scale can be wasted. Abused. It often lacks focus; discipline. Power, Patricia, is the usage of such. Knowledge and skill over a discipline, be it psionics or something else, equal true power. That can be conveyed.”

“How?”

“Our species is limited by our numbers,” the Imperator said, stopping and reaching for his lower wrist which had several buttons on it. “We cannot be everywhere, we cannot do everything. The Sovereign Ones understand this and instead work through their own agents and proxies. I wanted to develop this technique for our own species. Each Ethereal having an individual which represented their skill and power. This was begun as the Avatar Project.”

Ominous in a way, implied possession was not something Patricia was particularly endeared to. “I’ve heard something of this before. Only the name though. So it would involve possession of ‘Avatars’ for you to control without risk to yourselves?”

“No. I have told you before, I have little interest in unthinking puppets or proxies,” he pressed a button on his wrist and a hologram appeared before her. It showed a humanoid, likely a male, standing still in a black skinsuit which covered almost all exposed flesh. The face was obscured by a mask which was clouded a dark purple, and reminded her of a scuba mask. It almost appeared that the mask was grafted on, or attached to implants in the bald head itself.

“The Avatar Project had far grander ambitions than remote control,” the Imperator continued. “It would allow the two who were linked to become a singular power; each capable of drawing on the memories, experience, skills, and knowledge of each other, in addition to what they faced before them in the present. It would allow each to draw upon the raw power within them, elevating their own beyond their original limits. An Avatar would be the extension of an Ethereal; one who can truly embody and utilize the power we wield.”

“So why haven’t there been Avatars,” Patricia asked. “We definitely haven’t fought any before.”

“Because the project ran into a distinct lack of viable candidates,” the Imperator explained, his voice having a tinge of dryness. “The Sectoids initially showed progress, but they lack emotion. They lack the proper mindset to properly merge with us. We are not soulless automatons, nor did any of us feel enthused at the idea of a Sectoid Avatar – one which could never fully understand us, regardless of upbringing or genetic engineering.”

A hand waved dismissively. The tone reflected this. “The Vitakara and Andromedons lacked the gift. It could not be artificially induced, and the means by which the Bringer achieves this are…not able to be replicated. The project was halted and only considered intermittently by Revelean, who considered the theory sound. I had begun exploring other possible options, and then the solution appeared.”

“Humanity has the capability,” Patricia finished. “We were the missing link.”
“Exactly,” the emphasized word reverberated in her ears. “Humanity has just as much psionic potential as the Sectoids, but they are also capable of connection, emotion, ambition, and skill. Their capabilities for the Avatar Project could not be ignored, and I immediately restarted the project. And now the Avatar Project has succeeded. The theory has been proven and demonstrated by Revelean.”

All the pieces clicked into place for Patricia at once. “You planned for all of this. All of the Humans chosen by Ethereals. All of them to be Avatars.”

“Candidates, yes,” the Imperator corrected. “I knew that it was not a matter of if the Project could be completed, but when. So I have prepared accordingly. But they will not be simple Avatars, as the name crudely implies. They will be more. They will be Harbingers of the Ethereal Collective, of our power and will. Our voice and sword; a being who can earn and wield the power an Ethereal holds.”

It was leading up to a point. “You want me to be your…Harbinger.”

The Imperator did not waste time with pretense. “Correct. We both understand the threat the Sovereign Ones pose. We both see the potential and place Humanity can achieve in the galaxy. You are a skilled psion capable of mastering the power I can command – that which can be yours. You can lead your species into an era that few others could even comprehend. Together, Patricia Trask, we will ensure that the hold the Sovereign Ones hold over this galaxy is shattered.”

She was silent for a few moments. “I need to make this decision now?”

“Not yet, there is one more thing you must know,” the Imperator stopped his pacing, and faced her directly. “When the Bringer has been utilized and remains under control, Mosrimor and T‘Leth have been killed, Humanity has taken their rightful place within the Collective, and the traitors within our ranks exposed and purged, we will build and prepare for war against the inner galaxy. They have a head start, they are more powerful, they control more, and I do not want to use the Bringer more than necessary.”

“I don’t think anyone does,” Patricia pursed her lips. “That said, do you think that all the Ethereals – Harbingers included – would be enough to defeat the remainder of the Sovereign Ones?”

“I do not,” the Imperator said, making the hologram of the preliminary Avatar disappear. “So we will need to find more.”

“I assume you’re cloning them?” She wouldn’t have been surprised.

“At this moment the Collective has access to one Imperial-grade cloning chamber, and the materials to create more are elusive,” the Imperator said, the hologram of a barren star system appearing. “It is under tight control; none can stumble upon it accidentally. No Sovereign knows about it, and within twenty years a new Imperator-class Ethereal will be born.”

“Why just one cloning chamber?” Patricia asked. “If these were as difficult to produce as you said, why didn’t you just install more?”

“Because space was limited, as was power,” the Imperator said. “We needed to rest for hundreds of thousands of years. Nothing could be a drain on life support, and if we were found and murdered, it was imperative that those who carried it out believe that the Ethereals were killed forever.”

The implication was not lost on her. “But that isn’t the only one.”

“No,” the room lit up and displayed the known galaxy, with various worlds lightened in purple. “I
am not blind or lack the foresight to preserve my species. This was not the only group of Ethereals I intended to survive the war, though it was the primary one. In the latter days of the War I ordered the construction of Imperial cloning farms on worlds only capable of being accessed by FTL travel.”

He walked through the bright starfield as he continued. “There were alien survivors, I utilized them to build these stations along with thousands of automated construction. No other Ethereal knew of my plans or actions. Even those I recruited to go into stasis believe they were the last of their species.” He turned to her. “But the truth, Patricia Trask, is that even if I were to die – if all the Ethereals known were to die – my species is far from gone.”

Patricia counted at least twelve highlighted systems. “The Cloning Farms are expansive and isolated,” the Imperator continued. “Built in the shadows of black holes, dying stars and barren moons. They are intermixed with developing garden planets and water worlds. Each holds ten thousand Imperator-class Ethereals who were grown while we slept. When they reached maturity, their pods turned to stasis chambers. They sleep across the galaxy.”

“How wait?” Patricia demanded. “This is…it would have the power to dominate anyone; even a few Imperators would be enough to challenge a Sovereign One.”

“I would agree, were they not established in enemy territory,” the Imperator reminded her, looking to the highlighted system. “They rest within the grasp of Sovereigns and their proxies; with their locations scattered. And when they awaken, they will be noticed. They will need to be trained. Taught. They must learn the truth of this galaxy, and their role within it. Perhaps they would be enough to challenge a Sovereign on their own, but that is a chance that cannot be taken. Thus they will stay asleep for now.”

“Until you come,” she breathed.

“No, because if something happened to me, they wouldn’t sleep forever,” the Imperator clarified, raising a hand. “The first of the Ethereals would emerge one thousand years after we awoke. Then the next would awaken after another thousand. Redundancy in the event of catastrophe; a reason to believe the Ethereals will never truly be gone.”

He paused. “I suspect not all of them will survive; this is a long period of time. But enough will; enough will endure to continue my species. And that was the original, secret, plan, Patricia Trask. When we established a power base and a suitable force, we would march towards the first of these strongholds and multiply the power of our army ten thousandfold. But the Sovereign Ones changed that. I will not willingly lead them to an army they would use to conquer the galaxy. So they must be removed before I continue.”

“You cannot go to them now,” Patricia realized. “Mosrimor would interfere.”

“He cannot be allowed to know the truth, nor can the Bringer, even as restrained as he is,” the Imperator confirmed. “We both know that he cannot fully control me. Perhaps he is more powerful; hidden, but he rests assured that in a singular duel I would lose. More Ethereals of my power…he would be threatened. This cannot be kept a secret from him; such is impossible. So he would act. I will not risk it until he has been dealt with. When all the Sovereigns who are aware of us are dealt with.”

The light glittered off the towering form of the Imperator as he turned back to her. “That is what will happen afterwards. The resurgent Collective will liberate my sleeping brethren and with each stronghold we claim, the Sovereign Ones will grow more fearful. Combined with the leadership of Humanity, the genetic mastery of the Sectoids, the fleets of the Andromedons, the expertise and
diverse skill of the Vitakara, and the legions of Mutons, we will break the cycle perpetuated by the
Sovereign Ones.”

A pause. A heartbeat. “That is what I intend to make into reality, Patricia Trask. That is what I will
bring to this galaxy. That is why I need your help.”

He lowered himself to one knee, and extended a hand to her. “You know the stakes. You know the
truth. You know everything now. The time has come to choose, Patricia Trask. Join me, for the
good of your species, the galaxy, and yourself.”

He was right. There were no more excuses. She knew everything that mattered. What she still
believed she did not know was simply her deluding herself.

She did a psionic check on the Imperator, and unsurprisingly he was not lying. He might not know
everything, but he clearly believed everything he had said to her.

He still had not lied to her, even after all this time.

It was a choice between loyalty to her friends and species, or to a larger galaxy. A choice of what
really mattered to her. She could not choose both, no matter how much she wished it were
otherwise. She was going to regret what she would lose no matter what happened; the knowledge
of what she lost forever tormenting her.

A hero or traitor; a savior or coward; a martyr or pariah.

A Harbinger.

A soldier.

A Human.

Something more.

Yet she knew herself; she’d learned important things; things she would never be able to ignore.

But she was still Human. She had friends, people she loved and cared for. That couldn’t be
forgotten.

Nothing would be forgotten.

No matter what, she would remember the cost.

But in the end, the choice was clear enough to her. She knew who she was, and what she had to do.

Staring into the helmeted eyes of the Imperator, Patricia Trask made her decision.

She took the gauntleted hand which dwarfed her own. “I’ll do it,” she said, her voice calm and
collected. “I will join you.”
The thing that stood before him was not Human. It certainly looked Human, with flawless pale skin, expertly combed and lush black hair, glittering ice-blue eyes, and a full smile. The obvious irregularities were that it wore just a simple black skinsuit with a blade of some type strapped to the chest.

What gave it away was how it moved. It had a habit of changing gaits frequently, and each was of an immediate mechanical precision. It was like it was learning how to walk at times. It spoke in a voice which could only be described as dead. Toneless, flat, and even genderless, which had certainly been an unpleasant surprise when he’d introduced himself.

It didn’t help that he would occasionally – and near-perfectly – switch into various Human accents without warning.

Volk hated that.

Elena had similarly picked up on his alien nature as instantly as she’d figured out Asaru was a telepathic projection. And if anything, she was more disturbed by it. Volk knew perfectly well that “Nemo” as he called himself was not his original name, and found the idea that he was naming himself after the captain of the Nautilus odd, but it was the only thing he could think of.

There was no way this alien had chosen this name because of a movie about fish.

“The Collective is preparing to strike,” Nemo said in his dead voice, standing up straight as they walked in. “China is suffering an outbreak of smallpox, and once the optimum time has been reached, they will strike against them. This will draw ADVENT into the conflict fully.”

Volk grimaced. “I’d thought that the Collective wasn’t going to use bioweapons like that, or at least not against civilians.”

Nemo simply shrugged. “Isomnum and the Imperator have overruled the Battlemaster in this instance. I would put the blame on the illustrious Dread Lord rather than Asaru. Knowing what I have seen of your species and ADVENT, they will bring the situation under control. The Ethereals have a tendency to underestimate your species, something we will not make the same mistake of doing.”

It was somewhat flattering how…oddly high of an opinion Nemo had of Humanity, and conversely how much he didn’t care about the Ethereals. He’d flat out commended Volk for his initial warning that bringing Agent Gertrude back was a bad idea and stated his intention – with Asaru in the room – that he was not going to follow “Orders which hinder or are to the detriment of our goal”.

Volk wondered where this alien had been the entire time. Either he was a risk, and would explain why the Ethereals were hesitant to use him – or things were bad enough that they were bringing out all the stops to defeat ADVENT.

In the case of Nemo, both could very well be true.
“What is your plan?” Elena wasted no time, clearly wanting to get this done as quickly as possible.

“The Phantom Division – as well as you and your team – is now part of a Collective unit assigned to locate and eliminate strategic individuals in pursuit of the goals of the Ethereal Collective,” Nemo answered evenly, then tilted his head. “In simpler terms – we are infiltrators, saboteurs and assassins. We are given a list of targets, and we will kill them. Only individuals with direct ties to our mission will be targeted – no collateral damage against the civilian population. I know how you work, and we both agree that the dismantling of our actual enemy is more effective – preferably if they don’t even know it was us.”

Volk gave a single nod. “So, the same thing we had planned before things went down. I can get behind that. I think we were already given some preliminary targets—”

“Dismissed, the parameters have changed,” Nemo interrupted immediately. “Korea can be dealt with later. We have more immediate targets which will emerge when the conflict restarts.”

“What are they?” Elena demanded, walking towards the holotable which Nemo lit up.

“There are multiple military industrial plants within China,” Nemo stated. “Our initial deployment will be to sabotage them and render them unusable for China. Infrastructure in China is itself a very tempting target, and the more damage done, the less likely their resistance will be. That will be the first operation. Simple and straightforward.”

“Noted,” Volk said.

“Good, then we move onto the second phase,” Nemo brought up a holomap of Africa. “The Sovereign African States will soon be making their official debut, and we are expecting a quick and decisive response. There will likely be a domino effect of countries who will, and will not support them. Or even those who remain neutral.”

Nemo focused directly on Volk. “Those who are neutral or refuse to join the SAS are going to be targeted, and pinned on ADVENT. We will repeat this as necessary to drive countries towards the SAS and Collective. We will end with the tragic assassination of Helsa Betos.”

“What?” Volk demanded. “When was that sanctioned? Betos is helping you. That is a promise you should not go back on because—”

“Betos is a naïve, if useful idiot whose purported usefulness is coming to an end,” Nemo interrupted coldly, lifting a hand. “No, this was not sanctioned by the Ethereals and I have placed her as a target on my own. The Ethereals are not fighting strategically, and I am not beholden to their own internal plans. Betos is more of a liability than an asset. Thus, she will be removed.”

“And what happens when Macula learns your plan?” Volk demanded. “You do realize that this essentially throws any promise the Ethereals make into the fire. None of us can trust anything they say anymore – or at least we trust them less than usual.”

“I did not make that promise, and I am not an Ethereal,” Nemo answered, unconcerned. “I am here to end this conflict. If that involves going back on previous promises, then that is not my concern. If you have an issue with my plan, then by all means inform Asaru or Macula. I do not necessarily care how Betos is removed, only that she is. This is judged to be the path which benefits the Collective the most.”

“You’d best hope that they won’t be annoyed with you trying this,” Volk said. “Because I’m not keeping this to myself. The Ethereals don’t seem to like it when people bypass them.”
“Then perhaps they should do a better job,” Nemo said, giving a chilling smile. “I do not fear the Ethereals. They are not infallible and make many mistakes. And the only way they will learn is to be challenged. So I will challenge them to do better than I can do. If they wish to dispose of me, then they can do so and will ultimately be defeated by their own hubris.”

Volk appraised him for a moment, then shook his head. “You’re either crazy or just don’t care anymore.”

“I am not supposed to exist,” the tone of Nemo became less dead…more muted. “As far as I am concerned, every moment I am alive is more than should be possible. If I die, then my role will be finished and I will not be alive to care what happens afterwards. But I suspect I will not die to an Ethereal, not when I am useful to them. And when I can do things they cannot or will not.”

He waved them forward. “Come. At minimum I want your own take on the current plan, even if you insist on informing the Ethereals of the finer details.”

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Yang’s Quarters - The Prism

2/27/2017 – 11:42 A.M.

Yang sheathed her swords and placed them back on the rack where she kept her weapons. At least today she’d kept them more for her own personal reassurance than out of any need. Patricia had continued helping develop her mental defenses, which while they wouldn’t be at the absurd level that she and other Ethereals had…they would probably be adequate.

What had been more interesting had been Patricia herself.

The woman had actually chosen a side.

“You can stop wondering what I’m going to be doing,” she’d told her. “I’m staying. I’m going to support the Imperator.”

Yang had been admittedly surprised. It didn’t seem an absurd reason to follow up with a question: “Why?”

Patricia…she had appraised Yang long and hard, lips pursed and eyes probing. “The Imperator told me some things,” she finally said. “And…what happened to XCOM is what I’d feared. I’d accomplish nothing returning now, which would only result in my capture or death.”

There were only a few possibilities that came to mind. “The Sovereign One on Earth.”

“Yes,” came the nod. “T’Leth.”

Patricia had seemed somewhat distracted as well; more listless and…sad…than before. Not surprising if she’d made the decision to turn traitor on XCOM. Yang didn’t really care about abandoning a species and government which had done nothing for her, but for Patricia it would have been different. She had friends; she’d respected her Commander, Yang was pretty sure she’d been involved with one of the XCOM soldiers as well.

He was going to be in for a surprise when he learned his girlfriend joined the enemy.

She did kind of feel bad for him, whoever he was.
It remained to be seen just what the results would be of Patricia fully joining them. She’d been part of the Internal Council of XCOM. She knew everything up until several months ago. Yang realized that there was an extreme amount of information that could be released to the world, as XCOM (and likely ADVENT) had been involved in some highly questionable stuff.

For all the good it would do. Yang was personally unsure if they’d even bother with trying that. No one was going to believe an XCOM soldier who had turned traitor. Psionics did unfortunately make it easy to simply state that someone was being mind controlled. The Imperator was known as the most powerful Ethereal in existence.

If anyone could break the mind of the most powerful Human psion in existence, it would be him.

Patricia could probably say anything and ADVENT would just deny it, or more likely, ‘refuse to acknowledge the words of a traitor’. She could say that XCOM was manipulating ADVENT from the shadows or that they were performing assassinations and operations to destabilize or infiltrate other nations to drive them to ADVENT and no one would believe her.

Because unfortunately, Yang suspected that Patricia hadn’t brought any actual evidence with her – which was perhaps the one thing ADVENT would listen to. As it stood, anything she said was suspect, for the word of a traitor was not to be trusted.

That being said, Yang would find it hilarious if the Oversight Division decided to investigate anyway and ended up bringing down the ADVENT leadership. That would be so deliciously ironic she would actually make sure that they were preserved whenever the Collective won. Anyone that dedicated deserved to live.

But were the Oversight Division, Peacekeepers, or ADVENT Intelligence going to investigate based on Patricia? Almost certainly not, and to be fair, she didn’t really fault them. It wasn’t as though the Collective was open and honest about what they were involved in. No one involved in Paradise was going to be punished, and Isomnum still existed, which was proof of the immunity the powerful in the Collective had.

But she would think about that more later. Her own trial on the Dead World was fast approaching, and while the unnerving feeling and terror about going to any place which had the presence of the Bringer hadn’t gone away, she felt she was strong enough. The Battlemaster believed she could do it.

So she knew she had the potential.

She’d spent time researching and talking with Cogitian about the Trial of the Battlemasters, and for the most part had learned close to nothing about what it entailed beyond that one had to go down to the planet, forge their weapons from the metals, and then leave. Deceptively simple, but had a dangerous enough reputation that only the strongest made an attempt.

It was...daunting...as she’d looked at the records of the dead Ethereals. Aliens who’d spent decades training and preparing, only to still fail. And she’d only been here for...not even a year. She was a fast learner, and fairly smart and dedicated. But that alone was probably not enough, at least not in those categories compared to an Ethereal.

But she did have one advantage – she had a pretty solid idea of what she would face. The Battlemaster candidates had seemed to focus on the wrong thing. They’d prepared for the physical, when almost everything indicated that the trial was of a mental nature. She knew the Bringer was somewhere on the planet, and she could prepare for that.
Or try, at least.

If she succeeded, she would be the first alien to complete a trial meant for Ethereals. She would take a place by the side of the Battlemaster as – if not his equal – the closest one could become. She would become one of the most dangerous Humans who could exist, as it was implied that this trial was also the result of the Battlemaster’s immunity to telepathy.

And if she failed, she would just die.

Fair enough.

But she did not intend to die.

Though admittedly, that’s what they all said.

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*Beijing – China*

2/24/2017 – 10:12 A.M.

As far as glorified photo ops went, this was by far one of the most unpleasant. Admittedly, there had been some pushback from her cabinet about her personally visiting the current epicenter of an epidemic, but there were good reasons she’d gone forward with the trip anyway. The first was obviously good PR; the people liked unity and solidarity, and a public showing of support with her physically going there, it would show that she was paying more than lip service.

Although the deployment of soldiers and medical personnel should have already done that.

Second, they knew what the disease was – and more importantly – that it was able to be vaccinated against. Theoretically she should have a high degree of immunity to infection, and even if she, by some unfortunate miracle, got infected, the disease typically only killed the sick and weak. She was in good physical shape, healthy, and vaccinated. She was sufficiently protected. Not to mention that she would, of course, be taking appropriate precautions with masks and hazard suits.

It was bulky and unwieldy, not to mention paranoid, but that was the compromise she’d reached with her cabinet.

Third, it was an opportunity to meet with Qin directly and coordinate and discuss the situation face to face. Those kinds of meetings were preferable to her, and he would be sure to inform her of the full extent of the situation. ADVENT itself had been careful in distributing information, largely reporting outbreak locations and travel advisories.

The numbers they were holding for now because they were still growing, and because they were growing uncomfortably large.

She didn’t think it would cause panic, especially because it was in China and travel to and from there had been suspended, but it certainly wouldn’t do any wonders for morale. Unfortunate that this had struck now, since morale was surprisingly at an all-time high under ADVENT. But things couldn’t stay the same forever.

The trip was still unpleasant. While she wasn’t a squeamish person – she doubted she would be able to function in her position if she was – seeing the effects of the disease as it ravaged the bodies of the infected was more visceral in person than even in the pictures she remembered seeing as a child which described the military applications of viral bioweapons.
Rashes which morphed into hundreds of bumps covered the entire skin of victims, making many of
them unrecognizable or in severe cases blinding them or causing further complications due to
where the rashes developed. Even the survivors would be scarred and marked for the rest of their
life, but already there had been many who’d simply just not made it.

There had been far too many small body bags from the single treatment center she’d visited.

“How many in the government are infected?” She asked Qin as they walked into one of the
medical research centers which was working on both a treatment and determining the best way to
predict and quarantine further outbreaks.

“I assume you mean important officials?” He asked with a sideways look. “Our government
employs many people. But only twenty individuals of note have been infected. They are currently
recovering and are expected to survive. We acted fast when this happened, and inoculated our staff
and military.”

“And how much has the military been affected?”

This time he didn’t look at her. “We’re looking at minimum several hundred thousand affected,
with more cases appearing every day. Vaccines are being administered as fast as possible, but
considering how long the disease has been allowed to propagate, I am unsure how effective it will
be. The good news is that there have been comparably few deaths, as most of our soldiers are in
decent health.”

“But that is still a blow,” she nodded. “And only going to get worse.”

“Which can sum up this entire situation,” Qin agreed. “It is going to get worse before it gets better.
What of your end, Chancellor? Have your countries encountered similar outbreaks?”

“Comparably few, and they’ve been mostly isolated,” Saudia said. “They still number in the
dozens, but we’ve been proactive on our end with vaccine distribution. We can’t rely on people
seeing what’s going on in the news or online. Door to door visits have been conducted in areas near
an outbreak. So far, it’s seemed to help contain the spread.”

“Much like what we are doing,” Qin confirmed as they rounded a corner. “Although the number of
individuals is…significantly larger than what you have to deal with. Although you have to deal
with the scientifically illiterate; the West is home to some interesting conspiracy theories.”

Saudia snorted. “Unfortunately. But it hasn’t been a significant problem. If those fools would
rather risk it, then we let them. However, their ignorance will not extend to others. The few idiots
who’ve demanded as such have shut up when Child Services began to intervene.” Saudia allowed a
smile. “But it has been useful, as they will now have special monitoring from Intelligence in case
they try and use the internet to ‘warn’ others about the smallpox vaccines.”

“I do not understand why you tolerate individuals such as those,” Qin shook his head. “Dangerous
misinformation is corrected by swift and decisive arrests. Ignorance in this age is little excuse.”

“Because first, we try not to play into the image of a stereotypical totalitarian,” Saudia answered
with some bleak amusement. “Arresting idiots has the unfortunate effect of spreading their
message. But more importantly, they still have their personal rights. Which include the right to
hold an opinion. So long as that stays to themselves, they can believe whatever they want. When it
affects others is where the line is drawn. A suitable compromise, I feel.”

“Indeed,” the two of them finally approached a window which had several teams of researchers
and scientists within. “We’re continuing to try and find an effective treatment. But progress is… slow. By the time something is developed, it’s estimated that the worst will have already passed and only the survivors will remain.”

“Even if that is the case,” Saudia said. “It will not be for nothing. We are back to base zero with smallpox. It will take decades to fully eradicate. Again. This will ensure that now there is a reliable treatment.”

“A long view of the outcome, I can respect such,” Qin nodded. “Yet that will not change the fact that my country will be significantly damaged because of it while others will no longer have to fear this disease. A sacrifice I would have not paid, in all honesty.”

She wouldn’t blame him for the resentment he had. Already there were millions of Chinese infected, and hundreds of additional cases by the hour. Soon the thousands who had already died would turn into millions. With a country the size of China, that was unfortunately inevitable, but there was no chance that China was going to emerge from this in good shape.

“It is unfortunate,” was all she said. “But we are doing what we can to assist.”

“Not by sheer altruism though,” he said grimly. “I suspect after this, there will be a call to join ADVENT from in and outside the government. You’ve certainly had your people be involved on the ground level. It isn’t just our soldiers and security they see; but also the ADVENT medics and soldiers. They will not forget that, nor will anyone in our government.”

“And you see the benefits of what we can provide,” she said, turning to him. “Humanity is more effective united than divided. Our species has an unfortunate tendency to isolate ourselves from each other and be selfish when their rivals are undergoing hardship. It does not need to be this way.”

“I am well aware of such, Chancellor,” Qin said, lifting a hand. “Very acutely. But let’s not delude ourselves in this situation. This is a political and PR move to assist us, not because you actually care about the people infected. The more conspiratorial would wonder if this was manufactured solely to encourage us to join you.”

“Come now,” Saudia sniffed. “We have zero reason to sabotage you in such a way, not to mention painting a clear and decisive target for the aliens, which will only result in more of our soldiers dying, resources expanded, and all to reclaim territory that was already in Human hands.”

“That is what some would say, Chancellor, not me,” Qin clarified. “The point is this: You play the game very well, Chancellor, in a way few can condemn you for. That makes you dangerous to me, and I am unconvinced someone like that is the best choice to direct our species.”

“And I am curious as to the alternative?” She answered evenly. “You?”

He actually smiled at that. “Of course not. I am a product of this charged and political age. I am more of the opinion that having a singular directed government which has not been agreed upon by other independent nations is a dangerous direction to take Humanity. There needs to be checks and balances to naturally move in such a direction. The United States and European Union served as checks to us, and we to them. There was, of course, continued competition on a geopolitical level, but we prevented major conflicts for decades.”

“And it was slow; pointless,” Saudia shook her head. “Humanity will never unite the way you think it will. We’re too independent and susceptible to outside manipulation and brainwashing. The only way Humanity will unite is if they are dragged kicking and screaming along the way. And
considering the amount of resistance there is to ADVENT, this has very much proven to be true.”

“Touché, Chancellor,” he inclined his head. “But of course, the ideals that you and ADVENT espouse are not shared by the rest of our species. Perhaps you are right, perhaps not, but it doesn’t matter what everyone else wants. What ADVENT wants is the only thing that matters.”

“Prove you can do better, and we will consider it,” Saudia said. “But we don’t begin with the notion that all opinions and ideas are equal or worth debating. Some things are fact, others are rooted in idealism, naivety, and dogma. Those are not, nor should be tolerated in the war we find ourselves in.”

She looked back into the lab, her hands clasped behind her back. “But as to what you imply, I know that ADVENT will one day represent the entire Human race. Not today, a month, or even years from now, but it will happen. But I do not intend it to be a violent seizure or to leverage our power on the dying independent world. They will join us, because they want to.” She looked over towards Qin again. “And if they see us helping their people and supporting them even when they are not part of us, is it wrong of them to want to be a part of what we do?”

“Only if they’ve considered what they want to lose.”

“Perhaps,” Saudia said. “But I find that these kinds of decisions show the true character of a leader. The difference between one who is actually interested in the well being of their citizens, or one interested in holding on to their waning power.”

A corner of his lip turned up. “An interesting implication, Chancellor. A little too binary for my tastes.”

“Regardless,” Saudia replied, without looking to him. “When this situation is resolved and you make your own recommendation, I hope you remember both who helped you – and what you wish your legacy to be.”

The two world leaders stood in silence for a few minutes afterwards, simply watching the teams inside work hastily to develop a treatment to the epidemic that was proving to be a pivotal catalyst.

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Office of the Commander, the Praesidium – Classified Location

2/22/2017 – 1:35 P.M.

This certainly necessitated an unplanned meeting of the Internal Council. The Commander did have to give T’Leth some credit – at least he was keeping him informed.

That did not mean he was making good decisions.

“So let me get this straight,” Creed was shooting daggers into the Chronicler who merely met his gaze at the sight of the furious soldier. “Patricia tries to contact someone here. Maybe the Commander, maybe me. She is stopped by you. She asks to talk to the Commander to maybe clear up whatever lies the Imperator’s been telling her, and T’Leth refused?”

“Of course he did,” the Chronicler’s tone was measured in calm. “Patricia was very clearly compromised in some way. Letting her communicate further was an extremely dangerous risk.”

“Do you even know if she was compromised?”
“Unfortunately,” Aegis interjected slowly. “I fear the Chronicler is correct. That kind of communication is not easy to achieve, and something Patricia had no previous knowledge of. The Imperator would not have permitted this unless he knew it would not affect her, though I fear that T’Leth’s refusal has played right into his hands.”

“It certainly didn’t help,” Creed jabbed a finger at the Chronicler. “Did T’Leth think about how that would look to her? And that was not his call to make in the first place!”

“Correct,” the Commander spoke for the first time, turning a stern face to the Chronicler. “That was not T’Leth’s call. I’m not ignorant enough to believe that he couldn’t have had you inform us of the situation and allowed us to decide it. This is the first we’ve heard about Patricia in months. Any decision related to her needs to first go through me.”

“I will convey that to T’Leth,” the man inclined his head. “But at the same time-“

“At the same time, you can kindly shut up,” Creed interjected.

“Quiet,” now Zhang stepped forward, stoic as ever. “While I agree with the Commander that we should have been informed about this, T’Leth did nothing wrong. We’ve been warned thanks to Aegis –“ he nodded to the Ethereal in the room. “That Patricia is in serious danger of being compromised by the Imperator. Much as we don’t want to accept it, that is the reality. To let her enter without checking the truth of this is a catastrophic risk.”

“Couldn’t T’Leth have just broken into her mind to check himself?” Jackson asked, looking to the Chronicler. “One Human woman can’t be stronger than a Sovereign One.”

“Bad idea,” Creed shook his head. “You’d spook her and she’d leave.”

“More to the point, that is an arguably worse outcome,” the Commander agreed. “You’re talking about a woman who made a specific point to not read the minds of people without their consent. T’Leth ignoring that would reflect badly. Of course, this cuts both ways, which was why she didn’t want a Sovereign to read her own mind.”

“Most likely because the Imperator has filled her head with propaganda about the Sovereigns,” the Chronicler muttered. “Typical.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “From what T’Leth has told me, I don’t blame her. T’Leth’s brethren are not exactly paragons of virtue, nor apparently do much to dissuade people from their preconceptions. T’Leth may be different, but the other Sovereigns are still manipulative and dangerous.”

The Chronicler’s lips twitched. “Fair point.”

“Patricia’s issue was that she was relying on trust,” Zhang speculated, crossing his arms. “She had to know that wouldn’t work here. She’s a possible risk now-“

“No offense, Zhang, but you don’t know her that well,” Creed interrupted, shaking his head. “She had no idea that T’Leth had set up his little mental fortress over the Praesidium. When she wants to learn about something, she goes to the source. She probably intended to go directly to the Commander, and get answers that way. She wasn’t thinking about protocol, she was trying to find a reason…” he suddenly trailed off. “Oh no.”

“I warned you about this,” Aegis said, resigned if not saddened. “The Imperator took her for a reason. He has likely convinced her to, if not join him, cooperate willingly with his plans. She was lost the moment he spoke to her. There is nothing you could have said to her that would have
convinced her otherwise; the Imperator is too intelligent for that.”

“And because our Sovereign ‘ally’ didn’t bother to tell us, I suppose we’ll never know, will we?” Creed snarled, primarily directed at the Chronicler. “No. If she was still trying to get answers, she isn’t completely gone. She can be brought back.”

“She’s likely had little to no contact with other Humans,” Vahlen noted. “Spending any significant amount of time with aliens will make one more amenable and sympathetic to them, especially if they are treated well. It may be as simple as Patricia needing to be returned to some degree of normalcy.”

“I agree that we shouldn’t mark her off as completely lost,” the Commander agreed. “We need to find her – and talk to her. Assaulting the Temple Ship will be impossible, yes, but at some point – if what you believe is accurate, Aegis – he will use her on Earth. That is when we go to her and bring her back.”

“No.” Zhang disputed flatly, his tone leaving no room for dispute. “If Patricia ever directly acts against XCOM or ADVENT, then she needs to be eliminated. She is extremely dangerous if allied with them, and it will shatter morale, not considering that she knows some very important truths about what we’ve done and the formation of ADVENT itself. We can’t risk her becoming an out of control element.”

“She was one of us, and has been under the corruptive influence of the most powerful Ethereal in existence,” the Commander reminded all of them. “Even now Creed still thinks she’s resisting because she knows that it’s wrong, but when her only source is the Imperator or other Ethereals? Her mindset is going to be warped. It’s not her fault, not completely.”

“That would only apply if she’s mind controlled,” Zhang stated. “Aegis, you’ve said this is something the Imperator doesn’t do?”

“Not when he is attempting to persuade an individual of something,” the Ethereal answered. “He considers resorting to mind control as…failure. A cheat which is unworthy of the command he now has. With this said…his aura will have shaped her to be more amenable, though she is a powerful telepath, so it was likely muted. No, this will be worse. She will join him of her own free will.”

“Patricia is not some naïve little girl,” Zhang continued. “She knows the situation she’s in. She’s an extremely logical and methodical person. The Imperator doesn’t use mind control. She’s likely had opportunity to refute him or refuse to help, but very likely has not. Regardless of her decisions, they are her decisions, and she shouldn’t be treated as the victim here.”

“Have we considered that she’s lying?” Shen spoke up for the first time. “I sincerely doubt the Imperator would have just allowed her to walk away if she refused. She’s not the type to martyr herself for nothing, what if this is her trying to convince the Imperator she is an ally, who will then turn on him when she is sent to Earth?”

There was silence around the room as they considered that.

“Could that be done, Aegis?” The Commander asked.

The Ethereal considered it carefully. “In…theory. The Imperator could easily fall into the trap of pride. He is so convinced of his own beliefs that having someone who similarly understood would be reassuring to him, and he would begin to trust in a way. But it would be a…dangerous line to tread upon. The Imperator will be suspicious if she agrees too easily, and too much skepticism or
refusal will lead to him simply imprisoning her. She would need to be both extremely clever and lucky. But it…could be possible. The Imperator is not immune to that type of manipulation.”

“She could do it,” Creed stated immediately. “She knows what’s at stake, and she knows how the Imperator works.”

“Until we know for sure, I don’t want to put any kill orders out for her,” the Commander said. “I also don’t really believe she’d turn on us; not with everything that’s happened.”

Zhang pursed his lips. “People change. Patricia in particular is susceptible to a well-reasoned argument.”

“I want us to come to a clear consensus on this,” the Commander leaned on his desk, looking around the room at all of them. “Patricia could be compromised. But she could also be playing the part so she can eventually escape. I personally don’t think we should give up on her until we have clear reason to do so, and we haven’t hit that point yet.”

“Our decisions should not be decided around what’s best for her, but what’s best for XCOM,” Zhang said. “If you’re wrong, if we’re wrong, we’re going to get soldiers killed. Treating her as friendly until proven otherwise is likely to get people killed. Do we want to do that?”

“He isn’t wrong,” Iosif agreed. “I want to bring Patricia back as much as everyone, but if she isn’t on our side, I can guarantee that she’s going to be able to kill people easily. And this isn’t taking into account skills the Imperator or other Ethereals may have taught her. If she’s learned long-distance telepathic communication, what else has she learned?”

“How about a compromise?” Creed stepped forward. “We make the intent to capture her, not kill her. She’s not an idiot, if she’s on our side she’ll know what we’re doing. We make a demand for her to surrender. If she does, we bring her back and debrief her.” He paused, before resuming slowly. “If she refuses…we kill her.”

Zhang gave a single nod. “Acceptable. We would know quickly if she complies or not.”

“You’ll have us as well to assist,” the Chronicler said. “We have an interest in removing her from the Imperator’s control, and helping her understand that T’Leth’s rejection wasn’t personal.”

“Then that will be our objective,” the Commander confirmed. “Until that point…if anyone receives any contact from Patricia, or someone claiming to be her or know anything about her, that goes directly to me. That goes for T’Leth as well. Is that understood by everyone?”

“Yes, Commander,” they all confirmed.

“In the meantime, we’ve got other work to do,” he nodded. “Dismissed.”

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Barracks, the Praesidium – Classified Location

2/24/2017 – 7:19 P.M.

Nuan set aside her tablet and just stared blankly forward for a few minutes. At least her superiors were keeping her updated as her country continued collapsing. The infection tolls were staggering, and the death tolls continued to climb. The actual extent of the deaths wasn’t being shared publicly, a move that both the Chinese and ADVENT were in surprising agreement on.
To her utter lack of surprise, most of the government leaders seemed to be fine – probably been immunized as soon as cases started appearing, but everyone else was more or less screwed unless they were in a prioritized position. Doctors, military, and scientists had priority for immediate vaccination, and the regular citizens had to wait their turn.

Practically, this was the smart thing to do. The structure of order needed to be preserved, which would be admitted be more difficult if half the government was incapacitated, the military was crippled, and the doctors were weakened. Granted, that was happening anyway since the disease had been in circulation for possibly weeks beforehand, but its spread was going to be limited in those areas.

At least everyone in XCOM was immunized, for all the good that did them.

A knock on the doorframe to the empty barracks room distracted her. She looked up to see Iosif leaning in, a questioning look on his face. “You alright?”

She wasn’t, not really, and that was probably something he sensed. She should be used to it by now, but at times like this it still caught her off guard. In a way, she appreciated that she couldn’t pretend. Nuan waved him in and he took a seat beside her. Off-duty, so he wasn’t wearing his armor and probably hadn’t come from training.

“You probably know what’s going on in China more than I do,” she said, shrugging. “My superiors are keeping me up to date as well.”

He nodded. “It’s bad.”

“Yes.”

A pause. “Both of my parents are infected,” she said flatly. “Grandparents too. Everyone lives in Beijing, which is ground zero for where this supposedly started.”

“Oh,” he answered slowly. “I’m sorry Nuan, that’s awful.” He scowled. “Putting it lightly. I don’t know what else to say. Will they pull through?”

“My parents probably will,” she said, the brief bit of good news she’d received. “They’ll be scarred and endure a few more days of hell, but they’re expected to live. My grandparents though…” she shook her head. “Grandfather will probably pull through, my grandmother passed away earlier today. Not surprising; she had some previous health issues and was older. Supposedly a lethal combination for smallpox.”

Iosif gave a single nod. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Accepted,” she shrugged again. “I guess I’m luckier than most. At least most of my family is still alive. Others aren’t so lucky.”

“Everyone is working on a cure,” Iosif said. “From what I’ve heard, it may be ready in a few weeks.”

“And by then it’ll mean nothing,” Nuan said, a bitter truth she’d come to accept. And something the PLA had also come to the conclusion of. Everyone knew that a cure or treatment would only prevent the next epidemic, not this one. “The damage is done. It’ll take years to recover if we’re lucky.”

He didn’t dispute it.
“What are we going to do?”

“What about?” Iosif questioned.

“Come on,” she snorted. “We both know what’s going on. This was a deliberate attack by the aliens, probably to weaken China before an attack. There is no way this is an accident. So what are we going to do about it in response?”

“Right now?” He sighed, looking down. “Nothing, Nuan. At least not explicitly. There is – technically – nothing which links this to the Collective.”

“So a dead disease just so happened to spring up out of nowhere in the most populous country in the world?” She asked. “Which just so happens to be one the most strategically important countries on Earth that – since it’s not part of ADVENT – is even more vulnerable than normal? This is all just a massive coincidence?! Just bad luck?”

“Nuan…” he paused, before continuing. “I’m in agreement that it’s suspicious at best. But ADVENT isn’t going to accuse the Collective of something they can’t prove, nor are the Chinese from what I’ve gathered. Trust me, you’re not alone in thinking the aliens have a hand in this, but there is the possibility that this is just bad luck. Not everything has the aliens behind it. Sometimes disasters just…happen.”

His tone didn’t convince her, and he clearly wasn’t convincing himself either. “You don’t believe that,” she accused softly. “No one believes that. But everyone isn’t calling it out for some reason. ADVENT has their rules, fine. China wants to play nice with ADVENT, so they follow suit. But XCOM? Why isn’t the Commander saying something? He’s not part of ADVENT, we aren’t part of ADVENT.”

“And what would making accusations accomplish?” Iosif pursed his lips. “What should be our response to this? Should we be the ones to break the stalemate and retaliate violently? Invade the West Coast, Canada, or Australia? Create a virus which kills them like smallpox infects us?”

She flexed her arms, causing them to whirr. The sounds they made were satisfying at times. “It would be a start.”

He nodded. “And what if you’re wrong?”

“Then the aliens begin hurting a lot,” she answered. “They become more despised for what they did. Forgive me for not caring about their feelings or them being slandered. Of course they’re just going to deny it, but their denials mean nothing.”

“We have enough reasons to hate the Collective,” Iosif cautioned. “We don’t need to lie to do so.”

“Well don’t lie,” she said. “Just imply. Lay out the series of coincidences that led to this point. That isn’t a lie.”

“But it is an accusation,” he pointed out. “Which to many people, will be seen the same as absolute proof.”

“It just…” she searched for the words. “It feels wrong to just do nothing. It’s like watching a criminal walk free even though you know they committed the crime, but were smart enough not to leave provable evidence. Letting that happen is just not right.”

“I agree, but things may still change,” Iosif said. “We’ll have plenty of time to kick the Collective in the teeth, for crimes real and implied. ADVENT will help China recover and a treatment will be
developed. Not to prevent this epidemic, no, but it will help prevent a future one.”

“Until the Collective digs up some other old disease,” she suggested dryly.

“I think that we’re going to be prepared in case this happens again,” Iosif suggested knowingly, allowing a slight smile. “The ADVENT vaccine programs are going to be getting some special attention.”

“Hopefully,” she agreed. “And the rest of the world should follow suit.”

“Oh, I think they will,” he said. “ADVENT leads, and other countries follow, even if they grumble along the way.”

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Fort Nelson Outskirts, Alberta – Canada

2/10/2017 – 6:18 P.M.

It was, unfortunately, more or less what he’d expected.

“Yes.” Cycelea grunted from her prone position as she observed the small fortified town. “We’re not breaching that anytime soon.”

“Not with what we have right now,” Neil agreed sourly. “I’m not in favor of suicide missions.”

As they had expected, the Custodians had been able to update the rest of the Collective on what had happened and that there was an ADVENT kill team wandering the area, and to be prepared. That a Sargon had died because of them had probably bumped up the priority quite a bit, and as a result they were seeing the towns turn into impenetrable fortresses.

The shining black Custodians patrolled around the perimeter and stood near-motionless at designated guard posts, their heads moving back and forth as they scanned for enemies. Turrets of some kind had also been constructed around the entrances, and inside they had caught glimpses of Mutons and maybe some Vitakara.

There were a few civilians, but it was likely that they were only keeping them as hostages or to provide some kind of manual labor so that the Custodians didn’t need to manage everything. Since there were Custodians, there was also a CODEX connection. The only good news he saw was that everything was fairly concentrated (it was a small town), and there weren’t any Elites or Sargons in the mix.

Seekers were an open question.

“Thoughts?” Cycelea asked.

“Infiltration is going to be difficult,” he said, knowing that it was extremely obvious, but it was more to get his thoughts in order. “Telepathy isn’t going to be useful here. No Sargons or Elites, though likely a sizable Muto contingent. CODEX likely integrated. Which means…”

“The connection is a weak point,” she finished, lifting the binoculars to her eyes again. “Take out the CODEX, the Custodians will be hampered and it will screw with coordination.”

“Yes,” Neil agreed. “The downside to this approach is that it only works very well in coordination with an actual attack.”
“Of which we aren’t exactly equipped for,” she finished.

“Depends,” Neil mused slowly, thinking. “There was an interesting project which was shared recently. The Night Witch bomber – a glider prototype that was impossible to detect through modern radar systems.”

He could imagine Cycelea frowning under her helmet. “I know I’ve heard that name before.”

“World War II Soviet air force bombers,” Neil recalled. “All females, interestingly enough. Their tactics involved cutting their engines as they got closer to the target so it was more difficult to notice and detect them. They were impressive, and I guess someone in ADVENT liked the idea enough to apply today.”

“Huh, neat,” she lowered the binoculars. “Knowing ADVENT, it’s going to be a little deadlier.”

“I saw white phosphorus, chlorine-trifluoride, and thermite on the same page,” Neil smirked under his helmet. “I would say so. If, for instance, we were able to call a few Night Witch bombers to make some coordinated strikes after we disabled the CODEX transmitter, I think we just might be able to take the town. Only one problem with that.”

“Civilians,” she immediately noted.

“The good news is there doesn’t seem to be many,” Neil continued. “That said, one of our goals is to extract as many people as possible, and we should at least make an effort to save them. But the other thing to consider is that we want whatever Sargon is in this area to pay a visit.”

“Since we’re not interested in infiltration…taking out a few patrols of Custodians might get their attention,” she said. “We use that time to locate the CODEX transmitter, and when the Sargon comes, the bombs drop.”

“Glad we’re on the same page,” Neil said. “I’ll refine it and send it to Laura for approval. We’ll need to have this prepared well ahead of time. And until then…we catalogue everything the Custodians do. They’re machines, and that will make it easier to spot their patterns.”

“Seekers may still be a problem,” Cycelea pointed out as they moved to stand and retreat. “We need to be prepared should they be sent against us.”

“I know, I know,” Neil grunted as they began moving back, actions cloaked by the darkness of the night. “But don’t worry. They’re going to need to try a bit harder if they want to use that trick against us again.”

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*Avatar Project Research Station – Classified Space*

*2/25/2017 – 6:10 P.M.*

Things were going to move quickly now that she’d made her decision, and it was as expected. The first major development would be receiving Ethereal-grade genetic modifications, then undergoing the Avatar Project itself, which Revelean was explaining to her, with the Imperator standing behind them. The room they inhabited was circular in shape, not especially large, and with two highly computerized medical tables which could be adjusted to the occupants in question.

A small army of medical drones were stored around the room, the center of which was isolated from the rest of the room by glass. This clean room contained the majority of equipment and
specialized tools. It wasn’t especially daunting on its own; if any discomfort was to be had, it was the knowledge of what the room was used for.

There had probably been a significant number of test subjects used to refine and improve the project. Revelean had supposedly utilized both Sectoids and Humans (both captive and cloned) by the hundreds before he had reached an iteration which was both effective and stable. The few successful Avatar prototypes she assumed had been disposed of.

Or maybe they were still stored…somewhere.

She wasn’t wearing her normal clothing which she’d grown accustomed to during her stay, nor her Aegis armor. While the Imperator had said that she’d get specially made armor befitting of her rank in the future, for the surgery she was wearing the standard Avatar Project jumpsuit worn by the other test subjects.

All black, somewhat insulating and comfortable, and this one not having any armor pieces whatsoever on it. But footwear wasn’t hardened, and was functionally more slip-on than anything, though it was much more flexible. The suit definitely felt clingy to her, and very much like she wasn’t wearing that much at all. However, it was very easy to move around in.

“You’ve been appraised of the purpose of the Avatar Project,” Revelean began. “So I will continue with explaining how the surgery will proceed once your body has been sufficiently prepared.”

Mildly disturbing wording, but Revelean was clearly not the best at words. And wasn’t technically wrong. It was recommended that for best results she undergo the genetic enhancements. Which did raise a question. “Will it conflict with the ones I’ve already received from XCOM?”

“Of course not,” Revelean dismissed immediately. “We have been utilizing MELD far longer than your species. It will be altered and enhanced as needed. It is entirely possible that it might not be touched at all if XCOM did their job.”

“Good,” she said.

“And this is, of course, the time to make any recommendations if you wish,” Revelean continued, turning to her. “I would prefer not to repeat this time-consuming and expensive project multiple times.”

She frowned. “As in what way?”

“Appearance-wise, mostly,” Revelean said. “You are, after all, going to be representing the Imperator. Impressions are important, and the capability for physical alteration is present. Human females in particular obsess over their appearance from my observations.”

Patricia snorted.

“Nonetheless, the decision is up to you,” Revelean finished, glancing to a nearby console. “The Imperator wished to provide you with the option.”

“As Revelean said,” the Imperator added from behind him. “If you wish for such a thing, it should be done now rather than later.”

Hm. She considered it for a moment. She wasn’t especially unhappy with how she looked now, nor did she really want to change anything or be turned into an unrecognizable supermodel. Even if that was possible, she liked how she looked right now and didn’t really want to alter it significantly. Well…maybe there was one thing, but it didn’t really relate to facial appearance.
“Maybe make me a bit taller,” she suggested. “And proportionally balanced, obviously.”

“Noted.” Revelean said, typing briefly on a tablet he was holding. “I will work that into the procedure, and all final details will be repeated before you undergo it. We will move onto the actual Avatar Project procedure once you have been sufficiently prepared. How much do you know about the more intricate methods of the project?”

“Not a lot,” she admitted.

“Expected,” he said, half to himself it seemed, glancing at another screen in a hand. “In short, the Avatar Project creates the capability to establish a telepathic bond between an Avatar - yourself, and the Anchor – in this case the Imperator. This telepathic bond you have not likely experienced before.”

“No,” she confirmed.

“It will be disorienting at first, as both of the personalities merge and interact on that level,” Revelean said, looking back to the Imperator. “This applies as well to you, Imperator. A bond such as this – while not explicitly like a full bond – will not be something you have experienced before.”

“I have read sufficient material on psionic bonds and what happens during them,” the Imperator said. “I am aware of the risks and consequences.”

“Which mean very little in practice,” Revelean shook his head. “There are certain realities both of you will need to accept and understand. Most notably that for all intents and purposes, when the bond is activated, you will need to function as a single entity. Over time there will be some degree of personality drift as both of you settle into an equilibrium. Your first times performing the bond will be debilitating, but you will get used to it.”

“That severe?” Patricia frowned. “And invasive?”

“Necessary for the Avatar Project to work,” Revelean said. “You will need to draw upon the Imperator’s knowledge and experience, and that cannot be done if your minds are separate. I will note that the bond will go both ways. You will be able to know things about him as he will you – when bonded, you will not be able to keep secrets or restrictions for each other – nor will either of you be able to control a body. If you both fight each other, the body will simply be paralyzed and likely die.” He glanced to the center of the room. “I assure you that I’ve seen this happen numerous times in testing. You are doing this voluntarily, so I suspect it will proceed easier.”

Well…upsides and downsides to that. The Imperator would know everything about her, but in return, she could theoretically know the same. “But this isn’t permanent.”

“No, you will retain your own individual identities outside of combat and experimentation,” Revelean said, activating a life-sized hologram before her. “Or at least that is what I expect. The bond will only be triggered when the Avatar performs a certain action or activates certain components. The Anchor is – in design – always programmed to be the source of power of knowledge. The guiding hand. Thus, they have no similar component.”

The hologram Avatar had several highlighted marks around the face. “I will be installing these points to work in conjunction with your mask,” he motioned to the faceless mask the Avatar wore. “You are unlikely to put it on accidentally, preventing unwanted activations. The mask will clip into cybernetic implants around your face and open your bond to the Imperator.”

Looking closer at the hologram, Patricia could see an approximation of how that would go. The
mask would hook under the chin, then be sealed into place by hooks along the edges of the jawline and top of the forehead, with some short arms that would rest on the top of the ears for some – largely unneeded – support.

“The points will be cosmetically hidden when not in combat,” Revelean said. “Small nanite swarms will congregate and retreat smartly. You will also not feel any pain during this process. There should be no accidents here. Understand?”

She nodded once. “Yes.”

“When the bond is activated, you in particular will need to prepare for an overwhelming surge of energy,” Revelean warned. “This is normal, and it will take you time to adjust. While your psionic potential is capped – for now – you will still feel more powerful than you ever have. Do not let it overwhelm you, and as a result the psionic bleedoff will affect the world around you in possibly unpredictable ways. This will likely stop once you master it.”

“I suppose I’ll have to prepare,” she said. “But there are worse things to have happen to you.”

“I suspect you will adjust quickly,” Revelean said, lowering the hand with the tablet. “That covers the basics of what you will experience after undergoing the procedure. Do you have immediate questions?”

“Not especially,” she shook her head. “Although…how long will it take?”

“The procedure? Estimated twelve hours to complete properly, with several days of recovery,” Revelean recalled. “Your enhancement will take five days to fully complete, with you being unconscious throughout, with several days of recovery. I would prefer this begin as soon as possible.”

“As would I,” Patricia motioned to continue. “Let’s do this.”

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Situation Room, the Praesidium – Classified Location

2/26/2017 – 11:01 A.M.

“We have had limited interactions with psions,” V’Zarrah was saying to the small collection of Humans. “Incorporating them into possible strategies will need to be carefully considered. We have no interest in relying upon them.”

“Understandable,” the Commander nodded. “But they can be an asset for your fleet – and something you will need to counter the Sectoids and Ethereals.”

The Andromedon didn’t sound happy at that but conceded the point. “Agreed. I would advise our fleet commanders become acquainted with your psions and assess their capabilities. Your own fleet will need to understand how to incorporate psionics as well as training for traditional space combat.”

“If any training is to be done, it should be in the Atlantis facilities when it happens,” Creed interjected, appraising the Andromedons. “It’s a risk for both of our species to potentially be caught in Andromedon space.”

“We have established facilities in locations secret from the Ethereals,” V’Zarrah refuted. “And all of whom are trustworthy. This has not been a decision made overnight, and the updated plans to
incorporate your species have not changed it. Care will be taken, but we know what we’re doing.”

“We’ll debate this when ADVENT has a curated naval officer corps,” the Commander said, looking around the room. “Until that point comes, this is mostly speculation for something that will not happen for a long time. Earth will need to be reclaimed and the fleet will need to remain secret.”

“Indeed.” V’Zarrah looked to the Commander for a moment. “There is another topic that we need clarification on. Following the revelation that there was an Ethereal defector – Aegis – the Imperator implied to us that your species is under the influence of, or possibly being directed by, an entity he referred to as a ‘Sovereign One’.”

The Commander was surprised. Not necessarily at the question, which in context was perfectly reasonable and something he would have asked as well. No, he was surprised because the Imperator had actually revealed to the Andromedons something of that magnitude. Probably not the complete story – if the Imperator actually had the complete story – but it was, he had to admit, a pretty good deflection in the appearance of being open and honest to one of the species in the Collective.

Had he told others.

“What exactly do you need clarification on?” He asked.

The answer was immediate. “How much of it is true.”

The Commander gave a short nod. “The Imperator didn’t completely lie here. There is a Sovereign One on Earth – T’Leth he calls himself. He has a certain number of agents that operate on our planet and beyond, which you’ve probably seen. Fiona and the Chronicler.”

“The ones with stone armor,” V’Zarrah recalled. “They are agents of this T’Leth. I had assumed they were XCOM.”

“Correct,” Creed confirmed. “Not a lot of them, but we’re working with them.”

“Yes, T’Leth is not controlling our species,” the Commander continued. “The Chancellor was only recently notified about their existence. He has proven to be a help to us, and continues to provide his own expertise on certain subjects. Our psionic tech program is nearing testing stages because of him.”

V’Zarrah considered. “So you say. What are his intentions for the future?”

“More vague than we would like,” the Commander admitted. “But what is certain is that he wishes to remain an ally to Humanity and would assist us in future conflicts, and we would support him if he encounters issues of his own. Other Sovereign Ones will be hostile to emerging galactic powers, and an ally like T’Leth will be useful. Not to mention the threat of the Synthesized.”

“The machines that supposedly destroyed the Ethereal Empire?” V’Zarrah sounded skeptical. “Those still exist?”

“According to T’Leth, yes,” the Commander said. “And they have an explicit goal of hunting Sovereign Ones and any others in their path. They are as much of a threat to us as the Collective is, even if they won’t come until the future.”

V’Zarrah consulted a haptic display on his wrist. “These Synthesized are described as hybrids of cybernetics and flesh, correct? With odd abilities and spacecraft?”
“Something to that effect,” he confirmed, frowning. “Why? Do you know something about them?”

“Union Viarior has not paid significant attention to this presumably phantom threat,” V’Zarrah said. “We had more important things to concern ourselves with. But others have developed an interest in these Synthesized when we learned of them. In particular, Union Zacarrim thought their usage of cybernetics was something worth exploring.”

“Did they actually find anything?” Creed asked.

“Nothing significant until five years ago,” using his wrist he projected an orange-tinted hologram of what looked like an exoskeleton. Broken metal lined what was clearly supposed to be over a skeleton, with one of the arms altered into…something. Likely a weapon, but it had long-since broken. The head reminded him of a triangle or teardrop, but aside from that he didn’t see anything else identifying.

“Synthesized soldiers?” Creed questioned, looking at the hologram curiously.

“Unknown, but these were extracted from a desert planet in the process of terraforming,” V’Zarrah said. “Hundreds of thousands of these wrecks. At minimum this was a highly cybernetic species, but their uniformity makes me think they were soldiers. Considering what we know about the Synthesized, perhaps these were part of the army it used. Unfortunately, we were not able to recover any usable technology from them, though the metals we extracted and melted, as they were made with an unfamiliar composition. But if you are concerned about the Synthesized, then you should be aware of what we might have found on them as well.”

“I see,” the Commander said slowly, moving to the holotable to bring up an archived hologram. “In which case, have any of your Unions ever recovered one of these?” He brought up the hologram of the Indoctrination Pyramid recovered from China.

“No.” V’Zarrah denied flatly. “Something that exotic we would know about, and likely attempt to acquire. What is it?”

“What T’Leth calls an Indoctrination Pyramid,” the Commander said. “A Synthesized device which emits a telepathic signal to control others. Worst case scenario, it’s connected to a Prime, one of the managing intelligences. At best…it mostly causes insanity and mental deterioration. Avoid these at all costs and inform us if you stumble upon one of them. Do not attempt to research it.”

“You’re speaking to an Andromedon, Commander,” V’Zarrah said dryly. “That is what we do.”

“And for your own safety, I’d suggest you not,” he repeated. “But since you shared what you know, it’s only fair we return the favor.”

“Which is appreciated, I will inform the others of this,” V’Zarrah said, making a note. “But what does T’Leth intend for my species? Or has he not communicated these plans to you?”

“As far as I know, you’ll be left alone unless you make him your enemy,” the Commander said. “Or make an ally of his an enemy. Our…alliance…is atypical for him. A mutual partnership. I suspect he doesn’t care what you do unless it relates directly to him.”

“I would prefer to determine that for myself,” V’Zarrah said. “I want to talk to him. That is possible, yes?”

“That can be done,” the Commander said. “I’ll speak to the Chronicler. Although there is only one way T’Leth directly communicates, and you might not like it.”
“How?”

“Through Sovereign Orbs, which he uses to observe Earth,” the Commander said. “Touching them opens a telepathic dreamscape between you and him. Not dangerous, but it is initially daunting, and psionically based. It requires trust on your end.”

“Noted.” V’Zarrah said, not sounding deterred. “And I suspect that Union Zacarrim will wish to speak to him regarding the Synthesized. Perhaps their fascination can be answered in more detail.”

“I think you should also keep much of this to yourself,” Creed cautioned. “T’Leth doesn’t want his existence to become public knowledge. Share it with your leadership if you must, but the average Andromedon should still remain unaware.”

“We will continue the same policy as usual,” V’Zarrah promised. “This is valuable and destabilizing information if used properly. We will ensure that only those relevant will know about this situation.”

That was probably going to be as good of a deal as they got. And if T’Leth wasn’t happy with that…well, he’d probably let them know. Perhaps T’Leth would end up helping the Andromedons as well. The Commander could see both getting along nicely.

It nothing else, it would give the Andromedons pause if they ever tried to betray them.

T’Leth could turn out to be a very useful deterrent.

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War Command Center, Collective Mars Base – Mars

2/28/2017 – 10:00 A.M.

The room was among the largest in the base. It was alien in that it was constructed in the shape of an ascending ziggurat, each row of seats becoming smaller and smaller as it neared the top. The Disprium clearly liked to have whoever was in charge clearly visible to all, and the Battlemaster stood at the top with the Zar’Chon and the First Guardian to his sides.

The dimmed room was filled with the rest of the ranking soldiers who would be involved in what the Battlemaster knew would be the final invasion of Earth. Vitakara, Andromedons, even a Hive Commander was in attendance. Sicarius was somewhere, as was Quisilia, but they stood apart so as not to command additional attention.

“Our attack on Earth has been finalized. Within one week the attacks will commence.”

It was the first time that had been publicly acknowledged outside of internal discussions. But the officers and aliens simply remained silent, waiting for him to elaborate. Good. He pressed one of the buttons on the console and a replica of Earth appeared above him. “We possess numerical and technological superiority over Earth. It will be utilized to the fullest now. There will be no singular battlefields in the coming conflicts. We intend to conquer this world, and it shall be done.”

The hologram focused on China. “In three days Isomnum will address the Chinese and on the fourth day he will commence the invasion of mainland China and the surrounding countries. This will force an ADVENT response. They have been significantly weakened due to the smallpox epidemic, and without significant ADVENT support and protection, they will soon fall.”

“The question of Japan and the outlying islands is outstanding,” the Zar’Chon stepped forward.
“Fifty Andromedon Cleanser Ships have recently arrived in-system. They will be crucial for the overall campaign. After Isomnum addresses China, orbital bombardment will commence on Japan and Taiwan, with deployments of three million Mutons, Custodians, and Runianarch to each to assume control of the country.”

The Battlemaster suspected ADVENT would be shocked at this development, but he was no longer concerned with protecting the infrastructure which had already survived previous attacks, and in Japan at least, there was not really any concern for civilian casualties since they’d been evacuated long ago.

And for Taiwan...Cleanser Ships were precise enough where merely targeting the military bases and government buildings was feasible.

“In the likely event an invasion of China is declared, Isomnum will commence operations in what will be referred to as the Earth-Asian theatre,” the Battlemaster stated, as the area comprising the theatre lit up. “Due to his own restrictions, he will likely utilize primarily automated and mechanical forces, in addition to air support. We suspect that Aegis is likely to directly oppose him, along with a majority of XCOM.”

The globe spun until it focused on Africa. “The Sovereign African States will unveil their allegiance with us the same time as Isomnum,” the Zar’Chon said, motioning upwards. “We are expecting an immediate response, though what that could entail is unknown. We are prepared to provide significant military and civilian assistance. The SAS will begin the nearby assimilation of countries – through negotiation or conquest – and at the same time we will launch a direct attack against the south of the continent.”

The respective country lit up. “South Africa,” the Zar’Chon said. “Due to the technological inferiority of the African nations, we expect we can easily capture all nations south of the SAS within weeks, and subsequently turn leadership over to them. Since ADVENT has little to no presence, we will encounter minimal threat. This will be primarily carried out under the direction of Ethereal Macula.”

The globe moved until it highlighted the Americas, before zooming in on South America. “We will also begin a coordinated invasion of South America,” the Zar’Chon continued. “With orbital support, we will capture non-aligned nations and likely overwhelm the majority of ADVENT-aligned nations on the southern half of the continent. Our eventual goal is the capture of Brazil.”

He motioned to the Ethereals beside him. “This will be overseen by both of the Guardians.”

The Battlemaster took over as the Zar’Chon stepped back. “The United States will be invaded from a new direction. We will commence the invasion at Florida and advance up the East Coast. At the same time, our offensives will be renewed in the West Coast and strike teams will strike in major cities around America simultaneously, including New York, Washington D.C., Houston, Philadelphia, and Kansas City. These will be comprised of elite units including Spectres, Elites, Vanguards, Outsider Units, Lurainian, and Ethereals as well as candidates from the Avatar Project who will be revealed shortly.”

ADVENT had been able to weather assaults before. But admittedly, those had been only several major assaults. He was curious to see how they would react to dozens of assaults in frontal attacks all across the United States – and the world. Canada would also receive some support, but the Battlemaster did not especially consider the country vital, and much of it was underdeveloped. Orbital bombardment would likely reduce their military effectiveness significantly.

It zoomed in on a section of the United States. “I have also established a contingency which will serve two purposes,” the Battlemaster continued. “One is to provide ADVENT with a distraction if
they are proving more resilient, and the second is to draw Aegis to a specific point. Should the contingency be activated, the area known as Yellowstone will be targeted for orbital bombardment. The goal will be to trigger a cataclysmic effect that will destroy a large portion of the country and cause significant changes to the immediate biosphere. Since we wish to keep the environment largely untouched, it is why this is a contingency. I am the only one who can activate it, or rescind the order – remember that it can and might be used merely to draw Aegis to this position, as he can defend against the bombardment.”

The globe finally moved to Europe. The Zar’Chon stepped forward. “We are initiating a series of assassination and quiet strikes against first the leadership of non-ADVENT nations to throw them into chaos. Soft strikes against politicians and military officials will prime the countries for lightning invasions and will be carried out simultaneously. This will throw them into chaos and given the situation ADVENT will be facing, they will likely be unable to respond quickly.”

The hologram shifted to highlight ADVENT nations. “After this, we will begin operations to assassinate the ranking members of ADVENT. This is not exclusive to Europe, but considering that a majority of their major operations are overseen in Switzerland and surrounding areas, this serves as a good illustration. Public figures and heads of state who have supported ADVENT will be removed first, such as Prince Mason and the British Royal Family, Iseul Gwan, Minister Habicht, and similar individuals.”

A pause. “Following that, we will begin the assassination of ADVENT officials and military leaders. These will be more intermittent as they will be fewer and likely require custom timeframes to achieve correctly. They are intended to cripple ADVENT leadership in key areas. This includes Commander Christiaens, Feng Mercado, Kim Munju, along with Richard Tygan, Elizabeth Falka, and of course, Chancellor Saudia Vyandar.” As he said each name, the corresponding portrait appeared.

“The final target is Russia,” the Battlemaster finished. “A strike team will invade and take control of Moscow and from there, the rest of Russia will be taken over. We are not expecting significant resistance or retaliation from ADVENT given the other operations taking place. This will be accompanied by orbital support. After Moscow is secured, we will likely conduct strikes similar to those that will happen in America against Russian cities.”

He shut the hologram off. “This covers the overall plan to conquer Earth, and will be continually modified as new information emerges. Each of you has specific information to review and disseminate to your own command. I expect the instructions to be followed immediately for this operation to begin without issues. Your orders and mission are clear.”

He drew his sword, took a reverse grip and rested the point on the ground, pleased to have finally arrived at this point. “Each of you is dismissed. Go, and prepare to end this war once and for all.”

The Dead World

3/1/2017 – 9:00 A.M.

Her hands were steady as she piloted the small spacecraft down onto the grey, barren world. While she was definitely no pilot, she knew enough now thanks to simulations and hands-on experience that she could fly and land a simple spacecraft, with the assistance of the on-board computer. Flying past the spherical station of Paradise was…unpleasant, and the sense that she was being watched had not faded in the least since she’d arrived in the system.
But nothing had happened, and she’d proceeded downward.

Down onto the Dead World.

The planet was an odd contradiction and impossibility. There should be no breathable atmosphere, but one somehow existed if her sensors were accurate – though how this was actually possible she didn’t know. Given the legends and rumors about the planet, it could be any number of reasons. The Bringer being involved (Most likely) made even far-fetched theories seem somewhat plausible.

At least she knew for sure that taking off her helmet wouldn’t kill her. Not that she was planning to take unnecessary risks.

She had only been given one goal by the Battlemaster: Land, find the Forge, create her weapons, and leave. It was straightforward and simple. Too simple. No fighting, no puzzles or riddles, no clear test outside of what was clearly said. But she knew better. This Trial had claimed the lives of Ethereals, so there was something dangerous.

She should hopefully be able to-

She froze in her seat as the psionic power she had grown so accustomed to dissipated. It was ripped from her in an instant. She couldn’t feel the Psionosphere and her mind was completely exposed. The ship was on autopilot now and it could land on its own, which already had a pre-determined destination. Standing up, she tried telekinetically summoning her weapons to her.

It didn’t work. The psionic power was gone. The Psionosphere was gone. It was dead and absent.

She felt naked and vulnerable without it. Sure, she had been significantly genetically altered and enhanced with the best of Collective technology – but that wasn’t her best asset. She was a telekine and that’s what she’d trained for. To have that taken away was…damaging.

Well, the Trial now took on a different dimension. She couldn’t rely on psionics anymore.

She supposed the good news was that the same applied to the Bringer. He couldn’t dominate her if there was no psionics to influence her with. She’d have to rely solely on her training and mind. The good news was that she felt she could handle it. The bad news was that she just knew there was something else that was going to happen.

She pulled out the handheld holodisplay which brought up a map of the Dead World. Interestingly, there were still ruins, mountains, and landscapes on the planet, but it was just dead and grey. But still preserved. No weather, insects, or vegetation to degrade and destroy it. Probably one reason the Forge had managed to survive.

It was going to be a hike, with a roundabout path, but easy enough to follow.

Placing her helmet over her head, clicking with a sharp hiss, she grabbed her swords and moved to the exit. It opened, extending the departing ramp, and she stepped outside into paradise.

The vertigo she experienced when she looked around made her briefly question if she’d accidentally replaced her oxygen tanks with some psychedelic drug that made her hallucinate, because what she saw was absolutely nothing like the grey and barren world she’d flown down to.

She stood in the middle of an open forest, with her ship in a clearing surrounded by trees and covered in grass. The grass was green and not trimmed, but very short. Small flowers grew within it, ones she’d never seen before. The trees were a mixture of having brown and white bark, with
leaves ranging from red, orange, blue, and transparent. It was a bizarre mixture, and they grew in patterns and shapes that were definitely not similar to Earth.

Was this real?

She slowly took off a gauntlet and knelt down and picked some of the short grass. It was plucked easily enough – and felt real in her hand. She wasn’t going to take off her helmet, but it likely had a real smell too. It left some soil on her fingers, which she brushed off. Pulling her gauntlet back on, she pondered what to do now.

There were two possibilities: Either the world was still dead and she was now being affected by some kind of telepathic effect – though how that worked when the Psionosphere didn’t exist (and it still didn’t) here was unknown.

Or the world was real, and what was projected to the rest of the galaxy was a fake. A telepathic effect or ridiculously ineffective holoprojectors? If it was a passive telepathic effect, then maybe that somehow explained the lack of a Psionosphere. But if that were the case, shouldn’t it have broken when she entered the atmosphere? Or did it somehow change when she went into her ship?

Did she need a physical connection?

She had time, and she needed to know what she was dealing with, because it would change how she proceeded. Yang moved back into the ship and moved to the cockpit, and looked through the screens again to the outside. Grey and barren. Alright. Was it because she wasn’t actually seeing it with her own eyes and through a computer screen?

Didn’t matter at the moment. She grabbed a small empty jar which would normally be used for drinking, and walked back outside into the alien world. Kneeling down, she dug out a small patch of grass and flowers and put it in the jar. She also went over to a blooming tree of red and black leaves, and pulled off a small branch from it. Both of those in her hand, she went back to the ship.

Both stayed exactly the same. She set them down and considered. It appeared like she wasn’t going to get any actual answers until she left the planet. Whatever was happening, she was definitely being affected by it, inside and outside the ship. So she’d need to leave the planet entirely before she knew for sure what she was dealing with.

An unexpected turn of events, and she didn’t like how she might not be able to trust her own senses.

Stepping back outside, she began walking along the path which would lead to the Forge. It was walked and clear, with fallen leaves along the path. It was a beautiful sight, and she could see hills and vibrant countryside in the distance. The sky was a bright blue and cloudless, but without a blazing sun. It was an almost perfect world.

Still, something seemed off, which was why she held the swords in her hand. Her senses seemed artificially enhanced. Everything was too vibrant, as if she was viewing from a higher definition than she could interpret. The colors popped too much, the sounds and wind were too sharp to her ears. It all felt real. Too real.

What a stupid thought. It didn’t make any sense.

But that’s how she felt.

Yang walked in near silence along the path, until she froze as she saw a being sitting on a bench which was surrounded by trees which shed leaves with each gust of wind. These were the trees
with the transparent leaves and white bark. The bench itself seemed to be made out of the branches which dipped into the ground, shaped to provide seating to others.

The individual who sat on it appeared to be Human. It was an older male, with oddly vibrant skin and white hair with a neat beard which seemed to almost glow in the light. He wore an odd grey robe-like garment which she didn’t recognize, but it seemed to allow a decent amount of mobility. But it all was background compared to the impossibly purple eyes that glowed with psionic fire.

“Welcome, child. I said that you would come back to me.”

She didn’t even think before reacting to that same voice that penetrated directly into her mind, even as the mouth moved like a real one. She tossed one of the swords towards the chest and charged forward with the other sword in hand. The blade buried itself in the unarmored chest, spurting bright crimson blood while the other blade lopped the head off of the old man.

The body though did not collapse, and merely pulled her close to the decapitated body. “Now, now. Let us be civilized about this.” With a gesture she was thrown back by a powerful wave and slammed against one of the white-barked trees. As she stood, the sword was telekinetically pulled out of the body and returned to her, while the head was also pulled back to the hands, and placed back onto the head as if it were nothing.

A cold terror gripped her as she realized the implications. The Bringer was somehow here, and she had no way of defending herself from him. And it must be him who was maintaining this illusion – no matter which way it went. Did that mean he controlled the Psionosphere here…

If so…

She swallowed. The figure who embodied the Bringer smiled. “You learn fast, Yang Shuren. An admirable trait and one which has captured my interest.”

“No!” She spat. “I will never join or help you. I made that clear!”

The bearded face of the man twisted into a smile, the glowing eyes shining bright. “And despite that, you come here. You come to a world where my vision is most potent. Where my power is absolute. Why come to here, Yang Shuren, if you wish to flee me? You knew I would be here.” He appraised her, taking a step forward. “Perhaps not quite like this, but you are no fool. You know what the Ethereals did not when they came to this world. But you still come.”

She pointed a bloodstained sword at him. “Not for you.”

“You trial,” a simple nod. “Expected, I suppose. But why risk your life for this? For the Battlemaster? For the Imperator who you are growing disillusioned with? For a planet you now fight against? Or are you merely doing it because it’s expected of you?”

“Quiet,” she snarled, clenching the swords in her hand. “My reasons don’t matter to you, they never did and never will, even if you’re inside my head.”

He looked almost…sad as he met her eyes. “They matter, child. More so than you can imagine right now. I know what you think of me, I know your hatred runs deep, and in your eyes, it is justified. But today…it will be different. Today when you finish, you will understand. No more will ignorance guide you. Salvation can only come to those who are willing. Today you will accept eternity in Paradise – or reject it.”

“I’ll give you my answer now,” Yang said, stepping forward. “Rejected. I’ve seen what your
version of that is, and I want no part of it.”

“Continue first, child,” he gestured to the path. “Your journey here is not complete.”

“And what are you going to do?” She asked. “Send your people to attack me when I’m handicapped with what you’ve done to the planet?”

“Done?” He raised an eyebrow, smiling. “What I’ve done to this planet. How…interesting. Yes, you would feel that way. You are a blind woman wandering; so used to having to reach for the power when it should merely be another aspect of the reality we inhabit. The Psionosphere is a false barrier imposed on the galaxy by constraints of reality. One which will be torn down when the Crossing is complete.”

He looked around the forest, his tone almost wistful. “This planet is…special. The first time where the hard lines of reality were broken and the salvation for all species was unleashed. This planet was the homeworld of the Arthenn, psionic aliens who were managed by a few powerful and arrogant masters. The rest were little more than slaves and batteries from which the masters drew to extend their lives. The aliens lived without hope, life or love. They had no future.”

“And you found them,” she guessed. “You helped?”

“They longed for something in their lives, a reason for living,” the Bringer said wistfully. “Salvation and hope. I can give them what none can provide. Eternity. Their masters would be brought low and consumed forever, their minds scattered and broken for all time. But they would live jubilant and triumphant. Never dying; with me in eternity forever.”

“But it clearly didn’t work,” she smirked. “You failed.”

“A matter of perspective,” he said with some amusement. “The crossing…yes…it failed. I underestimated what it would take. What would be required. Yet at the same time…the Arthenn endure to this day. They are in Paradise, with me, they live eternal. And through the sacrifice of their physical bodies, they created the world you inhabit today.”

He pointed at her. “Let the scales fall from your eyes. Experience the power which will be afforded to those who accept Paradise.”

The rush that she’d felt when entering the world suddenly flowed back into her, far stronger than before. She could feel the power, but it was…different now. More a part of her than it had ever been. She’d needed to reach for the power before, but now it barely required any effort. It was as if the world was saturated with pure psionic energy; an inexhaustible well to draw from.

In an experimental gesture, she focused on one of the trees nearby and applied some telekinetic pressure with complexity that would exhaust her. With a series of snaps and creaks, the tree practically disintegrated as it crumbled into splinters and jagged wood, as the pulling of the telekinetic strings in hundreds of directions accomplished.

She looked down at her hand, not feeling any sense of weariness or exhaustion. It was just as easy as suspending a feather in the air.

Yang swung her head to where the Bringer was, and found he was gone. But he wasn’t gone, he would still be watching her, and waiting. Shaken at what she was seeing, yet empowered by the high of the power which flowed on this world, she carefully continued forward on the path. The sun overhead beat down on her, but she felt no scorching heat.

So she continued.
Minutes passed until the path began winding down a hill. In the distance, she saw a blurred city. She consulted her holomap, and unfortunately, that seemed to be the place she needed to go through. There was a contradictory series of architectures that she could see; some with curved and shining architectures which reached up to the heavens. Others were almost organic in nature, brown and webbed and reminded her of corruption. Others were buildings in a style she recognized from the Ethereal Empire.

Was all of this real? Or the Bringer continuing the illusion?

“And another one comes,” Yang started at the voice coming from the right. “It’s been…a long time.”

She felt the power at her fingertips, then hesitated as an Ethereal emerged from the forest. A female one, though only really possible to tell from the voice, not the armor. Her armor was far more ornate and detailed than the Battlemaster’s, with various symbols and decorative additions on the armor. It didn’t seem as heavy either, and the blood-red cape only fell off of one shoulder, mostly covering the arms that held an Ethereal short sword while a similarly decorated shield was held in the other.

She appraised the alien warily. “You’re not real.”

The Ethereal simply looked at her, the helmet impossible to read. It resembled the more traditional helmets of the Ethereals, if having not as many exposed points. “Why?”

“The only Ethereals alive, I know,” Yang said. “And if you were one of them, I would have been told. And they definitely aren’t living here. You’re not real. An illusion.” She snorted. “Like most things here, I guess.”

“I suppose that depends on what you define as alive,” the Ethereal said walking to the side, voice merely musing as if she were asking idle questions. “Perhaps I don’t have a physical body. Perhaps I do. You feel you cannot trust your senses. But it doesn’t matter. Body or no, I am alive.”

Yang shook her head. “I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

“Indeed?” The Ethereal turned. “And what are you, Yang Shuren? Are you a collection of organs and skin? Are you made up only of a brain, eyes, heart, and lungs? Is the body Yang Shuren, or is it your mind? Your consciousness?”

Yang paused. “Fair point. But you can’t have a consciousness without a vessel. A body.”

“Conventional wisdom would suggest as much,” came the answer in a sigh. “Despite our Empire’s vast knowledge, the truth is that we never came close to understanding the nature of psionics or the Psionosphere. We never could. We were too flawed. Too insulated. Too blind.”

She looked back to Yang. “I feel some pride in the fact that despite us losing everything, there are at least a few of my kind who have learned from our mistakes. No alien has ever undertaken the Trial of the Battlemasters. May I ask who yours is?”

“I…” Yang hesitated. “I don’t know his name, actually. He’s just…the Battlemaster.” She shrugged lamely. “That’s his title and what he’s gone by. He’s never shared his name.”

“I see,” she said. “If he is the last, I understand why he would adopt the title, as that is who all Battlemasters are. We are instruments of war, conquest, and destruction. We thought, planned, and executed according to this mindset. I am Ereuter, I have walked the path you did today. I hae intended to become a Battlemaster, yet fate had other plans.”
“And now you’re a puppet for the thing in the Psionosphere,” she finished. “Assuming that’s actually you. What happened to you, anyway? What did he lie to you about?”

“Lie?” Ereuter truly sounded confused. “He does not lie. The truth we may cower and flee from, but he does not lie. He told me the truth – about the universe, about our Empire, about how we would fall and die, about how we squandered our chance to break the grip the Sovereigns hold over our galaxy, about just how little we knew. And…” she trailed off. “He was right. About everything. So many dead by our own pointless short-sightedness, greed, and superiority. Our Empire lies in ashes; dead; forgotten. Our survivors led by an Imperator who retains the arrogance of his predecessors, yet ironically is drawn to a strikingly noble goal.”

“An idiot,” Yang stated flatly. “He works with you.”

“I agree,” Ereuter said. “But not for the reason you think. The idea that a mere Imperator could hope to command Him is…amusing to believe. The arrogance of the Ethereals knows no bounds. And it is so…unnecessary,” a hand waved in dismissal. “We want the same thing; a galaxy free from the iron grip and machinations of the Sovereign Ones, and protection from the scourge of the Synthesized. An end to their galactic harvests and perversions of self. Sadly, this is not to be. The Imperator is yet another only concerned for his own survival, his own power, at the expense of the greater good.”

She looked to Yang. “Do you know, Yang, what will happen in the future?”

“Of course I don’t?” Yang was confused by the question. “How could I?”

“I can tell you,” she said. “And what the greatest gift He offers to us. You are curious, I know that much.”

“Enlighten me.”

“He offers a universe without death,” she said. “What happens when we die, Yang? What happens when our bodies cease to function and begin rotting away?”

“I don’t know,” Yang shrugged. “Nothing. Or something like eternal torment in my case. Or depending on which god may or may not exist. No one knows the answer. And I guess it doesn’t matter really. The dead don’t come back. They don’t affect the world.”

“But I do know, Yang Shuren,” she said, the towering alien kneeling down so that Yang could look the helmeted Ethereal in the eyes. “Death of the physical body is merely a transition to eternity. It is true immortality, together with the other souls under His loving watch. There is no death in Paradise, Yang. You were saddened and disgusted by what you saw on this plane of reality within the station of Paradise because for you, death is finality. It is the end. But for Him…that simply is not true.”

She looked up to the sky. “Every soul that perished, by your hand, that of your allies, or who were allowed to join Him then…they live, Yang, and they will live forever, forever united in his Embrace. They will know no fear, doubt, or any of the physical ailments of this reality.”

“Impossible,” Yang shook her head. “All you’re doing is just feeding the Bringer. Only making him grow more and more powerful. It isn’t a gift, it’s a death sentence and you’re just an illusion trying to make me doubt.”

“We do make him more powerful,” she agreed. “With each soul added, he grows in might and power, as is his right. But we do not lose ourselves in his gestalt. We are all one-“
“Enough!” Yang needed to have her stop talking, and used the power of the world to instantaneously and quickly rip the Ethereal apart, which was accomplished in a splash of blue blood, flesh, and armor. The remains fell to the ground, and didn’t reform. Breathing heavily, trying to ignore the haunting words, she turned back to the path.

And now there was a little girl standing in her way.

Swallowing, Yang stepped forward towards her, hoping she would be silent. While she could tear apart the Ethereal specter, she would not be able to do the same here. The young girl with bright eyes and golden hair looked up. “Do you remember me?”

The memory of the haunting voices of the children came back; the grotesque trigger that made her recall. A single nod. “Yes.”

“Don’t be sad,” the girl admonished. “I’m ok.”

“No,” Yang remembered when the little girl was killed. “You’re not.”

She smiled up at Yang. “It’s not your fault. I didn’t die then. I can’t die now.”

Yang looked away. “Please. Go.”

“He doesn’t lie,” a small hand wrapped around a gauntlet which held a sword. “You don’t need to be afraid anymore. It’s ok to be wrong.”

“I can’t be,” Yang shook her head. “Even…this…you can’t trick me. No matter how much you try. I…can’t be tricked like this, not like this.” The hand around her own pulled back, and when she looked around, the girl was gone, yet her words still stuck in her mind along with the clinging implication.

What if she was wrong?

“Then you will sleep for eternity,” a new deep voice jarred her out of her reflection. Another armored Ethereal, this one bearing more resemblance to her Battlemaster approached. But his armor was golden, not grey like most. In his hands was a Guardian saber hilt, a double-sided one. “Appealing to your empathy and logic is clearly lost on you by the minds which inhabit the gestalt. You consider yourself a woman of logic and reason, yet you deny the evidence before her. You are Dead, like so many in this galaxy despite being offered the rare opportunity to ascend beyond such things.”

“And who are you?” She raised one of her swords.

“Idance, and like many others who stepped onto this world, I aspired to become a Battlemaster,” he stated. “And the Bringer showed me the truth of the galaxy. In all of its harsh reality and brutality. And I have watched you on this world, and your coddling will come to an end. What do you hope to achieve Yang Shuren. What importance is your life in the scope of a galaxy?”

“A galaxy?” She sniffed. “I don’t care about that. I will help the Battlemaster conquer my species and rebuild it into something worth preserving. I will kill all of those who’ve taken advantage of me and others, who’ve hurt myself and those I care about. And then?” She shrugged. “I’ll endure, and help the Battlemaster.”

“All you achieve can be undone, and anything you do will be undone if you continue on this path,” came the warning. “It takes far fewer to undo progress than create it. Your own species is rife with this short-sightedness. Progress undone and lost by the ignorant and fearful. Your kind are driven
by emotion and manipulation. You are children surrounded by equally blind adults; you require
guidance, but those who seek to control you are just as inept, and filled with just as many failings.
Your legacy will achieve nothing, you will be nothing, everything you build will be torn down.
Perhaps before your eyes, perhaps long after your body expires. As of now, it does not matter.”

He jabbed a finger, his words jabbing at her with such intensity that she took a step back. “You are
Dead. You are a Dead woman, conceived from Dead parents of a Dead species. Now you fight for
Dead masters who follow in the steps of the Dead. You are walking the path of the Dead along
with many others. Your legacy is as fragile as a Human life. Your bones will be argued over, or
crushed under the eyes of future cycles who wonder what could have happened to you. But they
will be as Dead as you are. Their fates assured forever.”

He was close to her now, the assaulting words rendering her mute, so strong was their intensity.
“But…” he said, voice soft. “There is salvation. It is possible. You need not be dead, your species
need not succumb like so many. You are afraid, it is understandable. The truth is terrifying. What
is the point of existence if all it will ever amount to is nothing? He has seen the cycles reap their
harvests over and over. You know this truth.”

He clenched a fist. “Accept this truth, Yang Shuren. Do not let the fear drive you to continue the
path of the Dead. He is no Imperator. He cares about the future of all. He wants them to join his
Embrace and be forever protected. I have seen the memories of galaxies in flames, and it will
happen once more. But now though…now hope can potentially bloom. Death can be made
obsolete. Imagine a galaxy where death no longer has hold on those who are saved; who can
continue safe in the knowledge that they will be forever preserved by his will and love.”

The massive Ethereal turned away from her. “I have said what I wished. Go, and I would ask you
think on what I say. I live, regardless of what you tell yourself or not – as well as those you have
already spoken too.”

The Ethereal dissipated into nothing, leaving her standing before the empty city.

Too many of those words echoed in her mind.

You are Dead.

Conceived of Dead parents of a Dead species.

You fight for Dead masters who follow in the steps of the Dead.

How much of this was true…”

How much of this had happened in some form before.

Cycles. It was called that for a reason.

Were they doomed from the start? Did anything they do…matter?

She walked forward, shaken and distracted. She didn’t see the specter of the Bringer until she was
much closer. This time she didn’t bother to tell him to go away, she wanted to, but she was thinking
too much now. “There are many more who wish to impart their wisdom, child,” he said as she
approached. “Yet I feel that you being overwhelmed would serve no one.”

She looked around the divided city. “What is this place?”

“The past, present, and future,” the Bringer stated. “Your situation is not unique. So many others
are already subverted and under the spell of the Sovereign Ones. Even now the servants of the Synthesized operate and prepare. And I still see all, and this is what I wish to show you. The galaxy is violent, savage, and brutal. It continues now, and will continue in the future if nothing changes. Follow me, child. See the realities that are taking place now in this galaxy.”

He gestured, and she decided to follow him into the towering and shining structure. It seemed inviting enough. Inside it reminded her of a church, and that may have been what it was. There were rows of shining white benches which faced an elevated altar and before it was a blue and white rug with symbols she didn’t recognize.

Small rivers ran along the path through the center of the pews, pouring from small artificial waterfalls which poured from the sides of the altar. Towering over everything was a statue depicting…something…an alien, likely. Perhaps their being of worship? It was illuminated by tinted light which came from stained glass etched with the white and blue symbol.

The church as a whole was highly elevated, with high ceilings which were angled and were segmented with more stained glass depictions of things she didn’t recognize. Alien music wafted through softly; beautiful in all honesty. The Bringer sat on a pew in the back and she joined him, even as they watched the other aliens that wandered through.

They were definitely…something she hadn’t seen. Wearing dresses or robes, all of them seemed female whose skin tones ranged from purple, to blue, to white in rare cases. An aquatic species originally, if she had to guess. The statue figures may be males or other aliens which possibly ruled over them? Their language she didn’t recognize, though it was pleasant to listen to.

“What is this place?”

“A temple,” the Bringer was amused. “To a false god. Not atypical for Sovereigns, but they cannot offer anything more than any other mortal. They cannot protect against the others of their kind. They cannot protect their thralls against the harvests. They cannot transcend death, or offer the same to their subjects. They are frauds and false. A god who will not intercede for his subjects is no deity, but a coward.”

Yang grunted. “And you’re not.”

“Death has no hold over me, Yang Shuren,” the Bringer said with calm confidence. “That barrier has been forever shattered, and I do not hoard this gift to myself. I walk among my people, I walk among Paradise through the beings you encountered. The Saints as they are called by my more eloquent children. Why have believers and servants if you cannot celebrate and live alongside them? Why cultivate followers if you merely intend to ignore them and be silent? Questions, eternal questions which appear in cycle after cycle.”

He turned his fiery psionic eyes on her. “All religion is false in a way, child. While I may be considered a god, I am merely the result of those who have found a way to transcend death. Yet I find myself wishing to live up to these lofty ideals – your species in particular has high standards for deities. Yet the truth is that there is only so much even the most powerful can do. But I can state that at least I do not cynically utilize those who follow me to merely destroy my rivals and discard them afterwards.”

He pointed to an alien which just entered. “The Sovereigns who would be gods reap what they sow. Their hypocrisy is seen even among their own, and when that happens…there is violent retribution.”

There was something definitely off about the alien. Features of contained anger were plastered on
her face. Pushing through the more calm occupants, she moved to the front of the altar where the leader gave her a command. Or a question. Yang couldn’t tell. The alien was saying something, and it seemed to be a fast exchange of dialogue.

Something akin to fear appeared in the other woman, and the first alien triggered something in her hand. An explosion of fire and a blue substance rocked through the church, annihilating the entirety of the occupants, reducing many to particles and destroying most of the structures at the epicenter of the blast, and damaging many others around it. Parts of the roof fell down, and the glass shattered into millions of pieces.

Silence reigned, with Yang and the Bringer the only two occupants still alive. “Who…” Yang shook her head, voice unexpectedly happy. “Who was that. Why did she…”

“Her child was taken,” the Bringer answered, lacing his fingers together. “The hypocrite gods demand much of their subjects, sometimes including their own children. Few defy a god, but there are those who will. After all, there is little more dangerous than a mother who has lost the only thing they care about.” He looked upwards. “And their only goal in life becomes to destroy the institution which took everything.”

He stood, gesturing for her to follow. “Come, child. There is more to see.”

Yang stood shakily, and followed hesitantly. “Why show me that?”

“To give you perspective,” the Bringer stated as they walked. “To show you what people are driven to under the grip of the Sovereign Ones. They perish and sacrifice themselves because they feel there is no choice. There is no hope. One can only submit or die. No freedom. No expression. Nothing that is not mandated and approved by the Sovereign Ones. So many lives perished senselessly. This kind of pointless sacrifice is what I will eradicate. What hold do the Sovereigns hold over their thralls if the fear of death no longer exists?”

“The unknown,” Yang answered. “You make a lot of promises. But what you have isn’t eternal life. Not really. It’s an imitation. A part of your mind which thinks it’s alive and independent, but it can no more defy you than my own limbs can defy my own mind. They are happy living that way because they’re brainwashed to want that. Death isn’t, and shouldn’t be something celebrated, something your own thralls seem to not understand.”

“But what does it matter, if they are satisfied and happy?” the Bringer questioned. “You would prefer they be miserable; trapped in their pointless and empty lives who can enjoy what you call ‘freedom’? What good is freedom if nothing can be done with it? What good is free will if it can never be realized to make decisions which matter?”

He scratched a finger on his beard. “You are driven by anger and rage, Yang Shuren. It defines your existence. It has defined the choices you’ve made. Revenge is a powerful motivator, but when you execute the ones who condemned your family, what will you do then? You do not support the Imperator. You are a traitor to your species no matter what you say. You have none who will truly accept you, nor do you operate under a leader you want or respect.”

“Wrong,” she shook her head. “The Battlemaster is my direct superior and who I follow. I’ll work with him. Help him with his goals.”

The Bringer cocked his head. “You are merely useful to him. A powerful alien, but still an alien. He will never see you as his equal or true partner.”

And Yang realized something rather important. The Bringer really didn’t know much about the
Battlemaster. He didn’t know who he really was or what he really believed. “In that you’re wrong,” she said slowly. “Maybe I won’t be his equal in combat. But I can be his friend. He needs one.”

“Ah.” The Bringer nodded. “I see. You want to belong. You want friends, companionship, love, validation.” He shook his head. “Ah, child. You merely had to say something. All your life you have faced rejection and pushed others away due to who you were. Your family never recovered from the shame of your expulsion…and you consider yourself tainted.”

Yang flinched. “Get out of my head.”

“I do not judge you, no one here does,” the Bringer said as they approached one of the brown webbed buildings. “Do you think you’re the only one who has been discarded by others who has come here? There is a place for you here, child. There is a life, cause, and friends who merely wait for you to take your rightful place with us.”

Yang shook her head, more to block the words than straight disagreement. “I have that now. Even if you don’t believe me, because he’s the one thing you can’t understand. He may not be able to give me eternal life, but he is real and can understand me better than you.”

“You’re attached to him now, understandable,” the Bringer acknowledged. “Then he may join as well. There is a place for all here, including him. His respect for the Imperator continues to wane, that is certainly clear even to me. Our goals align in this way. You both could stay, and in Paradise none will have to fear the death of the other.”

Yang snorted. “I certainly don’t fear him dying.”

“All mortals die, child,” the Bringer said, voice tinged with some sadness. “I am blessed, or cursed, to possess the knowledge to defy death. It is merely a matter of probability. All things, even Sovereigns – will eventually perish. Trillions of years, or merely a day, it will happen. I can never die, nor can the ones who have joined me. We will exist forever and ever in eternal joy and purpose.”

“Honestly,” Yang sighed. “Living forever would get tiring after a while.”

The Bringer just smiled. “You would adapt. You and him. But let us continue – there is something I feel you must see to understand the malicious selfishness the Sovereign Ones possess. This selfishness which consumes trillions upon trillions of lives.”

They walked inside, and an odd smell hit her first. It was a sickly sweet aroma of something burning, with working machines. Inside there were lines of coffin-like objects on the walls, manned by drone machines and on the ground there were additional aliens she also had little idea of what they were. Possibly insectoids, as they appeared to have brown-colored carapaces, but as she looked closer, it didn’t seem like they were all exactly the same.

Some had three fingers, others had six. The number of limbs also varied, as did the overall shape of the body. This appeared to be something which aliens were assimilated into instead of belonging to a singular species. The area on which they operated was open and surrounding an assembly plant which was constructing what appeared to be a machine of some kind – or a spacecraft.

Inside the partially transparent coffins, she could see other aliens inside. Not enough details, but they were clearly cognizant and alive, some of them banging on the interiors. The other aliens ignored them and she watched in muted horror as their screams reached her ears, and were presumably liquified slowly.
“What…are they?”

“Thralls, assimilated cleansers of the Synthesized,” the Bringer explained. “Or whatever name you wish to call them. They are responsible for cleansing the galaxy of the obvious artifacts of previous cycles; fooling aliens into thinking they are among the first. They are collectors and experimenters of aliens, sequencing their genetics and then using it to construct their ships.”

He pointed to the coffins. “The majority are melted down into a genetic slurry which will be used for biofuel of the ships, along with certain other uses. They are the lucky ones,” his fingers laced together once more. “The unlucky ones have their minds destroyed and rebuilt to serve as the enslaved mind of their flagships. Unthinkingly merged with others, they live in an eternal prison, forever condemned to serve under the Prime Directive which governs the Synthesized. A few more lucky ones are chosen to join these aliens – conditioned, grown, and raised to serve as excellent and effective servants.”

Yang swallowed. “This is in the past.”

“Yes,” was the confirmation. “A previous cycle I bore witness to. These aliens are of some interest to me, for they are not like others in the Synthesized. They, in their own way, are their own Collective, a species playing with independence. They are as much victims as those under the Sovereign Ones, but they understand artistry, culture, emotion. They are worthy of salvation, for they simply do not know better. They are created for a singular purpose with all other context stripped away. Yet until they are enlightened…this is what they will do to all species. To your species, as well as any others you care for.”

He motioned her to follow him outside, which she quickly followed, happy enough to leave the abomination. It was almost as bad as what was within the Bringer’s Paradise. “So you think the Synthesized are the actual threat.”

“Indeed,” there was no hesitation. “The Sovereigns will be forever obsessed with each other and their proxy wars. They continually fail to realize that with every cycle, the Synthesized grow stronger. They enter more galaxies, they purge, destroy, assimilate, and conquer. They are not shore by the weaknesses of the Sovereigns, for they are united in a common purpose – be it programming or no, it gives them a significant advantage. The Sovereigns will eventually succumb, and the galaxy will be ruled by machines who can no longer pursue their own directive.”

Yang was silent as she walked. Perhaps he thought that was enough for the Battlemaster to join her, but Yang knew that there was exactly zero chance that would happen, as it should be. This was one case where the enemy of another enemy was not their friend. The Synthesized were bad. The Sovereigns were bad. But the Bringer ultimately wanted the same thing.

Control over the galaxy. Probably more.

There would be no choice with him anymore than any of the other deity-like figures of the galaxy. All would end up being assimilated – or they would die.

Or worse.

“The future for the galaxy will not be the nightmare you envision,” the Bringer allowed a sigh as they walked out of the city. “Such measures will no longer be necessary. Why should they be when victory, safety, and peace has been achieved? No, child, the future will be beautiful; where all beings will be able to live freely without fear of war, disease, or death. Let me show you.”

They walked a short distance and Yang sensed the very atmosphere change as they proceeded. In
the distance there was another small city, but this one she could see was more…lively. There were figures in the distance, occupants who didn’t seem to notice their arrival. There were no guards or defenses she could see, and seemed to have been built solely with aesthetics and artistry in mind.

There was no specific style that she could see that was dominant. There were tall spires and glass temples; skyscrapers and columns evoked comparisons to Roman architecture. They were made out of extremely valuable and precious resources which were further utilized in copious amounts. Marble, obsidian, diamond, no expense was apparently spared in this place.

There were even more buildings which she could not really accurately describe or compare to others on Earth. Many of the buildings were engraved with figurines, scripture, or symbols of which she could only guess as to the meaning. The colors also ranged significantly, which should have clashed horribly, but instead it made the entire city seem vibrant and alive.

A city that was calling to be explored and experienced to its fullest.

Night was falling, and it seemed like there was an ethereal mist which resided over it, making it slightly hazy and mysterious, for lack of a better word. Voice and music wafted upwards, haunting and beautiful melodies that she’d never heard on Earth. Although interestingly, the more she listened, the more she could hear some chords and sounds that sounded like they were originally Human.

A medley of different music from different species?

“Speculmnis,” the Bringer said, moving a hand to display it. “A celebration of life and what all have to offer the galaxy.”

“It isn’t real,” Yang shook her head. “It can’t be.”

The Bringer’s eyes of purple fire just looked at her. “Does it truly matter? It is real, regardless of if it resides on this world or another. If you need additional reason, your Forge is within. Check your hologram if you doubt.”

She did, and he was right. Which at least told her that this place…it wasn’t real.

“Yet before you enter…” the Bringer motioned her over to him. “You will need something more appropriate. Something that is worthy of this place, and the role you desire to hold.” He entered one of the alien ornate rooms, which was simply covered in luxury, with stained glass, carpets, and tastefully integrated color schemes that brought the room to light.

In the center of it was a suit of armor.

Yang approached it hesitantly, giving it a closer look. It was…one of the most impressive pieces of…well, anything she’d seen in her life. Calling it merely armor was too simple a word; it was a piece of artwork. Something worthy of a Battlemaster, which made what she was wearing now look ragged and simple by comparison.

A deep red colored the majority of the armor pieces, with black serving to accent the rest of the suit. The aesthetic reminded her of a cross between the scale mail of a knight, but also a dragon with hundreds of small overlapping plates over the arms and legs, while the chest was a solid plate. The overlapping plates made it sparkle in the light, and pleasing to look at.

A black piece of reinforced cloth wrapped around the back and sides of the waist, some small additional protection for the legs, while a blood-red cape fell from the shoulders almost to the ground. Walking around it, she was…happy…to see that the Chinese flag was emblazoned on the
collar of the armor, a touch she’d appreciated from the XCOM armor.

The helmet itself was medieval and intimidating. It reminded her of a cross between the spartan helmet, and one from medieval times. The eyepieces were armored, and the gap which would normally remain open in a spartan helmet was closed in red bands of metal. The helmet top was smooth, and there were pieces which covered the ears which resembled dragon wings.

“This was created specifically for you to use in your future battles,” the Bringer said as she admired it. “Regardless of what you decide, you will certainly find it useful.”

“Even if I use it to kill your people,” she said, half-paying attention. “Generous…”

“Perhaps,” the Bringer didn’t sound insulted. “Yet death holds nothing over us. You will merely be giving them what they desire. I will leave you to put it on – assuming you wish it, of course.”

She merely nodded. If he was just going to give it to her…well…no point in turning it down. There was the possibility that all of this was an elaborate illusion, but in this case she didn’t think he was lying. Paradise certainly had the resources to make this, unfortunately, so it wasn’t out of the question. She turned to see he was gone, shrugged, and worked to change out of her suit into the new one.

The measurements were perfect, and the suit allowed for a full range of motion far better than her old suit. It wasn’t heavy, but weighty enough to where she didn’t feel like she was wearing just light clothes. The HUD had options for both English and Chinese, something she appreciated, and it appeared there were a few features of the armor she’d have to experiment with.

The Bringer at least knew how to make quality stuff.

When she walked back out, she was surprised to see that the form the Bringer had taken was…different. No longer was it an older man, but one much younger and taller. The skin had an attractive glow to it, and he wore a muted-colored tunic and pants; slightly exotic and formal, but nothing overly elaborate.

Aside from the eyes which were now a glowing red, he had taken an annoyingly attractive form. She narrowed her eyes under the helmet. “Cute.”

“We should aspire to look our best in this place,” he said with a smile, the voice still carrying with it the undertones of power, but now it had a much richer and melodic quality to it. “Let us continue, child.”

So they continued walking, and began mingling with the crowd of Caretakers and other soldier types she remembered from Paradise. But unlike the station, these Caretakers were ornately dressed in curiously old-time Earthen fashions, some close to Victorian. Decorated masks obscured their faces, and some simply wore ornate helmets.

The music grew more intense and there was some cheering and clapping in the distance; a celebration of some sort she wanted to go see.

No. Focus on completing this.

This is all a distraction.

She found it a little more easy to resist than it might have been otherwise. She’d never been the most social of people, nor particularly interested in parties and the like. Although she’d wanted when she was younger to know what it was like to completely put yourself out there without
second-guessing. It was the wrong place for someone reserved like herself, yet she still wondered…

“The dances,” the Bringer said, in response to her unspoken question as to what the commotion was. “We could go observe for ourselves. There is no rush, after all.”

She clenched a fist, more to keep herself focused than out of emotion. “I have a job to do.”

Something that was becoming more and more difficult to focus on. Maybe it was her imagination, but it seemed like the air itself was tinged with psionic energy and tinted with silver moonlight. She just wanted to stop and wander, perhaps eat some of the food or just listen to the hypnotic and rising music.

No. Focus.

She pressed on.

And froze.

Standing in the crowd, one of the few who wore no mask or helmet covering their face, was her dead mother, conversing and laughing at something one of the Caretakers was saying. She was dressed more simply than most of the crowd, and she looked exactly as Yang remembered. Not a day older than the day of her death.

“What is she doing here?” Her voice felt dead even to her, the sword appearing in her hand instinctively.

“Living.” The Bringer answered simply. “You have been destined for great things since the beginning, Yang. I would not let her simply expire when she was dying. It would be a cruel end to a young and defiant life. She deserved more, she deserved Paradise. And now she will live without the fear of death again. She is proud of you.”

“If…” Yang took a shaky breath and her mother caught a glimpse of her, and even through the helmet, seemed to know it was her. With a wide smile, she gestured for her to come. “If you could reach her…why did you not save her?”

“She was saved,” the Bringer insisted. “You are seeing her now.”

“No!” Yang shook her head violently. “That’s not her. It’s whatever part of her you wanted to live on. You found her, you could have healed her if you really cared!”

“To what end?” He spread his arms. “Her inexplicable healing would have caused more pain and hardship not just for her, but yourself and your father. A choice needed to be made…and it has proven to be the right one.” He motioned to the woman who stood a short distance away. “She wants to speak to her daughter again. She wants to be with you again. You want that too. Nothing can ever hurt her again.”

The woman who was her mother – regardless of the truth or not, for she felt too real for Yang to ignore – stood and waited, an arm outstretched and a wavering smile as she wondered why her daughter was not coming.

But the truth was that her mother was dead. She was still dead. This thing…it wasn’t her mother. It was a pretend trick at best, or a horrific taunt at worst. The Bringer was no better than the Sovereigns, or the Synthesized, or any of the other would-be rulers of the galaxy. He was just as manipulative, just as driven by selfishness and power as the rest of them.
He would go so far as to plot her life years in advance; engineer it just for this moment. To let an innocent woman die to gain some leverage over her in a bid to make her willingly join his mad cult.

Maybe she could join and be happy. She could live in euphoria, conditioned under the Bringer’s intoxicating power and never be sad, afraid, or hurt again. She could have everything she wanted or could want. It could very well all be hers. The chance of a lifetime that most would strive for.

But…

But it wouldn’t be real.

She would only feel what He wanted her – *allowed* – her to feel.

She wouldn’t be physically dead, but she would be fake.

A fake woman, existing with a fake mother, in a fake reality, feeling fake thoughts and desires.

Life was cruel, dangerous, and terrifying at time. Yet it could also be rewarding, uplifting, and joyful.

Real.

She would work to make the real world better for others. Not impose a fake alternative.

Tears stung her eyes as she closed them, reaching out in the saturated city around her. The power in her grasp, and she would harness it for one final purpose. With a flash she swung her sword out and decapitated the body of the Bringer’s vessel, and with a free hand clenched a fish and crushed everything in the area around her.

The illusions around her played their parts as their limbs and bodies exploded in mixtures of flesh and different colors of blood. No time to scream even, her mother – or the body at least – was turned inside out in a moment. Fake as it was, it made her hurt all over. The ornate structures and buildings cracked and tumbled into rubble and strips of metals and materials. Creaks, groans, and pops filled her ears as the music turned from a haunting melody to a fractured symphony before it vanished from the wind.

She didn’t realize she’d let out a scream initially, but when she finished, her voice ragged and raw, she knew it was needed. All of the pent-up emotions that had gathered on this trial…they needed an outlet, and the pure destruction she wielded served enough as one. With shaking hands, she lowered them and looked around at the carnage.

The Bringer’s vessel now stood opposite her, but now looked on in clear disapproval.

“Leave,” she spat, lifting her sword again. “You lose today. I will *never* join you. I will make sure you and your *cult* are purged from the face of this galaxy. We may die in the process, but when we *live*, what we feel will be *real*. It will be *us*. I will not submit to you, I will help forge a path forward free of you parasites of this galaxy.”

She directed her telekinetic power towards the vessel. “Now *go!*” Before it could be unleashed, the vessel vanished, leaving her alone.

Wiping off her blade, she stepped through the now-dissipated city as the illusion collapsed, to the Forge she could see a short ways ahead. Allowing the tears which had leaked from her eyes to dry on her face, she pressed on forwards. The worst seemed past. It seemed over.
She would finish the Trial.

She felt something change in her. It was almost like a comforting blanket which was drowning out white noise she never realized was so loud. Soon it became silent and clear. No noise; no distraction; no voices.

Yang knew that she had won then. Now the Bringer would soon have no power over her.

Her mind was her own, and it would never be broken again by another.

The Bringer knew that too now, and yet his final words which appeared in her mind were devoid of threats, anger, or emotion. They were, much like how they’d been, merely filled with a calm confidence that left her feeling cold long after they finally dissipated in her mind.

*You will understand eventually child. Not today. Perhaps not in the near future. But you will.*

*And when you do…*

*I will be waiting to welcome you to Paradise.*

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To be continued in Chapter 46

Voice of the Dread Lord
3/7/2017 – 8:00 A.M.

The room was close to empty and cold; the grey steel walls and floor did little to lower the unease of those who looked within it. From what most people could see, there were no walls or ceiling. Light shown clearly on the occupants, but when viewed in closer detail most wished that they hadn’t looked closer.

Yet they would still be drawn to it.

Mesmerized by individuals standing in shadow, wearing cloaks and armor of the blackest paint. Red lights shone from where eyes should be, silent and foreboding; judging and warning. Still as statues, the figures in black stood silently, comprised of various species and specialties. Later viewings would clearly note a Sectoid and Andromedon, though there would be endless speculation as to if the remaining two figures were Vitakara – or Humans.

But they were merely a background element.

A drone floated silently in front of the small gathering; merely waiting for the command to begin transmitting to the planet which would soon be awash in fire, blood, and death. Transmitting to people that would be dead mere days later. A prophecy of their destruction of which there would be no denying.

Two individuals took the center stage; one known, the other new.

The Dread Lord stood silently, an embodiment of death and terror of which few aliens have been able to so easily encapsulate. The death mask of his helmet bored through the cameras, and to the people who found themselves drawn deep into the black sockets of the shining metal skull. Were it not for the voice, some may have suspected that the Ethereal had not moved in the slightest.

Yet for the leaders; the military advisors of ADVENT and the soldiers of XCOM, they would be drawn to something else. Something which did not fully scale to the threat of the Dread Lord himself, but whose implications were far more alarming. Far more terrifying.

A woman, a female stood directly in front of the Dread Lord, far below his stature and the camera was angled in such a way as to make it appear that the Ethereal towered over her. As if she was under his direction; his control. Or perhaps that they were merely one entity, one unified warning and threat.

One voice.

She wore no heavy armor, and resembled something closer to a scientist than a warrior. Stark shades of gray; contrasting light and dark made up her garments. Gloves were worn over hands which were clasped behind her back. The lab coat she wore shimmered as light reflected off the alloy weave which laced through her garments.

Her belt was strapped with syringes and medical tools, and a pistol of unknown make was strapped
to her leg. There was also a mask of some kind dangling from her waist, though the video never allowed a clear look at it. At the time, it was unimportant. It paled in comparison to attempting to puzzle out why a Human was standing before the Dread Lord, but not as a prisoner or even a noticeable servant.

But as a willing **soldier**.

ADVENT facial recognition would later identify the woman as Sonoda Ikuko, an aging woman of clear Japanese heritage. With hair shored grey and equally colored eyes, whatever empathy or care she had once held in them was gone, replaced with a cool, sadistic glint. A disgraced psychologist, she had been assumed to have been a captive or casualty of the First Battle of Japan.

Yet it was clear something far worse had happened instead.

The drone blinked green. All systems were online. Sonoda pressed a button on her wrist. Thirty seconds would pass and the transmission would begin. It would be broadcast to the entirety of Earth; they would not be able to force their way into the networks, but it did not fully matter. For now, only China was important.

Agents within the Chinese had provided a simple solution to bypass the troublesome Intelligence that was monitoring the Great Firewall. While it was not necessary that the Chinese hear firsthand what would befall them, Isomnum had stated that such knowledge would be beneficial. So each Chinese citizen would be sent a link to the transmission; each restaurant and store would receive a command to turn to a station for an emergency broadcast.

And they would watch. Perhaps the Chinese would shut it down before it could be concluded.

But it would be enough.

The rest of the world…

They would watch with rapt attention.

The drone blinked an orange light. The transmission was beginning. They would be silent initially; allow the message to spread so that there were as many individuals watching this as possible, both from their home televisions and online. All across the world. A second drone slowly floated up beside the first one.

A hologram silently displayed a split screen of major television news networks. CNN, FOX, NBC, BBC, Chinese State Media, and more flashed through. The hosts could be visibly seen reacting to the news, and one by one they began switching to their broadcast until all that was seen was a reflection.

She could see the blood drain from their faces when they realized who it was.

None forgot the Dread Lord.

This **was** addressed to ADVENT in a way, but today they were not their primary audience.

Today that was China.

And so the Dread Lord began speaking.

“This *I speak today and bring a simple instruction and warning. I address the People’s Republic of China. The last of the free nations of Earth; the few who resist the expanding grasp of ADVENT.*
Your time of independence is over. Your leaders have lied to you, they continue to use and deceive you. They are meek and subservient to ADVENT and XCOM; pawns to give the illusion of your independence. Your inferior nationalism. But you are nothing, and never will be.”

The Ethereal paused, and Sonoda spoke; repeating everything he had said in Chinese.

They were their primary audience, after all.

But the Dread Lord needn’t stoop to speaking the language of those who would soon be conquered.

“I address the Communist Party of China. President Qin Yijung; General Cheng Zhen; Minister Han Jie. Leaders of your people. You have exactly twenty four hours to surrender to the Ethereal Collective or I will invade your nation and raze your cities to the ground. Your soldiers will abandon their minds and butcher their comrades. Family will turn against family; and sibling against sibling; your country will drown in blood and fire.”

A moment of waiting as Sonoda repeated his words.

Millions were now watching the broadcast, and while some stations had gone dark, more were still broadcasting what was being said. In military installations and bases across the world, ADVENT officials and officers watched in concern as they understood that the worst case scenario was coming true.

Commander Christiaens didn’t wait for permission to take action. She knew what was coming and the command was given. “We have confirmation of an alien invasion of China. Double the deployment of PRIESTs. We’re going to be fighting Isomnum.”

“I will march through your streets and set alight those who in their foolishness still remain; their bodies will soon belong to me and your dead will be set upon the living as all that you have come to know descends into a nightmare which shall only worsen. Your last moments will be spent in utter agony and terror, or feasting on your kin as your mind leaves you a broken shell of a person.”

Saudia sat quietly in her seat as she watched, and the Human speaking the previous words in Chinese. “Should we stop it?” Kyong asked quietly as she watched alongside her.

The Chancellor shook her head. Far too late for that. “No. Let him finish. I doubt we could stop it even if we wanted to, and it would only show the world we fear what he has to say. He has nothing more than fear and threats – both of which we can deal with. China will be attacked, we know that now.”

“What should be done, Chancellor?”

“Get me the Commander, and schedule an emergency cabinet meeting. And tell President Qin we’re sending soldiers to help.”

“This is what I promise should you refuse to surrender to us. There shall be no more chances. And to ADVENT, I give no warnings. We shall shatter your empire and crush your spirit as we will this entire world, and no more chances shall be allowed to you. You will have only one opportunity chance to surrender with the majority of your world intact, and you shall have mere hours. Should no surrender be forthcoming, the countries of Japan and Taiwan will be turned into rubble in twelve hours.”

The soldiers of XCOM all watched silently, some seething at the threats of the Ethereal while
mutterings began wishing for death on the Dread Lord and the Human traitor who so easily puppeted his words. Nuan gripped Iosif’s hand instinctively as she listened to the threats against her home; Sierra, with Ted and Ana immediately marched out to get ready to deploy.

Oliver just observed the screen in silence, wondering how many were going to soon be dead in the renewed conflict. Kane crushed the glass he held in his hand before storming out, not even seeming to feel the small shards stuck in his hands.

The Commander simply watched calmly, before sending the signal to convene the Internal Council. The war had just been declared anew.

“The time for benevolence and mercy has passed. You have been allowed to exist unmolested for far too long. Your only decision now is how many will die before you accept your place under the Ethereals. The conditions have been stated. Surrender or Earth will burn.”

The broadcast lingered on the Dread Lord as Sonoda finished the last words, and then on cue the light on the drone flicked to red, killing the connections.

It was done.

The world knew the demands of the Dread Lord.

It remained to be seen if such words would have an effect.

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Situation Room, the Praesidium – Classified Location

3/7/2017 – 8:24 A.M.

Not much needed to be hashed out now that they were all here. They’d all seen the broadcast. “Not a good sign that Isomnum has a large degree of command,” Jackson said grimly, her arms crossed as they stood around the holotable. “Aegis, thoughts on this?”

“Possibly a distraction,” Aegis didn’t sound entirely convinced. “I have a difficult time imagining the Battlemaster willingly putting him in charge of such a major operation. Isomnum’s tactics are…not something he would use unless there was no other choice.”

“And there are other choices,” Zhang added. “It is not as though the Collective is restricted in their actions.”

“Do you think the Battlemaster could have been removed or demoted?” Creed questioned. “Perhaps the Imperator isn’t happy with him, and what happened at Paradise wouldn’t have improved things.”

“It is not out of the question he’s been forced to allow others into the conflict,” Aegis agreed. “However, the Battlemaster knows what he is doing and is not as blinded by arrogance as other Ethereals. I know that he has some impact on strategy still, because if he didn’t, we would not have received the warnings of the bombardment on Taiwan and Japan.”

“The Collective is exploiting their space advantage,” the Commander said, looking at the holotable which showed the blue globe of Earth with red tokens moving towards it. “It was inevitable, I suppose. There are enough of the Cleanser Ships coming that I’m concerned that Isomnum is only the first of possibly dozens of attacks. You can’t be everywhere, Aegis.”
“Don’t forget their mystery structure on the Moon,” Jackson reminded him. “That probably has hundreds of fighters and dozens of ships – at minimum.”

“We have quite a few Firestorms now,” the Commander said. “But from what we know about Cleanser Ships, that might not be enough. Nor do we have adequate shields or AA defenses to reliably take them down.”

“Or enough psions,” Vahlen added. “Trained ones, anyhow. And ones who can sustain a barrier for days on a moment’s notice.”

“I will say there is some good news,” Shen adjusted his glasses as he reviewed something on his tablet. “The effectiveness of the Cleanser Ships is directly proportional to how close they are to the surface. For precise bombardment, they would possibly be in range of AA defenses. Indiscriminate bombing is a different story. If they attack China, we will likely be unable to stop them. However, if they wanted a more surgical strike with limited collateral damage…Aegis, this is what the Battlemaster would pursue, correct?”

“Yes, I believe so,” the Ethereal confirmed. “I suspect it may be a reason why he insisted a warning be given. Japan only has military personnel stationed there, and Taiwan is small and will have adequate time to evacuate. It sends a message without necessarily compromising how he wages a war. He has given a warning, and assumes no responsibility for those who ignore or refuse it.”

Generous,” Jackson said with a snort. “Evacuating an entire country in a matter of hours is certainly doable and especially when we don’t know what to prioritize. But we have been warned, so I guess it’s all fair.”

“It’s better than the alternative,” Aegis said. “Isomnum would not have given such warnings.”

“I’m unsure,” the Chronicler noted dryly. “This Ethereal is melodramatic enough to do such a thing. Isomnum thrives off the uncertainty, panic and fear which is no doubt happening now. People will die in the stampede to evacuate the country and the soldiers in Japan will be paralyzed and uncertain as their death comes to them. Even if the Battlemaster had not made it a stipulation, this is within Isomnum’s expected actions.”

“That is correct – and troubling,” the Commander wasn’t so sure the Battlemaster was behind it when phrased like that. “What is to stop Isomnum from firing an hour or two early? This is not an Ethereal above lying.”

“The location of the Cleanser Ships will be a clue,” Shen said. “We’ll know the moment that they are in range of the stated targets. If they show up hours ahead of time, we should be worried.”

“The question we need to answer is what are we going to do,” Iosif interjected. “We have two minor bombardment targets, and China is definitely going to follow. ADVENT won’t let the Chinese surrender even if they wanted to. And even the Chinese know better than to surrender to an Ethereal who styles himself as the Dread Lord.”

“Focus on China for now,” the Commander said. “An invasion is coming for sure. We’ll need our best there, especially if Isomnum is engaging personally. Chronicler, how feasible would it be for T’Leth to block the worst of Isomnum’s telepathy?”

“That depends,” the Chronicler answered slowly, scratching his beard. “You want to spook Isomnum and send him running? He could confine Isomnum to his own mind and prevent him from affecting anyone else. Not break or control him, mind you, but there is no way he could be
quiet about it. Risky if not done properly. And noticeable.”

“Noticeable in what way?”

“Noticeable in that T’Leth would have to move closer to Isomnum’s location,” the Chronicler said. “T’Leth is skilled, yes, and the Sovereign Orbs will never allow as much direct power as a personal intervention, but the further away a target is, the less precise such attacks become and expend more energy. It is why telepathic communications are easily defended against even by non-psions. It’s expending great amounts of energy and concentration over a significant distance. This is not irrelevant simply because there is a Sovereign performing them.”

“We don’t want people talking about sea monsters right now,” Jackson said. “But if we don’t have a choice…”

“Here is a better solution,” the Chronicler proposed, placing a hand on the table. “Isomnum only directly targets the minds he can sense, mostly a blanket effect if his dossier is any indication. This makes it feasible to hide people from him. We don’t have enough Sovereign Orbs to blanket protect the entirety of China, but we can ensure that the important and critical aspects are secure. The soldiers on the front lines, the government, and ADVENT. Psions will have to do the rest.”

“And we essentially leave the civilians out to dry,” Shen pursed his lips. “We should have the psions protect the critical infrastructure and the Orbs to protect the civilians.”

“You didn’t hear me,” the Chronicler repeated; frustrated. “I said we don’t have enough orbs to cover China. Even if we used every single one to protect civilians – civilians who I will note are currently suffering from a plague, probably poorly trained, and ultimately unimportant factors in this conflict. If the lines break, the civilians are as good as lost anyway.”

“He’s right,” the Commander said grimly. “There is also the matter of transporting them to the right areas. That is going to take time and we can’t have XCOM squads running around depositing orbs everywhere – and in places where civilians could touch them.”

“I was afraid you’d say that,” Shen sighed. “I understand, but I don’t like it. We have enough psions where this should be possible to accomplish both. It’s not the easiest solution, but it is the right one.”

“You are assuming that only China will be targeted,” Zhang pointed out, motioning to the hologram of Earth. “That is far too many signatures for one country; even China. It’s more likely that there is more than one attack planned. Yes, if we pulled everything back into China, your solution is justifiable. But I think that is what they want us to do.”

“Ironically relying on fear,” Creed nodded. “They know we know Isomnum’s reputation and want to do everything to mitigate or kill him. We overreact in China, they more easily attack other nations. China is important, but it’s not worth sacrificing the world for.”

“No, it isn’t, but we can at least make an effort to do what we can,” the Commander said. “Chronicler, we’ll begin sending teams to fortify infrastructure and military positions with what Sovereign Orbs we have. In the meantime, we’ll send a recommendation to China to begin evacuating the country.”

Jackson shook her head. “The country? Of over a billion people? That will never happen, not now.”

“And ADVENT isn’t prepared to handle a refugee wave of that magnitude,” Vahlen added. “If
even a fraction of the population leaves, that’s still more than ADVENT can feasibly handle even in several locations."

“This is ADVENT, not the United Nations,” the Commander disputed. “They’ll adapt to a refugee wave, and then turn them into productive individuals for the war effort. I’m aware that the country will not be completely evacuated, but more people will be saved if they follow that advice than if they stay and hope for the best. It’s the difference between losing the majority of the Chinese population, or a fraction of it. Anything to mitigate the effects of Isomnum should be taken.”

“A reasonable approach,” Zhang gave a short nod. “The best we can do, given the situation.”


The Commander knew that was going to come up, and none of the possibilities were good. “Only two possibilities for her. She’s being controlled, or she is a traitor.”

“Or the result of constant psychological manipulation and grooming,” Aegis pointed out. “Isomnum enjoys doing such to aliens. Twisting and destroying them, then reforging them into creatures loyal to him without question.”

Creed pinched his nose. “None of those bode well for Patricia.”

“No, they don’t,” the Commander agreed. “But until she shows up, we can’t worry about her. Ideally, we should try and capture this woman or one of Isomnum’s soldiers. That may give us more answers as to what is going on. But we should not focus on Patricia – or her situation – until she either becomes relevant or this situation is resolved.”

“Yes, Commander,” Creed acknowledged. “Orders?”

“I want no fewer than three squads in China,” the Commander said. “Possibly more. Put ten squads together and prepare them for deployment. Jackson, Zhang, Iosif, and Creed; all of you will be coming with me to China to join Saudia and her staff. This is going to be a possibly long-term coordinated defense. Aegis, you and Caelior will need to also prepare to deploy on a moment’s notice. Understood?”

“Yes, Commander.”

“Dismissed, we have a lot to do.”

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ADVENT Commander – Switzerland

3/7/2017 – 9:09 A.M.

“We are deploying several ADVENT legions to the major cities where we are expecting an attack,” Commander Christiaens stated to the small assembled collection of cabinet members and military officials. The overhead hologram depicting the Asian theatre was complete with small graphics and colors to easily distinguish the actions which were taking place.

“Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing are all cities of target,” she continued. “The Chinese regions of Fujian, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang are under direct threat due to their proximity to Japan and Taiwan – both nations named in Isomnum’s threat. It is also possible that the Hainan region will be targeted for the aliens to use as a staging ground to assault the mainland.”
“Should we even expect conventional tactics from Isomnum?” Weekes inquired, frowning in his armor. He was preparing to supervise the operations in China personally. “His dossier paints him as atypical, even for Ethereals. Most of whom don’t follow conventional tactics or wisdom with the exception of the Battlemaster.”

“We are working under the assumption that Isomnum is working under the Battlemaster,” Christiaens clarified. “We have and continue to be in communication with XCOM who have Aegis to give his own insight. They currently believe that it’s likely that the warnings against Taiwan and Japan were stipulations the Battlemaster ordered, and Isomnum would not necessarily have stated them.”

“But this is speculation,” Saudia wanted to clarify.

“Yes, Chancellor,” Laura said. “But informed speculation. The dossiers on the Imperator, Battlemaster, and Isomnum all indicate that Isomnum is likely not operating purely on his own, and this is part of a larger plan. While we can’t absolutely state that the Collective will follow conventional tactics and wisdom – we can make some logical assumptions.”

“Also keep in mind that it is unlikely that there will be a significant organic component to an invasion of China,” Elizabeth interjected. “Due to Isomnum’s…aura…that would be unwise, and his dossier indicates he enjoys taking part in such activities. We should expect a Custodian-heavy compliment, with additional heavy vehicle support. Sectopods for sure.”

“I was getting to that,” Laura shot the Director a nod of thanks. “Due to this predicted compliment, ADVENT legions are being primarily equipped with anti-armor equipment and electronic-based weaponry. MDUs are being outfitted with gauss and missile weaponry as well.”

“ADVENT Special Forces are being similarly prepared, as well as a select team of soldiers from the Phobos Project,” Weeks stepped forward. “There are fewer Hussar and Cuirassier units, and are being supplemented with Dragoon and Lancers, the latter of whom have been augmented to a degree with WHEEE cannons provided by XCOM.”

“Sorry, what?” One of the officials asked in a confused voice.

“Electrical-based weapon,” Weekes answered immediately with a snort. “Cute name, but the thing fries Andromedon suits. Can’t think of a better weapon to use against a mechanically-based army.”

“I have also been keeping in contact with President Qin,” Saudia said, taking her cue to begin. “He has, at the insistence of XCOM and our own support, begun the evacuation of China, first prioritizing the major cities and regions. Borders are being fortified with ADVENT and PLA soldiers. If Isomnum attacks personally, the fewer people that are there the better, and our focus needs to be supporting and protecting the soldiers.”

“Evacuating the entire country is impossible,” an official said, shaking her head. “What is he thinking? Especially since there are hundreds of thousands sick?”

“Because unlike the Battlemaster, Isomnum has no qualms about killing civilians,” Laura said coldly. “He wasn’t putting on a show in that broadcast. He fully meant everything he said. No, it’s not feasible to evacuate the entire country, but he frankly doesn’t have much of a choice.”

“And where are they all going? The ones who get out?” Was the next question.

“That is being decided based on their region of origin,” Saudia said. “Out of concern for possible similar invasions, all refugee points will be deep inland. This includes northern India, Mongolia,
Kazakhstan, and Russia. These regions are being sent additional personnel as we speak to handle the anticipated large number of refugees.

“Does this include the infected?”

Now that was a touchy subject. Saudia exchanged a look with Laura. “That depends on the region,” Saudia said slowly. “Regions and cities inland are moving quarantined individuals out of the country, at least those who are recovering and are somewhat self-sufficient. The ones along the coast are not; they cannot afford to be prioritized. Patients which are failing or dying are in the process of being euthanized and extremely sick individuals are being offered the option. Standing orders are to euthanize all infected non-combat personnel if a city comes under attack.”

There was muttering which broke out briefly after that. No one liked the idea, but the Commander had made a good point that it was entirely possible that cities could be under siege for days, and infection could spread rapidly especially if not all individuals were vaccinated. As of a few minutes ago, the PLA was working to transfer all quarantined soldiers further inland to prevent this. She doubted it could be completed in time, but some lives would probably be saved.

“Concerning the threat to Taiwan and Japan, we are taking appropriate actions,” Laura said, as the hologram focused on that region of the world. “We are sending ships, aircraft, and personnel to immediately assist in the evacuation of major Taiwanese cities including evacuating the government. Major military bases are also being evacuated and divided into smaller cells to go to pre-designated locations and reconvene when the situation is resolved.”

She focused on Japan. “We’ve initiated similar protocols in Japan, as well as moving several nuclear submarines near the coast. Should Japan come under bombardment, several nukes will be launched to take out the Cleanser Ships – which XCOM has stated will be responsible for the bombardment. With that said, we are anticipating significant infrastructure damage of Taiwan and Japan which will not be recovered easily, and there is a high possibility that the Collective will follow up this bombardment with ground invasions of the countries and use them as further staging points.”

“We are also preparing for additional invasions of Korea, and the majority of southeast Asia,” Laura added. “Korea can likely hold out for a significant amount of time, but we are not as fortified in countries such as Vietnam and Thailand. We expect China to be the major thrust, and for that conflict to spill over into the nearby regions. Yes?”

The officer she pointed too nodded. “We are assuming that China is the only target. What if there are more?”

“Then we will deal with them,” Laura said. “XCOM also suspects that there are multiple offensives, which is why we’re being careful not to overcommit to any singular one. We’re preparing for a major attack on China, but if there are others, we will be able to defend and respond accordingly.”

“Have we identified the woman in the broadcast?” Another officer asked.

“Yes, a certain Sonoda Ikuko,” Elizabeth said. “We’re not sure how exactly she’s ended up with Isomnum, but it surprisingly indicates that at least some of the captives are screened for use. Ikuko was a Japanese psychologist who was stripped of her license and arrested a decade back when she was caught participating in experiments on patients without their consent.”

Elizabeth consulted her tablet again. “From what we can tell, she was still serving her prison sentence – from all accounts she was a model prisoner – and when the aliens attacked Japan she
was present and still in prison. We had assumed that the aliens had either captured or killed the occupants. She’s the first prisoner that has reemerged. In short, she fits an individual like Isomnum surprisingly well. Aside from that, we can only speculate as to what her actual role is. XCOM is unsure as well.”

“Mind games, most likely,” Weekes snorted. “It makes a compelling image when a Human gleefully repeats the words of a melodramatic alien who unironically calls himself the Dread Lord. Either way, she should be put out of her misery if we ever find her.”

“We’ll cross that bridge if we actually come to it,” Laura said. “That is the current response, and will be updated every half hour until Isomnum’s first deadlines pass. Any emergency developments happen, you will all be informed. The Chancellor and myself will be making statements to the public shortly. Good luck, and dismissed.”

She gave those in the room a salute, and each of them mirrored the gesture.

Back to work, and back to war.

***

ADVENT Base, Busan – South Korea

3/7/2017 – 10:42 A.M.

“Do you think that we’re going to be attacked?” Beatriz asked as they armored up.

“Again?” Aleksandra snorted. “Aliens keep trying. They die again.”

“Can’t really argue with that,” Nobuatsu added, hooking a medkit to his waist. “This would be… attempt two or three to take Korea?”

Duri checked his rifle, and grabbed his helmet. “Unimportant. If they come here, we kill them. They’ll be walking into one of the most fortified bases in the entire world. I wish them luck right before we kill them.”

“With pleasure,” Cara nodded, giving a mock salute. “Looking forward to blasting a few more aliens up.”

“Especially that traitor,” Aleksandra snarled. “I hope she burns.”

Duri pursed his lips; and though he would not actually vocalize it, he felt the same. Everyone knew the Ethereals – the ones who were with the Collective anyway, were malicious, cruel, and faceless monsters. They could be nothing less if they still maintained their position. Not after Seoul or the revelations of their black site they so curiously called Paradise.

At this point he was not surprised at what the Ethereals were capable of. The threats of the one who called himself Isomnum were hardly shocking anymore; merely something he expected from their kind. At least this one was honest about it.

But the traitor which had stood with him was far more sickening. Perhaps she was under his control; a puppet of the alien. But it still made him furious that the slight possibility that there were willing collaborators was actually plausible. Perhaps it was a solace that it would only attract those who were as fucked up as the Ethereals themselves.

Either way, he doubted that she would show her face in battle. Such an individual; a puppet, was a
coward. Not to mention that the only nations explicitly named were Japan, Taiwan, and China. Mostly China. He would not be surprised if Korea was attacked after Japan, but he was not expecting it initially. It seemed more likely to him that they’d be transferred to the front lines.

His squad was mostly the same as the start of the war, with only two casualties (something of a miracle, in all honesty), battle-hardened, and he knew they were recognized by some of the higher-ups. Not that he cared so much anymore, it wasn’t like he had a home or family to go back to. If he died in combat now…well, he wouldn’t have to worry about leaving anyone alone.

Still, he would not intentionally do that to the rest of his squad. They had lives, friends, and futures. If they were moved to the front lines, he would not contest it, but he wouldn’t intentionally request it.

“Duri?”

He snapped out of his self-imposed trance when Cara shook his arm, her head cocked and voice mildly concerned. “Yes?” He said, with a short shake of his head. “You were saying?”

“The Chinese,” Miguel was saying. “What do you put their chances at?”

It didn’t take him long to give an answer. “On their own? Dead. With ADVENT? They have a chance. Depends on how much we want to commit to it.”

“Don’t know what the Chancellor is thinking here,” Cara leaned against the locker, arms crossed. “She’s been treating China way too nicely. Diplomacy is one thing, but we shouldn’t be putting our soldiers out there to defend a country that isn’t even ADVENT. Not until they actually join us. Otherwise, why bother joining ADVENT when you get the benefits anyway.”

“Strategy, Cara,” Nobuatsu said. “Why force China to join you when it’s pretty much guaranteed that they will when all this is done? You really think the Chancellor is going to send several legions to China without a guarantee that by the end, Qin will willingly and happily sign onto ADVENT after we literally save his nation?”

“I don’t know,” Cara shrugged. “The Chinese have made something of a point to keep themselves out of ADVENT.”

“That was before an Ethereal threatened an invasion,” Beatriz reminded her.

“Like the Chinese actually thought they could go the whole war without fighting in it.”

“Nobuatsu is right,” Duri said with a shrug. “China will join ADVENT when this is over. If they don’t, I expect they will be annexed for the sheer stupidity such a decision would require. A non-issue. Chinese independence is over, and everyone knows it. The smallpox epidemic essentially guaranteed that.”

“Stop making sense,” Cara said with a slight smile. “Well, I’ll admit I’ll be a little disappointed if the Chinese give in without some kind of fight. I’ve been kind of hoping that the Communist Party is deposed and replaced with Taiwanese leadership. A poetic end, I think.”

There were some chuckles from the group at that. “I’d pay to see President Qin sign over the country to Taiwanese leadership,” Miguel chuckled. “I’m almost sad that won’t happen now.”

“Hey, we don’t know that,” Nobuatsu said. “Knowing our Chancellor, I wouldn’t be surprised if she makes the ‘ADVENT transition team’ or whatever they’ll call it majority Taiwanese. What is China going to do about it? Not join ADVENT?”
Duri did crack a smile at that. Personally, he doubted that Saudia would be that petty. She was a professional, and relations with the Chinese were apparently good enough that she was taking the overly nice approach to assimilation. So if the Chinese played their part, he doubted the Chancellor would screw them over, even when she very easily could.

No, the only people who truly deserved to be screwed beyond redemption were Betos and her traitors. Even if they weren’t alien collaborators, defectors at this stage were essentially traitors to the species all the same. A shame nothing had been done to them during the lull, but honestly preparing for an actual threat was more warranted.

“Alright, is everyone ready?” He asked, after he did a final check of his equipment. “We’ve got a lot of preparation to do. We might not think the aliens would attack here right now again, but Command definitely isn’t as convinced.”

“Ready as we can be, Duri,” Cara confirmed, putting her helmet on and giving a thumbs up. “When you are, Officer.” The rest of his squad echoed similar affirmations.

“Move out,” he ordered as he took the lead. “After me.”

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The Prism – Classified Location

3/2/2017 – 10:17 P.M.

She’d mostly made her way back to the ship numbly after she’d found the actual Forge and made her weapons. It was simpler than she’d expected; merely a matter of following the instructions she’d memorized. In the end it didn’t really feel like the construction itself meant much; it was a beautiful set of weapons from a mechanical standpoint, but compared to what she’d experienced previously…

Well, Yang felt almost hollow inside. Alone.

Considering she was now telepathically severed – or blocked – from the Psionosphere, maybe that was the source. It was strange just how used she’d gotten to being able to sense at minimum the emotions of those around her, if not their thoughts. All gone now, and at most she could sense emotions if she actually tried. The Battlemaster had said she would be able to receive direct telepathic contact, but that was it.

It was with only mild interest that she’d confirmed that the so-called “Dead World” was very much not dead and was instead just a very odd planet. This was confirmed when she’d departed the planet, and could look out and see it for herself. It was…well, it had raised questions. Ones she would ask at some point. Perhaps now.

The Battlemaster had been waiting when she’d returned to the Prism. He didn’t seem overly surprised at either her armor or emotional state. Maybe this was common back in the Empire, which was why he didn’t inquire immediately. He merely gave her his congratulations and took her to the kitchen area where there was some food for her. She didn’t ask if he cooked it himself, as it wasn’t important.

She wasn’t hungry at first, but as she took small bites she did realize that she really did need food. So between all of that, she told him everything. She hadn’t necessarily intended to, thinking initially that the trial was a personal experience only to be known by those who participated in it. But now she just needed to talk to someone about what happened, and the Battlemaster was
literally the only one who could probably understand.

It took several hours to get through everything, and aside from a few clarifying questions, he mostly just let her talk, moving as fast or slow as she wanted. It was...difficult to convey everything, but he seemed to understand in some capacity. Although the Avatar Project might end up changing this, at least in some way.

The Battlemaster was quiet for a few moments after she’d finished. “Your resolve is admirable even in the face of what you experienced. I suspect many other Ethereals would have succumbed if they were in your place. With what you know, you were far more vulnerable. Well done.”

She pursed her lips. “Really? If I remember, most Ethereals who took the Trial passed.”

“Correct,” the Battlemaster said. “But knowing what I know now – and in what you have described – the Bringer is far stronger now. More dangerous and active. And as I said, you are aware of certain truths about this galaxy that we were not privy too. The Synthesized, the Sovereign Ones – and the Bringer himself. And yet you still resisted him.”

“So did you know what it was?” Yang asked. “Did the Battlemasters?”

There was some hesitance as the Battlemaster considered, resting his lower arms on his legs. “Only the highest in the Empire even knew some of the details on the Trial. We didn’t know what it was; there was discussion on if it was an actual entity or the effect caused by the removal of the veil of the Psionosphere to reality. All we knew for certain was that it could tailor itself to make Ethereals kill themselves willingly by somehow convincing them – and that those who stayed on the planet long enough would become immune to telepathy.”

“You never researched it?” Yang sipped her water. “I’m surprised at that.”

“If it was effective enough to make Battlemasters fail,” he answered. “There was significant concern that any researchers would kill themselves or others if exposed to it for even a short time. The risk was too great. I suspect that in time, attempts would have been made, but the Synthesized ensured that would never happen.”

“And the whole...‘dead world’,” Yang absentely waved a hand. “A lie.”

“A lie known only to us,” the Battlemaster confirmed. “We saw what everyone saw when the first Ethereals stepped on the planet. A world devoid of all life. Fate or chance led to its discovery, and its story was born from there. We didn’t know why the planet memetically forced all individuals to see a dead planet, but it did.”

“Probably the Bringer wanting to remain inconspicuous,” Yang guessed. “People are unlikely to step on a dead world. And the ones who do are...” she trailed off, shaking her head. “Dead. No way any ordinary people could withstand what he would do to them. I’m surprised he even allowed the Trial to be established at all.”

“The situation was different back then,” the Battlemaster said. “The Bringer appears...more awake now. More active. Back then...I did not experience the same things you did. There were no cities, and it never seemed like the Bringer directly spoke to me. I saw things, yes. Spoke with individuals I believed were apparitions.”

She perked up, not expecting him to reveal details of his own trial. “What did you feel he wanted you to do?”

“I saw aliens which had never been seen in the galaxy,” the Battlemaster said wistfully. “They
warned that the Empire would die. I saw our destruction, and the destruction of other civilizations by the Synthesized. I didn’t know it at the time. The unifying voice insisted that the only way to ensure the survival of the Ethereals was to join the gestalt; to join him.”

He looked back to Yang. “A paradise. Their terminology appears to have changed little. I believed it all illusions and lies, of course. I actually considered the possibility that the Overminds were behind the entire Trial. After all, what could possibly threaten the Ethereal Empire? There were none who existed that could come close to our power and size. It was…easier to ignore. My ignorance saved me, and many Ethereals. That, along with a weaker Bringer.”

Yang pushed her empty plate away and rested her arms on the table. “You think it would be different if you knew he was telling the truth?”

“If it was the first time I had heard of it, if I hadn’t had time to consider it in a more objective light, I do not know,” the Battlemaster admitted. “At minimum it would have been more compelling. I would have done much to ensure the survival of the Empire and the eradication of the Synthesized. I would like to think I could resist as you did, but that is something one cannot know until they are placed in that situation.”

“Well, if you took the trial today you would pass as easily as I did,” she shrugged. “Never thought I’d say that an Ethereal was my moral compass, but it helped me down there. None of us are saints, but you know right from wrong.”

“Today? Yes, I am older now. Wiser…” he trailed. “But back in my youth, perhaps I would not have been. Your words are appreciated, it is good that I could assist in that way in your trial. It has been a...long time since I’ve had a student.”

“I guess the Imperator made a rare good choice then,” Yang nodded. “I know you weren’t exactly thrilled about the idea. With you managing the Collective military and all that. Understandable.”

“But it appears to have worked out,” the Battlemaster nodded. “You are as worthy of a student as any Ethereal. It is unfortunate the potential of aliens went unrecognized in the Empire. Perhaps then we could have made a more successful stand.”

“We have another chance now,” Yang said. “Assuming the Imperator doesn’t make any more stupid decisions, I have a good feeling about the future. Earth will be conquered and my species will assimilate. A union of Ethereals and Humans. Don’t know if even these mysterious inner galactic species can withstand that combination.”

“I suspect that at some point we will find out,” the Battlemaster agreed. “But right now, let us focus on only one war at a time.”

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*War Room 16, Collective Mars Base – Mars*

*3/6/2017 – 7:10 A.M.*

He stood alone in the room. Contemplating on the moves both alien and Human would be making in the coming days. Quite intriguing to see play out, with many possible outcomes and predictions. The Dread Lord fool would serve as an adequate distraction while the main invasion commenced.

With that said, the utilization of Isomnum was yet another questionable decision in this conflict. It would do nothing but ensure the fall of China to ADVENT, and guarantee a wave of condemnation against the Collective. Which appeared to be the opposite of what the Battlemaster and Imperator
intended.

Such mishandling.

Too many internal Ethereal politics he was unaware of.

Too many unknowns.

*Distasteful.*

A hand held a hologram as he looked at the man in the image. Elderly, frail, an old shell of a Human whose time was long past; clinging as the symbol of a country which had fallen and been reclaimed. He studied the old face, the wrinkles and cloudy eye which had supposedly been the result of a failed break-in.

A story he found unlikely.

Humans had an interesting fascination with the past. It was one thing to remember and honor the past, it was another to continue to be stuck in it. It was not strictly ideology and dogma which kept Humans from advancing, but also clothing and smaller things. A slight annoyance, in all honesty. Why Humans, particularly the Asian nations perpetuated the wearing of robes and impractical clothing was something he did not understand.

Yet it would play to their advantage here.

Twilight would finally fall upon the Japanese Emperor and his family as their country would be reset by fire from the sky.

He set the tablet on the table and rolled it away. He knew enough and how he would properly accomplish his task. He would need to return to his station to acquire a temporary face, and briefly shed the Nemo persona. Merely for a day, but it was necessary while Volk and the other aliens dealt with President Shu-chan.

Then he felt it. The tingle in his head which told him an Ethereal was near. They were quite difficult to ignore, as much as he might want to. But this one was different; certainly one he had never met in person before. He turned around slowly; deliberately, and briefly appraised the Ethereals before him.

*Ah, yes.*

The Ethereal Macula. Another illusionist, though a more competent one than Nebulan. Quite clever in all honesty; capable of trapping victims in their mind as their perception of time was altered. In a way, time certainly was malleable; another aspect of reality that could be twisted and manipulated if only one was intelligent enough.

Unfortunate that he was trapped with the naïve Betos.

Although perhaps that was merely a limitation placed on him.

*Is that the truth, Ethereal? Are you merely following orders?*

Ethereals did not ask permission before reading minds.

*Let him hear the question.*

The Ethereal looked at him for a long moment. Nemo moved to replace the papers and equipment
he had used during his brief stay here. If the Ethereal wanted answers, he would have to ask him questions. In the back of his mind, he knew that the Ethereals felt they were entitled to respect and attention due to their power.

Power.

Fake power. False power. Rule by fear and intimidation.

Not true power.

Not lasting power.

“You are indeed a curious creature,” the Ethereal’s voice seemed mildly amused. “Few are brazen enough to hold such beliefs. Much less express them in your…unique way.”

“You are not special, Ethereal. I will not pretend otherwise,” he saw little point debating this with an Ethereal. “You are no more entitled to my respect or attention than any other alien. I do not know you. I do not respect you. Not yet. Tell me why we are speaking, I have an assignment to prepare for.”

“Very well, alien,” Macula said. “I have been informed about your intentions with Betos. Intentions which will not come to pass. You are not suicidal, not completely. However I can assure you that such actions will guarantee your death, so if you wish to pursue them, inform me now so I can save some time and eliminate you.”

Ah, so Volk – or perhaps Elena – had informed Macula of his intentions. Not surprising, and it served his purpose which was to both gauge Volk, as well as force a meeting with Macula. If that had not happened, the Collective would have been rid of a burden and streamlined their operations in Africa. However, the more likely outcome had come to pass.

“Why is she still alive?” A simple query, but an important one. “You know she is a hindrance to our operations there.”

“A former ADVENT officer and a Human with stated principles,” Macula said, with some frustration in his voice. “Not ideal, it is true, but she will appear more sympathetic and legitimate to the rest of the world than a clear puppet.”

“Then let her die a martyr.”

“And there are express orders not to betray our allies,” Macula finished. “And on this I will not go against the Battlemaster. That would be a bad idea.”

“Then do not tell him.”

Macula gave a short noise; perhaps a laugh. “It is not wise to push the Battlemaster right now, creature. There are some things which are simply not worth the risk. I will work on making Betos as efficient as possible. However, should she accidentally find herself on the field of battle, it would be a tragedy if she were to fall defending her people.”

Nemo allowed a small nod. “A definite tragedy. You at least understand. That is good.”

“And it lectures an Ethereal,” he sounded amused again. “Gives it compliments as if its word means anything. If it matters whatsoever.”

“Your approval or lack thereof is unimportant,” Nemo turned away again and finished
straightening the room. “I am under no illusions as to my status. I do not need your approval, nor will I mewl before you simply because your species bears the Gift. I will complete my assignments, but no more than that.”

“Quite curious, very,” Macula said as he twirled a black blade in his hand. “I’m quite curious as to what the Imperator intends for you.”

That gave him some pause. Mostly due to the unexpected nature of it. Perhaps it should not have been a surprise the Imperator was aware of his existence, but his implied interest was slightly unexpected. No one but the Zar’Chon had reason to care about the science experiment. “The Imperator is aware of my operations?”

“He was the one who ordered you be released.”

Unexpected.

Surprising. He had thought only the Zar’Chon would release him.

Many implications.

Implications he would dwell on when he changed his face.

But one question appeared clearly in his mind.

“Why?”

“That you will have to ask him,” the Ethereal answered. “Complete your assignments well. Once you prove yourself, he will give you the answers you seek. You are not the only one who demands respect and attention be earned.”

A day full of surprises. He was curious. He was…almost motivated to do these assignments well, if only to learn why the Imperator had taken an interest in him.

Something to mull over.

He gave a single nod to Macula. “Noted, Ethereal Macula. Your answers are appreciated.”

Without giving the alien another word, he walked past him out the door to a gateway which would take him to the familiar white room where he could prepare and think in quiet.

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Patricia’s Quarters – The Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

3/4/2017 – 4:19 P.M.

To say that she didn’t notice any difference would be a lie.

At the same time, to say that the changes were unpleasant would be incorrect.

She was still somewhat weak, and Revelean had directly advised that they not begin linking attempts until she was fully recovered. But the Avatar mask he had provided to her was alluring, if for no other reason than she wanted to satisfy her curiosity of what it would be like. The mask itself was fairly ordinary, with a clouded white front which would obscure her features.

Others were undergoing, or had undergone the procedure too, and she knew that their uniforms
would be slightly different. Designed around the Ethereal in question or the Avatar’s own personal
taste. She’d had plenty of input into her own uniform, and to her utter lack of surprise, quite a few
parts of it were based on XCOM armor – with enhancements of course.

But her body itself was definitely different.

When she’d said for Revelean to make her ‘a little taller’, she hadn’t quite expected him to jack up
her height entire inches. She was already a tall woman, and now she could even look down on
Saudia. How Revelean had managed to pull that off and proportionally adjust the rest of her body
to account for the differences she didn’t know.

She didn’t feel uncomfortable or awkward in her body. She could move as easily and smoothly as
if she had always been this size. Of course, mentally, it was an adjustment to get used to the extra
inches the height provided and she had already accidentally bumped her head a few times or
knocked something over when she misjudged her reach.

It certainly wasn’t a bad feeling though. And everything was adjusted as if she’d always been this
way. Subtle things, like her clothes were the correct size, her bed was also a few inches longer and
as far as she could tell, only her original Aegis armor was untouched. Out of curiosity she’d tried
putting some of it on, and couldn’t manage to even squeeze into it.

She was a bit sad that she’d never be able to properly fit into it again, but at least it was being
replaced with something just as good.

It also appeared that the Ethereals had also given her essentially any genetic modification XCOM
hadn’t. Her eyes had been left alone, and from what she had observed, they still worked like
normal. It did seem like the Muscle-Fiber Density modifications had been slightly tweaked, as she
could definitely jump farther than she remembered and her strength had been augmented as well.

It was an…interesting feeling to be able to throw around heavy objects like they were nothing.
Granted, it was something she had technically been able to do for a while now, but had stuck to
telepathy. There was something to be said for applying her advantages in a more tangible way
though.

The Disease Immunity and Secondary Heart modifications had also been left alone, though
Revelean had said that they had been augmented with additional nanite systems to handle internal
repairs and hardening the organs themselves from danger.

The largest addition that she knew was that her entire skeletal structure had been augmented with
MELD. According to Revelean, it would be nearly impossible for her to break a bone and vital
organs (such as her heart and brain) would be protected completely. He had noted that it would
make her entire body heavier, but that the other enhancements should negate that almost entirely.

So far it seemed he’d been correct. It didn’t seem like she was slower than before, though even if
she was, speed had never been something she’d relied upon or needed.

Her skin had also been subtly altered. It no longer had the slightly transparent tint which was a
hallmark of the Biomuscular Regeneration, but looked exactly like her original skin tone. A
cosmetic change Revelean had added, while insisting that the modification itself hadn’t been
altered. She had briefly tested it out by making an incision on her arm, and it seemed to have held
up.

The pain though seemed dulled. Probably intentional. Sharp enough for her to take note, but not
debilitating. An irritant instead of something crippling. A satisfactory middle ground. Of course
she probably would get a better idea in combat, but she had a suspicion that it was going to be…
difficult to hurt her.

It was not going to be a pleasant experience for reasons that had nothing to do with physical
danger.

The moment she revealed herself, she would be seen as a traitor until the end of days for ADVENT
and XCOM. Which was deserved, because she was a traitor. She had her reasons, but it wouldn’t
magically make her not a traitor. But she did feel there was a difference between betraying
ADVENT and XCOM, and betraying her species.

One was more important than the other, regardless of what it cost.

A chime outside her door sounded, and she waved it open. She could tell it was Nico outside, since
there wasn’t anyone who felt remotely like him. He had also recently undergone the procedure,
though unlike her, didn’t look overly different or taller. Though he very clearly hadn’t been
informed of her own changes as he took a step back as she stood, towering over him.

“Hi Patricia,” he said hesitantly. “You look…different.”

“A bit bigger than you remember,” she gave him a smile. “Revelean can’t resist showing off in
some things it seems. Not quite what I had in mind, but I’m not complaining.”

“Well, that’s good to hear,” he said, giving a cough. “So you actually did it. The Imperator choose
you to be his Harbinger.”

“Or Avatar,” she shrugged. “They use the terms interchangeably it seems. Avatar seems more
accurate, but yes, I did. I couldn’t go back; not with everything I know now.” She raised an
eyebrow to him. “You would have preferred this position?”

“Being the public face of the Imperator?” He asked in disbelief. “No way. I mean…it’s a great
honor and you’ll be great at it, but that’s not what I want.” He motioned to his plain black clothing.
“I’d rather keep in the background and not have every XCOM squad trying to hunt me down.”

She smiled at that, and he gave another awkward cough. “Are you ready for that?”

“For what?”

“XCOM,” he clarified, gesturing aimlessly. “Coming after you? You’ll have to fight them.”

“Yes,” she said quietly. “I know. I knew what I was signing up for when I decided to join the
Imperator. The best I can do is make it quick and painless for everyone involved and maybe save
some of them.”

He looked doubtful. “Do you think any of them will listen?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Probably not.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry. I know you were close to some of them. Friends or otherwise.”

“Appreciated,” she said. “I’m not going to mourn yet though. Nothing has happened yet. Even
though it likely will go the way I fear it will.”

She focused on him. “What about you? Are you ready?”

“Yes, I think so,” he said a bit hesitantly. “Me and Sicarius have experimented with the merge. I
don’t know if Revelean gave you—"

“He gave me pretty much every warning. Several times,” she interrupted with a smile.

“Right,” Nico cleared his throat. “It’s…even more intense than he described. It’s impossible to fully explain until you experience it. You see into your partner’s mind, but at the same time it’s yours. Merging memories and knowledge, but at the same some individual and separate.” He shook his head. “It’s amazing when you get over the disorientation. The first time I did it I couldn’t even walk in a straight line without falling over.”

“They said that I would learn abilities he knew quickly,” Patricia said, curious. “Did you learn anything new that you didn’t before?”

“As a matter of fact, I did learn a fairly useful trick,” he said, smiling. “Just a second.” He lifted a hand as purple energy coalesced around it, before a small portal appeared before which he stepped into and emerged a short distance away. “Couldn’t do that before, always had problems with concentrating,” he said as the energy faded. “Turns out all I needed to do was merge with an Ethereal and that problem is solved.”

He nodded to her. “You’re lucky. With the Imperator as your Anchor you’ll know everything. Psionic disciplines you couldn’t comprehend before; powers that were too complex, and so on. I do envy that about you. But after the war is over…” he shrugged. “Plenty of time to practice. Yang is back too, by the way.”

“She was gone?” Patricia asked.

“Oh, you were still undergoing the procedure,” he nodded. “She took the Trial of the Battlemasters. And succeeded.”

Huh, that was interesting. “Good for her,” Patricia said slowly. “What exactly did that entail?”

“Going to the Dead World,” Nico said apologetically. “The details are extremely secretive, so I’ve heard. I don’t know much more than that. But I don’t think the fact that the planet is close to Paradise Station is a coincidence, and Yang definitely didn’t seem happy when she came back. She looked…shaken. But she survived, which Cogitian was mildly astounded by.”

“Aliens breaking barriers,” she said dryly. “He probably didn’t think she could do it.”

“The Trial killed Battlemaster candidates,” Nico reminded her. “Most of whom were probably more powerful than her. It’s definitely an accomplishment that she did it. The Battlemaster is probably pleased as well.”

“He definitely has high expectations for his Avatar,” Patricia noted. “All I had to do was say yes.”

“The Battlemaster is a bit different from other Ethereals, I’ve noticed,” Nico agreed. “Not necessarily a bad thing, though he has clashed with the Imperator as of late. Regarding the war from my understanding. He doesn’t like the Imperator’s meddling.”

“Makes sense why,” Patricia shrugged. “This was his job and only his job for a while, and he doesn’t think everyone else is as qualified or smart as he is in this field. He’ll get used to it though, I’m sure.”

A moment of silence passed between them. “Will you be participating in the operation?” Nico finally asked.
“Not at the beginning,” Patricia answered, thinking. “But if it drags on…then likely. What about you?”

“I will be,” he nodded, lifting a piece of paper. “The Ethereals are apparently willing to start getting rid of the heads of ADVENT directly. With the direct authorization of the Battlemaster. Guess who my target is?”

“Saudia?” Patricia couldn’t think of anyone else at the moment.

“What? No!” He snorted incredulously. “Way too risky right now, so I’ve been told. No, the target they gave me was Rena Shu-chan.”

The name Patricia immediately recognized. “The President of Taiwan.”

“Correct,” he nodded. “And after the city is razed to the ground by Isomnum, their leadership will fall with it.”

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Administrative Command of the Sovereign African States, Abuja – Nigeria

3/7/2017 – 11:51 A.M.

The day had come, and this was as good as she was going to get. The message given by Isomnum had not exactly been something she was in support of, but Macula had explained that this was in service of intimidation and the war – if one had to be waged – would be far more conventional. He was under the control of the Battlemaster at the end of the day, who had some sense of honor. The bombardment of military and government locations was one she could accept as justifiable, especially as an actual warning had been given. She would not have ordered such, as the risk of collateral damage was especially high, at least in Taiwan. Right now in Japan it only appeared that there were military targets.

While she couldn’t completely get rid of the feeling that there was an ADVENT sniper or operative just waiting for the shot, rationally she knew she had nothing to worry about. The building where the address would be held was completely sealed off by SAS soldiers and personally swept by Macula and his operatives for any spies or traitors.

The room itself was fairly grand, and ironically she realized that in many ways it echoed the red and black color scheme of ADVENT. Although there was more white mixed in than ADVENT had. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling of a room which more closely resembled a ballroom. A podium was placed on an elevated section of the room, with a red carpet leading before it over the marble tiles.

Chairs were filled with the ranking officials in the SAS military, which included all of the former ADVENT soldiers and some of the newly risen native officers. A few select aliens were also seated with the crowd. A civilian crowd was also gathered at the back, and they were being thankfully quiet and respectful. Mostly because they knew that today of all days, interfering would just get them kicked out.

Betos herself was clad in her SAS armor. She was and always had been a soldier, and it was important ADVENT remembered that they were fighting one, even if she was still leading the only effective Human resistance against ADVENT. Her helmet was placed on the podium, and the red cape reminiscent of the one she’d worn while in ADVENT was borne in stark contrast to the night-black of her armor.
Keeper stood off to her left, in his uniform devoid of any markings. Hands clasped behind his head and glowing eyes appraising the room – and soon those watching – he was the ever-watchful alien observer. There had been some discussion on if Macula himself should be in the picture, but it was dismissed because Macula didn’t want the public spotlight, and would give ADVENT easy propaganda material.

If an Ethereal stood behind her as she gave a speech, they would just say she was mind controlled. The message would be undercut.

So Keeper had been the alternative.

Mox stood to her right, helmetless like her and wearing his armor. He’d been with her since the beginning and an instrumental part in the initial defection and forming the SAS, even through its growing pains. It was good that he was here now, even if he wasn’t particularly comfortable before a camera. But he didn’t need to speak today.

She did.

“We are ready, Grand Marshal,” Keeper told her, using her official title as the overseer of the Military Branch of the SAS. “Give the signal when you are.”

She nodded, and motioned to the camera crew which would begin filming and broadcasting it around the world. She knew that there would be immediate attention due to the alien by her side. She waited a few minutes for it to propagate, and get the all-clear from the crew in the back who confirmed they were streaming and the link was stable.

“I am Grand Marshal Betos, and Acting President of the Sovereign African States,” she began. “The many people who are watching will no doubt know me better as former Marshal Helsa Betos, the defector. I left when I would not continue with ADVENT’s unrestricted and harsh measures against the rest of the world. As expected, they have branded me a traitor and condemned my name in the history books.”

She rested a gloved hand on the podium. “ADVENT would have you forget their policies of control and deception. They would have you forget the purges of the Middle East, their invasion of Canada, Uruguay and their destabilizing influence on other nations to manipulate them into leaving as we see in the United Kingdom. It is important to understand that ADVENT is focused primarily on deception and lies to achieve their goals.”

She opened a palm and made a short wave motion to the cameras, looking in each one briefly. “Consider how much control ADVENT has in your lives if you are even able to watch what I am saying now. Who decides what is acceptable to be shown on the news? Who decides what is taught to your children and what is appropriate civil disagreement? Who decides which candidates are suitable for election? For those who live in ADVENT – how much control do you have in your lives?”

Betos pointed upwards. “ADVENT controls every aspect of your life, and they hide it cleverly, but at the end of the day, you are merely a means to an end. A soldier, a worker, a doctor; you are just a single piece in their war machine. The world under their control will resemble a sterile realization of what it means to be Human. There will be no independence or free will under ADVENT – only what they decide is what is best for you. But despite what they would have you believe, this is not the only option.”

Her arm lowered, she continued. “It is no surprise that you will fear and hate the aliens –
ADVENT has done much to stoke this fear. But understand that this is not the truth, merely something twisted to served their own purposes as it always is. I have been in contact with the aliens for months now, and they have greatly assisted in the continued development of the nations which have hosted myself and those who made the brave decision to follow me.”

Betos put some additional emphasis on the word *months*, since she derived some joy from the fact that right now Saudia was probably demanding how all of this had happened without her knowing. Someone in ADVENT was going to be getting yelled at very soon, she had a good feeling about it.

“Much of the aliens has been shrouded in mystery and propaganda,” she said. “ADVENT would have you believe it is a tyrannical state where the Ethereals rule with an iron fist. This is not the case. As the name implies, it is a Collective of species. Each one is allowed to develop independently and without direct Ethereal control. All these species are prosperous and advanced – and this could be our future. Not one under the authoritarian and Orwellian grip of ADVENT, but one where Humans continue to develop in unique and divergent ways without the fear of going down a ‘dangerous path’ as ADVENT would say.”

She subtly indicated Keeper. “The Sovereign African States have officially formed an alliance with the Ethereal Collective, and they will back us against the inevitable retaliation from ADVENT. They cannot stand the prospect of there being any option aside from themselves, for to them, there is only *one* path for Humanity. Within the Sovereign African States, there are many. We do not force others to *conform*, instead we encourage *diversity* in all aspects of life; of the different states and peoples. A place that is safe, just, and prosperous.”

Focusing on the camera, she began her conclusion. “This is a direct invitation to all countries of the world – those outside of ADVENT and the people within – that there is more than just ADVENT. Our alliance ensures that we have the manpower and technology to withstand the reprisals of ADVENT – and this can be yours.”

“Each individual and nation faces a choice today – will you choose to stand and defy ADVENT and insist that each Human and nation follow their own path, in their own way? Or will you obey the demands of ADVENT and remain as slaves to their whims; forever bound to their singular and controlling vision of what it means to be Human? I cannot make this decision – it is up to the world to decide what kind of Humanity it wants.”

The cameras knew that moment was the time to end it, and after a few more seconds, the stream cut and the broadcast ended. As they were speaking, diplomats were reaching out to all immediate neighbor nations to discuss the possibility of joining the SAS – and sharing news of the aliens in the process.

“Good speech,” Mox said. “Assuming ADVENT even allowed it to be played. But you know they won’t let anything come of this. Any protest will be crushed.”

“Yes, I know,” she sighed as the room began getting louder as conversation began. “But it was important to include – especially for the holdouts.”

“Regardless of the effect,” Keeper said with some amusement as he looked over the crowd. “I think it is safe to say that someone in ADVENT is getting yelled at.”

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*Joint ADVENT-Chinese Command Base, Beijing – China*

*3/7/2017 – 12:10 P.M.*
“Get me Director Falka on the line now!”

“Yes Chancellor!”

Of all the things she’d expected to have to deal with today, the traitor Betos and the United States African Edition was not something she wanted or needed in her life right now. That would have been irritating enough, but no, the fact that the aliens were openly backing her turned the situation from an irritation into a very real threat.

In a miraculously short time, the hologram of Elizabeth appeared in the recently-secured room which would serve as a place where she could maintain a presence over the coming conflict. Elizabeth – understandably – looked rather nervous. “Chancellor.”

“Elizabeth,” Saudia drawled, keeping her voice calm. “As of this moment, I am currently in China preparing to coordinate preparations for an invasion, the upcoming refugee wave, and overseeing the evacuations and reorganizations of two countries at the same time. In addition to that, there is just under four hours until said countries being evacuated are going to be orbitally bombarded to rubble.”

She raised a finger. “I just got finished with an initial response press conference – which I think went rather well – and what is the first thing I see when I land in China? I see Helsa Betos giving a speech – surrounded by seemingly advanced soldiers. It wasn’t the worst speech I’ve heard, personally. But I honestly could have had my day be better if she wasn’t in it.”

Saudia paused while Elizabeth winced. “There was one other thing…” Saudia paused dramatically. “Ah! I remember! Would you care to tell me how the fuck you didn’t know the Collective was supporting her!?”

The Chancellor jabbed a finger at her. “I am very tempted to have you expelled for gross incompetence when this situation is stabilized unless you have a very good reason for why we had no indication of this whatsoever. You told me that the SAS wasn’t a problem. It’s one thing to not know what she’s doing every minute of the day, it’s much worse if we don’t know she’s getting support from the aliens!”

Saudia took a deep breath, really wanting to throw something. “Tell me what exactly all of your agents down there have been doing. Now.”

Elizabeth swallowed. “I assume responsibility for this Intelligence failure. We don’t know what happened. We’ve been getting reports from our agents documenting the training and development of the SAS military, but nothing even remotely like what was shown. And no mention of any alien involvement whatsoever.”

She took a breath. “Our working theory right now is that our agents or communications have somehow been compromised. Almost certainly an Ethereal behind it, perhaps more than one for a deception this major. We didn’t anticipate something like this due to the Manchurian Restraints.”

“Of all people should know the Restraints are not completely foolproof!” Saudia practically hissed at her, forcing the Intelligence Director to wince. “I know that. It’s your job to know the weaknesses and take them into account.”

“I don’t dispute that, Chancellor, we are prioritizing this immediately,” she answered quickly. “I can assure you that we will determine the cause of the failure and that it will not happen again.”

Saudia gave a joyless smile. “I’m so very pleased that we’re discovering unaccounted for failings
in our operations on the eve of an invasion of China and mere hours away from Cleanser Ships arriving to pound our cities into dust.”

“Your concerns are well-founded, Chancellor, we’re doing everything we can to mitigate them as quickly as possible,” Elizabeth said quickly. “Every agent involved in Africa is going to be questioned by the Inquisitors and Oversight Division. Any compromised or corrupted agents will be purged and our policies completely secured.”

“I believe you,” Saudia said, shaking her head. “I expected better of you. There could not be a worse time for this to be discovered. So yes, you will fix the problem as soon as possible. But because of your failure, the SAS is now an alien-backed threat that we are going to have to deal with in addition to whatever the aliens have planned now.”

To her credit, Elizabeth didn’t dispute that. “Yes, Chancellor.”

Saudia sighed, and rubbed her forehead. “I’m drafting a response to her little speech since this needs to be dealt with immediately in that way. Get the media talking about that, at least. It’s going to pull time away from the evacuations, but I don’t really have a choice. The best we can do is damage control now until China is resolved.”

“Understood, Chancellor,” Elizabeth sharply nodded. “In addition to fixing our intelligence failings, we will assist to the best of our capabilities until this situation is resolved.”

“Considering that was what you were going to do anyway, I’m not going to give you praise for actually doing your job,” Saudia said coldly. Normally she didn’t chew out subordinates like this, but she was stressed and irritated, and Elizabeth had no excuse for missing something this major. “We will deal with the SAS shortly, and if you really want to start making amends you will put together a squad to either capture or execute Betos. Go to Weekes or the Commander if you want to, but don’t be surprised if they don’t have time right now because of the invasion that is coming up.”

“I’ll begin work on it immediately, Chancellor,” she promised. “Further instructions?”

“Start fixing your mistakes,” Saudia scowled. “At the end of this, you will stand before my cabinet, the Oversight Division, and the Congress of Nations and tell them why you deserve to keep your job. You’d best make a miracle happen if you want to keep it. Get to work, I’ve got a crisis to resolve.” With that she cut the feed and sat back down, still fuming.

Shaking her head and expelling another sigh, she returned and began furiously writing. Later she would need to have Aegis or one of the defectors refute Betos’s notion that the Collective was somehow better than ADVENT of all things. Because some idiots were going to wonder if the traitor had a point.

She simply did not have time for this, but she couldn’t let the traitor have the last word.

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Temporary Residence of the Japanese Imperial Family – Germany

3/7/2017 – 2:11 P.M.

A temporary new name and face, although unlike Nemo, this face he was only strictly wearing for the job. He doubted his acting skills would need to be put to the test. No one seriously considered the Imperial Family of Japan worth serious consideration, so there was less…protection…for them than there would be for heads of state with actual political power.
As he thought this, looking into the armored compound with no fewer than ten guards outside and four snipers on the room.

Pointless security, for he was just going to walk in, or more accurately, drive in.

The mind-controlled Human driving the limousine drove to the initial checkpoint and would say that Prince Kaneda was returning to the residence. There had been a Zararch spy watching the Imperial Family for some time. Of all the resident members of the Imperial Family, the Prince and eldest son of the Emperor was most prone to leave, likely because he knew that one day he would assume the title of Emperor.

Today, he had predictably left to presumably meet ADVENT officials. The perfect opportunity to enter with his face. The limo taking him to ADVENT had been dealt with, as the Prince had been temporarily mind-controlled to call ADVENT and inform them that he needed to return to the compound. His body would be found later.

But the face of Prince Kaneda would be useful for a little while longer yet.

A simple matter of the driver handing the identification, and they were inside. He knew the schematics of the compound, as they had been psionically extracted from the living Prince and then shown to him. The first order of business was the disabling of internal security. There were far fewer guards on the inside than outside, which would make his job far easier.

Exiting the limo in the garage, he was greeted with one of the family servants. “[Welcome back, my Prince,]” he greeted in Japanese. “[Your meeting with ADVENT was productive?]”

He readied his throat. The language of these people was less straightforward than most other Human languages. While he doubted it would be noticeable to this old Human, he unfortunately had not had enough time to fully perfect the voice. “[Well enough, I need to think.]”

The man didn’t seem to notice anything. “[Do you require my assistance?]”

“[No, but there is work I need to do.]” The doppelganger of the now-dead Prince walked past the man and into the main compound while he considered his targets. He stopped to get a glass of water from the open kitchen area while he looked around. No guards, and there shouldn’t be any outside the security room. The youngest children – Mashai and Rena – were watching a movie on the television. Good. If they stayed down here it would be easier to grab them.

Today the children would live. He suspected they would be part of some plan the Zar’Chon had regarding the future of Humanity. Or perhaps he would use them as hostages or give them to Isomnum to kill on live television. He didn’t know, nor particularly care. All that mattered was the elimination of the Imperial Family, the extraction of the children, and that no unnecessary individuals be killed.

The third aspect he had added himself. It was useful to send a message to ADVENT. The skill of a true assassin at work, and a professional assassin didn’t leave any collateral damage and was long gone by the time the bodies were found. While this was admittedly not the most difficult of assignments, it had been a while since he had participated in such an operation.

Drinking a glass of water – for theatre, nothing else, as the water did absolutely nothing to him – he moved to the upstairs and rounded the corner of the balcony which overlooked the main kitchen and room. The security room however, was on the third floor and directly at the end of the hallway. Nemo found it interesting that even in their exile, the Imperial Family still maintained some semblance of their luxury, as the colorful rugs and ornate furniture showed.
Unsurprising, perhaps. Humans born to privilege expected it their whole lives.

He gently tested the door handle, and found it locked. Good, ADVENT had some intelligent staff on hand here then. Normally it would force the outside individual to knock or otherwise get their attention – probably through the intercom just beside the door. Or someone could pick the lock since it wasn’t electronic.

He didn’t need to resort to any of those things. The less attention, the better. He applied a bit of strength and he heard the mechanisms of the lock click as they broke. Excellent, he softly opened the door and peered in. The men sat facing the shifting displays of screens, as it rotated through each camera. Both were helmetless and chatting about something.

The room itself was bare in furnishings and only held the table of monitors and several large computers. He filtered out their pointless chattering, closed the door behind him, and walked up silently behind them and without warning pulled them onto their backs and applied a hand to their throat. They were flesh and bone, he was not, and soon they stopped struggling, for what little good that had done them.

He stopped, listened. Good, they were breathing. They didn’t know what had happened or who had knocked them out. He looked at the one who was roughly his size, and quickly removed the armor and applied it to himself. The helmet resting on the table would provide an excellent disguise and no one would question an ADVENT soldier.

Glancing quickly at the name in case someone inexplicably recognized him, he tied the man up at the wrists and ankles, before applying tape over his eyes and mouth and propped the man behind the wall. Not a good hiding place, but it was better than leaving the body on the ground. For the armored man, he began strapping him to the chair (after removing all weapons and objects he could use to free himself), placed the tape over his eyes and mouth, placed the helmet on him, and propped him up.

A good loyal ADVENT soldier doing his job.

Instead of merely destroying the recording equipment, he shut it down, took out the disks and hard drives and stuffed them into a small sack. Damaged hardware could still contain information, and it was best to take that with him rather than risk it being found. The cameras would still work now, they just couldn’t save anything.

He disconnected everything anyway.

Exiting the room, he began his sweep of the third floor. There were only two targets up here, the second daughter to the Emperor Aneka and her husband, Keizo. Their room would be the fourth from the corner. Now he had an easy means of entering, because he would just knock. The woman answered the door, looking concerned when she saw him. “Is there a problem?”

“Possibly,” he answered, adopting a more ‘normal’ voice, primarily German. “There may be a situation. We need to make sure you’re safe. Is your husband with you?”

“Yes, he’s right—” When she looked back, he reached forward and effortlessly snapped her neck and quickly propped her up on the nearby wardrobe, and closed the door behind him in one smooth motion. Keizo stood up from his desk, looking confused.

“What was it?” He asked, looking very worried. “A situation? Aneka?”

Nemo unexpectedly threw the bag of hard drives at him which was enough to daze him, if not fully
knock him out. That was quickly solved with him walking over to the groaning man, leaning down, and snapping his neck in a similar manner to his wife. That out of the way, he lifted the body and walked over to the wardrobe and propped up the body inside, pushing aside the garments stored within.

He grabbed Aneka, and propped her up on the other side. With luck no one would think to check there for a day or so. Well after he was gone. Shutting the wardrobe completely, he stepped back, satisfied. If he could have done so, he would have used the lock, but he didn’t intend to waste time finding it, and improvising would be obvious.

He was also pleased he hadn’t needed to resort to using bladed weapons so far. Those were too messy and left too much of a trail for them to be optimal. Leaving the bedroom, he shut the door and made his way back to the second floor. There were many targets here, several unmarried or widowed sons and daughters.

As he methodically entered their rooms and killed them, he was slightly annoyed that no matter how it turned out, he would not achieve a perfect clean sweep of the Imperial Family. The daughter who had renounced the Imperial Family to marry a man not of high class didn’t quite count, but she was of royal blood. But the other Imperial daughter had inexplicably enlisted in the ADVENT military and he unfortunately hadn’t been able to locate where she was.

Unfortunate, but one woman wouldn’t likely be able to rebuild and the moment he learned where she was, she would join her family.

Killing everyone else and the Emperor was the most important, and soon he was before the residential room of the Emperor. Fortunately the Empress had died some years back, so this easy job would be even easier. A short polite knock was done, and upon hearing nothing, he stepped inside. Emperor Tamotsu was awake, and in his bed watching the news, which were talking about the impending bombardment of Japan.

“Do you think they will be able to stop it?” He asked, not looking to the man in armor. His voice was old and frail, the voice of a man who was close to giving up. Nemo could understand that the subsequent loss, reclamation, and overall destruction the country one was supposed to preside over would likely be difficult for any individual of any species to properly deal with. Even Emperors were not exempt from this.

“Possibly,” he said, moving a little closer. “Chancellor Vyandar and XCOM always manage to think of something.”

He wasn’t even lying there. Humans were adaptable, and it was going to take more than the poorly-utilized fear that Isomnum brought and the Cleanser Ships to prevent that. No reason to not give the Emperor some positive encouragement in his final seconds. “Is there a problem?” The Emperor asked. “You normally do not enter unless there is a problem – or is it bad news…?”

Ah…such a shame the idea had never occurred to him. Well, he could remedy that. “Not bad news, sir,” he said as he walked forward, reaching behind him as if to reach a letter. “We would have received a letter from ADVENT command if that was the case. But she has sent a letter, and I was instructed to bring it to you right away.”

The Emperor’s eyes lit up. “That is…good. I-”

With a lightning jab to the throat to stun him, Nemo transitioned to a grab and snapped the elderly man’s neck. Wasting no time, he hoisted the Emperor up by his neck and carried him to the closet where there was another ornate wardrobe. Propping the Emperor up inside it, he stepped back and
Mission accomplished. It was a...pleasant feeling.

All that remained now was to extract the children.

A very simple task now, one he knew he would complete without issue.

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Taipei ADVENT Command, Taipei – Taiwan

3/7/2017 – 3:01 P.M.

Volk was somewhat uncertain about this mission for two reasons, none of which had to do with the fact that they were about to assassinate the President of Taiwan in addition to whatever ADVENT and government officials were with her. It was a clever way of taking advantage of the situation. Volk wasn’t exactly a fan of the other operation Nemo was undertaking, since from his understanding, the Imperial Family was just being housed there, and it wasn’t like they had any influence in ADVENT anyway.

No, the first thing he didn’t like was how close they were cutting it in regards to the planned bombardment of Taiwan. The city was definitely not evacuated, but the base they were targeting was definitely going to be on the list of orbital strikes. An hour was going to have to be enough, since Nemo wanted the timing done almost perfectly.

Volk had wondered why the President hadn’t evacuated already, but she appeared to be one of those noble types that wouldn’t leave until the last minute. That, and he was fairly certain she was former military or at minimum had a solid interest in the operations, so she might want to oversee that as much as possible.

He did find it ironic that she was going to be flown to China, and from there, to Russia.

Well, he would have if she wasn’t about to be shot in the face.

He did have to admit, that despite preferring good old-fashioned weapons and gear, where his clothes were camouflaged and didn’t provide a lot of protection, as well as being mostly strung together, the Collective didn’t skimp on their tech. Collective-issue Phantom Division armor was comfortable, durable, and provided a temporary cloaking field.

Elena had asked the details about how it worked, and the answer Volk had not even been able to remotely understand, and he knew Elena hadn’t either. The only reason she’d asked was so that later when the mission was over, she could look it up and learn the specifics. Perfect memories were so very useful.

Either way, this had allowed them to set up just outside the base itself; on the roof in fact was where he was staying, and he had yet to be spotted. Snipers including some of his own soldiers and Elena, combined with Phantom Division and Zararch aliens around the area created a noose around ADVENT that they wouldn’t realize until it was too late.

Eventually, they would be able to fight back and all of them knew that they couldn’t fight an ADVENT army. With that said, they didn’t need to. They only needed to kill as many as possible.

“Everyone is in place,” the man, if such a generous term could be bestowed upon him, said. “I will begin momentarily.”
And this was the second issue he was unsure about. The majority of this operation rested on this boy that until a day or so ago he had no clue existed. He wore the same stealth armor as the rest of them, but it was painfully apparent just how young he was. Nico was his name, and Volk didn’t know his story, only that he was a powerful psion and the “Avatar of Sicarius”. Or “Harbinger”.

A new title for Humans who worked directly with Ethereals?

Either way, he didn’t like entrusting the outcome to someone he’d never worked with before, much less someone who looked like he’d just left high school. But he was overruled, and had to deal with it. The plane was out on the tarmac, heavily guarded, but ready for the passengers. ADVENT Ravens were also on standby to protect the plane when it took off.

Volk shot the kid one last look as he placed a mask over his face. It was rather odd, and fully covered it up and to a certain extent reminded him of a scuba mask, if the facemask was pure black. The air seemed to hum when he put it on, and the kid gave him a short nod before lifting a hand and vanishing with a purple-tinged distortion in the air.

“Avatar is in play,” he informed the rest of the team. “Await my shot.”

From what Nico had said, what he would do is go inside the base and begin killing people. When asked for details about how he was going to do that, Nico had explained that he could just tell people to die ‘and they will’. Previously, Volk would think that was the kid saying he wasn’t going to tell them because it sounded too ridiculous to think he was serious. But it was also apparent that psions could do a lot of unnatural things.

Maybe telling people to die was something they could do too.

One of two things would happen when people started dying. Either the President would be evacuated on the plane, or she would be moved to a safe room. If the former, that was where they came in. If the latter, then Nico would kill her. Mostly a foolproof plan unless there were unexpected elements they hadn’t anticipated.

So far there were no XCOM operatives or Sovereign Agents that they’d seen, so they should be good.

The alarm started blaring.

Nico had started.

“They’re aware,” he communicated, although that was obvious. “Prepare to attack. Probably five to ten minutes if things go to plan.”

ADVENT soldiers below were moving around and yelling to each other. Considering the way they were lining up, it looked like she was being moved out. Volk readied his rifle, quite curious to see how effective his weapons were. Unlike previously, the rounds he was using which were just metal bullets, these ones had a small amount of nanites inside them which would release upon hitting the target.

Possibly taking out others near it.

“She is coming,” Elena informed. “Four guards. A full squad behind her.” Eight more soldiers.

“Call targets,” Volk ordered. “Lining up the shot.”

The sooner he took her out, the better. He listened to the snipers call out their targets in quick
succession. When the last one was called, he lined up the shot. Her head was just in the sights, and while the slight obscuring the bodyguards provided might pose trouble for some snipers, it was barely an issue for him.

He fired.

President Shu-chan’s head splattered in a flash of red.

“Target eliminated,” he said. “Fire.”

The rounds from a dozen sniper rifles fired from around the base, killing the bodyguards and the ADVENT squad behind them. The nanites were working and he noted that they’d consumed a good portion of the face and the armor of the nearby (now-deceased) bodyguards. He swiveled his weapon to the Ravens.

Might as well make use of this.

He fired a few shots into the cockpits and engines of each plane, enough to drain the clip. He switched to a second one, though this one was just filled with standard armor-penetrating rounds. The base was now in chaos as the surviving ADVENT soldiers were being shot from all directions and had no idea where to go or take cover.

Volk felt cold satisfaction in how he took down several more soldiers who were hiding from sniper fire in one direction, while leaving themselves completely exposed to him. A few headshots took a few more soldiers out of the fight. He let a few more minutes of the pandemonium pass. “We’ve done enough here, they’ll be coming soon. Fall back.”

There were choruses of affirmation, and right on cue he looked back to see Nico standing behind him, a hand extended. Volk gave the black-masked individual a short nod. “Not bad kid, was it hard?”

Nico looked down at the ADVENT base in chaos, and answered, his voice layered and almost thoughtful. “Not really...no.”

Well, that was good enough for him. He grasped the free hand and with a wave of the other one, Nico teleported both of them away.

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3/7/2017 – 4:01 P.M.

As the Cleanser Ships hung in orbit around Earth, twenty in total with several dozen more in the system, it was ultimately clear that the time for bluffing was over. Those in ADVENT and XCOM knew as the ships moved into position that the Collective would hold back no longer. They had done all they could to prepare for what was coming.

Each Andromedon Captain awaited the command to commence firing. Each one had been given a designated target, and each one knew the distinct possibility that ADVENT might respond with nuclear force. Something they had prepared for and would deal with should the situation arise. They were not blind to the threat ADVENT posed.

As well as the fact that even now, it was a distraction.

Let ADVENT be occupied with the impending destruction of their cities. There was more in play than they realized yet.
The command came minutes after the deadline, well after they had been moved into position. The raw, awful voice which even made the implacable aliens withdraw further into their suits. “Open fire. Scatter these aliens to the wilderness.”

The signal given, the Cleanser Ships opened fire.

They were at the maximum range; excellent for protecting themselves, but poor for precise targeting. Their capabilities were such that if they were close enough, they could destroy a singular building without significant damage to nearby structures. At this range they simply did not have the precise capabilities.

But they would not let ADVENT surprise them again.

Yellow and orange streaks rained down from the sky into cities and military bases across both Taiwan and Japan. The latter country saw the last of their grand skyscrapers and buildings fall into twisted scraps of metal and concrete. Taiwan saw their island pounded by fire from the sky; killing soldiers and civilians who hadn’t been able to evacuate in time.

The warning then came. “[Incoming missile.]”

“[Fire countermeasures and raise shields,]” came the immediate command. The bombardment temporarily ceased as the trajectory of the missile was calculated by the onboard computers, and a missile per ship was fired against the incoming one. The shields were raised immediately afterwards, protection which was strong enough that even capital ships would have difficulty penetrating it.

For it had not been the first time such tactics had been tried against the Andromedons.

The missiles collided in a bright explosion, but not a nuclear one. There were no others detected. “[Resume bombardment interspersed with the pods,]” came the order. “[They will not try that again.]”

After some slight maneuvering, the pillars of fire which rained from the sky were interspersed with orange-tipped white streaks; boarding pods to further destroy the survivors who had evacuated. They had known that ADVENT would not be overly hurt by this attack, if that were the case they would have put up a larger fight.

Their error would be shown. The first wave would be pods filled with Chryssalids and Wraith-Class Seekers. Those would hunt down the stragglers and survivors. And with the primary infrastructure of the countries destroyed, there was no defense against the pods.

The locations were secured, and the signal was sent.

From Mars, the fleet of ten thousand strong troop and vehicle transports, discounting the fleet of fighters ten time that number, began to move. Already two hundred were hanging close to the Moon, having arrived hours ago, and they began to descend towards the open ocean, avoiding clustering. In the unlikely event that more nuclear weapons were deployed, they would not lose their invasion force like the last time.

When they had reached a certain altitude, they turned under the command of the guiding CODEX, and sped towards the islands of Japan and Taiwan, carrying thousands of Mutons, Custodians, and vehicles the Collective would debut for the first time. Flanked by several dozen Sectoid Fighters each, they were prepared to take on ADVENT and XCOM in the skies.

Within four hours, the countries of Japan and Taiwan belonged to the Ethereal Collective.
As the Dread Lord stood on the shores of Taiwan, he fixed the soulless eyes of his helmet on the final target in the distance; and reached out. He reached out to feel the fear that was slowly growing in each man, woman and child, he reached out to listen through them as they whispered and yelled in angry and terrified voices.

Just as anticipated. The seeds of collapse had been planted.

It was time to make them grow.

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To be continued in Chapter 47

March of the Dread Lord

Chapter End Notes

And so the end of Act III is upon us. Been looking forward to this for quite a while. Hope everyone had a good holiday and New Year. I would like to say that this story will be done in 2019, but not quite sure I can make that promise yet. It will be done when it's done. I'm not going to rush it or make cuts for the sake of finishing it up. If anything, I'd imagine that some things will be expanded.

To that end, if you haven't seen it already, one of my editors, Ashardalon125, has recently published the XCOM Files - Technical Addenda which focuses on some aspects of this story from a more technical perspective. So if you want a more scientifically-grounded take on some of the things in the story, that is it. More is planned to be added to it relatively soon. And of course, Edumesh is continuing with his excellently written Chronicles of Salvation. I recommend you check both of these out, not just because they're considered canon as far as in-universe continuity goes, but because they're both legitimately good and worth your time.

Thanks as always for reading. Here's to a good year.

- Xabiar
March of the Dread Lord

Busan Military Base, Busan – South Korea

3/7/2017 – 8:12 P.M.

It had been a very long series of hours as ADVENT prepared for a full scale invasion. Initially it had been more of a limited response, since it still wasn’t clear if Korea and Busan specifically would be another target. Duri and his squad were held back from going into the trenches to wait, and instead were moved to helping set up the artillery pieces, carry around boxes of ammo and grenades, and other general tasks.

Then the bad news had started rolling in, and the situation got worse and worse. The first bit of news was the fact that Betos had apparently not only proved herself as a deserter to ADVENT and a coward, but a full and legitimate traitor by openly stating her intent to side with the aliens against ADVENT.

As an officer, Duri had to maintain some kind of professionalism when he relayed the news to Aleksandra and Cara who were with him at the time. Both women had been dumbstruck when he told them, and then quite justifiably furious. Aleksandra’s voice had dropped to glacial temperatures when she’d expressed her displeasure in a remarkably restrained way.

Cara had been…less restrained. “If I have the displeasure of running into that bitch,” she had practically growled as she shoved cases of ammo into boxes. “She’s going to find out how it feels to have a plasma grenade shoved down her throat.”

He’d allowed a smile at that, glad the helmet could allow him to not have to worry about keeping a stoic blank face. Underneath, he had been seething. He, along with quite a few others, had eventually watched the entire speech the self-righteous traitor had given and he had privately wondered just how brain-damaged she was, assuming she actually believed it and wasn’t being mind-controlled.

The fury that built in him when she had the gall to say that it was ADVENT who was the tyrannical evil, instead of the Collective – made him want to do much worse to her than shove a grenade down her throat. The bodies of his family and girls stuck in his mind; senseless deaths caused by aliens, and that was far from the worst they’d done.

Thousands of captured people; experiments on babies; the utter horror that was their Blacksites.

And she stood there with a straight face and said that it was people like him who were the enemy.

He’d heard it said that traitors were often more hated than the actual enemy that was being fought. He understood that now. Hard to believe that even in this conflict, there were those who would rather turn on their own species than get over the differences they had with everyone else and fight back.

Given what he was just learning about, it seemed like something of a sick joke that the Collective had played on their little puppet. He was not quite in pure disbelief, but it was still a difficult thing to accept. “What happened?”

“The Imperial Family…the Emperor…is dead,” Nobuatsu said haltingly, slowly lowering the
tablet in his hand. “No details right now other than that there was an attack and none of the Imperial Family survived.”

Duri couldn’t relate to feeling a sense of reverence and loyalty to someone like a monarch. Granted, he knew the Japanese didn’t really view the Imperial Family as divine anymore, but they still held them in extremely high regard, essentially a celebrity status. He didn’t personally get enamored by those kind of people, but his daughters had of course had their share of people they admired, pop stars and the like. He couldn’t relate to that.

But he did understand loss now.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said, putting a hand on Nobuatsu’s shoulder. “There will be retribution for this.”

“It’s almost kind of unbelievable,” he said numbly, leaning back into a wall and tossing the tablet onto the table. “I’m not sure whatever deity we angered, but the Collective really has it out for my people. We lose Japan, we retake it, we lose it again, they level it from orbit, and now the Emperor is dead.” He shrugged. “I guess someone thinks we haven’t paid enough for World War II.”

“Hey,” Duri snapped his fingers. “Cut that out. The world is past all of that now and no one cares, definitely not some mystic deity. Taiwan was just captured too, and Australia hasn’t even had the luxury of being reclaimed. Hell, Africa now has aliens controlling part of it. China’s about to be fighting an Ethereal who wears a skull for a helmet. Japan isn’t special here; everyone has lost something at this point, and the only thing we can do about it is either reclaim or avenge.”

His voice hardened after he took a breath. “I can’t bring back my family. But you can do more than avenge the Emperor and his family, you can actually take back your country. So make that your goal.”

“Yes, you have a point,” Nobuatsu rubbed his eyes. “And maybe it isn’t all hopeless. They’re also saying the two Imperial children are missing, and likely abducted. So they’re probably alive and hostages. They can be saved.”

“There you go,” Duri patted him on the shoulder. “Two goals to follow. Bring back the children, and take back your country. Get angry and have a plan.”

Nobuatsu looked over to Duri curiously. “Nice words, but I’m not sure how much of a choice I have here. I don’t make the deployment decisions.”

“But you do know an Officer who will help,” Duri said. “And in the end, you can only do so much.”

“And…” he hesitated. “What about you? You have a plan?”

He almost chuckled, but it wouldn’t be appropriate and it was a fair question. “Not really, not anything concrete. I don’t have anything I can get back now.” He picked up his gun. He heard soldiers rushing past him towards the trenches. “The only ‘plan’ I have is to kill as many aliens as I can and eradicate this Collective piece by piece.”

He was mildly surprised Nobuatsu didn’t ask what would happen after, but instead just nodded. “Well, I think I’ll help you with that plan in addition to my own. It seems you will need it if you want to eradicate the Collective.”

Duri smiled grimly as he pulled out his rifle. “I’ll take it. Looks like something is happening. Let’s check it out.”
The mood was tense, but calm. There was a certain isolation to being in the wilderness in what ADVENT liked to call a ‘castle’. They were quite dedicated to following through on the pseudo-medieval theme of the Order of Terra, even if what they actually included had quite a few distinct differences. Namely that the supposed ‘castle’ was more or less a smaller and more fortified military base tailored with training grounds and other necessities of the Order.

Yet there was a kind of homage and aesthetic here that pleased her. Kaya had always been one to appreciate ceremony and rituals; partially because of her upbringing, and partly because she simply loved participating in such events. They were experiences one could not get anywhere else, and while others may have dismissed them as archaic and dated, there was a meaning and history she couldn’t help but respect.

It was almost funny in a way; the idea that someone had pitched an idea to ADVENT about creating a modern order of medieval knights. With samurai thrown in too for good measure. Kaya was personally quite unsure who had originally proposed and greenlit the project, since it had also sounded somewhat…odd…to her when it was first proposed.

Wars weren’t fought that way anymore. She could see a kind of ceremonial role for something like that, but according to Lord Hamilton, it was intended to be a fully-fledged military branch of ADVENT for use in legitimate combat operations. She admittedly wasn’t a military strategist, but it seemed like an odd investment especially during a war.

Hamilton had found that amusing, and promptly showed her some of the actual suits and weapons.

As it turned out, she should have had more faith in the intelligence of ADVENT. While ADVENT may have taken inspirations when naming the various positions in the Order, they were fully kitted out with modern armor, weapons, and tools. Knights carried rifles and grenades in addition to their MELD-enhanced swords; the Unit Standards carried by the Standardbearers were walking PDS fields to deflect plasma, and her own kit included grappling equipment, and a sniper rifle in addition to a katana.

The way they would be used was also tailored to their actual strengths. They were ultimately best for close combat, and that is how they would be used. Leading the charges in choke points, clearing out enclosed buildings and bases, and engaging with the alien units who also had melee forces. The Oyariah Titans were touted as the main threat, and there was also a Dath’Haram equivalent that was much less known.

And all indications suggested that, after several hard months of training, they were going to be deployed very soon. Soon ADVENT would see if this little project was justified or not. Kaya had faith; the men and woman who’d been selected were certainly among the most physically adept of Humans that she had seen. It reminded her more of a special forces unit than a “standard” military branch.

Given the weight of the armor and equipment each member had to wear, the weak were either weeded out or adapted to grow stronger.

After drilling almost nonstop, the majority were quite ready to be deployed against an actual threat. For her own part she wasn’t exactly apprehensive…but it was going to be a much more intimate
experience than her previous roles in combat. It turned out that she had good aim, and had managed to kill a decent amount of alien soldiers, but that was at range.

She was pretty sure she’d still be the one picking off aliens, but it was going to be closer.

But she trusted her unit. They’d all had to get used to each other quickly after being more or less thrown together in the beginning and forced to work together or get thrashed by some of the established units. But they’d done it, and she was confident they would do well. Still, at times she wondered the wisdom of keeping her actual identity a secret.

They knew her as Tora Sato, with the cover story of a civilian who’d enlisted and proved herself over some of the major battles of the war. Only Genevieve, one of the Gunners from her original squad, had also been asked to participate, and even she didn’t know. Unlike her, Genevieve had originally been a British soldier, which was plainly apparent from the fact that she was the largest woman Kaya had ever seen. Her entire family had military service, and her husband was working somewhere in ADVENT Logistics. She was coy about where.

Kaya hadn’t pried. Everyone had the right to their secrets. Although in her case, they were more for reasons of personal security than anything else.

So far, no one had guessed that the lithe, short-haired Japanese woman was in fact Kaya Yamato, a Princess of the Japanese Imperial Family. The only thing that might tip people off was her very distinct stone-gray eyes, but no one had yet made a connection. The decision to join the military directly had not been taken especially well, but she wasn’t going to be dissuaded, and no one was going to make a public scandal out of the fact that one of the Imperial Family was actually going to do something as opposed to being a historical relic.

Kaya saw very clearly what ADVENT was going to mean and it worried her. ADVENT was meritocracy incarnate, and anything that didn’t provide them with benefits was going to either be reduced, removed, or cut off entirely. If the Imperial Family didn’t do something to show that they were more than a rich family and cultural icon, ADVENT would reduce them into irrelevance – and not entirely without reason.

Strategically for the family, it was the most practical thing to do. Personally for her, it was the right thing to do.

As she’d told her brother, if the aliens won, there wouldn’t be an Imperial Family to survive. They definitely wouldn’t want something like her family hanging around.

Her status had made enlisting a bit more of a challenge, because ADVENT actually seemed torn between using her as a combat asset, or as a propaganda one. She’d had no interest in being any more of a celebrity than she already was, and had told them she’d be an actual soldier or not at all. So they’d given her an assumed identity and backstory, and deployed her with a mostly foreign squad who were unlikely to recognize her.

And in the event that they were, she fortunately didn’t look much like her public pictures anymore except for the eyes. Her long hair was (sadly) cut off completely. She could have kept a little of the length, but she’d dismissed that for practical and recognition purposes. She also now sported a visible scar on her forehead where shrapnel had scraped her when they’d fled from Japan.

In truth, she doubted anyone really cared. The soldiers were more concerned with what the aliens were doing and how to prepare than if they were serving with a princess or not. But it wasn’t worth having attention on her or any kind of preferential treatment which would unfortunately happen, intentionally or not.
She’d wondered how it would feel to see her homeland fall again, this time ravaged by the fire from the sky, but the second time hurt less than the first. Hamilton (who was one of the few to know who she really was) had given his opinion that it would be one of the first countries targeted when the aliens came back and would likely fall because, as he’d said, “The aliens have something to prove now.”

How right he was, and it was good she’d emotionally prepared for this.

She’d been mildly irritated that she hadn’t been able to help reclaim Japan the first time, but fortunately – or unfortunately in this case – it looked like she would be after all. All the more satisfying to kill the aliens occupying the land that rightfully belonged to her people. Killing aliens, as it turned out, wasn’t as hard emotionally as she’d thought it would be.

Maybe because it was psychologically closer to shooting an animal than a living being.

Then again, the aliens were like animals, or perhaps parasites. A quite literal invasive species on the habitat that was Earth. And the only permanent solution to an invasive species was extermination.

Someone walked into the room where she was sitting, the armory in particular, as she found it a good place to think and no one usually loitered around it. To her mild surprise, it was Hamilton. He looked grim, but it wasn’t a surprise given everything that had been going on. “We deploying?”

She asked, standing.

“Nothing about that yet,” he said, shaking his head. “But come with me. We need to talk.”

This was highly irregular. He usually only made a point to talk to her in private when the subject matter related to her identity. With growing concern, she followed him, wondering what had happened that they hadn’t heard about yet.

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ADVENT Military Command, Situation Room – Switzerland

3/7/2017 – 8:29 P.M.

The collection of military and intelligence officials was crowded around the holotable as Saudia stood in the center, flanked by Laura and Weekes. The fact that Watkins and a not-insignificant number of operatives of the Oversight Division were present quite rightfully made most of the people – especially those in ADVENT Intelligence – nervous.

Elizabeth was also in the room, though keeping to the back now that the military itself was taking the initiative in this situation. Saudia had already made a short statement to the media, and she was working on writing a more in-depth rebuttal to Betos as her supposed speech. In a morbid way, the assassination of the Imperial Family would serve as a good illustration as to what the Collective actually intended.

One thing Elizabeth had pointed out – and something Saudia found rather interesting – was the fact that none of the leaders of the SAS had been seen since…well, according to reports, quite a while. Which definitely made her quite curious as to their fate. Could they have potentially been considering turning Betos over and she’d promptly sicced the aliens on them in retaliation?

Something else to confirm before she used it properly. For now she would merely float the question.
However, right now she was far more interested and invested in burning the SAS to the ground. Betos being a defector was bad enough, but it took a special kind of selfishness to turn against her own species. And unlike what EXALT had planned, she had no illusions that Betos was seeking to ‘use’ the aliens to their own advantage. She was too idealistic, too stupid for that to have even entered her mind.

She would have considered that manipulative or wrong.

Fool.

Saudia wondered for a moment which outcome would ultimately be best for ADVENT. The swift assassination of the traitor and taking her out of the picture. She was, for better or worse, the figurehead. She would not be so easily replaced, and the other Humans, specifically the defectors, were probably more loyal to her than the aliens. At best it could cause infighting in the SAS before the aliens inevitably took control.

On the other hand, it would be an especially effective demonstration of ADVENT’s intolerance for traitors if she – and the other defectors – were brought back to ADVENT alive, and the world would watch as they were jailed, prosecuted, and sentenced to the Experimentation Labs. It would be both cathartic for the general population, and the traitors would serve some final use before their likely inglorious deaths.

She particularly wanted Betos to be alive to see everything she had worked towards fall apart and die.

Saudia allowed a thin smile at that; eyes with a furious glint in them. The others in the room saw that, and knew she wanted a plan that would make the SAS regret they had ever involved themselves in this conflict. “Thank you for arriving on such short notice, and for coming up with a plan of action to address this development,” she nodded to several of the uniformed officials. “We’ve all been appraised of the aliens massing on the islands, and indications are they will launch their attacks on China in just under twelve hours, in accordance with Isomnum’s demands. However, they could launch an attack on Korea before then since they are an ADVENT nation. But we are all here to handle the SAS and determine the response. Commander?”

“Thank you, Chancellor,” Laura took the center, and the holotable flared to life and focused on the continent of Africa. “The Sovereign African States have effectively declared war on us. We intend to negate this threat quickly and effectively. Right now, our operations will be to contain and sow chaos throughout the region, and Chief Diplomat Hassan will be leading a blitz to align ADVENT with the remaining independent nations. Yes?”

She nodded to one of the Marshals. “That approach seems too ineffective, Commander,” he said. “No disrespect to Hassan and the Diplomatic Corps, but we need to deny the SAS countries now. Is annexation completely off the table?”

“Yes and no,” Laura clarified, looking to Saudia. “Chancellor, would you explain.”

Saudia nodded. “Annexation is bad from an optics standpoint at the moment, and ADVENT will at least make an attempt to get them on our side. There are requirements to demand the annexation of a nation, and right now the independent African nations have not met them. However, the moment a nation refuses to allow troop movements or is actively allowing SAS traffic, those will be grounds for termination.”

“Which I will note are stipulations that we are making in our outreach to the nations,” one of the Diplomatic Corps added. “We’re giving them demands, yes, but as you said, we’re not going to
tolerate additional treason. The nations can keep their independence provided they allow us to move through them without issue, and flatly refuse any kind of agreement with the Sovereign African States. We are making it clear to them that failure to do this will result in authorization to annex their country.”

“So annexation could very well happen quickly,” another Marshal said, her voice grim. “They aren’t all going to agree to those demands.”

“Possibly not, but it isn’t quite just us issuing threats,” the Diplomat added. “We’re giving them some positive incentive to support us, regardless of their personal opinions.”

“Which is?”

“Protection,” Laura said. “From hostile incursions, both from the Collective and the SAS. They retain their independence, and they also gain protection so long as they allow us to move and operate in their territory.”

“That’s somewhat generous,” came a comment. “We might as well extend that to everyone in that case. Doesn’t this disincentivize joining ADVENT properly?”

“The independent countries are a means to an end,” Saudia explained. “All of this is temporary. Assuming that the SAS is inevitably pushed back or destroyed, we have a far stronger position to vie for integration. Not to mention it undercuts the claim Betos introduced about us being simple conquerors.”

“We also have yet to fully leverage our economic pressure on neutral nations,” came a comment from another diplomat. “Should the independent nations continue to be stubborn after the war, they will be able to be easily pressured into joining when they are sanctioned and their people begin suffering. This is not done now, for obvious reasons, but the nations will eventually join ADVENT. And continuing to refuse ADVENT integration in the event of us defending their country will be enough justification for such actions when the conflict in Africa is mitigated or ended.”

“Correct,” Laura agreed. “Nonetheless, we will give them all a chance to do the right thing. But the SAS is a disease that needs to be stopped from spreading. However, the diplomatic situation is one that is different from how we are going to handle the SAS directly.” Several orange submarine indicators lit up. “Our first operation is the launch of two nuclear weapons which will be detonated over the entirety of the territory of the SAS, disabling any non-hardened electronics and disrupting communications.”

“Why not just hit them directly?” Came another question. “Solve the problem immediately.”

“Considered and rejected,” Laura clarified. “Too much collateral damage, and a far greater risk of being shot down by Collective defenses. Worst case we don’t actually kill Betos, and now she has more reason – justified or not – to go after us and will appear more sympathetic to non-aligned individuals. This will hinder the SAS and aliens, as well as send an effective message.”

“We are not expecting significant damage to actual critical systems,” Weeks interjected, his arms crossed. “We’re assuming they learned their lesson from DC and are hardening their vulnerabilities. This will not apply to more general civilian infrastructure and likely their more delicate weapons. It will make her look incapable and weak, and regardless of her defenses, we can insinuate that we refrained from striking because we didn’t want to kill the civilians, contrary to what she’s said about us.”
“This is the first action of Operation Whirlwind,” Laura continued, as more submarines appeared on the map near the borders of the SAS. “This will be followed by several dozen missile strikes against various points of the SAS. As we do not have actual hard intel about the defenses, ground, air, or otherwise, these strikes will be to determine the strength and type of defenses. Based on this gathered information, future strikes will be conducted upon weaker, unprotected, or vulnerable points of interest. In the case of valuable primary targets with significant anti-missile defenses, clustered strikes to overwhelm the defenses will be conducted.”

As she spoke, the holotable lit up with the predicted strikes across various points of SAS territory. “Hassan is currently engaged in talks with the Egyptian government,” Laura said. “We are hoping that at minimum we will be able to use the country as a staging ground for surface-to-surface missiles to be launched against the SAS. Should other nations allow the same, this will be repeated. We intend to continue launching missiles using an irregular system and direction between every half-hour to two hours. We do not want to relent. We anticipate that after two or more weeks, we will have a far better appraisal of their capabilities, and the political situation will be settled. From there we will decide the course of a future ground invasion.”

The holotable now showed small graphics of planes. “However, the missile strikes will also be accompanied by nightly airstrikes conducted by the Night Witch bombers carrying ClF3, thermite, and white phosphorus bombs. The chaos caused by these, in particular the ClF3 bombs, will occupy the SAS for some time.”

“Ha,” one of the officers said. “A few more of those and you could just burn the country down.”

There was some chuckling, and Laura gave a slight nod and smile. “Perhaps some more incentive for allying with us, as we can prevent any accidental spread of the fire. Regardless, we are perfectly content to let the SAS burn to the ground and we build over it. That is not our problem. If their entire territory is engulfed by fire, all the better for us. The Night Witches are ideally built to carry this out, and not easily detectable by sensors. Should we judge their defenses vulnerable enough, airstrikes by bombers and fighters will also be authorized.”

The hologram ships and planes vanished, and now it just showed the country. “That concludes the basic details of Operation Whirlwind. This has been approved by Chancellor Vyandar, and Congress is being notified of the decision now. The nuclear strikes will commence in two hours, and Chancellor Vyandar will make a statement shortly afterwards contingent on the results.”

“Sounds good,” an intelligence officer commented. “Has a decision been reached on our satellite coverage over the nation? It’s fair to say it’s likely been compromised.”

“It has been,” Elizabeth said. “Teams are working to reclaim it. Should that prove ineffective, we will shoot it down and sent up another within three days.”

“Each of you will be given specific orders and information,” Saudia stood. “The aliens aren’t going easy on us anymore, so we need to give everything we have now. We get through this, and we can weather whatever they throw at us. It is not an exaggeration to say that the future of this war will heavily depend on the course of the next few days. Do not let me, yourself, or your species down. Understood?”

“Yes, Chancellor!” They confirmed with uniform salutes.

She returned them and nodded. “Good. Dismissed.”

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“We expect that ADVENT will begin an immediate diplomatic blitz against the independent nations,” Keeper was saying to the small group of officials and aliens in the room, including Macula. “Considering how they handled Canada, annexation is likely to be a threat they make.”

“And ADVENT has proven they will follow through on those threats,” Betos nodded. “So there has to be immediate protection allocated to nations that ally with us.”

“Can ADVENT even mobilize enough soldiers to take over all of Africa?” Mox questioned. “Sure, they could take a few nations if they wanted, but if everyone says ‘no’, can they really take down everyone?”

“ADVENT has entire legions in the European sphere sitting and doing nothing,” Keeper shook his head. “Recruitment is growing daily. If they really wanted to, they could invade the continent. But they wouldn’t even have to do that to cause havoc. One well-placed assassin or special forces team to arrest or kill the government would be enough to force capitulation with relatively little bloodshed.”

“See Operation Deus Vult,” Betos added grimly. “They have no issues eliminating who they consider to be in their way.”

“Or who oppose them,” Macula added. “This is not a surprising tactic for ADVENT to take. They are concerned with removing their enemy, and we should be as dedicated as they are in this respect.”

Betos fixed the Ethereal with a hard look. “We will defeat ADVENT, yes, but not by stooping to their tactics. The others will soon see what ADVENT is like first hand, and that will drive them to us; no threats and coups necessary.”

Keeper sighed, his unblinking glowing eyes on her. “We are now in a war, Grand Marshal, one where our enemy has no qualms about using whatever methods are needed to defeat us. If you were ignorant watching the response the good Chancellor gave, she was not especially pleased with this development, especially on this day.”

Betos had, as a matter of fact, paid close attention to the response the Chancellor had made. She couldn’t disagree with Keeper here. Saudia always exerted authority and confidence when she spoke, but her curt speech had a clear undercurrent of fury in it. Saudia had to be completely stressed and furious about how the lauded ADVENT Intelligence hadn’t known about this development.

Betos idly wondered if there would be some management changes within ADVENT in the near future. She couldn’t help but feel some pride at causing the downfall of Director Falka. If nothing else, that would be a satisfying, if minor victory.

“The Chancellor hasn’t been pleased with anything we’ve done,” Betos shrugged. “And the best way to hurt ADVENT is not to go after the other nations, but them directly. Better yet, we can appear as liberators. Should we hear they are annexing a country, we go into it and shut them down.” She glanced to Macula. “You’ve repeatedly said that your soldiers and tech are better than ADVENT’s. So I suggest we utilize that unless you’re concerned you were mistaken?”

“It isn’t our technological advantage that is at issue,” Keeper continued coldly. “It is the fact that
there are going to be larger amounts of soldiers – ours and yours – who are going to die because of you taking the moral high ground. That is a fact. ADVENT will annex countries or threaten them into submission, and we – who are based in this continent – could very well be on the defensive within days with less territory. Which means we will expend and lose more resources to take these nations because you didn’t want to take the initiative.”

“Arguing at this point isn’t smart,” Mox placed his hands on the table. “It’s been only hours. Let the diplomats do their job. Let’s see where the political situation shakes out in a few days. I agree with Betos that the diplomatic options should be tried first. We lose nothing except a few days – and you already expect ADVENT to do something similar. ADVENT will be hesitant, they don’t want to validate Betos so quickly by invading. Everyone is going to wait to see how this plays out for a few days, and then you’ll see what ADVENT does.”

Keeper’s lips twitched. “I would prefer we not be on the defensive. Reactionary tactics will be costly. But in essence, you have a point. In the meantime though, I would have our soldiers begin massing at several locations near the borders, and places ADVENT is likely to strike.” He turned on the red-lighted holotable which displayed the continent, as well as locations of interest.

Three countries were highlighted. “Egypt, Libya, and Sudan are likely going to be approached by ADVENT, if they haven’t been already,” Keeper said. “Any one of those allying with ADVENT, or otherwise allowing them to move through their territory would be an issue. Aside from giving them a direct point of entry into the SAS, they will establish artillery and missile systems which can reach our major cities.”

“Which are protected,” Mox noted. “ADVENT isn’t getting through with a few missiles.”

“Protected does not mean invincible, and ADVENT isn’t run by the incompetent,” Keeper shook his head. “Our fortified bases will be protected, but other areas are vulnerable and it could have the effect of keeping our forces pinned. I would prefer to avoid it if at all possible”

“I presume we have missile systems of our own,” Betos motioned to the map. “We return the favor.”

“A good solution, but there is more,” Keeper said, as several objects were highlighted above the map. “We have Cleanser Ships. It will have the effect of ADVENT intensifying their attack and defense, but they will be especially effective against ground targets. The only issue will be that precision targeting will bring them in range of ADVENT defenses.”

“And indiscriminate bombardment doesn’t help anyone,” Betos shook her head. “Some risk, but that is what combined arms is. Precision strikes in conjunction with missile strikes and armed assault will occupy ADVENT from focusing on the Cleanser Ships.”

“Should we be concerned with an approach from the northwest, Algeria?” Mox asked, looking at the map. “If ADVENT goes through Morocco, they could strike us from behind.”

“Possible, but unlikely,” Keeper answered, though gave an approving nod. “Spain is not part of ADVENT, and unless that changes in the next few days, ADVENT would be more likely to spend their efforts on Africa directly. If they try to move directly through the Tyrrenian and Mediterranean Seas, they will be slow enough that we will know well before they arrive.”

“Which reminds me-“ Betos began, right before alarms began going off. She’d recognized the sound instantly thanks to her being involved in the early warning systems implemented mere weeks ago.
“An attack?” She swung her head to Keeper and Macula. “ADVENT?”

Keeper’s face morphed to thoughtfulness. “It appears so. A faster response than I anticipated.”

“It’s for this city,” Mox said incredulously. “Which means a missile strike.”

Betos stiffened, blood draining from her face. “Not a missile strike. A nuclear one.”

“Where?” Mox demanded. “How could they reach us?”

“Fuck!” Betos swore as she remembered some very important details that had somehow slipped her mind. “ADVENT has nuclear submarines. Probably off the coast. They have a clear shot to us.”

“Calm down,” Keeper switched some options on the holotable, and pressed his earpiece. “We don’t have that confirmed. I will get that now.” A pause. “Status report, now.”

“If ADVENT thinks they can bomb this city, they are mistaken,” Macula reassured her. “The defenses are capable of destroying any missile fired to this city, even nuclear ones.”

“Confirmed,” Keeper was saying, glancing to her briefly. “We have Betos with us. We’re-“

There was a faint sound of a blast, and the entire room went dark.

A few seconds later, the lights came back on.

Betos looked around at everyone frantically, mentally calming herself down and trying to lower her pulsing heart-rate. *This was way too close and fast for ADVENT.* “What happened?”

“ADVENT being cute,” Keeper actually scowled, taking off his earpiece. “I’d wondered what their plan was with this. They’ve not used nukes this entire time outside of instances where they didn’t actually hit the ground. They just used the EMP capabilities of the nuke.”

“How has that hurt us?” Mox crossed his arms. “I know the critical stations were EMP hardened, but beyond that?”

“Not everything,” Keeper confirmed grimly. “Defenses, critical power stations, and computers were hardened. Which means the SAS will be able to function and defend itself, but all civilian and non-critical parts of the SAS are out of commission. This is going to tie up additional resources to repair. Wireless communication is severed for now. We won’t have a full extent of the damage until at least a few hours.”

“No time to waste then,” Betos said, coming back under control when she accepted that she wasn’t going to die. “But if this was the beginning…ADVENT isn’t waiting around for us.”

“No, they aren’t,” Keeper agreed, looking to the holomap. “I suspect this is only the beginning.”

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**Russian Castle of the Order of Terra, Russian Wilderness – Russia**

3/7/2017 – 6:41 P.M.

Kaya sank into her chair, numb. All sound seemed to fade away into white noise after she’d heard Hamilton say the words she’d never expected to hear; even with everything that was happening.

*There was an attack against the Imperial Family. All the members at the safe house are dead.* The
It didn’t make any sense.

Why were they dead?

Kaya racked her brains in anguish, trying to find some kind of justification for why the aliens would target her family; they were important and known, yes, but they didn’t have any political power, and weren’t even especially vocal ADVENT supporters.

“How?” She finally asked in a broken voice; still feeling too numb to weep. Or maybe it was because she’d seen several friends she’d made be killed around her. She couldn’t break down anymore so easily, but now she was at least feeling tears threaten to come out. It was just too... unbelievable.

Hamilton kept his distance and pulled his chair over to sit in front of her. Part of her wished he’d have not been so blunt in telling her everything that happened at once, but at the same time, that was just who he was. Damian Hamilton was not sympathetic or considerate, he was demanding and practical, and overall he was a fair and excellent leader.

This was, ironically, the most sympathy he’d ever shown for her. He’d certainly warmed to her since the first time they’d met. “Still unknown,” he said. “ADVENT thinks there was an infiltration into the compound by some kind of infiltrator unit. Whoever did it was quick, careful, and thorough. There was no collateral damage. Not even the soldiers were outright killed.”

That was... better. That meant the staff was still alive, the guards, and probably none of the heirlooms or records had been touched. Not a large comfort, in all honesty, but it was better than nothing. “Kiyumi!” She suddenly said. “Is-“

“Alive and under our protection with a PRIEST guard,” Hamilton answered with a slight nod. “As is her family. We assume they didn’t target her due to her not being a royal, and the reason you also weren’t targeted was because no one knows where you actually are.” He pursed his lips. “I know you aren’t thrilled with keeping your identity a secret all the time, but it very likely saved your life.”

“Do not lecture me about that right now!” She snapped at him. “My family is dead! I don’t care about that right now.” She wiped her eyes, trying to focus on what would happen now.

Hamilton didn’t speak right away, nor retort. After a few moments he continued in a calm, but softer voice. Which didn’t especially suit him. “Not everyone is dead, Kaya. You’re alive, and so is your sister. The children are also likely alive, even if they are in alien custody.”

Kaya turned her focus to the children. “Have there been any demands or ransom?”

“None,” Hamilton shook his head. “But it’s only been hours. They wouldn’t take them if they didn’t have a plan, otherwise they would have also been killed.”

Kaya wasn’t entirely convinced of that. Killing children was a line that no one – Human or alien – crossed without an extremely justifiable reason. But it didn’t really matter now. The fact was the children were gone, her family except Kiyumi was dead, and it just now struck her that she was now the immediate heir to the Imperial Family.

But she couldn’t just... leave. Not now.

“What am I supposed to do?” She asked, looking up at him. “I can’t leave here. And I don’t want
He appraised her, leaning back in his chair. “Normally, you wouldn’t. But you’re a special case, and have been from the beginning. If there was ever an exception to be made, this would be it. I don’t like it, but if you felt you had to return and put your family in order, you could. I’ve been ordered by people higher up than me to make it clear to you what your options are.”

“I want to talk to my sister,” she said. “I don’t plan on leaving either – I can’t kill aliens from a safe house.”

A razor-thin smile devoid of humor appeared on his face. “I’m glad to hear it. You can do more good for your family with a sword than sitting in a chair. As for your sister, I’ve got her on hold and you two can talk and figure things out.” He stood and pointed towards a small fob. “That will initiate the connection. Do it when you’re ready.”

He lowered a hand to her shoulder, his voice becoming ever so softer. “I’m sorry about your family, Kaya, I really am.”

“Thank you,” she answered quietly. “I appreciate it.” He gave her a nod and left the room. A few moments later, after some more consideration, she pressed the fob and initiated the connection. Hamilton’s office had a holoprojector and after a few minutes of waiting, she was able to see her sister in washed out colors.

She looked terrible, she’d definitely been crying and her normally well-kept hair was a mess. “[Hey,]” she said quietly. “[Is everyone safe?]”

“[They say we are,]” she answered dejectedly. “[I don’t know if I believe them. I don’t know what to do now.]”

“[Have they let you see the bodies?]” Kaya asked. “[Or given you any more information?]”

“[No, they say they’re ‘investigating’,]” Kiyumi sniffed. “[All they told me was that everyone is dead and the children are gone. They’re saying it was the aliens. I was terrified you had been killed too.]”

 “[I was more worried about you,]” Kaya said, glancing around. “[I’m in a secured place with my identity protected. You’re…living with your husband and kids.]”

Kiyumi shrugged. “[But I’m not part of the family anymore, officially at least.]”

“[Consider that no longer the case,]” Kaya scowled. “[I don’t care what any of the elders or purists say, you’re still Imperial blood and so are your children. It wasn’t right you had to give up your heritage then, and it’s definitely not right now. We’re the last of the family! I don’t fucking care who you married, and neither will anyone else!]”

“[But-]”

“[No ‘buts’,]” Kaya dismissed with a wave. “[I will punch anyone who insinuates that you don’t have any right to be here. For all intents are purposes, you are the best hope for the future of the Imperial Family since you have children.]”

“[But we need you here, Kaya,]” Kiyumi insisted. “[You’re the next in line. I can come back, but everyone needs your help now. We have to be together to work through this.]”

“[And do what?]” Kaya demanded. “[Sit around in a chair acting like an administrator and being a
hapless political prop in a role I can’t even think of taking right now? And don’t give me that ‘I’m
the next in line’ speech. You’re older than me. By birthright you have the right to be next in line
since the position wasn’t directly abdicated to me. And it’s safer that I remain here.

“[Safer?]” Kiyumi demanded incredulously. “[You’re on the front lines of a war! That isn’t any
safer!”

“[Safer in that whoever the monster is who attack our family is going to do it again when they
realize they didn’t succeed,]” Kaya said. “[My…superior…he said that the suppression of my
identity was likely the reason I also wasn’t targeted. But they will target us again, and it’s better if
we’re not in the same place.]”

“[So whoever takes the role is in danger,]” Kiyumi said with noticeable apprehension. “[I’m not
like you. I can’t live with that fear. My children can’t either. I’m not cut out for this and I don’t
trust ADVENT to protect us now.]”

Kaya pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to think. Kiyumi and her family were going to be in
danger regardless, but putting her in the role of Empress would heighten her profile significantly.
She didn’t know if she could, in good conscience, force that role onto her. She was right that living
with this threat hanging over her wasn’t something she would deal with well.

Admittedly, Kaya wasn’t enamored with that idea either.

But she wasn’t going to go back and do nothing and just be a target. And like Kiyumi said, she
wasn’t going to rely on ADVENT. Oh, they’d fix their protocols and promise that ‘this would
never happen again’, but with respect to them, she didn’t – and couldn’t – trust them right now. The
only way they would prove that is by stopping another attempt.

She was not risking her sister like that.

However…

There wasn’t, now that she thought about it, anything stopping the Empress from actually having
to stay and manage the family. While that was tradition, perhaps it was time for some of those to
be broken. And since Kiyumi had always expressed more of an interest in the administrative side of
the family prior to her engagement…

She nodded to herself. There was a plan. Hamilton was going to hate it, but it was the best one she
could think up right now.

“[What are you thinking of?]” Kiyumi asked after a few minutes.

“[I’m not going to put you in any more danger than I have to,]” she said firmly. “[I’ll take the
position.]” She raised a finger to cut off Kiyumi’s immediate thankful response. “[With several
conditions.]”

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3/8/2017 – 8:03 A.M.

“The time has come,” came the haunting command. “Begin the attack.”

Standing on the shores of Taiwan, the Dread Lord stood and waited. Listened and watched.

Felt.
He had not agreed to the delay merely because the Battlemaster demanded it. He would not have bowed to the squeamish Ethereal had it been otherwise. But it had offered him some quite useful time.

Time to seek and explore the populace that would soon be screaming.

Throughout the country soldiers and citizens had been subtly affected by the gentle, yet malicious touch of the ethereal specter. A light probe into the base emotions those were feeling. Some had felt unnaturally paranoid; feeling that they were being watched. Perhaps a shadow or two appeared to jump at them, perhaps they had suffered a minor hallucination.

Those sleeping had been affected the worst, and their dreams were filled with blood, terror, and death. Many had woken up screaming and incoherent, barely able to be calmed down as ADVENT and Chinese officials saw it as a warning of what was beginning to happen. This revelation increased their worry; their fear.

Psions recoiled at the alien touch of the entity; shaken and afraid of the sheer magnitude and power the entity exuded. One that had refused to identify or force itself into their minds, but reveled in their confusion turned fear. The reach and volume of the reports stoked the defenders into a worried frenzy, even as the unleashed plague continued to kill and maim citizens and Chinese soldiers.

The Dread Lord had stood silent and acted for hours. He needed no reprieve or to feel concern for physical limitations. He felt the fear of a nation grow by his subtle hand.

He fed on it.

Hundreds of transport ships sped towards the landing zones designated, which would first be softened with the Cleanser Ships. A lower hand brought up a holodisplay which the Dread Lord appraised to determine the initial impact. Fiery steel and plasma rained down from the sky, targeting the outer borders of the nation of China.

This volley was followed up with Chryssalid and Seeker pods. They would serve their purposes well. Yet this time there was not a complete success rate. Displays showed a significant portion of the coast was not significantly affected.

Psions.

Aegis.

It mattered little. The weak-willed traitor would soon be a broken waste of flesh and power before him. Aegis was all that was holding this species together. His subjugation would ensure that they broke.

For if an Ethereal could be defeated, what chance did these Humans have?

There was no more waiting, no more delaying.

*Let them feel the liberation of terror.*

*Let there be no more lies they tell themselves.*

One hand reached out, and the dam broke.

There was no protection for many, and the cities and areas which housed soldiers, civilians, and
others never felt anything amiss initially. Then chaos broke out all at once, as their minds conjured the images of their hidden fears and phobias. They responded viscerally, violently. They killed their fears or their fears killed them.

The fears were merely those who existed around them.

And the longer they lasted, the worse they became.

One would not be able to defeat the ethereal fears and shadows that plagued them, they could only pretend to. More would appear around them, morphing and laughing as they taunted the shattered minds. Worlds became twisted dreamscapes of black and warped reality. Friends were revealed to be monstrosities, and the deepest hidden seed of paranoia became reality with limited courses of action.

Some simply attempted to block the horror. They took their own lives or gouged out their eyes, content to live with the simple pain than be subjected to the abject terror they were witnessing. Yet the mind is a malleable organ, and merely clawing their eyes out did not protect them from the fears lurking inside their own minds – and now there was truly no escape; no response.

Only screaming, begging, and sobbing.

And when the legions of Custodians marched upon the cities, led by the black disciples of Isomnum, the Terror troopers and soldiers of his will, in many areas they encountered little more resistance than chaotic and broken Humans scattered, running, and fighting each other. A trifle to put down.

Not kill, not yet.

Armed with surgical equipment and blades, this broken and reformed collection of beings began their work on the subdued humans unfortunate enough to still be alive. They would be reformed as they had been, and become a living symbol of the fate of those who would deny the Dread Lord what he was owed.

Sonoda observed the pacification of Hainan with a bright smile on her face, clad in her black armor from what little threat these Humans posed against her. As the work began on conversion, she unhooked the mask which signified her sole and unique connection to her Lord, and donned it. The euphoria that swept through her as the bond was forged and the two minds merged into a singular entity was impossible to convey.

She closed her eyes and focused on everything around her.

On the pain and screaming of those whose limbs were being removed and grafted onto; as their bodies were opened and replaced with machines and parts which would ensure their servitude; as they remained cognizant and aware as they were broken and reformed into something more, something which had purpose.

They would no longer be empty vessels with meaningless lives.

They were the walking legion of the Dread Lord.

And as more and more were found and began to be converted, the anguish, paid, and terror only fed her more, and in turn fed her master.

A symbiotic, beautiful link.
The Dread Lord fed on what she did, and unleashed this anguish to the holdouts, those who were being protected by ADVENT’s weak psions, by Aegis.

But they could not last forever. They would break.

And they would then understand.

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Busan Trenches, Busan – South Korea

3/8/2017 – 8:41 A.M.

“Here they come!” Duri called as the alien transports began landing. The trenches were filled with soldiers shooting downrange, most not coming close to hitting anything, but still providing a volume of fire that would hinder the Collective, or so they hoped. Miguel had his SHIV over the top of the trenches, and it was also firing downrange.

Unlike previous conflicts, the PRIEST Division had a far greater presence here, and the white-armored soldiers were seen rushing every which way and spread throughout the trenches, and already they had succeeded in blunting the alien offensive. First there was the attempted orbital bombardment of the base, which had been largely negated when psionic shields had appeared over vital structures. The ground had still been shaking and they’d taken casualties and damage, but the worst had been quelled.

Now the ground invasion was beginning in earnest.

“What do you see?” Duri asked Beatriz as she looked through her scope. Slightly above him Cara was manning the newly enhanced ETC Browning, and sending hundreds of propelled rounds towards the encroaching aliens. Some things looked different to him though, even from this range.

“A lot of Andromedons and Mutons,” she answered between shots. “And some things I haven’t seen before. Vehicles.”

“Any Sectopods?”

“Yes, a few,” she confirmed. “But these others are different. I don’t like the look of the big ones.”

Green plasma fire was beginning to be returned to ADVENT, and it was just as inaccurate as what was being sent to the aliens. In the distance Duri could see the red glow of shields the Andromedons were putting up, but in general they seemed to be holding back. A few more minutes passed and he got his first good look at the vehicles Beatriz was talking about using his issued binoculars.

They reminded him of Sectopods, but if Sectoids had been completely redesigned to turn them into siege breakers. They had a somewhat rectangular body, which was covered with missile silos and launchers presumably to serve as a true artillery weapon for the aliens. It was supported by six legs which he noted had crude Andromedon shields around the joints.

A massive gun jutted out of the right side of it, which had to be a railgun of some kind, though he didn’t know for sure. It had yet to fire, but had been still for a few minutes as if preparing. Definitely was being readied for an attack. The only good thing he could note was their limited numbers. Twelve in total, all distributed along the front in a largely even manner.

Up above, an air battle was also raging. ADVENT had launched four whole wings of Ravens, and
nearly thirty of the XCOM Firestorms were also not only fighting the Sectoid Fighters, but also new V-shaped spacecraft that he could only assume were Vitakara in origin. The Flak Towers were also assisting in the air battle, as well as taking aim at the massive alien units.

ADVENT artillery was also firing from the rear, and it was not reaching far enough back to damage the siege units, and the few shells that did reach back were somehow picked off by laser defenses that emerged from the vehicle. Firing several rounds as a test towards the massive vehicles, he noted that pretty much nothing happened.

“Cara! Focus on the siege units!” He called.

“I’ll do my best!” She called. “But they’re still way out of range!”

“Woah!” Beatriz breathed. “Snipers are being employed!”

“What!” Mana demanded, but Duri saw it when she did. It looked like several hundred black Seekers had shot into the air and were idly hovering for only seconds before highly accurate plasma lances shot out of them. Several nearby soldiers were struck and Duri himself was already moving down when the highly volatile bolt slammed into his chest.

“Duri!” Beatriz screamed as he stumbled backwards.

“Shields engaged!” Aleksandra yelled, powering up her armor. “Take those things out!”

“Ugh,” Duri groaned, feeling the plasma eat away at him like acid. “Nobu-“

“I’m here,” the medic dragged him over to the front wall of the trench, out of the range of sniper fire. “Hold still.” A medkit was sprayed over the wound which briefly turned the wound freezing cold, before settling into a mild ache.

“Got one,” Beatriz called. “These things are tough. It took three shots to take it down!”

“Continue with it,” Duri called, also motioning to keep firing. “Nobu, how serious?”

“Looking it over,” he said quickly, appraising the wound and repairing the hole in it. “Clean entry and exit. There’s a scorch mark on the wall behind you when it hit. These things have enough power to penetrate a fucking tank. It went through your armor like nothing and is oddly thin. If you hadn’t moved, it would have turned your head into paste.”

“So don’t get hit by them in the head,” Duri grunted, moving to take his position, ignoring the ache. “Got it.”

More soldiers and targets were falling to the thin lances of green plasma, but ADVENT had adapted as the Shieldbearers utilized their suits. More of the Seekers were falling from the sky, but they had been successful in dividing the attention of the snipers, allowing for the deployment of another vehicle the Collective had been working on.

This one was also reminiscent of a Sectopod, if one had taken the main ‘pod’ and enlarged, elongated, and armored it. It floated along the ground, a massive railgun attached to the top, projecting Andromedon shields in a triangle that reminded him of a train buffer. Additional weapons were mounted on the sides, shooting both plasma and physical projectiles.

It was a vehicle designed for a frontal assault, and it was not idly moving to the trenches. It wasn’t what he would call fast, but it wasn’t slow either. It moved in irregular patterns, sometimes even stopping or moving backwards to miss or dodge fire. It somehow didn’t seem to be triggering any
of the mines either; possibly due to sensors to negate this issue.

It had also given ADVENT a very visible target.

The response was near-immediate. The PRIESTs and Dragoons which had also been deployed wasted no time in engaging with these vehicles. The PRIESTs in particular demonstrated their power by shooting psionic energy at them, picking them up telekinetically and then throwing them to the ground, generally resulting in mine explosions and derailment, and blocking their paths with psionic shields.

The vehicles still remained extremely durable, however, and the full arsenal of a Dragoon wasn’t enough to destroy one, even if it could noticeably damage it. The closer the vehicles got, the more soldiers began falling, as the medics dragged them out of the trenches and they were continually supplemented with new soldiers waiting in reserve.

“It’s firing!” Someone called out, and in unison the alien siege units fired a missile from a compartment in their chassis. It had a green flair and sped upwards into the air, arching until it was headed straight for the trenches.

“Shields!” Someone yelled nearby, and a barrage of psionic shields appeared in the sky and above the trenches. One of the missiles hit and produced a blinding explosion which took out the shields and rocked the ground itself. Some of the missiles were inexplicably caught and redirected towards the aliens lines and the battlefield where the hover vehicles quickly moved out of the way.

But no one emerged from the resulting blasts unscathed.

Duri saw one land on a nearby Flak Tower and the resulting white-green explosion briefly blinded him and threw everyone to the ground and a wave of burning heat and debris swept over all of them. In the chaos when he emerged, the Tower was reduced to a few scraps of metal – in addition to a significant portion of the trench being essentially gone.

He hauled Beatriz to her feet, just as Aleksandra was doing the same to Nobuatsu; gun raised, he looked around at what had happened. There were four large craters in the no man’s land, with several dozen wrecks of the vehicles, though the surviving ones were making a run to the trenches in the chaos. The alien line had also suffered some hits, but none of the siege units had been destroyed, although one was noticeably damaged.

How had that thing survived?

“Those things are coming towards us now!” Cara coughed, trying to get back on the turret emplacement. “Get ready!”

But just before they could more accurately focus their fire, a massive maelstrom of psionic energy appeared in the group and began ripping even the heavy armor of the vehicles into pieces, causing many of them to explode. Duri glanced back and, to his surprise, saw an XCOM squad marching down into the trenches.

They’d gotten an upgrade. The suits towered over his own and appeared to be one-man armies on their own. The psion who’d created the maelstrom jumped down into the trench. He gave him – or maybe a her, he couldn’t tell – a nod. “Thanks for the save. You came at the right time. Officer Eun-Jung, how can we help?”

“I was going to ask you that,” she said, making several hand motions to her squad who mostly began heading to the broken trench lines. “Psion Eriksson, Zeus-1, XCOM. We’re here to make
sure the Collective doesn’t gain a significant foothold here. MEC and Archangel support is incoming.”

Duri pointed in the distance. “The Collective has some new tech. Those siege units are priority targets. You saw what they did with one volley, and that was probably a test. They’re going to swarm the weak points now.”

“Agreed,” she confirmed, stepping forward. “Looks like they’re confident enough to send in the silver legions.”

“What?”

“Look,” she pointed in the distance. “Mutons and Custodians are moving forward. Guess that means Isomnum isn’t actually focusing here. Good news. It’s going to be getting a lot tougher soon.”

“We’re aware of that,” Duri said, then cocked his head as he remembered something. “Sorry, you said your name was Eriksson?”

“Or Mona,” she clarified absentmindedly, focusing on the oncoming invaders. “Doesn’t matter to me.”

Duri blinked, knowing now was not the time to press this, but Johan had failed to mention that his sister was in XCOM. Or maybe he didn’t know? “Do I know you?” Mona asked curiously, picking up on his confusion.

“Not exactly,” he shook his head. “I’ll tell you after we halt this attack.”

“Sounds good,” she stepped back. “Hold this position until then, we’ll reinforce the gap up ahead.” With that she dashed away to rejoin her squad, as the aliens continued to advance forward inch by inch.

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Sanctuary – Classified Location

3/8/2017 – 12:14 P.M.

“No.” Sana was adamant. “I will not support this action, and I am disappointed that you went through with it. I thought you forbade the deliberate targeting of civilian families.”

The Battlemaster was not happy that she was making this more complicated than he needed at this moment. “I would have preferred a different target be chosen, but the Imperial Family was a valid one, and one the Zar’Chon believed should be followed up on to remind ADVENT of our reach.”

Sana turned away to look at the two children, both inside one of the enclosures that was made to resemble a bedroom. They had been placed into a psionically induced sleep until it was decided where they were going to be placed. “This conflict is taking too much of a toll on you. You would not have sanctioned this even one year ago.”

“One year ago I was not in a war against an Ethereal and these Sovereign Ones,” the Battlemaster growled, jabbing one finger at her. “You are not involved here, Sana; you are not being forced to accept Isomnum, or be under pressure to end this war now with the knowledge that if we’re lucky we won’t have to fight more of these Sovereigns. I do not want to do this, but I had little choice.”
“No, you do have choices,” she insisted. “You just do not want to bear the consequences.”

He closed his eyes and composed himself before answering. “Would you prefer those two children be dead, Sana? Would you prefer I was not involved to restrain the more indiscriminate of our brethren? Because that is what you’re saying I should do. If I do not sanction these operations, then the outcomes become far worse. Do you honestly think that had I been unaware, the Zar’Chon or the Imperator wouldn’t have ordered the same thing?”

That at least didn’t elicit an immediate response. ‘I dislike how we are put into this position to begin with…it is not right. We do not need to resort to such tactics. We are above that.’

Had they ever been? Had there ever been a war fought using only ‘ethical’ and ‘correct’ tactics?

He sat on a nearby chair, looking around the empty white room. “Do you honestly believe that? The only reason you hold our species as above such things is because we had never been in a true conflict prior to the Synthesized. And when we fought ourselves…we were no better than the Humans or any other species. We are not special, Sana, and we never have been.”

“Perhaps,” she admitted after a short while. “But that does not excuse or justify what we do now.”

“No, but we cannot change what has happened,” he shook his head. “I would save your outrage for Isomnum, because I will not be able to restrain him, regardless of what he allows. He has not, nor will ever, follow my orders. I have multiple attacks to order in addition to this. The children, while it may be of issue to you, mean very little in the scope of this war. They are safe and protected. We can revisit this issue after the offensives have been launched.”

“And will you just let him continue without consequence?” Sana demanded. “You know what he will do unchecked.”

“His involvement is by the direct order of the Imperator,” the Battlemaster said flatly. “If not for that, I would not have let him be given any significant command. I suspect this is a pointless test by the Imperator to see if I will follow his orders. Should I intervene against him, he will remove me from command. I merely have to provide him an excuse. The only way to effectively stop Isomnum is to kill him.”

She appraised him quietly. “But you will not do that.”

“No,” he said, also subdued. “But not because I couldn’t. Or because I would not. I would end his life without hesitation should the opportunity present itself. I would take significant pleasure in ending the life of that monster. But the consequences are too high and far reaching for the Collective at this point. I will have to allow XCOM and ADVENT to do that for me.”

She looked at him in surprise. “You intentionally intend for him to die against the Humans?”

“Intentionally? No,” he shook his helmet. “But should such an event happen, it will not affect the larger war plan. Isomnum is powerful, but he is arrogant and underestimates the effect his tactics will have on the species. I will not stop him from succumbing to his weaknesses, as I did not stop Caelior.”

“I would not say the two are the same,” Sana pointed out. “Caelior’s issues were due to his youth and inexperience. There is no redemption for Isomnum. Allowing him to be captured was…unfair to him. Even if you could justify it.”

He was not interested in debating this at the moment. “You see my intentions. That is the best I can do short of betraying everything I have built here. The next time you criticize me for an action I
take, consider yourself in my position and ask yourself if you would do anything differently.”

“And I have, Battlemaster,” she said. “And I would not do what you did, even if I understand your reasons.”

He allowed a shrug. “Then you are better than I am.” He stood. “I will return to Mars. We will discuss this later…although I am curious, where is Mortis? I have not seen him for several weeks.”

“He is on Vitakar,” she answered. “Attempting to learn of the species itself and their history. He went with a Vanguard escort so his aura doesn’t make everyone around him die.”

“Good.” The Battlemaster would have preferred he be more involved, but Mortis was still figuring out where he stood on the whole concept of the Collective, and like Isomnum, Mortis would not follow his orders because he asked. Although he would do the same to the Imperator, where even Isomnum knew better than to cross that line.

He needed to focus now, and prepare Yang for deployment. China was only one aspect of this renewed invasion.

There would be many others.

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Busan Battlefield – South Korea

3/8/2017 – 9:42 A.M.

This was a battlefield they were coming in hot to. Sierra was glad for all the times they’d trained deploying from a flying Skyranger. It was exhilarating and terrifying to jump into a pitched fight on ground and air. They were low enough to be targeted from the ground, but not high enough to engage the dogfights in the skies.

“And we are clear,” Sierra called as she began a wide arc. “Find somewhere safe, Lightning Sky.”

“Copy that Host-1,” their pilot said as he sped off towards the city proper. “Good hunting down there.”

“Anna, Ted, form up behind me,” she commanded as she began appraising the situation. “Both of you good?”

“We’re good,” Ted answered in her ear. “Collective is bringing everything they have here. Never seen anything like this before.”

“Yeah,” Sierra saw both of the Ballista-class MECs being dropped well behind the ADVENT trench lines, who immediately began advancing towards the pitched fighting. “They’re not holding back.”

“Host-1, this is Zeus-1 on the ground,” Mona’s voice came through loud and clear. “We need report from our own eyes in the sky. ADVENT trenches were just hit hard with some kind of plasma explosive.”

“Right,” Sierra hovered idle for a moment, before swooping downwards. “I’m guessing that came from the big vehicles. Siege breakers from the looks of them. You can handle those other vehicles moving in right?”
“Gonna be messy, but we can. How many?”

She did a ballpark count. “Way more than you can handle everywhere. Over a hundred at least, and they’re converging towards the weak points. Looks like ADVENT is also moving to handle them.”

“We’re headed to one as well, HUD should be updating with our position.” Sure enough a few seconds later it lit up in the lower-corner of her HUD. Sierra nodded to herself, even knowing Mona couldn’t see her.

“Copy, you want us to reinforce your position?”

“Not currently, let’s see how we handle them before we call in backup.” Mona grunted, with Sierra hearing yelling in the background. “The MECs are working to target the siege breakers. Are there advancing ground forces right now?”

“Yep,” Anna confirmed, as she laid down fire from her plasma cannon. “There’s hundreds of them. Mutons leading the front, with Custodians following behind. Elites are interspersed.”

“These are the helmeted ones too,” Ted added. “No easy headshots this time.”

“Copy,” Mona confirmed. “Thin them out a little would you?”

“Three Archangels against an army of Mutons and Custodians?” Sierra snorted. “No problem. Good thing we came prepared for company. We’ll slow them down for you.”

“Acknowledged. Good hunting. Zeus-1 out.” The moment she clicked off, Sierra was already thinking how best to approach this. Going too low would get them picked off easily from sheer volume of fire alone. Staying in one place would have the same effect. Archangel armor was good, but it didn’t make them invincible.

The Custodians were the largest threat, so they should be prioritized. Mutons could be dealt with easily enough. The Elites were also a problem. “Anna! Grenade and missile compliment?”

“Three thermite missiles, four WP grenades and one ClF3 grenade,” she answered. “I predicted we would need at least one.”

They would, so they would need to make it count. “Use the thermite to poke some holes in the Custodians. Drop the WP in front of the Mutons and let them choke on it for a while. Save the hellfire for the big one. I’d prefer you get that out of the way now so it isn’t clipped and you go down with it.”

She swiveled to Ted. “Target the Elites. Take them out one by one. Tell me when you need to go back. Outside the Custodians-”

“I know, I know,” he said. “And what about you?”

“Going to emulate Anna,” she said, briefly holstering her WHEEE cannon, and pulling out a WP grenade. “Take evasive action and kill as many as you can. Remember – slow them down, don’t try and kill all of them at once and pull back if it gets too hot.”

They both confirmed, and the Archangels sped off over the pitched battlefield. Anna went right, so she went left. The good and bad news was that there was so much to cover, and not enough soldiers to do it properly. Should have sent two or three hosts to deal with this she thought as she tossed the first WP grenade towards the group of Mutons charging towards a point in the trenches that had been annihilated by one of the massive bombs.
Two more followed it, and she was going fast enough that the Mutons barely had enough time to look up before their faces were melting and loud pained roars met her ears. However the response from the Custodian support was immediate and she had to spin and swoop to dodge the hail of plasma fire shot her direction. A few clipped her, but the suit could easily take that.

_Your turn._ She sped upwards until she was essentially out of the effective range, pulled out several of the thermite grenades, and maneuvered just over where the bulk of the Custodians would be in that area, and dropped the explosives. Her enhanced vision made this actually feasible, where her normal eyes wouldn’t have been able to accurately judge the distance.

Gripping her WHEEE cannon, she decided to follow up with an absurdly risky maneuver. One she’d admittedly practiced – a lot – but doing it over a desert was far different than doing it in a pitched battle. She angled herself downward and cut the engines. Forming her body correctly, and keeping the WHEEE close to her chest, she quickly reached terminal velocity as the thermite exploded below her.

_God I’m cutting it close._

At just past the warning point she flipped herself up, fired the jets once and fell the rest of the way, her modded body able to take the force of hitting the ground. She couldn’t have planned it better if she’d tried, as there was a moderate clearing of melted Custodian bodies – one of which she utterly crushed under her boots as she landed.

She immediately fired the WHEEE in front of her, spun to the side and fired again, turned a full one-eighty and fired once more, before turning to her right and firing again. Without pausing to see her handiwork, she fired the jets and blasted up into the air before the aliens could even think about responding, laughing hysterically at the fact that had actually worked.

Once safely in the air, she glanced down to see that it had worked perfectly. Just as she’d hoped, the electricity had arced throughout the nearest Custodians, frying their bodies as well as the original target. She hadn’t given much thought to aiming since it was so dense, and that turned out to have been the right decision. There was a large pile of dead Custodians where she’d been, and it was safe to say that the brunt of that offensive was blunted.

“Anna! Report!” She called as she sped back towards where they had begun.

“Grenades expended, and I’m trying to mow these things down from behind,” she grunted, and ahead, Sierra could see her. Along with something she did not expect chasing her. “And I picked up a tail.”

“Is that a Seeker?” It certainly looked like one, but if someone had given it steroids. It was bigger than Anna, and pursuing her at an alarming pace. “Nevermind. Coming in to assist.” While she sped towards the duo, she changed the power cell of her WHEEE. Only one fresh one left after this, though recharging would solve that issue relatively soon.

“Dive on my command!” She called, taking aim. She did _not_ want to fry Anna as well as the Seeker. “Now!”

With no hesitation Anna plunged to the surface and Sierra fired. The bolt slammed into the Seeker and it exploded into multiple pieces which fell back to the Earth. “Eliminated,” Sierra called, swooping around.

“Thanks,” Anna said flying away while firing towards the ground. “Tried using my hellfire grenade on one of the big ones.”
“And?”

“Well, it sort of worked,” Sierra flew in the direction she had been fighting in and saw that one of the machines was indeed being forced back, and one of it’s legs was on fire – as was the surrounding area. “It has some kind of point-laser defenses,” Anna explained. “It clipped the grenade I threw. Problem was it just made it rain fire all around. When all is said and done, I think that one is out of the picture.”

“Excellent,” Sierra said, and saw in the distance Ted firing lances of purple fire from his arms. Glancing briefly at the battlefield, she saw a good number of red-armored corpses, including a fair number of Muton bodies. He hadn’t been idle either. “Ted, how is it going?”

“Sixteen of the Elites eliminated,” he breathed heavily, as he kept swooping to avoid fire. Sierra saw that he’d definitely taken some direct hits from the scorching on his chest. “Don’t know how many more I can take out.”

“Just a few,” Sierra promised as she pulled out her pistol and took several potshots towards the ground. “We’re all expended anyway-“

There was a burst of static.

“Hello ADVENT, hello XCOM,” a familiar mocking voice drolled. “It’s been a while hasn’t it. A lot has happened, and what a coincidence I’m back here.”

“Host-1 to Zeus-1,” Sierra contacted urgently. “We-“

“We’re hearing it too,” was the answer.

“Unfortunately this time, I’ve been given strict orders,” the Hunter said, voice mockingly upset. “But while the number of things I can actually kill has been reduced, it’s still enough of a target rich environment where I can have some fun. And there are a few little flying nuisances that I think need to be culled.”

“Back! Back!” Sierra ordered, all of them taking evasive action in varying directions. Ted shot upwards, Sierra tucked into a spin, and Anna took a dive towards the ground as they sped towards the trench lines which now seemed very far away. None of them cared about possible fire from the ground now; grazes were preferable and could be survived.

The Hunter could not.

And he was openly laughing. “Come now, XCOM,” he chuckled. “Do you really think you can just fly away? From me?”

Sierra stiffened as she heard Ted scream from above and arch his back as the shot tore right through his armor – and through the rightmost jet. A second shot penetrated directly through his left foot, turning his fall into an uncontrolled spin. “I’ve got him!” Sierra yelled. “Anna get out of here now!”

Without waiting for a response, she boosted her jets to angle to catch the falling Archangel. They were only a few hundred feet above the ground now, but she slammed into him, catching him in the midsection and eliciting a yell of pain. “Sorry,” she breathed, as she immediately tried to course correct herself.

“It’s…fine…” he breathed in between grunts.
“Ah, everyone loves a hero!” Her blood ran cold as the Hunter taunted her from his unknown position. “I like you, random Archangel! I like you enough I’m going to give you a chance to fight. Let’s see how you do!”

Before she could even think about what that meant, her right primary jet was destroyed and this time there was no stopping the fall to the ground. The good news was that they were close enough that she could ensure they both survived. The bad news was that they were still far from the trenches and they were in an open minefield.

“Anna! Zeus-1! I’m going down!” She called as she made some last-second boosts on her legs right before she crash-landed into the hard dirt. Turning herself around, she fell backwards, slightly cushioning the impact on Ted who would not have survived a direct landing. It slammed her onto her back, and it clearly damaged the suit beyond repair, but she was somewhat alive, if dizzy.

“Come on,” she groaned, briefly pushing him off to get up. The Collective was advancing forward, and green plasma fire was whistling around them. Their armor would still take a few hits, but they were getting closer. A brief diagnostic showed that her leg jets were still good. Ted had his foot shot, and was probably running on half a lung, so he couldn’t make a run. She was going to have to do this on her own.

A long shot, with the possibility of both of them getting blown up with a mine, but there wasn’t a choice.

“Don’t move;” she told him and picked him up in her arms, trying to adjust slightly for weight distribution. Thank god for strength enhancement gene modding. He was still heavy, but movable. Without wasting time, she took off running. After she’d worked up a good speed, she jumped into the air and activated her leg boosters.

She yelped and almost was flipped over, but her forward momentum was enough to keep her moving, and she cut them so she could land with a running start. “Sierra, we’ve got a fix on your position and a PRIEST team is coming out to assist you,” Mona updated. “Stay alive a few more minutes.”

“Copy,” she breathed, starting now to feel the strain. It turned out that multiple landings from terminal velocity had consequences even on a modded body. She repeated the jumping maneuver, this time able to better account for the kickback, and landed successfully, even if now her legs were starting to hurt. She probably looked ridiculous, but it was a hell of a lot faster than just running.

The trench was ahead now, close enough that she saw a slew of white armor moving forward out onto the battlefield. It was also useful that there were the wrecks of those hovercraft that served as some kind of cover. Unfortunately not all of them had been destroyed and one suddenly swept towards her, guns firing.

She leapt straight into the air, and was clipped by the plasma cannons sending her flying backwards and directly into the hard hull of one of the wrecks. At the last instant she tossed the limber body of Ted to the ground to prevent his neck from definitely being snapped from the slam. He yelled as his leg twisted underneath him, but she couldn’t do much more.

Dazed against the machine bearing down on her, she struggled to rise and her head rang.

Then the machine was lifted into the air, and Anna swept down, firing her plasma cannon into the weapons on its sides, turning them to slag. Corrosive psionic energy appeared around the machine, rending its integrity void as the telekinetics similarly crushed the interior. It was tossed a short
distance away and exploded. Sierra rose to see a team of PRIESTs, with Anna landing and firing a few shots behind them into the approaching Muton army.

“Got here just in time,” she gasped, stumbling over to the body of Ted and trying to pick him up again. He was completely passed out now, and given how bloody his chest armor was, she hoped he was still alive. “Thanks.”

“We can carry him, sir,” one of the Priests said. “You’ve done more than enough.”

“Unless you’re modded, you’re not carrying him on your own,” she insisted, stumbling towards the trench lines. “Just…have someone waiting.”

The Priest didn’t argue, and just began calling for a medical team when they got back. Psionic shields appeared behind them as they made it back inside the dubious safety of the trenches, but a team of medics rushed to Ted who Sierra laid on the stretcher, and began spraying their medkits and calling out their medic lingo.

She was too tired to listen too closely, and took off her helmet, breathing heavily.

“You did it,” Anna said, also taking her helmet off as some ADVENT personnel brought them water. “When he started talking…” she shook her head. “I thought we were all dead for sure. We don’t just…survive that.”

“He still might not,” Sierra said wearily, slumping to the ground as her armor felt very heavy. “I probably made everything worse.”

“Fuck off with that,” Anna grunted, hauling her to her feet. “Now he has a higher-than-comfortable chance of dying in surgery as opposed to definitely dying from terminal velocity. You saved him and yourself. We need to get new gear and rest.”

“Alright,” Sierra shook her head and absentmindedly realized her WHEEE cannon was gone. Wonderful. “Have there been any casualties?”

“Three wounded enough to be taken for treatment,” Anna grunted as they passed through several squads of ADVENT soldiers. “Cho’s MEC was taken out by one of those green bombs the siege units shot. Hendrix’s was damaged in the blast and is being repaired now. XCOM is going to send a Goliath as backup.”

“The Hunter is the larger problem,” Sierra said warily. “We need to deal with him.”

“XCOM is aware,” Anna said. “I think they’re working out how to deal with it.”

“Well,” Sierra took another long drink of water. “They need to figure it out sooner than later.”

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Throne Room of the Imperator – The Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

3/7/2017 – 9:08 A.M.

To describe the feeling of psionically mind merging with the Imperator would be nearly impossible. Patricia knew she was one of the most powerful Human psions, but at the same time also knew that compared to even the weakest of Ethereals she was significantly lacking. But until her first merges with the Imperator…she didn’t understand how vastly inferior her capabilities were.
While not completely having control, she could comprehend and grasp how much power he could bring to bear in seconds.

Power strong enough to reduce this ship to scrap, telepathically dominate armies, or send a moon crashing into a planet.

It was…fortunate that she didn’t have to find this out the hard way, and hopefully humanity would never have to experience just how outmatched they were against the Imperator. To simply describe what the Imperator could do was simply not doing him justice. Yet it was also a sobering reminder that the Imperator could be compared to the Sovereigns like a human could be compared to an Ethereal.

No reminiscing. Focus.

The voice in her head was not her own, not completely, but it was also not the Imperator’s. It was a merged compilation. The intensity of the voice, be it the lighter or deeper pitch, seemed to depend on the intensity of their connection. It also depending on who ceded control the most. That had been among the first experiments – how to cede or take control.

Incorrect words.

He-she-they were right. It wasn’t the correct explanation of what was happening. A mind could not give or take control any more than it could ignore itself…it was closer to deciding which side should take control; what to draw upon. It depended upon what they did. When it came to her body; when that was primarily what she was doing, the part of her that was her was more in control.

But when the vast experience and skill of the Imperator was needed, by instinct her body reacted. It was not as crude as being hijacked, as their merged mind had come to the same conclusion, and the only notable consequence was what it was drawing from; who it was drawing from.

The first few times had been overwhelming, as she’d stood paralyzed or just fell to the ground, trying to comprehend the mind of the vastly older and more powerful being her mind was joining with. It had taken multiple attempts to even begin to start moving on her own; walking was a challenge, much less fighting.

A process that Revelean had assured them was expected and natural.

“Your minds are from different species and chemistries. An Ethereal does not think like a Human and the reverse is true. All that can be done to change this is by exposure. It will not be pleasant, and it will be incoherent and vast for the beginning, but the minds of both Human and Ethereal are malleable and adaptable – it merely requires effort and time.”

Nothing had been painful, thankfully. It had been more of a fugue state at first, with her getting bombarded with information, languages, and incomprehensible gibberish that the sheer volume of had forced her mind to simply stop working correctly. Overloaded, Revelean had called it. The Imperator had not been as affected, but that was to be expected.

It probably helped that everything she had seen from the Imperator’s mind stayed with her for the most part, which allowed her to think and ponder over it. The first few times she’d barely gotten anything she could understand; mostly images and words in Ethereal Script that she couldn’t entirely process.

Now it was becoming easier, and the amount of secrets between them was diminishing each time
they merged. It wasn’t as though she had many things she could call major secrets – although her
time in XCOM could certainly be considered that from a military standpoint – but the Imperator
likely knew of them from seeing her memories as well.

As for what she’d learned?

Many long talks, debates, and arguments during the Synthesized War. The rush of vertigo as he
had been awakened and immediately thrust into a war; the confusion and stress at being considered
the only hope of a species he had never really know; the long and continuous battles against an
enemy that more and more seemed less mindless, and more conniving and malicious.

Thousands of Ethereals and worlds sacrificed, and more and more evidence that this enemy could
not be defeated. Not now. It was too late.

And a name. His name.

*Viatorian.*

*Destroyer of the Prime.*

The name she’d recognized from reading on the Synthesized War, or at least what Cogitian had
written. She’d wondered if the Imperator was one of the famous ones in the war; she’d guessed that
*this* Imperator was one of the ten coordinators of the war, although which one she did not know for
certain.

But now she did.

The only Imperator to have killed one of the Synthesized Primes was still alive, and had set his
sights far higher. Time would tell if they were successful, but there was no possible way for
humanity to know just who they were facing.

She realized now that they were lucky that the Imperator was sending his Harbinger to solve such
issues. Were the Imperator himself to directly intervene…the war would be over far sooner,
although it would awaken T’Leth.

And now was not the time for it.

She looked down at her armored hand, ensheathed in psionic energy, as was her entire body. It felt
hot, like an engine with too much power in it. Which in a way, it was. She was a bottleneck to the
true power the Imperator could bring to bear…but what power she *did* have was beyond compare.
There felt like there was little that she could not do.

*With one motion, we could splinter this ship.*

*With one command, the legions would become ours.*

*In one moment, reality can reshape itself.*

The power flowed through her; the voices evenly split. Both intertwined and cognizant of the
world around them. They had *clicked* to use a Human term. It would still take time to fully master
what they could do, but the difficult part was over, and as Revelean had said, it had only taken time
and effort.

Yet it had been worth it.
Human and Ethereal, soldier and Imperator, their minds had overcome the obstacles of their artificial union. They were of one mind in this joining.

The path ahead was clear.

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Hong Kong, Guangdong – China

3/8/2017 – 10:12 A.M.

To say they were stepping into a nightmare would be an understatement.

It was less of a coordinated attack, and much closer to a free-for-all. The Chinese soldiers initially depending the city had been devastated by the initial psionic attack, even with Aegis protecting them. While they retained their minds, they were paranoid, shaken, and afraid. The ADVENT soldiers deployed were faring better, but they still weren’t prepared for the onslaught.

China had lacked the trenches and Flak Towers of other fortified cities. They had defenses, but they were facing the black legions of Custodians led by the black-robed soldiers of Isomnum. As well as strange hovercraft that had come floating over the ocean, and not from the air. Smart, and that was not what Oliver really wanted from the Collective right now.

“There is a significant sustained psionic attack on this city and throughout the border regions of China,” Geist stated with a calm coldness. “Aegis is defending against it. That will be what I do as well; to reinforce the cities under assault that are succumbing to him. Many have already fallen and are being overrun.”

“You can’t help them, can you?” Kane’s voice reminded Oliver of an animal just before it struck. Restrained, yet just waiting for the opportunity to strike. Even the question was rhetorical and Geist did not treat it otherwise.

“I do not have time to help them,” he shook his head. “They will be put out of their misery. Isomnum’s reach is weak to affect as many as possible it will not be difficult to penetrate a mind that is already broken.”

Kane nodded. “Better to die than live in the hell Isomnum creates.”

“What are we doing?” Oliver asked.

“Either prevent Hong Kong from falling, or eliminate as many of Isomnum’s soldiers as possible,” Geist said. “Target priorities are the black-cloaked soldiers. All others are secondary. There is too much ground to cover with one squad, so there will be two teams. Chronicler, take Oliver and Kane and investigate any requests for assistance.”

He turned to another trio of XCOM soldiers. “David, take Alisa and Kanda. Do the same. Viktoria’s Archangel host will provide air support in the same way. MECs will also be operating on their own to provide assistance to ADVENT. That is why we are here. Ensure ADVENT does not fall. Understood?”

“Yes, Overseer!”

Kane unstrapped his massive weapon. The gun seemed almost as long as he was tall, and wasn’t standard XCOM gear. He’d asked along the way, and Kane had said it was a specially developed ETC variant of an M2 Browning. Which translated to a Browning that didn’t need a stand, but was
essentially the same thing. Normally it would be impossible for a regular Human to wield them as heavy weapons, but thanks to gene mods and Kane being the largest person Oliver had ever seen by far, it looked surprisingly natural in his hands.

The Chronicler’s wrists had a blueish glow about them as he clenched a fist. “Let’s go.”

Their first encounter was an overrun ADVENT squad that was fighting off a Custodian advance on a barricaded four-way street. It was being led by one of Isomnum’s Sectoids, and just from the glimpse of the area, Oliver saw the effect that alien had. There were soldiers, Chinese and ADVENT, shot in the back, and even now one Chinese soldier was being restrained as he shouted gibberish.

Kane said nothing, but let loose with his weapon. The Custodians were confident enough to have been advancing, and thus were unprotected. The Browning shredded four into pieces before they moved with surprising swiftness to duck into cover within the nearby buildings. The Chronicler waved a hand and two of the Custodians were ripped apart by a blue wave of energy.

The Sectoid chittered as Oliver fired at it, a psionic barrier appearing to absorb the plasma. Glowing with psionic energy, the Chronicler lifted a hand and Oliver felt something...cushion his mind for lack of a better word. There was a presence, but he suddenly found himself able to think more clearly and focus.

The passive effect Isomnum and his minions had placed over the city was not to be scoffed at. The soldiers were rallying, and firing back with ragged cheers. “No!” Kane roared, glaring briefly back to the Chronicler. “Stay out of my mind! I do not need your protection. Not from him!”

Heedless of the danger, he instead marched forward towards the Sectoid. A psionic barrier had appeared and was absorbing all of the rounds, but he had successfully attracted its attention. Oliver fired multiple shots at an overwhelmed Custodian and it fell to the ground as a smoking wreck. More were brought down by the Chronicler’s psionics and the combined ADVENT and Chinese survivors.

The Sectoid had the air distort around him, and directed a hand towards Kane, likely a psionic attack.

But something unexpected happened instead. Not only did it just seem to make Kane angrier, the barrier itself was dissipated and the Sectoid shook his head as if stunned. Only mere seconds was all it took for it to be ripped apart by the unforgiving rounds of Kane’s Browning; turning the alien into ground meat leaking ichor blood.

With that fight done, the Chronicler was talking to the leading officer, and Oliver saw Kane go over and smash a boot on top of the head of the Sectoid, turning it into a splat, before walking back while reloading his weapon.

“What happened?” Oliver asked.

“The alien made the mistake of looking into my mind,” he said in a low voice. “It didn’t like it.”

Oliver didn’t know much about Kane, but it appeared that he’d had some history with Isomnum. Something he’d have to ask about later, because now was not the time. “Will they be able to hold?”

Oliver asked the Chronicler as he walked up.

“For now,” was the answer. “We couldn’t stay even if we wanted to. Too many other defensive points that will fall without us. Follow me.”
Without waiting, they both followed the Chronicler down a winding path of streets until they saw another battle raging ahead. This was a full street battle with ADVENT and the Collective fighting to take control of it. There were two of the hovercraft leading the front, in addition to Outsiders of all things.

“Been a long time since we’ve seen those,” he grunted, readying his weapon. They were coming up behind the Collective assault, so they had the element of surprise. But these Outsiders looked different. They were bigger. Their armor was a dull orange, not the bright crystal they had originally been made out of.

The ones in the back seemed to know something was coming, but before they could do anything, the Chronicler swept his arm across with a yell as the entire street was engulfed in a blue crackling maelstrom of energy from side to side. Oliver fired into the storm at the targets, though he really didn’t think he was adding much.

The Outsiders and hovercraft attempted to fight back, but against a psion they were incapable of sufficient retaliation. As it turned out, that was armor the Outsiders had been wearing, and when it broke, it revealed the crystalline form underneath. Not that it protected them any better, as they shattered soon afterwards, and the hovercraft were subsequently rendered destroyed.

Not all the aliens had been taken out, as there were Custodians fighting in the front, but the combined power of a plasma grenade, the Chronicler’s telekinesis, and Kane’s weapon ripped the entire line of Custodians to pieces. It appeared they had arrived just in time as well; as the Chinese defenders were close to breaking.

Looking back, Oliver saw that there had been several defensive points that had been constantly overrun in short order. Only about ten of the Chinese soldiers were left, and half of them were wounded in some capacity. They didn’t speak English, but did make their thanks known as Kane and Oliver helped fortify the area as best they could. The Chronicler looked around the street for a minute, and then proceeded to collapse one of the buildings, and telekinetically moved the debris around to create a near-impenetrable barrier.

“Find allies; retreat,” he said with a waved hand to the Chinese.

They began moving off immediately. “Telepathy?” Oliver grunted.

“Yes,” the Chronicler said. “No English, so I had to improvise.”

“We need to keep going,” Kane insisted. “There is too much ground being lost.”

Unfortunately he was right. The few battles they had encountered did not paint an optimistic picture of how the attack was going. “We need to change the tide of a major defense,” Oliver said. “Can you find one?”

“We’re heading to it now,” the Chronicler said, motioning them forward. “And if we hurry, we can salvage this as much as possible.”

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Skyranger, En Route to Mission Site

3/8/2017 – 10:05 A.M.

This was going to be a very risky operation, but from the news Nuan had heard…it was necessary. Things were already bad, even with Aegis and the Chronicler working to prevent the worst of it.
The attack was fast and overwhelming, and multiple smaller cities had already fallen, with the larger ones being contested – with ADVENT losing.

She didn’t necessarily know by how much, but it was far too close for comfort.

“The island of Hainan has been captured by Collective forces,” Iosif said, standing in the skyranger; commanding all of their attention. “We suspect it is already being used as a staging ground to the mainland. It’s likely that Isomnum will not expect a strike so soon after landing, which means that if we do enough damage, we can significantly affect his operations.”

“Without as much infrastructure or defenses in place,” Alberta Hill, the MELD Operator accompanying them added. “Easier for us.”

“Exactly,” Iosif confirmed. “We are still expecting significant defenses, but nothing firmly entrenched yet. We are likely going to be encountering significant amounts of Custodians and Isomnum’s personal soldiers. We’ve heard reports of Collective vehicles, so be prepared for those as well.”

“What about civilians?” Analyn asked, clasping her hands together. “The island wasn’t completely evacuated in time, and it’s possible they’re still alive.”

“They are not our priority,” Iosif shook his head. “And it is unlikely they’re even still sane now. Isomnum does not avoid targeting civilians. They may be crazed and attack us. Put them down if you have too. We can deal with them once the region is secured. Gamil, Ellinor, both of you will need to protect us from the worst of Isomnum’s effects.”

“Will do,” Ellinor nodded. “Not exactly my specialty, but for a group this small it can be done.”

“Hainan isn’t a small island,” Nuan commented. “Are we going to be the only ones taking it on? That’s dangerous, even for us.”

“Just give me time,” Alberta said, likely smiling underneath. “And enough materials.”

“Until that point, Alberta, we’ll still need help,” Iosif chided. “The good news is that we’ve got backup incoming. ADVENT is sending PRIEST, Dragoon, Cuirassier, and Lancer squads to help us secure the island – or cause a lot of damage for the Collective. Some will be dropping in behind us, others will be striking other areas of the island.”

“Sounds good.” This sounded like a much more plausible scenario. One they could possibly win. ADVENT special forces could definitely handle some of the worst the aliens could throw at them, and the PRIEST Division also being included would help mitigate the worst of Isomnum.

Nuan did wonder how much the aliens had prepared for this possibility. The Battlemaster was likely still behind some of the offensive, and Isomnum was unlikely to be blind enough to not anticipate some kind of response or attack on critical locations. This entire operation would have contingencies, and she supposed that they would find out just how thorough such contingencies were.

It was going to be satisfying though to kill aliens invading her homeland. She’d only visited Hainan a few times in her life, but in the end, it was still a part of China, and she would defend it to the bitter end. She had not expected it would be in quite this way, but she couldn’t complain about it. Humanity standing and fighting together against an alien threat.

This was how it should be.
She had been right to initially be suspicious of XCOM and ADVENT, as had most people, but by now it was clear that they intended to do exactly what they promised – defend Humanity through whatever means they could. Didn’t matter the nation or people, they would still fight because it was the right – and admittedly strategic – thing to do.

She looked up to Iosif, who gave her a reassuring nod.

She smiled under the helmet. Not that he could see, but maybe he could sense her thanks. If there was someone she wanted by her side right now, it was him.

“This is Rising Sky to Janus Team,” their pilot said. “We are coming in on the LZ. Prepare to deploy. Fires in the city, doesn’t look like they have it fully under control.”

The lights turned to red, and they all stood. “Showtime,” Ellinor said, the Templar gripping her ax.

All of them brought out their weapons or drew on their psionic power. They descended with a roar and hit the ground with a shake and a thud. The ramp hissed and lowered, the waiting nightmare beckoning. Nuan could see the ADVENT dropships also in the distance behind them.

“Go!” Iosif commanded, pointing with his mace. “Let them have it!”

And charging into the streets and into the waiting battle; ADVENT forces deploying all around them, the battle to take back Hainan began.

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The Prism – Unknown Location

3/8/2017 – 4:17 P.M.

The hours were ticking away and Yang felt…disappointed by what she was seeing.

Idiot.

Isomnum was taking the most blunt and ineffective approach to China she could have imagined. His grandstanding at the beginning wasn’t going to make anyone actually important afraid of him, and all he was going to achieve was ADVENT getting a whole lot of propaganda to distribute about the evils of the Collective.

This of course would imply the Dread Lord actually cared about the opinions of aliens.

She shivered.

He quite clearly did not.

She had news broadcasts of the attacks playing in the background. It was mostly speculation and some ‘front line’ interviews with clearly designated officers in Beijing – nowhere close to the ‘front lines’ unless the media somehow considered ‘front lines’ to be the same country. It was disingenuous and largely amounted to ADVENT saying “We’re prepared if the coast falls.”

Which it probably was. Isomnum was at least making progress against ADVENT, and for that she could admit some grudging appreciation. She didn’t feel sorry for the brainwashed soldiers and politicians who’d presided over the country for decades, or that they were getting anything less than they deserved. But strategically, Isomnum was not how she wanted to see the Chinese brought low.
It would have preferably been her extracting the confession of President Qin over the hundreds of political dissidents he’d ordered eliminated who dared question his policies, possibly while dangling him over the highest skyscraper in Beijing, but that was unfortunately unlikely to happen.

The best case scenario for her was Isomnum dying well before he reached that point, the Battlemaster stepping in, and both of them finishing the invasion.

Unfortunately she felt like Isomnum was going to blow any impact they had very quickly. Once ADVENT learned what Isomnum was doing to the civilians, things were going to get bad. Bad as in it was going to tarnish the Collective possibly irredeemably if it was just allowed to continue unaddressed. Not to mention it was going to really undercut Betos and her activities.

She hadn’t known much about the SAS or their situation until it was announced; unsurprising as it appeared to be a deeply secret mission by Macula, but she was mildly impressed that Betos actually went through with supporting the Collective. And Isomnum was going to very much fuck all of it up if this wasn’t handled correctly.

“You are anxious,” the Battlemaster said, indicating his return. He must have returned through the Gateway since there had been no other indication of his arrival.

“Because I’ve been reading the intel reports one of Isomnum’s thralls has been so kind as to send back,” she said, turning to him and shutting off the news projection. “He needs to be recalled or dealt with. This is just going to make things worse. ADVENT is already furious over the assassinations, but this will send them into an entirely justified uproar.”

“Let me see,” the datapad floated to his hand and he began reading. She realized that it was probably difficult for him to see since the tablet was made for someone not twelve feet tall. Then again, the amount of modifications he had, he could probably read perfectly fine.

She also realized that his greeting was not exactly standard. He noticed that she was anxious, and aside from a few physical tells, it wasn’t very apparent. Likely a result of the deeper bond between them. While it wasn’t exactly full merging like what Nico and Patricia had with their respective Anchors, there was still a more intimate understanding of each other that accompanied the merging.

It was…not as debilitating or overwhelming as she was expecting. There was not necessarily a sudden comprehension of psionic abilities or overwhelming power at her fingertips like had been described. There was just a telepathic…connection. That was the simplest explanation. A direct link to the Battlemaster that he was seemingly still getting used too.

“No one has touched my mind in centuries. I did not expect that the first to manage it would be an alien.”

They hadn’t really pried into each other’s minds for now. When it came down to it, the Battlemaster respected his mental privacy and that of others. A privilege for a species that relied so heavily on knowing what others were thinking, or at least had that capability. This distance would likely lessen, but when they both were used to it.

They didn’t need that to be effective in battle. Already they were far more coordinated when joined than apart. Being able to communicate at the speed of thought took some getting used to, but that was what the hours of training in the Prism would be used for.

In the meantime, the Battlemaster gently floated the datapad over to the nearby table. “Unfortunately that Isomnum continues to squander every opportunity he gets to show some restraint and
usefulness to the Collective.”

To most people, that would be just a statement. But she could tell very clearly that the Battlemaster was furious with what he had read. As well he should be. “What are you going to do?” She asked as he made his way over to the communications room. She suspected she knew his immediate response, but wanted to confirm.

“I am ordering the immediate withdrawal of himself and his units,” the Battlemaster said as he punched in the codes. “The Second Guardian will assume control over the Chinese offensive.”

Yang pursed her lips. “And do you really think he will withdraw?”

“He will,” the Battlemaster said. “Or when he returns, I will kill him and send his corpse to ADVENT.”

“The Imperator—”

“The Imperator will need to decide on what course the Collective will take,” he snarled, strong enough that the room shook. “There are no places for creatures such as Isomnum.”

A few moments later, the hologram of Isomnum appeared, one hand holding the holocommunicator. “Why are you speaking to me, Battlemaster. I am busy.”

“I’ve been following the reports you have been sending,” the Battlemaster said. “What are you thinking?”

“I will break the minds and spirits of all who oppose us,” was the answer hissed through static. “Do not act surprised by this, Battlemaster. There are more ways to break minds, lessen morale, and destroy hope than mere telepathy. Psionics cannot block the screams, they cannot blind those with eyes. They will see those who dared resist us and they will break eventually.”

“It is unnecessary,” the Battlemaster said, taking a threatening step forward. “We do not need such crude tactics. This is directly against our interests. We intend to conquer and assimilate. Fear will only rally the Humans against us; it hinders our operations on this planet. You are in direct violation of this.”

“Silence.” Isomnum lifted a hand and closed it into a fist. “You seek assimilation; equality with species who are our lesser. They will rally at first, but fear will break eventually. Resilience only survives in the face of hope. Should hope prove to be futile, they will collapse and assimilate. You will have your assimilated aliens, and unlike your pathetic and restrained tactics, they will not dare question the might of the Ethereals.”

He cocked his head, the soulless eyes of the death mask looking at them – first to the Battlemaster, and then to her. Even though his mind could no longer affect hers, she looked away. “You are tactical, Battlemaster. Do you really think the Imperator is such a fool as to place me here if he did not intend for me to execute this task as I saw fit? I do not care what violation you believe I am committing. The Imperator placed me here, and I will do as I see necessary with his approval. And when ADVENT crumbles and their will is broken, perhaps you will understand just how wrong you were.”

The Battlemaster pointed a finger to him. “The Imperator means nothing at this juncture. You are under my command now, Isomnum. I order you to withdraw along with your soldiers. The Second Guardian will take your place and command the Chinese offensive.”

Isomnum laughed.
A long, grating, and horrifying laugh. “Are you threatening me, Battlemaster?”

“Yes.” There was no ambiguity in his voice. “Withdraw, or the moment you return to Collective space, I will kill you.”

“I look forward to witnessing your removal from Collective military command,” Isomnum said. “The Battlemaster ruled by fear – fear of what I have done and will do. Fear that he might be wrong. Fear of meaningless backlash and opinions of aliens. You care too much for the opinion of those beneath you, Battlemaster. Your pet has corrupted you further than I had imagined. This conversation is over.”

The hologram vanished. Yang winced. “I’m worried that would happen. The Imperator isn’t an idiot.”

“We shall see,” the Battlemaster said, as he was already putting in another code. An Andromedon appeared.

“Your orders, Battlemaster?”

“Relocate all Cleanser Ships assigned to China to reinforce points of attack in phase two,” the Battlemaster ordered. “Do not respond to hails or contact from Isomnum or affiliated subordinates.”

The Andromedon seemed confused. “Has there been a development?”

“Isomnum has put his personal goals over the greater good of the Collective,” the Battlemaster answered. “The changes in approach will be discussed shortly. No one may countermand this order.”

“Understood, Battlemaster.”

The hologram winked out, but Yang looked at him with some concern. “It won’t stop him from just mind controlling them if he wants it.”

“No, but unknown to those on the ships and Isomnum, there is one Special Operator on each ship who will inform me if they become compromised,” was the answer as the Battlemaster punched in a code yet again.

This time the image of the Zar’Chon appeared. “I presume this is about the questionable tactics Isomnum is planning to utilize?”

“Indeed,” the Battlemaster confirmed. “Our plans are going to undergo some revision.”

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Russian Castle of the Order of Terra, Russian Wilderness – Russia

3/8/2017 – 9:24 A.M.

To say that her revelation was surprising was something of an understatement.

Reinhold, the German of the group and normally the most easygoing of the unit for once didn’t have anything to say; instead just showing a blank expression on his face as he processed it. Vicki looked similarly stunned, and only now did Kaya remember that her entire family was second-generation Japanese immigrants.
Funny how those kind of things turned out.

Genevieve’s mouth had opened and closed several times after she’d finished, definitely in the most amount of shock since they’d actually spent the most amount of time together. “I’m sorry,” she said, still in disbelief. “You’re who?”

“The goddamn Princess of Japan is what she is,” Terje said, his Norwegian accent even more pronounced than normal. “No point in making her repeat it.”

“Empress,” Mike, one of the Squires corrected absentmindedly. “Get your titles straight.”

“My apologies,” Terje lifted his hands in mock surrender. “Empress then. Japanese royalty either way. I mean…is that your title now?”

“Once things are formalized,” Kaya shrugged. “Technically I’m acting Empress until a ceremony. For all intents and purposes, that is my position.”

“Ah,” Terje suddenly winced. “Then that attack on the Japanese royals…”

She gave a sober nod. “Yes. My family.”

“I’m sorry,” he shook his head. “No one deserves what happened to them, but especially not you.”

“Appreciated; from all of you,” she waved a hand. “I’m not telling you this for sympathy, and I’m sorry I’ve technically been lying to you this entire time. But there are protocols ADVENT insisted on.”

“Technically?” Bethany, another Squire sniffed. “Not sure how ‘technically’ there is about it. Apparently your name isn’t even real.”

“Hey, lay off her,” Genevieve interrupted. “She said it was protocol. Honestly, this isn’t something new. I’ve heard the British royals doing this all the time.”

“It might have saved her life too,” Vicki chimed in. “Otherwise she might have been killed too.”

“Possibly,” Kaya agreed. “It’s impossible to say. Hamilton wanted it to stay under wraps even after this.”

“Wait, he knew?” Mike demanded, then paused, pinching his nose. “Of course he knew. No wonder he always had some kind of weird interest in you. I thought…well…”

“Oh, do go on,” Reinhold said with a raised eyebrow. “I really want to know what you thought it was.”

“Not important!” Mike insisted. “Since it’s definitely wrong.”

Kaya felt a little smile creep on her face. It did feel good to have this out now. “I can say very safely that whatever you might have, ah, thought was going on definitely wasn’t.”

“How the hell does this even happen?” Vicki asked. “I haven’t heard of any kind of royals being in the ADVENT military. And before that you usually only heard of the British. Did you just…ask?”

“More or less,” she answered. “Long process, with a lot of back and forth. Name change, false identity, backstory, all of that figured out. No preferential treatment. What you would expect.”

“So…” Genevieve sat down on the nearby chair. “Is this a really long way of telling us you’re
going back to be Empress? Because honestly that’s a completely justifiable reason. Didn’t think I’d say that, but then again, I didn’t know you were actually a monarch.”

“What? No, no,” Kaya denied immediately. “I’m not going anywhere. Not until the aliens are driven off our planet and the one who killed my family is dead.”

“So you’re not going to be Empress?” Vicki asked, confused. “Can you even be both? You have a sister right?”

“Normally it’s more of an administrative position,” she said. “A figurehead. So I’m making some changes. There…well…there isn’t anyone to stop me now,” she gave a sad smile. “Besides, I know this killer is going to want to finish the job. I’m a better target than my sister, and it’s important that my people see me in this position – fighting back.”

“Wait, I remember you now!” Vicki said, who’d been appraising her face. “You cut your hair. A lot. No wonder I didn’t recognize you. It was some interview you gave a few years ago.”

“Probably,” Kaya had given quite a few interviews, although she’d only heard of a few that had been given a western release. Probably when she’d addressed the circumstances of her sister leaving. And she’d definitely looked different then. Aside from the hair, she was quite certain the younger her had been more happy. And innocent. “You’re likely going to be seeing me on the news in the next few days. I wanted to let all of you know a little beforehand so you weren’t too blindsided.”


“Something like that,” Kaya glanced at the clock. “Hamilton wants to keep details about where I am under wraps. No identifying Order garb, not yet at least. But something to show people that I’m alive. Something hopefully inspiring.” She felt her lips curl into an empty smile. “Knowing ADVENT, they’ll be waiting for the right moment to propagandize my position in the Order. I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it.”

“I mean, it’s certainly a good story,” Bethany commented, lifting a hand as if illustrating a title. “‘Japanese Empress fights to retake Japan.’ Not the worst headline in the world.”

“No, but still,” Kaya shook her head. “I don’t want any kind of celebrity treatment here, no matter what ADVENT does to me. I don’t deserve that anymore than you; I just happened to be born into the right family. You can even keep calling me Tora if that’s what you’re comfortable with. But there’s also the risk that everyone will be a target if my position is ever revealed.”

“Ha!” Terje grinned. “Well, then we will all have the pleasure of killing the bastard who killed your family. Doesn’t change anything. We’ve worked well together so far, and I don’t see a reason to change that. Anyone disagree?”

No one spoke up, and there were several nods of confirmation. “Thank you,” Kaya said quietly. “All of you. I’m sorry you had the bad luck to be paired with me of all people.”

“Nah,” Genevieve dismissed, shaking her head. “It just makes things more interesting. Plus, I’m one of the few to actually say I’m friends with the Empress of Japan.”

“Or fought with the Empress of Japan,” Terje added.

“That too,” she nodded. “Well then, let’s get to training. I bet that Freya is wondering where we all are. She is going to love this.”
Knowing Freya, Kaya expected her to just raise an eyebrow, accept it in stride, and immediately get to work. And maybe talk in private later. “Let’s go do that,” she agreed. “The aliens aren’t going to kill themselves.”

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ADVENT-Chinese Joint Command, Beijing – China

3/8/2017 – 12:19 P.M.

“It’s not looking good right now,” Laura was saying, shaking her head. “Too many aliens, not enough entrenched defenses, and Isomnum’s direct intervention.”

“Aegis should have been able to protect them,” one of the officers said. “Right?”

“Aegis is the reason ADVENT lines haven’t gone insane yet,” the Commander clarified. “He’s under direct assault from a former Overmind. He can’t protect everyone, and is also engaging with the invading forces.”

“Which is still leading to problems,” General Cheng said, frowning at the holotable. “Isomnum’s influence is forcing us to contain and deal with the civilians who are left and subsequently have lost their minds. This is dividing our attention further and it’s not improving morale.”

“No, it isn’t,” Saudia said. “And the aliens aren’t helping matters by releasing their new toys. I don’t suppose you know anything about these, Commander?”

“Unfortunately not,” he said, moving to enhance a holographic recreation of the hovercraft and the siege-breaker. “Likely something Fectorian or the Andromedons developed. A direct response to our defenses and fairly impressive. They have the advantage this time, and only our most fortified cities will be able to repel them.”

“What is the status of Busan?” Saudia asked Laura.

“Holding well, if suffering casualties,” she answered, consulting her tablet. “The first trench is being slowly overrun, but they’re causing significant damage to the alien forces.”

“The one piece of good news today,” she muttered. Losing the first trench was not a major deal, as the aliens would find three more layers behind it, much less the defenses in the city itself. Busan would not fall, but it would not be easily defended, depending on how badly the aliens wanted to claim it. “The only issue is that the Hunter has shown himself,” Laura added. “Although he’s not the wild card he used to be.”

“Not surprising,” the Commander grunted. “The Battlemaster wouldn’t have deployed him if he was. I’m working on a team to handle him.”

“We may need more XCOM teams in China,” Laura said, returning their attention to the siege at hand; with many red-lighted areas on the holographic coast of China. “Even if this strike in Hainan works, that isn’t going to stop the invasion, nor will it be able to be held indefinitely.”

“We need to wait for a few more hours yet,” he disputed. “I will not overcommit to this attack; not yet. Right now Isomnum has not done anything we did not expect. I suspect something unexpected is going to happen, and we do not want to overplay our own hands just yet.”

“At the same time, I don’t want to unnecessarily lose significant portions of China,” Cheng pointed out with a frown. “We may need to start preparing euthanasia commands if the insane civilian
problem gets worse. There are tank brigades in the cities which are about to engage if the front lines keep falling.”

“That is not going to help,” Laura said, shaking her head. “The euthanasia. Not the tanks.”

“It’s preferable to having to worry about being stabbed in the neck by some insane civilian!” Cheng shot back. “We don’t have many options here; I do not like it either, but we have to put our own soldiers first before anyone else.”

“I have a better idea,” the Commander said. “Halt the advance altogether. Have the Purifiers begin creating a line between the armies in as many places as possible. It’s possible it could spread, but it would give us time to regroup and solve this issue, and temporarily halt the alien advance – or funnel them into corners. Not even aliens will risk going through ClF3.”

“It could also burn down the cities,” Cheng added.

“You’re right, it could,” the Commander nodded grimly. “But it would stop the aliens for now. Concerted bombings along the coast with ClF3 bombs would also help, and more directly impact the alien lines. They have yet to deploy the siege breakers in China yet.”

“I wonder why?” Laura mused.

“Possibly so we expend everything on what is already deployed,” Saudia guessed, scratching her chin. “However, I agree with the Commander. Extreme, but this advance needs to be halted. We can make decisions on how best to defend the major cities or retreat if needed to more fortified interiors.” She glanced to Cheng. “However, you or Qin need to also make the call.”

He grimaced, but nodded. “Move your forces into position, I will inform President Qin about these developments.”

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Haikou, Hainan - China

3/8/2017 – 10:47 A.M.

The infrastructure was eerily untouched, likely due to the lack of any significant fighting that had taken place. But that was the only thing Nuan could see that was even remotely normal, because right now they were facing something out of a nightmare. In the middle of the streets there were Isomnum’s black-armored soldiers performing surgeries.

Surgeries on civilians.

There wasn’t even any slight indication of protocol, sanitation, or comfort. The screaming men, women, and children were being held down by clamps or Custodians as their limbs were removed or replaced with basic prosthetics or were forced onto their backs as their spines were cut open or their brains exposed to the cybernetics that were being meticulously applied.

Custodians guarded the operations sites and moved to defend them as the enraged XCOM soldiers approached. Nuan snapped her gauss rifle up to aim at the nearest Custodian and fired at the head. The rounds tore into it, but she temporarily forgot that was not the actual control center for the machine, and the black humanoid robots moved to defend.

She really needn’t have bothered, since Ismail shoved one hand forward, and the entire front line of Custodians was lifted into the air and crushed into scrap metal. Orange-tinted wisps of apparent
dust floated off Alberta and converged on the scrap of the Custodians while Isomnum’s soldiers stood at attention and directed the converted civilians to begin marching against the XCOM squad.

It was worse seeing them approach, since it was apparent that they were mad from pain and terror, and clearly not wanting to do it, but the machines or psionics in their heads forced them to obey. There was some pattern to how they were outfitted; most had an arm with bladed fingers clearly intending to bludgeon or stab enemy soldiers, possibly relying on the soldiers being unwilling to shoot them.

Others were strapped with devices that looked explosive, and they were hanging towards the back. They were not shambling either, but being forced to run at full speed towards the soldiers. Gamil raised an arm, and several psionic barriers appeared in front of the horde of probably thirty of the converted, with at least a dozen more being finished up by Isomnum’s soldiers.

“Grenade out!” Yavin called, and tossed a plasma grenade over the psionic wall, which Ismail assisted by telekinetically grabbing the grenade, and slamming it to the ground with extra force. Nuan winced as the green explosion vaporized a good portion of the converted, but at least they were out of their misery.

“Ellinor, move in with me,” Iosif commanded, brandishing his mace. “After Isomnum’s minions.”

“They’re not going to do what he plans on doing to all of them,” Nuan growled, turning around to see at least several hundred storming forward from around street corners and down the main road. They were interspersed with the black-robed soldiers of Isomnum, primarily Sectoids and Vitakara, with the occasional Human.

It did appear that Isomnum’s soldiers were in full retreat as the two Templars bore down on them without mercy. One of the black-robed Sectoids tried mustering up a telepathic attack against Iosif before his head was caved in by the mace. A black-robed Human simply elected to run away from Ellinor, and ran straight into a psionic barrier, and as he turned to meet her, she buried the glowing ax in his face and kept cutting down.

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“With pleasure,” she agreed, and charged. Gamil removed one of the squares of barriers, and the first thing Iosif did with the revealed space was thrust an arm forward and a horizontal field shot out, slamming into those directly in front of him and even decapitating a few, accompanied by several brief spurts of crimson blood.

Alberta was seemingly doing enough to occupy the majority of the Custodians, as they seemed almost frozen as they retreated, to let the remainder of the converted try and kill them. Gamil lowered the barriers entirely, giving the rest of the XCOM soldiers license to shoot whatever approached them. None of them had even sought cover yet, as there wasn’t a significant need.

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“We’ve got reinforcements coming from behind,” Analyn informed, sounding worried. “More of those…converted civilians.”

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It didn’t make sense why he would go this far? Sure, the practical argument for easy disposable soldiers was pretty straightforward, but he had to know that was only going to make everyone furious? Could this really be something the Collective would sanction? Especially since they were still trying to appeal to other independent nations?

However, as she looked closer at the faces of the converted, whose eyes held only terror and madness, and their faces covered in dried and running blood and gore, she realized that Isomnum simply did not care what anyone, be they Human or Collective, wanted.
He only wanted everyone to feel terror.

Ismail motioned and three of the bomb-converted were thrown backwards and ended up exploding in a red-orange blast, taking out more of the standard converted. So they were suicide bombers, good to know. The best thing to do…the only thing…was to put them out of their misery.

*These aren’t people anymore. They are tools. Enemies.*

*Aliens.*

“Fire!” Yavin called, green plasma shooting from his rifle into the rushing horde.

*You are not killing people. Only things which should be dead.*

“Funneling,” Gamil said, and he repeated the same psionic barrier technique, only leaving open a gap large enough for a few to get through at a time. Everyone concentrated their fire in that direction. Nuan saw an opportunity to fully exploit their clustered situation.

“Switching to hellfire rounds,” she informed, ejecting her half-depleted clip and putting in the Hellfire rounds, which was the unofficial term for the rounds which contained small traces of ClF3. It admittedly turned her gun into something of a primed bomb, but it was a risk she was willing to take. She fired into the horde and was rewarded with a burst of flame as the fire began to take hold and spread.

“Gamil! Lower the shield slightly!” She called, running along the side and taking aim. “Let me fire into the group!”

“Better idea!” Ismail extended a hand to her. “Be ready!”

She barely had time to prepare herself as she was suddenly lifted into the air over the barrier with full vision over the road. Without wasting time she fired a spread across the entire street; and since she didn't need to be extremely accurate, a line of fire took hold and began spreading throughout the ranks. She spent the next few seconds targeting the general area where the black-robed and armored soldiers were, and focused on them.

Her eyesight and aim were good enough that they had difficulty reacting in time, and found themselves suddenly shot and drenched in fire they could not extinguish. She repeated this four or five times before the converted were dying out, and instead Custodians were emerging as reinforcements, in addition to Outsiders.

New Outsiders though. These looked different. She motioned to Ismail to put her down, and was subsequently lowered swiftly. “More reinforcements. Custodians and Outsiders.”

“Outsiders?” Analyn asked. “Haven’t seen those in a while.”

“These look different,” Nuan updated, shooting a look back to the other side of the street to see how Iosif, Alberta, and Ellinor were doing. “Probably improved.”

As it turned out, Iosif was just finishing off the last of Isomnum’s soldiers with a mace swing to the head, turning another Sectoid brain into mush. Ellinor’s axe was stained with yellow and red blood, while Alberta’s nanites had noticeably stripped the Custodians down to extremely reduced and cannibalized sizes, and were instead constructing barriers and what looked to be ammunition magazines from the remains. As she looked around, she also saw that entire portions of the street – including abandoned cars and light posts, were also being stripped.
“We need to watch from the roofs,” Iosif said, returning to them. “And from behind, though it looks like ADVENT will help us with that.” Several hundred feet downwards, Nuan saw a Lancer squad establishing a forward position, supported by Hussars and PRIESTs.

“We need to get this back to the Commander,” Nuan insisted. “Once they see what Isomnum is doing…”

“No need, Engineer Kun, we’re storing all of this now,” the Commander’s voice was grim. “The implications are unpleasant to say the least, but the Collective will not be able to justify this. We think-“ The signal abruptly broke up.

“Jamming us,” Iosif tapped his helmet. “Took them long enough. We’ll have to find the origin and destroy it. We’re lucky at least some of it got to the Commander.”

“Orders, Iosif?” Gamil called. “I can maintain this barrier, at least for a while. But they’re attacking psionically.” He shook his head, even as the barrier held firm. “We need to get rid of them.”

“Open a path, and we’ll go out there,” Iosif commanded. “Nuan, Yavin, provide covering fire. Gamil, reduce the shields to pillar formation. Ismail? Wreck some havoc.”

“Yes sir!”

Pillar formation simply meant that there would only be sections of a barrier, which allied (and enemy) soldiers could use as cover. Nuan dashed towards the purple barrier, careful not to lean on it. She wasn’t comfortable leaning on something that could vanish at any moment. Not wanting to risk the Templars, she switched back to standard ammunition, and resumed firing at the Custodians and Outsiders.

These Outsiders really were different, especially since there was more than one type now. A dozen were fairly small and lithe, and had formed shields onto their arms, and the opposing limb now had a crystalline blade on the end. They were worryingly fast, and beelined straight for the Templars. The Custodians were content to focus on the remaining soldiers, while also making do with the meager cover on the street.

Yavin shot the plasma rifle one was holding, causing it to explode. Nuan destroyed the head of another. Ismail sent a psionic wave that cleared an entire section of the street, crushing one of the Custodians with a car, while others were just thrown into the wall. Several massive Outsiders from the back stepped forward, and lifted their arm which had a cannon of some kind on it.

Lasers activated from a gadget on its shoulder and a red laser shot out directly into the barriers all of them were hiding behind. Nuan’s flickered, and she was slightly concerned until Gamil managed to reestablish the density of it. This needs to be fixed. She switched back to the Hellfire rounds. “Target the back row!” She yelled to Yavin, who nodded as he’d gotten the same idea.

She didn’t have the right weapon for long-range sniping, but she didn’t need exact precision every time. Only a few shots needed to land. She focused on one of the larger Outsiders, and sent a volley in that direction. Splashes of flame confirmed hits, and more fire appearing on the back row confirmed Yavin had hit as well.

In the center of it, the melee Outsiders were giving Iosif and Ellinor a good fight. For every hit they managed to land on the enemies, or send back with a psionic barrier, the Outsiders managed to take a good shot at the Templars themselves. What was worse is that they hadn’t managed to kill any yet, as every time they landed a hit, the Outsider would retreat, regenerate, and return.
There were enough of them attacking that it was a viable strategy.

“We’ve got trouble from above!” Alberta called, and Nuan directed her attention above to see a dozen massive Seekers descending upon them – or merely hovering.

“Close the gap!” Iosif yelled to Gamil. “We’ll handle ourselves!”

The barrier reestablished itself, as the majority of the squad moved to face this new threat. Nuan fired at one of the Seekers, which was surprisingly fast at avoiding her shots, but she clipped one, and that was all that was needed for the fire to start, and it shot back over the buildings before any more damage could be sustained.

One barreled straight for Ismail and knocked him over as it began strangling him. Not wanting to hurt him, Nuan immediately switched to her plasma pistol and opened fire on the Seeker, causing enough damage that it released him and shot into the air. Alberta lifted a hand and the nanites formed into a cloud that the Seekers were suddenly engulfed in.

The few that were left outside reacted immediately. One fired several rounds directly into Alberta, though they did little more than scorch her chest armor, and didn’t even come close to penetrating the skin. The others dived toward Yavin and Analyn respectively, both of whom fired at the massive machines barreling towards them.

Nuan joined in shooting down the one targeting Analyn, and it crashed a short distance away. The other one wrapped the tentacles around Yavin, but this time lifted him into the air and began contorting the body in addition to emitting the black gunk into his helmet to overwhelm the sensors. However, Yavin instead used the defenses of the Titan armor to fight back.

The nanites normally dedicated for repair were instead turned to attack the machine, and in minutes the Seeker froze up and let Yavin’s body fall nearly fifteen feet into the hard concrete. As the Medic, Analyn rushed towards him and began trying to treat him. He wasn’t going to get up for at least a little bit, but with the Seekers falling from the sky as Alberta’s nanites consumed them, it seemed that threat had been largely contained.

Nuan swung back to Iosif and Ellinor, both of whom had abandoned taking out the Outsiders for the moment in favor of kiting around the battlefield, and killing everything else. It also seemed like they were adapting well to the Outsiders, as Iosif was easily fighting off three at a time, encasing two more in psionic prisons, while throwing the other one back with a horizontal barrier.

Ellinor was having more of an issue, but she was also dealing with the armored Outsiders, ones that reminded Nuan most of the original ones…except with dull orange armor instead. They were firing on her with notable accuracy at the same time she was fighting off a half-dozen of the other Outsiders.

“We’ve got a problem!” Alberta suddenly called urgently. “A Mosrimor Avatar!”

Nuan stiffened. She hadn’t been on the mission to Argentina, but she’d heard of the Mosrimor…thing…that the Chronicler and Zara had fought. It had taken a lot to beat it, and in their position, she didn’t know if they could beat something like that. Especially given what it could supposedly do.

She turned around and it was worse than she’d expected, in addition to the rippling black skin of the nanites in the shape of a thin Ethereal, it was accompanied by the black recreations of Lancer Squads, Hussars, and PRIESTs. They didn’t seem to be quite the same as Spectres though, since there was no flash…
Those weren’t recreations. Those were the ADVENT soldiers, who were now being puppeted by the Mosrimor Avatar. Behind it was also an uncountable number of Custodians. “We’re not prepared to fight one of these,” Alberta called, drawing the nanites back to her as the Avatar and Puppets advanced. “Not without backup.”

“Can you hold it off?” Iosif called as he slammed the shield of an Outsider away and smashed the head of it in, and another strike to the chests, which this time was enough to seem to kill it.

“Not for long,” she said worriedly, as the Mosrimor Avatar began leaking black nanites into a fine mist around it. “We need to call it off. This was way more than we expected.”

“Agreed,” Iosif confirmed. “Rising Sky, we need an evac…damn it!”

Nuan remembered at the same time. Their comms were being jammed. There wasn’t anyone able to hear them, and they had no way to call for help. “Change of plans!” Iosif grunted. “Gamil! Trap the Avatar. Alberta try building around it. Hold it off for us to escape. Everyone else help me kill these things!”

“Copy!” The barrier protecting her vanished and she rushed towards Iosif, firing her plasma pistol to distract it. Ismail was assisting the Aegii and Operator as he telekinetically focused on holding the enemy force in place, which the Avatar seemed content to allow, even as the ADVENT Puppets began acting to destroy the barrier by firing at it with weapons and psionics. The Custodians behind them did the same.

Nuan caught the attention of one of the Outsiders and it swung to face her and jabbed at her face. Sidestepping she grabbed the arm and shoved a plasma pistol in it’s ‘face’ and blew it to pieces and did the same to the heart.

Iosif encased three in stasis fields while they took down another one. “I can’t hold them off!” Ellinor yelled frantically as she was stabbed under the armpit with one of the blades, even though she retaliated by burying the axe in the head of the offending Outsider. But it wasn’t enough as the continued barrage of attacks from all sides led to her being stabbed in the joints, neck, and more. Even the defenses of the Titan armor were only successfully in dissuading two Outsiders, and their own regeneration proved enough to suffer no lasting effects.

Analyn had Yavin propped up against her, as he still had the wind knocked out of him from the fall, and both of them were firing at the mass of Outsiders, though to minimal effect.

“It’s breaking through!” Gamil shouted suddenly. “I can’t keep it out!” He clutched his helmet and the barrier collapsed, and with it their hopes of holding back the aliens. The Mosrimor Avatar did nothing, but there was a noticeable psionic glow about it as the black mist of nanites rushed forward, and was met by the far smaller cloud of Alberta’s nanites, with the latter being consumed and overwhelmed within mere seconds.

Nuan watched in horror as the nanite cloud washed over first Alberta, then Gamil and Ismail who first tried struggling to get off the cloud of nanites burrowing into them, but soon fell to the ground, writing and screaming in pain. The Outsiders fighting them were still fighting back, and she was too slow to dodge one and felt the blade penetrate a gap in the elbow.

She shot and kicked back, gasping as the nanites from her suit began repairing it, but it was a lost cause. They were all going to die if they didn’t get out of here now. “We have to go!” She yelled to Iosif. “Now!”
The nanites from Mosrimor had reached Yavin and Analyn who’d been unable to outrun the black cloud. Nuan knew she only had one chance to really make any sort of difference, and she reached to the one Hellfire grenade she had, and chucked it towards the Mosrimor Avatar who extended a hand, and inexplicably grabbed it almost in amusement.

It was less amused when the grenade exploded and coated the Avatar and the nearby puppets in fire. It must have thought it was an ordinary grenade that it could withstand to show how it couldn’t be hurt.

The Outsiders were bearing down on them still. They dashed back to an alleyway, with Iosif doing the majority of the fighting, and he finally created a barrier to block them off, while pulling back his arm, and dissipating the barrier while throwing the other one forward, sending a final horizontal barrier which outright destroyed several of the Outsiders, but sent the majority flying back. Wincing in pain from her wound, Nuan fired the last of her Hellfire rounds along the ground and where they had been hoping it would slow the aliens down.

And with the aliens distracted, if only temporary, they ran.

They were on their own, in enemy territory, and Nuan had a sinking feeling that the Mosrimor Avatar wasn’t dead yet.

Or that they couldn’t just send another one.

This was bad.

Iosif was also breathing heavier, and she didn’t fail to notice the scratches and hits he’d taken during the fight as well.

This was very bad.

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*Collective Military Command – Mars Collective Base*

*3/8/2017 – 5:17 P.M.*

“We are seeing a significant pullback from ADVENT and Chinese forces,” came the report. “Isomnum’s forces are pushing them back, though he will not be able to maintain this offensive moving forward.”

“As expected,” the Battlemaster was not surprised by this development. “He has been isolated completely?”

The Vitakarian checked the datapad. “All Gateways have been rendered inoperable and transports returned to your command. He will eventually run out of soldiers and equipment.”

“I feel this may have been too much of a drastic step,” the Zar’Chon said unhappily. “Regardless of his methods, this should have perhaps been postponed until after China was conquered. I don’t deny the need to punish him for his actions—“

“He is no innocent or suffering from naivety,” the Battlemaster interrupted bluntly. “He has been given multiple chances, and yet still intends to treat this as a board to play his ideological games. There is no place for it, and I have finished enabling his actions in this manner. We do not require his skills or abilities in this way.”
Ravarian’s expression didn’t change. “And what of the Imperator?”

The Battlemaster looked long and hard at Ravarian, until the Zar’Chon looked away. “The Imperator,” he answered slowly. “Will make his opinion known should he decide to do so. The Imperator has shown a distinct lack of tactical and strategic skill thus far, and I am under no obligation to entertain his suggestions until he proves himself worth listening to. If the Imperator contacts you, direct him to me.”

A nod. “Yes, Battlemaster.”

He had not expected to be placed into this situation; he had thought better of the Imperator, and perhaps the Imperator had some grand plan for Isomnum, but unfortunately that plan would never be realized. The Imperator was not going to exert his influence on this conflict anymore until he could show some competence.

Utilizing Isomnum in any public capacity was the opposite of competence.

There was the risk that the Imperator would just remove him from his position, but that would not happen for a long time yet, and thanks to Isomnum’s idiocy, he had provided an excellent excuse for completely cutting him out of the Collective altogether. The Imperator may be displeased with that development, but the blame could be laid solely at the feet of the Dread Lord himself.

How Isomnum was resolved, he didn’t especially care. Either the Imperator would extract him via Sicarius, or ADVENT and XCOM would kill him. Or the unlikely happened and Isomnum won. Either way, he would disavow the Dread Lord as a rogue operator, and then proceed with the invasion in a more conventional and effective manner.

The holodisplay flashed to life. “All our forces are in position, Battlemaster,” came the update. “We are ready to commence the invasions on your orders.”

“Have them stand by,” he commanded, looking over the deployment plans for a final time. “I will be boarding shortly.”

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To be continued in Chapter 48:

Dream of the Dread Lord
The ADVENT forces were in full retreat and those that were left were in the process of being converted into something more... useful... assuming their minds were still intact to begin with. The smaller number of civilians were also in the process of being enhanced to serve as his soldiers as the conflict progressed deeper into the country.

The Dread Lord stood alone; simply waiting and considering. The Battlemaster had been true to his word, and this time Isomnum suspected that the Battlemaster would follow through on his threats should he retreat at this juncture. A rare, but infuriating moment of backbone displayed from the one who was so often a coward. His absurd stances would backfire one day, and Isomnum suspected that the Imperator himself might take action.

Or perhaps not. Too many of his own kind were weak of mind and stomach. If any were to be thrown aside as a sacrifice, it could very well be him. Yet he doubted, for the sole reason that the Imperator saw what he could bring and utilize, and he was not so foolish as to cast it aside based on pure morality.

Yet the situation now placed him in a curious position. His forces would last for a while longer, but they would inevitably start to dwindle, which would allow ADVENT to reclaim their territory piece by piece, and Aegis would continue to limit his effectiveness, and regardless of the pathetic character of the traitor, he was steadfast in his defense.

It would not be enough, but Aegis would be granted a quick death.

Fortunately, this was a setback he had a contingency for.

One spindly arm pulled out a holocommunicator. He activated it and after a few moments of waiting, saw the image of the Creator in her ridiculous cult uniform. Such a weak and malleable mind, twisted to serve an entity far more intelligent and dangerous than she could ever be. She had been rightly used as bait by the Imperator to harness greater power.

The puppet was of course ignorant of the role she played, but that was to be expected by one so thoroughly corrupted by the Bringer. And it was not her he needed to speak to, yet the arrogant puppet spoke as if she had authority. “Isomnum. You interrupt my work for what reason?”

“I am on Earth.” The corrupted Ethereal did not need more than that. “I have not called to speak to you, but to Him. I will speak to his representative now.”

“You forget of whom you are speaking,” she insisted. “I am his voice and will just as-“

The air rippled around Isomnum. “Silence. I have no interest in you or your arrogance. I am one of the few who are responsible for your continued existence and that of your master. Otherwise you
would all be dead at the hand of the Battlemaster now. I will speak to Him, now.”

The Creator was silent for a few moments, her body remarkably still as if listening. “As you wish, Isomnum.” The image shifted until the towering figure of the Temperance appeared, two arms visible and clasped together. The head was in a form he had not seen before, one with six eyes and a mildly aquatic shape and texture, even as the skin was still marble.

There were few creatures he treated with caution or was wary of. The Temperance was one such creature. It was intelligent, manipulative, and was quite aware of the limitations the puppet Creator was forced to endure. And any individual who could successfully defend against the Twins – as spineless as they were – had strength.

Strength the Temperance did not flaunt, which was a significant indicator of the danger such a mind posed. The truly powerful did not flaunt it. They simply were.

Power could not be faked. Those with it instinctively recognized others who had it as well.

“You show disrespect to my disciples,” the Temperance said in a monotone. “Unnecessary.”

“Then they should show more respect and lessen their arrogance,” he replied. “Your puppet is unimportant now. The Battlemaster has done as you predicted.”

A slight nod. “You have been completely cut off?”

“Yes,” Isomnum confirmed. “With the threat of death upon returning to Collective space. He will attempt to follow through, unless the Imperator intervenes.”

“It is irrelevant. You have justification to receive additional support,” the Temperance waved a hand to something to the side. “I presume the arrangement still stands.”

Spoken without ambiguity. A rhetorical statement which was not a question. One the Dread Lord did not dispute. “Yes. Assist in the conquest of China and you will be allowed to take as many as you desire from the inhabitants. You also have my assurance that the Paradise projects will not be hampered.”

“Accepted. We look forward to showing the skeptical of your kind the…advantages…of our assistance to your Collective,” the Temperance brought the hands back together. “Your support will arrive momentarily. Our Orders will each assist in your glorious conquest.”

“ADVENT will pose little threat to your soldiers,” Isomnum reminded the alien. “Your involvement will attract the attention of T’Leth.”

The Temperance showed no response to the words. “We are aware, Isomnum. We will handle him should his interference become problematic. Expect us shortly.”

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Situation Room, Mars Collective Base – Mars

3/8/2017 – 8:14 P.M.

It appeared that his deployment plans would need to be temporarily put on hold, which suited the Battlemaster fine. It would keep them focused on Isomnum for now, and there was no significant time rush. Macula was handling the attacks currently being faced by the SAS. It was causing damage, and it appeared to be a sustained attack, but nothing critical was being damaged that
couldn’t be repaired, at least from a military standpoint.

It was, however, going to require a significant amount of additional resources and personnel to ensure the civilian infrastructure didn’t collapse, as that was being hit the hardest, even if ADVENT did appear to be largely targeting military positions and personnel. Curiously it appeared that ADVENT had some kind of bomber which was oddly difficult to detect, which was already responsible for a number of spreading fires.

That would need to be handled. But that was something Macula had assured him could be done.

Right now, the Imperator was speaking with him. He had expected it would come at some point, but the immediate response was curious. He would have expected it after there had been progress on the ground. The Imperator was impossible to read behind the helmet, but he expected that the Imperator was largely displeased with recent actions.

“You should have consulted me before taking such drastic action,” the Imperator said. “This goes beyond military authority. You actively disbarred an Ethereal returning upon the pain of death. That decision cannot be made unilaterally.”

“Then perhaps you should have reconsidered utilizing him in a military operation,” the Battlemaster responded flatly. “Or including him in your plan at all. You knew what he was like. You knew what he would do. You knew how incompatible he is with myself others. I am tired of hearing you feign ignorance, Imperator. You knew exactly what you were doing. The fault lies solely with you.”

“If Isomnum would not have listened to you, I should have been informed. The Imperator began before the Battlemaster cut him off with a lifted fist.

“No. I will not give Isomnum the benefit of the doubt. He is intelligent enough to know what he is, and is not allowed to do. You either failed to make clear his restrictions, or he no longer will listen to you. His actions do not warrant any protections within the Collective, no more so than your Paradise experiment.”

The Battlemaster took a step closer to the hologram. “You intend to turn the Collective into something aliens will be interested in joining with, and staying in willingly, without significant coercion. If that is the case I am unclear exactly what you are thinking? Do you really think the Creator or Isomnum provide any benefit to achieving this supposed goal?”

“It is not that simple!” The Imperator answered. “And your willful naivety will not change that. You know of the Sovereigns and the Synthesized. The threat they pose.”

“One more than the other,” the Battlemaster commented.

“Both are usable to ensure we are not inevitably conquered by one of these two forces,” the Imperator continued. “There are no other Ethereals who understand the inner complexities and weaknesses of the Synthesized, and the Bringer is our answer to stand against the Sovereigns. And as there is a Sovereign One on Earth, they will at times be needed to achieve the greater goals of our objectives. By throwing a childish tantrum you have actively damaged our operations on Earth and given ADVENT and XCOM hope that they can defend. Do you not see how your public unveiling of this infighting is actively rallying the Humans?”

“Then perhaps you should have made better decisions,” he answered, motioning with a hand. “Perhaps you should think on why there is opposition to your decisions that are supposedly for the greater good. I will not continue to actively accept your inferior choices merely because you were
designed to be the leader of our species, even if others will. And you know that I am not the only one.”

“I accept our disagreements to a point,” the Imperator stated. “But that point stops when the greater interest of our Collective and species are threatened.”

“I am very glad we agree on that,” the Battlemaster nodded. “Considering that knowledge of Paradise and Isomnum is actively damaging the reputation and internal capabilities of the Collective, dissolving these issues is the only practical measure to take.”

“The sarcasm of Humans is rubbing off on you,” was the neutral notation. “And given the opportunity, would you kill him? One of the last of our kind?”

He was, in fact, glad the Imperator had asked. “Isomnum is not an Ethereal worth preserving. I would kill him with no hesitation. And if you are so concerned about losing his knowledge, rip it out of his mind before he is executed. Isomnum will never be safe within the Collective so long as I am alive, and should the Creator dare show herself before me, I will execute her as well.”

The Imperator appraised him for a few long moments. “Your insubordination is becoming an issue, but will not disrupt operations further at this point. Go. Do what you will, though soon we will need to discuss your role within the Collective. I will not have the Collective military led by someone as unreliable as you-“

Not unexpected, and as he had little intention of listening to the passive aggressive threats of the Imperator, he shut off the hologram and turned around to Yang who’d been standing in the far corner, who looked both impressed and concerned. “You’re braver than I am,” she said. “Cutting him off like that knowing what he can do…”

“There will be no Ethereal that actively defends Isomnum,” he answered unconcerned. “And the Imperator will not act against me without showing himself a hypocrite. He has limited power over me and I have no interest in maintaining that illusion more than necessary.”

“And what if he removes you from your position?” She asked.

He did wonder what would happen if that step was taken. The Imperator may be angry enough to do it, at least temporarily. “I will deal with that when it happens,” was all he said. “We will discuss this at a later time. Now we have nations to conquer.”

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Hong Kong, Guangdong – China

3/9/2017 – 1:32 A.M.

Oliver slumped behind cover, and then forced himself to rise again and take aim at the Outsider which continued to encroach on their admittedly defensible position. It wasn’t good news that they were slowly and steadily being forced out of the city, and were only holding a few more points in Hong Kong, but both the Chinese and ADVENT defenders were going to make the defense as costly as possible for the aliens.

It helped that the aliens were being funneled into specific choke points, which were the results of the Chronicler’s work destroying the nearby buildings and cutting off flanking routes. Oliver didn’t know how the man was still standing after all he was doing, but he was continuing to fortify the general area. The entire defense point had been leveled and destroyed, giving the defenders some much needed room.
It was big enough that a few Chinese tanks were being rolled in and placed along the lines of sight of the streets, and sniper nests had been established in the back line of buildings that offered clear shots down the street. In the area that contained the defenders, there were several rows of barricades and improvised cover of destroyed cars and boxes.

PRIEST teams, Dragoons, and squads of ADVENT soldiers made up the primary ADVENT defenders, with the majority consisting of exhausted and wounded Chinese. Oliver was extremely concerned that whatever protection Aegis and the psions were providing was beginning to weaken as he himself had experienced sudden bouts of terror and seen things briefly, though without any detail. Several ADVENT and Chinese soldiers had shot themselves or attacked others.

It was bad, and it didn’t sound like things had gone much better elsewhere either.

David’s team had been forced to retreat after Kanda had been killed, and both soldiers had been wounded and were receiving medical treatment elsewhere. From the scattered report Geist had given them, it sounded like they’d encountered a powerful Human psion who’d forced Kanda to go insane before breaking their entire offensive.

The bad news was that there was a better-than-comfortable chance that this person was coming their way.

The Archangel team had run into problems as well. They’d suffered a casualty and Viktoria had also gone down. Geist had responded by taking a team of ADVENT and Chinese soldiers and going in after her. They’d taken losses, but from how the other surviving Archangel, Zama, had described it, Geist had been angry.

Geist had also apparently suffered injuries, but was still contributing to the telepathic defense, albeit while hooked up to machines and receiving blood transfusions. Both him and the surviving Archangels were being treated further inland, while Zama, David, and Alisa were in one of the other defense points with the second Goliath that had been deployed.

The first one was right behind them now, and actively patrolling when needed. They were certainly a sight to behold in action.

“Another of the hovercraft!” Came the shout from one of the Dragoons as, sure enough, the vehicle came around a corner and began firing its weapons at their position. The tanks fired in response, the booming shots hitting the red shields that protected the front of the vehicle, causing them to flicker.

“They never stop coming,” Oliver muttered as he focused on the Outsiders that continued advancing. Those in particular were proving difficult to kill. Plasma rifle shots worked to take out the armor, but it still retained the regeneration capabilities of earlier models. As was the case here, as even a direct shot merely caused the wound to flare brightly before it healed itself.

The barrage from Kane’s Browning was enough to finish the job, however.

The alien hovercraft fired something from the top of it, and that was always bad news. “Grenade launched!” He yelled.

One of the PRIESTs in the back row extended a hand, purple energy flickering, and the projectile was caught and subsequently sent back towards the vehicle. It splashed with a bright plasma explosion which left a smoking hole in the vehicle, exposing the internal mechanisms. Oliver, Kane, and the other Chinese and ADVENT soldiers concentrated their fire, with the ADVENT telekine visibly keeping the vehicle in place. One ADVENT soldier went down from the return
fire, but there was enough concentrated firepower that the vehicle exploded a few moments later.

He noticed that the aliens were being significantly more conservative now; they weren’t throwing Custodians or Outsiders at them in overwhelming numbers like they were at the beginning. Were they beginning to run low? Or just deciding that the swarm tactics were too costly? Either way, it gave them a better fighting chance.

“Keep cover fire, I’m getting some more ammo,” he told Kane as he dashed deeper into their small fortification to get replacement plasma cells and magazines. The Chronicler was in the makeshift command center, where he was talking to a small hologram of the Commander. Oliver stopped and gave a quick salute as the Chronicler turned to include him in the conversation.

“Ilari, good to see you still fighting,” the Commander greeted. “You – and Kane – have done as well as can be expected. You might just need to hold out a little longer.”

He was tired, but just nodded. “I’ll hold out as long as I can, Commander. Any new developments, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Good news for us, in fact,” the Chronicler said, his voice dry and, somewhat surprisingly, with no trace of weariness in it. “It appears that Isomnum crossed a line and the Battlemaster has publicly pulled all reinforcements and support for his invasion.”

Oliver blinked. The fuck?

“About my first reaction as well,” the Commander said, and Oliver realized he’d spoken out loud. The wonders of going without sleep for nearly twenty-four hours. “We don’t know exactly how many forces Isomnum has on the ground, but now he can’t expend them casually. And while the Battlemaster did a good thing here, I doubt Isomnum is going to retreat now. He is, unfortunately, in a box with his only escape to continue to press forward.”

“What did he do?” Oliver shook his head. “And why now?”

“He’s in the process of converting civilians into some kind of mechanical war machines,” the Chronicler said. “Thousands of them. We might be encountering them soon. Which I’m guessing is what the Battlemaster didn’t want him to do, since it’s not exactly helpful to their image right now.”

“This was likely the final straw, not just the action,” the Commander interjected. “From what Aegis has said, even Ethereals hate Isomnum, and the Battlemaster is using this as an excuse to have us remove the problem altogether. Which we’ll do, even if it comes at the cost of preserving the country.”

“I’ll take it,” Oliver said. “I’m moving back out now, good luck, Commander.”

“Good luck,” the Commander repeated with a nod. “Reinforcements will be coming shortly.”

He dashed back to where Kane was positioned and saw that in the meantime, they’d killed a few more Outsiders and Custodians, although they’d lost one of the tanks during the skirmish, or at least damaged it enough to where there were people trying to put out the fires. Two of theDragoons were firing micro-missiles down the streets which resulted in bright explosions which were forcing another of the hovercraft back.

“Got good news,” Oliver said to Kane as he resumed firing. “Isomnum pissed the Battlemaster off enough that he cut off support. We hold out a bit longer, we’ll probably get the upper hand.”
Kane didn’t answer right away, and just fired down the street in an almost mechanical anger. Which was admittedly, not the reaction Oliver was expecting. “Thought you’d be happier.”

“I expect you’re happy with the Battlemaster for taking such a principled stand,” Kane said, hastily reloading.

“Can’t say I’m mad at him,” Oliver shrugged, firing at a group of Custodians taking cover behind a destroyed hovercraft. “We could be dealing with a lot worse.”

“He is a coward and an opportunist,” Kane said coldly in return. “An enabler of Isomnum and those like him. He is no better, and it’s sickening that he will be praised for this as if he has successfully washed his hands of it.” Kane chucked a plasma grenade and it hit the hovercraft hard enough that it exploded on contact and took out a Custodian standing too close.

Well, apparently Kane hated the Battlemaster too. Oliver decided to drop the subject. He couldn’t really say that he was in the best of moods given the previous hours.

Just a little longer, and things will start to change.

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ADVENT Trench Lines, Busan – South Korea

3/9/2017 – 5:14 A.M.

There were significant portions of the first line of trenches that had fallen, and Duri and his squad had been forced into the second row, while the aliens pushed forward to claim their first piece of actual territory. Of course, they had the misfortune of now having to fight in the confined trenches which were designed not to protect from the back.

Some of the aliens, like the Mutons and Elites couldn’t really fit into the trenches that well, and were prime targets for the Snipers and Rocketeers. So the trenches themselves were still largely untaken – aside from the dozens of Muton corpses which now inhabited them. The majority of the alien army was taking the smarter approach to using the wrecks of the alien hovercraft as staging grounds, and having far more success.

“Duri, catch.” He turned to the sound of Cara’s voice and barely raised a hand in time to catch a water bottle. He quickly sunk to the ground, took off his helmet and took a long drink of water as the guns still fired around him.

“Thanks,” he said. “Any news from the back?”

“It’s more or less the same across the trench lines,” she shrugged, reloading her weapon. “The first line is compromised in a lot of places, but they’re holding out right before it since we’re stuffing the trenches with their corpses. XCOM is downwards, trying to keep the Hunter’s attention.”

“Best of luck to them,” Miguel grunted as he adjusted some parts on the SHIV. “I don’t envy them. At least he isn’t on our comms anymore.”

“I’m more worried about the siege weapons,” Duri said, standing back up after putting on his helmet and looking downward, where the siege vehicles had slightly advanced. As far as he could tell, there was only one that was significantly damaged. “They’ve not fired for several hours. Which means they’re waiting for something.”

“Maybe they ran out of ammo?” Cara suggested.
“Unlikely,” Duri snorted. “Beatriz, do you see anything up there?”

Beatriz was in the Flak Tower a short distance behind the trench line, and utilizing the Sniper Nest within. “Nothing on the siege breakers. Shields are up, which is stopping me from getting a clear shot on them. They keep funneling soldiers downwards to the front, and have a fresh wave of the hovercraft coming this way.”

The siege breakers had continued firing at semi-regular intervals, and each time it had been either a plasma missile strike, one of those massive bombs, or a chemical weapon. Unfortunately for the siege breakers, they were facing the PRIEST Division, who had turned many of the missile strikes away, although enough kept getting through to cause damage.

Beatriz and many of the snipers had briefly switched to the Hellfire ammo, or ClF3 rounds to try and cause significant amounts of damage, but it appeared that the quantity contained in each round was simply too small to cause enough of an impact. There’d been confirmed reports that the siege breakers – as well as the hovercraft – had some kind of limited nanite repair functions, as well as the shields which could handle the chemical.

So instead they’d saved the Hellfire rounds for the Muton Elites to much greater success.

“Duri, we’ve got big problems coming our way,” Beatriz interrupted his thoughts frantically. “A new spacecraft just landed in the far back. Definitely Sectoid.”

“Ethereal?” He wondered, now becoming worried. Ethereals tended to use Sectoid craft.

“Possibly, don’t know yet. That isn’t our biggest problem even though it’s probably related. A transport opened the moment it set down. It’s filled with Chryssalids. Hundreds of them by the looks of it. They’re charging out now.”

“Oh, that’s not good,” Cara breathed as she jumped onto the Browning emplacement. “Not good, not good.”

“Everyone, Chryssalids incoming!” Duri yelled several times to everyone in the trench to get the word out. “Be ready!”

He still remembered the stories about the attack on Hamburg, where the creatures had first been reported. A lot of rumors back then, but as a military officer he’d known a lot more than most civilians. Enough to be appraised of the possibility of creatures that implanted eggs in hosts that elicited a zombie-like effect before birthing another Chryssalid.

They were among the most terrifying weapons the aliens had, and they had largely avoided using it after that point. That was clearly no longer the case, and unlike the much slower alien soldiers, the footage he’d seen of Chryssalids was that they were fast, agile, and surprisingly durable. If they swarmed, things were going to get bad very fast.

“ADVENT forces, we have been appraised of the incoming Chryssalids,” the voice from ADVENT Command said, in one of the rarer public broadcasts. “Stay in positions. Purifiers are approaching to prep the area for defense.”

“They better hurry,” Beatriz said from above. “They’re coming our way, and the ones that aren’t are planting eggs in the corpses.”

“I thought they only attacked Humans?” Cara demanded. “Or laid their eggs in them?”

“Apparently not,” Duri said as he readied his rifle, now able to get a glimpse of the purple alien
insects rushing closer, ignoring the aliens hiding behind cover. “Everyone ready!”

“Fire!”

Gauss fire shot out from the second trench line as the Chryssalids poured through. The first wave immediately collapsed as their chitin plating was shattered; it appeared that the Chryssalids fortunately hadn’t undergone extensive upgrades, but even the volume of fire wasn’t enough to completely stop the flow, and the Chryssalids jumped into the trench and likely began impregnating the many alien – and Human - corpses that inhabited it.

Duri waved Mana and Nobuatsu to follow him as they moved with another squad to defend the connecting tunnel with the Chryssalids that were about to come through. Cara and Miguel were continuing to mow down all the Chryssalids they could with their Browning and SHIV respectively. Down by Duri there was a Gunner, another Officer, and a Priest.

The roars and screeches of the Chryssalids could be clearly heard, and three of them came scuttling around the corner, red and yellow-tinged spittle dripping from their mouths and the orange eyes that glowed in the dim light giving them an even more sinister appearance. No one wasted time in opening fire and the Chryssalids were immediately cut down, only to be immediately replaced by more who came scrambling around the sides.

The Priest took center position, his body glowing a bright purple, pulled back an arm that was sheathed in bubbling purple energy, and then shoved it forward, sending a bright purple wave through the narrow corridor, vaporizing everything in it’s path, leaving only Chryssalid body parts behind.

Duri knew they could hold the choke points. Their lack of armor made them weak, and the area was narrow enough that they could reliably kill anything that came through. Up above was a more difficult prospect, as it would only take a few coming down from the top into the main trench line to break it.

“Corpses are up and walking forward,” Beatriz updated to the sound of gunfire. “It’ll be a fresh wave when they all birth.”

“Cara! How is it up above!” Duri called as some of the puppeted corpses had become aware and were walking towards them.

“Few close calls but we’re doing it!” Cara called back. “We could really use those Purifiers!”

Ironically, the Chryssalid zombies they were now fighting were proving more difficult to kill since they were still wearing armor. Targeting the head only seemed to mildly slow it down, although they were already walking slowly forward. It was difficult to wound something that felt no pain. “Target the joints!” The other Officer called. “Block them off!”

Everyone complied, and Duri crippled an incoming Muton, forcing it to crumble to the ground, although it still continued to crawl forward. A few more, and the corridor was effectively cut off, as even the Chryssalids were being forced to climb over the fallen zombies. The Priest stepped forward. “Back!”

Both arms were emblazoned in purple energy, as he formed a small sphere of destructive energy between his hands and sent it forward through the corridor, and as it continued, it grew larger and began ripping everything caught inside it apart into bloody chunks. When it reached the largest concentration, the Priest closed his fists and the sphere exploded and destroyed everything in the general vicinity, including the corridor itself as it blew the armored roof off in certain places, and
the flooring and lighting was annihilated.

“Woah! Easy,” Duri helped catch the Priest with the other Gunner as he began falling down.

“ Took more out of me than I thought,” the Priest wheezed. “Worked though.”

“Yes, good job,” Duri assured him, passing him off to the Gunner. “Take him back, have him rest up.”

The Gunner looked to his commanding Officer. “Carrie?”

“Take him back, and mention we need another Priest or Purifier here,” she agreed with a wave. “But for now I think we can hold it. That seems to have taken out most of the zombies.” She snorted. “Zombies. Amazing.”

“I doubt that’s all of them,” Duri told her. “The explosion might have spooked them.”

She jabbed a thumb backwards to another Flak Tower. “I’ve got my sniper up there. They’re definitely not stopping.”

“Any breaches?”

“Gonna be difficult to have permanent breaches when there are Psions here,” she shrugged, reloading her weapon. “Haven’t heard of any, but been distracted. Officer Carrie Jenkins.”

“Officer Duri Eun-Jung, a pleasure,” he said as sure enough, few Chryssalids came around the corner, screeching at him. “As much as it can be here.”

They mowed down the Chryssalids, with Mana throwing a WP grenade towards the end to see if it would have some effect. Normally that would have been dangerous in a corridor, but since said corridor had holes in the roof, it was safer than otherwise.

“Beatriz, what’s the status on the Purifiers?” Duri asked.

“Coming up now,” she said. “Priests are psionically shielding them as best they can before moving out. Got more bad news though. You know that Sectoid ship? It’s carrying a Hive Commander.”

“What?”

“What?” Nobuatsu echoed.

“Got some confirmation from XCOM, it’s a Hive Commander. They really want this place bad-Damn it, siege breakers are firing.”

“Apparently they’ve got a Hive Commander here,” Duri explained as they shot a couple more Chryssalids. “Siege weapons are also firing.”

A short distance away they saw several plasma missiles hit, while others were deflected away. One of the Flak Towers was directly hit, but managed to keep standing and returning fire. In the distance more shots landed, but Duri also saw the Purifiers begin moving up ponderously slow. The psionic shielding wasn’t directly on them, but angled before the Purifiers so as to allow them to use their flamethrowers.

Four of them had just walked across the small bridge above their own trench and began spreading out. “Beginning purge,” one stated, and the white-orange flames shot out and began exploding as
they made contact with Chryssalids, vehicles, and aliens. This forced an immediate retreat of all the front-line aliens, and to make it worse for them, one of the Purifiers colored noticeably different was firing a hose into the back of the growing firestorm, causing further explosions.

“That should hold them back for now,” Duri said.

“Yeah,” Carrie agreed. “But I really don’t like how close it is to us.”

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ADVENT-Chinese Joint Command, Beijing – China

3/9/2017 – 7:15 A.M.

With the limited amount of sleep she had gotten, Saudia wondered if she should have even bothered. The bed was fine, and the shifts were done so as to have Ethan be with her during that period of a few hours, but the stress of the past day essentially made any sleep fitful and elusive. She was fairly sure she was more tired when she woke up than when she tried to sleep.

“Any updates?” She asked as she put her professional attire back on; one benefit to being Chancellor was that there was never a shortage of fresh clothes.

Ethan was reading his tablet, face grim. “Hong Kong is holding, but in danger of being pushed out. The entire coast is essentially lost, and allied forces have regrouped a short ways inland. No idea what Isomnum is planning now that his reinforcements have been cut off. It could get a lot worse.”

The short and curt statement the Battlemaster had sent directly to ADVENT and the media had been one of the largest and most baffling surprises of the entire day, and they had yet to see if there would be a tangible aftereffect. It just seemed…odd.

Why even utilize Isomnum if you were simply going to disavow him later? It wasn’t as if he was ignorant as to who Isomnum was. She could have predicted something like this, and overall everyone was just baffled, if cautiously optimistic.

So far, there were two explanations as to how this could have happened and what the ramifications were. Both Laura and Elizabeth were of the opinion that this was a tactic to make Isomnum a scapegoat (possibly with him aware of this), to justify everything he would do which would not taint the image the Collective was trying to push through Betos. Time would tell if he was truly cut off, or if he was receiving resources quietly as a front for the Collective to do controversial things while keeping their hands clean.

The Battlemaster himself might not be in on this plan, although in that case Saudia had to wonder if the Imperator actually thought that would work. The Battlemaster was oddly principled for an Ethereal, especially a warrior. Interestingly enough, she believed he was sincere, or at least as much as he could be. So the Imperator or other Ethereals covertly supporting Isomnum would likely not go over well.

The other explanation was that this was genuine and there were no ulterior motives, or as the Commander had said, this was the final straw that caused the Battlemaster to get rid of Isomnum. He was, unsurprisingly, not liked by other Ethereals. At the same time, it seemed out of character for him to pull something like this during an ongoing invasion, which the Commander had then pointed to Betos as a possible reason why the response was so quick.

Hard to really say your Collective is benevolent and welcoming if you’re forcefully converting civilians into walking weapons.
Personally, she was of the opinion that no one – including the Collective – knew what was going on or what would happen yet. She found it unlikely the Imperator would have sanctioned this for any reason, especially during an operation, so the odds were high the Battlemaster had done this on his own. So how the Imperator responded remained to be seen, or what Isomnum would do himself. His actions could be an indicator for what was actually going on.

The largest takeaway for her was that there was a very high level of infighting within the Ethereals, which was certainly…curious. The fact that the Battlemaster had done this indicated that he was capable of defying the Imperator and more importantly, had certain lines he would not cross. This had been hinted at with some of his previous actions, but he had taken a very firm stand.

Quite curious indeed.

It made her wonder.

“Korea is holding strong,” Ethan continued. “Although there are sightings of a Hive Commander, so this could continue to get worse. And the aliens are continuing to slowly advance, even if it’s costing them significantly.”

She perked up, frowning. “A Hive Commander?”

“XCOM confirms it,” he said, walking over and sitting by her, showing the image of the orange-skinned alien that was multiple heads smaller than the Vanguard escort. It wasn’t wearing anything, but its telepathic capabilities were certainly enough to defend itself. “They really are determined to capture something here.”

“I wonder if Aegis could identify it,” she muttered. “The damn things all look the same.”

“In any case, XCOM is working on handling it,” Ethan said as he continued scrolling down the pad. “There has, unsurprisingly, been a lot of coverage on our assault against the SAS, with plenty of people condemning her as a traitor.”

Saudia allowed a thin smile. “Good.”

“CNN is interviewing some of the Vitakara defectors now on it,” Ethan continued. “Per your suggestion, I think. They’ve got a whole media tour scheduled. Public sentiment right now is definitely against the traitor.”

“Of course it is here,” she said. “Africa is what I’m interested in.”

“Hassan is saying, and I quote ‘Negotiations are proceeding well’,” Ethan said, putting an arm around her. “You might want to ask him that, since I don’t get access to your updates. I know he was targeting Egypt and Libya heavily, so I’ll take that as a good sign. As far as we know, the SAS hasn’t made any progress on the diplomatic front.”

“That we know of,” Saudia muttered. “Until Elizabeth finds out what went wrong, our intel on the SAS is potentially incorrect.” She sighed heavily. “This was perhaps the worst time she could have screwed up.”

“I’m pretty sure she knows that,” Ethan set the tablet to the side. “Which tells me that the aliens put a good amount of effort into making sure we didn’t know. It’s good they consider us a threat, at least.”

“That isn’t an excuse,” she dismissed. “She was put in charge to anticipate and counter moves like that. And if she can’t do it, I will find someone else who will.”
“Mmm,” they were both quiet for a moment, just waiting in the quiet room. “What do you think will happen next?”

She pursed her lips as she leaned against him, closing her eyes. She didn’t open them while she thought. “I don’t know. That worries me.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know if they’re ready to pull the trigger on us,” she continued, her eyes still closed. “They’re more advanced in technology, resources, and manpower. They could attack in dozens of places across the world and we can’t defend them all. They could theoretically teleport into this room and kill us both. I don’t know what they will do, but it looks like they want to end the war. Against their full power…I’m not sure we can stop them, even with all we have.”

Ethan, curiously, didn’t seem concerned as his heartbeat was steady. “From one perspective, yes. I think the Battlemaster at least wants to end it. He’ll likely invade more countries. But it seems like…well, the Collective itself isn’t stable. The Vitakara, Aegis, this split with the Battlemaster and Isomnum…” he trailed off. “And I suspect the Commander has something in mind. A contingency.”

For once, she knew something about the Commander he didn’t, and couldn’t tell for right now. And she didn’t know if T’Leth was going to be as involved or the trump card the Commander was hoping. Although Ethan would just say he had a plan for that as well. According to him it was impossible for the Commander to be caught unprepared.

“Probably,” she agreed nonchalantly, then snorted. “No matter what happens, it won’t end until the Commander is dead or we win.”

“Oh yes,” Ethan agreed. “If the Collective were to somehow win, he would be immediately organizing the resistance. And he would be…well, angry. If the aliens would like him now, they would be terrified of him later.”

From what she knew of Miridian, it wasn’t out of the question that the Commander could turn into such a Human equivalent. Hopefully they didn’t have to find out.

She leaned up and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Come on, let’s get to work. Spent enough time off.”

She finished getting ready, and her phone buzzed which she immediately answered. Only high-priority calls could go through, so something had happened. “Yes?” She said.

“The aliens have expanded their invasions,” Laura answered briskly. “Brazil and America. Possibly others, we’re getting exact locations. We’re all assembling now and preparing to reinforce.”

What perfect timing. “We’re fairly well entrenched in both countries, especially in the-“

“They’re invading Florida, not the West Coast,” Laura interrupted. “Which probably means they’re intending to take out ADVENT Special Forces Command.”

“I’m coming up now,” Saudia said. “Prepare a report with as many details as possible so we can compile something for the press.” She hung up and a few minutes later she was marching down the hallways with her entourage.

On one hand, the targeting of SFCOM was bad as they weren’t as prepared for that area.
On the other, the aliens were going to run directly into SFCOM. They were not going to find it as undefended as they were probably hoping.

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Porto Alegre, State of Rio Grande Do Sul – Brazil

3/9/2017 – 8:00 A.M.

Her task was straightforward.

“Two main offensives will begin our conquest of South America,” the Battlemaster had said during the final briefing. “The First Guardian will lead the assault against Fortaleza, and will continue the assault from the north. You will capture Porto Alegre from the South. Isolating Argentina and Uruguay will be important, and establishing a frontal position within the interior of the country will serve us moving forward. The terrain will be a hinderance, but one which can be mitigated with air-based assaults.”

As far as she knew, Porto Alegre was a decent-sized city, if not one ADVENT would expect to be the first attacked. Zararch reports had put the defenses as ‘moderate’, which mostly just indicated that there was an ADVENT presence there. It would fall under a sustained assault, with a sizable civilian population. Only the major cities like Brasilia were extremely fortified, but the limited infrastructure development across the nation had a side effect of isolating other cities from each other.

“Deployment point approaching,” the CODEX informed as it materialized in front of her, a golden holographic projection with a feminine voice. “Please confirm air or ground deployment.”

“Air,” she said. “Additional notes on the defenses?”

“Critical infrastructure points have been located and will be available upon your request,” was the answer. “ADVENT has detected your descent, and are moving to prepare. You are also likely to encounter Peacekeeper forces in addition to standard ADVENT defenses. There is a high probability of limited ADVENT special forces engagement.”

“Noted,” she said, putting her helmet on and doing a final check on her weapons. She wouldn’t need to utilize the Avatar connection yet, and hopefully wouldn’t. It was admittedly most effective when they were both together, but in their positions they needed to be able to operate independently. There were too many points of interest to have both the Battlemaster and his Avatar attack the same one.

That was fine. She could handle herself.

Let’s see how I do against the real ADVENT.

“Deployment position reached.”

The hatch opened underneath her and she began dropping to the ground. It wasn’t a significantly long drop, but it would have definitely killed a non-modified or non-psionic Human. It was the length of several skyscrapers, anyway, and while falling she took a quick look at the city and the landing alien transports from all sides.

Vehicles weren’t needed for a city like this, but there were plenty of Mutons, Runianarch, and Custodians that would be able to dismantle the ADVENT defenses. As well as herself. She saw
herself getting close to the ground, and stabilized herself with telekinesis before hitting the ground with a thud in front of several hastily erected ADVENT barriers with several dozen soldiers pointing weapons at her.

They appeared to be confused, which was understandable. Her rather unique armor and humanoid appearance would raise some questions. “Identify yourself!” Several of the officers yelled out in English and Spanish.

Well, the Battlemaster might give them a chance to surrender if the opportunity presented itself. So she would as well. “Surrender to the Ethereal Collective and you will be treated fairly.” No reason to add a death threat, since that was implied. People would generally respond better to the benefits of surrender than the downsides of refusal.

“Fire!” Was the immediate response as the crack of the gauss rifles sounded.

She gave a thin smile under her helmet as the gauss rounds just stopped a short distance from her body due to the telekinetic field she’d erected. An invisible cushion that caught hundreds of the rounds within seconds to the immediate alarm of the defending soldier. “She’s a psion!”

She drew her swords and tossed them forward while beginning to walk on her own, the telekinetic barrier still in place as she manipulated the swords to puncture them in vulnerable areas in the necks and joints. From the front she lifted a hand and a half-dozen ADVENT soldiers and the barricade were yanked into the air and subsequently crushed into broken bones, metal and flesh.

The other hand she thrust out, sending a telekinetic wave that threw the remaining defenders backwards and right into the swords which crippled or killed them. She killed the rest of them through snapping their necks or outright crushing their skulls. She recalled the swords back to her hands and continued marching forward, ignoring the terrified civilians who ran away from her as they watched the firefight.

She didn’t care about them. There was no place for them to run now.

The streets themselves were nowhere near cleared out, and were filled with abandoned cars or people taking shelter in them as ADVENT forces began marching downwards, yelling orders as they took cover while the remaining civilians fled into nearby buildings or just away from the fighting. Both swords in her hands, Yang charged forward with a series of slashes and stabs.

ADVENT armor had vulnerabilities, particularly in the neck and joints. Combined with her new weapons their armor could be penetrated from a direct hit, even if it was more difficult. The less durable material of their helmets made them prime targets for stabbing them directly in the head, which she performed several times and afterwards sent the corpse towards another soldier.

It was remarkably easy to fight against standard soldiers now. It was only a matter of flicking her fingers and they would go flying backwards and slam into a wall, which she could compress them into until their skeleton shattered. Entire groups could be lifted into the air and killed in moments. Their weapons couldn’t penetrate her telekinetic barrier and grenades she could just throw back.

And if they tried to run, she would just leap after them, or direct her swords to impale them.

No escape.

No hope.

Only defeat.
The CODEX gave her regular updates on the status of the other incursions, all of them going well, and the fact that ADVENT appeared to be rerouting more forces to stopping the threat which was carving up their defenses. It wasn’t a surprise then when she saw a PRIEST team approaching with the distinct Lancer escort. A mixture of Executors and standard soldiers.

Excellent.

There were three Priests, and one of them had the distinct misfortune of appearing to be a telepath who was confused as to why he couldn’t affect her. The other two were Dynamo psions, and one shot out a stream of energy at her while the other began forming rifts in her general vicinity.

She charged forward, moving faster than they anticipated. The four Executors rushing towards her she telekinetically lifted and tossed back into the psions. The Lancers were equipped with plasma weapons which she couldn’t block like the gauss weapons, so she sent her swords out that jammed into the weapons, causing them to explode. With a free hand she telekinetically grabbed one of the Priests and shattered his body.

The Lancers adapted quickly and switched to sidearms or tossed several grenades, all of which she caught and reflected back towards them which they dodged out of the way from, aside from a few of the Executors still on the ground who were now covered in the Symbiote substance. She killed them quickly, even as she beheaded one of the Priests while telekinetically crushing the chest of the other with a loud crunch.

The other Lancers were dispatched quickly enough.

More would come, but they would have just as little success. As the CODEX continued to update her, she knew it was only a matter of time before the city collapsed completely, and the Collective had a solid foothold in the region.

Mission accomplished.

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South Florida, Florida – United States of America

3/9/2017 – 10:32 A.M.

“Prepare them for offworld transport,” the Battlemaster commanded the Custodians as they finished securing the civilians who had been captured or otherwise stumbled into the Collective landing zones. “Do not allow interference once their processing has been completed.”

The Custodian acknowledged this wordlessly as the machines began lining up the Humans and leading them through one of the established gateways that had been erected. The invasion of Florida was one where some experimentation was due. Simply assaulting the fortified cities was of limited effectiveness currently, especially when approached directly from space or no firm starting point.

This time they would be attacking from the ground. There was a large amount of open space in Florida, especially in the southern half. Their positioning now was above several of the nature reserves, though several Runianarch and Sectoid teams were exploring the feasibility of southern expansion as ADVENT would be hesitant to continue into it.

From this centrist position, they would be able to expand east and west, while cutting off Miami from the north, largely ensuring significant control over the southern half of Florida. North would be highly difficult. ADVENT SFCOM was the primary target, and the base – as well as Tampa
near it – was extremely fortified and a direct assault would be a waste.

However, they had a significant personnel and resource advantage, which was why the current construction of a central command was being developed. The combination of architects, engineers, and geologists of the Sectoids, Vitakara, and Andromedons had been able to design a self-sufficient base with slight tweaks to accommodate the Floridian terrain.

Custodians and Spectres had also proven extremely useful in the construction of the base itself, with Mutons being used for heavy manual labor, Custodians for heavy-duty precision work, and Spectres for the creation and implementation of more delicate and critical components. Heavy equipment such as construction machines, anti-aircraft defenses, and gateways had been flown in, and when the Gateways had been established, enough personnel had been deployed for the base to already be taking some shape.

Twelve Executors were deployed on the perimeter, and to date had yet to encounter any encroaching ADVENT or XCOM force, though the Battlemaster suspected that one would be coming in time. They had estimated that it would take three days for the base to be capable of basic operations, a week before it was at full operating capacity, and two weeks before self-sufficiency could be established.

The Sectoids were using this as an opportunity to perform their geoengineering experiments, primarily by infecting and modifying current farm and swampland. The Everglades in particular were of interest to certain Sectoid Hives, as well as the viability of growing various alien foods on Earth. This tied partially into the self-sufficiency of the base.

The Sectoids were likely going to be pleased with the opportunities these invasions would bring. Once bases were established in Brazil, the rainforests were something the Sectoids were also interested in. Last he had heard, Yang had been mopping up the remainder of ADVENT defenders while the First Guardian was encountering stauncher resistance.

Unsurprising. Yang’s operation was to establish a working base of South American operations while the First Guardian was to attract more ADVENT defenses. He saw the commanding Zararch Officer waving him over as she was speaking to several Zararch Operatives and Fectorian’s REPLICA units. “Battlemaster,” Zar’aour’a’vitiary greeted. “We’ve finished our sweeps of the surrounding area. No signs of ADVENT moving against us yet, though there is a small town nearby.”

“Moore Town,” the Battlemaster recalled. “They have ADVENT support, correct?”

“No military support, yet at least,” Aoura clarified, bringing up a small holodisplay of the town. “However there is a heavy Peacekeeper presence. They have one of their prison production facilities located nearby. Heavy defenses, but nothing we wouldn’t be able to handle. Taking it out would hinder their production capabilities in this region, if only by a small amount.”

“PRIEST involvement?”

“unlikely in the town, at least there were no reports,” she shook her head. “There were several Deacons spotted near the Peacekeeper Station. Nothing that can’t be defeated.”

“Send Vanguards to psionically delay civilian evacuation,” the Battlemaster ordered. “The Peacekeepers will need to be dealt with.”

“There is a potential concern,” she added. “A minor detail, but there is an organized militia in the town. We are not aware of their exact armaments, but it is safe to assume that their equipment and
weaponry is inferior to standard ADVENT personnel. They will be on guard, even if they can be easily defeated.”

“Civilian defenders are irrelevant,” he shook his head. “I do not expect them to pose a significant threat. This does not alter your orders. The Peacekeepers are the larger concern, especially if they have Deacon support.”

“We can move Cleanser Ships into position,” Aoura suggested. “Destroy the Station and Prison that way.”

“No,” the Battlemaster disagreed immediately. “Targets this small would be brought in range of ADVENT defenses and aircraft. Not worth it, and I do not want to destroy the prison. There are a significant amount of Humans within that may have reason to turn against ADVENT.”

Aoura smiled. “I believe this is a better approach. I would suggest we act fast if we want to move before ADVENT inevitably sends the military to evacuate and fortify the town.”

The Battlemaster considered. “Inform the Stalker that she is to take her soldiers and destroy the Peacekeepers and secure the prisoners. I will also send separate teams of Custodians to secure the civilian population and return them for processing.”

“Acknowledged, Battlemaster,” she confirmed while making a note. “What should we be preparing for in the meantime?”

“An assault,” the Battlemaster said, looking to the sky. “It will take ADVENT time to realize what we are doing, but when they do they will attempt to strike us with everything possible. Likely by air and XCOM may respond as well.”

“Against all of this?” She indicated the continued formation of the base. “It’ll need more than one XCOM squad or a few airstrikes.”

“If ADVENT has a countermeasure,” the Battlemaster said, turning to check on the status of the central command center to monitor the progress of the wider conflict. “We will learn of it soon enough. Then when we are ready, we will march.”

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Hong Kong, Guangdong – China

3/9/2017 – 7:45 A.M.

Oliver was one of the first to see it. Or rather, them. “Kane, we might have some trouble.”

Kane swung his Browning to where Oliver was indicating and stared for a few moments, trying to get a better look. Admittedly, Oliver wasn’t quite sure what he was looking at either. Six knights approached, each carrying a different weapon and with their armor slightly different. He could tell it was intricate and of exceptional craftsmanship, as there were miniscule writing and symbols engraved onto the armor which ranged from silver to a mix of deep blues and whites.

Behind them was a male Vitakarian in silver-white robes, which seemed highly impractical for the combat situation. He seemed to be the main leader as the other knights were moving before him. They were definitely hostile then, even if he still wasn’t sure what they were. The knights were differing sizes as well, and he could swear that one of them was a Muton.

Kane opened fire without a second thought. “They’re from the Bringer!”
Oliver didn’t know how he knew that, but the knights took the attack as a signal to storm forward, and several of them became engulfed in psionic energy, some of them applying it to their weapons as they shouted war cries in an unknown language and charged forward. The Custodians and Mutons which were still alive and had been largely in retreat held their positions as the half dozen psionic warriors charged forward.

He decided to target the robed figure who was standing in the back. The shots were perfect, and would have hit the alien in the head had a blue shield not appeared right before him, blocking the shot, and immediately after that the figure looked to him and Oliver found himself being lifted into the air as what felt like an ice-cold knife was jabbed into his skull as an alien presence manifested itself in his mind.

He’d never come under a psionic attack this direct before, and it was a mixture between helplessness, agency, and seeing flashing or thinking random thoughts from his memories, largely recent. He saw Kane turn the focus of his fire to the robed figure who seemed not bothered in the least as a psionic shield just appeared around him.

Then just as quickly as it had happened, the icy pain vanished and Oliver could concentrate again, picking himself up from the ground. There was still something off about everything, but he had to assume that the Chronicler was now protecting his mind more directly than before. The knights had somehow not been slowed whatsoever by the volume of ADVENT fire, and were nearly towards the front line and they leapt into it, swinging their weapons and utilizing their psionics.

The front-line soldiers didn’t stand a chance, and the one knight that was marching towards them was projecting a psionic shield superimposed over the kite shield he (Oliver assumed the knight was male) was carrying while purple heatless flames fell off the black short sword. Oliver could glimpse more of the writing that was inscribed on the armor, and while at first glance it looked like a character language like Chinese or Japanese, it was none of that. He definitely had never seen it before, or anything like it.

Maybe the language of the Bringer.

What was it doing here supporting Isomnum?

The knight slammed the shield forward and sent out some kind of psionic wave that sent most of them tumbling backwards, while Kane just stumbled, although absorbed the worst of the corrosive wave, stripping off a layer of his Titan armor that immediately began repairing itself. The knight slashed forward and Kane deflected it with his gauntlet although damaged it in the process.

With his free hand he grabbed the wrist holding the blade and the knight responded by slamming him with the shield which was now laced in corrosive energy, intending to damage the Titan armor enough to let him go. The rest of the soldiers took advantage of the struggle by flanking the Knight and firing into it, with Oliver throwing a Symbiote grenade to the ground and pinning it in place.

Then Kane unexpectedly let go and fell back, briefly firing with his plasma sidearm. “Evade it!” He yelled as the knight roared, and the ground flared with purple fire as it ate through the Symbiote substance and rushed to one of the soldiers and stabbed him through the helmet, before swinging his sword and sending a lethal wave of psionic energy towards a duo of ADVENT soldiers, which almost disintegrated the armor of one and dismembered another in a spray of red.

The knight suddenly stumbled and roared again, pointing the sword at Kane and a beam of purple energy materialized and shot at him. Oliver shot at the hand while Kane threw a container at the knight which, while it didn’t kill him, was enough force him to move as two Gunners moved behind the knight and opened fire with Oliver diving to the side to avoid the crossfire.
It miraculously didn’t go down, but the armor was weakening even as Kane picked up his Browning and started firing into the back of the knight again, and now the knight was clearly suffering from something. It dropped the shield and dropped to one knee as it raised its hands and shot out energy that was enough to vaporize the upper half of one of the Gunners while the other managed to fall out of the way just in time.

That appeared to be the last effort of the knight, as it fell to one knee, visibly vibrating and screaming a blood-curdling war cry as the psionosphere began ripping around it. Heedless of the danger, Kane walked over to the knight and placed his hands over the helmet, and the knight jerked backwards and swung his arm around shoving Kane to the side with surprising force as it suddenly charged the surviving Gunner who struggled to get his weapon up.

It wasn’t nearly fast enough as the knight tackled the Gunner to ground the and began slamming his fists into the helmet, heedless of the pain that it had to have been causing him as one of the fists glowed with psionic energy and punched straight through the helmet as the knight stood and charged the nearest trio of soldiers coming in to help.

All of them backed up and fired their weapons, with Oliver tossing his last symbiote grenade at him, and it detonated just close enough to ensnare the leg. The armor was completely tarnished now, and it was bleeding profusely from multiple points, staining the metal crimson. Its yell was more raw-throated, and a hand glowed in psionic energy, even as Oliver saw fingers of the hand fall off, and it inexplicably placed it on the trapped leg and severed it.

The freed knight leapt forward and crawled along the ground and tangled the legs of a soldier who’d been unable to move back in. How was this thing still alive? It shouldn’t be possible, but the thing was still encasing his wrists in psionic energy as they were disintegrating before his eyes, and was whaling on the corpse with bloody and corroding stumps.

Kane charged forward and jumped on its back with enough force that the armor cracked and Kane’s boots went through the body, snapping the spine and crushing the bones and organs within. Kane fired the Browning point-blank into the head for a full three seconds and the knight finally seemed to die.

Kane stepped out of the body as Oliver looked at the corpse in disbelief as the surviving ADVENT soldiers pulled the mutilated corpse of the soldier away from the knight. “Good job,” Oliver said to Kane as he looked at the corpse which had endured so much punishment. “I don’t know how—“

“You’ll see,” Kane said curtly as he reloaded his weapon. “Learn your suit. Nanites can be used for more than repair.”

Oh…So that had been what he was doing. And it explained why Kane had been so insistent on evading the creature. Because he knew that in minutes the nanites he’d infected it with would debilitate it so that it would presumably be easier to kill. A feature of the suit Oliver did know about, but had not seen a good reason to expend them in that manner until now.

But these nanites, as opposed to ultimately debilitating them, only seemed to drive them into some berserk rage where they fought until they literally died. It was…unnerving to see the soldiers fight immune to the fear of self-harm.

“What is that thing?” One of the soldiers asked in awe and horror as Oliver looked around to see how the rest of the soldiers were faring.

“They call it a Carmine Baptist,” Kane said shortly as he began appraising what was next even as the body was being eaten by nanites. “A soldier of the Bringer.”
Oliver stared at him. “How do you know that?”

Kane looked back at him and answered flatly. “I watched the footage.”

They would have to discuss this later, as the battle was far from over. A cursory glance showed that the other robed Vitakarian was still standing, but currently dealing with a squad of ADVENT soldiers and Priests which had moved forward. Oliver saw in the background there were four Priests fighting the Muton Baptist, surrounded by nearly a dozen other dead soldiers.

There were the corpses of two more of the Baptists scattered around, but they had taken a significant toll on ADVENT and reduced it already to a fraction of its strength. The remaining two Baptists were engaged against the Chronicler and on the retreat as the Chronicler was... well... *unleashed* was the best word Oliver could describe.

He was almost more of a blue hologram than person, if said hologram radiated energy which was actively ravaging anything in its vicinity. The Baptists had shielded themselves, but the Chronicler had one encased in a telekinetic grip and with the other was ripping it apart while the other Baptist was shooting much weaker psionic blasts towards the Chronicler which seemed to be doing nothing.

Oliver couldn’t pay much more attention as the Priests were falling to the Muton Baptist, one of which had been smashed into paste, while another was being flayed with psionic energy while in the massive grip of the alien. Right. Bringer soldiers could somehow use psionics despite that apparently being impossible.

The Goliath was also actively targeting the Muton, and a series of micro-missiles as well as the plasma lance slammed into the alien which seemed to only damage the armor, but not the alien underneath it. This one didn’t have any defensive gear, but held a massive warhammer that it swung around in an arc forcing everyone to stand clear or have their heads caved in.

The Priests were having trouble keeping it contained, as one tried to put it in a psionic cage, which dissipated when the Muton closed a fist and the area around the Priest began turning into a rift. The other tried pinning it with telekinetics and had her concentration broken when the Muton telekinetically threw the hammer at her, forcing her to dodge or get hit.

“*Distract it,*” Wei Liuxian, the Goliath, said in an infuriatingly calm robotic tone. “*Away from me.*”

Oliver nodded to Kane. “Take point?”

“Be ready to fire,” was all he said, as he began shooting his Browning at the much-less armored Muton which immediately caught the attention of it. Oliver strafed to the left, and took some inspiration from Kane and threw some of the empty containers and boxes at the alien, which divided its concentration if not being more than an annoyance physically.

It gave a signature Muton roar and shot out a hand at Kane to shoot a funnel of psionic energy towards him, which he dodged by moving behind some barricades and cars that only withstood the raw energy for a few seconds. Oliver added his own shots to the mix, and scored a few hits that were causing the alien to slightly bleed.

But the distraction was enough for the Goliath to stomp over and slam a metal foot onto its back, planting the Muton firmly in the ground facedown. The Goliath wasted no time in following up with a metal fist delivered directly down into the head of the Muton, resulting in the sound of crumpling metal and broken bones. Even though it was clearly dead, the Goliath repeated this
again and the head was turned into paste.

Oliver reloaded and turned to see the Chronicler had dispatched his opponents and was now facing the robed alien and engaged in an astonishingly fast duel. The ADVENT soldiers that had previously been fighting the alien were dead – more accurately in pieces – and the Chronicler was now fighting instead.

The robed figure was using psionic barriers offensively and at an extreme speed, though the Chronicler was responding by simply performing micro-teleportation every few seconds as the area gradually became encased in a rift with the Chronicler at the center. The robed alien was protected by a shield himself, but it was going to fail eventually, even if the face betrayed nothing.

“Enough.”

The psionic maelstrom suddenly ceased even as the Chronicler continued to emit blue energy. The alien on the other hand had been yanked into the air even as the Chronicler had not moved a muscle. The passive expression that had been on the alien’s face began contorting as...something happened to it.

That was when Oliver realized that the voice hadn’t come from the Chronicler, but something his mind had heard.

“Your puppets are worthless as you are,” the voice rumbled – T’Leth, Oliver assumed. “Fanatics driven by the whispers of a dead power. You have no influence over this planet and species, and your days are numbered. Flee, for your people will suffer agonizing deaths otherwise.”

Oliver and Kane watched as the alien quite literally melted in front of them while the Chronicler stood and watched, and listened to the alien scream as he was melted second by second until only the robes soaked in blood and slurry were left. The energy slowly dissipated from the Chronicler.

“Was that...him?” Oliver asked after a few moments.

“Yes,” the Chronicler looked around. “He’s...angry. The Bringer is involved on Earth. He must be stopped, and there are many others who are in danger.”

“We’re down too many to hold this position,” Oliver said, looking around at the survivors. “What can we do?”

“ADVENT must retreat,” the Chronicler shook his head. “Isomnum is no longer the priority. Finding and stopping the Bringer’s forces is, and we’re going to have to move as fast as we can.”

“Then we go,” Kane said without hesitation. “ADVENT will not stop them unprepared.”

The Chronicler was somber, but he gave a nod. “I know. And the Bringer does too.”

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Haikou, Hainan - China

3/8/2017 – 5:18 P.M.

They’d been running for hours, and at this point they needed to stop and take a rest. The Collective was still out there, but both of them were fairly sure they’d lost the immediate pursuers. Luckily it wasn’t difficult to find a place to go, and they’d snuck into a hotel and kicked one of the doors in on a lower floor.
There might be more survivors, but they hadn’t encountered them. Nor did either of them expect to at this point.

Exhausted, Nuan carefully set her weapon against a corner and leaned against a wall while taking off her helmet and releasing a breath. “I…think we should be good for now.”

“For now,” Iosif agreed, also setting his weapons aside. “I think that you killed the Mosrimor avatar. At least I don’t know anything that would be able to come back from that. That’s their best weapon to try and find us.”

“Unless they bring in more of them,” Nuan closed her eyes. “Or Sectoids.”

“That is a risk,” Iosif admitted, sitting on one of the beds. “There is good news though. If they do a telepathic scan of the island, I’ll know it. They can’t touch my mind without me knowing.”

“Oh good,” she muttered. “So they’ll have our direct location.”

“Not exactly,” Iosif clarified. “I’ll block them. They’ll just know the general area we’re in. But since I haven’t sensed anything like that, it either means that they’ve given up, or don’t want to track us that way.”

“Or didn’t think of it,” Nuan supplied.

“Possible, but unlikely,” Iosif shook his head. “I can’t imagine they wouldn’t have thought of it.”

“So what do we do in the meantime?” Nuan asked, going over to sit by him. “We never came up with a plan.”

“Good question,” Iosif sighed, pinching his forehead; showing actual exhaustion for probably the first time. “Getting off the island is essential. But we’re cut off, and going the wrong way will just lead us into Isomnum’s path. So we need to rest and get clean first. We might be here a few days yet.”

“Do we even have that long?” Nuan asked, looking around. “We’re not low profile. XCOM soldiers won’t just be allowed to…wander around.”

“I don’t know, Nuan,” Iosif said slowly, shaking his head. “Finding two people on an island, XCOM soldiers or not, may not be important for them. They could easily assume that we can’t do anything without them knowing, and it only takes one mistake on our part to get caught. They can afford to play it safe for now.”

He looked to her. “And we can’t run ourselves to exhaustion, not right now. We need to slow down and think. Staying in one isolated place is better than constantly moving.”

Nuan pushed herself up and went to the bathroom to see if anything was working. Turning on a few faucets answered the question. “Water works, at least. Heated too.”


Nuan walked back out, eyeing the bathroom suspiciously. A shower would feel good right now, as would sleep, but she was leery of getting out of her armor right now. Iosif seemed to sense what she was getting at. “We take turns,” he shrugged. “One in armor, the other not. Remember I have psionics too. I’d also suggest we replenish our nanites with the resources around. Fill everything to capacity.”
That was a good plan. Nuan nodded. “Alright. Let’s do that first. No splitting up.”

“ Wouldn’t think of it,” Iosif grunted as he stood and followed her to one of the rooms down the hall. Within an hour they’d successfully destroyed the room and harvested the wood, fabric, and metal to replenish their nanite stores and repair any damage to their armor. A useful side effect of the repair was that it functionally cleaned the armor as well, removing the blood, scratches, dirt, and gore that could pile up. A new suit for all intents and purposes.

“What next?” Nuan asked. “Sweep the floor or get food?”

“Sweep first,” he said, lifting his rifle. “Make sure there isn’t anyone else here.”

“Couldn’t you sense that?” She asked.

He tapped his helmet. “Not a telepath, I know when someone will touch my mind, not as easy to do the opposite. Otherwise I wouldn’t have asked.”

“Sorry,” she apologized. “I’m…not thinking as straight as I should.”

“Neither am I,” he admitted. “Otherwise this should have been the first thing we did.”

“Well,” she motioned to the hallway. “Let’s go. Shouldn’t take long if we go fast.”

“Not too many places to hide,” Iosif admitted. “Although…it would go faster if we had a keycard.”

“Do we want to go down and look for one?” She asked.

He shook his head. “Better to not go down unless absolutely necessary.”

So they began their sweep, being decidedly unsubtle about kicking in the doors and clearing the room. Each one took about a minute since all the rooms on this level were only for a small group of people at most. The beauty of standardized hotel chains, and it helped that Hainan was something of a tourist spot.

There had definitely been something that had happened here. Most of the rooms were already upturned or disorderly, and not from regular guest messiness either. There were bloodstains in many rooms, clear signs of fights, holes and scorch marks in the walls. No bodies, which meant that they’d been manually removed. That was good news since it probably meant the aliens weren’t going to come through again.

They were close to three quarters of the way through, and as usual Iosif tried to kick in the door, and surprisingly found that this time it was jammed. He kicked it in again, and confirmed that it was definitely barricaded from the inside. They exchanged silent glances through their helmets. Survivors. Iosif instead gave a tentative knock. “Hello?”

No answer, Nuan took the initiative. “[We’re Human, with XCOM. We’re not going to hurt you. Please open.]”

There was a brief silence. “[How do I know that?]” Came the voice of an audibly nervous man.

Nuan sighed. Caution was understandable, but it was tiring right now. “[We really don’t care. We’re going to clear the rest of this floor. When we come back, we want to come in. If you want off this island, we’ll be your best chance.]”

She turned to Iosif. “I said we’ll finish sweeping the floor and come back to him. Give him time to
“If you say so,” he said, and they continued to sweep the rest of the rooms. They reached the last one and kicked it in as was standard procedure and entered a seemingly empty room, but this one had the corpse of a…machine? It looked like a Human corpse, except that it had been shot in the back and there were clear mechanical components in it.

“This is new,” Nuan muttered as she turned the machine over. “Might be someone left in here…”

The bed was disturbed, as was expected, and under the beds seemed clear. “Definitely some people here,” Iosif muttered. “I can at least sense that.” She nodded.

“[You can come out,]” she said out loud. “[We’re XCOM, we’re not going to hurt you.]”

No response. Maybe not a Chinese resident? “We’re XCOM, she said. Come out, we won’t hurt you. We know someone is here.”

“Ok!” A voice called out from the bathroom which had been conspicuously closed. “Just…don’t shoot us.” Iosif went to open the door, and was greeted by a visibly nervous Chinese woman who still blocked the entrance. Her eyes widened as she saw their towering suits. “[Don’t shoot,]” she insisted to Nuan in Chinese.

Nuan exaggeratedly made a point of placing her rifle in the corner and taking off her helmet to assure them that they were Human. “[We won’t, we’re not going to hurt you.]”

The woman swallowed, then opened the door. “[Not for us, for him.]”

“The hell?” Iosif demanded as on the ground was a clearly wounded Vitakarian who was barely conscious and bleeding from an unknown stomach wound. There was teenage girl also in the room who started at the sight of the armored soldiers. The room had dozens of bloodstains and all the towels had been torn up for makeshift bandages.

Iosif raised his weapon but the woman stepped in front. “[No! No! He helped us!]”

Nuan motioned to Iosif to lower the weapon. “[Explain.]”

“[We experienced some kind of…]” she waved her hand around. “[Nightmare. Everyone did. It ended, we woke up and there was another person that tried to come into the room. I thought she was a survivor someone to help. She tried to kill us! He shot it, but it hurt him. He saved us, you can’t shoot him!]”

“What’s she saying,” Iosif asked.

“They experienced Isomnum’s attack,” she said, thinking through the story. “When they came to, she says they were attacked by that machine in there and this alien saved them. I don’t think she’s lying.”

The Vitakarian was awake, and was looking quite terrified as the XCOM soldiers looked down at him, even if he didn’t say anything. “Why help a random woman and her…daughter?” He shot the teenage girl a look.

Nuan indicated the girl. “[Who is she?]”

“[My daughter,]” she confirmed. “[My husband is on the mainland. I…don’t know if he’s alive.]”
“[Hey, don’t worry, I’m sure he’s fine,]” Nuan lied, not wanting the woman to break down now. “[We need to focus on helping all of you right now. We need to get closer. See what his wounds are.]”

She motioned for the medkit. “I need that.”

“We might need it later,” Iosif cautioned, even as he complied.

“And we might need him to interrogate,” Nuan answered as she carefully aimed the medkit. “He was here for a reason.”

“Probably Zararch,” Iosif speculated, looking down at the alien thoughtfully. “It doesn’t make sense for anyone else to be here. Doesn’t explain why he’d help a random Human couple though. I doubt it’s for sympathy.”

“If he was here during the attack?” Nuan shrugged as she stood back up. “Possible that he’s now questioning his loyalty. We get him out of here alive, we find out.” She looked back to the woman. “[Move him onto the bed and find him clothes if you can. We’ll be back.]”

As the woman and her daughter began moving the alien away, she and Iosif moved back out to go back to the first guy. This time they just opened the door and walked inside. There was a Chinese man in a business suit holding a gun shakily at them, and Nuan carefully took off her helmet again.

“[Easy. We’re all Human here.]”

“[Ok. Ok.]” he said shakily and put his weapon on the ground. “[Sorry, sorry.]”

“[It’s fine.]” she reassured him. “[We’re all on edge today.]”

Well. It appeared that their stay here and eventual exfiltration was going to be a little more complicated than they had planned. Nuan just felt more exhausted at the prospect. They had three Humans and an alien to keep safe now, and only two tired XCOM soldiers to make it happen.

But this was what their job was all about, even if it was difficult.

It was much easier to just shoot things.

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ADVENT-Chinese Joint Command

3/9/2017 – 10:09 A.M.

Many developments, some expected, some not.

The invasions in Brazil and America were not as surprising. Florida was slightly unexpected, but the Commander was not as concerned due to the fact that it was reasonably fortified and there was a strong militia core developed in the state, something ADVENT had confirmed. It was going to be a long fight, but one they had a decent chance of winning, even if there were indicators that the Battlemaster was taking a smarter approach to this.

He was, however, rather focused on the holoprojection of the figure that had been captured on camera in Brazil. A woman and psion, who was almost certainly a female. Carried two swords, wore rather unique armor that was masterfully crafted – and was fighting against ADVENT. “Do you think it’s the same person?” He asked Zhang who was communicating from the Praesidium.
“It matches the description Fiona provided, at least as far as her fighting style goes,” Zhang said, looking at the projection curiously. “It is likely Yang Shuren. We do not have confirmation of this yet, but she should be considered our enemy, whoever she is.”

“Thank you for the sage advice,” Creed commented sarcastically. “We should be planning our response, not looking at one traitor Human who we may or may not know. The Bringer is involved now. Isomnum isn’t going down without a fight.”

“I wonder if the Battlemaster knows,” the Commander mused, scratching his chin. “Or the Imperator. It’s possible that Isomnum went behind the Imperator for this to salvage his plan.”

“That’s a question to ask later,” Jackson interrupted. “The Bringer’s involvement has been damaging already. They’re tearing through ADVENT and are appearing in locations that are well away from the fighting. Places ADVENT isn’t prepared.”

“I’m aware,” the Commander nodded. “The Chronicler has said that T’Leth is actively monitoring China and deploying his agents at will. Unfortunately, it appears there are more of them than what T’Leth has active, and at least some of them are teleporters. Creed, have you reviewed the squads deployed?”

“Yes sir,” Creed confirmed. “Being deployed as we speak. I’m not sure this is the best first deployment for Axis, but he has reason to hate the Bringer more than us. MELD Operators and psions should be solid counters, so long as they are protected. More Priests will be needed as well. Can Aegis continue to hold out?”

“He’s given the affirmative, but we need to dissuade Isomnum from continuing,” the Commander said. “ADVENT is preparing drone strikes along the coasts since they’re largely abandoned. Nuclear action is on the table, so I’ve heard from Chinese officials. Continuing debate on that though, and I don’t think they’re ready to do anything until a more approximate location of Isomnum is fixed.”

“What of Hainan?” Creed demanded. “Are we writing off Iosif and his squad?”

“Not yet,” the Commander shook his head. “But we can’t devote anything more to recovering them right now until we know for sure. Iosif can look after himself, and I don’t want to send another team until we know what we’re facing. The Bringer is a far more pressing concern now, as are the invasions.”

“How much should we commit to the attacks led by the Collective and the ADVENT attack on the SAS?” Jackson asked, motioning to the hologlobe. “If anything at all?”

“Let’s wait to see what the Collective does in Brazil and Florida,” the Commander said, thinking. “Actually, Creed – put together a team to take out the First Guardian. Hold off on Florida until we see them do something. In the meantime, I think it would serve as a nice distraction for our other resident Ethereal to show how he’s changed.”

Zhang caught on immediately. “South Korea.”

“Correct,” the Commander confirmed. “The Collective is under the impression that they can gain a foothold in the region. Caelior is powerful enough to handle these siege breakers and the Hive Commander that is supposedly there. If we’re lucky, we can capture the Hive Commander and the Hunter. We cease this siege in Korea, we can move him to other important areas.”

“At the very least it will give the Collective another shock,” Zhang commented. “I’m concerned
about possible retaliation for this. I cannot see positive reactions to the fact that another Ethereal has defected.”

“Assuming they believe a defection at all,” Jackson pointed out. “They may claim that it’s the result of XCOM Manchurian conditioning. And would only be half-right.”

“The point is that Caelior is an asset we are intending to utilize,” the Commander refocused the conversation. “That will shake up the Collective’s battle plans, since they know that we can break any siege just by sending him to defend against it.”

“And handle the orbital defenses,” Creed added. “Still needs practice on that, but I’m assuming he’ll get it relatively soon.”

“Are you sure we shouldn’t deploy him in China?” Jackson asked worriedly. “Korea is holding, even if they are slowly being pushed back. China is in a more precarious situation.”

Both the Commander and Zhang began shaking their heads before she even finished the sentence. “Caelior is the equivalent of a nuclear bomb,” the Commander said. “China requires a scalpel. Not to mention Caelior would likely attract the direct attention of Isomnum, and he can’t defend against it. Too high of a risk to potentially lose him. Aegis is suited to contain Isomnum, Caelior is not.”

“We can save him for the Battlemaster,” Zhang said. “And other Ethereals whose inclination is not telepathy.”

“Fair enough,” Jackson relented. “What stance should we take on the SAS, Commander. Since they’re firmly with the aliens…”

“Traitors, all of them,” he pursed his lips. “If you want to make a statement, we stand behind ADVENT and strongly encourage all African nations to assist in the elimination of the traitor state. Zhang, we will need to watch some of the independent nations closely. If they are looking to defect and ADVENT diplomacy fails, the Hades Contingency is authorized.”

“I anticipated that,” Zhang confirmed, making a note on his tablet. “Contingencies are in place and agents have been deployed. We’ve taken preventative measures already, and multiple SAS diplomats have been removed.”

“Excellent,” the Commander nodded. “When you say removed?”

“Most eliminated and disposed of. Several have been captured and are being interrogated.”

“Possibly worth subjecting them to the Restraints and letting them go,” Jackson mused. “The more moles in the SAS, the better.”

“It would take too long,” Zhang dismissed. “They are already late for their assignments. They will assume ADVENT has compromised them. They will not have proof, nor will anyone believe them. As far as I understand it, ADVENT negotiations are proceeding well. Libya and Egypt are at least holding joint talks with ADVENT.”

“Saudia is scheduled to meet with both of them by the end of the day,” the Commander recalled. “A good sign, and the continued bombardment is keeping their military primarily in check. Right now the SAS is contained, and I want to ensure it stays that way. But carefully. There is at least one Ethereal behind them, and I don’t want to commit heavily until we know which one it is.”

“We will work on acquiring this information,” Zhang frowned. “Unfortunate that we did not know of this. More disturbing that ADVENT failed to notice this development. We will need to begin
monitoring independent countries to ensure this does not happen again. I am surprised this precaution needs to be taken.”

“We likely should have been doing it already,” the Commander sighed. “However, we did learn a valuable lesson here. We can’t rely solely on ADVENT to monitor Humanity. They need assistance every now and then.”

“An expansion of XCOM Intelligence is in order,” Zhang said. “Especially considering our operations beyond Earth.”

“We’ll discuss details after the current situation is largely resolved,” the Commander nodded to all of them. “Get your assignments done and I’ll keep everyone updated as to the current situation. Good luck.”

With each saluting, they winked out of existence as the Commander prepared to return and catch up with what was happening with Saudia in the meantime.

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Cairo – Egypt

3/9/2017 – 4:18 P.M.

Saudia had only been to Egypt a few times in her life, and had never really enjoyed it. Too hot for her tastes, sandy, and really only known for a few things which had been mild disappointments in her youth. The pyramids had largely been degrading stones that couldn’t really compare to the more modern pieces of architecture, not to mention she’d continually been disappointed that she couldn’t go into them while they’d been there.

Now that she was older, she could appreciate them for their history and how they certainly helped Egyptian tourism even if she was never going to be amazed by them. She still disliked the blazing heat and the endless sand. That was probably never going to change. Nonetheless, she didn’t have to worry about that much in the well-furnished room where she and Hassan were waiting for the Egyptian President and Prime Minister.

She was occasionally glancing over at her tablet, which she normally would never bring to a diplomatic function like this, but considering the situation across the world, particularly in China, she needed to be up to date on everything. China was still not going well, but that was the only completely bad news she was seeing.

Well, Brazil was also being invaded and losing some territory, but nothing crucial had been lost yet.

The doors suddenly opened, and their two hosts entered. President Hussein Shamon was first, a tall and stoic military man who had spent several decades in the Egyptian military. He’d been what could have generously be described as harsh, especially when it came to clamping down on crime and extremism. He’d been surprisingly active during the War on Terror to violently put down any Caliphate individuals and sympathizers, likely wanting to keep the Commander himself as far away as possible.

For the most part, it seemed to have worked and Egypt had largely escaped the worst of the fallout, despite having a notable Muslim population. In the years since Shamon had made it a very…public point to insist that there was no Islamic extremism in his country whatsoever. Very much an international relations move, but one Saudia knew was based in some action. Egypt had also made
efforts to more closely align itself with Western countries, although had difficulties for some due to the less than democratic actions of the police and military to suppress dissent.

From what Hassan had said, Egypt was wary of ADVENT, and Falka had said that there were continuing talks on the viability on simply staying out of the conflict or allying with China, the latter of which was quickly shot down. Ironically, there had apparently also been suspicion that the SAS was actually a trap by ADVENT which was why they’d refused to entertain the possibility of joining.

If only that had been true, and at one point she would have entertained that idea. But that was too complex and wasteful for the current war. That would have been the plan of EXALT, not ADVENT.

The other individual was Mono Bata, the Prime Minister. A political figure that kept a notable low profile, he had proved to be a relatively efficient manager of the government, and unsurprisingly had strong military connections, which was the case with almost every important member of the Egyptian government. It was slightly refreshing to deal with a government with a more militaristic mindset. They were usually more practical, if self-serving.

Either she could work with.

“Chancellor, a pleasure,” President Shamon said, extending a hand to shake, which she took. “Hassan, you as well.”

“Mr. President, Prime Minister,” Hassan answered, nodding to each of them. “I and the Chancellor appreciate you being able to meet with us so quickly.”

“That we do,” Saudia confirmed. “Although I should warn you that due to the situation, I may be required to depart earlier than planned.”

“I do not envy your position, Chancellor,” Shamon said, as he indicated the table. “But I understand the possibility. I am impressed you came yourself at all, as these talks could be conducted by your Chief Diplomat.”

“I prefer discussions like these to be had face to face,” Saudia said as she took a seat, with Hassan beside her as they were opposite the two Egyptian leaders. “The implications are significant for your country no matter what is decided, and that should be treated seriously.”

“An understatement, Chancellor,” Prime Minister Bata agreed, his voice more gravelly than his colleague. “So let us discuss. We know what you want from us.”

Saudia exchanged a glance with Hassan. “Do you know what we want, or do you assume?”

“It isn’t difficult to extrapolate,” Shamon said with a knowing, if guarded smile. “Perception is important to you now, especially after Betos’ little speech. In theory you could march through our nations to strike at them, and there is little we could do to stop you without suffering the same fate as Canada. But it would subsequently give some legitimacy to the claims of Betos, and that you would prefer to avoid right now.”

“In theory,” Saudia nodded. “But in contrast to the traitor, we would be hesitant to do so unless we were severely threatened. As of now, the SAS is not an existential threat to ADVENT.”

“But you want to stop them before they become one,” Shamon nodded. “And that means moving through our country, and perhaps others.”
“Correct,” Saudia confirmed.

“I have mentioned this before,” Hassan added. “But the war will eventually come to you as well. You have tried to stay out of it for understandable reasons, but that is beginning to come to an end. The SAS will attempt to expand and conquer. They merely need a technicality to justify invasion, and Betos is a puppet for the Collective. Her word cannot be relied on.”

“I’m curious,” Saudia laced her fingers together. “Has the SAS reached out to contact you?”

“No,” Bata said. “Not yet, at least.”

“I find that curious,” Saudia mused, while allowing a smile. “You are one of the pivotal nations in the continent. Why would they not reach out to Egypt?”

“Perhaps to avoid spooking you,” Shamon suggested. “To give you pretext to annex our nation and then have a clear path to their territory.”

“You are thinking too rationally,” Saudia shook her head. “You have the wrong impression about Betos. She is not a political strategist or military genius, she is an idealist whose naivety is being turned against us. View her actions through the lens of her idealistic morality, and ask that question again.”

It appeared both men got her implication. “A curious theory, Chancellor,” Shamon said, nodding slowly. “And ADVENT yet has little issue with myself or our government.”

“We respect results and pragmatism, Mr. President,” Hassan said. “We know better than most that some harsh actions are necessary for the benefit of all.”

“The actions of ADVENT lead me to believe you,” Shamon nodded. “And so you want our… permission…to move through our country.”

“That would be our most basic request,” Saudia confirmed. “However, consider the big picture. Know that anything you do to assist us – even if it is as simple as moving soldiers through a nation – will be grounds for the SAS and Collective to attack. You cannot claim neutrality. You will be marked until this war is ended.”

“And so we should throw in completely with ADVENT,” Bata inferred with some skepticism. “Why take that step when we know that you will protect us should an invasion come, if only to protect yourselves?”

Saudia smiled. “We don’t take steps such as these for free, Prime Minister, I would think you know that. While I will not disclose the details of our agreement with China, we are not defending them with the expectation that they will leech off of our goodwill. We have a mandate to protect Humanity, and will do our best to fulfill this. We do not have a mandate to protect those who hold our species back.”

Bata shot a glance to the President, who merely raised an eyebrow. “Confident, Chancellor. But in your position you can afford to be. My Prime Minister does raise an excellent point, however. Why should we do anything more than allow you passage when you will protect your investment regardless?”

Saudia pulled out a small holoprojector and placed it on the table. “What are the benefits of ADVENT? Aside from receiving complete and unconditional military protection, medical and infrastructure support, and a voice in deciding the course of our species? There are no downsides to becoming part of ADVENT on a structural level, gentlemen, not if you want Egypt to have a true
presence in the world.”

She paused. “Your military was widely recognized as among the best in the region, and responsible for keeping order in chaos. It merely requires modernization, and Egypt will be widely recognized for their efforts to bring Africa under control. But there is the question of what Egypt will get that others do not. An extra incentive one is owed as a full member nation of ADVENT.”

Hassan continued speaking as she activated the hologram showing Africa. “ADVENT is currently engaged in a long-term environmental project to reverse desertification,” Hassan said. “Project Greenwall. Early tests being performed in the Middle East are promising, and for Egypt we can expand it significantly.”

An area of the hologram was highlighted. “A plan proposed decades back utilized the Qattara Depression to serve as an artificial lake, which would be filled by the creation of a canal to the Mediterranean Sea. If I recall correctly, it was never implemented due to the high cost. We would be able to complete this project with no cost to the Egyptian government or its citizens.”

Both men looked surprised, if somewhat skeptical at this proposal. “That is a curious offer,” Shamon said slowly. “Especially with the lack of financial issues. But it would not be a promise acted on for years. And agreements can change.”

“Incorrect,” Hassan said, nodding to Saudia who pulled out a document from her bag. “Appropriations have been made to begin near-immediate construction of the Ball Canal, as well as several hydroelectric generators throughout it which would provide the country will additional clean energy. This has been approved by the Congress of Nations, and requires my signature. ADVENT is not solely composed of soldiers, Mr. President, we are capable of beginning projects at the same time, especially for our member nations.”

She pushed the document over for the President to read. “We do not require a decision this instant, and I presume that you want your lawyers to look over the proposal to confirm we’re not hiding things in the fine print. You will also find a few more appropriations that will directly benefit your country.”

They read them quietly for a few minutes while she sat back and waited. They were being won over, she could see it. Admittedly not difficult when they were getting anything they could really want. “You have also appropriated historical restoration and museum funding?” Bata asked, unable to mask his incredulity. “How can you afford to pay for these projects so easily?”

“We consider it an investment, in your nation and our species,” Saudia said. “A fitting one, I believe, considering Egypt has the privilege of being one of the oldest civilizations in the history of our species; a nation which held some of the earliest developed humans to walk this Earth. An investment which will pay off later, I am sure. Money, resources, manpower, we have all of those and there is little reason not to utilize them. Let us worry about any financial or resource cost, Mr. President, I assure you we will take care of it.”

“I see,” Shamon said slowly, looking to the Prime Minister. “Well Chancellor, in this case, I think we should be able to come to an arrangement very soon.”

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ADVENT Trench Lines, Busan – South Korea

3/9/2017 – 3:41 P.M.
There was the continuous feeling that they were going to be overwhelmed at any moment. The adrenaline that had pumped through all of them at the beginning had become dulled as Duri and his squad repeated the actions of aim, shoot, reload, repeat, over and over again. ADVENT was continuing to take losses as the siege weapons fired steadily, and they were not always able to be deflected, especially as the Hunter had made a mocking point to start picking off Priests.

It seemed XCOM hadn’t managed to deal with him yet.

In the no man’s land, the aliens had established multiple forward positions, even if they had been temporarily prevented from moving forward when the Purifiers had burned a literal line in the sand. Duri had been concerned briefly that the fire would come their way, but it had proved to be unfounded as it mostly just…burned in one place, going deeper into the ground until it burned itself out. They were just careful not to get too close, since the lingering poison and byproducts of the chemical were dangerous in their own right.

He’d seen some of the Archangels flying overhead, or maybe it was just the same one, either way it had been impressive the way it had systematically taken out multiple Mutons and Custodians with a long flamethrower sweep. XCOM and ADVENT both seemed to have an affinity for fire. But right now his back pressed against the trench wall and he sighed, tired.

At some point they would have to be relieved and get some sleep. But the fact that they hadn’t yet meant that ADVENT couldn’t afford to replace any soldiers now, or they didn’t want to risk making substantial changes yet. Granted, they were holding the line very well, even as plasma fire continued spraying over the trenches and into the scorched Flak Towers.

Fortunately, the aliens seemed remiss in trying to actually make substantial progress beyond the first trench, a fact that Cara was continually upset about. “Come on, xeno cowards!” She shouted at the closest alien position with Mutons barely peeking out and firing. The barrage of Browning fire drove them back. “Stop hiding!”

“Don’t think it’s working, Cara,” Duri said with a tired chuckle. “Maybe if you yell a bit louder? I’m not sure they can hear you.”

“Ha ha, sir,” Cara retorted. “Hilarious!” She returned to focusing her fire on the barrier, and it did seem like she clipped one of the Mutons hard enough for it to roar and stumble back.

“Careful what you wish for, Cara,” Beatriz warned. “There’s a massive force coming up now. Andromedons leading them. Probably to storm the first trench and get an actual position.”

Duri breathed in. “Well, we can’t have that.”

The army that she had been talking about was soon within sight, and it was indeed led by Andromedons who were projecting red barriers in front of themselves, which made them targets as well as protected them significantly. Behind them was another line of Andromedon soldiers who were cycling out with the ones who had their shields depleted, and behind them were an unknown number of Custodians and Mutons.

Not good.

Purifiers were being moved up, and ADVENT defenders were focusing fire on specific Andromedons, though this only seemed to trigger the side effect of the armor Duri had forgotten about – how the Andromedon suits still continued fighting after their deaths. Now grenades spewing acid and fire were being thrown into the trenches, and while some were caught, dodged, or deflected by soldiers and Priests, others landed in the confined spaces.
Duri ducked as one of the grenades just barely flew over the trench and detonated above on the other side. More Andromedons were ‘dying’, but they were pushing to the trenches and beginning to file down into them. It was going to get ugly very fast if they maintained any sort of foothold. Duri pulled out his own grenade and rushed down to the tunnel that had previously held off the Chryssalid rampage and chucked it to the end, and was rewarded with the pained roar of a Muton.

Carrie had also returned with several of her soldiers. “Guess they got smart!” She called as the tunnel began being filled with plasma fire. “A Priest is coming. We need to hold off until then.”

“Got it,” he said, and stuck his rifle around the corner and fired blindly. “Aleksandra!”

“Working,” she confirmed, activating her PDS field. “Clear now!”

“We’ve got cover!” He yelled to Carrie. “Take them out.”

All of the soldiers, including Carrie’s Gunner and Rocketeer moved out of cover and focus fired down the center, with the Rocketeer firing several warheads into the far trench, with everyone else just continuing a volume of fire or chucking grenades down along with it. The plasma that was heading their way either fractured or was outright deflected, likely to the surprise of the aliens.

“Shield off,” he waved to Aleksandra. “Let’s save it for when we need it again. Miguel, we need the SHIV down here now.”

“Coming right up,” was the answer.

“Beatriz, how many are still going into the trenches?” He demanded as he returned to the blind fire tactic, even as he singed his armor from the plasma.

“Fucking Andromedon suits are not going down and causing a lot of trouble,” she updated. “Battlefield Engineers coming in now to set up permanent shields. ADVENT Priests are helping, but they’re being focus-targeted. More difficult to concentrate I think. You’re not getting those reinforcements cut off anytime soon.”

On cue the siege breakers fired another volley, which Duri knew would tie up more of the Priests. He was seriously considering the viability of retreating to the third trench line as Carrie’s Gunner was shot in the knee and had to be pulled back. Until there was a transmission interruption that Duri was sure he’d misheard initially.

“This is XCOM Operative Eriksson to all ADVENT personnel,” she said. “Be advised that we are receiving Ethereal support. Do not open fire on any Ethereals seen in the field, he’s friendly.”

Duri wiped the dust off the visor of his helmet and glancing at Aleksandra and Miguel seemed just as confused from their body language. “Did you guys really give up China? For this?” Even the Hunter seemed confused. “Aegis struck me as the type to go down to the bitter end. Huh.”

“Do you know what he’s talking about?” Carrie called. “Is China lost?”

“No idea,” he called back. “But there must be a good reason they’re bringing him over here, and we can definitely use him.”

“I’m not sure,” Beatriz sounded unconvinced. “They didn’t actually say it was Aegis.”

Duri reloaded his weapon and resumed his firing down the tunnel. “What, you think there is another Ethereal that defected? Why would XCOM hide that?”
“More importantly,” Miguel grunted. “Who would it be?”

“Guess we’ll see either way,” Duri said. “Only helps us, and if there’s a Hive Commander, we’ll need it.”

They continued fighting for a few minutes, still waiting for Aegis to come, or at least begin work elsewhere. Word would spread fast.

And it did. Duri was somehow unsurprised that the Hunter was the first to make a comment. But instead of his dark sarcasm, the Hunter sounded utterly shocked. “Is this a fucking joke?” A pause. “You have got to be kidding me!”

“Not Aegis?” Duri looked behind him. Now he was cautiously optimistic, because either XCOM had said it to lure the Hunter into some kind of trap, or there were now two Ethereals that were working with XCOM, and that was going to give everyone a better fighting chance.

“Oh my god,” Beatriz said in a small voice. “Oh. Oh.”

“What-?” Duri began asking, but trailed off as everyone felt a tangible change in the air. Everything seemed to become still and static; the air didn’t move, and random pieces of dirt, cloth, and other material floating in the wind became frozen. To his unbelieving eyes, he witnessed an Ethereal leap over the second trench and immediately focus on the Andromedon defenders.

“Correct me if I’m wrong.” Carrie shouted as the Ethereal appeared to just look at the defenders and an entire line of suits were picked up and crushed into pieces of scrap and yellow blood. “But isn’t that the Ethereal that attacked Japan? Twice?”

“Caelior,” Duri remembered the name numbly. Now that he remembered, there had been a small note saying that the Ethereal had been taken into custody by XCOM, but he’d just assumed that…

Well.

Caelior looked mostly the same as he had when he’d been fighting for the other side, though his mix of robes and armor was blue and silver, as well as prominently displaying XCOM emblems. He was showing his former allies the same power he had once used against ADVENT, though from what Duri remembered, his power seemed more controlled and directed – even as it was relentless and brutal, with enemies being crushed, pummeled, and ripped apart.

Barricades were ripped from the ground and wrapped around the soldiers they had protected before strangling them. Weapons were yanked from dozens of Custodians and Mutons at a time, while more were simply turned into organic missiles to be hurled at their comrades or flung across the battlefield.

The hovercraft, which had been hanging back recently, moved forward while firing their weapons. Six of these vehicles entered range, and Caelior yanked them all into the air, and began systematically tearing them apart and throwing the chunks at other vehicles and barricades.

It was safe to say that the tide had officially turned.

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**ADVENT Trench Lines, Busan – South Korea**

3/9/2017 – 5:51 P.M.
“Looks like our WMD is doing his job nicely,” Marvin commented as they stood a short distance behind the fourth line of trenches, watching as Caelior continued on his march through Collective lines, turning the aliens to slag and rent flesh. It was both impressive and mildly terrifying to behold, especially as he had completely supplemented the PRIEST defenders when the siege weapons had continued firing barrages, and he’d elevated himself into the air telekinetically to get line of sight over the entire defense line, and erected a telekinetic cushion that absorbed, and then turned away the oncoming missiles.

The Priests were quick to supplement his temporal exposure, erecting Psionic shields in front of him to stop the barrage of plasma fire that also was aimed at him from the entrenched alien defenders who were not going down without a fight.

But the Archangels were waiting for something very particular. There were two problems to solve – the Hive Commander that had been identified, and the Hunter who had not ceased his strikes, even if he was now remarkably quiet. Fatima had been working extensively to telepathically hunt down the slippery Hunter, and she was supposedly getting close, while Said was working with the Priests to lessen the influence the Hive Commander was spreading against the defenses.

This was apparently a dangerous Hive Commander.

“I really hope she hurries up,” Anna muttered, stepping up beside Sierra. “I hate standing here and doing nothing.”

“Join the club,” Sierra grunted. “But Mona is right. We go out hunting him blind and he’ll pick us off one by one. Quick and clean is what we need.”

Their key to success here, Archangel Kawamura, a telekine, sounded skeptical. “This is assuming we’ll even be able to kill or hold him. You know how durable his kind are. I don’t think he’s missed a single shot.”

“It’s simple,” Marvin said. “You hold him in place, and we flay his regenerating skin off of his bones for as long as it takes until he’s a burning puddle. You have your flamethrower ready, Sierra?”

She lifted her wrist. “Always.”

“The Hunter is dangerous when he’s unknown,” Marvin continued. “Corner him and he’ll lose his advantage.”

“In theory,” Kawamura supplied.

If he’d had his helmet off, Sierra guessed Marvin would be rolling his eyes. “Fine. In theory.”

“I’ve got him!” Fatima interrupted over the comms triumphantly. “Placing his location within this vicinity. Far left-center in no man’s land, not a lot of places for him to hide. I’ll let you know if it changes.” On cue the mini-map in her HUD lit up.

“Alright, let’s go!” Sierra called up, and one by one the six Archangels blasted into the sky and towards the battlefield.

“Erecting telekinetic field, expect some visual interference,” Kawamura said, and a few seconds later Sierra did see some visual distortion, though nothing too significant. Unfortunately it was necessary since the Hunter would just shoot them out of the sky otherwise, and since he didn’t use plasma, physical rounds could be stopped or deflected.
As they sped across the battlefield they spent some time sniping some of the many Mutons and Custodians on the ground, with Sierra causing one of the Elites to explode with a blast from the WHEEE cannon. The plasma fire that shot their direction didn’t miss, but was so wildly inaccurate that it wasn’t a concern.

“Well, what have we here,” the Hunter drawled out. “Archangels coming out finally. Let’s see how long you last…”

“Here it comes,” Kawamura said, and Sierra barely saw anything but there were several flashes and a small explosion away from the rapidly receding group. “Hah, idiot.” Kawamura smirked. “Come on, did you really think I didn’t plan for you to use exploding rounds.”

“Can’t blame me for trying,” the Hunter said. “Oh well. Guess I’m going to have to adapt. Whatever will I do now that I’ve been outsmarted so handily?”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Sierra commented as the sarcasm audibly dripped from the Hunter. “I wouldn’t be shocked if he has backup weapons.”

“Jim, altitude surveillance,” Kawamura suggested. “Target area sighted. Open fire at will.”

Their sniper, Jim, shot high into the air as Sierra focused on the area where the Hunter likely was hiding. It was a fortified location, with Custodians, Mutons, and Andromedons taking cover behind barriers and adjusting their sights to the oncoming host of Archangels. Kawamura swung her arms outwards as she slowed, and inversely applied the telekinetic bubble to the entire area and began compressing down.

The effect was instantaneous, as each thing caught in the invisible net was suddenly forced downward. The Mutons roared in pain and fell to the ground, only to find that the pressure didn’t lessen. The heads of the Custodians began crumpling as they fired up. The Elites and Andromedons managed to remain standing, albeit with growing pressure and pain. It didn’t help that the barriers themselves were shaking.

Sierra aimed her flamethrower at a section of the defenders and the white-orange flame engulfed those unfortunate enough to be caught in it. The Mutons boiled alive, while the Andromedons endured, though their suit integrity continued to suffer. The other Archangels combined their weapons and slowly exterminated the defenses that appeared to be close to a hundred strong.

Kawamura applied more pressure, and this was enough to shatter the Andromedon helmets that were still standing, which cascaded into the deaths of the pilots and the destruction of internal delicate instruments. The Muton Elites died as their brains collapsed, and the Mutons were flattened into the ground in a mix of fleshy mush and broken armor.

Marvin and Anna performed flyovers with their flamethrowers, adding a final layer of destruction to the carnage. “Think we got him?” Anna asked as she flew around to regroup.

“Let’s see,” Kawamura said, and ended the telekinetic field. “I doubt he’s dead, but he’ll get up now-“

She jolted in surprise as a plasma bolt slammed into her jetpack and sent her to the ground. “Your psion is a bit too distracted,” the Hunter chuckled as Maria dived to the falling Archangel. Spinning around, Sierra saw the black form of the Hunter a short distance away, with no surrounding cover and no reinforcements in sight. He was holding a sniper rifle. “Thinking I would just sit still while she probed where I was. But since you’re all here, let’s talk.”
The Archangels opened fire as they began strafing runs, and the Hunter just stood there, though growled in disgust. “What part of ‘let’s talk’ did you not understand? Idiots.” In quick succession he began firing back, even as he tanked a full blast from Anna. She suddenly threw her flamethrower to the ground as it exploded.

The Hunter swung his rifle to Sierra, and she swooped to make it difficult to shoot, but the alien somehow managed to punch a hole right through the WHEEE cannon, making her have to throw away another one, since she wasn’t going to risk it exploding on her. She briefly stopped to think about what the Hunter was saying.

“Hold fire!” She called, even as she reached for her pistol. “What do you want? And put down your weapon if you want to talk!”

“Nah,” the Hunter said, the smirk clear in his voice as he kept his rifle trained on the shaken Kawamura who was still recovering. “I think I’ll keep my eye on your telekine. She even so much as waves a hand, this time I’ll aim for her head, and not her jetpack.”

While the other Archangels maneuvered around the Hunter, weapons trained on him, Sierra decided to take the risk and land on the ground a short distance away. In response the Hunter switched to a one-handed grip of his rifle while pulling a pistol on her. “Careful where you step, Archangel. Just because I was nice before doesn’t mean I won’t blast your head off.”

Sierra didn’t lower her pistol. “What’s your game. We have you surrounded now that you revealed your position. You can’t get out of this.”

The Hunter laughed. “I cannot die. I’ve been shot, burned, decapitated, spaced, dismembered, and flayed. If you think having my limbs shattered and broken, if you think your plasma weapons are anything more than just temporary discomfort, then I’m afraid to disappoint you.”

“Maybe if we aim for the body,” Sierra indicated him. “But the head may offer a more permanent solution.”

“I’ll take my chances,” the Hunter said. “Which is why I’m talking with you at all. Now, you see the truth is that I don’t have a desire to be here right now. I wasn’t expecting the Little Storm here, and frankly, I’m not prepared to kill him right now, and as fun as it is to pick off your poorly-defended soldiers, I’m not an idiot.”

Sierra cocked her head. “Are you surrendering?”

“What? That’s funny,” he nodded indiscriminately behind him. “No. It’ll take you a while to get through here, even with Little Storm helping you out. That Hive Commander isn’t going down without a fight. Nah, the fact is that this entire battle –” he waved around with the pistol. “Means nothing. Especially with what’s going on in China.”


“Well, the almighty bitch herself has decided to send her Bringer pawns to help Isomnum,” the Hunter interjected. “Now, let’s say that the bitch and I parted on bad terms, and since you know what Paradise and the Bringer are, I won’t recap them. Suffice to say that them being involved is bad for everyone involved, especially myself.”

Sierra raised her eyebrow under her helmet. “And why would that be?”

“I may have been the one to accidentally blow the lid off of the Creator’s hell,” he said absentmindedly. “Now, I’m under the Battlemaster’s protection, but if the Bitch is deranged
enough to ignore the Battlemaster and help our prestigious Dread Lord, there’s a non-zero chance that she’ll come after me too, and I value my life too much to tie myself to a pointless battle.”

He flipped the pistol in his hand – clearly showing off. “Now, I’ll get to the point. I have an interest in stopping the attacks in China now. Every Bringer soldier dead makes my own chances of survival better. You obviously want to stop Isomnum. So here’s my offer – I help kill the Dread Lord and whatever pets from the Creator he brought, and in return you don’t come after me when I do this. I give my word I won’t kill your own soldiers during this period. When I leave China though, all bets are off. Temporary alliance, after all.”

“Do you really expect me to believe that?” Sierra asked skeptically. “That the Battlemaster would just let you do this?”

“What, you think I ask for his permission?”

The Hunter chuckled. “He’s occupied with bigger things than me right now, and I guarantee he wants Isomnum stopped as much as you do now. If I take a few days or weeks to chip in here and there, well…” a shrug. “I doubt he’ll care. Besides, I’ve been wanting to kill the Dread Lord for some time. Everything else is just a bonus.”

“And if we don’t agree?” Sierra inquired.

“Then I kill all of you, and go to China and kill everyone who gets in my way,” he said, angling the pistol towards her head again. “Plus, if you agree, I’ll be sure to put in a good word for you when I talk to the Battlemaster.”

“Orders, Sierra?” Anna asked.

She considered in the long seconds as the battle raged in the distance. As much as she hated to consider it, she didn’t know how well they could beat the Hunter right now. In the event Jim hit him, it might not debilitate him permanently. And his marksmanship was so much higher than any of theirs, he could outshoot them before they could fire back.

It was not a decision she wanted to decide unilaterally. However…being able to push the Hunter from a Collective tool to more of a directed weapon was an improvement, assuming he was telling the truth. This was going to be a risk, but she was going to take the chance. If the Bringer had soldiers involved in China now, they could very well use him.

“Fine, you have a deal,” she said unhappily. “Go back on it, and you’ll wish we’d have taken you out here.”

“Excellent!” The Hunter holstered his pistol and returned to a two-handed grip on the rifle. “I’ll be in touch in China, be sure to tell the Commander so he isn’t surprised. But I’ll need to…acquire some things. I really hope the Bitch remembers me, because I have definitely not forgotten about her.”

The Hunter suddenly vanished in a flash, and Anna landed beside her. “I really hope you made a good choice,” she said. “This could backfire.”

“Trust me,” Sierra sighed. “I know.”

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It took some time for the Hunter to make his way to the end of the Collective lines. XCOM would return to help Caelior clean up and begin pushing forward. As long as the Hive Commander was a factor, Caelior would be prevented from being an unstoppable force, or so it was theorized. Still, it had been a surprise to see him of all Ethereals show up.
It was, the Hunter mused, rather indicative of the state the Collective was barreling towards. First Aegis, now Caelior, and it was probably only a matter of time until a few more pivotal Ethereals defected. The rift between Isomnum and the Battlemaster was the clearest evidence of this yet, and the Hunter was rather fascinated to see it play out.

Ironically, it seemed like the Collective may not be undone by the Humans, but by Ethereal infighting.

If such a time came, he’d have to be careful about who to throw his support behind. Assuming that anyone actually cared. If they didn’t, all the better for him. It was tempting to consider just abandoning everything and taking his chances in the inner galaxy, but so long as the Imperator and Battlemaster were alive, that was only going to result in his untimely demise.

Then again, it wasn’t as though he wasn’t sticking his neck out here.

*I am not going to do that again.*

He was *good*, he knew that. At range he doubted that there was anyone in the galaxy who could match him in pure marksmanship. An accomplishment he took some rare pride in. At the same time, XCOM had easily had the upper hand there. There was a benefit to building up a certain persona of utter confidence and dismissal of opponents – it helped him to bluff.

Unfortunately, he was not omnipotent, nor had the ability to stop time. His body could withstand the damage easily enough, but it was only going to need one volley to debilitate him, and even a four-on-one – especially if they were *XCOM* – was simply not going to turn out in his favor. Not to mention he knew there was a sniper far above, and he wouldn’t be aiming for the body.

Fortunately, his bluffing had likely saved his mind and gotten what he wanted.

None of the aliens paid him any mind as he walked away, pulling out his holocommunicator. They had more important things to worry about, and he wanted to get out of here as quickly as possible. A lot of hunting to do and prepare for. A feral grin spread across his face as he envisioned the hunt to take place.

He was quite interested to see if these soldiers the Bringer commanded were as dangerous as he imagined they were. The bitch was deranged and mad, but she still unfortunately had a brilliant mind, and whatever the Bringer was, it wasn’t an idiot either. Perhaps if he was lucky, one of the so-called Saints would come.

He’d always wanted to know what it was like to kill a being that thought it was a god.

He scowled at the holocommunicator, annoyed by how long the Battlemaster was taking to pick up. “Come on tin man, pick up the damn call.”

A full minute passed before the hologram of the Battlemaster appeared. “*You are alive. Good.*”

“Thank my charming personality,” he quipped sarcastically. “I’ve found out how far I’m willing to stick my neck out, and this no longer includes *exposing* myself to a fucking Archangel team while being assaulted by one of their telepaths for hours.”

“It happened as I knew it would,” the Battlemaster said, unconcerned. “You achieved your objective?”

“Of course I did,” he rolled his eyes under the helmet. “I have a free pass in China. Heading out there now, and if XCOM keeps their word, I shouldn’t encounter problems. Depending on how
involved the bitch is, I might receive some special attention.” A pause. “Admittedly, I’m almost surprised XCOM agreed so quickly.”

“They know the risks the Bringer operating openly poses,” the Battlemaster answered firmly. “Your actions against them are minor compared to that.”

“Fair enough,” fine with him. He didn’t really need to be considered on the level of a Sovereign One. Too many people gunning for you then. “Also, Little Storm is back and on the wrong side.”

“I am aware,” was the curt response. “Concerning. He will need to be handled when Isomnum is contained.”

“I’ve got a plan for him if you want,” the Hunter offered. “I wouldn’t mind taking him out. Never liked the petulant child.”

The Battlemaster was silent for a moment. “I’d prefer he not be killed. It is also unlikely he is being coerced. Aegis would not stand for it. I would prefer to know what brought him to willingly assist them. Reclaiming him is a greater priority, but his involvement changes how we need to prepare. This is secondary to your objective. Use whatever resources you need to eliminate Isomnum and the Bringer’s soldiers.”

“And keep your sanctioning of this under wraps, I presume?” He inquired. Not that he particularly cared one way or another, he had no interest in trying to blackmail or backstab the Battlemaster. There were some beings you simply did not screw over – unless you had the protection of other beings protecting you.

Such as his current predicament with the Creator. Although he was wondering how much that would matter if the Battlemaster lost influence or station in the Collective. His protection might not be worth as much after that. A problem to consider if it happened. For now, he had plenty to distract him.

“Preferably,” the Battlemaster said. “However, I doubt anyone would believe you. You are an unreliable alien to them. Anything you say is suspect.”

“Suits me fine,” the Hunter nodded. “Well, in that case, I have a certain Ethereal that needs killing. Good luck…well,” he waved a hand. “Wherever you are.”

“Good hunting. And if you target ADVENT or XCOM, I will be sure to send your dismembered body to the Creator.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the Hunter sniffed. “No need for threats, not when it comes to this. Trust me,” he patted his pistol. “There are only a few people I actively want dead – the esteemed Dread Lord is one of them, and our glorious Creator is the other. It will be done, Battlemaster, have no worries.”

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Haikou, Hainan - China

3/8/2017 – 10:13 P.M.

Everyone was in as best shape as could be expected at this point. All of them were set up in rooms of their own, which admittedly wasn’t difficult to set up, given the fact that all of them were open. The Chinese mother and daughter – Yawen and Ren Fao respectively – were in their own room after they’d been able to learn some of who they were.
Both of them were residents of the city, and had been requested to leave their homes and move to the hotel to wait for evacuation. They’d experienced delays, and before they’d been able to be moved away, the whole city had been locked down and soon after that Isomnum had attacked. Had it not been for the Vitakarian, they would have died.

Said Vitakarian had his wounds bandaged and he was recovering, though both Iosif and Nuan had made sure that he was secured and bound. They were not as trusting of this alien yet, although Nuan was curious as to why the alien would help them. Something to interrogate it about at a later date.

Their other newfound civilian was Jun Ye, a fairly wealthy businessman who primarily worked as a representative overseas, although he had said that ADVENT “Was shaking up everything in this line of work” and he was in the city temporarily, although subsequently been caught up in the evacuation and subsequent lockdown.

Nuan had spent time questioning exactly how he had acquired a gun, seeing as how they were supposed to be extremely controlled. China was not America where everyone seemed to have the things, and so a civilian holding one struck her as suspicious. She’d first suspected that he was Chinese Intelligence or even a colleague. The explanation was just as simple, though made her bristle. He’d been granted an exemption by someone in the Communist Party, allowing him to carry a firearm. Bribery.

A crime officially, and the man had been suitably terrified when Nuan had revealed she was a member of the MSS and calmly asked him for the name of the individual who he had bribed. Not that Nuan intended to really punish this man, but whatever person who was participating in corruption would need to be removed at minimum.

They simply did not have time to deal with continued corruption when the Earth was being invaded.

He was now sleeping in his own room – the same one he had barricaded earlier – something there had been debate over. There was some logic to everyone being in one room, but at the same time, it would become crowded very fast and it would also trap them all in one place. There were risks and benefits associated with each option, but in the end they had all decided to have multiple rooms for the night. More decisions would be decided in the morning.

Nuan and Iosif had also taken a trip down to the kitchens and managed to bring up enough food for everyone from the working fridges. They hadn’t wanted to risk actually cooking something in case an alien patrol stumbled upon them. It had been a somewhat nerve-wracking experience, especially with the dead silence that they hadn’t wanted to break for fear of missing something.

But it had happened without incident, and everyone was feeling a little better. More so now that they were both able to use the showers after having to delay that initial plan. “Who’s first?” Iosif asked, as she set her rifle in the corner. “Actually, scratch that. You go first, I can wait.”

Nice of him, even though he’d probably earned it as much as she had. Still, she wasn’t going to spurn him being courteous. “Alright. Help me out of this.” And began taking off the easy parts of the Titan armor, such as the gauntlets, helmet, and boots. Glancing over to Iosif, he was clearly hesitant. Granted, she wasn’t exactly oblivious as to why…but still. “It’ll go faster,” she said. “I don’t bite.”

“Yes, yes I’m aware,” he said, moving over to her and starting to help loosen things up. “Don’t usually get this close to subordinates though. Even XCOM has an aversion to the possible harassment lawsuits.”
Nuan had to chuckle about that. “Has that ever happened in XCOM?”

“Not so far,” Iosif said as he lifted upwards and helped pull the center chestplate over her head. The damn thing really was heavy. “Intentional by the Commander. All candidates get psychological profiles sent over. Examples of unprofessional or criminal behavior, harassment, anger management, and so on – gets an immediate disqualification, doesn’t matter how good they are.”

“Good for him,” she wasn’t too surprised. The Commander struck her as a professional and someone who didn’t tolerate that type of behavior. She wasn’t ignorant of the irony that he more than likely sanctioned things that were just as technically bad or worse, but if someone was mean to a lady? No chance of getting into XCOM. Sort of weird standards when she thought about it, but she couldn’t really complain.

It took close to ten minutes to get the suit fully off, as it was a lot more complex than previous suits, even the Aegis. Both of them were quite blatantly ignoring how close they were to each other, and making short comments about nothing. Eventually she was stripped to just the black undersuit. “Alright, I won’t take too long,” she said, standing up and moving to the bathroom.

Once inside, she started the shower, took off the undersuit, and stepped into the warm water. Yes, this definitely felt good, even if it didn’t eliminate the stress of the day and the events just hours earlier. It was almost surreal; she just continued pushing forward despite the fact that she’d just watched horrendous deaths, suffered injuries, and witnessed Isomnum’s terror weapons.

She didn’t know if some small rational part of her brain was keeping the weight of all of that from crashing in at once, or if she was just…numb to things like this now. There was a surreal aura around a lot of things now for her, and it hadn’t stopped since she’d first watched Isomnum broadcast his speech to the world.

A dream. A nightmare.

At times throughout the day it seemed like she was just walking through the motions as if in a lucid dream. If she was in a dream, she wouldn’t have been surprised. She knew the soldiers who’d died slightly, in a comrades sort of way, but they weren’t who she considered friends. She’d survived after pulling off a lucky throw, rushed through the town while being chased, and got to be a hero by finding some desperate civilians. Even a moral quandary was thrown her way in the form of the alien.

Not to mention how now she and Iosif were sharing a room.

Rationally, she knew none of this was fake. If it was a dream, she would have woken up by now. Nor would she have wanted to live such a paradoxically real dream. Because this could plausibly happen, if she’d really been in a lucid dream, she would have not had anyone die, China would be saved, and she’d lower Isomnum into a burning pit of lava.

Perhaps she was just tired. Maybe she’d been killed by the Mosrimor Avatar and living out some kind of fucked up afterlife.

Wouldn’t that be funny.

You are very tired, Nuan, stop overthinking things.

Right. The warm water was making her loopy, and she couldn’t afford that now. Plus, she’d promised not to take too long, and she didn’t want to make Iosif wait uncomfortably long. A
minute later, she shut off the water and began drying herself off. The only downside was that she’d have to wear the undersuit again, and that she didn’t have any other clothes, but she’d make do.

She wrapped the towel around her to give a little more covering, for all the good it did. Back in the room she saw Iosif had moved her Titan armor to the side, keeping all the components together, while also working on taking off his own armor. Without a word she moved over to help him as well, and this time they didn’t really talk, even as the atmosphere shifted for both of them.

Extremely distracting. Not uncomfortable, but distracting. Enough for her mechanical hand to linger on his chest briefly before she realized what she was doing and quickly moved it away, while he just sort of froze. They only locked eyes for an instant before continuing with what they were doing. Eventually after what seemed like a long time, he was in his own undersuit, and coughed awkwardly. “I’ll be out soon.”

“Right,” she said distractedly as she copied what Iosif had done, and moved the various components and pieces to the side. Well, there was exactly zero chance they could really continue to not talk about the growing elephant in the room. Intended or not – and she had definitely not intended it when she’d originally been assigned here – they’d become close.

Close, with neither of them really willing to acknowledge or push it further. Him probably because he was the director of Psionic Operations and there were some power dynamic concerns from his end, and from her…well, maybe not to make the only friend she had here distant or uncomfortable. While it was true that she wasn’t really looked on suspiciously anymore, she still didn’t feel like she quite fit in with everyone. Easy to put aside when on missions, less so back at the Praesidium. It really was annoying that this was something that was being dealt with in a situation where they both could very easily be killed in the next few days, or even hours. That would be decidedly tragic. But they didn’t choose to be put in this situation, so they just had to deal with it the best they could. And something told her that awkwardly avoiding it would be the worse alternative.

So she just sat and waited, distracting herself with trying to think about the logistical issues with moving the alien prisoner. It was a temporary distraction, but worked for however long it took for Iosif to finish up, and he’d similarly used the towel to cover up slightly more than the undersuit showcased. “Hey,” she nodded as he walked over to sit on the edge of the bed opposite her own.

A short silence was punctuated by Nuan sighing. “So. Tell me if I’m imagining this or not.”

His lip twitched. “I somehow don’t think so.”

“Well…” she trailed off. “This thing with us. That we keep avoiding. I know it’s not exactly appropriate right now, but…” she coughed. “You’re not an idiot. I like you, more than I should since I didn’t really plan on anything like this…I think you feel the same. Or if not, we should get it-“

She trailed off as Iosif raised a hand. “I may not be a telepath, but you’re somehow more unsure now than when fighting. Funny how the mind works. Anyway,” he shook his head. “It’s not just you, I feel the same. Not expected for me either, and I was more considering how to handle it. I can’t completely forget about rank here.”

She relaxed a lot after hearing that, happy that her suspicions were confirmed. Ok good. They could go from here. “I wondered. I don’t really care about that though. Does it really matter,” she looked around. “Especially here?”

He gave a wan smile. “Realistically, no. But…well, I like to be on the safe side when it comes to
this kind of thing. Beaten into me by my superiors a long time ago, and I can’t drop it so easily. But we have someplace to start now. We can work through it more when we get back to the Praesidium.”

“Ok,” she nodded. “Good extra motivation to get out of here alive.”

“In the meantime, we need to figure out who’s going to stay up first,” he nodded to the clock. “Shifts every three hours. I don’t think everyone should be asleep at once.”

“I’ll go first,” she said. “Since you let me use the shower before you.”

He smirked. “I won’t argue right now. But don’t let me sleep later – I’ll remember the time.”

Nuan walked over and retrieved her rifle as Iosif settled into bed, pulling the sheets over himself. For her part, she sat on the edge of his bed, and silently watched over him as he drifted off to sleep.

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China

3/11/2017 – 3:11 P.M.

Oliver missed the days of straightforward fighting and holding positions against an oncoming alien force. Predictable may have been too strong a word to use, but it at least introduced some sense of normalcy and stability to war that had been lost when the Bringer had begun assisting Isomnum. It had turned a nightmare into a demented fever dream that was no longer restricted to the coast.

All XCOM squads deployed to China had been turned into an immediate counter strike force thanks to the Chronicler’s teleporting, and he and Kane had been teleported all over the country to assist in repelling surprise attacks by the Bringer and other forces. Few they may be, they were somehow capable of outclassing even the PRIEST Division.

They’d often arrived too late to save the majority of defenders, even if they’d served in softening up the Bringer soldiers and were more easily dispatched. But it never seemed to be enough to completely stop the flow, even though rationally he knew that the Bringer would eventually cut his losses. It didn’t help that Isomnum was very much still active and expanding his reach over a tiring Aegis.

The worst places they’d found weren’t filled with defenders, but with the Bringer Caretakers teleporting unconscious victims away with the dead bodies of Chinese and ADVENT defenders all around them. Performed throughout the country, in many places which hadn’t undergone a full evacuation, this was devastating.

But this one seemed different.

The whishing sound of the teleportation put them in the location of a city ADVENT had reported as coming under attack by a new type of Bringer soldier, or at least that was what was assumed. It was entirely possible that they were incorrect, and it was one of the dozens they had already fought. That all of them seemed to have slightly different armor didn’t help with this.

They were immediately confronted by ADVENT and Chinese soldiers on a street, in a city which had limited infrastructure and no skyscrapers. Definitely one of the more rural cities of the country, but there was something immediately noticeable and wrong as Oliver actually got a good look at them. At their arrival all of the soldiers broke into sudden cheers and claps, with artificial smiles on their faces.
They wore no helmets, and had no eyes.

He shouldn’t be staring in disbelief, but this was not expected. The sockets were still bloody, if precise. They had to all be in extreme pain, but none of them seemed to react to the fact they were blind. Adding more to the surreal atmosphere, there was a lively and haunting melody that was playing across the air.

“Chronicler?” Oliver asked, raising his weapon at the smiling and cheering mind-controlled soldiers. They had to be mind-controlled, though up to this point they had been just killed, not preserved like this.

The Chronicler seemed to appraise the crowd for a second, until the crack of a gauss pistol from behind him fired and blew the head of one of the women apart. Kane was wasting no time in systematically executing them coldly with direct shots to the eyeless heads. The cheering stopped as all of them seemed to freeze.

“Kane!” Oliver swore. “Wait-“

“No, he’s right, though not for his reasons,” the Chronicler said grimly. “These people have been touched by the Bringer. They cannot be allowed to live.”

All of the controlled soldiers suddenly began laughing, and a new voice reached over them, a madly happy female from what he could tell. “Indeed! Indeed! Perceptive, little pawn. And yet you think killing them is what we – what they fear?”

The laughing grew more intense, and blood began trickling out of their eye sockets.

“You think we fear death?!“

Even Kane had stopped shooting as he beheld the mad and increasingly raw laughter of the soldiers, some of whom had fallen to the ground, shaking as they kept laughing. One of them stumbled over to Kane and yanked the pistol to his smiling head.

“Do not hesitate. Give them what they want.”

Kane fired, and this time he continued walking. The Chronicler refrained from performing executions on his own, and Oliver complied as they walked forward, the laughing blind moving out of the way down the cleared street. More of the laughing were falling over, and coughing up blood as their bodies were forced to continue laughing.

It soon turned to wheezing, coughing, and gasping as the trio witnessed those who had previously been laughing hysterically seem to die, with wide and bloody smiles on their faces.

Even in the quieter absence of the laughter, he could still hear it.

But why do this?

Kane had holstered his pistol and pulled out his Browning as they approached what looked like a city center of some kind. If one had turned it into a nightmarish cult hub. In the center there was a literal altar and still more blind soldiers were in the crowd, eagerly looking towards the scene unfolding before them, even lacking eyes.

In the center was a lone figure wearing deep purple robes, which were adorned with more of the mysterious writing and symbols that to his perhaps too tired eyes seemed to shift the more he watched. It was clearly a woman, though the species he could not tell. The most distinctive aspect
of her attire was the mask she wore.

It was silver and completely covered her head, reminding him of the old theatre masks he had seen before. Those masks expressed an emotion, happy, sad, angry, and more. Always static, never evolving. So too was the mask the woman wore, one with a laughing mouth, wide eyes; coalescing into an unsettling image, more so because unlike most masks, this one had extra details on it in silvery detail.

Small scars, wrinkles, dimples, details that disturbingly looked like a static snapshot of someone who had actually been laughing.

On the altar was a woman who was lying tranquil, with no restraints or anything that Oliver could see. The masked woman was over her holding a small and pristine knife that she then lowered to the wide eyes of the victim and began cutting the eye out. The crowd cheered and the victim expressed no pain, even going so far as to clap while lying down.

Oliver didn’t fail to note that there were several cameras placed around the area, and he realized that this was likely being recorded or streamed for others to watch. He sincerely hoped that ADVENT was finding and shutting them down as fast as possible.

Kane growled and lifted his rifle and the Chronicler shot a hand over to him and Kane was suddenly encased in a stasis field. “Let me go!”

“No,” the Chronicler said quietly. “Not yet. I want to see what happens.”

“There are others!” Kane yelled. “We’re not killing them for your curiosity!”

Sure enough, Oliver looked behind the altar to see that there were at least a few dozen soldiers who still had their eyes, but they were clapping along with the crowd, were not restrained in the slightest, and had wide smiles and bright eyes.

It reminded him far too much of a celebration. Were the Chronicler not protecting his mind, Oliver was afraid he might have been caught up in the ‘festivities’ since even now he could feel the urge to also show appreciation for what he was seeing. “Everyone is lost.” The Chronicler hissed. “They will all die. Just not yet.”

The masked woman extracted the bloody eyeballs, which were amazingly still in their shape, and carefully placed them in a nearby basket which to his disgust held dozens more extracted eyes. The victim stood with a smile and walked to the crowd, seemingly thrilled with what had happened.

“Another child has joined His ranks, and will forever see with His sight!” The masked woman called out. “Who shall be the next to cast aside your mortal senses for that which is eternal?”

To his dismay and horror Oliver saw all of the soldiers who still had their sight nearly swarming the masked woman, practically begging and pleading to be the next to have their eyes cut out. “Let Me Go.” Kane demanded.

“Not yet,” the Chronicler said. “Patience.”

“Ah, your enthusiasm is commendable, but first!” She turned around and looked right at the trio. “Let us extend a welcome to our guests of the afternoon! An ambassador from none other than T’Leth himself.”

The crowd seemed ecstatic at that, and Oliver wondered just how powerful this psion was that she was managing to influence everyone so completely simultaneously. It was growing more and more
unnerving by the second, starting from when they’d stepped foot into this cursed place.

The Chronicler rippled with a blue aura as he continued to walk forward. Something Oliver now knew as T’Leth taking control over him. He lifted a hand, and closed it into a fist. “Be silent.”

Some hands were thrown to throats, as Oliver saw a rippling band of air around the throats of the crowd. It appeared T’Leth was justifiably angry.

The masked woman twirled the knife in her fingers, the blood seeming to vanish off of it as she expertly sheathed it in a pocket. “Such a lack of manners. For a ceremony mind you! Is that all you came to do little puppet? Disrupt our joy? How typical of your kind, how hilarious!” Even while choked, the crowd around them took the cue to exert as much laughing as they could.

“What are you?” T’Leth almost sounded curious. “You have developed more extensively than normal.”

“I am no one of importance,” the masked woman bowed dramatically, going so far as to extend a hand dramatically. “Merely one of His Trusted, who has been tasked with so holy a task as to bring His truth to all others here!” She spread an arm indicating the asphyxiating crowd. “A truth all here now know. One I invite you to understand as well!”

She stepped forward. “I knew you would come. But you came expecting war and hate, and there is none of that here, unless you have brought it with you.” She spread her arms. “All of these men and women were suffering. They exist in pain and anguish daily, fighting for temporal and petty things. Fighting for a people who will never face the danger they endure themselves. Who do not truly care about them. Now they understand that One does, and they rejoice.”

“What a lie,” Oliver muttered, training his weapon on the laughing mask. “One she is deluded enough to believe.”

A rumble sounded from the Chronicler, a deepness and rumbling Oliver realized was a laugh or chuckle from T’Leth. “Your hypocrisy has not changed, Bringer. You offer no choice, only domination and submission. You may have manipulated the Imperator into doing your bidding, but you will not be granted this species as yours – or any others.”

A dramatic sigh sounded from the woman. “So be it, Sovereign. Give in to your primal nature and kill me!”

T’Leth sounded amused again. “No. I won’t kill you. But he will.”

There was a loud crack as the Chronicler executed all of those he had held in the crowd, and subsequently released Kane who began firing rapidly at the woman. Those who T’Leth had not executed rushed forward screaming crazed battle cries, Oliver quickly put them down with well-placed shots to the head.

The woman suddenly duplicated into dozens of copies – psionic illusions most likely – and pointed at Kane who stumbled, kicked away a rushing brainwashed soldier, and continued forward with a furious roar – one of rage, not pain.

The Chronicler broke the psionosphere around the area where the illusions were, and purple surges of energy lashed out which vaporized several copies, and the Chronicler extended a hand towards what was left and all of the copies suddenly disappeared revealing the real one a short distance to the left of where she had been standing, one hand moved to her head, which she shook and directed at Kane again.
Oliver threw a plasma grenade to her which somehow broke into pieces well before it reached her location. The robes she was wearing were being ripped by the rounds from Kane’s Browning, but not seeming to hurt her as Oliver saw wounds being healed in seconds. A Biopath then. Kane’s weapon suddenly fell apart and exploded as a final round went through it.

Pieces of his armor started falling off as well, and realizing what was happening, he outright charged towards the woman who lifted a hand above as if to teleport away – except nothing happened – seeming to leave her stunned just long enough for Kane to slam her into a nearby wall and was unrelenting as he smashed her head into the wall again and again, before throwing her to the ground.

The Chronicler was also walking forward, energy flowing off of him and one fist lifted and clenched. With pieces of his armor still falling off, Kane lifted his boot and slammed it down on the mask and elicited a yelp. He repeated this move several times, with the woman somehow laughing madly as much as her breaking face would allow, until there was a distinct cracking sound of bone giving way and the body stopped moving.

Kane stood over the body, breathing heavily. “Good job,” the Chronicler nodded.

Kane attempted to swing a punch though he was frozen just before his broken gauntlet could hit the helmet of the Chronicler. It didn’t seem to deter him. “Don’t you ever do that to me again, Chronicler.” He growled.

“Then keep yourself in check,” the Chronicler replied calmly, releasing him after stepping back. “We killed what I believe was one of his most powerful soldiers, and another city is dealt with. Good work.”

Oliver looked around at the carnage, and he definitely did not feel like they’d done good work. No one had been saved and he was never going to forget the nightmare this place had been. Kane’s voice was more controlled now. “I need armor and weapons.”

“Yes,” the Chronicler agreed. “We need to replenish those first. Let’s go.” A portal was created around them, and they were gone just as quickly as they’d come.

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ADVENT-Chinese Joint Command, Beijing - China

3/11/2017 – 5:05 P.M.

The situation was continuing to deteriorate and Saudia didn’t know what the best solution was. The introduction of the Bringer had disrupted their defenses significantly, and attacks across the country were being reported, and in many cases it was a matter of civilians going insane and attacking ADVENT and Chinese soldiers.

Aegis was weakening, XCOM was being rushed all over to put out fires and hunt down Bringer soldiers, and ADVENT was suffering substantial losses even when they won. Worse, the Bringer – or Isomnum – wasn’t just targeting defenses, but also the populations. XCOM had confirmed this multiple times, which was triggering a massive rush to evacuate the inner cities since boundaries no longer seemed to matter.

ADVENT was also working overtime on the digital front, as some of the assaults were being broadcast by the Bringer’s soldiers, a way for Isomnum to continue to spread his terror non-psiologically. It was a continuous battle to keep it suppressed, and while it was being largely
successful, and Saudia had ensured that a gag order on any footage was given to the media, they weren’t going to be able to stop everything.

Even one or two of these teleporting Bringer operatives were enough to somehow take on garrisons. Oh, they’d be put down, but only after they’d killed many times their own number. Suicide units or not, they were weakening the defenses across the country, and it didn’t seem like T’Leth had enough operatives to stop everything.

Then something changed.

It began with the feeling of a growing pit in her stomach, and looking out the window she saw the city burning, with alien fighters swooping in and strafing the buildings. Ice clamped around her heart as she saw what was happening. Her body suddenly froze as the Manchurian Restraints took hold, and the rational part of her brain screamed that this was impossible.

Then it all vanished. “Chancellor!” One of the Priest guards called, marching up with her honor guard. “You need to come with us now.” Saudia looked out of the building, and was immensely relieved to see that there was no alien fleet in the city…but something was still wrong.

“What’s going on?” She demanded, pulling out her pistol, a concerning feeling that she would need it coming over her.

“Unsure at the moment,” Ethan said, stepping forward. “But the entire city just experienced a psionic attack. Priests are trying to contain the situation, but it’s taking hold. We think Isomnum is here.”

She stiffened. That was very, very bad. And brazen. “How?”

“Probably teleportation,” the Priest said, as they began escorting her out with her in the center. “But he shouldn’t be here. It’s unlike his dossier, but if he is he must have also brought backup.”

Saudia thought furiously as she was escorted through the hallways. Protocol dictated an extraction to the nearest Gateway back to a secured ADVENT base, but she knew there was some greater objective here. There were only two places they needed to focus on to cause maximum damage, and if the population remaining was driven insane and dealt with the forces on the streets…

“Order an immediate evacuation of the building,” she told Ethan. “They’re going to attack here - and send the evacuation order over to Qin at the Great Hall as well. Any legislative and administrative officials need to leave now. Isomnum wants to make a statement here, and he doesn’t have the forces for a prolonged battle.”

“Yes, Chancellor,” Ethan confirmed and began rapidly speaking in the background, as they began moving towards the open staircase leading downwards. Elevators were a terrible idea, and while the stairs were restrained, there wasn’t a better option. While she was confident that she could be protected, she was worried about the parts of the Chinese government who’d elected to stay due to believing the danger was still far off.

Everyone should have paid more attention to D.C. The Collective clearly had no problem striking in the heart of what is assumed to be protected territory. But maybe it would turn out for the best; in D.C. they had almost killed the Battlemaster. Perhaps here they could kill Isomnum.

“Where is the Commander?” she demanded, knowing he was still observing operations here. He needed to get out of here as well until it was contained and safe.

“Don’t know,” Ethan updated. “Communications are jammed now, I just barely got the evacuation
orders off.”

“And Qin?”

“Interrupted, but he got the message,” Ethan stepped in front of her as fighting was just ahead in the hallway they were trapped in. It was a wide hallway, yes, but with almost no cover and only the stairs at the end. A robed figure was thrown back and slammed into a wall, and was subsequently struck by lightning.

The Commander emerged from the stairs, not wearing armor, but holding a gauss rifle. Beside him was another figure in blue and black robes who was absurdly tall – as tall as her even. He was almost regal in how he conducted himself and his face was stern, though his stormy grey eyes flashed with annoyance. In his hands with fingerless gloves over them was a staff of all things.

It was metal with the handle itself having grips built into the design, with a sharp spike at the bottom, and at the opposite end held the head of the staff, which was a ring with odd text written on it. In the center was an orb that glowed with an internal blue-green light, with ripples emanating from it. One of the Sovereign Orbs, which meant that this new individual was an agent.

Good news.

“Chancellor,” the Commander greeted curtly. “Glad you’re safe. This is Crevan Machas, we’re going to get you out of here.”

“We’re escorting her to the Gateway now, Commander,” Ethan confirmed. “You can-“

“The Gateway is compromised,” Crevan interrupted curtly. “Fiona is currently engaged in combat with one of the Bringer’s teleporters. The building is under attack and you are the target. They are marching up here now.”

That explained why they’d been fighting up and not down. Saudia saw no reason to disbelieve them. “Fine. What is the plan.”

“We move towards the roof, and a Skyranger will come to evacuate you,” the Commander said. “Alternatively, Fiona teleports us out of here. Whichever comes first, but we need to keep moving.”

“Indeed,” Crevan glanced to his staff. “They are aware of our capabilities and will be sending forces against us. I can prevent teleportation surprises and telepathic attacks within a certain radius, but little else.”

“Understood,” Ethan moved her guard around. “I don’t suppose you know what is happening?”

The Commander pursed his lips. “Isomnum is indeed in the vicinity. We did not expect it, but it is going to cause issues. I think he is trying to provoke a reaction, and if he succeeds in this brazen attack, he will get it.”

Vague, but Saudia suspected he was referring to T’Leth, which she would have sincerely hoped was the case even before there had been an attack of this magnitude. “Enemy contact!” A guard called out, and Saudia was yanked out of the possible line of fire as one of the Priests placed a barrier before her.

Four soldiers stepped out of a blue-tinged portal. Another of the robed aliens, this one wielding a short silver sword. There were two of the soldiers which XCOM had identified as Carmine Baptists, one carrying a sword and shield, and the other carrying an axe. The one in the center emulated the Baptists, but was distinct in several ways.
The armor was more ornate, and the silver wording on the armor seemed to move and glow. A deep purple was woven into the color scheme, and an equally colored cape fell from his shoulders – and this man was a giant, eclipsing even the wiry height of Crevan, with the body mass to match. But the most distinct piece of attire was the silver helmet which was designed to bear a face. Much like in a theatre.

If the mask portrayed utter rage. It was disturbingly detailed; a snapshot of raw emotion captured somehow in metal. The mouth was open in a snarl, the beard was short and stained with spittle. The eyebrows were furrowed and the face was creased with every feature emphasizing the utter anger felt.

Too detailed. That shouldn’t be possible in something so inanimate.

“Fire!” She heard Ethan call, and the Baptists charged with shrill battle cries. The robed one pulled out twin pistols and began firing purple bolts in their direction. Crevan stepped forward and slammed the staff into the ground with enough force to plant it. He was definitely enhanced if he could do that.

She saw the Commander pull something out of his pocket, and a few seconds later three things whizzed towards the robed alien. It teleported away, and reappeared behind the Commander now, though he managed to keep the harassment of whatever he was doing up. The Baptists were unaffected by the pounding fire, and slung their weapons forward, sending waves of psionic energy towards them. The second Priest erected another barrier which absorbed the blasts.

Once they got close enough, Crevan waved a hand towards the charging Baptists and they suddenly slowed, then collapsed to the ground, somehow dead. He gestured for the shield to be lowered, and the masked Baptist marched forward slowly; deliberately. It pulled a greatsword from behind it and the blade became emblazoned in blue energy.

Crevan lifted his hands and shot lightning from his fingertips, a white-blue stream of electricity that slammed into the masked Baptist with enough force that it dropped the greatsword and roared in a howl of pain and rage, briefly echoing the mask it wore. Plasma and gauss rounds dented and marred the pristine armor, and yet it was not killed.

Instead it lifted a hand and the lighting streaming from the fingertips of Crevan was directed towards it, while the opposite one was pulled back and then shoved forward, and purple-tinged lightning shot out instead before anyone could properly react. It didn’t hit Crevan, but instead hit one of the Priests who couldn’t block it in time, and she barely had time to scream before the lightning fried her body.

Crevan ceased his stream of lightning, and instead adapted his tactics. With a motion, the armor of the masked Baptists turned molten orange over the course of seconds as it slowly began melting off in chunks. The Baptist roared and charged forward, disregarding his weapon lying on the ground. More rounds were penetrating the weakening armor, but they weren’t slowing it down.

Crevan directed a single stream of lighting at him, forcing the Baptist to slow down significantly, though not outright stop. Saudia looked back to the Commander, who was still engaging with the robed alien who’d just thrown a dagger at him while shooting purple-tinged projectiles. Not wanting to be helpless in this situation. She lined up her pistol and fired.

The robed alien had clearly not expected her engagement and the round went straight through its neck, forcing it to stumble back, which allowed the Commander to reached out telekinetically, lift it into the air, and crush the head into yellow paste. But to her dismay, she saw that two more aliens emerged from a portal on the same side, who were another regular Baptist and robed.
This was getting bad. They were becoming pinned.

The Priest protecting her focused on the masked Baptist, for a few solid seconds, yelling “Hold him still!” At Crevan, who reinforced his lightning intensity so much that the Baptist was forced to remain still. The Priest released a hand, and the psionic shield appeared in the chest of the Baptist, expanding horizontally, ripping it in half.

And it still didn’t die. Bleeding out on the ground, it flopped forward with its two arms in screaming fury, when Crevan ripped up the staff and stabbed downwards, skewering its head and twisting until it stopped moving.

Fire immediately became focused on the new threat, with the Baptist firing a psionic wave forward that the Priest was able to block just in time. This robed teleporter also had a rifle, and the bolts struck one of her guard before he could react, and penetrated their armor somehow. “More behind!” Ethan called, swearing. “They’re not stopping.”

This time though, only one emerged from the portal. A stone-faced man in robes, looking decidedly unimpressed with what he saw. The Commander behind her telekinetically grabbed the Baptists and began crushing the armor even as he fired psionic energy back at the Commander which was blocked by the Priest.

The other robed man lifted a hand and the weapons of her guard went flying towards him. Crevan shot lighting from his hand at him, though a raised palm and small psionic shield blocked it from ever hitting. He lifted a hand sharply and another of her guard was bisected vertically and fell into two pieces.

They were losing, little question of that now, and she fired her pistol at the stone-faced man, for all the good it would do. Crevan intensified the lightning, lighting up the room and filling it with the crackling sound. Yet the man didn’t seem deterred, but instead looked to her and a blue psionic shield appeared around her, trapping her.

She fired her plasma pistol at it, heart pounding as the very real danger of what could happen next set in. The Commander had killed the Baptist, and was still fighting the robed teleporter, while her last Priest in an attempt to distract the robed man charged forward and encased him in a psionic prison, making him temporarily immune to harm.

He was decapitated by blue shield appearing out of his neck.

*It can’t end like this.*

“Fiona, get back here now!” Crevan yelled, now sounded concerned. “Do whatever you have to!”

The man gestured towards her, and she saw a blue psionic barrier sever her arms.

She barely had enough time for her brain to process what was happening before another shield severed her knees and the functioning torso fell to the ground, sending screaming jolts of pain through her body.

“Saudia!” Ethan yelled from above.

The shock of the pain and her inability to do anything numbed her. Blood pouring out of her wounds, she forced herself up on her stumps towards the one who had crippled her. If she was going to die, it would be looking her killer in the face.
There was a flash of green and a stone-armored figure stepped out, and was immediately different from the rest. She was stained in yellow and red blood, with her sword equally as ruined. She flickered a greenish-white; as if a hologram phasing in and out. The man forced two psionic barriers at her which should have decapitated or bisected her, but instead they went through her as if she didn’t exist.

A hand encased in white-green energy was extended and the figure was suddenly before the man and placed it on the chest. The man stiffened, opened his mouth – the only trace of emotion she’d seen, just before his body vanished in a flash. She allowed herself to slump to the ground, light-headed from the loss of blood and only hearing the last snippets of conversation before she passed out.

“You know what will happen…”

“Yes.”

“I’ll deal with it. We need to get the Chancellor medical attention now.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“Yes. Hold her steady.”

***

In the Great Hall of the People, there was a party being thrown.

The doors of the exclusive building had been thrown open, and all residents had been invited inside. It was a subtle whisper, a sirens call that was impossible to ignore even through the madness that now permeated the once-great city. None were immune to its call, not completely, and right now no one would interrupt the festivities which awaited.

If one walked the city during the time Beijing had fallen, they may have believed they had been walking in a dream, for that was the atmosphere which had been woven throughout the night. A fine purple mist tinged the sight of all who stepped outside, the smog replaced with intoxicating clarity and revelry.

The dull and defeated eyes of the soldiers, psions, and civilians who had lived in fear had their concerns slowly melt away as they first cowered in terror, then felt themselves settle into a euphoric state of mind; a mind knowing that their temporal concerns, dreams, and fears were no longer important. Only One was.

That deserved to be celebrated.

The exclusive steps that had been denied to so many were open to the hundreds which walked forward, and the site of so many pointless and cruel deaths was turned into one of remembrance and celebration. The robed ambassadors of the Bringer waited and welcomed those with open arms as if they were old friends reunited, and invited them to partake of the festivities, free of the dull and tiresome lives they’d lived.

Fires burned to cook food, and the smells wafted over the air, of what seemed to those who wandered over to be a delicious aroma, as intoxicating as the atmosphere around them. So content were they that they paid little attention to the tables where meat was carved off the dozens of corpses, each from a willing line of people willing to contribute their bodies in celebration of such a night.
Such a victory.

For they knew even in death they would ascend to something greater.

Blood once more flowed within Tiananmen Square, but instead of the blood of innocents tainting the stones, it was the blood of the sanctified; the few and honored who so freely offered their own flesh for others.

Hundreds partook of the meal outside as melodious music played by a Weaver of this dream drifted over the air; a hypnotizing sound that those who heard felt the urge to follow. Within the Great Hall itself, the most prestigious of the night resided and reveled.

Those who wove the dream were seeded throughout, encouraging and directing the festivities in honor of their god. Wine glasses filled with thin red liquid were freely distributed as well as flesh on platters cooked to differing temperatures, to of course accommodate for all tastes. Toasts were shouted frequently to boisterous cheers.

Those within ate, drank, and were merry.

Deeper within were the halls of honor, the place where the Auditorium of Ten Thousand People stood; a place of history and significance where the leaders of this nation had given statements, lies, and truths to their citizens. Declarations of power; declarations of war, it was a place where the attention of the world could be focused.

So to it was that the auditorium was filled to the brim as hundreds of the newly converted sat in rapture as they feasted and listened to the men on the stage who sat in front of a fully packed and ornate buffet of the courses of the evening. Raw organs were placed in special bowls, and limbs both cooked and uncooked were available to be cut and eaten.

The men who had once represented the nation, led their military, and ruled over the people eagerly partook of these delicacies, liberally giving their compliments to the chefs, with bloody mouths and eyes that shined too bright. Lively conversation between them took place as they babbled around topics of little and great significance, their tongues twisting the languages into something most would consider gibberish, but which each equally mad man understood.

Yet what enraptured the audience so was how each who sat at the table stood up and loudly professed their devotion to the One Who Brings Paradise, who gave moving testimonials and revelations they had experienced so quickly, yet had been apparent to them all along. How they had lived their lives blind until they had their eyes opened.

Many of these testimonials moved much of the audience to tears, and those who professed their newfound faith broke down; believing themselves so unworthy to receive the love that had been bestowed upon them this night.

The greatest of these was when the former President Qin stood and professed the sins he had so easily partaken in without remorse. He confessed every single crime that had been done against his people through sobs and tears, so remorseful he was of the injustice he had committed for so long. He loudly and fully decried the evils of ADVENT and how they would deny the love and joy he had been awakened to tonight.

By the end, he understood that he could not merely accept the unconditional forgiveness of the One Who Brings Paradise, it could not be enough. A sacrifice was required. As he had been blind to his acts for so long, and his words had led so many astray, he would ensure he would never lead those off the only path that mattered.
To a standing ovation, before the crowds he took out a knife which had been given to him by those who wove the dream, and cut out his eyes, then severed his tongue, and yet there was smile on his face as he finished, for he knew that the Bringer was satisfied with his offering.

Such festivities and joy could not simply be restricted to the confines of the square and halls, and such powerful testimonials could not go unheard. So they were shared; broadcasted to the world with high quality cameras at all angles. The celebrity event of the year that all needed to see and understand to be saved.

ADVENT would try, but they could not stop all of it, not at all.

The world was held by what happened that night, captivated and terrified.

And after the blind and mute Qin returned to his seat, a spindly arm came down to rest on his shoulder as the black eyes of the Dread Lord looked down on him in the closest to approval one could come, then looked back out at the revelling crowd as the audience felt compelled to speak of their own conversions.

He looked upon the mad world that he had created, and saw that it was good.

For perhaps the first time in his life, he felt it.

A small, obscured emotion that he had only heard described. Unlike any he had felt before.

Happy.

He mimicked his lips in an approximation of a smile.

A genuine smile.

Happy.

He was happy.

He had won today.

The first of many, for the world would be shaped in this image.

Within the Dream, in the midst of the revelry, one could just hear the mad laughter of the Dread Lord.

And those who heard, smiled, and prayed for the Dream to never end.

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To be continued in Chapter 49:

Reign of the Dread Lord

Chapter End Notes

Well, one million words (or close enough to the point where it's better to just do it now). I'd hoped that everything would line up so I would break it in chapter 50 and
subsequently wrap up Act III, which would have been a poetic, albeit probably unrealistic, outcome. But length is not really something I can really plan for, so here we are. Still, it's a large milestone and one I honestly didn't think I'd be breaking until I was close to the end of the story, or at least past the rough halfway point. Can't promise that there will be another million words to follow, but hey, you never know!

In all seriousness I'm very thankful to everyone reading, reviewing, or otherwise following along in my hobby. It's special, and not something you can't completely appreciate until it happens to you. Regardless, thank you, and know that your feedback has definitely helped shape the story into what it is today. The most radical changes are suggested by my excellent editing team, but if someone else has a good idea, I'm likely to figure out some way to incorporate it. And trust me there's a lot of time left in the story for things to keep happening ;)

I'll close out this particular note with highlighting the two pieces of supplementary material written by members of my editing team, the first being the Chronicles of Salvation, by Edumesh - of particular relevance given the events of the chapter, and an excellent piece of writing on it's own. The second is the XCOM Files - Technical Addenda by Ashardalon125 which is a more technically-focused XCOM files with a more scientific component. There is not significant overlap with the XCOM Files, although you may see a couple characters in both. If you want a glimpse of some of what ADVENT may develop or pursue, I would highly recommend checking it out and both should be posted on AO3.

The last thing I'll highlight is a series by SLoTH4, who writes Shadow of the Phoenix, a Star Wars story set in the post-Legacy era. I've been working with him quite a bit to help expand and flesh it out, and have personally written quite a bit of supplementary material for his universe with a lot more on the way. If you want to see a rather different take on Star Wars with a good amount of background material to go along with it (I do think some of the stuff I've written for him is among my best work), I recommend you check it out. The addenda are already in my profile, and the main story is also on AO3 as well.

So thanks again everyone, and let's see if we get another million words out of this.

Also, told you Act III was going to be a climactic end.
Unknown

Saudia didn’t remember waking up, or much of what happened after she’d fallen unconscious. She was fairly certain that she had lost one or more of her limbs, and yet she lifted one up in the blue-tinged light and could see that she very much had them. Looking down confirmed that both of her legs were still intact too.

Odd.

Especially when she looked around to see where she was.

It was a vast blue expanse, reminding her of being deep underwater. Light appeared to come faintly from all around, with no clear light source or ‘surface’ to see. Perhaps the color was closer to a deep teal than blue, but it nonetheless appeared to permeate everything. She looked down at the ‘ground’ and knelt down to feel it.

No moisture or anything on it, but it did just barely give when she pressed down on it. She walked a few steps, and she could definitely feel it slightly sink as she put weight on it. Only a few millimeters, but still noticeable. She kept walking aimlessly for a few minutes, unsure of where she could go or what she could do.

She had a suspicion of what was happening now, unless there was some new kind of psionic therapy treatment that the PRIEST Division had failed to tell her about. If so, she was going to have some words with them, but it was more likely that she was here thanks to Earth’s resident Sovereign One. She suspected he wasn’t doing it out of sympathy for her injuries she knew were very much real.

Saudia pulled her arms closer together, uncomfortably aware that this could very well be one of the few times left where she would have ‘real’ arms and legs for a while. ADVENT bioscience was proceeding well, but they weren’t quite there yet in terms of growing replacement limbs. While she knew the prosthetics she’d receive would be top of the line, she also knew enough to know that it wouldn’t be the same.

The world around her suddenly dimmed to the point of complete and utter blackness. She stopped, and waited. There was absolutely no sound to the point where it became deafening. She thought she saw a shape materialize in front of her, and it was massive. Six blue lights appeared above her, in groups of three, slanted downwards as they resided in stone-like orifices.

“Chancellor Saudia Vyandar.” The voice came from no mouth, but from everywhere – including her own mind. Immediately she felt the sheer weight of the voice; one which carried the authority of a being which had lived longer than her species had existed. “It’s time we spoke.”

She cleared her throat. “T’Leth. A pleasure to meet you, despite the circumstances.” A pause. “Or would you prefer a title, if you have one?”

“My name will suffice,” T’Leth answered. “Many titles I have; bestowed on me by my enemies and brethren. Unnecessary. I require no title to be recognized by, Chancellor.”
She was unsure if that was supposed to be an insult or not.

“No insult, Chancellor,” T’Leth rumbled. “Merely a statement of fact. None outside EXALT knew your name before you achieved the position, and now it is what and who you are. No one knew the name Saudia Vyandar before Chancellor.”

She curled up one lip. “A natural evolution. Or would you disagree?”

A slight pause. “No. Quite expected, as you had prepared for such a position your whole life. You are notable, for a mortal alien. One who can attempt to see the long term and act as a guide to lead her species through it. Very rarely does such occur without guidance from one of my brethren or the other hidden powers of this galaxy.”

“Flattering,” Saudia answered after a moment. “Although I don’t know how much credit should be taken given the fact that one of your people was in EXALT for decades. I feel like I may be the culmination of such tampering.”

“I reside on your planet; I rest and recover from my wounds of previous cycles,” T’Leth said lowly, with an undercurrent of threat. “Your Chronicler found me by accident, and I was not aware of him until months later, so deep was my recovery.” The eyes grew more intense. “I have little time or patience for steering species towards my whim. My brethren would do such, but I see little worth investing in a tool that will be annihilated when the galaxy becomes a battleground for the Sovereign Ones again.”

A slight delay punctuated his words. “Believe what you will, Chancellor. But understand that had I truly been interested in commanding your species, there would be no war. There would be none of the issues that plague your species, many of which are pointless, futile, and self-destructive. As you no doubt see, as ADVENT is your tool for fixing what you recognize are the fatal flaws in Humanity. More importantly, there would be no doubt as to whom you answer to. Do I make my point, Chancellor?”

Saudia nodded. “Clearly, T’Leth. Although I am curious about something, ever since the Commander shared this revelation with me.”

“Speak it then.”

She considered how best to phrase it. “I am not ignorant as to the power discrepancy between myself and you, let alone our species. So why do you bother communicating with myself, the Commander, or any individual Humans outside of your agents. It does seem as though it would be…beneath you.”

The eyes blinked once. “Consider it a mixture of curiosity and pragmatism. Many of my brethren act as you propose. A trait which is not exclusive to my kind, as the Ethereals have demonstrated. We were the first species to claim capture of thousands of galaxies. We were the first, the Apex race. There have been none who have matched us since and the belief is that there never will be. Why consider others your equal or give such consideration when entire species are inferior to even the weakest of my kind?”

T’Leth’s voice grew almost considerate. “And something I have always found curious is how many of my brethren rely on so-called inferior species. They raise themselves as gods or deities, or control them through well-placed agents. They know that without their proxies they have no valid chance of claiming this galaxy and others. But they also believe that such species are incapable of reaching the heights we have achieved. Arrogance and fear. That is what we are now, and few will accept it. They cling to their proxies and believe themselves invincible and powerful, even as they
will inevitably fall again and again.”

The eyes grew intense to the point where she had to look away. “The Sovereign Ones will die one day, forever. We are too divided, too scattered for there to be another solution. But there will be a new species who will emerge to take their place, and perhaps they will avoid the same fate which has befallen us. So I consider such investigation of species a curiosity, as they could potentially be our replacements. I’ve spoken to millions over the course of the same time span. Many of them like you are now. It was not enough to save them, but it was interesting nonetheless.”

“Were any of them allied with you?” She wondered. “As we are now.”

“Many of them were the proxies of other Sovereigns,” was the answer. “You would be…dismayed to understand just how little life in this galaxy is natural. Your own species is not unique, as you have been tampered with by other alien forces. Nearly all life is the result of an experimentation or plan by my brethren. You are merely unique in that your creators have not come back yet to claim the results of their labor.”

Saudia felt cold at that. Assuming T’Leth was telling the truth, that did not imply good things for the future. “I don’t suppose you know who was behind this, or who might come later?”

“I have my suspicions,” T’Leth rumbled. “But it is irrelevant now that I am here. More to the point, such an…alliance with aliens. It is amusing. Yet something I am curious to observe for myself. I find it ironic to consider that I may be one of the few of my kind to have the willing cooperation of an alien species.” A pause. “Outside of curiosity, more practically since I am in such an alliance, it is prudent to speak to the leader of it. Thus, here we are.”

“Unfortunate the timing is bad,” Saudia sighed. “Although I suppose I have your agents to thank for saving my life. And you, by proxy.”

“Yes. An error I failed to accurately anticipate.” It almost sounded like an apology, though the tone didn’t indicate as much. “I suspect that not all is as it seems with the Bringer and Isomnum. The Imperator…he would be allowing this for a specific reason, and I believe I know what it was. Previously I assumed he was directing it, but now I think he is…observing. This makes the Bringer’s actions more difficult to predict, otherwise you would have been evacuated immediately.”

Saudia cocked her head. “Observing what?”

“To see if the Bringer would overstep,” T’Leth answered. “I suspect the Imperator will punish it somehow, though far too late to mitigate the impact. Nonetheless, this is a threat which I shall see is personally eliminated. I have seen this scourge appear in the galaxy before, and the fact that it is one of the few issues which will unite my kind speaks for itself.”

“And how will you…” Saudia gestured with an arm. “See to it, ah, ‘personally’. I doubt you’re going to leave wherever you are in the ocean”

T’Leth waited before answering. “There are ways of exerting my will on reality that do not require my physical presence. The soldiers who march to reclaim the city Isomnum holds will bear witness to my power as I strike down the false god who reigns in the city of the mad. Isomnum will die today, and the Bringer will be purged from this Earth. On this you have my assurance.”

The voice seemed to deepen. “We will speak later, Chancellor. Awaken and lead your people to victory.”
Saudia soon woke up as the world of blue dissipated all around her.

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Throne Room of the Imperator – Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

3/12/2017 – 12:17 A.M.

There were many different holoprojections throughout the Throne Room, each one a different news station or livestream – all of them covering the events taking place in China, the rest of the war temporarily forgotten as all eyes were turned to the terror happening by the hand of the infamous Dread Lord.

Patricia could not say she was pleased with the development. Quisilia also seemed slightly irritated, though she suspected it was more to do with the fact that Caelior was now back and working for XCOM than the events in China. For her part, she wasn’t shocked at the development. If he wasn’t working with XCOM willingly, the Manchurian Restraints would be sufficient to keep him from causing too much trouble.

“This has gotten out of hand,” Quisilia said, for once serious as he appraised a holomap of China. “I believe we have learned what you wanted to. Best we end this before Isomnum gets it in his head to try this in another city. With the Bringer’s teleporting soldiers, he will not be restricted by geography.”

“Isomnum will die today,” the Imperator said flatly. “ADVENT and XCOM are already moving soldiers to retake the city. Should they fail, Sicarius will eliminate him. Or perhaps yourself. I have no intention of Isomnum continuing to sabotage our efforts. I have learned what I needed to.”

Patricia shot a glance to the Imperator. Despite linking several times, she was nowhere near aware enough to know each and every plan he had – especially as it pertained to this. “And out of curiosity, what was your plan?”

“Isomnum was a tool,” the Imperator said. “One I brought along as he might fulfill a certain role, given his power and experience. Dangerous, but potentially useful. Yet he is irrelevant when we will claim the legions of Imperators held in stasis. He is a fool obsessed with his own understanding and belief on terror. He is…susceptible…to beings like the Bringer. I knew he would reach out – this does not surprise me.”

It took her a moment to follow, but when it dawned on her, she gave a very slow and deliberate nod. “The Bringer provided support of his own volition. Without express permission.”

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Quisilia hesitated, absentmindedly flipping one of his blades in his hands. “At a certain point I wonder how much it is actually worth. The Bringer has given us very little but trouble and sought to go behind us at every turn. Useful as this entity is, perhaps the Battlemaster has a point and the project should be shut down.”

Both Patricia and the Imperator shook their heads. “No,” the Imperator answered. “If this event has shown anything, it is that the power the Bringer brings is extraordinary. A few hundred soldiers
were enough to take the capital of an ADVENT-protected city, nearly kill the Chancellor, and scatter the defenders of a nation. Properly controlled, it will be a useful entity."

A pause. “Yet I am also tired of dealing with this. Two chances the Bringer has been given to willingly cooperate. The first warning was not sufficient. This next one will be. There will not be a final one.”

“Acceptable then,” Quisilia agreed. “I would recommend that we allow the Aui’Vitakar, Greater Hive Commanders, and the Federation access to monitor Paradise station as they see fit. While more invasive Mosrimor systems are in existence, more cannot hurt and will give them the feeling of acting in the interests of security. So long as they understand the necessity of it, they will likely not pose any problem.”

“I suspect the Sectoids will be interested in the capabilities of the soldiers,” Patricia noted thoughtfully. “I’d do one better – let them have access to any and all aspects of Paradise to experiment with as they see fit. It could even have the benefit of lessening their numbers to the point of irrelevance.”

“Agreed,” the Imperator said after some consideration. “The Bringer has lost his chance for privacy. I believe that these actions will temper the worst of the Battlemaster’s rage.”

“Unlikely,” Quisilia commented mildly. “Nothing short of the destruction of Paradise will satisfy him. I would suggest that you make some greater efforts to make him understand the necessity of the plan. This current divide stems from Sovereign Ones; the Bringer is just a catalyst.”

“Perhaps inform him of the Imperators?” Patricia suggested.

Quisilia laughed. “Trask, please think about how well that would go over. ‘Yes Battlemaster, I’ve known that there are facilities full of Imperators and I didn’t tell you this and instead focused on the Sovereign Ones which included making a deal with an entity with a taste for cannibalism. No, we still need Paradise, but just wanted to clear the air.’”

Patricia winced. “Fair point.”

“He will react better when T’Leth is dead, Earth is conquered, and the Bringer has crossed into the controlled body,” the Imperator said. “While he will not doubt be furious – as will the others who have not been told – he will not make drastic actions.”

Patricia bit her lower lip, thinking. “Which brings me to another question – how should Caelior be handled? Or Aegis, for that matter?”

“Aegis was misguided and left for what he believed were the right reasons,” the Imperator answered. “I would prefer he be captured, should he not have already been compromised by T’Leth. The same with Caelior. They can both still be useful. But not at the expense of the greater Collective. Now that T’Leth is likely becoming more involved, I suspect this war will end with their deaths.”

“Unfortunate.” Patricia was not looking forward to what was coming next. She did not quite know how XCOM – or ADVENT for that matter – were going to react to her entrance. It was one thing to fight the unquestionable evil of the Bringer. But one of the former great heroes of Humanity? That was going to be more difficult to swallow.

Betos was a slightly different situation. She was an unknown, and who would be seen as an Ethereal puppet. Patricia was formerly of XCOM and the most dangerous Human psion.
Considering the position she held now, it would be difficult to state that she was merely a puppet of the Imperator, though ADVENT would still attempt to make that claim.

It was fortunate that the core of ADVENT was what the Imperator wanted intact, otherwise she could very likely say enough about the foundation of the organization to irreparably harm it – in theory. She doubted that when she revealed herself, her word would be given any semblance of weight. Still, it was a possible sword to hang over the heads of ADVENT.

It was still going to be hard.

Very hard.

But it was coming soon. Coming after Isomnum was finally defeated.

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Porto Alegre Collective Base – Brazil

3/12/2017 – 3:21 A.M.

The offensive was technically proceeding well. ADVENT hadn’t given up the city without a fight, but they had eventually fallen to her and they had soon secured the rest. The civilians were currently in the stages of being processed for transport to temporary worlds where they would be kept out of the fighting. After more land was gained in South America, they would be brought back.

ADVENT would no doubt complain about forced resettlement and the injustice of it all, but to her it was more responsible than keeping a bunch of civilians around to die in collateral damage – and she also had no intention of using them as Human shields or anything of the like. She and the Battlemaster had standards – and the capture of Porto Alegre was a textbook success.

So when news was reaching her about China…well…

It put a damper on things.

She’d watched the footage for a while, a stream provided to the Collective itself by the illustrious Dread Lord. She sincerely had wished that Isomnum would have eventually just given up and died when the Battlemaster had rightfully cut his support. Maybe a last stand before a real invasion could happen.

But no, instead he had brought the Bringer and turned her country into a nightmare.

She’d hated President Qin, the entire Communist Party, and the corrupt institutions which perpetuated the problems and demands forced on China. She would have quite happily executed them all, even if they didn’t remember who she was. They deserved nothing less, and it had been her own private dream.

But this…no.

Not like this.

Qin and his like deserved death, yes, but delivered in a swift and just manner. No ceremony, no drawn-out proceedings; merely a summary judgement as an enemy leader. He was a man she despised, but not even he deserved the mockery that the Bringer was forcing, not just on those who deserved death, but many, many who did not.
She’d known there would be civilian casualties in China. It was a fact of war, and with a population as dense as China’s, it was impossible to avoid. Not deliberate targeting though, which was what Isomnum not only allowed, but actively reveled in. Zararch spies had been giving detailed reports, and while Beijing was the obvious focus of attention, it was playing out the same on smaller scales across the country with ADVENT and XCOM scrambling to smash them as they popped up.

Sickening. The people were not at fault, and never had been in the system. They were the last who deserved to be punished. Even many in the military were good people who were doing what they could to increase their standing and provide for their families. She blamed no one for joining the Chinese military for practical reasons, or even if they succumbed to the propaganda perpetuated from the moment they were born.

How ironic, that she now hoped for ADVENT and XCOM to give unto the Dread Lord a death that would make the Imperator himself shiver.

All she could do was watch and take out her fury in battle. Not that there was a shortage of those with ADVENT maintaining outposts and launching small strikes of their own, but they – for now – were not the ones she wished to destroy utterly and completely. If she could, she would participate in the attack against Isomnum herself, but that would likely just cause more problems, and the war was larger than China.

At least the Battlemaster had done something, even if it was sending his pet assassin into the fray. Better than nothing, and if nothing else the Imperator had much to answer for. He was just as much at fault for this fiasco as Isomnum. First for putting Isomnum in such a position, and then continuing to allow it to continue with support from Paradise – which Yang knew very well that he could stop if he wanted.

The fool likely wanted to see the Bringer’s power in action; likely to justify keeping Paradise station open. Perhaps he didn’t care, but she didn’t think for one second that he could not stop this if he wanted. No, he was allowing it to continue, though for what purpose she didn’t know, and it wouldn’t be enough regardless of justification.

It was irritating from a diplomatic and political standpoint, and she could not understand the reason for letting it continue for so long. ADVENT was going to use this to further demonize the Collective, or maybe if they were smart, would pin it on the Imperator instead. However, she didn’t put much stock in ADVENT propaganda correctly identifying the right perpetrator.

She’d had enough, and shut off the feed. It was all the same anyway, and watching it wouldn’t do anything except make her angry. Instead she went to her bed and laid down, and after an hour the strongest emotions plaguing her dissipated and she fell into a fitful sleep, as tomorrow would bring about yet more conflict.

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**Russian Castle of the Order of Terra, Russian Wilderness – Russia**

3/12/2017 – 6:11 A.M.

The Order of Terra was ready for war, and ready for blood. Kaya hadn’t imagined that their first deployment would be against what could be best described as a nightmare incarnate, but here they were. Ironically, it appeared that many of the forces they would be fighting carried melee weapons and thus were suitable opponents.

They were all nervous to some degree, especially considering the danger they would be facing.
which felt…different…compared to their previous stints in combat. For Kaya there had always been some small comfort in battle taking place over a distance, even if that was more impossible to predict. But the danger had the illusion of being easier to avoid.

Not so when the battle was up close and personal – as it would be in Beijing. Granted, her job was going to be a lot of hit and run strikes against targets of interest, but she didn’t carry a katana for show. And she wagered that she was going to be using it more than she wanted to. Still, if there was a time to deploy the Order, it would be now in an urban environment where they would function best.

They all stood armored up and prepared to deploy. All the squads tended to be composed the same way. Four Squire units, who were armored to a degree that they were essentially walking tanks, carrying tower shields which were a full inch thick and stood as tall as they were, even as they were designed to holster a rifle to fire at the enemy as they advanced.

Two Knights were usually in tow, which had less armor even if it was still substantial, but allowed for greater movement. Several of them also had Molosser hounds which were at their sides and outfitted in some light armor. Kaya liked the genetically created dogs. They were surprisingly affectionate with their owners and even most others. It was easy to forget that they would rip out the throats of aliens without a second thought if the command was given. The Knights definitely looked the part too, with kite shields and helmets straight out of the medieval period. Well, minus the rifle strapped to their backs which they would use until they engaged in melee.

Her own armor was lighter, as a Samurai unit that some of the squads had, though not all. Unlike the Knight, it didn’t copy the archetype as faithfully. While the way the armor was designed was reminiscent of known Samurai armor, it wasn’t as heavy or restrictive. It was far more form-fitting and sleek, as it held grappling equipment, a back sheath for her katana, and her HUD in the helmet could manually mark targets of interest. And of course, she held the newest long-range ADVENT sniper rifle outfitted with nanite rounds and even with gauss rounds was capable of penetrating nearly any level of armor.

They called it the “Widow”, and she didn’t know if it was named after the spider or the possible widows who would be created after they perished to this weapon.

Did aliens even have spouses?

Not a relevant question.

The leader of the squad, or at least the main coordinator (which ultimately led to the same thing) was the Standardbearer who held possibly the most stressful job of the entire Order. They were outfitted in gold and white armor of the same density as the Squire, and were only armed with a pistol or SMG, as they could usually only use one hand in battle as the other held the standard of that squad.

From what had been explained to Kaya, the Standardbearers were to fulfill two purposes – coordination for the squad and to serve as a rallying point in the chaos of battle. The standard itself wasn’t a gimmick either, at least not in the way most people would think. The pole was tipped at the bottom with a sharp point, turning it into a weapon of sorts if necessary, or to plant more easily.

The more important piece was that each standard incorporated Shieldbearer technology and functioned as a smaller-scale PDS field capable of redirecting or stopping plasma. Useful for advancing on an enemy position, and the Standardbearers were equipped with enough batteries to last hours as the standard itself literally cycled through them as it ran out.
The banner for their own squad which fell from the standard was the generic one for the Russian Castle itself; a roaring bear. They hadn’t been able to agree on one, and had mostly forgotten about it in favor of other matters since they had assumed they were at least a month or so from deployment. Assuming they survived, they might be more inspired.

All of them stood in formation, with dozens of other squads in the square of the training grounds silently waiting in the chill morning air. Helmeted, Kaya couldn’t see the expressions of her squadmates but she could guess them easily enough. Determination, fury, fear; in certain ways she was grateful that the emotions of those who fought for ADVENT were hidden in favor of the uniform. It certainly projected a powerful image.

Before all of them standing before a holoprojector was Lord Damian Hamilton, clad in his own battle armor reminiscent of the Knights, though a red cape fell from his shoulders. He was not the only one of similar rank, as there were a dozen other Lords who would likely be taking command of the various points of attack. Some held maces and warhammers, others held swords and shields. Hamilton himself carried a greatsword with a rifle also hanging at his waist. He did not have one of the hounds by him, as opposed to some of the other Lords.

His helmet was off as he addressed those assembled.

“We all know what we’re walking into so I won’t address it further,” he began, the holoprojector igniting into red light and showing an outline of the city. “We have our orders to lead the charge and take Beijing back, destroy Isomnum and his forces, and pacify or eliminate any stragglers. We will be followed by MDU, PRIEST, and XCOM support, all of whom have assured us that we will be psionically protected. Once we’re in, we fight.”

Several points lit up. “There will be four points of direct entry into the city, and from which we will spread out and begin clearing the city, street by street until Tiananmen Square – which has been identified as the base of operations for the aliens – is surrounded and no escape is possible. The American, German, and Korean Castles will be involved in this attack, each focused on a different point of entry. Ours is this one.” The southmost light turned green.

“Standardbearers will be given specific directions about where to go when we arrive,” Hamilton continued. “There will be some backtracking due to the nature of the streets, but it is imperative that you do not break formation under any circumstance. When a street is cleared do not continue to advance without the express permission of your Standardbearer. There can be no gaps in our advance.”

Made sense. It was definitely something drilled into them enough. Hamilton paused. “This is probably not what any of us had in mind for our debut to the world, but perhaps there is no better test for us. We say we are willing to march into hell itself in the name of ADVENT and destroy the monsters that lurk within. Today we will prove that to the world – and teach the aliens to fear our wrath and vengeance.”

A roar of approval sounded from the assembled soldiers. The flicker of a smile appeared on Hamilton’s face. “The aliens claim to bring a god down to rule over us. Today we will slay it, along with the Dread Lord it champions!” Another cheer. “March forward, and make the streets they inhabit run with their blood!”

A bit melodramatic for her tastes, but Kaya cheered all the same. The energy had turned from apprehensive to electric. They were ready, and there was no one more ready to exact vengeance upon the monsters in China than they were.

She did a final check of everything before they prepared to deploy through the gateway. Everything
was in order.

*Time to kill some aliens.*

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*ADVENT Military Commander – Switzerland*

*3/12/2017 – 6:11 A.M.*

The Commander, Zhang, the Chronicler, Falka, Laura, Weekes, and essentially every other major figure of ADVENT and XCOM stood together as they reviewed the coming assault on Beijing. The good news was that it was going to be fairly easy to move forces into position as Isomnum hadn’t taken the city organically and as such had no territory or means of cutting off reinforcements.

Being so close to Russia, Mongolia, and Korea was also useful.

“The Order of Terra will work to sweep the entire city,” Laura was saying. “As they accomplish this the main military force will make tentative advancements, led by an MDU-heavy force. Support from the legions will also be present, as will large numbers from the PRIEST Division.”

“What I’m concerned about is that there isn’t anything stopping Isomnum from leaving as fast as he came,” Weekes grunted. “I’m certain we will take Beijing back, but it will mean little if this monster isn’t destroyed once and for all; otherwise he’ll just do this again and again.”

“Do not worry, Chief Weekes,” the Chronicler interjected smoothly, already encased in his stone armor, minus the helmet. “I will ensure that Isomnum and his thralls cannot escape so easily. Besides, Isomnum is too drunk on his power to abandon his prize so easily. It would certainly break his terror effect if he flees at the first sign of staunch resistance.”

Weekes eyed the elder warily. “If you don’t mind my asking, how?”

The Chronicler smiled. “What Isomnum – and the forces of the Bringer – use to teleport is the Psionosphere. I cannot say what level of familiarity you have with the topic, so I will explain as simply as possible. A skilled user can move themselves through two points of the Psionosphere, provided they understand the technique properly.”

Weekes nodded. “I know the basic Psionosphere theory. I read Vahlen’s paper.”

“Teleportation is exceptionally difficult – and able to be defended against,” the Chronicler explained, lifting a hand to gesture in the air. “Simply put, the range of teleportation can be restricted to a certain area. No – teleportation beyond a certain point. A veil, if you would, capable of being created and maintained by psions. This will keep the aliens in the city.”

“With respect,” Finn Gerstner, the PRIEST Vicar General interrupted. “As someone who understands this a bit better than most, the amount of energy needed to create and maintain such a barrier requires nothing short of an Ethereal, and neither Aegis or Caelior seem to specialize in it—”

“It is taken care of,” the Chronicler interrupted in a tone that indicated that the topic was concluded. “Trust me.”

Knowing what was coming, the Commander nodded in solidarity. “Leave that to us, General. We have this under control.”
“And what stops them from teleporting to the edge of this veil, stepping through it, and leaving it that way?” Laura asked with a raised eyebrow. “Good in theory, but able to be circumvented.”

“Aegis will be encasing the city in a psionic bubble,” the Commander said. “There will be no escape – with areas open for ADVENT forces to enter, of course.”

That seemed to satisfy them, and while Aegis was tired, he could continue on a much more contained scale. “The majority of our forces will ultimately converge on Tiananmen Square,” Laura continued, highlighting the area. “This is where Isomnum has made his primary base of operations – or what goes for one at any rate. In addition to soldiers, tanks are also being deployed to collapse necessary infrastructure and overpower the primarily infantry forces.”

“The actual soldiers of the Bringer seem to be few in number,” Elizabeth recalled. “We’re going to be facing mass hordes of insane civilians and soldiers. Even Isomnum’s own alien forces are minimal, as we’ve eliminated most of his Custodians.”

“And tanks can run over the majority with little issue,” Weekes nodded. “The Order and our military forces should focus on removing the weaker threat. They aren’t capable of handling the soldiers of the Bringer, let alone Isomnum. Targets of interest should only be handled by PRIESTs, XCOM, and special forces.”

“I’m not sure how ordinary special forces will fare against psionic soldiers like this,” Kyong said, the first time he’d spoken in the meeting. “Enhanced they may be, but unless they can mitigate-“

“Agreed,” Weekes nodded. “We’re not going to throw away our Lancers and Dragoons like this. They’re needed more in Florida right now. We’re going to deploy the Pantheon.”

Kyong cocked his head. “Who?”

Ah, about time they were going to use them. The Commander had been aware of the initiative for some time, and was pleased that it had progressed to a usable stage. “The Pantheon,” Weekes explained. “Conceived shortly after the approval of the Order of Terra. A special forces team primarily psionic-based. Very small, very elite, very dangerous. No psionic soldier has a Trask Level under eighty.”

“And they’re called the Pantheon because…?”

“Because their call signs are based on Greek mythology,” Saudia said faintly from her chair, her voice still rough. “Something you can thank the Commander for. The other proposals were far less creative.”

The Chancellor looked exhausted and just barely patched up from the wounds she’d suffered, but she was very much alive and wanting to be involved even if she couldn’t quite think straight. Grey cybernetics were in place of the limbs she’d lost, and he’d noticed that she’d not been moving them much, likely still getting used to them or they still needed to be calibrated. No artificial skin was placed over them, although this was because she’d refused it and not because it couldn’t be applied. Something the Commander could understand.

Covering up a disfigurement implied some kind of shame, but revealing it to the world could certainly send a message. And considering Saudia was going to make a statement as the assault began launching, it would be a powerful message indeed to see the woman who had been attacked and mutilated return hours later not deterred in the slightest from achieving victory.

“I’m pleased they found my suggestions agreeable,” the Commander said. “I’m certain they will
perform well. With our combined forces, we should be capable of crushing this threat once and for all.”

“Indeed,” Laura agreed. “We nonetheless have a difficult road ahead. Although we should make this decision now – if we are able to subdue Isomnum, how should we handle him?”

There was some silence at that, as they considered. It could theoretically be possible to capture Isomnum, and then extract his secrets, put him to trial, or otherwise attempt to gain some use out of him. But at the same time, the benefits were questionable and uncertain. Not to mention holding an Ethereal like that was…dangerous.

Saudia did not hesitate. “Execute him,” she said lowly, fury breaking through a normally professional persona. “Preferably painfully. We gain little from his life. We take his ruined and mutilated corpse and display it for the world to see so that no one need fear him any longer. He will serve as a lesson to any who dare attack us so brazenly.”

A pause. “I believe our Chancellor has spoken,” Weekes said approvingly. “Are there any objections?”

The Commander held back a humorless smile. There would not be anyone who would advocate for sparing Isomnum, not under any circumstances. Technically, the military could override her here, but he sincerely doubted that was even up for discussion beyond a hypothetical. “If we are in such a position,” he said. “I believe one or more of my soldiers would be…pleased to deliver the final blow. Or one of them.”

“You have the Phobos soldier, yes?” Laura recalled. “McTaggart? No promises, but if he so happens to be in the right position, no one will get in his way.”

“Good enough,” the Commander nodded. “And I also would not be surprised if the Hunter showed his face in the battle. Supposedly he will be on our side.”

“Uh huh,” Laura muttered unconvincingly. “And after?”

“We have his word he will depart peacefully,” the Commander said. “Obviously to be taken skeptically. We will handle him if he becomes trouble.”

“We’ll have to address that if it comes up,” Laura said, looking back to the holotable. “ Forces are ready. All we need to do is give the order. We should do it quickly before Isomnum grows a brain and leaves.”

Saudia gave a nod. “Do it, Commander.”

It was a simple order, a single phrase, but one the Commander knew marked a decisive point in the war. Laura opened a comm to the officers on the ground. “Operation Ragnarök is a go. Bring down the hammer.”

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Haikou, Hainan – China

3/9/2017 – 7:19 A.M.

The quintet was nearly ready to depart, and over a salvaged breakfast Nuan and Iosif laid out the plan to their civilian counterparts – and alien prisoner (who was still largely bound, even though his hands had been freed so he could eat). Earlier the morning the duo went into the kitchens and
brought back plenty of food – cereals, milk, and fruit along with plenty of packaged snacks (many of which were being put into a bag to carry along their journey later).

Nuan was very glad that they had found a mother and child who wasn’t especially young. Ren was young, but a teen and could follow directions and had learned very recently the art of keeping quiet. She’d been rather quiet in the presence of the two soldiers, though Nuan couldn’t completely blame her for that. They probably seemed more threatening than a half-dead alien.

The alien as it turned out was Zararch as they had suspected. Zar’ravas’inth’a, a spy placed in China to watch the population and prepare for an inevitable invasion. In his own words, he’d been fairly low level and was more keeping track of identifying weak points and the most effective routes to take the city.

This was, as he’d said, what he’d expected to be used by a more conventional military. Of which Isomnum was very much not. He couldn’t say if any of his intel had been used since he’d been caught in the initial attack as well and nearly lost his mind. He didn’t elaborate on the details of what he’d seen, but it had been enough for him to reconsider his allegiance to the Collective – or at least the Ethereals.

He…hadn’t gone so far as to disparage the Collective itself, but he made it very clear that he wanted no part in assisting the Ethereals who quite willingly ignored their own assets in their assaults and perpetuated complete indiscriminate warfare, which Ravas found insulting on a personal level.

Iosif was mildly unimpressed with his reasoning, and had included a chocolate-chip muffin in the food he’d given to the alien. Nuan had smirked at that, especially as the alien had just stared at it and eventually sort of just picked around it, after he’d eaten the rest of his breakfast, only to look in disbelief as Iosif dumped a small bag of chocolate bars before him.

“Yes, this is hilarious,” Iosif said, deadpan. “But believe it or not, I got them for a reason. You’re still wounded and likely will be in pain, and I’m not interested in hauling you the entire way there. So if the pain gets too bad, eat one of these until you get high. That will probably help. I will do my best to keep your mind straight.”

The alien pursed his lips. “I do not want to become a drug addict.”

“Chocolate isn’t addictive,” Iosif sighed. “As much as Zararch propaganda may have said otherwise, it just makes you feel good. Or loopy. Or both. It’s like marijuana for Humans. Not addictive, but has similar – and sometimes beneficial qualities.”

“And can also induce vomiting,” Ravas reminded him.

“In large quantities,” Iosif corrected. “So don’t eat them all at once.”

The alien accepted without another word, although took the bag with some distaste. The rest of them ate in relative silence, until the end when Iosif figured it was time to explain what was going to happen next, with Nuan translating for the Chinese speakers.

“We are assuming that we’re on our own, and that extraction will be of our own making,” Iosif explained to them on. “Luckily we have some options, namely boats. The aliens don’t seem interested in destroying the infrastructure and are more likely to just leave it alone than requisition, use, or destroy it. Nuan knows the city, and knows where the ports are.”

He tapped a gloved finger on the table. “In short, we’re going to find a boat and steal it.”
“[What if they don’t have keys,]” Jun Ye, the businessman asked nervously. “[We could trap ourselves.]” Nuan relayed the question to Iosif.

“Possible, but a decent amount of boat owners leave their keys and rely on other things like locks, ropes, security, and fuel to keep away thieves,” Iosif said. “All of those can be bypassed, and worst case scenario, I will likely be able to hotwire it.”

Nuan cocked her head. “You know how to do that?”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t always an upstanding Russian citizen,” he commented with a smile. “Had a rather eventful childhood involving my father’s car, curfews, and other idiotic restrictions. Long story, suffice to say I can probably do it.”

A story she’d have to ask about later. “Back on topic,” Iosif continued, eating one of the granola bars he’d snagged. “The ports will have things like fuel, supplies, fishing equipment and so on. I’m not a fisherman, but in a pinch, we may have to try our luck. We’ll pack up as much as we can in any event. As well as enough fuel.”

“[Do…do you know how to drive a boat?]” Ren asked apprehensively, looking to both of them.

“Not really,” Iosif admitted after the question was relayed. “But I’ve ridden on them before and they appear to be largely simplified now. To the point where I’m confident we can drive without issue. Don’t worry about it. Even better is that most of the boats nowadays have GPS.”

“[So where are we going?]” Jun asked after a moment.

“The closest land which ADVENT controls is Vietnam,” Iosif said. “Going to China is a bad idea, but Vietnam is untouched for now. It’ll be a long ride, but as long as we have enough fuel, it should be possible. We’ll also try and get one with sailboat capabilities in the worst-case scenario.”

“Hopefully it’ll be that simple,” Nuan said slowly. “Go to the port, get a boat, and leave.”

“Hopefully, but possibly not,” Iosif warned. “While I think Isomnum has moved a majority of forces into mainland China – at least that’s what I would do – there are likely stragglers we’ll run into and have to fight and kill. Most we can handle, but we need to stop them before they sound an alarm.”

“[I’ll do what I can,]” Jun said, clearly trying to sound brave, patting the pistol holstered at his waist.

Nuan snorted. “[You’re not going to tickle an alien with that piece of junk. Use this instead,]” she reached down and slid him her gauss pistol. “[Has a kickback, but it’ll do damage. Make each shot count – I assume you’re halfway decent?]” Jun took it delicately, eyes wide as he looked at the weapon.

“[Yes, yes, I don’t keep this for show,]” he said half-distractedly as he overlooked the weapon. “[Although I can’t say to have killed anyone. But the Triad is active in too many places to be too careful. Safety here?]”

“[Yes,]” Nuan confirmed, curiosity piqued. “[You had to worry about the Triad?]”

“[Depending on where you went,]” he said, swapping out his pistol for her borrowed one. “[Everyone had to worry about them. Although one good thing about this was is that their activities died down. Things went to hell for them after one of their leaders died. Or maybe defected. Wasn’t sure, but a bunch of their operations were hit soon after. Haven’t recovered since. Still there, and
I’m still paranoid.]”

Nuan debated giving him the reason for the mysterious collapse of the Triad, but that could be a story for the boat. “[As long as you can shoot, you should be fine.]”

“If I may,” Ravas coughed. “I’m also a good shot. And have experience with any Collective weapons we may find. You will need all the help you can get.”

Iosif pretended to consider this with a raised eyebrow. “Tempting, but I’ll decline your generous offer. You’re Zararch and I don’t trust you, and I won’t until we have a trained telepath interrogate you. Unless you want to find yourself decapitated, you’ll stay in front, stay quiet, follow instructions, and make no sudden moves. You are not a priority here. Understand?”

The alien gave a single nod.

“Getting to the port will be done quietly and methodically,” Iosif said. “Building to building, street to street. We can cut our way through walls and buildings and I have limited telepathic detection. Rooftops may be best, as I can create bridges if necessary. Normally it would take us four hours to get there on foot, but for us I imagine it will take the whole day, so we can escape under the cover of night. If we get there before nightfall, we will wait.”

He looked around. “Does everyone understand the plan?”

They all nodded in affirmation. “Alright then,” Iosif dusted off his hands. “Grab what you can, and let’s move out.”

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ADVENT Media Hub – Switzerland

3/12/2017 – 6:03 A.M.

She’d been better, but she was well enough to give her speech to a world that needed to hear from her right now. Saudia stood flanked by Ethan with three replacement guards and six Magus-class psions of various disciplines. They had enough forces to fend off a small army should the Collective try something again, but still she felt vulnerable with nothing solid protecting her.

She wore her standard black outfit with the red sash, but it definitely didn’t seem safe now. Too thin. She’d considered wearing armor, but had been talked out of it since she’d only be ‘exposed’ for a limited amount of time. In the future she may be more insistent, but she’d not had the will to debate with anyone on it; not when there were more important topics on her mind.

The press corps were unusually silent when she’d walked in, and all stood in what she could only assume was solidarity. A good number had even refrained from taking the same number of pictures as before. She was almost touched by their concern. They and those they represented didn’t especially care for her, and the feeling was largely mutual. But they didn’t wish to see her dead, which was heartening in a way.

She wiggled her fingers, still not completely used to the sensation. It was eerie in a way, she could still feel things with a surprising degree of sensitivity, but at the same time it felt odd; filtered; almost too sharp at times. Expected, the doctors had told her. It would take some time to get the calibrations perfect.

The cybernetics were grey and expertly crafted. Exceptionally natural-looking, minus the lack of skin color and the obvious mechanical joints. It was genuinely impressive how efficient it was,
although she’d personally not wanted to find out for herself how true that was. Her mechanical hands were visible from her outfit, and while she didn’t necessarily want or need to draw attention to them, it was impossible to miss and a number of the journalists blinked in surprise, audibly gasped, or whispered to colleague when they saw a portion of her injuries.

Pulling up her pad with her speech written up on it, she placed it on the podium where the two microphones were ready to broadcast her words. Times like this she felt like a speechwriter would have been helpful, but at the same time after a few minutes of considering, the words had come together easier than she’d feared.

Today would not be the day where she would speak words written by someone else.

“Thank you all for gathering on such short notice,” she began. “As all of you are aware of the situation, I will not repeat it, suffice to say that I am fully updated since coming out of surgery. Mere hours ago I, along with the personnel at ADVENT-Chinese Joint Command came under attack by Isomnum. Most did not survive, and I owe my own life to my personal guard and the soldiers of XCOM. My own injuries are unimportant and will not impede me from continuing to do my duty.”

With that out of the way, she transitioned to her first point. “These actions in the past hours have served to demonstrate the full depravity the aliens will inflict upon us for daring to continue to resist them, and now that they have seen that we do not bow to threats, they seek to fill our hearts and minds with terror, for there is no better source than the horror which has emerged from China.”

A pause, waiting to let them think. “I’ve thought about what message the Collective – or Isomnum – is sending here. Is it a promise of our fate should we continue to resist? Or a promise of the world under their control? What is the purpose of such terror, or is it merely the madness of the Ethereal leading it? Terror for the sake of terror.”

She shook her head. “No. I do not believe so. Isomnum may believe so, but he is a tool being utilized by others, knowingly or not. This terror he inflicts upon us is not without purpose – or for the reasons he perhaps believes. This entire event is a warning, but not from Isomnum – from someone else.”

She let her fingers curl around the edges of the podium, moving her gaze around to the various journalists who stood in rapt attention. “The Imperator knows that such actions will not shake our resolve; not even the attack on my life would make me consider submission – so this is instead a warning. This is the future the war will take; monsters unleashed under the guise of ‘unsanctioned operations’ as Isomnum currently is acting now. But we know better; the Imperator is not original in his methods. As fundamentalist nations once funded terrorists to strike against their enemies as proxies, so too will the Imperator begin to see a surge of ‘unaffiliated extremists’ who take matters into their own hands as the war continues.”

“It is becoming clear,” she said after a moment. “That there is a growing rift in the Collective. On one side we see the Battlemaster; an Ethereal – our enemy – who will wage war traditionally and on respectable terms. Perhaps we will win, perhaps not, but there is little ambiguity and surprise in such a war.”

She rapped her metal fingers on the podium, looking around. “And on the other side there are those who are showing their fear. Who do not rely on their advanced armies, technology, or unfathomable number of resources, but instead emotion. Terror, fear; all to drive us to capitulation. The madness unleashed by Isomnum is the personification of this method. Yet they will also stoop to such levels as assassinating unaffiliated civilians who merely reside in our territory, as they did with the Imperial Family. They wish to instill a fear of being associated with us.”
“This is not all,” she continued. “They parade pawns and collaborators that attract all eyes to them, who boldly proclaim the evidence of our eyes and ears is merely propaganda orchestrated by an oppressive authoritarian regime seeking world domination…” her voice lowered. “But perhaps this will silence the puppets who act as mouthpieces for the Ethereal’s poisoned words. All have seen what crimes the Collective and Imperator has perpetrated, and those who are so foolish as to believe these are not allowed at the express permission of the Imperator should look themselves in the mirror and ask if they believe it.”

Saudia looked directly into the cameras, eyes hardened. “But these actions are horrifying in their own right, regardless of species. I know there are members of the Collective; the Zararch, Runianarch, Lurainian, the many Andromedon Unions, the Aui’Vitakar, perhaps civilians on many worlds. The extent of the Collective’s crimes had perhaps been hidden to you before now, but consider if this is truly a cause you wish to support.”

Ever so slightly the cameras and microphones inched forward, clearly wanting to catch every single word in perfect clarity, as this had become something more than a short update to the China situation. “Your leaders are lying to you. The Ethereals are lying to you. What they have allowed in China is being carried out on Paradise station tenfold. You are little more to them than an exploitable resource, and should you dare question them, they will ensure disaster and misery befalls you as they are attempting to do to us.”

She curled a lip up ever so slightly. “We did not want this war. I believe that many of you do not want this war. We recognize it would be prudent that it ends before it pointlessly continues, but your masters are content to continue to send your parents, children, and siblings to die in it and they will not stop. The Imperator will not allow the war to stop from mere pressure, and soon a choice will present itself before you.”

Gripping the podium, and making her voice clear, she continued. “There are many soldiers who have abandoned the Collective as they realize what it truly is. Each and every single one is braver than the cowards who allow what is happening in China to continue, who will not dare voice that the abuses and terror is happening. They do not because they are ashamed that they have been forced to stoop to such depths in an attempt to frighten us into submission.”

A shake of the head. “It would be almost pathetic; were it not paid in the blood and lives of thousands of innocents.”

She projected her voice slightly more. “This is no longer a war between powers, if it ever could be called such. There is no ambiguity on what the right side is. One side abducts civilians and presses them into experimentation labs, one side using psionics to drive civilians into states of madness and depravity; one side seeks to dominate another for no crime outside of simply existing.”

She let that linger. “I would ask that the Collective would think carefully about who and what they are fighting for. What crime has our species committed that we are warranted invasion? What is so offensive about us that motivates such actions against our civilians and soldiers? We never wanted to be your enemy, and we do not condemn your species for the crimes committed by the Imperator and his ilk.”

One finger was lifted. “But make no mistake – we will never surrender; we will never submit to the Ethereals, to the Collective, to the Imperator. We have been shown what fate awaits us, and that such measures are taken show the depths of the fear which grips the Imperator’s heart. Because he knows that he is losing his grip; on his soldiers, on his allies – even other Ethereals – and soon the war.”

“Understand this –” she lowered the hand slowly, as well as her voice. “We will show no mercy to
those who continue to abet the Imperator, as there is no more excuse for ignorance. The only fates
of those who stay will be as corpses or prisoners of war. We will take back our planet; our solar
system – and then we will go hunting.”

She indicated those behind her. “Today we will kill the god which has claimed domain over
Beijing and strike down the Dread Lord. As we speak our military forces in conjunction with
XCOM and Chinese Command are marching on the city and will purge it – and thus show the
world and beyond that such actions do not elicit cowardice or fear – but action.”

Saudia allowed a final, dangerous smile. “We will go to whatever lengths necessary to protect
Humanity, regardless of origin, race, or creed. Even if we need to march into hell and back to do
so. The war has turned today, but it will not be Isomnum who emerges victorious today. Because
today?”


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Tiananmen Square, Beijing – China

3/12/2017 – 5:50 A.M.

The revelry and celebration seemed to go on without end, but Isomnum was careful not to lose
himself in the hypnotic dream the Weavers were spinning for their thralls. He needed nothing of
the sort now, and while he could take satisfaction in what he had accomplished, there was little
question of the fact that the Humans would attempt to get revenge.

Thus, he stood on the stones of Tiananmen Square looking over the thousands of mad victims and
cultists alike. How useful they had been here. They would serve many more purposes in the future.
It certainly helped that there was little resistance as his remaining forces converted thousands of
civilians into something slightly more dangerous.

He disliked that the Bringer’s forces shaped it as something to practically beg for, as it devalued
the entire purpose of conversion, but it was a small price to pay here. He had considered leaving, as
he had largely achieved what he had set out to do, but running would indicate weakness and
ADVENT would spin any reclamation of their city as victory.

That could not be permitted.

He had observed the Human reaction; outrage and horror in equal measure. It should have elicited
demands for compliance; he should have seen masses of Humans expressing fear over what would
come next should ADVENT continue their pointless and doomed war. That is what should have
happened.

Yet the idiot Humans were clearly not intelligent enough to understand that fear should be their
instinctive reaction and then take steps to mitigate such fear. No, the Humans were simply angry.
Not fearful, furious. It showed the extent to their delusions that they believed their armies strong
enough to exact vengeance.

They should realize that they were in a position of weakness.

These actions indicated that the Humans believed they could withstand the power of the Collective
– including his own power.

His anger had grown when he’d realized this. It was clear that the Humans were either too
brainwashed or too stupid to acknowledge the blatant hint he had given them with his actions. They clearly needed to be broken further. They needed to be shown that they needed to be afraid; that their shining armies and alien traitors would not save them.

Yet for once he found himself slightly puzzled at what to do next.

If the sight of Humans cannibalizing, mutilating, and happily killing themselves didn’t make Humans fearful, then what would?

Perhaps it was a matter of volume, of scale. One city was little in the grand scheme of things, and as China was not officially part of ADVENT, perhaps it was easier to disparage and dismiss. The failure of the Bringer’s soldiers to capture Saudia certainly contributed to this – a failure that would not be repeated.

He suspected the Weavers could create a grander show the next time. More bloody, violent, and horrific than the last. He had listened to some of the Weavers paint vivid pictures of what they called the Children of Paradise – creatures born from the heart of the station that were abominations to any sane mind. Fusions of species, masses of flesh and limbs, true works of genetic artistry and unnatural design.

In the future, those could be brought if the Humans continued to fight their inevitable fate.

Alternatively, he could take matters into his own hands. He would, should the Weavers continue to fail to elicit the fear that should have gripped the Human populace. Instead he was met with scathing condemnations and graphic descriptions of how he and his soldiers should die; usually slowly and painfully.

It was irritating. Not due to the threats. He had little concern for a faceless persona on the Internet. It was the wrong reaction.

There was little satisfaction in eliciting terror if those who should feel it completely missed the message.

Humans. Idiot, stubborn, idealistic creatures.

The air suddenly shifted and he paused. It was not the familiar touch of the Weavers which assuaged his mind, but something else. The sky suddenly turned purple as he saw a barrier cutting through the smog and hanging over the city.

*Aegis.*

Unsurprising he was still here. The Ethereal was powerful and could last a significant amount of time. He had expected Aegis would assist the coming force, and he was prepared. Although this was certainly a curious usage. As if he wanted to trap him, clearly forgetting that thanks to the forces of the Bringer, such boundaries no longer concerned him.

Well. It would limit his usefulness in the coming battle. He was rather hoping Caelior would show himself. He would quite enjoy breaking the young traitor; Caelior had always been an upstart irritant, and now he had leave to treat him as one. Perhaps if the Bringer’s soldiers proved themselves here, he would give the Ethereal to them. The Imperator would not care about the traitor, otherwise he would not have sacrificed him to XCOM so easily.

Then something changed in the sky. The smog became tinged in purple until it resembled storm clouds hanging over the entire city. Isomnum felt the telltale sign of an illusion as it lightly pressed
against his mind, which he dismissed with barely a thought initially – only it came back, with twice as much intensity. Another dismissal only resulted in the same.

Confusion was the first feeling, as only an Ethereal would be able to maintain such an illusion and impress it upon him such as this. He could certainly block it, but it would require effort on his part – effort he saw little reason to expend for such a pointless reason. Yet looking into the sky, he did not expect there to be shapes forming in them.

No…

These did not glow purple, but blue. Six orbs which seemed to arrange themselves in smoky clouds. Eyes? The more vibrant they became, the more Isomnum became convinced, and he was reminded of the Sovereign One that was supposedly on Earth. Little was known about their biology, save that they were aquatic. But the Voice had once described what they looked like.

Six eyes were among the description.

Upon seeing this, Isomnum paused. Had he been Human, he would have frowned. Instead he merely watched. Also according to the Voice – and the Imperator – the Sovereigns did not reveal themselves openly, preferring to act through puppets and proxies. Yet to him, this seemed…too obvious, too blatant.

He was not the only one to notice. Those who inhabited the Square paused what they were doing and looked up, the Dream seemingly gone. It only lasted for moments as the Weavers redirected their attention with psionic commands, tricks, and spells. Yet those who retained their minds considered the situation more cautiously.

One of the Weavers approached. “Lord Isomnum, do you have directions?”

He considered. Running would be cowardly and undermine his efforts, as well as what he had achieved here. Yet…he had not considered such blatant intervention by a Sovereign One, and unfortunately only knew their reputed capabilities. In any case, he was suddenly no longer sure he held the upper hand. ADVENT, XCOM, and the agents of Sovereigns he could overcome. A possible direct intervention? More questionable.

“Remove critical forces from Hainan,” he commanded. “Maintain a limited number to direct the Converted and your Exalted. A price can still be extracted from the Humans here. We will decide our next target afterwards.”

“There is an issue,” the Weaver said slowly. “Our Stalkers report that they cannot breach the barrier erected by Aegis.”

“What?”

The Weaver did not cower, but the blood drained from her face as she felt his full attention turn on her. Nonetheless, she continued. “We do not know why this is happening. The only one who could cut off such a large point in the psionosphere is a Sovereign One. We are currently trapped, and with no way out. The Stalkers have confirmed the barrier is complete. ADVENT forces are converging upon our location, along with XCOM and agents of T’Leth.”

A hand clenched in controlled anger. “There were assurances that this was not to happen.”

“We…did not anticipate such a reaction,” the Weaver said meekly. “We-“

“You should not have come to this planet, Dread Lord.”
The voice was deep, booming, and originated from the mind itself. Isomnum looked to the hanging blue orbs in the sky. It was no question of who had spoken it. “Your kind are said to not interfere. You should not reveal yourself, else you will paint yourself as a target – and that you do not want.”

The air rumbled, and Isomnum got the impression the Sovereign was laughing. “You know little of me, Dread Lord, else you would not utter such words. I am not my brethren. I do not fear your pathetic threats. You will serve as an example to the Imperator – and the Bringer.”

“Send your pawns, Sovereign One,” Isomnum stated. “They will die as many have before them. You are not here now, merely an illusion meant to intimidate.”

“Be thankful, Dread Lord,” T’Leth rumbled. “That I have merely cut off your escape, else I would rend your body into pieces. Yet I feel that this will soon befall you and those who serve the Bringer. So I will merely watch; watch as you lose more and more; watch as the dream collapses all around you and you realize that you have been abandoned and used, like the pawns you are in a game between masters. I will watch you die, Dread Lord, and the last thing you will see is not fear, but vengeance. You will not taste victory, but ashes as you expire, knowing that you are an utter failure and your ideology dies with you, disproved to the galaxy. Prepare, Dread Lord, for your death now approaches.”

After that, the eyes themselves dissipated, though the illusion of purple mist remained. Isomnum stood quietly, considering. The Sovereign One was, in fact, not here, though his presence would be felt. The conflict was most certainly not lost, and he was not so weak as to be intimidated by such drivel, though the utter conviction by which said threats had been said was concerning.

Isomnum knew the difference between true and false power. The words T’Leth had spoken were not ones of arrogance, but power. Isomnum knew he was powerful, but he most certainly was not so foolish as to underestimate his enemies. T’Leth would pose a concern, although his stunt had revealed his limitations. Should the barrier be breached, they could leave and that itself could be a victory.

Alternatively, he merely had to weather the storm coming upon him. T’Leth would send his agents, but he had faced such before. They could still win, so long as T’Leth remained a non-factor outside his illusions. If T’Leth could end the fight, he would have. Therefore his threat was limited.

Still. There could be improvement. Tipping the odds further in his favor. He pulled out his holocommunicator and within moments the image of the Temperance appeared. “Lord Isomnum. I assume there have been developments.”

“Correct.” He did not mince words. “T’Leth has prevented teleportation in a radius around the city, and Aegis has erected a shield to prevent escape. We will weather the ADVENT attack easily enough. However, Aegis must be eliminated or the barrier must otherwise fall. More soldiers are required.”

The Temperance did not answer for a few seconds. When he did, the answer was as emotionless as ever. “There will be complications. The aftermath of your attack has not been received as anticipated. More soldiers will not be sent without the express permission of the Imperator.”

Isomnum exhaled loudly. “This is not a request, Temperance.”

“Nor is my decision a choice,” he answered. “I will speak to the Imperator about further support. I cannot promise more, for both of us ultimately answer to him.”

“You lacked this hesitation earlier,” Isomnum noted. “Do not concern yourself with the Imperator.
I will handle him, and ensure your projects are supported. This is difficult if I am indisposed due to the Humans. Your failure to continue supporting my operations will result in this support being withdrawn – and you being replaced. Consider your next words carefully.”

The Temperance did appear to consider, and not a single hint of what he could be feeling showed on the stony alien face. A face that Isomnum saw had six eyes. “Risk has been calculated. More is lost by continuing to incur the Imperator’s wrath. I cannot support you further without his permission. It will be asked, but there will be no further promises.”

Isomnum nearly crushed the holocommunicator, though kept his voice calm. “You have made a mistake. You best prepare to meet your god, as it shall happen when I come to Paradise.”

The Temperance was not affected, and answered as neutrally as ever. “I will take my chances.”

The image disappeared. This time he crushed the device in his hand.

How disappointing. That it was not the Humans who were fearful and cowering, but the thing which puppeted Ethereals. A thing who is driven by fear of a greater Ethereal. Such cowardice would not be tolerated, and the removal of the Temperance would be carried out slowly to serve as a lesson for his replacement.

It was not the Imperator one need fear.

They would soon learn that.

But now he had a storm to weather, an army to slaughter, and an escape to plot.

The odds were stacked against him, but he felt no fear, as such emotions had been purged long ago. It did not matter how many were against him. The Synthesized had tried before, and he had inevitably won.

This time would be no different.

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Beijing – China

3/12/2017 – 5:45 A.M.

The army that marched on Beijing was massive, and Oliver believed that in his long career that he had never quite been involved in – or seen – an operation on this scale. Even in XCOM their role was more limited and never quite seemed to lead the charge in places – only came in afterwards to take out dangerous enemies or support locations near collapse.

Not today.

That feeling hit him when he saw the purple barrier glowing in the night around the city, as far as he could see and having to crane his neck upwards to see the top. It really was awe-inspiring what the Ethereals could do when their power was unleashed – and that knowledge placed a grim note on his mind as he remembered they were going up against another one.

But they had a good team.

ADVENT did as well.

It was going to be a night where their alien allies proved themselves to the world, as Aegis, Caelior,
and now Axis were deployed and ready to participate. Caelior was assisting another entrance, while Axis was in their squad, fully clad in his battlesuit which still reminded Oliver of what might happen if someone took an astronaut uniform, and put armor on it and then painted it black.

He couldn’t claim to be fresh and fully rested, but he was ready to end the nightmare that had gripped the country, as was Kane, Geist, and everyone who had been fighting in China. Now they were supplemented by reinforcements including another Archangel to replace the one Viktoria had lost earlier, as well as Angelina Fonseca and Daas Nandi, a MELD Operator and Shoggoth Handler respectively.

It was interesting to see the reactions to the Shoggoth from ADVENT soldiers who had no idea what it was and gave it a wide berth. It was a good distraction, as no one had yet commented on Axis which was likely helped by the fact that his face was completely masked and his humanoid stature gave him some degree of blending in.

Somewhat ironic, as it was Axis who had been a major consultant for what was to come.

“Everyone in the city is lost,” he had said grimly. “It is a memetic plague which has taken hold which cannot be cured or removed. There is no choice. Every single person in the city must be executed. Otherwise it will be propagated until it is impossible to contain.”

Words which both the Internal Council and ADVENT Command had expected, but it was still going to be difficult to accomplish. The first kills would be the hardest, and Oliver knew that Isomnum was going to do his best to traumatize anyone who massed to attack. As they approached the designated entry point, with the shield lines of the Order of Terra behind them, his fears were confirmed.

“Massed civilians on the other side of barrier,” he noted grimly. “Need to be cleared out.”

“I see them,” Geist said. “Many of them.”

Isomnum was playing his part well. The civilians on the other side looked normal, wearing regular clothes and looking sad and afraid as the army approached. They were mostly women and children, some of them holding infants in their hands. They yelled in Chinese as they moved closer; now afraid of what was coming.

“Liuxian, Richards, move up and prepare to burn them,” Geist ordered calmly, and the two MEC pilots who commanded the Marauder-class MECs stomped forward and readied their flamethrowers. Purifiers moved behind them, though these ones were outfitted with standard napalm and not ClF3. Still dangerous, but they weren’t walking death traps.

“Axis, are you sure about this?” Alisa, one of the Gunners asked quietly. “They don’t look compromised.”

“They are.” Was the statement from the Zudjari. “I touched the minds of several. They are being directed to act like this. It will break down when they begin burning.”

“Prepare for entrance!” Geist roared, preparing to send the telepathic signal to Aegis. “Fire!”

Flamethrowers roared to life as a sizable section of the barrier pulled back, and the civilians immediately rushed forward – only to be turned into cinders as they met two dozen streams of flame which turned the immediate area into an inferno. Oliver winced at seeing them burn, but did not look away. Kane said nothing beside him, but how he clenched his replacement Browning told Oliver all he needed to know.
“Coward,” he practically spat, but didn’t elaborate. No reason to.

And then the civilians changed from crying to screaming and breaking into suicidal charges to mass-rush the MECs and Purifiers. Men, women, children which had been hiding in nearby buildings or hanging back on streets didn’t hesitate and charged forward, shouting the language Oliver had heard many of the Bringer’s soldiers yell when they fought.

“Forward, into the city!” The leading Lord of the Order of Terra commanded, which was echoed by the ADVENT Officers as the shield line began advancing, with Purifiers armed with extinguishers to put out the fires in their path. Most of the XCOM squad entered before the shield line proper did, so as to provide support to the Purifiers and MECs, as plasma fire and psionics now joined the white-orange flame.

“Converted on approach,” Oliver snapped to the squad as he saw the black-augmented figures begin charging forward. “Possible suicide ones, can’t confirm.”

“Acknowledged,” Geist said, gesturing and erecting barriers which tripped the rush of Converted. “Take them out.”

A task easier said than done, as Oliver and the rest managed to cause enough damage to most of them that they collapsed to the ground in smoking wrecks, but not all of them were caught. One detonated in a suicide blast that killed several Purifiers and scorched Richard’s MEC. The Order of Terra was inside and the shield lines were beginning to go down the streets in tight formation.

Custodians were now entering the picture, and now that the masses of brainwashed civilians had been eliminated, they were stepping back to let the main forces take the front. Custodian fire was accurate in that it hit the towering shields the Squires carried, but did not penetrate them. But the Squires returned fire with their mounted rifles, forcing the machines into cover.

Oliver tossed a plasma grenade towards a trio hiding behind a car, forcing them into Order fire and destroying them. Behind him he saw dozens of soldiers move into the nearest building – a skyscraper, and begin the first of many complete sweeps, accompanied by Priests to find and snuff out every living person in the city.

And it was going to be taken slow and steady.

They had time.

As the tanks began rolling in, Oliver only hoped that it would not be long before the Dread Lord lay dead, even if the rest of the city would take longer to subdue.

A goal he needed to ensure was achieved. Joining Geist at the front, he lifted his rifle and fired at more of the Converted which were now marching down the street, these ones backed with a few of Isomnum’s own soldiers. The Order of Terra did not cease marching, but took the assault head on. The first of many all of them would endure.

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**Beijing – China**

3/12/2017 – 8:15 A.M.

It was worse than she had feared. She’d seen the massed civilians on the outside of the barrier when they’d arrived, and knew that all of them would be dead when the command was given. The orders had been explicit and clear – eliminate everything in the city; no exceptions. There was
considerable fear that they were infected with a psionic contagion which could be spread to others if not contained – or at minimum made them alien agents and unreliable.

It still didn’t make it any less sickening when the shooting started.

Kaya was almost happy when a switch seemed to have been flipped and they turned from sobbing and begging people into shrieking madmen who lunged at the front lines before being promptly stopped. Even as they made their way deeper into the city, slowly but surely, the assaults hadn’t even come close to ceasing.

She didn’t know how many people had lived in the city, and it had not been one of the ones which had been largely evacuated – most believed they would be safe in such an insulated location. They’d found out otherwise in the worst way possible. The number was in the high millions, she believed, and hundreds were dying every minute.

She saw the standard of her unit which was right behind the line of four Squires together with another unit. Freya, their Standardbearer, hadn’t even needed to activate the PDS field since there was almost no plasma fire to worry about. The blades of Terje and Genevieve were slick with the blood of attempted ambushes from the buildings; never in serious danger as these people were weak, small, and sometimes sick with Smallpox.

But the close quarters made it worse for all of them. She knew personally that Genevieve had seen and done a lot, and experienced enough of the horrors of war. But nothing quite compared to slaughtering a half dozen women with an ease that was almost unfair. The weapons provided to the Order made killing easy; effortlessly.

And they were using these tools on civilians brainwashed to fight their own kind. Necessary or not, no one was going to emerge from this with sound minds. The pressure she had continuously felt in her head having nothing to do with that, but took it as a sign that the psionic protection was still intact. Yet at times she could almost smell a sickly sweet aroma which pierced her helmet.

Not everything could be blocked.

Her heart beat fast and continuous as she fought, holding a sniping position on top of one of the tanks which accompanied the march; she didn’t know the kind, but it was Chinese and the autocannon had also assisted in making short work of mobs. She felt terrified, but not due to any psionic influence.

It was because there was something else here – something which she didn’t know was friendly or not.

Looking to the sky, she saw swirling purple mist, and yet if she looked closely, sometimes she saw six bright blue orbs which seemed to be looking down; watching, observing. She’d wondered if she was seeing things, but when she’d pointed it out…everyone had felt the same way. None of them knew what it was…but she didn’t think it was this Bringer.

Kaya was not strongly religious. She was most certainly aware of the various religious customs in Japan, and herself had participated in such for mostly ceremonial reasons, but a personal belief had never really solidified itself. She’d found religion more fascinating when looked at from the perspective of an objective outsider, to see all the disparate religions and what linked them together and made them different.

She’d never known enough to say for certain if a god or gods existed, but she didn’t quite discount the possibility of it happening; derided as some might believe that.
But now…

She looked back up to see the eyes still looking down upon them.

Maybe there was something up there. But not the old and wise figure depicted in so many stories. This one…it felt more to her like something that had been awakened. And the next question she had was how and what would it do?

She trained her rifle back on the front lines as they made their way through bloody streets. Occasionally there would be bumps as the tanks rolled over corpses. She’d done her best not to think about them. Peering through her rifle, she froze as she saw new targets at the end of her scope. Standing near an upcoming intersection was a figure clad in shining armor with a cape billowing from the shoulders.

The armor reminded her of a Knight, but this one was instantly recognizable as different. The names had been provided to her thanks to XCOM, and it meant things were going to get serious. “Baptist ahead!” And it wasn’t all, there were hordes of civilians, both Converted and unmodified. Now there were brainwashed ADVENT soldiers in the mix too.

What made this Baptist unique was the fact that it was a Cobrarian. It didn’t seem to be as heavily armored as the previous Baptists, but it was still clad heavily enough to likely absorb light gauss fire. The sword it held was more of a fencing weapon; thinner and slightly curved. It lacked a hood, which meant it was female, although she didn’t think it mattered much what the gender was.

Gauss fire cracked as the Squires opened fire as did the tank autocannon. She focus-targeted the Converted, one of which was a suicide bomber, which went up in a loud explosion taking out a portion of the charging mob. The Baptist was hanging back, moving from side to side with an almost blurring speed, waiting for the opportunity to strike.

Even the volume of fire was not enough to kill all of the mob before they reached the shield line, clawing and pushing through while shouting cries in a strange tongue. They ripped rifles from their rested positions forcing the Squires to pull out their swords and start stabbing back, while herself and the soldiers also on the tank fired downwards to further stem the tide.

That was when the Baptist struck as she moved with blinding speed up and over the mound of bodies, pushing some of them down. She hissed as a hand glowed with psionic power and blasted the nearest Knight – Genevieve – who just barely got her shield up in time to block the stream of energy, even as it began quickly eating away at her shield.

Terje along with another Knight charged the Baptist and she ceased and lashed out with her tail at Terje, making him stumble just as she almost went to the ground and then slithered through his legs and wrapped around his body several times. Before anyone could react, she jabbed the thin blade just under his throat and opened her mouth, spitting hissing green acid for several seconds until his face was melted.

She was trying to fire at the Baptist, but the alien was too fast to get an accurate shot at. She didn’t even have time to process his death as the Baptist was doing the same thing to the other Knight. Freya as firing her own pistol at the Baptist to little effect. The shield line was still managing to hold, but there was already a casualty even if she couldn’t tell who yet; she prayed it wasn’t one of her unit.

One of the Priests created a psionic maelstrom around the Baptist, which caused her to quickly slither out of it directly into the psionic energy stream of another. Hissing it charged with lightning speed at the Priests, this time not bothering to drag out the deaths, instead moving on the ground
and stabbing upwards into their chins before moving to the next.

Unaccustomed to such a fast and difficult enemy, the soldiers were almost hopping backwards to avoid dying to it. The autocannon fired at it, and this time it managed to score several hits, making the Baptist turn around and flick out her tongue before springing up onto the tank, giving Kaya very little time to think about how to respond.

She only had one thing that might work – a symbiote grenade. Setting it for almost immediate detonation, she threw it while leaping down and the black goop exploded and managed to land all over the Baptist, pinning it to the ground and even one of its arms to its side. “Shoot it now!” She yelled, focusing her Widow at the writhing alien which began glowing with psionic power.

The concentrated fire though was severely wounding it, and blood now poured from dozens of wounds yet the thing seemed to keep thrashing. Another symbiote grenade was thrown and this one covered it completely. Three Purifiers which had been hanging in the back moved in and concentrated their streams of flame on the Baptist and did not cease the streams until the corpse was burnt to ash.

ADVENT had learned a few things from previous encounters. They would not stop fighting until they died. Overkill was standard policy, and excessive measures were encouraged. Breathing a little easier, she turned to see the shield line mopping up with Genevieve and another Knight filling the gaps where other Squires had fallen.

An uneasy pit formed in her stomach. This was their first real fight. And just one of the things had been enough to stop their entire unit – or at least extract a heavy toll. But she wasn’t going to leave yet, even as the soldiers moved on. She pulled Terje’s body off to the side so it wouldn’t be run over by the tanks. He would get a burial, and she wanted a body to lay to rest.

But that was all she could do for now. Leaping back onto the tank and reloading her weapon, she prepared for more fights ahead – and more losses.

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Haikou, Hainan – China

3/9/2017 – 6:23 A.M.

The day had been an exhausting and strenuous one for them all. It had been slow going for hours as they had sometimes been forced to huddle down in abandoned houses and shops for long periods of time whenever Iosif heard or felt something. It was not a pleasant feeling knowing that they could be seconds away from being discovered and cornered.

There had been several close calls, one being when they’d stumbled into a Custodian trio with their backs turned. They’d taken them out immediately but knew that it was only a matter of time before someone came looking for why the units had gone offline. More upsetting was when they stumbled onto a gibbering civilian in a house who they’d had to put down before he noticed and possibly alerted others to them.

Nuan wished she could have done it when the civilians weren’t in the house, but they didn’t have that luxury.

They’d kept speaking to an absolute minimum, instead relying on nods, hand gestures, and other non-verbal cues which their civilians understood easily enough. They’d stopped several times to eat quickly, never more than fifteen minutes, and then were back moving along the streets and
between the houses.

Their Zararch captive had eaten some of the chocolate, although very cautiously, almost nibbling on it as if afraid he was going to fall over and die from the food. If they weren’t in a life-or-death situation, Nuan would have found it very funny, but to his credit, Ravas was smart enough to take some precautions, going to far as to tape his mouth shut in case he accidentally made noises when high. While that didn’t seem to happen, he definitely seemed oddly at ease and buoyant compared to everyone else for the short time he was under the influence. Never more than a half hour, probably because he stopped eating the moment he felt it working.

But now, they’d found the port, and there was no shortage of boats to be seen.

She’d honestly been expecting it to be much more difficult than it was, but the city itself almost seemed completely abandoned, as if everyone had been abducted. Clearly not everyone could have been killed, so their fates were likely worse than she had feared. Hainan wasn’t a battleground anymore, so they had likely been moved to the mainland.

Good for them right now, but somewhere ADVENT, China, and XCOM were likely having a hard time.

She hoped the Mosrimor Avatar was gone as well. It was almost too much to hope for, even if Iosif said that he didn’t feel anything like it. Then again, if he did than they were possibly screwed since the Avatar would know they were alive and trying to escape.

Night was falling, so they didn’t need to waste more time. “Alright,” Iosif said slowly, his suit volume almost as low as he could make it. “You three search some of the yachts and boats if there are keys left in them. Most aren’t big, so it shouldn’t take long. Be quick and quiet, and meet Nuan on the dock who’ll keep watch. I’ll go into the shop with Ravas and see what supplies there are. When we’re regrouped, we’ll take the next steps.”

Nuan relayed his orders, and they all moved out and the civilians began searching the various boats. While unlikely, Nuan kind of hoped that some rich person would have been kind enough to leave the keys in one of the nice ones. In the meantime, she took up a watch post with her back to the boats and water.

It had definitely been a bustling port at one time, with boxes, nets, and other marine equipment strewn around and outright abandoned. Her suit filters removed most smells, but she suspected that were her helmet to cut off, she would smell rotting fish, shrimp, and goods. She also didn’t fail to note that there were some Human bodies lying around, already beginning to decompose.

She moved some of the boxes to create some cover if a firefight broke out. They were probably not sturdy enough for more than a few shots, but it was better than nothing. Minutes ticked by, the silence growing louder as she waited for something to happen. She wasn’t expecting they would get out of here without a fight since the Collective did still have a presence here – if a much reduced one.

“[Soldier Kun?]” A voice whispered, and Nuan turned to Ren standing behind her nervously. “[I found one.]” Somewhat shaking hands held a key fob and she pointed to one of the nicer-looking yachts, one of the bigger ones too. Aside from the sea filth which had built up along the bottom of the yacht where it had sat in the water, it looked very good.

“[Excellent job,]” she said just as quietly, taking the key fob. “[Stay here and wait for your mother.]”
A few minutes later both Yawen and Jun came back, Jun finding the keys to a smaller boat which was almost immediately dismissed in favor of the one Ren had found, while Yawen didn’t find anything. Good enough; they had two options and now they just needed Iosif to come back. A few minutes after that they did, and saw him fitted with a rollaway packed with boxes of something, while Ravas pulled a cart filled with various cartons of gasoline.

“What did you find?” He asked quietly. “We’ve got some food, bait, and fishing equipment here. Ravas has gas. There’s more inside we’ll need to get too.”

“Ren found a good one,” Nuan pointed to the Yacht. “She didn’t check, but I assume it’s filled up. I think they do that automatically at these places.”

He started to whistle, but then stopped when he realized that wasn’t the time. “Perfect. That’s for longer voyages too. Bigger tank, and probably has storage already on board. Might be more difficult to drive, but we’ll make it work. Let’s move everyone on board and then get the rest-“

“No, no,” Nuan interrupted quickly, having thought about it for a while. “We need to leave now. We’re lucky no one has found us yet, and getting more is just greedy. We need to run for it while we can.”

Iosif shot a glance to their entourage. “It’s not just us, Nuan, and we don’t know how long it will take. Precautions should be taken, and as you said, no one has found us yet. It seems like the place has mostly been abandoned.”

“Which can change,” she insisted. “Once we’re on the water, no one can come after us. We still have food we brought along. That will have to be enough.”

Iosif thought about it for a few long seconds. “Alright, fine. Worst case scenario we don’t eat our own rations and give it to them. We can last longer without food.”

Nuan breathed a sigh of relief and explained what they were going to do to the civilians who listened attentively, and then helped unpack everything Iosif and Ravas had gathered and load it onto the yacht. While they were storing things belowdecks Iosif and Nuan stood in the enclosed cabin looking over the controls.

“Looks simple enough,” he muttered to himself. “Don’t know what most of these gauges are supposed to mean, but I see speed and fuel, and there is an accelerator lever and steering stick. Compass too.” A pause. “All of it in Chinese, but I have you for that.”

“Is the compass useful?” She asked.

“I know enough to know which way to go, so yes in that context,” he shrugged. “GPS seems to be working, even if it’s a primitive piece of crap and in the wrong language. You’ll have to set it up. I don’t want to turn this on until we’re ready.”

Nuan did have to admit the yacht was very nice, and even had a cabin for two people to comfortably stay, as well as a lounge area. The deck had a lot of space too, and there were lots of cabinets and compartments to put stuff in. Ropes still bound the yacht to the deck, but those could be easily removed. Iosif joined her on the deck.

“Think we’re ready,” he said, then gestured as a couple psionic barriers severed the ropes binding them to the dock. At Nuan’s look, he justified it. “I hate knots and don’t have time to fiddle with them. Isn’t our boat either, so I don’t really care about it floating away when we dock in Vietnam.”

“Hey, I don’t care,” she said. “Just didn’t think about doing it like that.”
They walked back to the cabin. “Feels like it’s going too well,” Iosif commented. “Like something is going to come out and surprise us.”

She felt that way too, but nothing happened. Iosif turned on the yacht and it rumbled, sounding horribly loud as the engines roared and chugged. She could imagine Iosif wincing under his helmet, much like she was right now. Still, he began piloting it out, although he bumped into a wooden post along the way.

It only took a few minutes for him to mostly get the hang of it, easier since there was nothing for him to really bump into when he was out of the ports themselves. In the meantime, she programmed the GPS to get them to Vietnam. The satellite network was still working, luckily, and it put them on course for them to arrive in…fourteen hours going at a certain speed. She didn’t know what the conversion was for ‘knots’ to ‘kilometers per hour’, but it wasn’t likely important.

But…it seemed like they had done it. She stepped out onto the deck and took off her helmet as she observed the rapidly fading city. It looked dark and abandoned, a husk of what it had been; before Isomnum and the Collective had ravaged it.

There would be retribution. She had no doubt.

She could only hope things were going better on the mainland. Although for all she knew, Isomnum could have won. She didn’t think that had happened, but given how easily Hainan had been taken, he was probably doing better than they wanted. She had faith it would be defended though.

Until then, she sat down as the yacht sped forward and enjoyed the breeze on her face, relaxing for the first time in days.

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Beijing – China

3/12/2017 – 3:12 P.M.

The noose was closing in on Isomnum, slowly but surely, and with much blood being spilled on all sides. While the brainwashed hordes died in droves to ADVENT and XCOM, the fact remained that ADVENT was suffering losses of their own, and, impossible as it had seemed at first, Sierra seemed to note that there was a lesser amount of the hapless pawns to throw at them.

Then again, they were being replaced with more dangerous things.

The Order of Terra was behind the main force now, focused on completely purging the city as they continued forward. The military and XCOM – wanting to press their advantage – now took the lead and were doing well for the most part. Sierra and the Archangels zipped and flew throughout the city, providing support and aerial fire wherever requested.

Right now, they were responding to an urgent request in one of the few zones where Isomnum and the Bringer’s combined forces were successfully fighting off the attackers. ADVENT corpses lay scattered as well as exploded tank chassis, even as more ADVENT reinforcements poured in to stem the losses. “What do we see?” Sierra demanded as she performed a first sweep, more difficult than usual due to the smoke that permeated the air.

There were two distinct hosts here, all of them from Korea after they’d been quickly transferred. They had that going for them at any rate. “Buch of brainwashed civvies, at least a couple dozen Converted, four Baptists, and…shit. Got a read on Isomnum’s human traitor too, and beside her is...
one of those stone-faced robed freaks.”

Not good at all. The Baptists were bad enough, but Isomnum’s…partner? Puppet? They’d never really figured out what she was, only that she was dangerous. But her and one of those robed figures? That was bad, as she’d heard quite a bit of how notoriously dangerous they were. “Allies on the ground,” Anna said. “T’Leth’s agents it looks like, can’t tell who, but they’re fighting back.”

A crackle of lightning shot from the ADVENT lines and was blocked by a psionic shield. “Got Crevan here, good.”

“We’ve got priority targets,” Kawamura said roaring past Sierra’s position. “Robed figure first. Suppressive fire while I move around and take him out.”

“Copy,” Sierra, Anna, and Jim acknowledged. “Moving around for a clear shot.”

“Don’t get too close,” Jim warned. “Those ones will slice you in two with their barriers.”

“Understood,” she said, checking her rifle. “Fire at will!”

The ClF3-tipped rounds from her gauss rifle shot towards the robed figure who barely seemed to react, only lifting a hand which produced a barrier surrounding him and Isomnum’s puppet. Sierra noticed she wore a lightly-armored battlesuit with some kind of full-face mask that was stone-grey and oddly enough, was plain.

The deadly fire splattered onto the shields and then melted to the ground, continuing to burn. One of the Baptists looked upwards and raised a hand, firing a stream of purple energy that they dodged. A second one followed suit – but there was no purple energy which spurted from her hands. Instead, she yanked downwards.

“Ah!” Marvin yelled as he was suddenly yanked downwards. Sierra turned her weapon to fire at the Baptist, but her rounds stopped just short of the Baptist, held in a telekinetic cushion. She yanked downwards again, and Marvin’s thrusters fought it for every inch. But a threshold was soon reached, as the robed man made a minuscule motion and a purple barrier bisected Marvin into two clean pieces.

Kawamura roared around the corner with her hands thrusting down, producing such force that the entire block shook and slammed everyone on it – including the masked woman to the ground. The robed man didn’t so much as blink, as he stabilized himself in an instant by placing a stasis field around himself effectively sealing him in place.

That couldn’t have been good for his body. A few shots from Jim high above slammed into the helmet of one of the downed Baptists, splintering the helmet but somehow not seeming to kill the woman who sort of flopped upwards, roaring in pain and rage deliriously. But she was too wounded to concentrate, and a volley from Anna was enough to kill her for good.

By now the robed man had recovered and Kawamura was in his range, which she was aware of and immediately tried to shoot upwards – and she did right into a barrier, which at best compressed her spine. Sierra didn’t know if she died immediately from that, or the fall through a building into the ground on the other side. What she knew for sure that the barrier that decapitated the body ensured she was dead.

Now they had a problem. Their most powerful psion was dead and they were down another Archangel. The two Baptists were giving ADVENT and Crevan a difficult time, not to mention the
Converted that were pushing forward. Maria had moved to the ground to help fight them off, and Anna was firing streams of flame to also help stem the tide, but the other Baptist was coming for them now.

Worse, the robed agent was advancing forward. Slowly, deliberately, one step at a time as if he had all the time in the world. The masked woman was staying in the same place, psionic energy rippling around her, a telltale sign that she was engaged in a telepathic battle with someone else, likely another T'Leth Agent she hadn’t identified yet.

She would have taken a shot, if not for the fact that she needed to get back before the robed man got any closer. The Baptist was also taking matters into his own hands, by first leaping onto the wall of the nearest building and then launching himself at the closest Archangel, who happened to be Anna. She dodged it, but the psionic ripple around the blade scored a cut in her armor, causing her to spin away as the Baptist fell to the ground and landed safely.

Lovely.

“Woah, hang on we got something new,” Jim suddenly interjected.

“Would it be the Hunter?” She growled, firing on the Baptist and flying back slightly. “Do we know if he’s even here yet?”

“No, behind the woman. Look.” Sierra did and saw something shimmer in the background. Something she actually had to focus on to get a good look at. A figure suddenly became visible, indicating that some kind of cloaking device had been hiding it as it stepped onto the shredded concrete surrounded by bodies.

It looked like some kind of Andromedon unit, if the Andromedon suit had been cut down to a much more slender build, with the bulky suit and helmet shrunken to something more proportional. This was not to say the black-armored unit was unprotected. It almost seemed made of metal when she squinted. The only color was the helmet which was a pale white, almost clouded glass. Tubes connected to devices on the wrists and there were three weapons of unknown design attached to the back, waist, and thighs.

With a blinding motion it flung a hand forward and a device went spinning towards the robed man who immediately turned around and stopped it with a barrier, causing it to explode into blue dust which descended downwards. For some reason, the man stepped back rapidly as if burned. The Andromedon then vanished.

No. Not vanished.

It charged.

Sierra wasn’t sure she’d seen right, as it happened in an instant, but there was no mistaking that a blue streak followed the Andromedon as it charged forward and rematerialized where the masked woman was. Although it was more accurate to say where the masked woman had been, as the sheer force of the Andromedon impacting her had caused her to explode into chunks.

She’d never seen it coming, and the Andromedon was now colored in red.

In moments it tossed out several more devices and sidestepped with surprising quickness, and within seconds was back nearly twenty feet away, a sniper rifle in hand. Those weren’t grenades as Sierra had originally suspected, but some kind of dispersion device that spewed a blueish poison. They had been aimed behind the robed figure and now surrounded him.
Sierra didn’t understand why he didn’t just endure it and run forward, but she wasn’t going to turn
down the help of the mystery Andromedon and swept forward, hovering as she tossed forward
several grenades on his position, while Anna and Jim rained down fire on the robed man. The
Andromedon fired several shots from the rifle which exploded when they slammed into the
barriers. They fired projectiles Sierra couldn’t identify, a strange fact in its own right. It wasn’t
plasma, but it didn’t seem completely physical either.

The mist was closing in, and the robed figure only encased himself in a barrier. The Baptist which
had been trying to kill them instead charged the Andromedon, psionic power blazing from his body
and weapon. The Andromedon holstered the weapon and suddenly had a blue glow of his own
around him, with one armored hand extended, it gestured upwards and Sierra saw a nearly
imperceptible wave move up and the Baptist was suddenly floating in the air as if the gravity had
been turned off.

“What the fuck?” Anna said, speaking for all of them.

Psionic Andromedons?

What?

It drew its arms back as if to leap forward and then charged in a blue streak towards the Baptist
still in air and in a moment the Baptist was caught in the black gauntlets and slammed into the
nearest building, and then in another charge, slammed into the ground with a thud. Somehow the
Andromedon suit was undamaged, and it slammed an armored foot on the head of the Baptist –
whose body was already barely together as it was – and crushed it into mush.

They had continued firing on the barrier around the robed man, and the Andromedon seemed to
consider how best to break it, but before he could, one of the Baptists which had been fighting on
the ADVENT line rushed to the attempted rescue of the robed man. This one was a Muton, even
larger than the Andromedon himself.

Psionic energy poured along the warhammer it carried, but the Andromedon did not seem phased,
and simply raised a wrist and shot out a stream of the blue mist the robed man was so afraid of.
Sierra didn’t know if it was acid or poison, but she figured she was going to see firsthand what it
could do as the Muton paid no heed and charged straight into it, and at the last moment the
Andromedon turned into a blue streak and reappeared a short distance away.

It took a few seconds before Sierra saw what the effects to the Muton were. It stumbled, coughed,
and roared, but the psionic energy was gone and it didn’t seem to be handling whatever had been
inhaled well. A blue aura once more enveloped the Andromedon as it clenched a fist and the area
around the body…shifted.

At least that’s what it looked like, as if there was a continually breaking and reforming mirror over
the form of the Baptist. Only it did seem to be actually shifting, as the first spurts of blood began
happening. She watched with some fascination as the body was rent into tiny pieces with the
Andromedon glowing the whole while and did not stop until nothing remained of the body aside
from mush and metal scraps.

It wasn’t exactly something she hadn’t seen before, Dynamo psionics had these effects all the time.
But this didn’t seem to really be like that.

The robed man was still alive and now the Andromedon was going to deal with him. The front
lines were being claimed, and the quick looks the man was giving between the rapidly dwindling
Converted and the Andromedon meant that something needed to give soon. While the mist was
beginning to dissipate, it wouldn’t go away completely in time to save him, not to mention he was likely growing more weary. Sierra didn’t know if this was accurate or not, the face still betrayed nothing, but maintaining shields for this long needed to have some kind of physical consequence.

The Andromedon was glowing blue again, with hands held up by his waists, palms upwards and fingers curled. Ever so slowly the fingers closed and Sierra didn’t know what he was doing until Anna gasped. “Look!” Sierra looked to the barricade where the robed man was standing and suddenly clutched his chest and then the barrier broke completely.

He gasped, and Sierra could hear the sudden crack from up here as all of the bones in his chest seemed to break. And in the matter of half a minute, the body just seemed to compress on itself. The neck jammed down into the torso, the legs were bent up at awkward angles, and the hand which had covered the chest broke through the cavity and pulled most of the arm itself in.

That was when Sierra saw what was happening, just as the rest of the body was swallowed with final crunches. What emerged was a floating black orb which maintained an almost white halo around it, and all of the mist which was around it began to be pulled around it, creating a swirling effect.

“Is that a black hole?” Jim asked in disbelief. “Get back everyone, now!”

Sierra didn’t feel a pull of gravity, but she was not taking chances with this. She looked to the Andromedon who was back to normal, and with his work apparently complete, turned away and pressed a button on his wrist. He vanished from sight a few seconds later. Their concerns about the possible black hole turned out to be groundless as it eventually shrunk and just as quickly as it appeared, it vanished without a trace.

There was some fighting still going on, but it was clear who the victors would be now.

“So,” Anna said, reloading his weapon and looking around. “I don’t suppose you know what that was?”

Sierra had an idea. There were enough reports by Aegis, and she’d talked to enough Andromedons to know that there was maybe only one thing which fit that description, and what worried her was that it was definitely not an ally, regardless of it helping in this particular instance.

“I think,” she said slowly, looking to the space the Andromedon had been. “We just saw our first Special Operator.”

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Beijing – China

3/12/2017 – 5:42 P.M.

“Got more Baptists incoming,” Oliver called out as he shot down some of the charging Converted. Some of the altered suicide variants exploded close to where ADVENT was trying to set up a defensive position. ADVENT Officers and soldiers yelled for backup as they were charged by more brainwashed civilians.

David and Kane moved to assist, their weapons spitting hundreds of rounds into the creatures even as behind them came more of the Baptists. The city square they were pushing into was a key place of importance, given its proximity to Tiananmen Square itself, and how easily it connected. The defenses had only grown more and more difficult and ADVENT was losing soldiers by the dozens in trying to push forward. Alisa had been injured when a Baptist severed her arm, and a few more
had almost taken out Axis by rushing him.

To make it worse they weren’t the standard brainwashed civilians either, but had been altered significantly. Their bodies were clearly degraded and falling apart, and it appeared like they were continuously being possessed by some kind of Ethereal presence. Their eyes glowed blue and oddly colored brands and markings covered their faces and bodies.

More unsettling was the faces that still somehow smiled.

They were faster than they appeared though, extremely fast, and only kill shots seemed to permanently put them down otherwise. Like the Baptists, they would keep moving until death (though not quite as violently). After a few encounters with them, it became clear that their purpose was to spread the psionic plague that gripped the population.

They tried to overwhelm single targets and then force a connection which would then infect the individual with the plague. Sometimes it worked, and already ADVENT had already been forced to kill some of their own due to it taking hold. Axis had been there to confirm, and they couldn’t take chances that it could be cured or reversed – Axis himself had stated otherwise.

The other use was as psionic suicide bombers. They would rush forward and then explode their bodies in a wave of blue-purple energy. Neither Oliver, nor anyone else, could tell which one was which, and it seemed to be a random decision – whatever would be the most successful.

“How many?” Geist demanded as he erected additional barriers to trap a number of the thralls, before crushing them with another barrier from the top. His voice was strained, as he’d primarily been the one to fight one of the robed Weavers as they were called earlier. That had been a difficult battle where a good part of the ADVENT force had lost their minds before Geist got it under control.

The most effective counter to the Baptists so far was Angelina, who deployed enough nanites to destroy it in minutes, and the amount of materials around made replenishing her stores simple. Daas’s Shoggoth was also useful at taking down the larger Baptists even if it had suffered a number of injuries and was pulled out while it was being healed.

Tanks fired in vain attempts for the main guns to hit one or more of the Bringer’s soldiers, while the autocannons did everything they could to mow down the mobs of thralls. Although that was sometimes not enough to stop them from being damaged by the psionic explosions of the psionic thralls, or attacks from Baptists, telekinetic or otherwise.

Oliver reloaded his weapon, another magazine depleted, and he’d had to retreat to fill up his ammo soon. He’d lost count of how many kills he had, how many rounds he shot, or anything like that. It had been hours upon hours of endless combat with them inching ever -closer, and this was yet another wall they would eventually break through.

He really missed fighting regular aliens right now.

A flash and one of the lightly-robed Stalkers materialized and was followed up by Fiona appearing right in front of the alien, sword drawn and surrounded in a green-blue aura. The Stalker was alternating between some kind of psionic hand cannon, and a thin bladed weapon. Another Stalker appeared and attempted to strike Fiona who dodged and whose counter was subsequently dodged easily.

The trio continued dueling in a way which was difficult for Oliver to follow in the heated battle. Worse still since there was a constant rate of fire being exchanged but little heed seemed to be
taken by those fighting. Oliver could swear he saw projectiles that looked like they were going to hit Fiona suddenly dissipate in a green flash.

They kept disappearing, reappearing, over and over that he didn’t know how any of them kept track of it, but he knew this was not his fight, and there were Baptists coming. He realized he hadn’t answered Geist’s question. “At least four,” he said as the armored soldiers approached. “Possibly more behind, I can’t tell.”

“MECs should be called to move the line forward,” David called. “We’re still in a stalemate. Or the Order. We’re just going to be stuck here otherwise!”

“Negative,” Geist answered flatly as he lifted a hand and a half-dozen purple barriers materialized which were immediately stormed by ADVENT soldiers. “Liuxian and Richards are holding positions themselves. Moving them would compromise other operations. We will need to make do here.”

“Understood,” David growled, as he blasted another of the psionic thralls back, which subsequently exploded in a smaller wave of energy. “They can’t have many more here.”

The Baptists broke into charges, several of them glowing with psionic energy, while others manifested psionic shields in front of themselves. Most carried long or greatswords, one carried a warhammer. All were either Human or Vitakara. “Angelina, Baptists incoming,” Geist said firmly. “Oliver, Symbiote on my mark.”

“Only think we have a few of these left,” he warned, pulling out the grenade. “Ready.”

“Now!” On his mark, Oliver threw it towards the oncoming armored soldiers. It exploded and caught one of the Baptists who roared furiously as she began melting it with psionic energy. “Concentrate fire on the stuck one,” Geist commanded, motioning his hands to trap all of the other Baptists in stasis fields.

A simple tactic, but one which would only work temporarily as they still possessed a command of psionics without moving. Every gun turned on the stuck Baptist, and the sheer amount of fire was enough to turn the once-pristine armor into a battered and scoured hunk which leaked red blood. A sharp laugh suddenly permeated the area, one which he also heard in his mind.

“Must be a Weaver,” Oliver muttered apprehensively. No one else was deranged enough to make that noise in the middle of battle.

“Isolating it,” Geist answered immediately. “This one is different. Stronger.”

“It might have a mask,” Oliver said. “Those ones appear to be their elite.”

“I’ll handle it,” he said tightly. “You will need to handle the Baptists.”

“This’ll be fun,” Angelina said, rushing up, a golden-tinged mist flowing off of her which headed towards the oncoming Baptists who were going to crush into the ADVENT lines. “Oliver, take the right one!”

He concentrated his fire at the figure as it reached out and clenched a fist, lifting and throwing a squad of ADVENT soldiers away while compressing their bodies. The nanite rounds hit his chest and began eating through it. A golden mist descended on the Baptist, and it began eating through it as well. Thralls continued to follow, punctuated with Converted at random intervals. Most fell to machine gun fire, but many did not.
There were so many dead bodies that piles were forming on the streets, hundreds from the thralls, and dozens from ADVENT who were at least being moved regularly to clear more room. This seemed to trip up the thralls at times, but the Baptists had no trouble navigating the mass of corpses. Oliver tossed a plasma grenade towards the Baptist and then shot it in the air when it was caught telekinetically, ruining a good part of its upper armor.

“Got a fix on the Weaver in the back,” Kane said in clipped tones as he was fighting off another charging Baptist. “Masked. Walking forward. Many thralls.”

The conflict continued for more minutes, with the lines breached and the three living Baptists still fighting furiously. This was taking too long. “Something’s wrong,” Angelina said. “They should be dead by now.”

Worse now, Oliver was beginning to feel awful, and not due to exhaustion but real, scouring pain which seemed to engulf his whole body. Oddly enough he felt humid and sweaty, which was probably true, but closer to what it felt like to be melting with how much water he was losing. His eyesight was getting worse too, and it didn’t make sense until he put all of the symptoms together in one terrifying conclusion.

“It’s a biopath!” He shouted, as ADVENT soldiers suddenly collapsed around him in pain on the ground, him taking every ounce of strength to keep standing and fighting. That explained why the Baptists weren’t dying and his symptoms. If they didn’t get out of here now…

Kane and David were moving back, though David stumbled, and gave the Baptist the needed opening to smash the warhammer into his head, forcing him to the ground, and following up with another shattering one. Angelina seemed to still be in largely working order, although that was probably thanks to the nanites that flowed through her body.

Geist was backing up too, and now faced with another Baptist, but failing to keep it contained or his concentration up as trapping barriers broke with less difficulty as the Baptist burned through them with corrosive psionic energy.

“We are under biopathic attack,” Oliver said into the comms, thinking that maybe someone could send backup. “Repeat we are under a biopathic attack. Taking significant casualties!”

The Baptist reached Geist and grabbing the stumbling soldier, and stabbed him straight through the stomach. Before Oliver could even process what had happened, Geist gripped the Baptist on the shoulder and a barrier materialized and severed the Baptist in half vertically. Both Geist and the two pieces of the Baptist fell to the ground, the sword still very much in him.

Oliver’s body was on fire, and he knew trying to take off his gear for possible relief was only going to make it worse, so instead he stumbled to Geist who was reaching for a non-existent med-kit, having forgotten he’d used it once before.

“I’ve got it,” Geist wheezed, his voice still tight and under control, betraying nothing of the pain he felt. “Get everyone else out of here before it gets worse-“

He was cut off as something roared overhead; he looked up to see something which shouldn’t be anywhere close to here – a Collective UFO. Aegis? Oliver knew XCOM had his ship stored somewhere and it was that kind, but Aegis was still maintaining the barrier…

Alternatively, they were definitely going to die now if it wasn’t a friendly.

Generally speaking, Collective UFOs weren’t friendly.
His heart sank when a cavity opened underneath it and an Ethereal that was not Aegis or Caelior fell out. This one in fact didn’t seem to be armored at all, or very lightly armored at best. A weave of some kind if he had to guess which resembled robes but with more freedom of movement. It stood out because it was mostly white – and the Ethereal in question had no helmet or hood.

It landed on the ground lightly, the drop not affecting it in the slightest. The atmosphere suddenly changed as a noticeable aura grew around the Ethereal, most noticeably around the arms and hands. Oddly enough, Oliver didn’t feel threatened by the Ethereal, but much calmer and somehow able to think more clearly.

His body, while still hurting, stopped feeling like it was on fire. The Ethereal looked around and extended its hands and the distortion around the Ethereal became more pronounced and he went from feeling ‘not on fire’ to the pain actively dissipating over the course of minutes. The Baptists immediately changed their targets from ADVENT and XCOM soldiers to the Ethereal who Oliver was now sure wasn’t an enemy.

Hopefully.

They charged the Ethereal and it lifted an arm and the Baptists suddenly became much slower until they were practically frozen statues. “Shoot them,” the Ethereal called – distinctly female to Oliver’s surprise. “They will not stay as they are forever.”

Reinvigorated, Oliver and the remaining ADVENT and XCOM soldiers fired into the statuesque Baptists and their armor shattered after several volleys, and their skin followed suit having somehow been turned brittle – this Ethereal must be a biopath too. It was like a bloody pinata – as the skin shattered, the internal organs and bones fell out. The heads were shattered soon afterwards leaving behind blood-stained statues of hardened flesh.

Geist had painstakingly pulled the sword out of his body, and was also somehow standing with only some blood around his stomach to show for his wound. “Unexpected,” he coughed. “But not unwelcome.”

“Who is it?” Oliver demanded as the Ethereal walked forward with the ADVENT soldiers rallying behind her, with most of XCOM as well. The air was almost electric and Oliver could see the Weaver outright fleeing at the sight of the Ethereal.

“That, I believe, is Sana'Ligna,” he said slowly, musing. “It appears she’s come to help.”

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Beijing – China

3/12/2017 – 4:12 P.M.

One shot, three kills.

“Come on,” the Hunter muttered as yet more of the thralls died. “At least pretend to try and win!”

This was so absurdly easy he was close to going to sleep.

Well, perhaps a bit of an exaggeration, but he really did not know what the Bringer – or Isomnum – was thinking here. Mass swarming tactics were not going to work on ADVENT unless their lines were broken first. Granted, they were probably doing their best after deciding to trap themselves in here for some reason, but it was still a complete waste.
He missed going on the comms and taunting. He would have loved for Isomnum and the Bringer’s pawns to hear him mocking their idiotic efforts and strategies. He probably could have, but this was one time where he’d restrained his impulses and decided to keep himself off the comms. He wanted as little attention on him as possible, and that went for ADVENT and XCOM too. They might think he was just gone, or had never showed up, but he didn’t really care. His own life and safety were more important, and the Bringer was something he was not brave enough to fuck around with.

He knew he was a bit arrogant and overconfident, but he also knew when to drop the jokes when needed.

So he’d instead compromised by just pretending to be on the comms. It was disappointing how no one would hear him, but he would still make some good memories here.

“Oh, what have we here?” He chuckled as he saw one of the Weavers come out, flanked by two Baptists and a host of Converted and…the corrupted psionic thralls. *Exalted*, that was what they were called. A host of Converted and Exalted accompanied her. Well, time to give ADVENT a show even if they didn’t know it.

The Weaver was the most dangerous one, but shooting her right now was the wrong move. Would draw attention to him and he didn’t care for that right now. The army charged into the streets which were filled with corpses. He chuckled as the tanks in the streets instead elected to speed up and just run them over.

It didn’t get all of them, but it did make a satisfying sight to see the puny weak Exalted get crushed under the treads after getting mowed down by the autocannons. He added his own support to the mix by shooting the suicide-bomber Converted which took out a decent number. He also helped pick off the ones which escaped the treads and weren’t immediately picked off by ADVENT.

The Baptists were charging forward, and the Weaver was likely getting ready to attack, if she wasn’t already. In any case, she was now vulnerable. He had something special for her. A gift from the Battlemaster from the Vaults of Desolan. There was so much down there that for once he’d been in awe – and understood that psionics was not necessarily the end-all be-all of power.

He switched out his clip with the ammo. The Battlemaster hadn’t actually explained what it was, only that any psions who were shot with it would be crippled permanently without immediate aid. So far, it had held up. He was so happy to have a weapon that seemed tailor-made to kill the bitch’s army. One face lined up in the scope and…

*Fire.*

As expected, the round penetrated and the moment of penetration was accompanied by a puff of blue mist around the chest which the Weaver breathed in even as she gasped in pain. Or pleasure. The freaks seemed to not know the difference. “Oh, you liked that?” He asked, lining up a shot to her face this time. “Have another.”

Her head exploded into red mist. He grinned as dopamine rushed through his body. *Now that’s good, very good.*

Funny how he was getting so much more satisfaction from killing supposed ‘allies’ than attacking the ‘enemies’ - ADVENT and XCOM.

He wondered why that was.
Sure, he couldn’t have claimed to have the best of histories with the Creator, and his relationship with the Ethereals could be at best classified as mixed. Some of them were fine, like the Battlemaster, but most of them were idiots who relied too much on their ability to read minds or destroy planets. Or tampered with things they didn’t understand.

Ethereals were meddlers. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it backfired.

He hadn’t failed to notice the eyes looking down from the sky, and he was pretty sure that wasn’t the Bringer looking down on Beijing. No, it was something else, and he was going to be rather glad when he left this place. It was an uncomfortable feeling at times, even as shrouded as he was telepathically. But it was an illusion, nothing more. At least for now.

Well, the truth was that in the end, he liked the Humans. He could respect that they didn’t just roll over and die like the Vitakara had, and were smart enough to do so effectively, unlike the Mutons. More to the point, they could hold a conversation, and there were certain people who he felt he could actually relate to. Granted, the Humans still largely had the same reservations on killing and death like most sapient life, but he’d done some research, and there were a few Humans, mostly criminals and soldiers, who understood the art and joy of killing and death that only someone like him could appreciate.

Humans were a species of war and conflict, much as they wouldn’t classify themselves as such. At least before ADVENT either. He respected how they were taking advantage of their natural desire for war.

Fighting against them was…well, depressing at times. It tempered his enjoyment when he killed them in droves. Ironically, he felt like his own skewed moral compass was affecting him here, if one existed inside him. When put side by side, between the Collective, the Bringer, and the Humans, the answer to the question of who really should be eliminated was pretty fucking apparent.

Gah, he still had two Baptists to take out.

“A bullet for you,” he shot into the back of one of them. “And a bullet for you.” A second round slammed into the neck gap between the helmet and breastplate. Neither full kill shots, but he waited a few seconds, then half a minute, and allowed a laugh when he saw them stumble back when they breathed in the blue poison.

He really, really hoped it prevented them from going into heaven, or whatever they believed the Gestalt was. Dying in fear and anguish was the minimum they deserved.

His ears pricked and a flicker of fabric caught his ears and a millisecond later the buzz of electricity sparking made him spin around and see something he’d expected for a while now. One of the Stalkers behind him, who had appeared right into his trap and was being shocked with a lethal amount of voltage.

He laughed and shut off the voltage before lifting a foot and stomping down on the head with all his strength, crushing it to a pulp. “Tell the Bringer I said hello,” he said lightly as he hauled the corpse to the edge of the window he had been aiming out of and threw the corpse down.

Unfortunately, this meant it was time to move since there might be more.

He’d really expected more than one Stalker to come after him, and it spoke to how much ADVENT was demanding Isomnum’s attention otherwise he felt he’d have been attacked long before. Although really, did the Creator really think he was going to not expect some kind of revenge for so elegantly blowing the lid off her operation?
A whistle reached his ears and he leaned back and saw another Stalker appear – this time in the back of the apartment room before the electric trap he’d devised. He spread his arms wide, teeth bared under his helmet. “Well, well, the Creator has found me. Oh no, whatever shall I do?”

In his head he counted down the seconds as the Stalker drew his weapons. “Idiot, you fell into my trap again.”

At his words the Stalker looked around in a rush which was all the time he needed to pull out his pistol and shoot the idiot right in the head. At this distance he could have done it with his eyes closed. Ah, perfect. The only thing better than a trap, was making a target think there was a trap, and then killing them when they focused on that and not the most lethal sniper in the galaxy.

A title he felt he’d earned.

And then stepping out of a psionic portal came his nemesis.

Occidera held her blade in her hands, suited for combat. He sighed. “Good to see you, sister.”

“You have caused enough trouble,” she growled, a hand raised and rippling with restrained purple energy. “It is time for that to end.”

He stared at her, bemused. “What are you even doing here anyway? Were you here before or after the barrier went up?”

“Irrelevant,” she answered coldly. “My only directive is your containment.”

“It appears the bitch still can’t use her brain,” he said, amused as he twirled the pistols in his hands, a second joining the first. “Good luck bringing me back, not unless you want the Battlemaster to stop playing around – trust me, your Creator and Bringer are more vulnerable than you think.”

“Oh, you don’t worry,” she hissed. “I’m only to keep you contained. I don’t need to bring you back. Nor will I kill you, if that was possible at all. But if I keep you merely…contained? Well, the Battlemaster won’t do much about that.”

“Ah, poor you,” he chided. “Unfortunately, I’m not under any such restriction.”

“Do not forget where you came from,” the Assassin warned extending a hand. “You were born from the Creator, and she controls you now and forever.”

He felt his body begin to tighten up as if slowly freezing. “The Legion is bent to the will of their Creator,” she said, stepping forward to the frozen Hunter. “And she has gifted me with the knowledge to deal with pests such as you.”

Now this would be an extremely concerning development, and he couldn’t exactly say it felt that great. His own body betraying him like that? The Creator putting in a backdoor to maintain her control? Who could possibly have seen this coming?

He was really sick of certain people thinking he was an idiot who forgot who he was dealing with. The bitch was insane, but she was unfortunately intelligent in the sciences. He’d have been a fool to think she hadn’t implanted some little control measures in him. Luckily, she lacked the foresight to apply them where it really mattered.

With a hand the Assassin clenched a fist and shattered the electric traps which he’d set up. Now, there was a timer, but he really needed to show off right now. “Oh sweet sister, you haven’t learned a thing,” he said, moving a finger down to a button on his wrist, triggering the poisoned
frag mine implanted in the ceiling.

“How-“ she gasped before the ceiling exploded downward and coated her in a fine blue mist with some metal shards that damaged her lighter armor. Pistols in hand he unloaded with the poison-laced bullets, each one striking true against her joints, chest, neck and hands. Her body twitched and bled as she writhed on the ground, right as the poison took hold.

He strode through the mist, his helmet allowing him to breath without harm, laughing at his wounded sibling. He pulled out a knife, one laced with the poison and slammed it down on her wrist, pinning it to the ground. “Feeling a little down? Short of breath? Disconnected? Ah, don’t worry, I’m not going to kill you today. Don’t have the time, or the resources.”

He holstered his gun and lifted a finger. “Now, did you really think that I was just going to not investigate what I’m made of? Let me tell you, Revelean found my biology fascinating, if concerning. The Legion you call them? Well, it’s infeasible to completely replace all of it. But some? Well…”

He absently fired a pistol, shattering her kneecap. “Let’s just say that having a Sovereign who specializes in nanotechnology is exceptionally helpful in supplementation, especially when Fectorian was all too willing to experiment. So let me guess, you wanted to come here, planned to freeze your little slave-cells and call it a day?”

She didn’t answer, as she wheezed and gasped heavily. He grinned. “Oh, having some trouble breathing? Let me help.” He went over to his bag, whistling a tune and pulled out a grenade and walked by over. He considered just shoving it in her mouth, but she’d probably bite, so he instead shot her lower jaw off leaving a bloody line where it had been. Satisfied, he stuck the grenade in her mouth and pulled out the pin, and it spewed more of the poison into her mouth. “There we go.”

Oh, he was enjoying this way too much.

“So, let’s make this crystal clear,” he said absentmindedly, not really caring that she was too delirious or in pain to really listen. It wasn’t for her anyway, but whoever decided to extract her memories afterwards. “I. Am. Your. Enemy. You come down on Earth again, and I will be there to fuck up everything you do, and I guarantee the Battlemaster will look the other way. And please, stop underestimating me, because you suck quite a bit when you can’t rely on your purple space magic.”

He reloaded the pistol, continuing, and sitting down beside the body. “I know everything of your little cult. Your so-called Saints, your Orders, your experiments, everything. Your strengths and weaknesses. I know how to hide myself from your all-seeing god. All of you are so completely pathetic it’s hilarious. You can’t get anyone to join your insanity, so you go after weak-minded civilians. How does it feel to be the most hated thing in existence right now?” He gaffed. “You have to be really idiotic to think that little show in Korea would go down well, much less China.”

While part of this rant was definitely aimed at the bitch and the Bringer, it was something he really wanted to yell at the Imperator who was definitely just as guilty. But time to wrap it up. He wondered if he would actually kill her. On one hand, she’d be dead, but on the other, no one would hear his excellent speech and that was a shame.

Well, he was recording it, but he felt the Battlemaster wouldn’t really approve.

But there was Twitter…

Ah, something to debate later.
“Alright, I’ve got a few more cultists to kill,” he said, standing and going to his bag and pulled out a plasma saw. While he hadn’t really intended to use it on his sister, and wanted it more for cutting sniping nests and planting traps, it was going to be more useful. “Let’s delay your regeneration a bit.”

So wounded she was that she almost didn’t react to him removing her limbs. With some rope, he wrapped it around her head until he made a noose, dragged the leaking torso to the window and tossed the twitching body out, the poison grenade still lodged in her mouth. Once he was satisfied with the length, he tied it to the window.

He sincerely hoped anyone looking up would appreciate the message – and that the Creator got the message.

But his place was compromised now. Time to move shop and help some more Humans.

Humming a lively tune, he packed up, ecstatic at how the day was going. He knew that one day he would look back fondly on it as one of the best days of his life.

Although he did have to survive it first.

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Beijing – China

3/12/2017 – 7:14 P.M.

The march continued; unstoppable and unrelenting.

They had cut their way through hundreds of brainwashed thralls; lost or suffered hundreds of wounds and deaths, and paid for every inch taken with blood from enemy and ally alike. Kaya had never thought she would participate in any conflict so bloody, and she didn’t know if there was a similar point in Human history that could compare in scale and loss of life.

War was…not specifically sanitized now, but certainly beyond the archaic times of the medieval era and earlier. Weapons were more lethal and technology advanced to the point of quick and deadly strikes. Mass armies weren’t as common, nor were invasions. Fighting had been transitioning to be automated before the aliens came. Even now combat had been largely waged across the distance.

But not here, not now.

And the fact that the Order of Terra existed showed that there was still a place for this kind of brutal close-quarters combat, if updated for an era of rifles and laser guns. That was no more apparent than a full day of fighting almost non-stop. Her body was exhausted, but she had reached a numbing point where she barely felt it.

It helped that now they were supported by some group of ADVENT psions she’d never seen before. A good thing too, because with the noose closing around Isomnum, they needed all the help they could get. And she felt the change in atmosphere the closer they got to the Square. A pit of unease; of foreboding growing inside her.

Terror.

Sometimes she thought she was seeing things that weren’t there, or corpses were twitching when they shouldn’t be, or that something was coming on her right now and she needed to shoot it just to
be safe. Paranoia and fear were growing in her, in all of them. Nothing she could easily point to either; just a nameless call of the unknown.

*You can’t take chances. You cannot die today.*

A voice whispered in her head, relentless as it grew louder and louder the closer she got.

In battle, she could push it aside. But when it died down, it was more difficult.

Yet the urges came out of nowhere and even stronger – it was taking everything she could to focus her mind on the here and now, and some of the other soldiers weren’t so disciplined. Already there had been several accidental deaths, and even more accidental wounds. She was proud her own unit was still keeping it together, although Genevieve had admitted that she’d *almost* struck her one time when she was sure something was creeping behind her.

But everyone was getting tired, even as they felt a surge of renewed energy with the end in sight. Blood of multiple species coated the shields, weapons, and armor of the Order of Terra, and many of the ADVENT soldiers assisting them. The treads of the tanks were tarnished with blood and gore of their own. Everywhere they stepped Kaya felt like they were continually treading over corpses.

*So many dead.*

It was difficult to believe that the urban landscape didn’t change, not since they’d started. There shouldn’t be this many dead in one place. Had she not been standing in it herself, she wouldn’t have believed carnage on this scale was happening. But it was very much real, and it wasn’t over yet.

But the end was in sight, she knew it.

The city intersection they were fighting to claim was under some of the heaviest guard, and in return ADVENT had sent their best to assist. Tanks attacked from multiple streets, the shield lines of Squires fired unceasingly, the MDUs continued meticulously eliminating enemies with mechanical precision, and the Priests behind them shielded their minds, ravaged the enemies, and showed the power ADVENT itself could bring to bear.

None so impressive as the special forces unit that had been sent to assist them. A *psionic* special forces unit. The Pantheon they were called, a name that she’d found interesting until she saw why they were called that. They did not hold to the uniform nature of ADVENT, and their armor was unique to each member.

There were also several soldiers from XCOM, though these ones wore armor that looked like it was made of stone. They stood out to her for some reason, likely since they were not even using a standard kind of psionics, but these were tinged in blue, not purple, even if they were clearly the same abilities.

In times like this, she felt unmatched when she witnessed these masters of a power that was as alien to her as magic face off against the shining soldiers of the Bringer who maintained a similar mastery. The conflict facing them now was fought on a level where she could only fire and pray she was helping.

“Got more thralls incoming,” Vicki coughed as she fired her rifle from the shield line. “Baptists are engaging the Pantheon and XCOM.”

“Hold line and open fire!” Freya commanded, along with the other Standardbearers. “Soldiers, fire
It hadn’t taken long for ADVENT to form a symbiotic relationship with the soldiers, as when the shield wall held position, the soldiers went up to between the gaps and added their own firepower to the avalanche of lead that was being flung towards the enemy. Kaya and most of the ADVENT snipers had taken up places on the tanks, and took out priority targets.

“Kaya, situational report,” Freya demanded.

“XCOM soldiers causing significant distraction in the ranks,” she reported. “Pantheon operatives Ares and Zeus focusing down a half-dozen of the Baptists.”

Which didn’t do justice to the battle playing out. The operative who’d called himself Ares was close to the largest man she’d ever seen, carrying a warhammer that was probably taller than she was. He also appeared to be a powerful psion as well, judging from the actual creation of a damaging psionic aura which she noted was hurting those around him by causing purple tears and rifts. The sweeps of his weapon were also augmented with psionic waves which extended their reach.

In any event, he was successfully managing to fight of three of the Baptists due to his sheer ferocity in getting in close quarters with them. The operative calling herself Zeus was less engaged at the front, but an extremely dangerous force to be reckoned with. She stood out because she was hovering in the air telekinetically, her armor was lighter, more curved, and white as opposed to the hard red and black of Ares, who looked like a walking tank in protection.

A purple distortion flowed around her as well, and she was summoned psionic maelstroms of sizes and intensities which even the Baptists were struggling to counter. They attempted to counter by firing psionic energies up at her, but were thwarted when a psionic shield manifested and blocked it. She’d responded by summoning a maelstrom which ripped the Baptist apart.

On the other side the XCOM soldiers were fighting their way towards the robed figures that were called the Weavers. There were three of them and they appeared to primarily be using their thralls to put bodies between themselves and the soldiers. It was not working.

The number of thralls charging the shield line was thinned through sustained fire, and the snipers with tank autocannons turned the remainder into shredded meat. By now they knew enough to priority target the Converted and the psionic thralls. It did help that the Squires were armored enough that even the psionic suicide bombers wouldn’t kill them outright, just damage them severely.

“Be advised that there will be airstrikes incoming shortly,” the voice from ADVENT Command said. “Targets are infrastructure alien forces are taking advantage of.”

“They’re targeting the Square!” Genevieve whooped with a ragged cry. “We’re almost there!”

Airstrikes had been taking place in the past few hours, although they appeared to largely be targeting chemical plants to release poison into the air and poison any thralls in the area. Their filters would work, but Kaya couldn’t say she liked the idea. But if it would reduce the fighting… well, it was justifiable.

A few minutes later, she saw orange streaks fall from the sky and into the city away from her. They all felt the reverberations seconds later. The Weavers were reached by the XCOM soldiers and while they tried putting up a fight, they were killed seemingly without much trouble. The Baptists were also falling, unable to fully stand against the psionic power arrayed against them.
She lined up a few shots of her own, and fired when openings showed. She hit one, which likely
did nothing more than distract it, but it gave Ares an opening to slam upwards with his hammer,
and then down fully on the head, crushing it.

It seemed like it was starting to snowball in their favor. Victory was in sight, only a few short
blocks away.

“March!” Freya and the Standardbearers ordered, and the line began advancing once again as the
Baptists were eliminated with help from the XCOM soldiers.

Soon, the nightmare would be over.

They just needed to survive a little longer.

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Tiananmen Square, Beijing – China

3/12/2017 – 8:19 P.M.

The noose had tightened, and Tiananmen Square was now under direct siege.

Defenses had been prepared, and the normally open square was now covered in barricades and
improvised cover, the revelry of the previous day abandoned and the litter and food from the event
left to rot. Thousands of thralls still packed the square, along with many of the Converted.

The soldiers of the Bringer were about to make their final stand, and they would not go quietly.
ADVENT couldn’t identify how many were left, but they estimated that it was under thirty.
Isomnum had also not been spotted yet, though his presence was nonetheless apparent as even the
telepathic might of the Priests, Agents of T’Leth, and now Sana’Ligna couldn’t completely
suppress the feelings of terror and flight which gripped every individual at some point or another.

The front lines of ADVENT stood, broke, and reformed multiple times; overwhelmed initially by
the overload of psionic permeation, the marching thralls, and the aftermath of the feasts which still
showed blood and parts of Humans strewn around. Not everyone could withstand the sheer power
of the Dread Lord – but most endured.

Cracks of gauss weapons and flashes of green were seen from the ADVENT lines, firing into the
oncoming rush of thralls. Purple psionics flared in the skies from both sides as the Baptists were
attempting to distract Caelior, while the Pantheon, Priests, and XCOM were firing psionic rifts and
lances into the midst of the mobs.

“Fire!” Came one of the orders, and the line of Purifiers besides Oliver unleashed streams of white-
orange flame that incinerated the charging lines. He did his own part, firing into the crowds of the
Converted who followed. The MECs were back with them, and also firing streams of napalm into
the mobs from the alleyways, encircling them in a ring of fire and death.

Kane was taking the lead directly into the Square, a number of Order soldiers and ADVENT
squad behind him. Axis assisted by ensuring those following him – not Kane himself – were
shielded telepathically. So many offensives were taking place at once it was impossible for Oliver
to follow all of them. Sana was a short distance away, petrifying the front waves of thralls and
healing the wounded.

Overhead, Archangels roared and performed sweeping attacks of flame and psionics. Viktoria
turned nearly an eighth of the square into a rippling psionic maelstrom which turned everything
inside into shredded meat, bones, and metal. The Chronicler led his Agents in direct combat against
the Bringer’s soldiers, each one seeming to be possessed of unearthly power and might.

Tanks reached the front lines and began plowing forward, no longer afraid of the mobs as the true
threats were being targeted by T’Leth and XCOM. Those who weren’t completely shredded by the
autocannons fell under the treads of the tanks, crunching and breaking like toys. Blood flowed
from behind the tanks, and those who were still alive and crawling to attack were executed by the
legions following behind.

Caelior was attacking from another angle, and he was determined to end the fight.

“Come out, Dread Lord,” He roared, floating in the air and rippling with a telekinetic shield. The
thralls around him were flattened to the ground, and with a flick of his hand several Baptists were
clumpled into balls of flesh and metal. “You can hide no longer!”

Hands extended to all directions, and slowly squeezed into fists. The ground itself rumbled as
Oliver realized what Caelior was doing. There were three buildings in the Square; three ones which
were important places to the Chinese government and people – also where many were hiding
including Isomnum.

And Caelior was going to tear them apart.

ADVENT soldiers cheered when they saw what was happening, and attacked with renewed vigor
as they advanced foot by foot over a mound of twisted and broken bodies. To their credit the
Bringer’s soldiers attempted to attack Caelior psionically, but psionic shields erected by Priests and
XCOM psions put a short end to that, as well as the Chronicler closing in on the final main group
of the Bringer’s forces.

Oliver saw Fiona flash in and out at times in the midst of the battle, sometimes dueling with one of
the Stalkers, sometimes coming in to provide a swing of her sword and had killed several thralls.
What he also noticed was that sometimes she appeared around some of the Baptists, and instead of
attacking, got behind them and teleported away with them in her grasp.

The three buildings shook, and dust and stones began to fall from their skeletons as the
compression began to take hold. Cracks formed in the entire exterior of the buildings, and they
only spiderwebbed further as time progressed. Those who were inside were rushing out, realizing
that there was no safety, no escape within.

Oliver knew that there were going to be many people who had once been part of the Chinese
government found among the dead. Or perhaps it was better that they wouldn’t be recognized here,
and simply be unrecognizable. Perhaps everyone who had been inside was now dead on some
random street. Whatever the case, there were fewer and fewer bodies to be thrown, and now
ADVENT soldiers were so desensitized to the horror they already experienced that putting down
former members of a foreign government wouldn’t phase them.

Not after they’d had to put down women and children.

Oliver swapped out his clip and resumed firing into the mob, something he was good at now. The
joints were ideal targets, particularly the legs. When they went down, it was much easier to kill
them as they crawled or they were run over by the tanks. Over half of the Square was taken over,
with the Chronicler and Pantheon pushing far ahead.

It was difficult to even see the Chronicler, so encased he was in his own personal psionic
maelstrom which ripped apart any thrall which came before him. Crevan was standing on one of
the tanks, and calling down lighting strikes on the exact locations of the Bringer soldiers; they no longer came from his fingers either, just one hand raised to the sky while the other held the staff with the Sovereign Orb blazing a shining blue at the top.

One of the buildings – Oliver didn’t know which one – suddenly imploded on itself with groans, and the sound of shattering concrete and bending steel. With a triumphant roar, Caelior lifted the hand directed towards the building, and it lifted every piece of the shattered building, and slowly coalesced into a massive collection of concrete and steel, which he threw into the northmost building which nearly broke it then and there.

“That flushed him out!” He heard Sierra on the comms say. “Isomnum spotted!”

“Where!” Kane immediately demanded.

“Just came out of the building Caelior hasn’t trashed, got a small army of Baptists with him. Nothing that can’t be handled.”

“Heading that direction,” the Chronicler stated. “We’ll handle him. T’Leth wants his mind before he is executed.”

“Daas!” Kane called. “Follow me!”

Their Shoggoth Handler was still with them, and the black animal was having quite a bit of fun it seemed, turning the thralls – and a few Bringer soldiers – into pretzels. Daas was firing his own plasma rifle, but came to assist as Kane began pushing forward with his small entourage. Oliver scowled, wanting to call him off, but also knowing Kane probably wouldn’t listen.

Might as well help him out, and there were mostly only thralls left.

He told one of the tanks to follow his lead, and riding on the top of it, directed it to carve a path to where Isomnum had been spotted. And from the top, he could see what was happening. Isomnum glowed with psionic energy as did the Baptists around him. Even from this distance, still telepathically protected, he felt a wave of nausea and fear appear and disappear just as quick.

The Chronicler blasted a wave of psionic energy forwards which vaporized one of the Baptists, while others protected themselves with psionic shields. The other Agents began their attacks as well and one of them unveiled a Sovereign Orb glowing from a box, telekinetically lifting it into the air as it glowed brighter.

The Baptists suddenly stopped and fell to the ground, clutching their heads as if puppets with strings cut off. Oliver didn’t know what had happened, but it was clearly painful for them. The Chronicler and his men showed no mercy, and executed each Baptist one by one as they marched on Isomnum who backed up, and attempted to summon some weak psionic attacks.

But there was no escape, as the building he had exited out of crumbled under the power of Caelior. The Chronicler extended an arm, and Isomnum was lifted slightly into the air, and then forced to the ground on his knees. Oliver felt like they were saying something, but he was too far away to even begin to guess what.

The Sovereign Orb was telekinetically moved to the hand of the Chronicler, and without ceremony, he grabbed one of Isomnum’s hands, and placed it on the orb. Isomnum seemed to freeze, and then went limp. In a few minutes, they had reached the Ethereal who was almost certainly having his mind ravaged by a Sovereign One.

The Chronicler saw Kane and his entourage coming and held up a hand. “No! Not yet!”
“When!” Kane demanded, throwing aside his Browning as Oliver jumped down from the tank and rushed to intervene. “You will not keep him alive!”

“Alive, no,” the Chronicler said, lifting a hand in warning to Kane. “But his mind is useful. More useful to extract what he knows intact before you splatter his brains across the pavement.” He lowered his voice. “Patience, or I will kill him the moment T’Leth finishes.”

Oliver could feel Kane seething, his body tense in constrained rage. He put a hand on his shoulder firmly. “Don’t do anything stupid. We’ve already won, just a little longer.”

Behind them Daas walked up with the Shoggoth behind him. Daas whistled, and the Shoggoth trilled happily and wriggled toward the Ethereal and began wrapping itself around the Dread Lord. “Hope you don’t mind,” Daas said with a shrug to Kane. “Kill will be yours, but I’ve wanted to see what she’d do to a live Ethereal – non-lethally, of course.”

Kane gave a single nod.

The Chronicler motioned and the Sovereign Orb floated back to his hand and Isomnum collapsed to the ground, though not before the Chronicler removed the helm that once covered the Dread Lord’s head. “He’s all yours,” the Chronicler said, stepping back. “Try to leave something for Vahlen.”

Oliver doubted Kane heard the request, so focused on the Ethereal in front of him that all else faded away. Isomnum seemed to be stunned, as he barely reacted to Kane picking him up and slamming him onto his back with the Shoggoth adjusting accordingly, audibly breaking limbs as it did so. Oliver had wondered what Kane would do, what elaborate death he had planned for his nemesis.

It appeared that he had a simple solution.

A fist raised, then fell, then repeated over and over. It wasn’t long until the corrosive cobalt blood was seen, but Kane didn’t even consider stopping. The fists rose and fell, again and again, and still Isomnum barely seemed to react, perhaps still too overwhelmed by T’Leth taking his mind. Ethereal physiology was good, Oliver knew that, but it was giving way to Kane’s relentless beating.

They watched for entire minutes, silently as he wailed on the Ethereal body that twitched slightly as it died, and the sounds of impact turned to that of something wet and squishy. The eyes had burst long ago, and the blue blood coated his fists and had eaten through some of the lining of the armor, though kept being repaired. What had once resembled a face now just looked like a purple mash of bones, blood, and flesh.

“Alright, he’s gone on enough,” the Chronicler said quietly. “Let’s get him back.”

Oliver and him walked up. “Kane,” Oliver began tentatively, knowing better than to immediately pull back the massive man. “Enough. He’s dead.”

Kane didn’t respond, and buried the fist back down in the flesh of what had been Isomnum’s face. “Kane,” Oliver insisted more intensely. “He’s dead.”

He reached down to grab and arm, and was yanked forward as Kane simply ignored the pull and continued his beating. He wasn’t registering anything but the task in front of him. The Chronicler muttered something and he briefly cut comm links with Oliver – though he saw that he was still connected to Kane.

The massive soldier suddenly stopped, and stood up, breathing heavily. He let Kane calm down for
a minute, as he stood over the corpse of his nemesis. “You did it,” he repeated. “He’s dead now.”

There was a long moment. “He is dead.” He looked to his hands which were covered in blood. “I killed him.”

“Good job,” the Chronicler said, handing him Isomnum’s helmet. “Keepsake if you want it. You earned it.” There was a moment of hesitation, and then Kane took the helmet, looking at it closely, clearly thinking to himself. What he was thinking about, Oliver didn’t know and knew better than to pry.

“Let’s go,” Oliver told him, giving him a hard pat on the back. “I think we’ve earned a rest.”

Kane said nothing, but tucked the helmet under his arm, and followed his lead.

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Tiananmen Square, Beijing – China

3/12/2017 – 8:49 P.M.

Disbelief.

That was what coursed through Isomnum’s mind.

They should not have made it so far.

They should have been stopped.

And there was no means of easy escape. ADVENT had marched on the city from all sides, and they had not succumbed to the millions upon millions of mindless thralls he had directed towards them. Humans were supposed to have easily exploitable psyches. They were supposed to exhibit compassion and sympathy for those who were hurt or wounded.

They should have seen the weeping women and children and moved them to safety.

But…they hadn’t.

Instead they were gunned down. It was not just the obvious bait he left, they were methodically finding and hunting down every single living person in the city out of fear of possible corruption. It was…unexpected. Unnerving for he hadn’t anticipated such a steeled and pragmatic response from the Humans.

Could he possibly have underestimated an alien species so completely?

It couldn’t be. Not like this. He had of course performed hundreds of hours of experiments worth of work on Humans. He knew what worked on them and what didn’t. But all of his research, all of his planning, it seemed worthless at this moment because they were not behaving correctly. Why?

What had changed so significantly?

Had ADVENT somehow changed everyone somehow? Was such psychological development possible?

He would need to carefully re-elaborate his position on the Humans. Either by mistake in interpretation, or simple underestimation, he was going to lose if he did not escape – and soon. They were in the Square, and he would have to fight his way out soon. His presence was being mitigated by the sheer number of psions in the field, and…her.
He seethed as he pulled out the holocommunicator.

Sana’Ligna…

Another traitor. He would take exceptional pleasure in her execution. Unlike the Humans, he knew exactly what to do to break her. He had wanted to reduce that woman to a pathetic wreck for some time, as such weakness was sickening to behold. Potentially he would drag her to Sanctuary and force her to watch as he tortured every single one of her patients to death.

The air around his flashed with power as he was filled with righteous indignation.

The hologram of the Imperator appeared. He waited for Isomnum to speak. “I require extraction,” he said bluntly. “The Humans have proven more efficient than anticipated. Failure to do so could result in my capture or death.”

“Yes,” the Imperator nodded. “It could.”

He waited a few seconds. “Attempting to escape on my own is unlikely to be successful,” he continued, slightly frustrated as the Imperator did not seem to grasp the situation. “Assistance would not be requested if it were otherwise.”

“I know,” the Imperator answered blandly. “Explain to me why I should intervene after what you have done? What your shortsighted ambition has wrought?”

Isomnum’s eyes slowly blinked. “I have struck at the heart of the largest cities on Earth. I have utilized the power of the Bringer – something you have refrained from doing as of yet – and proved that ADVENT cannot properly stand against them unless their greatest are brought to the front. I have occupied the minds and hearts of Humans across the world and commanded the greatest response yet from ADVENT. I destroyed the government of this nation and nearly brought the execution of the Chancellor.” He jabbed a finger at the hologram. “And this is after you allowed the coward Battlemaster to withdraw official support and stranded us here. And yet I did not die as he planned, but instead have achieved what I set out to do.”

“You set out to die?” The Imperator clasped one pair of hands behind his back. “You directly disobeyed the strategic and tactical commands of the Battlemaster. Your actions have indeed caught the attention of ADVENT, and as a result they are threatening to destroy you. You have awakened the wrath of a Sovereign One, fool, and now T’Leth will be heavily involved going forward. Your actions have weakened the faith of our allies, and caused the desertion of Sana’Ligna. Your actions have done nothing but weaken the Collective, and all you have achieved is learning what happens when you underestimate a species so completely and utterly. I have little use for those who are too blinded by their own ambition and ideology to understand the galaxy no longer revolves around the Ethereal – and it does not revolve around you, Dread Lord.”

Isomnum stood still, and his voice grew indignant. “Do not patronize me, Imperator. We both know I am too valuable to abandon. I will do what no one else is capable of or has the will to do. You will always need a Dread Lord, the one to take the fall and blame for actions which are necessary and what the small-minded consider abhorrent.”

The Imperator was silent for a long moment. “Perhaps that is the wrong direction to take. You may be right, Isomnum, perhaps I will always need a Dread Lord. But I feel confident in perhaps attempting a different strategy, and if necessary I will find one – but it will not be you. You have served your purpose well, and rest assured that even in your stumbling you have provided me information of value.”
This…the Imperator could not be serious.

Impossible.

“You need me,” Isomnum insisted, voice growing more intense. He would not beg, nor would his voice break. But he...could not believe he would be abandoned like this. “If not now, when the Synthesized return. And you will not find another who can handle them as I have.”


He almost crushed the holocommunicator. “You will lose the others if you show your willingness to abandon one of our own, one of our last. You cannot simply abandon me merely because you disapprove of my methods. You are smarter than that, and it will show how disposable we are to you. Your support will erode and you will inevitably fall.”

To his shock, the Imperator laughed. “Amusing, Dread Lord,” he said. “But I will take my chances. And when news of your death spread, there will not be mourning, there will not be concern; there will be relief and celebration. You were a necessary monster, Isomnum, but your usefulness has come to an end. Die as you lived; alone and in terror.”

The link cut off.

Isomnum stared in silence.

Disbelief.

Impossible.

Coward.

Fool!

“Lord Isomnum,” One of the Carmine Baptists rushed up. “We need to leave. This building is being attacked by Caelior and we would be trapped within it should we stay.”

Isomnum looked around to see that the entire room was shaking and the sounds of cracks and breaking was apparent. He had no choice, he needed to attempt an escape – and when he did, the Imperator would pay. Pain was no issue, he could endure it, and he could quite easily face any individual who was thrown at him.

“Gather what remains and follow me,” he commanded, idly missing Sonoda who he realized would have been useful here. She had been efficient in predicting what would be needed. An ideal Human; and understandable one. Not like these ones who ADVENT used. The remaining Baptists gathered around them and they marched outside and he saw the sight of his defeat.

His thralls were broken; scattered, and falling to the lines of tanks and ADVENT soldiers. The three symbols of the Square were essentially destroyed, with two reduced to scrap and rubble. He looked around and only saw ADVENT. No path presented itself – and then he saw the Agents of T’Leth approach.

He focused his acute psionic power on them – and realized he could not penetrate. Something was blocking him. The Baptists charged, but they were defeated with an unnatural ease. They must be under the protection of the Sovereign, it seemed. He should not linger. He moved backwards, and summoned some psionic energy he directed at the soldiers which was blocked with ease.
The leading one – the Chronicler reached out, and Isomnum found himself in a telekinetic grasp. Something trivial he should be able to escape – yet he could not touch their minds. He could not feel fear…but there was something akin to unease growing in him. “Do not worry, Dread Lord,” the voice of T’Leth emanated from the Chronicler as Isomnum was forced to his knees, despite trying to fight it. “Your death will not come yet. Your mind still has some use for me.”

He did not understand…until a glowing ball floated over to the Chronicler. He knew what those were – and knew it could not touch him else he would be lost. But he was powerless to stop the telekinetic pull forcing the hand forward, which the Chronicler grabbed and placed on the orb.

It was cold.

And then he was gone.

He found himself in a deep blue area, as if he was underwater and the light was tinted a deep teal. It was silent; very silent. He saw no place to run to, and instinctively knew that he was being watched and kept here telepathically. He felt the presence of the Sovereign.

It was all-encompassing.

He did not feel fear. Such had been purged from him.

Perhaps he could yet resist.

The air rumbled.

“Amusing. To think that even at the end, you still cling to your delusions. Admirable, if lacking in intelligence.” The deep voice physically hurt his mind, and forces suddenly clamped his body together, his arms locked to his sides and his legs together. He looked down to see his feet had sunk below the cloudy ‘ground’ pinning him in place.

In front of him a creature appeared.

Had he not already been paralyzed, he would have froze.

No…not this. How could he know?

Malicious delight permeated the air. “Your mind is not closed to me, Dread Lord. This is my domain – not yours. And I find your fear of this particular creature…warranted.”

The figure was bipedal and tall, standing nearly his own height. The body appeared to be composed out of thick and thin sinews, colored various shades of green as if the muscles of a creature were exposed. It wore no armor, unlike the many thralls of the Synthesized he had fought. But he had never forgotten the long vine-like fingers and the constantly writhing and moving skin.

The aliens had no faces, at least not normal ones. Their skulls were shaped similar to Humans and Vitakarians, with a mass of tentacle vines falling from halfway down the face and entangling with the chest; a nose cavity shaped as a three-way slit rested just above, and two milky-white eyes set just to the sides of the face.

The alien lifted the fingers and moved them, the tips of the digits expanding and contracting as miniscule sinews grew and retracted around them. “A fascinating species. One I had little idea existed until I looked into your mind – so close are they to the forefront of your mind you almost don’t recognize it anymore. I found such an aura you commanded curious. Fear has a source. True terror cannot be faked and yet you claim to have none.”
The puppet of T’Leth walked forward slowly. “No…that is your secret that none knew about you. One you perhaps had forgotten yourself even if you drew upon your primal reaction. You are no master of fear because you studied it in labs and countless victims, it’s not because you saw firsthand the effects of such dangerous emotions.”

Isomnum tried to move away as the creature came forward slowly until his head was frozen and the alien put a hand around his neck. “No…” T’Leth mused. “It was because you are afraid. Only one thing has instilled such terror that you will go to any lengths necessary to ensure it is never felt again. Let it awaken in you again, Isomnum. Perhaps remember what it was like to fear.”

He felt it as a tickle at first, little sinews going into his ears; worming their way through his skull. More then entered his mouth which he tried to bite down on, but to his horror the severed sinews did not die, but wiggled their way down his throat as thicker ones forced his mouth open and continued to go down it.

He felt everything.

“A fascinating means of reproduction,” T’Leth said with amusement. “An excellent design choice. An insurance that such a species can never die, but merely…appropriate. And this could have happened to you, Dread Lord. In fact, it will. You will sit here as you are slowly converted into an alien thing which will turn you into an organic puppet, feeding off of your mind and body. You will be cannibalized over decades with your mind being saved for last.”

He felt the sinews under his skin now, penetrating the blood vessels and nervous system. He had read so many reports and studies on the capabilities of this species, and now he was serving as the test subject himself for torture that had only been speculated.

So he screamed.

There was no one who would hear.

Not now.

Not here.

“The mind is a funny thing, Dread Lord,” T’Leth said, voice now cold. “Did you know that you are already dead?”

The pain was becoming so intense that he could barely focus – but then he suddenly found himself back in China, with his mask ripped off somewhere, face exposed to the elements. He was no longer restrained by telekinetics, but by a mass of black tentacles which squeezed and broke his limbs into pieces.

But he also noticed the blue tint above, and the creature was standing a short distance away – even as the sinews continued to appropriate his body, wriggling like worms and leeched under his skin. In front of him though was an XCOM soldier. He was massive and wore black armor. Isomnum did not know who or why he was there – or why the other soldiers in the area were holding back.

“He would be disappointed to know you forgot who he is,” T’Leth said. “But perhaps you will be interested to know that he survived an attack of yours. He awakened, and now he will kill your body.”

The soldier advanced, weaponless, and punched Isomnum in the face with enough force to crack his skull. A second punch followed the first. Then a third. More and more rained down upon him until his vision was spotty and bloody. He screamed, though not from the punches, but from the
sinews that were tightening around his heart and lungs.

At some point, he was aware he died, yet he still felt the impacts and the soldier turned his head and face into bloody paste, ignoring the corrosive blood which splattered everywhere.

Then it was gone, and he was back where he had been, with the alien still holding him, and now the green sinews were creeping into his eyepieces, the micro-thin points reflecting blue light, as they hovered just over his eyes.

“Your body is dead, Dread Lord,” T’Leth said. “But your mind…it will endure for now. You will only be allowed rest when I am content with what I have learned and have served your punishment. There are few creatures I have encountered worthy of such a fate – you may count yourself as one of them. And perhaps a seeming lifetime of torment being turned into the thing you fear most will be sufficient justice.”

The points jabbed into the corners of his eyes, and then more joined, thicker and thicker until his eyes were blinded and reformed as the sinews wrapped around and dissolved them. So he screamed in the utter darkness. He never even felt as T’Leth pushed deep into his mind, he never felt him sift through centuries of memories.

After a certain point, he felt himself be released.

And he walked.

No, his body walked forward.

His mind screamed in protest, but he could do nothing but passively observe as he was turned into a puppet; a walking weapon for something far older and dangerous than his kind, or potentially any others.

“And do not worry,” T’Leth reassured from the darkness. “I will not let you fall to insanity. You will be aware, of every second of your prolonged existence. I can hear every thought, and you will beg, plead, and wish to be condemned to death. But you will not be granted such. Not until I am satisfied. But do not worry about diverting my time; I assure you it is no trouble.”

His body walked forward.

No dignity was left. He pleaded in his mind for death as more of his body began being consumed. He did everything possible, from pleading forgiveness and contrition to apologizing for every single thing he had done. T’Leth was indifferent, and the alien parasite now consuming his body dragged him across the endless blue watery landscape.

His sight had been partially restored, tainted as it was by the alien biology.

And he saw nothing.

But he felt everything.

Time soon lost all concept for him, as he kept walking the endless space over and over.

But T’Leth kept his promise.

He was aware of everything. He could feel everything. In the fog of pain and horror, he understood that there was one thing he was right about.
There were fates worse than death.

The Dread Lord continued to walk, as he was slowly and completely stripped of what he was and turned into his sole fear; a puppet of an alien master, yet he continued to retain his self, right until the end.

His memories soon faded, his few enjoyments and times in Empire, those were gone. He knew he had been someone, he knew he had been powerful. But all he knew of was his constant and eternal suffering, and that there was only one sure truth in this reality he found himself in.

He was trapped here.

Forever.

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*Dreadnought of the Harbinger – Collective Space*

*3/12/2017 – 10:01 P.M.*

“Harbinger Trask?”

Patricia turned to see the Zararch officer walk up to her, and offer a salute. She had been introduced to him after taking command of the Dreadnought, commissioned and approved by the Zar’Chon himself. Zar’marian’vitiary, one of the top analysts of the organization. Who had been stuck monitoring Nulorian activity and was now moved to the war effort.

Right now, she wore no armor, and only her white uniform the Imperator had first given her at the beginning. As a Harbinger, and Avatar of the Imperator, it was important to convey his authority in her position of command. When it came time for combat, she would don the battlesuit, but for now such was unnecessary and made her more approachable.

The Avatar mask still hung on her waist though.

“What is it, Officer?” She asked, not raising her voice as the pilots worked in relative silence.

“We have confirmation,” he handed her a datapad. “Isomnum is dead. XCOM has taken the body away and ADVENT is spreading it everywhere they can.”

The corners of her lips curled up. “Expected. His loss won’t be mourned, and he has weakened China for a future assault. No one will miss him. Although…” she paused. “What effect will this have on morale do you think?”

He hesitated, considering. She felt his hesitation. “Speak freely. I’m curious.”

“We respect the Elders and the work they contributed to preserving our species,” he said slowly. “But Isomnum…he…was not exactly looked upon with favor. The soldiers and personnel will hide it, but they are likely happy at his demise, despite losses sustained in China. The Battlemaster gained a significant amount of respect when he severed connections to Isomnum.”

“Good, nothing of value was lost,” she said, reading the report slowly. “Isomnum’s purpose is served, and no one cared for him in life, and his death will only be met with celebration. What of Sana’Ligna?”

“Nothing has been determined yet,” he said, shaking his head. “We suspect she has been taken to a
secure site for debriefing. Her defection, should it get out…that will be more difficult to reconcile. She is among the most revered.”

Patricia had been thinking about that. “I’m not positive she has defected. Not the way we think, at least. That is too brazen an action for her. I suspect she has an ulterior motive.”

“Which is what, Harbinger?”

“Simple,” she lowered the datapad. “She wants to end the war on all sides. She wants peace. She will find out that neither ADVENT or XCOM will want that now, nor can we back down now. We will have to see, but I would not place her firmly as a defector yet.”

“As you say, Harbinger,” he nodded. “I will keep you appraised of the situation.”

A nod. “When will we arrive in-system?”

“One, week, Harbinger. You took command at an ideal time.”

“Well,” she gave a slight smile. “Teleportation has it’s uses. Dismissed, and thank you.”

He saluted, and left, leaving her alone on the bridge surrounded by displays and holograms. Soon, she would reveal herself and everything would change.

Soon, the war would be entering a new, and likely final phase.

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To be continued in Chapter 50

After the Terror

Chapter End Notes

Couple things which are mostly unrelated to the conclusion of the Isomnum arc. Next chapter will answer some of the questions you may have and bring in the next phase of the war as Act III comes to an end. Anyway, I am aware of the recent development with Phoenix Point and suffice to say I'm extremely disappointed. Julian Gollop has lost a lot of my respect for his shortsighted decisions, and I got my refund for the game. Not pleased, but I guess I'll just look forward to XCOM 3 now whenever that comes.

On a more positive note, I would like to thank the reader whose been working to update the TvTropes page. Don't know what you go by outside of the site, but I want to say your additions are noted and appreciated. Thank you.
No, you aren't misremembering things. This was originally a different chapter title, but as I was outlining and writing this, I realized it was going to be absurdly long and it was better to split it into two different chapters. The difference between a few weeks for a chapter and probably at least a month. So next chapter will be the end of Act III. I can promise that.
would not go against the Imperator, but not once did T’Leth get the impression that he believed she
was only a mere puppet – as he disliked the Imperator’s treatment of aliens – Humans especially –
as equals.”

“I...am inclined to agree with this assertion,” Aegis said, his voice slower than usual, as he was
still recovering from the previous battle. “I had warned of the Imperator’s persuasiveness. Yet I
suspect that Patricia has not fully joined of her own free will, but she thinks that she has joined
willingly. The Imperator’s presence distorts proper thinking—“

“Don’t make excuses for her, Aegis!” The Chronicler unexpectedly snarled. “Patricia isn’t some
hapless telepath who can’t block out a simple aura, nor is the Imperator someone who resorts to
such blatant measures. She joined willingly, end of story.”

“Isomnum was not the most stable of Ethereals…” Jackson proposed quietly, though her face was
grim. “Perhaps…”

“Isomnum was not insane,” the Chronicler stated firmly. “He merely had a highly warped and
distorted view of the galaxy and those who inhabited it. Pose these questions to Sana if you do not
believe them. She most certainly knows.”

“But...how?” Shen’s voice was a mixture of pain and confusion. “After everything that’s
happened, after seeing the truth from the beginning...what could make her turn like this?”

The ghost of a smile devoid of emotion and joy appeared on the Chronicler’s face. “The Imperator
apparently has a twisted view of the Sovereign Ones. He learned of the cycles, and has now
determined that the greatest threat is not the Synthesized, but the Sovereign Ones themselves who
he believes perpetuate the cycles over and over.”

“The issue is that he is convinced that every single Sovereign One is the same based on what little
he knows,” the Chronicler continued. “He believes they are all malicious manipulators only
concerned with complete domination over all life. He intends to purge the Sovereigns from the
galaxy and ‘break the cycle’.”

The Commander shook his head. “That won’t work. Not on his own.”

“No, but he determined this after he forged an alliance with Mosrimor,” the Chronicler clarified,
resting against the wall. “And has never trusted his supposed Sovereign ‘ally’ which is why his
involvement in the war has been limited. But the Imperator is aware on his own he stands little
chance, which is where the Bringer comes in. He is determined to allow it to cross into a body
which he would control through a kind of mental conditioning – and use it against the other
Sovereigns.”

As much as he hated to admit it, the Commander could see the thought process behind this. The
picture of what the Imperator actually seemed to be planning suddenly made certain actions much
clearer. “Out of curiosity...what would the Bringer be like should he cross into a physical body?”

A pause. “We don’t know.” The Chronicler finally admitted. “But...there is no entity like it, and
theoretically it is possible that psionics as we understand it would exist only at the whim of the
Bringer. The Psionosphere itself would be whatever he could will it, and I imagine that you can fill
in the implications of that yourself. In short, it would pose a significant threat to the other
Sovereigns.”
“Are you saying that he could succeed?” Iosif demanded incredulously.

The Chronicler snorted. “No. There is little that would unite the Sovereigns, but the emergence of the Bringer would ensure that the Imperator – and very likely all species associated with him – will be eradicated from the face of the galaxy. He does not know this, of course, but his plan is convincing and foolproof for those ignorant as to the true nature of the Sovereigns and the galaxy.”

“All of this makes it clear,” Creed said in a low, tempered voice. “I see how he did it. Patricia responds to logical arguments and plans. She had no idea of the Sovereigns before she was taken, no idea of what the galaxy was like beyond Earth. The Imperator knew that T’Leth was on Earth, or at least that there was a Sovereign there.”

Like a bolt of lightning, the revelation hit the Commander as well. “Damn,” he exhaled slowly. “It explains the invasion; the slow and quiet incursion. Why they didn’t invade with an army. Or approach us diplomatically. The Imperator believed that we were under the control of a Sovereign One.”

“Something he eventually ruled out, if the later invasion is anything to go by,” Zhang muttered. “Too little, too late.”

“That appears to be true,” the Chronicler nodded solemnly. “The goal of this entire operation is not to conquer a planet or even a species – those are just fronts for the real reason – to kill the Sovereign residing on Earth. Assimilating humanity into the Collective is the easiest justification to present to the Collective, regardless of how little sense it makes in the context of the Collective thus far.”

“And the Imperator believes he is right,” Creed said slowly, carefully. “Patricia would sense that. He would be more than happy to show and explain why he does so. You don’t know how powerful that would be to convince her. I think she genuinely would believe he is right.”

“She does,” the Chronicler said. “There is no ambiguity about it.”

“Context is important,” the Commander said slowly, an undercurrent of hardness in his voice. “And explains a good deal. But it is no excuse. She knows better, or knew better. His reasons do not change the fact that they invaded a world on false pretenses. It does not change the hundreds of thousands of innocent Humans abducted. It does not change the fact that they continue to invade our territories and kill our soldiers.”

Anger was a rare emotion to feel so strongly, but it grew in him now. “The Imperator lies, or perhaps is deluded enough to believe he is on the right side. He was not interested only in the Sovereign, else he would have approached peacefully – or quietly to determine if it existed. Once he determined our species was not under its influence, he should have pulled back and established peaceful relations if that was truly his intention.”

A long pause hung in the air. “And he didn’t. He wishes control over our species, the reasons are merely window dressing. He is no different than the Sovereigns, using his people as proxies against a foe they have no idea exists. Patricia has no excuse for this, and if she has abandoned our species because of it, she will be executed as the traitor she is.”

There were nods from those around the holotable, Creed included, though the pain was clear on his face. “Perhaps she can be reasoned with,” he said slowly, though without much hope. “She has only heard what the Imperator has told her. If she heard from you or-“

“Unlikely,” the Chronicler interrupted with a shake of his head. “She’s more than joined him, she
has become his Harbinger. Aegis, have you heard of the Avatar Project?"

“Yes, it was a theoretical experiment conceptualized by Revelean,” Aegis answered. “A means for Ethereals to use other species as proxies without risking us in direct conflict. The experiment went nowhere and was eventually discontinued.”

“Well, the Imperator ordered it started again,” the Chronicler answered. “And succeeded. She is the Avatar of the Imperator, and has a direct connection to him, and if Isomnum’s memories are to be believed, is now capable of merging with his mind and drawing anything from it, in addition to a degree of power.”


“Only more invasive,” the Chronicler clarified. “What I have with T’Leth is a mental connection, but little beyond that. When he…” he waved a hand. “Assumes control, it is only T’Leth who exists; who controls my body. I am merely an observer, and it is largely a haze. Here…it appears to be a mixture, where both minds become closer to something singular, with neither having full control. It is more dangerous to fight, though also will likely have ramifications for both who are linked. Not to mention the procedure for this is…also invasive, though Isomnum lacked the details.”

“This is extremely troubling,” Aegis stated. “Patricia is far more dangerous than we believe if this is true. If she has direct access to the mind of the Imperator…her limited Trask level by comparison will mean nothing next to the mastery the Imperator can call upon.”

“Would she be able to be handled?” The Commander asked the Chronicler. “We can clearly not afford to take chances here.”

“Of course she can be handled,” he answered. “Little doubt of that.”

Aegis did not seem convinced. “We would do best not to underestimate her capabilities now.”

“And we will not,” the Commander said firmly. “But this will be…we will need to think of the fallout when it is revealed. It will not be taken well.”

“I’ll work on something to address this,” Zhang nodded. “I suspect Sana may have more to add.”

“Let us hope,” the Commander agreed. “And see if she is going to be on our side or not.”

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Barracks, the Praesidium – Classified Location

3/14/2017 – 7:15 A.M.

The screen was bright in the dimly lit room, and Nuan didn’t feel like getting up to increase the overall brightness. She was more than content to just…sit. Relax. For the first time in what felt like days. So much had happened that she’d largely missed, and catching up on everything that had happened was a painful, though necessary task she felt she needed to do.

The only thing she had wished was that she could have been there when Isomnum was beaten to death by Kane. She didn’t know the man well, but made a point to go and thank him the night of the celebration. He hadn’t really responded to her outside to a short nod, but at least he knew. He’d probably been getting similar comments. Not a man of the spotlight, but she couldn’t blame him.
XCOM Intelligence had taken away their alien friend, and he was presumably being questioned. She’d been skeptical, but it appeared that he was an actually genuine defector and hoped that XCOM wouldn’t treat him too harshly. The civilians were currently staying in a refugee camp in Vietnam and being cared for, and if things recovered relatively quickly, they might be returning to China in a few months.

Although personally…Nuan doubted that they would want to go back. She wouldn’t. Too many bad memories, not to mention if China was ever attacked again, Hainan would again be on the front lines. Hopefully ADVENT would just…turn it into a defense point. It wasn’t safe for civilians to be living in it right now.

The celebration had been…fun…but she needed to get informed as to what was happening. There was so much that was just…an open question mark. She didn’t even know if there was a Chinese government anymore or if the Bringer had killed them all. For all she knew, the ISS had been completely purged.

Google wasn’t being helpful, and she was hesitant to ask the Commander or even Iosif at this moment as they had a lot to focus on. But she had a sinking feeling that it too had been similarly destroyed, which made her feel…empty. She had only been there a few years, but when she’d been accepted it had been one of the proudest moments of her life. The knowledge that she was one of the elite few to have achieved such an important position…well, she had loved it.

All in service to a country which was now devastated.

No one would mourn the ISS. Perhaps they would feel some respect for the Chinese soldiers who had died in defense of their country, but that was where the sympathies would end. Right or wrong, justified or not, the Chinese government – and especially Chinese intelligence – had been looked upon with disgust, hate, and fear by the western world – who was now for all intents and purposes ruling humanity.

Not that she resented ADVENT for achieving what many had tried – east and west – and failed to do. But it didn’t exactly thrill her to know that there were many, many people in ADVENT – citizens and officials alike – who were secretly pleased with this outcome. The Chinese state was effectively destroyed, the Chinese military and intelligence forces were heavily reduced and wholly dependent on ADVENT, and they would unquestionably be integrated into ADVENT at this point, as she knew they would not take ‘no’ for an answer.

She wondered if she was being unfair. Obviously, no one wanted this particular outcome, but ever since the Chinese had made an alliance, she’d known that ADVENT would eventually bring them into the fold, and the way they would do this was by allowing the Chinese to become weaker and weaker until they asked to join. The Bringer, Isomnum…they had just accelerated this timetable.

But again, she was probably among the few in the world who would privately mourn the loss of the men and women of the ISS. There had been good people there, and most were likely dead. The only comfort for them was that they had been avenged.

A short knock on the wall drew her attention. She turned to see Iosif in the doorway, looking questioning in. “Thought you would be busy,” she said, keeping her voice low and spinning her chair around nonetheless. “I can’t imagine how much work you’re dealing with.”

“It’s a lot, but a break is in order,” he said, pulling up a chair opposite her. “But you don’t have to worry about that. So why are you up so early, and don’t lie, because I can tell you’re not alright.”

It was going to be interesting having a partner who could sense her true emotional state without
even trying. She could keep herself outwardly composed fine, but clearly that wasn’t going to be a thing now. Perhaps it was for the best. Honesty and all that. “Trying to figure out what’s going to happen to my country next,” she shrugged, nodding back to the screen. “The government is gone. The military is barely holding together. The ISS appears to just be…erased. No one knows what’s going to happen now except that whatever comes will be under ADVENT control.”

He gave a nod. “Talks are going to happen today. Not sure you’ll like what will probably happen.”

She shrugged. “I can guess. Don’t worry, I’ve accepted it. It’s probably for the best whatever happens. We couldn’t protect ourselves without ADVENT, so maybe the next time it will go better.” She paused. “Although I don’t know what I’ll consider myself after the talks go through. Taiwan is going to take over the mainland, yes? That’s where it’s headed?”

Iosif pursed his lips. “Very likely. They have a mostly intact government barring the recent assassination of the President. They suspect a reunification will be a good thing; a new dawn for the country. Tibet is likely to gain independence, and Hong Kong is considering demanding sovereignty.”

“And the collapse of the Chinese state will be complete,” she mused quietly, without bitterness. “I wondered years ago how it might happen. Many contingencies and warnings. But never thought it would be so…complete. Everything I spent my life enforcing and protecting is now gone. I don’t know what to feel. I don’t even know if I can call myself a Chinese citizen if the country I lived in changes so radically.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Iosif disputed. “You were born in China, you lived there your whole life. No matter what happens, that won’t change.”

She knew he wouldn’t really understand, but didn’t completely fault him. “Whatever is made after today is not the country I will have been from. I’m not Taiwanese or Tibetan. The China that will be built will only resemble the country in name.”

He leaned back in his chair and considered her seriously. “Nuan, do you think that is a bad thing?”

“I don’t know,” she answered quietly after a minute. “We weren’t perfect, but neither was America and they still exist without foreigners and dissidents taking them over. Perhaps China needed reform…but it should be on our terms. Where it was Chinese who made the changes so it would be us who were still at the core of our country…not Chinese pretenders and traitors.”

She sighed. “I suppose it doesn’t matter. Maybe it is more palpable to me because I’ve gotten used to XCOM. It’s become something of a home. Now the only one I really have left, if my nationality is gone as well.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” he said. “And ultimately…nationality itself is becoming a thing of the past, or at least compared to what it used to be. We’re Humans, and that is a more important label than where you happened to be born in the world. One day I think you’ll find a new place to call home, be it China or somewhere else.”

“Or maybe I’ll just end up staying here,” she said, then allowed a wan smile. “If things work out, wherever you are too.”

“I think I’d be fine with that,” he said lightly after pretending to consider, before growing more serious. “But I won’t pretend to completely understand you here. Nationalism isn’t something I subscribed to as much as you.”
“Really?” She raised an eyebrow. “You’re Russian.”

“And?” He smirked. “Contrary to popular belief, that does not always indicate a strong nationalist desire nor do all who join the military do so because of a fervent belief in the leadership. Perhaps they simply want to protect their home or help those who live inside it.”

“Point taken,” she relented.

“But don’t hold back if you want to talk about it,” he continued. “And I’ll see what I can do to find out if there are any survivors of the ISS.”

She blinked. “I…thank you.”

“Of course,” he nodded. “You may be right that no one cared about them, but they should know that at least someone does. Give me a few days though, we have a lot of other things to deal with.”

“That’s fine,” she said, some of the void inside her filling. Perhaps false hope, but there was at least something to look to in the future. “I’ll wait.”

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ADVENT Secure Checkpoint, Beijing – China

3/14/2017 – 3:00 P.M.

Humans and Ethereals stood together in a room under a nameless skyscraper which had been first converted into a field hospital, and then later into a secured room where what could potentially be among the most important meetings of the war would take place. The Commander, Zhang, the Chronicler, and Aegis had arrived from XCOM. Saudia, Laura, and Elizabeth had joined from ADVENT.

And Sana’Ligna herself was merely standing quietly as the Humans and lone Ethereal gathered around a simple wooden table, some pulling out files and binders, or in the case of Elizabeth, a tablet. This was to be the first ‘real’ talk with Sana, and the Commander decided to start things off. There had been some brief discussion with Saudia beforehand, and she had said she would let XCOM take the lead due to Aegis.

“Your cooperation against Isomnum is appreciated, Sana’Ligna,” he began, hands clasped behind his back. “As has been your work in healing the wounded.”

“It is the least I can do, Commander,” she said, her voice melodious and oddly soothing. “Though I feel in some cases there was resentment. The soldiers do not trust me, I have sensed that much.”

“You are an Ethereal and an alien,” Laura said bluntly. “Most of them have not had good experiences with either.”

A sigh. “I understand that. I hope my assistance may ease their prejudices.”

“It likely will have a positive effect,” the Commander said, wanting to move the conversation back on track before it focused on the wrong thing. “However, that is irrelevant at the moment. Now while we are grateful for your assistance, the question remains why you did so in the first place. You did not come at the behest of the Battlemaster of Imperator, correct? But you have yet to indicate if you will follow Aegis in joining us.”

“I assisted because Isomnum was an evil that needed to be stopped,” she stated. “While I…did not
wish his death…I do not feel remorse that it happened. Even though so few of us remain, he did not deserve to be among them. I assisted because I could no longer stand by and do nothing; I could not remain bound to a side which not only harbors and enables those like Isomnum, but refuses to correct their mistakes.”

“I’m pleased,” Aegis said approvingly. “Perhaps your departure will open the eyes of others to realize the failures of the Imperator and his methods.”

“You misunderstand, Aegis,” Sana shook her head slowly. “I do not intend to join you, ADVENT, or XCOM, nor subject myself to them. I assisted because it was the right thing to do…but I made my decision to not perpetuate this war through my own actions.”

That answered that question, which the Commander could not say he was pleased by. His features hardened. “Respectfully, Sana’Ligna, what do you intend to do then? Go back to the Collective? If you are not a reliable ally, you cannot stay here.”

“I intend to bring this war to an end,” she said firmly. “For the sake of your species and our own. Nothing will be achieved here but more Ethereals dying and your species will eventually succumb to the Imperator. He has, and continues to take actions I disagree with…but few go against his power. Even I can see that he is not to be trifled with.”

Saudia pursed her lips, though her expression was contained. Zhang followed suit. The Commander simply shook his head, though the Chronicler looked amused. “Your confidence in the Imperator may be misplaced,” he said neutrally, resting his hands on the table and looking the Ethereal in the eyes. “Isomnum was no pushover. He died to us. The Imperator has not faced a Sovereign One, and not even he can match their might. Do not count out our species.”

“So you believe,” Sana answered. “I sincerely hope you see the error of your ways. The Imperator is sending his Harbinger to take this planet. I wish to avoid your species being conquered, but you must understand that this entire war…it is pointless. You are accomplishing nothing but killing hundreds of thousands of your own species, not to mention soldiers of the Collective. Your lands, infrastructure, and monuments are slowly destroyed and ruined. Continued war will only bring ruin to your species, not freedom.”

The Commander was silent for a moment, then let out a chuckle. “Assume for a moment that we entertain such an idea. That we give up out of fear. That we accept that we are doomed to fail because the Imperator is sending Patricia Trask to break us.” At this Saudia and Laura shot alarmed glances his way. “What guarantee of any sort do we have that the Imperator is even remotely interested in peace?”

His lips curled into a thin, furious smile. “The Imperator, Sana’Ligna, is not and never has been interested in peace between our species. So long as T’Leth lives on our world, he will never cease trying to undermine, eradicate, or conquer us.”

“That is an understandable point,” Sana said. “Which is why T’Leth must leave Earth.”

The Chronicler raised an eyebrow. “And just why would T’Leth do this – and why do you assume that he could even do this.”

“If your Sovereign is as powerful as you claim, leaving Earth for another planet should pose no difficult task,” Sana answered the Chronicler back. “If your Sovereign is as benevolent as you claim, would he not willingly accept the risk if it meant that the war against an innocent species would end? Or is he a coward who will continue to hide behind a proxy or merely because he selfishly does not want to leave?” Her voice softened. “I understand it is not fair, but for the good
of Humanity—and to end a war—it is the clearest solution to resolve this dispute. The Imperator is focused on the Sovereign Ones. When he learns T’Leth is gone, he will pull back and focus on the perceived greater threat.”

“A completely foolproof plan,” Saudia said, her weary tone biting. “You only suggest that we force our one trump card that could ensure our protection off of Earth on the slight chance that the Imperator would end the war.”

“You also assume that T’Leth being here is a negative,” the Commander said slowly. “From what I’ve seen, it is the one thing which has held the Imperator back. He fears the Sovereign Ones, and T’Leth in particular. And after everything my species has endured under his orders, you dare insist that we remove our own ally to end this war?”

“And your continued loyalty to this Sovereign will ensure your species dies!” Sana insisted. “He will only use this to continue to justify the war! Unfair or not, that you are aware of the Sovereigns and actively protecting one gives the illusion that you are proxies to it.”

“A perception that would disappear if T’Leth left?” Zhang demanded incredulously. “You are a fool, even more so than I anticipated. The Imperator would consider it a trick—and he would continue the war—and this time there would be no Sovereign on our planet. Instead of ‘saving’ us, your idiotic plan will ensure that we lose.”

“As for our loyalty,” the Commander stated, crossing his arms and glaring at the Ethereal. “T’Leth is our ally. A powerful ally, yes, with questionable power dynamics, but nonetheless he approached us and offered his help. The Imperator may consider us proxies, but frankly, what he believes does not concern me. T’Leth has proven to be a reliable ally, and neither I, nor XCOM, will abandon our allies on the false promise of peace.”

He pointed a finger at her. “And let me be clear, Sana’Ligna, the time for peace has long since passed. There will be no peace while the Imperator lives. His actions have marked him as an eternal threat to our species, and unless he is deposed and replaced by more intelligent leadership, we cannot in good conscience end the war which is the only action which gives him pause.”

“So you intend to continue the war, even if peace was an option?” Sana demanded. “Based on your own fear of the Imperator and nothing else?”

“Enough, Sana, think!” Aegis interrupted, as forcefully as the Commander had ever heard him. “You know—as well as I do—that the Imperator will never cease the subversion of Humanity. He does not operate like this. Every species in the Collective is ultimately under his control, and Humanity will be no different. Perhaps there will be a false peace, and he will wait. A century or two may pass, and the war will eventually become a memory.”

Aegis looked around the room. “Humans have short lifespans, and are adaptable. Trade will begin between the Collective and Humanity. Relations will normalize. XCOM will be disbanded or reduced, and public sentiment will be manipulated to support integration into the Collective. And then the Imperator will win.”

“While I don’t disagree with your sentiment,” Saudia interjected. “ADVENT would not be so easily fooled as to forget what the Imperator has done even after we are long dead. But your point is unassailable—the Imperator will never be someone we can consider safe. And unlike other enemies, we cannot wait for him to die. He will live forever, while we will not. He can be patient, but I cannot predict the future. Loathe as I am to admit it, time will have an effect.”

“And centuries of peace and normalization are things you consider bad?” She demanded. “Millions
of dead and years of war are preferable? And again, based on your fear of what the Imperator could do?"

"Will do, Sana," Aegis clarified. "There is no ambiguity, even if you cannot see it."

"And the Imperator would never agree to peace so long as T’Leth is a factor," the Chronicler interjected. "And do you demand he turn himself in? That he be forced to leave for peace knowing that he will be hunted?"

"T’Leth is a Sovereign One who has survived such cycles for millions of years," Sana stated, her own voice turning hard. "You clearly consider him to be an ally, but the truth is that he ultimately does not need you, and you need him. If he is so powerful, then he should be able to survive far from Earth."

"And again, you use the same justification without saying why T’Leth is somehow bound to this?" The Chronicler smirked. "Why must T’Leth – who I will note has resided on Earth for centuries and never once interfered – leave? Instead, might I suggest the Imperator himself leave? The Imperator does not need the Collective, though it needs him. And if he is so powerful, then he should be able to survive far from Earth. Why is the Imperator special, Ethereal?"

For the first time, Sana had no answer for him. "Your pursuit of a peaceful solution is admirable, Sana," Aegis finally said. "But the truth is that there is no solution that does not involve the deaths or otherwise negations of the Imperator or T’Leth."

"Ignoring this," Laura interrupted. "There is also the fact that the Imperator allowed individuals like Isomnum and the Creator free reign in his Collective - including Revelean - who are no doubt continuing experiments on Humans well out of the public eye. Not to mention the continued existence of Paradise station which is actively running. I for one will ensure that there is no peace so long as the station exists, and if the Imperator has not shut it down due to this, he never will."

"He will not," the Commander said pointedly to Sana. "And you know why. Because it is important to his ultimate plan. The Imperator is only concerned about controlling power strong enough to defeat a Sovereign, and he will never give that up. But you know this. You know peace for us is a foolish and idiotic option. So why are you really trying to force this peace?"

"I gave you my reasons, and it is disappointing you do not consider them valid or believe I must have some angle," she said, voice bitter. "Though I suppose in this galaxy, such is expected. You do not see the direction the Collective is headed. The longer this war drags on, the more will die. And I do not mean your species. The Collective will fracture; tensions between the Battlemaster and Imperator are growing to a breaking point. Millions will die, my species will be destroyed beyond hope of recovery, and your species will be assimilated or eradicated. The Sectoids or Andromedons will be purged, and it is only a matter of time before the radical Miridian inspires a rebellion which will force the Zararch to purge swaths of the species. Is it this hard to believe I do not want this to happen?!!"

"Peace doesn’t prevent any of this from happening!" The Commander retorted. "At best it delays it. It is only going to ensure that the next conflict is bloodier and longer – and this one with absolutely no hope of peace. As for the Collective…" he shook his head. "Let it burn. Let the Andromedons and Sectoids eradicate each other. Let the Battlemaster and Imperator at each other’s throats. I have no sympathy for your species, Ethereal, or your Collective. You started this war, so I am content to let your kind destroy themselves. Then we will come later and finish the job to ensure that your kind never do this again."

"And you instead propose genocide?" Sana demanded. "You see why I will not bind to these
people, Aegis. They are little better than the Imperator.”

The Commander’s lips twitched. “Better. You certainly have an interesting perception, Sana, though perhaps not surprising for a species that innately considers themselves superior.” He walked around the table slowly. “Let me ask you a question – have we invaded a planet without justifiable cause and subjected a technologically inferior people to a war they should not win? Have we kidnapped thousands of civilians and used them for test subjects in labs? Have we created anything remotely resembling Paradise? Do we allow creatures like Isomnum to exist and espouse their beliefs? Do we have a certain class of Humans who have unlimited power and consider themselves superior over all others? Do we have client states which we keep in line with the threat of violence and replacement?”

He stopped before Sana, his voice low. “No. No, I do not believe we do. Do not dare suggest we are remotely comparable to what the Imperator has allowed to flourish under his watch. And let me be clear – I do not wish to completely eradicate your species. Only the ones who refuse to surrender. Those we will kill. The rest we will control with the Manchurian Restraints to ensure they cannot abuse their power again.”

“And do you support this, Aegis?” Sana asked, looking to the opposite Ethereal.

“There are a limited number of outcomes for this war,” Aegis said. “What the Imperator plans will ensure the eradication of our species. Thus he must be restrained or killed. There is no other way. I have given it much thought, and there is simply no easy solution.”

“I see.” Sana was silent for a moment. “I fear that you may wish to reconsider later. You will soon see that you underestimate the Imperator, and the legions the Battlemaster commands. I am sorry, but this cannot be denied. But I will remain, and be willing to see a peaceful resolution to this war.”

The Commander shook his head, an incredulous laugh threatened to break loose. “You still don’t get it. It doesn’t matter what the Imperator does or does not do – we will not surrender or insist on a false peace. And where do you intend to go? Back to the Collective?”

“No, I will not support them either until they similarly insist on a peaceful solution,” she answered. “I will turn my efforts towards providing healing and protection for those caught between your side and that of the Collective.”

“On Earth?” Saudia asked.

“The conflict takes place here, so yes.” She answered.

“I don’t think so,” Laura stepped forward. “The last thing we need is a rogue Ethereal roaming on our planet, and you have clearly shown yourself to not be a reliable ally here. We don’t want or need your ‘help’ or ‘aid’, Ethereal. Come back when you’re ready to take a real stand. You do not want peace, Ethereal, you want a return to the status quo.”

She motioned absently. “I’ve read your file, and for once it appears to reflect reality pretty well. This war hasn’t revealed anything you didn’t already know existed about the Collective, it’s only forcing you to confront the reality that your kind enjoy playing god and unleashing whatever they please upon the galaxy. Paradise station existed long before this war, yet you continued your own work in pretend ignorance because it was out of sight, and out of mind.”

“You knew the Vitakara are controlled by a brutal police state but it was fine because there was peace,” she continued. “You claim to be empathetic and care about life but you know the experiments conducted on Paradise, by your fellow Ethereals, and what each and every Muton is
subjected to on Desolan, but you didn’t care because you didn’t see it. Because there was peace.”

She shook her head, glaring daggers into the Ethereal. “You don’t want peace, Ethereal, you want quiet. You want things to go back to the way they were. You don’t want to be confronted with uncomfortable truths. You don’t want to be challenged. You don’t want to admit that you or your kind are wrong. You want to pretend that everything is fine, that your conscience is clear, but you know deep down that it isn’t and never will be.”

Laura pulled out her pistol and set it on the table, hand over it. “You are a coward, Sana’Ligna, and the only thing I hate more than an enemy is someone who tries to insist that both sides are equal and valid when they are very clearly not. Centrism has a place, but not when the fates of billions hang in the balance. You’ve spoken enough to make your position clear. So I will do the same – help us, or get off our planet, or the next time we see you, we will kill you just as we did Isomnum.”

There was silence after that. The Commander was rather impressed with the speech, and doubted he could have said it better. But Sana was not done, it seemed, though Aegis spoke before she even could. “That is an unfair assessment. Very few are ignorant as to the less than desirable elements of the Collective, but there is little one can do without being ostracized and continuously watched. I experienced this myself.”

“And left when you saw it could not be changed,” Laura nodded. “Exactly.”

“And what is it you think I have done here?” Sana demanded to Laura. “I have done everything short of defecting. I was one of those who participated in killing an Ethereal. I assisted an army backed by a Sovereign One, as well as one the Imperator is at war with. I cannot go back to the way things were, even if I wanted to.”

“Then commit to it,” Laura shook her head. “You did the right thing here, but I’m not going to give you extra recognition for acting like a decent sentient being. Isomnum is a product of the Ethereal Collective, not an abnormality. Even if you cannot go back to the way things were – something I doubt as Isomnum was hated even in the Collective – that is what you ultimately desire for everyone else. But we cannot go back to the way things were – nor do we want to.”

“Peace is not a concept we do not strive towards, Sana’Ligna,” the Commander interjected, wanting to speak before Laura drove Sana away, and while he wouldn’t necessarily be displeased, he would prefer that she not decide to go back to the Collective. “But peace is only desirable when our species is in a position of safety and no threats are posed to us. This will never be met so long as the Imperator lives – or at least exists in his current form.”

“By that logic, Commander, T’Leth should be subject to the same restrictions,” Sana countered. “He poses a direct threat to the Imperator and by extension, the Collective.”

“Of course he does!” The Chronicler laughed. “The Imperator attacked him. He wants him dead. How exactly should he respond? Do not paint the Imperator as the threatened and damaged party in this scenario, Ethereal. Everything is the result of his actions, and I am tired of you attempting to rationalize them to promote a faux peace that will never work.”

“Then be clear about what your goals are,” Sana said, straining. “You do not want peace, you want supremacy for your species. You desire to be the ultimate power in the galaxy capable of crushing any threats under you. Until such a point is reached, you will never strive for peace even if it leads to endless conflict and war.”

“We were attacked unjustly when we had not even developed proper space travel,” Saudia said.
coldly – stone cold eyes focused on the Ethereal. “By an alien power that far outweighs us in numbers, technology, and might. Had events proceeded any other way, we would now be a pawn of the Ethereal Collective. But now we have the capability to ensure that no alien force can conquer our species again – and if that involves utterly destroying the alien powers that threaten our existence, then I will personally ensure it is done. You will not be the only ones who will try to subjugate us, so we must be prepared for the next.”

“I suppose it was unlikely you would have been willing,” Sana shook her head. “You’ve seen and done too much, justified or not. The only peace that will be achieved is through war which leaves billions dead. You, the Imperator, the Battlemaster, the only thing that matters is growing or maintaining your power, and it is clear this will never change.”

Laura looked like she wanted to punch the Ethereal. “If you think this has anything to do with power, Ethereal, then perhaps you need to reexamine facts. We did not start this war. We are being invaded by an alien power. We have been on the receiving end of attacks against our world for nearly two years. We are actively resisting a forced assimilation of our species. Tell me why we should even consider peace with the Imperator?”

“Because if you do not, you will die!” Sana answered fiercely. “I cannot make that any clearer! You believe you can stand against the Imperator, but you cannot. Do not give yourselves false hope merely because your Sovereign ally believes he can protect you. The Sovereigns do not protect their allies when they are threatened – they leave. They flee. How else have they survived so long? Everything is expendable to them – and for T’Leth, your species is included.”

“Beware the propaganda of your Imperator, fool,” the Chronicler smiled. “He knows very little of the Sovereigns. He has an inbuilt perception based on his own paranoia and delusions. T’Leth may not be a conventional Sovereign in his own philosophies, but even he understands that even the worst of the Sovereigns do not abandon their pawns and tools until such have already been destroyed. Sovereigns with the mindset you describe are the most likely to die a quick and painful death.”

“As for the threat the Imperator poses to us…” Saudia paused briefly. “We’ll take our chances. Such…concern…for our species is admirable, but I assure you, Sana’Ligna, we do not intend to lose. Every single time we were supposed to fall, we have overcome your Collective, and the Imperator will be no different.”

“Then there is nothing more I can say,” Sana said sadly. “I hope you consider the blood on your hands worth it before you see what you have built destroyed. You will soon see that the Imperator is not like any threat you have faced before. When that happens…I hope that you reconsider. For the sake of your species.”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” the Commander said non-commitally. “But if you would excuse us, we have a war to win. I would advise you stay away from your former allies unless you want to be designated as an enemy again.”

“Do not worry, Commander,” she said as she departed. “I will not be returning to the Collective. There are those on Earth who I will help, though I will not discriminate based on labels. They deserve protection and healing, as they are mere pawns being thrown into conflict by yourselves and the Imperator. You may not care about their fate, but I do and will act.”

“Be safe, Sana’Ligna,” Aegis bowed his head. “But do not take unnecessary chances.”

She did not answer, but departed quietly until they were left alone.
Saudia looked at Laura, rather surprised. “Perhaps I should have you look at my speeches. I didn’t
know you had that talent.”

“I don’t, Chancellor, but I’ve disliked this Ethereal ever since I read her file,” Laura answered
calmly, picking her pistol back up and holstering it. “Self-righteous aliens who consider
themselves morally better than mere mortal aliens are something I rather hate, and after she started
talking, I knew exactly how it was going to go.”

“Unfortunately, I expected similar,” Aegis said, sounding deflated. “I cannot fault your reaction,
nor can I fully condemn her. She simply will not accept certain realities of the galaxy and that she
will no longer be assisting the Collective directly is a positive development. I will keep in contact
with her to ensure she does not act… rashly. My concern is not her, but what Mortis will do.”

“Considering the first thing Mortis did when he was awakened was immediately decide to
eradicate Paradise, I think he may actually make the right decision,” the Commander said. “He
appears to have a conviction his sister lacks.”

“Perhaps,” Aegis mused. “We will soon see. With your permission, I would suggest that Caelior be
allowed to see her. Perhaps to show that your intentions for Ethereals are not necessarily ill-
intended.”

“I’ll consider it,” was all the Commander said.

“In any case,” the Chronicler coughed. “I would like to say that I did not quite expect the amount of
support for our Sovereign ally. T’Leth will be heartened to learn of it. He is…used to abandonment
when it is convenient. Expected of Sovereigns, but having a reliable ally is not something he is
used to yet. I’m glad.”

“Convey to T’Leth that we value his support as an ally,” the Commander nodded. “So long as he
proves reliable, he has nothing to expect from us but reciprocation.”

“Now there is another matter,” Saudia said, her voice demanding attention. “You mentioned that
Patricia Trask was coming to Earth. Would you care to clarify this development?”

Right, time to explain this. “We learned a good deal of information from Isomnum’s mind before
he was killed. Which included the fact that Patricia has joined him, and is going to be coming to
Earth to secure the planet for the Imperator.”

Just from their faces, the Commander knew that this was going to be a long and largely unpleasant
conversation. But better to hash out the contingencies now than later, and so as he explained what
they learned, he was keeping a growing list of solutions ever in his mind. There was a lot to
consider, and not a lot of time to implement it.

Better to not waste any more time.

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Sanctum of the Overmind – Classified Location

3/14/2017 – 10:11 A.M.

The first time he had been brought here had been nothing short of awe-inspiring. It was a jungle
world, one largely overrun with a moon shining above. It was a green, healthy, and nearly
untouched ecosystem which had life thriving on it. All except for a massive stone structure that
rose above the trees which covered the planet.
Ivan suspected that the Overmind had found the structure in far worse condition, but had now restored it to its former glory. Although what had actually *lived* in this place? The Overmind had not said, but there were clues still left around. Murals on walls depicting aliens fighting in wars, alien script engraved into plaques and pictures, old archaic weapons and unseen technology whose power had long since been drained.

The Overmind kept one of the rooms in this tower solely for storing odd and unique artifacts he had found. Sometimes Ivan saw certain ones disappear, then reappear, or new ones take their place. There were a healthy number of Vitakara and Sectoids who entered and exited, perhaps archeologists or specialists.

As it turned out, this tower was only one of many which existed throughout the planet – all of which connected to massive underground labyrinths and tunnels. Excavation was ongoing as underground it had fallen into disrepair and collapse. But the Overmind was interested in this world for a particular reason, and as it turned out, it was not even on the planet.

*Look to the far planets, look at what hovers in empty space.*

He had, and he’d seen *something* which was in pieces. Large pieces, but pieces nonetheless. The structure had been large, he could tell that much, but it didn’t appear to be a space station or something that had held life. From the shape of the wreckage and compaction of materials, he had believed it was a defense platform of some kind – or a weapon. Then he had spotted the remains of two rings floating, and made the connection. He’d seen one of the replicas of the device in Cogitian’s library.

It then made sense why the Overmind was curious about this planet – and these aliens.

From what he had read, such advanced technology should not be able to be destroyed easily, if at all. Yet here one lay in ruins.

Today though, he was merely reviewing the events on Earth.

At the top of the tower, which had been converted into a modern communications hub, he was playing old Human news stations in the background while reading Zararch, Andromedon, and even intercepted ADVENT reports detailing the events which had taken place. He could not say he was pleased or surprised by the outcome.

Isomnum had been a fool, and he was certainly not upset the Dread Lord was dead. However, the ramifications for said actions and subsequent death were clearly becoming apparent – and something that no one would see on the daily news.

*Assessment.*

The command appeared in his mind. A rasping voice which he knew now was designed to be as unsettling as possible. The Overmind had no mouth, and so communicated solely through telepathy. Ivan had soon figured out that his ‘voice’ was something unique to each listener – but the one thing in common was that everyone found it disturbing.

He was used to it by now. The Overmind was not even in the same room, but a few floors down, but was constantly aware of everything happening in the Tower – and the planet for that matter. He would occasionally ask for Ivan’s own opinion, and through the link forged by the Avatar Project, he knew that it was because the Overmind was both curious as to his own perspective – and to make a larger point.
Ivan set the tablet down and tuned out the sounds around him. “Whatever Isomnum knew, T’Leth knows now too. The Sovereign orb would not have been used otherwise. We should assume that ADVENT and XCOM are aware of the Avatar Project as well as that Patricia Trask is coming to end the war. This will pose problems.”

Why?

“They are allowed time to prepare,” Ivan answered, not completely sure where this point was going. The downsides seemed obvious to him. “The moment Patricia appears they will have stories ready. Propaganda to distribute. Not to mention know the others who have undergone the Avatar Project. It gives them information, and they will exploit it. Not to mention they will likely abandon any plan to ‘redeem’ Patricia if they know for sure she is on our side. That would have been useful.”

They underestimate what she can do.

“She was the Psionic Overseer of XCOM,” Ivan said, thinking. “Respectfully, I doubt it.”

Patricia Trask of XCOM could be easily defeated. XCOM does not fear her adequately. They will only prepare for her telepathic capabilities – capabilities they can mitigate with their own equally powerful psions as well as the Agents of T’Leth. They are arrogant. Their defeat of the Dread Lord leads them to believe they can kill the Imperator’s Harbinger.

“Obviously,” Ivan grunted. “Though Sonoda didn’t exactly give them reason to fear the results of the Avatar…” He trailed off, his brow furrowing as he grabbed his tablet and pulled up several of the diagnostics recorded from the battle which Isomnum had been so kind as to keep operational. He now had a very good idea of what the Overmind was getting at.

Sure enough, he found the diagnostics for Avatar Sonoda, and much to his surprise, saw that she had not once activated the Avatar link. He looked at the readings in disbelief. “What the hell were either of them thinking?”

Isomnum was arrogant. He did not believe he needed an Avatar, and only acquired one for symbolic purposes. Allowing an alien deep into his mind is unthinkable, thus he did not allow one. Sonoda could have activated the link, of course, and had she not died, she would have. It does not matter now.

“And now XCOM does not know the actual capabilities of the Avatar Project,” Ivan finished slowly, nodding to himself. “Since they killed one…they will not treat another one as a significant danger – Even the Harbinger of the Imperator himself…” a smile spread across his face. “Isomnum has certainly been more useful in death than he ever was in life.”

Isomnum was useful in life against the Synthesized, but his time had come. We must move forward, and not be stuck in the ways of the past.

“Still…” he considered. “Patricia is not invincible. I am curious if her plan can be executed as well as she claims.”

She learned well from the Commander. She knows XCOM, ADVENT, and how they will react. The Imperator is confident in her capabilities, as am I. You will soon assist her and liberate Humanity from the grasp of the Sovereign One.

Fighting alongside Patricia Trask. Certainly not something he ever thought he would remotely consider as possible. But times were strange, and he wouldn’t have placed himself as the Harbinger
of the second most powerful Ethereal alive. Although there was one outstanding issue he was curious about.

“The Bringer. Does the Imperator intend to act?”

Amusement rippled from the Overmind, strong enough that Ivan could feel it easily. That was rare, and it gave him a good feeling.

*The Bringer will learn his place. The Imperator has grown tired of his arrogance. There will be retribution for his subterfuge, but it will come after his Harbinger has acted on Earth. A message needs to be sent to all, and later…later the Bringer will be punished.*

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*Research Labs, the Praesidium – Classified Location*

3/15/2017 – 2:11 P.M.

The Chronicler, Aegis, Vahlen, Shen, the Commander, and V’Thrask stood around a monitor as they watched the footage taken from multiple armor cams from both ADVENT and XCOM soldiers. “You likely know better than we do,” the Commander said, looking to the Andromedon beside him. “Is that a Special Operator?”

The Andromedon looked at the footage quietly, clearly considering his words before answering. “I do not think it can be anything else. I am afraid that I likely know as much about the Special Operators as you do. The Unions do not command them. They answer solely to Federation leadership and the Chief Overseer. I have never seen one in combat before.”


“Too little data to be sure,” V’Thrask answered. “Special Operators are known to be observers and assassins. They only act if their own safety is in danger, or they have received orders to eliminate a direct threat to the Federation. I suspect their equipment is not as extensive as a standard soldier, but their capabilities supplement this void.”

“The next important question is why there was a Special Operator there at all,” Vahlen said, pacing while she looked down at her tablet. “The Battlemaster would have learned the Hunter was involved, assuming he wasn’t aware the entire time. Could this have been additional backup?”

“It is not surprising there was a Special Operator there,” V’Thrask corrected, tone somber. “I suspect there are dozens of Special Operators observing throughout Earth. What is exceptionally surprising and concerning is that it acted.”

A pause. “This was either done at the orders of the Imperator or another high-ranking Ethereal – or it was a warning from the Chief Overseer to the Imperator. What I can say for sure is that the Federation will universally consider the Bringer a threat to the Andromedon species and if the Chief Overseer wanted to make this point abundantly clear to the Imperator – this is how it would be achieved.”

“More cracks appear in the foundation,” the Commander mused thoughtfully as he looked at the stilled image. “Paradise might become more trouble than it is worth for him. If nothing else, it will distract him for a time, assuming your interpretation is correct.”
“V’Zarrah will update me shortly on the situation in the Federation,” V’Thrask said. “Although I doubt we will have confirmation on why a Special Operator was utilized at all. The Unions will be unaware of this fact even if Federation leadership will not. J’Loran is also likely aware.”

“Questions about the appearance and motivations aside, there is a much more pressing matter regarding the appearance of this unit,” Vahlen interrupted. “In short – what it actually did. Aegis, have you ever seen psionics utilized in this way?”

“No,” he answered slowly. “I have not. I speculate that it is a form of advanced telekinesis and the initial charge appears to be similar to the Battlemaster-“

“It isn’t psionics,” the Chronicler interrupted, shaking his head. “I thought it was, and consulted T’Leth for an explanation. But it’s not, and that the Special Operators are using it is a notable threat.”

“Would you explain what it is then?” Vahlen asked.

“In short, it is poison,” the Chronicler explained. “There are literally hundreds of names for it by each species who has encountered it, but it is poison, pure and simple. Psionics is the greatest power in this galaxy, and one Sovereign who was weak in the arts decided to find a way to even the odds. She developed the Element, which affects the galaxy in a tangible way by manipulating mass – granting those who used the Element powers similar to psions. But that was a side effect.”

“Its purpose was to prevent psionic development,” Aegis finished. “I was…unaware it had such properties. We had found it in the Empire, and because our species reacted poorly, we assumed its use was limited to transportation. But if it was artificially created…”

“Exactly,” the Chronicler nodded firmly. “It is extremely useful, to the point where it has propagated across the galaxy and entire civilizations – those created by Sovereigns themselves – have based the technology of their entire species on it. This merely comes at the price of ensuring that psions cannot develop – as it is absolutely lethal to psions – and places those who rely on it at the mercy of its creator.”

“Fascinating,” the Commander commented. “A rather ingenious way of subverting psionics. Though this element clearly has uses, even if they are limited. Vahlen, you performed autopsies on Bringer soldiers who died from odd wounds?”

“Yes,” she quickly walked forward and pulled up the reports. “My conclusion was some type of poisoning, which was confusing as I did not believe that they could truly succumb to something as simple as poison, but if they were shot by projectiles which were infused with this element…”

“And who would have had access to such weaponry?” The Commander wondered rhetorically. “Well then, it appears the Hunter has provided some unknown assistance again.”

“Commander, I believe we have not considered the implications of this yet,” Shen interjected, eyes lighting up. “This is the solution to the Ethereals. A silver bullet that we didn’t know existed until now. We know there is a poison which can kill and inhibit any psion it encounters. If we were to acquire some and even manage to get a little on the Battlemaster or Imperator…we have our method of victory.”

“Aegis, was this element capable of being synthesized?” Vahlen demanded.

“No,” Aegis and the Chronicler answered at the same time, the latter shaking his head. “The only one who can even comprehend how it functions is the creator, and I guarantee that she will be less
than willing to help."

“However, deposits were fairly common throughout the galaxy,” Aegis clarified. “It needed to be refined before usage, but I suspect that the raw state will work perfectly fine as a chemical or bioweapon.”

“As good as it is to learn this, we should not forget what this implies,” the Commander said, deciding to curb the celebration as several unfortunate thoughts entered his mind. “The Collective has stores of this element ready and waiting to be deployed. Yes, it was used to help us this time, but how long will it be until it’s going to be used on ADVENT Priests and our own psions?”

“They have to be careful,” Shen pointed out. “They don’t want to risk us getting our hands on any of it. Too much usage and it will only be a matter of time before we recover some and use it against a singular target. The death of an Ethereal will hurt far more than human psions they kill.”

“The Battlemaster will not be careless with its usage,” Aegis warned. “He has learned better than to allow technology to fall into your hands. We should proceed carefully, and make it a priority to acquire this element as soon as possible.”

“Do you know where it would be kept in the Collective?” Vahlen asked.

“Desolan,” Aegis answered immediately. “Perhaps other places, but Desolan for certain. Likely well-protected.”

“The Federation as access as well,” V’Thrask stated. “If the Special Operators have it, that means it is being harvested and stored. I have never heard of such an element being sold or traded, which means that anything to do with it has been suppressed by the Federation. I will have V’Zarrah investigate this matter for himself. There have been many questions on the Special Operators. Bringing certain details to light could force a response.”

“Or force the Ethereals to become suspicious,” the Commander noted.

“A reality to consider,” V’Thrask agreed. “However, we will open our own investigation. If we cannot find stockpiles, perhaps we can locate a place in the galaxy where it can be harvested. We will need readings and chemical information. Chronicler, if T’Leth has access to these or has the knowledge it would be appreciated.”

“I will do what I can.” The Chronicler confirmed. “But the Commander is right. The Collective has brought this into play – and I am afraid that they are going to use it before we do.”

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Busan Military Outpost, Busan – South Korea

3/13/2017 – 8:12 P.M.

Today…well, it had been a largely good day. Duri felt better than he had in a while. The Collective had been pushed back, the nightmare in China was over, and he and his squad was alive. He couldn’t ask for more. He wasn’t exactly the party type, but he was willing to allow himself to enjoy the celebration.

It was the first real celebration he’d seen, and he was mildly surprised that ADVENT Command was letting it happen to this extent. It wasn’t just the military base itself, but the city in general. A mixture of military and civilians joining together to celebrate the defeat of the Collective. Still, smart move. Morale would be high after this.
Even the XCOM squad had decided to stay for a while as they’d mopped up the remaining Collective soldiers, which Duri was pleased by because he could talk to Mona, who now sat across from him at one of the tables. Both of them had some food, were out of their armor and wearing more normal clothes as some music played in the background.

Cara and Beatriz were sitting with him, Aleksandra was drinking over with some other soldiers and one of the XCOM operatives. Nobuatsu was unfortunately not joining them, as he needed to be on hand to treat all of the wounded, of which there were still many. Miguel was actually keeping up a conversation with the MEC pilot, which Duri had never seen before.

The pilot seemed to be almost completely mechanical with joints and limbs which seemed rather basic compared to the prosthetics he knew both ADVENT and XCOM were capable of producing. Mona had explained that they were intentionally designed that way to be able to interface directly with the suits, and Duri found that thinking about what that meant was…well, he couldn’t quite wrap his head around it, nor did he really want to.

Mona was joined by two of her own soldiers, Said and Fatima Tariq who were also psions. Cara had been rather surprised to hear they were a couple, and there had been a long tangent on relationships in XCOM. Their explanation that they’d been civilians who’d eventually been caught up in XCOM was one that made sense, although Duri noted that they were very light on details as to how that happened.

“Johan mentioned you,” Mona was saying. “Not that we…talked a lot during the beginning of the war. Too busy. But he said you were a good officer.”

“I do my best,” Duri answered. “All I can do now. I don’t want to lose anyone else.”

Mona snorted. “Look, I don’t blame you at all for his death. He was fighting against the goddamn Warlock. It’s frankly a miracle that anyone in your squad lived. Trust me when I say that from what I know about that alien, that’s a pretty good outcome.”

“He did drag me out after I got shot,” Beatriz added. “Things were almost worse.”

“That was fun,” Cara said with a smirk. “Running back and firing a ton of lead and praying we were out of range of snipers. Can’t say I want to do that again.”

“Did Johan know you were in XCOM?” Duri asked. “He never mentioned it to me.”

“He didn’t know,” Mona denied with a shake of her head. “He still thought I was with ADVENT in Sweden. I might have told him I’d been transferred, but he never knew I was in XCOM. Or that I was a psion.” She lifted a hand, as a slightly purple ripple appeared around it. “My psionic aptitude was what got me into XCOM in the first place.”

“ADVENT didn’t find it?” Beatriz inquired, sipping on her drink.

“This was before the PRIEST Division,” Mona explained. “All psions were being shipped to XCOM for training. If I had been examined a few months later, I would probably be a Priest.”

“ADVENT and XCOM really like their overdramatic and fantasy-esque names,” Cara chuckled. “Imagine just a year ago talking about Priests, Templars, Purifiers, and so on in an actually serious conversation.”

“Wait until you look at what the ranks are in the Priest Division,” Beatriz said. “I’m convinced they just made some of them up.”
“No, they’re real,” Mona said as she resumed eating. “Mostly. I looked them up once. You have to admit though, it’s more creative than standard boring designations.”

“Do you think they asked the Catholics if they could take all their old titles?” Cara asked.

“Given how closely the Catholic Church and ADVENT are working together, maybe,” Mona said with a shrug. “But probably not. ADVENT doesn’t ask permission for something like that.” She sipped on her water. “Although it might make things a bit awkward if certain Priests go to a church.”

“Wonder how many of them are silently shaking at the heresy they see,” Cara said, amused, and they all laughed.

“So how long has Caelior been with you?” Duri asked, turning the conversation away from laughing at titles and names.

“Since we beat him in Japan,” Mona said. “It’s a more complex situation that you think, which I don’t know how much I can say. But he’s on our side now, and will remain on our side.”

“I don’t suppose you can say if XCOM has anything else they’re hiding?” Cara asked.

“Afraid not,” Mona said with a smile.

“Even a little bit?”

“Ease up, Cara,” Duri said lightly. “XCOM has security protocols too.”

“Worth a shot.”

“Do you think our chances are real?” Beatriz finally asked after a few minutes of eating in silence. “Beating the aliens, I mean.”

“Very real,” Mona nodded, though more seriously. “One Ethereal has defected. Another has left. Caelior is with us now. Isomnum is dead. It won’t be easy –‘ she shrugged. “There is a high chance that I won’t be alive to see the end of it. But can we win? Absolutely. The aliens only have so many tricks they can rely on, and we’re emerging on top each time. They’ll run out soon.”

“Reassuring,” Duri said, taking a drink of water. “As much as it can be knowing the chances are better that I’ll die before it ends.”

“Welcome to war,” Mona said. “Where we all think we’ll be the ones to live through it all but in reality are just as capable of dying as anyone.”

“I’m more aware of that than I want to be,” Beatriz shuddered. “If that alien had aimed just a bit higher, I’d be dead.”

“Or I’d be shot,” Cara added. “We never know how things will play out.”

“Exactly,” Mona agreed. “We can only do the best we can to keep ourselves and those around us alive. Johan would be happy you’re all alive even if he couldn’t see it happen himself.”

“We’ll avenge him,” Duri said, lips pursing. “I suspect that Warlock won’t be able to keep himself from the fight forever. Maybe it won’t be me, but he will die sometime. I have a good feeling.”

“I know someone who very much agrees with you,” Mona said with a small smile. “It isn’t just the Warlock whose days are numbered.”
“Their time will come,” Cara said, lifting her half-filled glass. “We’re doing at least one toast before things go back to normal right? To Johan and Kang. Anyone you want to add, Mona?”

Mona looked like she wanted to say something, but then shook her head and raised her glass. “To those in your squad who gave their lives for our victory.”

Their glasses clinked, and they drank as the celebration continued long into the night.

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The Praesidium – Classified Location

3/15/2017 – 10:11 A.M.

It took him a bit, but Oliver finally found Kane. Which he was doing more out of curiosity than necessity, as he suspected that Kane would have showed up on time anyway. Still though, he wanted to make sure Kane would actually follow through with his almost tentative agreement at the party last night.

Oliver wasn’t a party person, though he could have a good time when he wanted to, but Kane looked so out of his element that it was almost funny. Even more so was that he was the closest equivalent to the celebrity in XCOM as one of the few who had personally killed an Ethereal. Of course, realistically, Oliver knew that the Chronicler and the Agents needed the majority of the credit, but Kane had been the one to strike the killing blow.

Which put him in a crowd with…Oliver thought. The Commander, Vahlen, Franklin, and Patricia had killed the Ravaged One. Interestingly everyone there was still alive…well, Patricia might not be now, but almost everyone else was. As it turned out, Kane was in the Tactical Review and Strategy wing of the Praesidium, which housed an incredible amount of information on known alien units, Ethereals, and figures. If one wanted to know anything about who they were fighting, it was here, along with plenty of raw footage to go along with it.

Luckily, he’d remembered Kane mentioning how he’d watched battle footage, so thought he might be here. Sure enough, he was, sitting in the sparsely populated room watching something that Oliver couldn’t see. “This where you hang out?” He asked, walking up.

“Yes,” Kane answered without looking up, though paused the video. “Always something new to review; to learn.”

Oliver looked to the screen. “This one?”

“Recovered from Brazil,” he said tightly. “Of the Battlemaster’s pet Human psion. She is clearly a valuable asset to him.”

Oliver vaguely remembered the fact that the Battlemaster had his own Human psion like Isomnum, though not details. He really should look into that if they would be fighting her in the future – which was very likely if ADVENT kept failing to properly defend the continent. “Alright, what do you know of her?”

“Yang Shuren, Chinese national prior to her family making enemies of the Communist Party,” he said from memory. “Lived in Australia, and were presumably abducted during the Collective invasion. Skilled telekine, heavily durable armor, uses twin swords. Extremely dangerous in melee combat and close range.”

“Know anything about why she’s with him?” Oliver wondered.
“Her reasons are irrelevant,” Kane dismissed flatly. “She is a traitor and will die as one.”

“Unfortunate we couldn’t have captured Isomnum’s Human,” Oliver mused as he looked at the still, if somewhat blurry image of the red-armored woman. “Perhaps she is under conditioning or being controlled.”

“It would not change anything,” Kane said, reaching over to close the video. “She is a valuable asset of the Battlemaster, and killing her will hurt his own operations.”

“She your next target?” Oliver asked, now aware that Kane had some kind of list he placed enemies on. Now that the main one – Isomnum – was dead, he wondered who would be the next to earn the death mark of Kane. For whatever that was worth.

“Only if I encounter her next,” Kane said, standing. “The Warlock, Battlemaster, Yang, it does not matter the order they are killed, only that they die.” He frowned. “You’re here to make sure I come, right?”

“Would disappoint some people if you didn’t show,” Oliver said. “Besides, this is something you’ll be good at.”

Sparring matches were a thing which had gone on quite a bit in XCOM, and it had more recently evolved into something of a ranked tournament. Said tournaments took quite a bit longer than general sparring, especially the past few weeks when everyone was busy, but it had recently concluded and there was no time being wasted in starting it again to anyone who wanted to participate.

And after some encouragement, Oliver and a few of the other soldiers had convinced Kane to try his hand at sparring. Kane had agreed, although he’d only promised he’d ‘try it’ and see if it was worth his time. Kane valued his time quite a bit, as Oliver was seeing, although he always seemed to spend it training, at the range, or informing himself on the conflict.

Granted, everyone else did that as well, but not quite on the level of what Kane took it to. He was an example that Oliver admittedly felt he should follow a bit closer. But it didn’t hurt to have some more relaxing hobbies and interests, so maybe sparring could be Kane’s. For whatever reason, he didn’t seem to be as thrilled with the outcome of the battle as Oliver had expected, but maybe he just hid it well.

In any case, as they walked towards the Training Rooms, Oliver felt that this would be an interesting event.

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Dreadnought of the Harbinger – Patricia’s Quarters

3/17/2017 – 12:00 P.M.

In the small quarters where the Harbinger slept, Patricia was kneeling on the floor in a meditative posture as she had found it was the easiest way to concentrate when she needed to think; prepare. Surrounding her body were holodisplays which outlined schematics and layouts. CODEX speakers had relayed dossiers of every individual of note, although for many she already knew a lot.

Thus, they had been updated.

She had been doing much of that while she had been on the Dreadnought. There was a significant amount of knowledge, context, and nuance that the Collective as a whole lacked on ADVENT,
XCOM, and Humanity. There were a very few people who could accurately explain and predict what ADVENT would do or how they would respond. Even among Humans, the mindset that ADVENT was cultivating was not one that came naturally.

But it did to her.

It was…saddening to her that the Commander would not react well to this. Ultimately, she owed much of who she was now to him. If it hadn’t been for him, she would likely be a different person. One who lacked the vision and will to do what was necessary for Humanity, no matter what it cost, or no matter how much it hurt herself and others.

Ironically, their similar mindsets would play off each other in the months to come. She knew how he thought, while he would do the same to her. Going into a mental conflict against the Commander – a risky move, but she had the ability to make mistakes and improve, and ultimately there would be no one else in the Collective who would be best able to understand him and prevent what he would do.

Even now she knew how he would react; what steps he would take; what ramifications there would be to her coming actions. But the Commander was not the only one to plan ahead, to have contingencies and foresight. She could not under any circumstances underestimate him. That would get her killed and she did not intend to die now.

ADVENT, XCOM, she knew how they operated and what they were most likely to do. As someone who had been one of the consultants on the original Advent Directive, as well as the pioneer for all modern psionic theory, she knew the strengths, weaknesses, and ultimate vulnerabilities of them.

T'Leth and his Agents she knew less of, but that information she would acquire soon enough. Their own Sovereign ‘ally’ was going to prove beneficial in this regard.

In fact, he was going to prove his usefulness very soon.

Fortunately, T'Leth appeared to have a desire to show his hand. Beijing had done more than expose the Bringer for the manipulative entity he was, but also showed the capabilities of T'Leth and his people. Such…command over the Psionosphere…well, that would certainly pose an issue were she to ever fight.

Or perhaps it would be an issue, had she been one to go into fights without knowing as much as she could about an enemy; how they acted, what they were capable of.

When she deployed, XCOM needed to be shown that they had no more hope. Yet doing this would require some skill. She was not so foolish enough as to believe she could strike at the heart of XCOM by herself and face the soldiers, psions, and agents waiting for her. But XCOM needed to hurt when she acted.

And a dead XCOM squad simply was not going to be sufficient.

ADVENT she would handle as well here, though in a more political way. While she knew it would go nowhere, it did not hurt to dirty the reputations of those who led it. Saudia might have escaped the shadow of EXALT, but perhaps it would linger for a time in the public consciousness. If nothing else it would cause some confusion in ADVENT.

Ideally, she could be in multiple places at once to cause the maximum amount of chaos and confusion. But physically, that sadly wasn’t possible. But there were other options; opportunities
that she would take advantage of. She was confident she would succeed, of that she had little doubt. With the Imperator, there was very little that she felt she could not do.

Nothing could compare to the feeling of power and unity she experienced when joined.

Where it had once been overwhelming, it now felt right.

Everything she had done and experienced, every decision made, it led to who and what she was today.

There was a presence outside her room, which she immediately recognized as Marian. The analyst had been very helpful over the past few days, particularly in ensuring that the information she was providing was being relayed back to the Zararch itself. While in her meditative position, she was quietly observing the mental states of those on the Dreadnought. Nothing invasive, but she could sense emotional states, and the flicker of a memory or word.

It was useful to also know where everyone was on the ship. Discontent, disagreements, and distraction could be easily detected and resolved. She knew very well that subordinates would keep truth to themselves, even if they disagreed. A sentiment that both she and the Commander agreed was useless and damaging. Even if he would be her enemy now, there were good lessons she needed to take.

With a telekinetic command the door opened and she faintly heard Marian enter. “Harbinger Trask-” he began, then abruptly trailed off when he saw her kneeling on the ground, the air distorted around her and tinged with power.

She opened her eyes, which bore the glowing purple reminiscent of his own blue ones, normally she would cease the passive telepathic presence on the Dreadnought, but this time she made a concerted effort to maintain it. Practice. Marian stepped back instinctively when she looked at him, his heart rate rising as fear tinged his mind, afraid he had interrupted her.

“Calm,” she ordered, her layered voice penetrating his mind. No reason for him to be concerned, and in a few seconds, he’d returned to his normal self. “You have an update?”

“Yes, Harbinger Trask,” he said, handing her a datapad. “New developments on Earth, in addition to the daily intelligence report. Upon your request, suggestions for the dissemination of the information you possess have been proposed by senior Zararch agents and leadership.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking the datapad and walking over to set it on the table. “Your own assessment? You have been appraised of the plan. I want your opinion.”

Before he opened his mouth, she knew he was preparing to lie – or at least downplay his concerns. She turned back to him just as he was about to speak. “I am not an Ethereal, Marian, you may speak your mind. Remember that I know if you are about to lie or not.”

The alien felt a mixture of surprise, fear, and embarrassment in a short amount of time, though composed himself and rephrased what he was going to say. “With respect, Harbinger Trask…I am concerned that you will need more support than what has been provided for optimal mission success.”

She nodded. “You do not believe I can do it.” It was a statement.

Marian hesitated, but continued on. “In this particular case, Harbinger Trask, not completely. My job revolves around finding weaknesses and making connections between them. Your plan has vulnerabilities, especially if the reactions are outside your established parameters. It relies on
outside reactions far too much for my own personal comfort.”

A pause. “I’ve read what you’ve done when you were with XCOM. It was…impressive. It caused many sleepless nights for myself and others in the Zararch as we feared the implications of a Human with such power. But XCOM has others like you, as does ADVENT now. There is a limit to what you can realistically do.”

He waited anxiously as he finished, clearly unsure what her response would be. Truthfully it pleased her to know that she had apparently been feared in the Zararch, and she knew the Commander and Zhang would have loved that little detail. It was flattering. But the analysis was more or less what she anticipated. Practical, realistic, and assumed the worst.

The issue was that it lacked…context.

Marian was thinking like an intelligence agent; not like a Human, not like a psion, not like a Harbinger. Hopefully he would be able to expand this way of thinking in the future. No reason not to start now. She walked over to the water dispenser and telekinetically brought the cup to her hand. Her prolonged silence was making her Zararch advisor nervous.

“Your concerns are well-founded,” she told him, taking a sip and turning around. “What I expected. My proposal is absurd from your own perspective. But consider mine.” She walked to her bed and sat cross-legged on it, while motioning for him to sit opposite her by pulling up a nearby chair. “Who am I?”

He answered hesitantly, but clearly. “The Harbinger of the Imperator; his voice and will; his Avatar.”

“Yes, I am that,” she nodded. “But that isn’t everything I am. I am a psion. I am a Human. I was a soldier of XCOM. These give me perspective and insight that one who was just the Harbinger wouldn’t have.” She swirled the water in her cup around. “You dislike how much I rely on reactions. You see many ways they can go wrong. From an objective standpoint, you are in the right. But the reality is I know how they will react. I know what they will instinctively think and plan to do.”

She smiled at him. “And I suspect your beliefs on my own capabilities will change when I execute my plan. I am…more…than I was when I was with XCOM. I will be able to protect myself just fine.”

“I’m relieved that this has been taken into consideration, Harbinger Trask,” Marian said slowly. “Though I suspect I will not be completely at ease until this operation is concluded.”

“A fair stance,” she agreed. “If you don’t mind, I would like to ask another question of you.”

“Of course,” he said, though was growing more apprehensive. She hoped he would get past the stage of being so high-strung around her. It definitely wasn’t good for his health. “About what.”

Patricia felt that she could let the psionic observation fade away now, as her little experiment had confirmed what she’d wanted to test. Besides, it might make Marian less nervous if the woman he was speaking to didn’t have fiery purple eyes. “Do I make you uncomfortable?”

He blinked rapidly. “Do you mean…because of who you are?”

She waved a hand. “Something like that. I suspect there are aliens here who…are not comfortable with my decision. Much less me taking command.”
He paused. “Truthfully, Harbinger, I am not uncomfortable with you, even as you take command. You come at the express will of the Imperator himself, and I do not doubt his will for a moment. If he trusts you, I do as well.” He let out a breath. “If I may speak more personally, I feel relief. I would much prefer you to be fighting for us, then against us. I cannot help but respect someone who has recognized the necessity of the Collective and joined it, even though your actions will be seen as a betrayal by the majority of your species.”

She pursed her lips. “Indeed. But a necessary decision.”

“One you will be properly recognized for in the future,” Marian said. “I am sure of it.”

If they won, he would be correct. Patricia though was not going to count on that, not until Earth was claimed by her hand.

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Project DH0022 Holding Station, Zararch Oversight – Classified Location

3/15/2017 – Unknown Time

There was a certain comfort to being back here. Familiarity. Clarity.

Away from being surrounded by aliens and their plots and plans. Schemes and shadow wars. It was…an enlightening experience to have observed the incident which was Isomnum. So much to be learned and understood.

Yet there was a job that needed to be done, though Nemo did not see why two things could not be accomplished at once.

The next target was one which had been chosen in response to the arrival of Caelior. Such a revelation would spur more defections; plant subversive thoughts in the minds of the common soldier. The death of an Ethereal would not help with this. If they could not be incentivized to remain loyal through what they already had…

Then the fear of defection would need to be put into them.

Nemo needed a new face while the hologram of his target was before it. Runi’siris’svitianis, the Vitakara Representative of the AEGIS Division. The current face of the Vitakara defectors. A mere soldier and puppet of ADVENT, she nonetheless was being effectively utilized and was ultimately not intelligent enough to see the ways she was being used.

It ultimately did not matter.

She was a traitor, and traitors were to be punished.

The Zararch report on her was comprehensive, as it was simple to acquire information prior to her defection. Her psychological profile in particular was of interest. An easily swayed and frightened woman who was prone to groupthink and propaganda; one who acted in the moment and then could successfully rationalize and justify their decisions after the fact; one who had little-self-reflection, especially when being told she was a hero and doing the right thing.

Killing her would not be enough. It would only galvanize the others. The defectors and traitors needed to fall into despair. They needed to understand that eventually they would realize they had made mistakes – and that there would be punishment for them. There was an art to destroying a public figure, and…well.
It was something it had some experience in.

This operation would be slightly different, as he had decided not to abandon the Nemo persona, as the face worn would be primarily for the operation itself, and it made it simpler for Volk and his people to follow. Although the Human was likely to have difficulty wrapping his staunch mind around the polymorphism Nemo displayed.

Several hours had already been spent on the face. It helped that there were detailed medical scans of Sirasis, which could be easily replicated, if done delicately. A more rounded face, closer eyes, wider nostrils. Details which few would notice, but would be essential to fully sell her untimely demise. Red blood stained the floor as it had emptied his veins in preparation for Vitakara blood to be inserted.

Satisfied with the current progress of the face, it turned to face the captive it had strapped to a chair also in the room. By far the most curious aspect of Isomnum’s operation had been the insertion to the entities of Paradise Station. These agents of the Bringer…they were certainly a concern, if not a threat to him, and there was only one way to truly understand a threat.

The source had to be approached.

It had been a simple matter to have one of the Caretakers brought to him. The species and gender had not been important, and so he had received a Human female Caretaker. Immediately upon taking her to the station, he had stripped her of her bulky clothing to see what was underneath. As expected, she was…degrading.

Skin was turning gray and cracked. Blood openly flowed from breaks in the skin, if only from minor cuts. Her hair was falling out in patches, and a thorough medical scan revealed that her bone structure was remarkably weak and there were multiple hairline fractures, especially in the legs and feet. Already the pain tolerance of the Caretaker was exceptional.

But that…that was not what it was interested in.

Pain tolerance was not special.

It was the thing in her head which caught its interest.

“It is time to talk,” Nemo said, moving towards the bound Caretaker. The voice he was modifying to accurately replicate the tone of Sirasis, and now sounded an approximation of a female. His hands were along his neck as he was continuously adjusting the vocal cords. The memory of the voice of the real Sirasis played in his mind, and he knew just when it would be pitch perfect.

In the meantime, it would talk to the Caretaker.

She was silent. Unsurprising. She had not uttered a word since her arrival, nor resisted.

He lifted a datapad from the floor. “I know who you are. Or who you were before you were taken to Paradise Station. I’m curious if you still retain yourself or if the Bringer has fully puppeted you.”

“You misunderstand, as do all who lack His vision,” she said, voice cracked and raspy. “I am myself as I have always been, and now have been blessed to receive His presence and power.”

Nemo looked to her degrading body. “The Bringer demands a heavy price.”

“A price I pay willingly,” she said. “My mortal body will serve as he wishes until it can no longer function. You cannot understand, sightless as you are. If you only understood who He was; what
he has done for a simple Human like me—"

“Ah, I understand your god more than you think,” Nemo smiled and held up an ornate and bound tome. “Do you recognize this?”

Her eyes widened for the first time. “The Chronicles…you…you have read them?”

“Indeed,” he answered neutrally. “What few chapters exist at the moment. Inspirars is a talented speaker, writer, and rationalizer. I cannot say that I did not learn from the words he wrote. It is certainly enlightening; and convinces me further that the Imperator underestimates the entity that he is foolish enough to think he can control. The Imperator relies on his influence and power to overcome his obstacles, while I prefer to know them. And what better source that the Bringer’s own designated prophet.”

It smiled at the indignant look on the face of the Caretaker. “There is only one Prophet, which you should know, and do not negate her role.”

“I’m very well aware,” Nemo said. “The point being that I read your Chronicles to understand the mindset of your cult. It is most certainly a fascinating study in how a mad entity can warp the minds of so many so completely. Warp them to the point where wrong equals right, where the unnatural is commonplace, and where lies are truth. It is not surprising that Beijing happened as it did when viewed in the context of creatures who have lost all rationality.”

“How can you say this?” She demanded. “You should understand who He is! How can you not?”

“I understand who your god is perfectly well,” Nemo said, reaching down and picking up a small glass jar. “Your god is a manipulative coward. I found a rather interesting creature in the chapters of the Chronicles which were provided to me,” he shook the jar where the dead creature was. “I confirmed with Nebulan that the creature exuded a weak telepathy. Certainly not enough to affect a psion, but would certainly…enhance the Chronicles to an unfortunate curious individual who happened to stumble upon it.”

Nemo set the jar down. “Now, why would the Bringer have put such a creature inside? If he was so convinced that his truth was convincing and legitimate, why would he resort to such deception? Perhaps he fears that he would be utterly rejected; his Chronicles burned in fires, and people rising up to purge the galaxy of his sickness.”

“They do not understand the necessity or truth on their own!” The Caretaker spat. “They cannot be saved if they remain blind.”

“Such a strong god, whose will must be forced upon the unwilling, and later brainwashed to believe it is what they wish all along,” Nemo commented. “It merely confirms that the Bringer knows well the unnatural state he exists in and knows how his wishes are revolting to the sapient individual. Thus, domination is the only way to ensure his success. The Imperator is…arrogant…but the Bringer is just as fallible. Which is why you will recognize that your god cannot save you.”


She sneered through chapped lips. “I am not afraid to die, creature. If this is to be my fate, I accept it willingly. Death is not the end for us, while you…you will die with no hope of salvation one day while I will be in Paradise.”

“So your Chronicles imply,” Nemo nodded, standing. “And what if Paradise is denied?”

“Paradise cannot be denied,” she said. “Not now. The Bringer watches over me, and will welcome
me when I die by your hand.”

Nemo stood. “We shall see about that.” It walked over to a console and began turning on the scanners. Fectorian and Revelean had requested data on what was learned, and it would certainly comply. Nemo then walked to a sealed container which was in the far corner and unlocked it. Inside was a black orb which rippled and swirled with nanites.

Nemo picked the orb up and walked back and set the orb down before the woman and only gave a simple phrase. “Deny the woman Paradise.” The orb rose suddenly and the nanites which had been around it expanded to form a larger globe where Nemo could see the center orb was a pale blue and green color.

Then it began glowing brighter.

The woman stiffened and her eyes widened in terror. “What did you *do* to me!”

“Denied you what you wanted most,” Nemo answered, walking over to a table and picking up a pistol. “Your god is not all-powerful. He will not come to save you. He is mortal and fallible like everything else. I want you to think about that as you die.” Nemo fired a single shot into her chest which clipped the heart.

Sitting down opposite her again, he tuned out her begging and screaming to let her die in Paradise. A useful experiment, and one that would need to be conducted on other pawns of the Bringer. She would die…but not for several hours. The wound inflicted would make sure of that, which would be more than enough to time see how quickly the mental state of a Caretaker would degenerate.

In the meantime, Nemo returned to modifying his face and body for the role it would soon be playing.

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*Mess Hall, the Praesidium – Classified Location*

*3/15/2017 – 12:02 P.M.*

Until this moment, Sierra felt like the day was going pretty well. Or at least not to the point where she could complain about it. Daily Archangel practice runs were always good to get the blood flowing and flying always put her in a good mood. The victories they’d enjoyed were certainly a confidence boost, and this had been the first day where Ted had been well enough to join her and Anna.

A full squad again. Another good thing.

So they’d done their exercises and then naturally decided it was time to eat. Dressed in fatigues after taking short showers, they made their way to the Mess Hall and upon entering it Sierra felt the mood immediately change. Conversation was common, especially at this time with all the soldiers and staff here, but everyone was talking in subdued tones, as well as many looking furious at… something.

Anna looked around, then to Sierra. “I think we missed something.”

“Perceptive as always,” Ted grunted. “But yeah, this is odd. Another alien attack?”

“Doubt it,” Sierra dismissed after a moment. “Base would be on alert if that was the case.”
“Want to place bets?” Anna asked. “Mine is that the SAS did something. Probably got a country to
join them. Maybe more.”

“Or Brazil lost more ground,” Ted added. “Or more Human traitors have been found like the
Battlemaster’s puppet.”

“Wonder how they would learn that,” Sierra said as they went to get trays. “Unless a new one
showed up.”

“You want my serious guess?” Ted asked rhetorically. “The Chronicler’s people did something to
Isomnum’s mind before he died. I bet they learned something and it’s only now that they’re
sharing it. Or maybe they just learned it and are sharing it. Considering what Isomnum knows, I
doubt it’s good news.”

Sierra raised an eyebrow and looked around. “Doesn’t appear to be good news anyway, from
Isomnum or not. Hey,” she called to a woman in engineering attire who was walking past. “Excuse
me, did something happen?”

The woman pursed her lips. “Memo was sent out an hour ago. Check your inboxes. Read it for
yourself. Better that way.”

Sierra had a bad feeling about this.

They got their food in silence and Sierra pulled out her phone and accessed the XCOM email. She
had a bad habit of not clearing notifications, so it made sense that she hadn’t seen the message.
Nothing like saying PRIORITY MEMO – READ IMMEDIATELY to get her attention, as well as
the standard ‘flagged’ feature which automatically screamed at her to read important messages if
she did so much as check other unread ones first.

It was a .pdf document of course, like all memos. XCOM dispersed their information that way.
Apparently in the beginning the Commander had just laid out stacks of documents here and let
people read them that way. She almost wished he still did that, but XCOM was likely too big now
for that to feasibly work. Made more sense to just send mass emails instead.

“You’ll have to share with me,” Ted said as he began eating. “Didn’t bring my phone.”

“Sure thing,” Sierra said as she opened the document up.

She read the first few lines, blinked, and brought the screen closer to her face convinced she had
missed something. She reread it again in disbelief. “What the actual fuck?” She read the rest of the
memo in short order, it was only a few pages and it really, really needed to be much longer. Ted
had stopped eating and looked at her, concerned.

“That bad? What is it?”

She almost threw the phone out of anger to him, but restrained herself. “Much fucking worse that
we thought. Read it.” Instead she practically shoved it in his face.

He went through a similar range of emotions, first confusion, then stunned disbelief, and then
shocked anger. “Patricia…she joined the Imperator?”

“Is this a joke?” Anna asked, setting the phone down with a stunned look on her face. “We’re not
close enough to April for this to be funny.”

“No one on the Internal Council would do this, even for a joke.” Sierra shook her head, trying to
rationalize what the hell Patricia had been thinking. “There is no way they would send this out unless they were certain.” She glanced to Ted. “Good call on the Isomnum thing though. Sounds like they learned it from him.”

“Maybe Isomnum was lying or misunderstanding something?” Anna wondered faintly. “I just…why?”

“Yeah, that might be a good detail to conclude in the memo,” Sierra scowled. “I doubt they know either, only that she has. I bet it’s simple though. The Imperator is controlling her. *Aegis* is intimidated by him. No way Patricia could refuse him.”

“I…don’t know,” Ted’s voice was strained as he looked blankly at his food. “I’ve talked with Aegis. I’ve read the file on the Imperator. That…isn’t how he works by all indications. He apparently stays away from things like direct control like that. I think he may have actually convinced her.”

“I might believe that if Patricia hadn’t literally been fighting this war from the beginning,” Sierra shook her head. “You don’t just *switch sides* at this point without blackmail or mind control. What could the Imperator say that magically made everything that’s happened go away? ‘This was all a misunderstanding’?” She mimed. “Patricia is smarter than that. And even if he *did* say that, she wouldn’t fucking *join* him.”

“I think the main point of this is that the next time we see her…we will have to fight her,” Anna said quietly. “Her reasons aren’t known, and probably aren’t important now. She’s on their side, willingly or not. I’m certain the Commander wants us to know what’s coming. Isomnum’s death has probably made the Imperator angry. So he’ll send one of the heroes of the conflict as his pawn in retaliation.”

“Well, the good news is that if he’s stupid enough to send her alone, we can beat her,” Sierra said firmly. “Even if he sends an army, we have enough psions and an Ethereal to capture her and bring her back and break whatever hold the Imperator has on her. The Collective won’t be able to hold her forever.”

“Agreed there,” Anna breathed heavily. “But it isn’t going to be pleasant. Not to mention it’ll be worse if she manages to kill one of us. Or if we have to kill her.”

“It won’t come to that, not unless she’s with another actual Ethereal,” Ted said confidently. “Patricia is a telepath. A powerful one, but still a telepath. Geist and Aegis can occupy her…and the rest of us can subdue her. Remember we captured *Caelior* alive. We can do that for her. She deserves that much.”

“Yeah,” Sierra nodded. “She does. I bet the Imperator thought this was going to be a demoralizing event for us. If he wants to throw Patricia at us and thinks it’ll break us, well…”

“He’s going to be very disappointed,” Anna finished with a wry smile. “I’m not going to blame Patricia for what happened. Not until we know for sure. Odds are she’s a pawn of the Imperator regardless of what you think, Ted. And if she’s a legitimate traitor, we’ll put her in the ground where she belongs. But until then, she’s a victim of the Imperator and we’re going to treat her like one.”

“Within reason,” Ted said slowly. “No holding back until she’s secured though. Because I guarantee she will be trying to kill us.”

“We’ve fought Ethereals, Hive Commanders, and massive siege machines and won,” Sierra
reminded them. “One probably-controlled XCOM soldier?” She took a gulp of her water. “I think we can handle that.”

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Central Government Complex – Hong Kong

3/15/2017 – 1:02 P.M.

If there was ever a moment where the course of history would change, it was now. Mere months ago it was close to impossible to imagine the gathering which existed today, yet now they stood around a round table with their respective flags and officials in the background, ready to speak and negotiate on the future of China.

Unfortunate that it had involved the destruction of so much of the country, but they could only move forward now. Rebuild and act together as one united force. Today was to begin the process of helping China come together – or safely split apart. Saudia sat with Hassan at her side, while the representatives of what remained of the Chinese government, the Taiwanese government, the Hong Kong Council, and the Central Tibetan Administration held seats across from each other.

The Acting President of China, Jian Huang was one of the few survivors, having left Beijing to help organize evacuations and preparations for the northern parts of the country. As such he’d been spared the worst of the fighting, though quite clearly did not want the responsibility of leading the country. Unfortunately, there was no one else left of importance, and of the remaining members of the CPP, he was the one Hassan had said was the most qualified.

Hanying Yao was also the acting President of Taiwan, although as opposed to China, the majority of their government was still intact and there was a clear line of succession. He was prepared and he, along with his advisors, looked confident as to how the talks were going to go. Saudia suspected that the Taiwanese were thrilled at how for once, they had the upper hand over the Communist Party – or what was left of it.

Zexian Tang spoke for the Hong Kong government as Chief Executive, and while Saudia had been mildly surprised when the Hong Kong government had demanded a seat at the talks, she was not caught off guard. Hassan had warned her that since the Chinese had been slowly and deliberately stripping away their ‘independence’ by installing their own media, immigrating mainland Chinese, and becoming far more politically active in Hong Kong affairs, they wanted to air their own grievances. Hassan didn’t necessarily believe that Hong Kong wanted to be completely independent, but that it wanted concerns addressed.

Finally, Speaker Rebten Tashi spoke for the Central Tibetan Administration, who had previously been known as the Tibetan government-in-exile. ADVENT had recognized them, and they had gratefully accepted their place in the talks. They would want independence, Hassan had assured her, although the CTA would then dissolve when an actual government was in place, one elected by Tibetans.

A nice sentiment, though Tibet would still have to follow ADVENT law like everyone else. But ADVENT would certainly be willing to facilitate elections.

“Thank you for responding quickly to our requests,” Saudia began as the meeting officially came to order. “The future of China, which we know will take months to fully recover from the attacks, is something that must be determined now rather than later so we can adequately prepare. Regardless of the outcome, ADVENT stands to provide support for a smooth and stable integration.”
They were all long past the point of even asking if they would be ADVENT members. That ship had sailed when Beijing had been taken by ADVENT. No one would demand complete independence now. Hassan nodded to Acting President Yao of Taiwan. “President, you have requested to give the opening statements, which has been granted.”

“Thank you, Chief Diplomat, and you as well, Chancellor,” he began, standing up. “I am certain everyone in this room is aware to the extent the country of China has been damaged, from the cities to the outskirts. There is no land which is untouched by the conflict. Regardless of past political stances and agendas, we are all inhabitants of this land we call home and should strive to do what is best for her inhabitants.”

Not the best opening he could have chosen, as the CTA representatives – Tashi in particular – narrowed their eyes. She supposed it was difficult for them to call the land ‘home’ when they had been in exile for decades with no say over who they believed were their citizens.

“The people of this land need stability and leadership, especially now,” Yao said, looking around the room. “ADVENT will provide them with physical needs, but they also need faith and hope – faith that their leaders can provide for them and represent their interests, and hope that they will rise from this event stronger than ever. That cannot happen with a country which is divided.”

He nodded his head to ADVENT. “Ultimately, we are all one people, one species. As the founders of ADVENT put aside their bloody and rival pasts, we too should strive to move beyond what has divided us for so long. Our own people know well the feeling of being ostracized from our country, but even we agree that it will be far more compelling and unifying if we do not emerge from this with the Chinese nation broken into separate states, but one united people, under one united – and fair – government.”


“We have the infrastructure and manpower to lead from the start,” Yao nodded. “We would not think of assuming permanent control, but we would maintain positions long enough for elections to be held and would voluntarily step down. This interim government would be composed of qualifying surviving officials of the Communist party, as well as members of the CTA,” he nodded to the Tibetans. “We do not want an exclusive hold over the government, as that would hinder the unification of our nation.”

“But you would be in charge of selecting them,” Chief Executive Tang noted, who had clearly not missed being snubbed by Yao. “You also neglect the contributions and leadership of Hong Kong in favor of a government which had held no real power for decades while we have been faced with harsh pressure from the Chinese government to become more integrated.”

“We could not return because of the Chinese,” Tashi defended. “Had we seen a way, we would have done so. But we both know that neither of us could protect ourselves, and the West would not support us despite their platitudes.”

“Young proposal is well and good, Acting President,” Tang said slowly, turning his attention to Yao. “However, I put forward a different proposal. The best way for us to move forward is not through a unification, but by forging our own paths independent of each other. We do not have the same beliefs, values, and customs as you do, as the Tibetans do, and others. And Hong Kong will not once more be in a position where our voice is silenced due to the threat of the grander Chinese authority.”

He shot a glance to Huang. “I do not care if you assimilate the mainland Communist party, but this time we will claim our true independence. The “one country, two systems” policy is over. We have
no intention of returning to the fold of the Chinese government.”

An interesting development, Saudia stayed quiet as Yao raised an eyebrow. “I understand your grievances, but we do not intend to remake the Communist party. I will also note that you wish to create an independent state of an island? Is your pride worth more than presenting a united front to the world?”

“I will ask you what gives you the right to play kingmaker?” Tang demanded. “Why do you have more of a right than Speaker Tashi and the CTA? They were exiled by China as well. You are not special.”

“We are Chinese,” Yao said. “Exiled perhaps many years ago. If anyone is entitled to manage her fate, it is us if the mainland government is no longer a factor.”

“We are not Chinese,” Tashi said firmly. “And we will no longer pretend to be such. The Tibetan people have lived under the yoke of a Chinese power for far too long. The forceful conversion of our people to see themselves as Chinese is over, the suppression of our religion is ended. We are not your people, Acting President. We never have been and staunchly refuse any attempt at reunification.”

“As far as our size is concerned, Acting President,” Tang said, looking to the Chancellor. “I believe we need to consider a rewriting of the borders of this land in the context of this war and what has been contributed. Hong Kong has sustained heavy losses and damage during the conflict, as well as many of her soldiers killed in action across the country.”

He motioned to his aide who handed him a sheet. “To the Chancellor of ADVENT, the Government of Hong Kong requests that the regions of Hainan, Guangxi, Guangdong, and Fujian be ceded to Hong Kong and placed under our jurisdiction in light of our contributions to the war effort and previous limitations which were imposed on us by the previous Communist Party of China.”

The room burst into murmurs and subdued comments as Saudia leaned forward. “I disagree with this proposal,” Yao said, frowning. “With respect, Chancellor, giving them land for the sole purpose of contributing is shaky ground. I will remind you that Taiwan has been allied to ADVENT from the beginning and have contributed many resources, soldiers, and manpower to the war effort.”

“And you are getting the majority of the mainland,” Tang said smugly. “So I would not complain about your share.”

Yao pursed his lips and Saudia decided to speak. “Chief Executive, are you and your advisors certain you wish to gain independence?”

“We are certain, Chancellor,” Tang nodded. “Even in the event we do not receive more territory. We came to this decision unanimously and will not back down for the sake of a false unification.”

“And what of your citizens,” Yao cautioned. “This should not be a decision you rush into just to gain independence.”

“Considering you wish to take over millions of people who are not aware of your own existence, do not lecture us about not respecting the will of the people,” Tang snapped back. “I’m certain that the general population of China would prefer the Communist party, not those who they’ve been conditioned to consider traitors leading them.”
“Be that as it may, Chief Executive, the Taiwanese can be considered the legitimate government of China,” Hassan pointed out. “What you request is for the territories you wish for yourself to simply be given to you without considering what the citizens themselves wish. On those grounds your request is questionable.”

“And there is a solution I believe we can agree on,” Tang said. “Let the people themselves decide. Allow myself and Acting President Yao present a case to them, and they vote to remain a part of China, or a state under the Hong Kong Administration.”

“I see that as a plausible solution,” Saudia nodded. “And I agree that Hong Kong is entitled to territory should they desire, though you are placed in a difficult situation due to your limited size. Until such elections can be held, I presume you wish to establish Hong Kong as an independent state.”

“Yes, Chancellor,” Tang confirmed. “We do. We will not be convinced otherwise.”

“Make a note of that, Hassan,” Saudia said. “Considering the unique situation and background of your state and people, I’m inclined to grant this. Hong Kong will be granted member status within ADVENT, and be entitled to a representative on the Congress of Nations.”

“Thank you, Chancellor,” Tang bowed his head. “We will not forget this.”

“It is prudent that we state our own demands,” Tashi said. “We request that the sovereign territory of the Tibetan people be returned. No more or less than what we originally possessed and an immediate expulsion of immigrant Chinese and former government officials from our lands.”

“Former government officials of the Communist Party will be recalled,” Hassan said. “However, forcibly removing immigrant Chinese who have lived their lives in Tibet will not be permitted. However, we will allow the option of immigration to China if they wish to remain under a government they identify with. Is this acceptable.”

Tashi nodded once. “It will be.”

Huang coughed. “While it may be obvious, I will put forth my own decision and that of the surviving members of the Communist party to support Acting President Yao in his management of the country of China. We do not have the people and structure to manage our nation, even if we wanted to. We have little choice but to leave it to your hands.”

“Accepted, Acting President,” Yao said respectfully. “We will do our best to help the citizens of this country and will certainly take your own suggestions into account.”

There were a few more minutes of deliberation, and finally Hassan lifted a hand. “We have already reached important steps in deciding the future of China. There will be a short recess before we return to discuss more specifics.”

They all went into their own separate groups and the sound of conversation filled the air. Sitting back, Hassan looked to Saudia. “I didn’t expect Hong Kong to be so aggressive. An interesting development.”

“But not an unwelcome one,” Saudia said, scratching her metal hands absentmindedly. “I think something like this was what was needed. Let them forge their own paths. Perhaps in the future they will decide to unify as Yao wants. But not yet.” She looked to the Tibetan delegation who were laughing and almost celebrating over the decisions. “Let this nation and people heal. They can always make a different choice later.”
“Support needs to still be provided in Brazil and Florida,” Creed said as they looked over the holomap. Zhang, Iosif, and Jackson were also in attendance. “ADVENT is holding well in Florida, though they’ve taken most of the non-urban centers. Miami and Tampa are holding out well.”

“I’d be surprised if they weren’t,” the Commander said. “ADVENT SFCOM is there. Any Collective advance is going to hit a steep wall. Caelior is likely responsible for Miami being retained.”

“He stopped the orbital bombardment and then pulled the ships out of the sky,” Jackson reminded him. “That seems to have changed up the Battlemaster’s strategy.”

“We should be sending him elsewhere,” Zhang said with a frown. “Keeping him in one location lessens his usefulness elsewhere, especially with the Guardians and the Battlemaster’s Avatar carving through Brazil.”

“And the moment he is moved the Battlemaster levels Miami,” the Commander reminded him. “I agree he should be moved further – but not until the Battlemaster ceases all assault of Miami. ADVENT reports place him moving heavy artillery down to the region. Along with Vanguard support.”

“Telepathic overwhelming?” Jackson wondered, considering. “Couldn’t be with just Vanguards.”

“We should use this chance to deal another blow to the Collective,” Iosif said as he paced. “We have multiple targets in play now. The Guardians in Brazil, the Battlemaster’s Avatar, the Battlemaster himself, and whoever is puppeting Betos in the SAS. An overwhelming attack with our strike teams with ADVENT assistance could work, especially in conjunction with Aegis or Caelior.”

“The issue is that the Battlemaster has to know that,” the Commander said, pursing his lips as he leaned on the holotable, looking into the blue light. “Realistically, the Battlemaster knows we’ve reached a critical mass of psions. But he still takes to the battlefield openly. Why?”

“He’s skilled and dangerous,” Creed answered with a shrug. “Not difficult to see. Why would he stop now, it’s not in his style or personality. If he dies, he dies fighting.”

“But he isn’t a self-sacrifice type,” the Commander pointed out. “Limited in his skills or not, he’s waiting for us to make the first move. He has something up his sleeve and that open question mark makes me hesitant to commit too heavily. Isomnum was isolated and we could rely on his own arrogance and limited range of abilities. The Battlemaster is smarter than him.”

“Then we take his Avatar,” Jackson said. “She’s clearly dangerous, but she can be killed.”

“I agree there,” he nodded. “Creed, do you have a squad in mind?”

“I can put one together easily enough,” Creed confirmed. “No shortage of those willing. She’s a telekine, so she’s going to be a difficult target. Especially since she knows offensive and defensive usages. Makes sniper eliminations unlikely and this is not taking into account the fact that she is heavily augmented.”
“Dynamo psions are the best choice then,” Iosif said. “Telekines can’t block them. Include snipers too. If nothing else it’ll force her to concentrate on maintaining a telekinetic field.”

“No noted,” Creed tapped on his tablet. “Next time she appears, she’ll have a more difficult time than just going against ADVENT.”

“We should rotate our squads already in operation,” the Commander said, swapping the holomap to display active XCOM squads. “Give them a break for a few days. The West Coast is becoming more active. Jackson, you received the list of candidates?”

“Yes, Commander,” she confirmed. “I’ve narrowed the list down, but it will expand our numbers significantly. I’ve passed it to Creed and Iosif for final review.”

“Good,” the Commander said. “We’ve entered a critical stage of the war. It will eventually spread beyond it. Are the preparations for the Summit proceeding on schedule?”

“So far, yes,” Jackson confirmed, briefly glancing at her tablet. “Coordinating on this scale in secret is difficult though. The Andromedons are willing, and ADVENT has cleared themselves. We still need confirmations from the Sar’Manda and Nulorian. Although I expect an answer within days…” She trailed off, reaching up and tapping her earpiece. It must have been urgent, as she would never do that in a meeting otherwise.

“We have a problem,” Jackson said somberly, looking back to them. “Patricia has appeared.”

The reaction in the room was immediate the moment they heard it, as the Commander focused intently on Jackson. “Appeared where and how?”

“Don’t know how, but she’s in front of ADVENT HQ in Switzerland,” Jackson said.

“Attacking?” Zhang demanded.

“No yet,” Jackson answered. “But she’s beginning to attract attention. She wants to make this a public event.”

The Commander exhaled. “We knew this was coming. Creed, put the squad together. One way or another, Patricia will be handled today.”

Creed nodded somberly. “Yes, Commander. It will be done.”

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To be continued in Chapter 51

Enter the Harbinger

Chapter End Notes

Two authors notes in one chapter, probably not something that’s going to happen often. In any case, this is sort of an announcement to let people know this is something that’s coming. Right now I'm working on putting a Discord server together for readers of the
series with other authors I've worked with over time. Some of you are already aware of this, but since I've confirmed there is enough interest, that is a thing that is happening. If interested, let me know so I can sent you a link when it launches which will be sometime shortly before the next chapter. Otherwise the next chapter as well as my profile and the forums will have the link.

Thanks as always for reading!
Every ranking officer and division head was in attendance as the Commander prepared to handle the revelation of Patricia appearing before ADVENT HQ. All of them were looking at live feeds and hologram reconstructions of where Patricia was. Immediately several things stood out to the Commander.

The first was that she was wearing what appeared to be her original red Aegis armor. No weapons, but as she was a psion, she didn’t need them. Realistically, the Commander was skeptical that it was the original Aegis armor, but instead probably something more advanced; superficially designed to resemble her old armor. Or perhaps she was wearing it and was extremely confident. It was interesting that she cared enough to emulate it, at any rate. Other than that, she looked… almost normal. Her helmet was tucked under her arm and she appeared in no hurry to do anything. There were a few additional notable cybernetic additions along her neck and jaw, but Aegis had already speculated that they were the result of the Avatar Project, whatever that entailed.

“ADVENT has Hussars positioned to take shots,” Jackson updated the Commander. “Priests and MDUs are being mobilized and moving out. Civilians are being advised to remain in their homes. Doesn’t look like she’s doing anything right now.”

“She’s waiting for us,” the Commander shook his head. “Whatever she’s planning, she wants for us to be there.”

“A trap?” Shen wondered.

“Or a demonstration,” Zhang countered grimly. “If she’s intending to send a message…what better place than the headquarters of ADVENT itself.”

“Has the Chancellor been evacuated?” Creed asked.

“Yes,” Jackson confirmed. “She’s in a secure location.”

“Two Agents are protecting her right now in addition to her Guard and Priests,” the Chronicler added. “Sovereign Orbs are seeded around the perimeter and interior. Breaching the safe house is impossible without someone knowing.”

“Good,” the Commander was pleased that Saudia was taking steps to mitigate the threat of Ethereals and other entities like the Bringer. T’Leth was the best way, should everything else fail. “But we can’t wait much longer. Creed – the squads.”

“Ready and waiting,” Creed confirmed. “Two full squads specialized to take her down, along with MEC and Archangel components. With your permission, I’m going along as well.”
“Granted, so long as you do not hesitate,” the Commander nodded. “She’s going to want to talk to me as well. I’m going along too. With the amount of personnel, the danger should be limited. She cannot face down two XCOM squads and the defenses of HQ.”

“T’Leth will want to observe too,” the Chronicler said. “I will also participate. We cannot be too prepared here. Though I want to make a suggestion as to our… response.”

The Commander motioned for him to go on. “Let’s hear it.”

“We can expect that Patricia is going to attempt to sow discord and division based on what she knows,” the Chronicler said. “The media are going to get their hands on some footage, and if Patricia is smart, she’ll be sure to spread it. No better place than the capital. The only appropriate response is to respond in kind.”

“How?” The Commander raised an eyebrow. “Doing the same thing isn’t feasible.”

The Chronicler cocked his head and smiled. “Is it? Patricia appeared out of nowhere; we can do the same thing. I propose Fiona teleport a strike team to Vitakar, directly before the Aui’Vitakar, and show the people and government what they are really facing. I suspect this would be more… poignant if Aegis and several of our Vitakara allies participated. The entire species is isolated from the reality of this war. That will change when it is brought to them.”

“I approve of this plan,” Aegis said. “If nothing else, it will force the Imperator to respond. The Zararch will suppress this as best they can, but word will spread. So long as we do not violently attack them, and merely state our side of the war, this has the potential to heavily destabilize the planet. We have the manpower and capability – and they will not expect it.”

“I agree,” the Commander nodded. “Unfortunate that sending Caelior is out of the question.”

“It is likely for the best,” Aegis said slowly. “Regardless, we will be attacked by the Imperator. If Caelior were permitted to leave Earth, two Ethereals in the heart of the Vitakara would be a larger deterrent than one. Yet it is likely safer to hold Caelior back in Switzerland and use him if Patricia proves more dangerous than expected.”

“There is something to consider,” Zhang pointed out. “If Patricia is expecting any of this and her appearance is a trap to lure us away from more important targets. She has no chance of taking the HQ or causing any permanent damage. It would be a symbolic attack, but perhaps a distracting one. The Battlemaster, the Guardians, the SAS, they could all launch coordinated strikes when our best are deployed to stop one woman.”

The Commander pinched the bridge of his nose, thinking. That was a good factor to take into account. When it came down to it, Patricia – assuming she was mostly the same woman – would be able to predict some of their reactions. Of course, there were things she was ignorant of since her abduction, but she wasn’t an idiot, and underestimating her was dangerous.

The good news was that there was an obvious solution. “Send squads to likely locations of attack,” he told Jackson. “If the Ethereals decide to take advantage of us being distracted, we will be ready. Iosif, take a squad to Florida in case the Battlemaster makes a move. Carmelita and Geist will lead the other two.”

“Acknowledged, Commander,” Iosif confirmed. “Although what if there’s an attack here? Patricia knows the location.”

“Possible, but unlikely,” the Commander said slowly. “But we would know of an attack long
before it happens. They’d need an army to breach it successfully, as well as be fighting the defenses and soldiers inside. There will be an attack on the Praesidium – but I suspect today will not be that day.”

He frowned. “Though the reality is that the Praesidium is no longer secure. We may have to begin finding a new location for more critical projects. No point in taking chances right now though. Even if attacking would be suicide unless the Imperator himself participated.”

“His capabilities would be neutered here anyway,” the Chronicler said, shaking his head. “Teleportation tricks would fail. Not to mention T’Leth can easily direct his attention to here. Too many safeguards and the Imperator is clearly going to use her as his proxy.”

“I would not be surprised if something was sent though,” Zhang warned. “Perhaps as a message that they know where we are now. Caelior should stay. The teams for Patricia are more than sufficient. Backup protocols should also be initiated for a worst-case scenario. With the Imperator, we cannot take too many chances.”

“Agreed,” Aegis nodded. “Sicarius is a likely agent should he attack the Praesidium. If not properly stopped, she could cause havoc here. And discover some things best hidden. Specifically, the Andromedons we have here.”

“Move them to Paperclip base,” the Commander ordered, as an unpleasant reality set in. “Patricia also knows that the Andromedons we had here prior to our alliance with the Unions were under orders to defect. The Unions allied to us need to act very quickly if they are to remain intact.”

“Fuck,” Creed cursed. “This just keeps getting better.”

“Jackson, I assume the Andromedons have contingencies in place for this.” The Commander looked to her. “Have contact be made and put them into action. We need to assume that their actions on Earth are compromised. We will need to meet to establish the next steps.”

“Understood, Commander,” she confirmed.

“We know what to do,” the Commander said, straightening up and looking around the room. “We’ve spent enough time talking. Execute your orders and those of us preparing to deploy, we need to get going. Understood?”

“Yes, Commander!” They saluted, and he returned it before they all rushed off to prepare for the coming battles.

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Briefing Room 6, the Praesidium – Classified Location

3/18/2017 – 11:11 A.M.

Being given the command to mobilize, Sierra expected that she would be going to meet the traitor Patricia and putting her down. But after walking into the Briefing Room with the rest of her Host as well as not one, but two of T’Leth’s Agents – Fiona and Crevan specifically – as well as Aegis with no sign of the Commander or Creed anywhere…

She had a feeling that something else was going on.

When some of the Vitakara defectors also walked in, she was thoroughly confused. “What’s the mission, sir?” Sussan, one of the psions in the room asked. “Taking out Patricia?”
“No, though this is of equal importance,” Aegis answered, stepping forward. “The Imperator has seen fit to send his proxy before ADVENT. The Commander has decided that we will return the favor.”

Huh. Well that was interesting. “Where?” Sierra inquired. “Does the Collective even have a capital?”

“The true power nexus of the Collective would be the Temple Ship of the Imperator,” Aegis said. “But the bastions of power for each species exist, and the most malleable is that of Vitakar.”

“Fiona will teleport us to the capital of the Vitakara,” Crevan said bluntly, his almost dismissive eyes looking at each of them. “From there Aegis will present the reality of the war on Earth to the population. Our Vitakara allies have been appraised of this prior to coming here, and will provide legitimacy to Aegis. Our mission is to both send a message to the Collective, and protect Aegis and the citizens should there be conflict.”

“And what part of that mission includes getting back?” Anna asked. “The Imperator – or the Zararch for that matter – aren’t just going to let Aegis talk.”

“No, the Imperator will send someone,” Aegis agreed with a short nod. “Perhaps an Ethereal; perhaps a fleet. We have sufficient capability to resist for a time.”

Considering that there was an Archangel Host, a MELD Operator, two psions, Aegis, and two of the most powerful T’Leth Agents, Sierra could see how they’d be able to hold out for a while. “Unless the Imperator comes himself,” Lacy Sable, one of the Infantry commented from the side, leaning against the dull metal wall. “With who we’ve got, he might think it’s his only option.”

“I suspect the Imperator is…occupied,” Aegis said, motioning with a lower hand. “If our beliefs about the Avatar Project are correct, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to maintain influence over Patricia while acting on his own. There are others who he could send instead. Quisilia and Sicarius are the most likely.”

The memelord and the assassin, a dangerous duo. As much as Sicarius seemed like the bigger threat, Sierra couldn’t quite ignore the fact that Quisilia had gone up against five Agents of T’Leth and emerged the victor. Granted, T’Leth hadn’t been completely awake yet from what she knew, but Quisilia was objectively the most dangerous of the two.

“What about Deusian?” Isacc Glenn, the MELD Operator asked neutrally.

“Who is that?” Sierra asked quietly to Anna, who just shrugged.


“It is not theoretical,” Aegis said, clearly having heard their discussion. “Reapers can and did destroy planets when necessary, which is why her deployment is unlikely. The Imperator does not want wholesale destruction – not in the heart of the Vitakara species.”

“So we go in, give our speeches, maybe fight some Ethereals, and leave?” Sierra asked. “Is that the plan?”

“The bullet points,” Crevan said flatly, eyeing her curiously. “As well as disseminating some important information with the Aui’Vitakar. It will likely not matter, but it will sow political discord and discontent among their people.”

“Which is what?” Anna asked.
“Footage from the Sectoid Hive, Paradise, the conflict on Earth, recorded interviews with defectors and captives, information to shed light on what the Collective is,” Crevan said, the corners of his lips just barely pulling up into a smile. “Outcomes are advantageous anyway. Should the Aui’Vitakar attempt to act, they will be removed. If they do nothing, the people will attempt to turn against them. Problems will arise that the Imperator will need to devote his attention to. Problems that will not involve Earth.”

“Is Nartha appraised of the situation?” Anna asked.

“No, this does not require his knowledge or approval,” Aegis said. “The circumstances are not ideal, but we cannot afford to wait. This will only be justifiable for a limited amount of time, and the Imperator learning our capability to teleport to such a place will not be taken lightly.”

“Any specific instructions for the non-talking people?” Sussan asked.

“Kill anything that shoots at you,” Crevan commanded. “No civilians or politicians. No firing until they fire at you. This applies to the Runianarch. If you see a Zararch operative lining up a shot, remove them. Keep Aegis and the Vitakara safe.”

“All of them grabbed their weapons, put on their helmets, and readied for the teleportation, which a good number had never experienced. The atmosphere around Sierra began to echo that which surrounded Fiona until her vision was now a blinding white-green and then in an instant everything flashed and she was struck by the feeling of falling into a bottomless pit with no jetpack.

Then just as quickly, it ceased and the world materialized around them. Only a few seconds of confirmation were needed before Sierra confirmed for herself that this was really happening.

They were on Vitakar.

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Barracks, the Praesidium – Classified Location

3/18/2017 – 11:02 A.M.

“Do you think there will be coordinated attacks?” Nuan asked quietly as she helped put on his armor.

“Hard to say,” Iosif answered with a restrained shrug. “I wouldn’t be surprised, but if there are… well, we’ll deal with them.”

“Did you want to go after Patricia?” Nuan scowled, thinking of the traitor. At this moment there wasn’t a terrible fate that she didn’t wish would befall her. It certainly put a damper over the previous victory.

“Of course I did, everyone does,” he grunted. “But it’s also important that we don’t become distracted by what she does. Trust me, two squads of the best psions, MECs, and specialists is enough to take on an Ethereal, much less whatever fake thing she is trying to be.”
“Let’s hope so,” Nuan also couldn’t shake the feeling that this wasn’t going to go as well as they were all clearly hoping. But from what she saw, everything was being done properly. Important battlefields were being reinforced, squads were being sent to deal with Patricia, and there was even a team going to Vitakar itself.

“Keep your guard up too,” Iosif advised, pulling on his gauntlets. “While unlikely, the Ethereals might try attacking the Praesidium. Worst case you might be called in if Patricia brings in a surprise army.”

If there was one thing Nuan wasn’t worried about, it was an attack here. Not that one wouldn’t come…but if there was going to be an attack here, it would be a dedicated one. Nothing less than an army and multiple Ethereals could get past the soldiers, defenses, and of course, T’Leth always observing for intruders.

“Is that why Caelior is still here?” Nuan asked as she handed him his helmet. “Contingency plans?”

“For now,” Iosif acknowledged. “Right now we don’t need him, but if things change, we have him on-call. Until then he’ll act as a final deterrent to an attack here.”

Now that they were finished armorign up, Nuan leaned against the lockers, thinking. “Do you think they’ll kill her? Will they even talk to her?”

“The Commander and Creed are going,” Iosif pursed his lips and holstered his sidearm. “They’re going to talk to her, for all the good it’ll do. Personally, I’d not waste time with the traitor, but she was part of the Internal Council, and her and Creed…well…” he gestured. “Can’t blame him for at least trying to bring her back. He’ll fail, but he tried.”

Nuan closed her eyes. “If you’re ever put in that position…just don’t hesitate. If in some nightmare I end up like that, whatever part of me you were drawn to is gone.”

He gave her a sad smile. “Easier said than done. I don’t have a connection to Patricia like Creed does. Solutions are much simpler. No matter how objective I am now, it wouldn’t be as easy if it were you in that position. I know I’d at least feel obligated to try.”

“I know, I know,” Nuan sighed. “This is a mess.”

“A generous term for it.”

“I suppose.” Knowing it was almost time for everyone to leave, she went closer to him and without hesitation kissed him on the lips. He seemed a little surprised, but for once she didn’t feel any kind of uncertainty around what she was doing, and neither did he it seemed.

It only lasted a few seconds, but felt so very right.

When it broke, she pulled him into a hug; awkward as it was with her unarmored body pressed into his much larger frame. But it was enough for her. “Do your best to come back,” she told him quietly. “Please.”

“Don’t worry,” he answered into her shoulder. “I am not going to die today. Especially not now.”

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ADVENT Headquarters – Switzerland
It was an overcast day; fitting in a way. Patricia was mildly surprised that ADVENT had waited so long before sending someone to deal with her. Granted, considering who she was, perhaps it wasn’t a surprise, not to mention they almost certainly had snipers trained on her from several different points.

Not that it would help them. Not now.

Now it seemed like they were coming to deal with her.

Multiple squads of ADVENT soldiers and a dozen Priests were marching down the street towards her, MDUs behind them. This was going to be somewhat tricky given her situation, but manageable. It was a fascinating experience, to be able to command such power with only a fraction of the expected effort.

This…hyperawareness…it certainly took some time to get used to, and she marveled at how the Ethereal mind was capable of processing so much information from so many places at once. It was much more understandable how the Battlemaster was as reactive and fast as they had seen. One day Humans would be able to do this without being connected to an Ethereal, but not quite yet.

There was a temptation to annihilate the soldiers coming towards her right now; a desire born of the Imperator’s side of their bond, but Patricia was able to temper it. The time for killing was not yet; they needed to wait before acting; before XCOM showed up. The commanding Officer halted a dozen meters from her.

“Patricia Trask, you are requested to surrender and submit yourself for questioning.” The rifles of the soldiers and MDUs raised as he finished.

The lips of her mouth turned upwards. “I’ll wait, you are not who I am waiting for.”

The Priests behind him fanned out slowly, some of them shimmering with power around them. “I’m afraid you don’t have that option, Trask,” the Officer said, taking a step forward. “We have orders to take you in or kill you. XCOM is on their way.”

“I know,” Patricia gave a singular nod as she quietly gathered her own power, while easily swatting away the attempts by the Priests to penetrate her mind. Her link with the Imperator had turned her mental defenses so strong that attempts now barely registered. Certainly not from these Priests. “I don’t have a desire to hurt you, not today, but attacking me would be unwise.”

Before the man could open his mouth, she telepathically penetrated each of the minds of the soldiers, and even the Priests only could put up a few moments of resistance before they realized she was inside. Telekinetic bonds were wrapped around their throats as she extended an arm, lifting the entirety of the army off the ground and choking the air out of them.

The MDUs were simply compressed into wrecked machinery with groans and shrieks of bending and snapped metal. When the first of the soldiers blacked out, she released the telekinetic bonds and gave a singular command.

Sleep.

Six bullets were caught in the telekinetic field she’d erected. She maneuvered her head to look closer at them, and with a delicacy dismantled one of the bullets telekinetically, revealing a small drop of a presumably unknown substance. It immediately started burning upon contact with the air and fell to the ground where it continued burning into the pavement. ClF3. Of course.
She moved the bullets away and set them carefully on the ground. No reason to start a fire yet, and these could prove useful.

A skyranger roared overhead. No, three skyrangers.

She waited.

Time to see who showed up.

Several MECs were deployed, all of them on the streets beside and behind her. XCOM soldiers dropped on the nearby rooftops and one on the street in front of her. She saw from the weapons that XCOM had prepared for her well. Snipers, Marauder-class MECs, many psions, a couple of the MELD Operators she’d heard about.

And leading the small entourage was the Commander himself, with Creed and the Chronicler behind him.

A pang of sadness shot through her at the sight of Creed, whose helmetless face reflected her heart, though held the resolve she expected of him. The Commander though…his face was grim and he clearly expected for this situation to only end one way. This wasn’t a team sent for capturing her – he intended to kill her today.

She couldn’t blame him, though because he was here himself, perhaps he hadn’t given up some hope of bringing her back. She knew he wouldn’t take the final drastic step until all other options had been exhausted. This would be the only time where she would be able to surprise him before he stopped underestimating her.

Patricia was not under the illusion she could beat the Commander at his own game – not yet anyway. But she would get there in time. The Chronicler was the one she was most concerned about here. The disdain for the Sovereign puppet was amplified through the Imperator’s own contempt for the man.

A dangerous opponent, hence why he was here. Fortunate that she would not need to face him for long.

“Hello, Commander,” she finally said. “It’s been a long time.”

“A fact which is apparent,” the Commander said neutrally, hands clasped behind his back. “You look like you haven’t changed. They treated you well.”

“They did,” she confirmed. “But for a reason.”

“Did you ever consider that was intentional?” He asked, his voice still emotionless. “Your treatment, your interactions with the Ethereals, everything given and shown to you…it was for the sole purpose of turning you against us. I’m surprised you don’t see that you’re being used here.”

That…was amusing.

She tapped her head. “You know about the Avatar Project, Commander. At least the concept. There are no secrets between us any longer, between me or him – and from the very beginning, he has not lied to me. I know exactly who the Imperator is and what he intends, and I made this decision willingly.”

Patricia wondered if there would be a denial, but the Commander simply pursed his lips. “I was afraid of that. When we learned what you had done, I wondered – hoped – that it was something
you had been forced to do. If you were being a puppet of the Imperator.” His eyes hardened. “I
would have preferred that to you betraying everything we have fought for. What your friends, your
soldiers have died for.”

She allowed a sigh, a conflict of emotions swirling within her, amplified by the Imperator’s link
which allowed her to focus and organize the words she wanted to say. “Do you think this was easy,
Commander? That I wanted to do this? The Imperator told me the truth about the Sovereigns the
first day I was on his Temple Ship. And he gave me the option – I could return to XCOM or I
could stay and consider helping him.”

“And why didn’t you?” Creed finally demanded angrily. “Were we all—was I—not enough
motivation to return?”

“No!” She scowled. “It isn’t that simple. How could anything be simple after learning the truth
about the galaxy we live in. A repeating story of unending cycles which will destroy, remake, and
destroy the galaxy over and over again. We would be walking directly into an unwinnable war
ignorant of who the real enemy is.” She pointed at the Chronicler. “And one of their agents you
have sided with.”

“The Imperator is an ignorant fool,” the Chronicler sneered. “He has no concept about the
Sovereign Ones, only circumstantial theories and what he learned from Mosrimor. Perhaps he
believes he is doing the right thing, but he will be humbled like so many before him.”

“Better to die fighting your kind than live as proxies to fight your wars,” Patricia growled, the air
rippling around her as the Imperator began speaking in unison with her. “You tell stories, puppet of
T’Leth, stories and propaganda to my species. How many worlds have you destroyed; how many
species have you rendered extinct? And for what? You intend to conquer the galaxy for yourself,
T’Leth, you are no better than the rest of your kind.”

T’Leth was certainly speaking through the Chronicler now as his voice turned deeper and
reverberated the air around him. “And your master has proven himself no better, puppet of the
Imperator. His species razed worlds, he now uplifts species to fight in his doomed conflict with my
kind. He believes he will end the cycles, but in the end, his goal is the same – the conquest of the
galaxy. In the end, even should he succeed, he will only succeed in perpetuating them.”

“Do not make assumptions, puppet, of what we will or will not do,” the Harbinger stated coldly.
“You have conquered and killed many species; I will not let you have this one.”

“The fact is that while the Imperator was trying to conquer our species, T’Leth has helped us
protect it,” the Commander said. “And based on that – and speaking to him myself, I am more
inclined to believe the word of him over the word of an alien who is responsible for perpetuating
this war, and aspects such as Paradise.”

“You of all people should understand the necessity of such actions, Commander,” the Harbinger
stated. “The Sovereigns will not be defeated conventionally. We must do whatever it takes to
defeat them, no matter the cost.”

“Perhaps from that perspective,” the Commander nodded. “But unfortunately for you, I don’t share
the same goals, and the perpetuation of such a monstrosity is unforgivable and I will purge it from
this galaxy – along with any who were responsible for creating it.”

Now was not the time to be invested, not quite yet. The merge lessened and allowed Patricia to
speak more as herself. “I don’t want to fight you, Commander; any of you. We both want this war
to end, but it cannot be on unfinished terms. Please, surrender and end this before it becomes
worse. I have assurances from the Imperator—\

“Surrender is out of the question, Patricia,” the Commander dismissed immediately. “You know that will never happen. Not after what’s happened. Not after what our species has endured.”

“And will ADVENT be able to stand when the truth about them comes out?” Patricia asked. “Who Saudia is? The catalyst for the creation of ADVENT itself? EXALT? Will you be able to put up a united front when this is no longer hidden?”

“What you say doesn’t matter now,” the Commander said; giving an ironic smile. “ADVENT cannot fall now; certainly not because of that. Even should Saudia be compromised, someone just as competent will take her place. ADVENT is not EXALT. It is not their people. It is the will and power of Humanity itself now. Something you once believed in. We do not act in a house of cards, Patricia, tell your truth to the world if you wish, you cannot stop what is already in place, no matter how much you try.”

Annoyingly, she wondered if he had a point. If so, it would make things slightly more complicated. She would have to consider this more.

None of the soldiers had moved at all, even though all had their weapons trained on her and the psions were pulling at the edges of their power, waiting for a chance to unleash it. She noticed something odd. “Aegis is not here,” she noted. “Or Caelior. Strange.” She furrowed her eyebrow, slightly confused.

“We don’t need them to deal with you,” the Commander answered. “You were sent here to send a message, so we sent one of our own.”

Possibilities ran through their head, and only a few were plausible. “He is not on Earth.”

The Commander just smiled.

Excellent.

An unexpected development, but certainly not an unwelcome one. “I see,” was all she said. “You are confident in your abilities.”

“I know you well enough, Patricia,” the Commander said. “As does Creed. I know you wanted to draw us here, our best in case of a surprise somewhere else. Perhaps your Ethereals will launch coordinated attacks. If so, we will be ready for them. The Chancellor and her entourage are safe and cannot be harmed. You will accomplish nothing today, and your grand demonstration will be stopped.”

She had expected nothing less. She nodded.

“Did you come here to kill me or capture me?”

“Surrender peacefully and we will allow your survival,” the Commander said with a nod. “Refuse and we will put you down like the traitor you are.”

Patricia looked to Creed. “I’m sorry.”

He gave a single nod back. “So am I.”

She looked back to the Commander. “I’ve chosen my side. I am the Harbinger of the Imperator, and I will free our species from the influence of T’Leth with or without you.”
“Kill her.” The Commander ordered immediately while jumping back and putting on his helmet.

Patricia gave one final smile, and relinquished control.

The Commander was occupied now. The clock was ticking.

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Aui’Vitakar Path, Vitiary – Vitakar

3/18/2017 – 11:30 A.M.

The first thing that struck Sierra about Vitiary was how clean everything was. There wasn’t any litter, stains, standing water, or really anything that she would expect of a normal city. As if Vitiary was anything close to a regular city – which it was not given the few minutes she’d had to look around at it. She’d heard the Vitakara didn’t have skyscrapers, but she’d interpreted that to mean they didn’t have tall skyscrapers.

Nope, they actually did not have any tall buildings. At least relatively tall. Around four stories was the highest she’d seen any building, and those were much more the exception than the rule. But each one appeared to be constructed like a fortress, with thick concrete and obvious supports along the base. The colors ranged from white to grey, but in all honesty it seemed like a very bright city overall.

The sidewalks housed lighting poles which could seemingly be extended or retracted depending on the need, and curiously there were very few roads, which were instead supplemented by some kind of trains which sped throughout the city. Some of them were for citizens, but the majority seemed focused on cargo transport.

“Guess they don’t have cars,” Anna noted as well.

“Because they have aircars,” Ted said quietly, pointing up. “Look.”

Sure enough, Sierra looked up to see that there were a decent number of flying vehicles over them, moving through small poles hovering on stands in the sky, which flashed between blue, green, yellow, and red. As she watched a few minutes, she noted that there really weren’t that many cars, but just enough to be noticeable. Probably a status thing, since it seemed to be built so you didn’t need an aircar.

“Restricted,” Ravas, the recent Zararch defector said to them from beside her; looking almost nervous to be back on his home planet. “Only government, military, and ranking aliens get air vehicles and speeders. Civilians are rarely exceptions.”

“Businesses, too I suppose?” Ted asked. “Or business officials?”

“Absolutely not,” Ravas almost seemed offended. “Unlike your species, managing to competently run a service does not grant authority or input into – or over – government and military laws and regulations.”

Anna snorted. “Fair enough, alien. Looks like we’ve gotten the attention of some people.”

She wasn’t wrong, as they’d appeared in the middle of a bustling crowd, at least several hundred Vitakara were in the small square they were standing in awkwardly. The vast majority appeared to be civilians; and a surprising mixture of races, barring the Oyariah and Sar’Manda were in the crowd. There were a number of uniformed Zararch Peacekeepers who seemed torn between
intervening or just staring in awe at the group.

Or more specifically, at Aegis.

The crowd was utterly silent and still, as if a singular movement would break something. The area was silent outside of the rushing of aircars and hover-trains. “Take off your helmets,” Ravas said, moving to the front of the group. “They should see who you are.”

“Hell no,” Lacy said with a shake of her head. “Don’t they have snipers everywhere?”

“We have Elder Aegis,” Ravas said with certainty. “And no Zararch Peacekeeper will fire on an Ethereal – not yet anyway.”

“We’re not Ethereals,” Isacc pointed out.

“He’s right,” Cairu, the other Vitakarian with them added. “Most of these people have never seen a Human in their life before. They need to see us together.”

“I agree, do as they say,” Crevan said with a tone of absolute authority. “It will take more than the threat of snipers to deter us.”

Sierra wasn’t thrilled with the idea, it reminded her too much of cheesy movies she’d seen where these kind of actions were used to show that ‘they were friendly and not so different.’ Only in the real world they were dealing with an organization that kept its citizens in a police state and were more than willing to execute invading aliens.

_God protect us_, she thought fervently as she pulled off her helmet and exposed herself to the planet’s air. It was refreshingly cool; certainly not uncomfortable. With clicks and hisses, everyone pulled off their helmets even if they kept a firm grip on their sidearms when it inevitably went downhill. The Vitakara in the crowd all reacted differently.

There were very few gasps or other verbal expressions of surprise, but all of the Vitakarians were blinking rapidly, Borelians still just seemed frozen, the Dath’Haram looked at the arrivals with new interest, and the Cobrarian flicked their tongues in and out rapidly. Sierra was reminded that she really, really did not like snakes, and one that was as tall as her and had arms was something she had an urge to shoot and fly away from as soon as possible.

Aegis began speaking in some strange language, until she remembered that she was an idiot. Of course the majority of aliens wouldn’t speak English. Good thing she hadn’t been in charge of this mission, because that detail would have gone over her head. “Citizens of Vitakar,” Ravas said, being kind enough to translate for them. “I am Aegis, formerly of the Ethereal Collective. We have come to your capital to tell you the truth of the war your people are involved in; what your siblings, sons, daughters, and parents are dying for.”

Aegis speaking commanded the attention of every Vitakara in the immediate area, and more and more were coming out to watch. “You have been lied to about the circumstances of this war; the Collective invaded the homeworld of the Human species without provocation, and will not stop until the species is under their control. The Humans have decided to fight back against this injustice, and have succeeded in blunting the might of the Collective.”

Aegis extended a hand to the crowd. “I was the first Ethereal to recognize the error of the Collective, and the Imperator who rules your people apathetically. And it is not merely this war which provoked my departure, but the truth of what the Imperator has used the Collective for. You are viewed as a means to an end for the Imperator; test subjects and soldiers to fight and die in his
personal wars forged under false and fabricated circumstances.”

On cue the Vitakara stepped forward. “I am not the only alien to realize the truth of what I was supporting. Others have come to see that they have been lied to by their leaders; that what they were ordered to accomplish was the opposite of what was right; they are ones who wished to live in a better future. The Imperator has seen fit to send his own pawn to Earth instead of going himself, and today it is time that the people of Vitakar know that the Imperator and the Ethereal Collective is lying to you.”

“We move forward to the Aui’Vitakar,” Crevan said quietly as Aegis began moving forward and the crowd parted to let them through. Sierra looked back to see that there were a crowd of Vitakara who were following them. She’d never been part of a march before, but this seemed a lot like what she would expect to be in one.

There was a shout as one of the Zararch Peacekeepers raised his rifle at them. Aegis moved to lift a hand but Crevan was fast and a sustained stream of lightning shot out from his fingertips to slam into the Peacekeeper who collapsed to the ground screaming. Crevan ceased the stream of lightning a few seconds later, an expression of contempt on his face as he appraised the twitching Vitakarian whose body was now covered in burns and no doubt permanently blinded and scarred.

Without wasting time, he looked around the crowd as his hand returned to the staff he carried and spoke in the Vitakarian language in the same neutral tone, though with an obvious undercurrent of warning in it. Sierra raised an eyebrow. “Our Sovereign ally is full of surprises. Didn’t know he could shoot someone with lightning and not kill them.”

“That was to send a message,” Ted commented, looking as the crowd looked at them now with some trepidation as well as interest, while a few members took the wounded Peacekeeper away. “In the only way Crevan can, it seems. Ravas, what did he say?”

“We are not here to fight,” Ravas translated. “But we will not tolerate unprovoked attacks upon us. The next to attempt to attack us will die.”

Sierra looked at the former spy. “You sound worried.”

“He spoke it perfectly,” he nodded to Crevan who led the front by Aegis. “The language. Not even Aegis speaks it without an accent. That man could pass for a native here. Aliens should not command such an understanding without being raised in it.”

Normally Sierra would find that a bit odd as well, but his status as an Agent of T’Leth put some things into perspective. It certainly wasn’t stranger than being able to shoot lightning out of his hands. Besides, there were more important things to worry about for her. “Do you think we’re getting a welcome party up ahead? The Zararch have to know what’s going on now.”

“By now they do,” Ravas said slowly. “I’d be ready. They will act without warning. If an Ethereal is not sent to handle the situation.”

“Let’s hope it’s just the Zararch,” Sierra said as she saw the Aui’Vitakar building up in the distance. “The fewer Ethereals to deal with, the better.”

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ADVENT Headquarters – Switzerland

3/17/2017 – 11:48 A.M.
Things happened very quickly after Patricia put on her helmet and the fire command was issued. She immediately was encased in self-made box of psionic shields, while shots rang out from plasma, laser and gauss rifles, all of which slammed into the shield. The psions Nina, Mercedes, and the Chronicler all radiated power as they combined their telepathic might against Patricia.

The Commander aimed down the sights of his sniper rifle and fired with Hellfire rounds which set the liquid fire around Patricia. She lashed out with a hand and their Telekine Eva was thrown back before she caught herself and retaliated with a telekinetic strike of her own which Patricia was surprisingly caught off-guard by and rattled, though her psionic shield was maintained.

Fire from the Archangel Host rained down, still not penetrating the shield but certainly causing some distractions. Miriam and Zara were marching forward, clouds of nanites swirling around them as the two soldiers launched the attack against Patricia. She waved a hand and the area surrounding her crackled with psionic energy until it grew to a small maelstrom.

“Get into her mind!” The Commander shouted as all of them were forced to back up as the storm grew more intense, though in response he saw that her psionic barriers had fallen. “Chronicler! Status!”

“Something’s wrong,” he grunted, sounding oddly strained. “She feels completely different. I’ve never felt anything like this; not since T’Leth. Isomnum didn’t put up this much of a fight!”

“She’s merged with the Imperator!” Creed yelled, shooting at her as the maelstrom suddenly dissipated. "Of course her mind is a fortress!"

“Not like this,” Nina coughed, her form glowing brightly as she focused once more. “He’s right, something’s off.”

“Terli, Joseph, Nira,” the Commander commanded. “Take her out now. Aim for the head.”

Sniper shots rang out and all the rounds were suspended in a telekinetic field she’d erected around herself. The Commander fired several more Hellfire rounds into the telekinetic blanket and yelled to Eva. “Break it!”

Patricia wasn’t up to date on all their techniques, and there were ways to mitigate cheap tricks like this. With a telekinetic pinch from Nira, the rounds all exploded in the field and fell towards Patricia who jumped back, right into the waiting flamethrowers of Donald’s MEC who sent jets of Napalm her way.

She only just barely managed to erect a psionic shield to mitigate the worst of the flame, but now Sharad was bringing his MEC forward and his dispensers were tuned towards spraying acid around her, which he was aiming towards the ground to mitigate her being able to block it. She retaliated by shooting a stream of psionic energy towards the MEC, which was successful in forcing him to back up.

Now though her armor was taking direct hits, and soldiers were throwing multiple grenades at her, some of which were thrown back, while others were caught in a telekinetic field which were subsequently shot by the Commander and the other Snipers, damaging her armor further. Still though her mind remained unable to be penetrated.

“Symbiotes out!” Asgeir, their squad engineered called as he tossed three of the grenades into the air for Nira to grab, who then let them hover in the air for a few moments as the MELD Operators covered the grenades in MELD, and then she shot them towards Patricia who crushed one telekinetically, spraying the symbiote on the ground, another she deflected and slammed into the
wall of a nearby building, but the final one landed right beside her left foot and exploded and the accompanying nanites began consuming her iron armor.

“Liuxian, give her some heavy ordinance,” the Commander ordered the Ballista MEC who aimed his many micro-missile launchers at the woman who was still fending off Donald and his flamethrowers, and fired, a half-dozen standard rockets, each firing in sequence. Patricia shot a hand to create another psionic barrier in front of her which protected against most of the rockets, but a few slipped through and further turned her armor into scorched and damaged metal.

She was losing, and the Commander knew it. No amount of hardened armor or genetic modification would protect her forever. “Eva, pin her now.” The telekine took a few steps forward, air shimmering as her power gathered and extended a hand towards the pinned form of Patricia and closed the hand into a fist.

Patricia gave a raw and inhuman roar as she was rendered completely immobile. Psionic shields appeared around her, completely stopping all other attacks. Another hand joined the first as Eva kept Patricia within her unrelenting and firm prison. “She’s tough!” Eva grunted, the air around Patricia rippling and shimmering as Eva slowly crushed her. “But I have her now.”

“Chronicler?” The Commander asked as he reloaded his sniper rifle.

“Making progress, but far more difficult than should be possible, even with her enhanced,” was the answer. “Worse, she’s attacking us. Not powerful enough to be a problem, but it slows us down. The Avatars should not be this resilient.”

“Resilient is relative,” the Commander said, as the hands of Patricia crumpled into twisted wrecks. “She’s losing and she knows it.”

And in one swift moment the barriers fell. “Hale! Launch it now!” The Commander ordered their Shoggoth Handler to enter the fray, and with a happy trill the Shoggoth was launched towards Patricia and wrapped itself around her limbs and began breaking them, causing her to scream angrily as she was wrestled to the ground.

She’d definitely not known what the Shoggoths could do. Not really.

The timing became perfect as the Commander lined up his shot perfectly, and with a synchronized command made possible by the allied telepathic links that Mercedes had established, fired directly at the head of Patricia Trask. The helmet’s armor could not stand against powered gauss rifles equipped with Hellfire and AP rounds, and drilled a massive hole in the head of the former Psionic Overseer.

She slumped to her knees as the nanites continued trying to consume her, her body likely kept upright by the symbiote still attached to her foot. The Chronicler looked at the body, clearly suspicious. “That was too easy.”

“Speak for yourself,” Nina coughed. “I’ve never experienced something; someone that powerful and skilled.”

But the Commander had a feeling like the Chronicler was right. While it was possible that they had killed her, and the Imperator had just been extremely overconfident, it seemed…unlikely. Then again, she was facing squads and soldiers equipped specifically to kill her, so perhaps she’d just been…beaten.

The Shoggoth was still on the body, clearly trying to get at the meat but William called it back and
it responded with a trill, but before it could move the corpse of Patricia suddenly grabbed the Shoggoth, and…shifted.

The armor ceased being red and turned to a stark black as it began shifting and repairing the damage. The symbiote substance was eaten in a few seconds as the nanites which made up the…thing they were fighting activated into their true state. “It’s a Puppet!” The Commander warned as they realized tactics needed to be switched.

Dozens of questions popped into his mind to wonder what was going on now? The Meat Puppet still maintained the Human shape, as opposed to the normal Ethereal one, but it no longer resembled the Aegis armor, just the humanoid form. The Commander really wished he’d brought a Dynamo psion now, as an anti-Puppet squad this was not.

“The hell was that?” Zara yelled, furiously as she readied her nanites for battle. “Was she never here?”

The Chronicler, for once, seemed unsure. “This shouldn’t have happened. That was her mind. I felt it; altered slightly because of the connection, but it was her. I’m certain of it.”

“We’ll figure it out later,” the Commander said. “Switch to Hellfire rounds. Kane, Terli, light it up. These things are still dangerous. Nina, Mercedes, can it still defend itself?”

“It’s not nearly as strong now,” Nina answered with heavy breaths. “It’s definitely weakened.”

Black clouds of nanites poured off of the Puppet and flew in all directions. The nearby MECs fired their weapons to incinerate the clouds, but not before several of the clouds reached some nearby soldiers and began eating through. Their own nanite systems would be able to provide some relief, but not forever. The MELD Operators worked to fight the clouds of their own while the Chronicler drew upon his destructive side and thrust an arm forward, shooting a stream of blue fire towards the puppet.

One black hand lifted and a psionic shield manifested in front of the energy stream. The Archangels roared overhead, firing Hellfire rounds and successfully managing to set the Puppet on fire. But this one seemed smart, as every part of itself which was on fire dropped to the ground; saving crucial aspects of itself.

It was forced to move forward, but slowly, and now they had the Puppet in some kind of containment. The Chronicler contained the most of its attention, while Miriam had moved opposite Zara and together with the MECs they maintained a circle around the Puppet, keeping the clouds of nanites from hurting their comrades.

It was slow going, and time consuming, but they were going to do it. This time the Commander was sure of it – and the entire time he was trying to think of what Patricia was doing. Too many things didn’t add up, and it raised dangerous questions, both about what her own capabilities were and also that of the Meat Puppets.

Firing several times at the Meat Puppet causing more smaller fires, he mentally ran through what he knew about the Imperator and his capabilities. Supposedly a master of every discipline, which included telepathy, biopathy, teleportation…could it had been an extremely fast teleport? Had Patricia managed to control the Puppet which was why her mind was familiar?

Teleportation…

“It’s getting smaller!” Asgeir called excitedly. “It’s almost gone.”
Patricia wasn’t an idiot. She had to know they’d create a kill team for her, which was why she hadn’t risked herself at all, which didn’t make much sense if she was intending to make a statement. Logically, that meant that she wanted them here for some reason? To taunt them? To offer a final surrender?

To draw us away?

Then suddenly the form of the Meat Puppet fell apart leaving behind a bullet-ridden naked Human body which looked mostly female, barring the fact that it lacked hair. “Back up! Back up!” Zara yelled as the nanites moved across the ground and soon found what they had potentially been moving to all along.

The ADVENT soldiers “Patricia” had subdued before they’d arrived.

His mind flashed to Iosif describing their doomed mission to Hainan.

“They’re going to the bodies!” He called. “Burn them!”

His mind couldn’t stop thinking about Patricia’s goal, even as the nanites began eating into the soldiers on the ground and the MECs fired napalm and acid onto the bodies with grenades being tossed, and golden swarms of MELD nanites working to counter the puppeting as quickly as possible.

If to draw us away, from what?

All major locations on Earth were protected, all current battlefronts were accounted for, they couldn’t come under a surprise attack, and it would take an army to consider assaulting it; things just didn’t add up outside of a failed mission. A failure of the Imperator, something he couldn’t help but find suspicious.

Teleportation…

...allied to Mosrimor...

...to draw us away...

...they need an army...

...advance warning...

The answer hit him instantly and he went cold.

“Creed!” He yelled. “Contact the Praesidium now!”

He didn’t hesitate. “Yes, Commander!” He stepped back as the battle continued on, with some of the nanites managing to raise a few of the bodies, though they were being put down soon after arising. The Commander hoped he was wrong about what was happening, but the more he thought about it, the more sense it made.

“No response,” Creed called. “What’s going on?”

“Try again!” He roared. “Have any emergency signals been sent?”

“Checking, and no,” he answered frantically. “Why?!”

“Because I know what Patricia is doing,” he said coldly; grimly. “She’s attacking the Praesidium.”
The crowd continued following them, and there were no more incidents of Zararch or Runianarch soldiers attacking them or getting in their way. Sierra was acutely aware that they were being followed and watched as the soldiers weren’t able to keep a low profile, and she assumed the Zararch were just waiting in the crowd.

Aegis stopped occasionally to talk, but it wasn’t anything especially new, so instead she just kept her guard up high and followed the march. In the distance the Aui’Vitakar building stood. It was definitely one of the biggest in the entire city, if not the biggest just from the surface area it took up alone. It reminded her of the Pentagon; low to the ground, massive in square feet, and had a large number of soldiers outside.

It was more circular than...well, a pentagon, as well as colored a matte white with a lot of glass by the entrances, but the principle was the same, and the rows of Runianarch guarding the building looked around at each other tentatively, waiting for some kind of order on how to proceed. Aegis shouted something to the captain, which continued for a few minutes.

“There should have been something by now,” Ravas said quietly, under his breath as he looked around the area where the Vitakara were still enraptured by what was happening. “This isn’t normal.”

“An Ethereal and a supposedly hostile alien species showed up in your capital,” Sierra snorted. “Protocols don’t get that specific, and I bet they’re waiting to see what we do.”

“That isn’t how this works,” Ravas insisted. “The Zararch do not waste time observing when they can act. The only thing that stops them is the intervention of an Elder.”

“Well, there you go,” Sierra said. “Makes sense to me. The Imperator doesn’t necessarily want shootouts in the capital right now.”

“And Aegis is hurting his reputation and credibility,” Ravas added. “It makes little sense to not wait.”

“Presumably the Imperator is acting through Patricia on Earth,” Anna said with a shrug as the Runianarch stood down, and they kept walking again – and now towards a group of Aui’Vitakar representatives who were waiting for Aegis. “Maybe he’s distracted. Whose next in the hierarchy?”

“The Overmind, and potentially Quisilia,” Ted answered. “It does seem like it’s going on too long without anything. I wonder what they’re waiting for.”

“Maybe they know they’d make things worse?” Sierra wondered aloud as Aegis began speaking directly with the representatives. “What can they really say that wouldn’t be a lie?”

“Propaganda is effective against Vitakara,” Ravas said grimly, looking around. “Very effective, and one appearance by an Elder will cause questions, but they are well-conditioned to turn back to the Elders and Zararch when given the opportunity to. None of these people want to think they are on the wrong side; all they need is someone to tell them they are still doing the right thing.”

“Good luck with that,” Anna said sarcastically. “Let’s see them sweep Paradise and the Sectoid
Hive under the rug.”

“Contact! Weapons up!” Sussan commanded as she quickly put her helmet on and drew on her psionic power. The Archangels and rest of the soldiers quickly followed suit, and prepared their jetpacks for flight. A short distance to their left, Sierra saw the source of the commotion and turned her weapons immediately to the threats before her.

Slow and loud claps rang out as Quisilia clapped mockingly with his upper hands. “Well, well, Aegis. Long time, no see. I certainly didn’t expect to see you here.” He looked up at the Aui’Vitakar building. “I expect better of you; to at least send an invitation or advance warning before you show up before the good people of Vitakar.”

Quisilia wasn’t alone. By his side was another Human, who Sierra had to blink at several times because it was barely a kid. There was no way that boy was any older than twenty; certainly too young to be around Ethereals. But he was very much standing beside Quisilia, outfitted in black armor and seemingly otherwise unarmed. She definitely didn’t recognize him, and the only really identifying features besides his armor was his Hispanic ethnicity and a noticeably Human knife strapped to his belt.

It ultimately didn’t matter. Another traitor to put down, although this one…Sierra didn’t want to kill him because unlike Patricia, there was a very good chance this kid had been taken advantage of by the Ethereals.

“Quisilia,” Aegis turned from the representatives. “The Imperator is still refusing to intervene himself.”

“There is much work to be done managing the entire Collective,” Quisilia said with mock humility. “And our work has grown thanks to what Patricia Trask has willingly provided us. But do not believe you are being ignored; this little stunt…certainly clever, and I cannot say unjustified.” He lifted a finger on his upper right hand. “But – why have you come, Aegis? To spread your lies and propaganda to the Vitakara species?”

“Only to tell the truth, Quisilia,” Aegis answered firmly. “Do not intervene.”

Quisilia laughed.

“What?” He chuckled, motioning to the crowd who were starting to become more relaxed when they saw Quisilia at such ease. “You think I was sent to fight you? And potentially hurt our own citizens who we have promised to protect? Absolutely not.” He turned to the crowd. “We have ensured that you are insulated from this war, and despite the actions of Aegis today, we will not endanger you further.”

He looked back to Aegis. “But it is certainly a cowardly move to smear the Imperator; the Collective, when there is no one to speak for them; to defend them and refute the lies and points you will inevitably try to make. You believe that your case is strong enough to sway the people of Vitakar?” He looked back to the crowd and amplified his voice. “Then prove it when I am here to contest you!”

Sierra hadn’t lowered her weapon, still keeping it fully trained on Quisilia who was getting some cheers from the crowd at that statement, and narrowed her eyes. “Is he challenging Aegis to a debate?”

“Doesn’t have much of a choice,” Ted noted, clearly suspicious. “They attack, we have free reign to strike back. We strike first and we’re the undisputed bad guy. It’s not a bad move, if a desperate
one.”

“I certainly understand the confusion all must be feeling now,” Quisilia was directly addressing the crowd now. “A war changes people; allies become enemies; enemies become allies; the rules are broken and remade over and over again – yet I will stress now that what you see is normal. It is typical for defections to occur, out of fear, cowardice, or misplaced anger, so do not believe such traitors represent the feelings of all those who serve our Collective and your species.”

“Perhaps let us speak,” Cairu stepped forward. “Your species has lied to my people for too long, and this time your words will not go unchallenged.”

“Ah, of course,” Quisilia gestured to her. “I would welcome to hear the reasons for your untimely defection, to hear why you turned your back on the prosperity and protection the Collective has and continues to provide for your species. Yet I have not heard from Aegis if he wishes to risk making his claims when he is challenged on them – Aegis?”

It felt like a trap to Sierra. Quisilia was comfortable, and it didn’t seem fake; not even like he was putting on an act. Well, he was, but it wasn’t one where seemed fearful or unsure of the outcome. But the alternatives were not appealing either. They could fight Quisilia and likely accomplish nothing except turn the Vitakara against them. They could leave and hand the victory to Quisilia if keep the Vitakara open to what was happening. Or they could participate in Quisilia’s ‘debate’.

The question she had was how much of this was stalling by Quisilia, most likely to wait for some kind of attack. Aegis felt the same way. “You wish to trap us here; stall us until you are prepared to attack.”

“Please,” Quisilia sounded utterly annoyed by the suggestion. “Within moments I can request the aid of Sicarius, Deusian, or the Overmind himself to end the threat you pose. I deliberately choose not to. You have my assurance, Aegis – before all those around us – that there will be no action taken against you or your people so long as they refrain from violence. You came under a banner of mostly peace – “ He shot a look at Crevan. “So I will respect this decision. Besides, I think it should be excellent for airing some grievances.”

“And what happens afterwards?” Aegis demanded. “You simply let us go? The people have no choice here, and you will merely clamp down on them the moment we leave.”

“You will be, of course, free to leave,” Quisilia said, bowing his head. “This is after all a peaceful meeting. And you knew that you would leave eventually, without ‘saving’ these individuals. So little has changed, except that now the people of Vitakar will have the opportunity to think for themselves and not have their perspective skewed by one side or another.”

More steps were taken towards the crowd as he extended a hand towards them. “Hiding the truth from our loyal citizens is not and never been our way! We shall not hide what is said now – I have decreed that the world of Vitakar shall hear what Aegis has to share with you – and myself to defend the honor and integrity of the Ethereal Collective and our citizens! Is that an acceptable action?!”

The crowd cheered; enough of them present to make the noise deafening. That created a sinking feeling in Sierra’s heart, and the Vitakara around her looked unsurprised, but saddened at the reaction. “I don’t think we have a choice now,” Sierra said slowly. “Not if we want to give the win to Quisilia.”

“Then I accept, Quisilia,” Aegis stepped toward the other Ethereal before the cheering crowd. “I hope you will be able to defend the atrocities the Collective has committed.”
“And I hope that you will be able to prove such allegations,” Quisilia said, his tone on the cusp of mocking. “I anticipate an interesting and long discussion – let us not delay, and give the people what they want.”

Quisilia and his Human companion walked toward the Aui’Vitakar building itself and with some trepidation, the rest of them followed inside. Fiona kept herself in the middle of them, likely in case she needed to teleport them all away, and none of them put their weapons down. No matter what Quisilia promised, Sierra was certain there was something else at play.

Though what that was, she didn’t know now.

That worried her.

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Practice Range, the Praesidium – Classified Location

3/17/2017 – 11:32 A.M.

Plasma rifles were nice, but in the end, Nuan personally preferred weapons which had some weight to them. Not that there wasn’t recoil in the plasma weapons, but it felt almost fake, like it had been put in for the sake of it. Realistically she knew that wasn’t right, since laser rifles had no recoil, but it still felt odd.

She was still happy with her shooting though. Dummies and paper targets were riddled with holes or in scraps on the ground. The team managing the shooting range had begun rigging their dummies with tiny explosives or other effects to reward good shots. An addition she quite liked. It was very satisfying to get a headshot and see the head of the dummy explode.

Nuan decided she was done for now, and went to set her rifle back on the rack and grabbed her water bottle. She hadn’t heard anything on how the attack on Patricia was going, but assumed – for now – that no news was good news. Besides, XCOM had ADVENT backing them up there. She thought even the Battlemaster wouldn’t be able to penetrate it, let alone a traitor – enhanced by the Imperator or not.

She wasn’t the only one at the range either; a decent number of soldiers made the rounds at all hours since many had worked practice into their daily routines. Normally she wouldn’t come this early, but she needed something else to think about besides dwelling on what was happening. It was out of her control, all she could do was wait and hope.

And Iosif wasn’t even in serious danger; at least relative to dealing with someone like Patricia. They hadn’t heard of any other attacks elsewhere; not yet at least. Those might come, and when they did, they would be ready. She did wish though that she’d been deployed somewhere, if not to fight Patricia herself.

“Hey,” a woman walked up, who Nuan recognized as one of the Rocketeers, though she couldn’t remember the name at the moment, even if she stood out due to being distinctly Arabic. “Usually don’t see you here this early. Nuan, right? You were-“

“China, yes,” Nuan nodded, then gestured to the range. “I don’t like waiting, especially when everything is happening and there is nothing I can do about it.”

“I get that,” the woman nodded. “Fakhr if we haven’t met, though I think we’ve gone on a few missions together.”
“That name she recognized. “So do I. Good to meet you properly…” she paused. “Months later.”

“XCOM has gotten big,” Fakhr smirked. “I remember when it was…well, much smaller.” The good attitude faded as she became more serious. “It does feel like a turning point, doesn’t it? Patricia coming back, T’Leth getting more involved, Isomnum dying…it feels like things are going to change in a big way now.”

“I think we’ve reached that point,” Nuan agreed. “Patricia…well…I didn’t know her that well, but this seems out of character for someone like her.”

“Can’t say I knew her well either,” Fakhr sighed, sitting down beside her. “Not like the Commander. Or Creed. I respected her though, and from what I saw, she will do whatever is the best ultimate solution for her soldiers and Humanity. She’s…a lot like the Commander, only more easily swayed I guess.”

Fakhr pulled out a phone. “Think something should have happened by now. Attacks are reported quickly. We’ll see if Patricia tried to spring a trap on the world.” She tapped on the screen a few times, then frowned. “Huh.”

“News?” Nuan asked, looking over.

“No,” Fakhr shook her head. “Wireless is gone down. The one thing I’ve never had to worry about here was the Internet going down. I swear that even during the Battle of the Citadel the networks were up.”

“Maybe it’s your phone,” Nuan guessed. “Devices aren’t as reliable as we like sometimes.”

“I’ll reboot the whole thing, that usually fixes most problems,” Fakhr said with a light scowl. “Small problems in the grand scheme of things-“

An alarm blared and within seconds the lighting became intermixed with red.

Fakhr and Nuan both stiffened, as did every single soldier in the range. “The hell?” Fakhr asked to no one as she stood up. “This shouldn’t be happening.”

“What is it?” Nuan knew that there was some kind of emergency – the lights and alarms only went off when there was trouble coming – or had come. “It can’t be an attack? We’d have been warned about it!”

“I don’t know,” Fakhr said, grabbing a rifle and Nuan grabbed her own. “But this only happened once – and that was when the Citadel was attacked. We only had a few hours to prepare then, and we’ll probably get the same here-“

“Attention, all Praesidium staff,” the voice of Central Officer Jackson broadcast with everyone stopping to listen. “We are currently under attack by an unidentified hostile, the Atlas Protocol is now in effect. All designated kill and evacuation squads mobilize and execute your instructions. I repeat we are under current attack. Jackson out.”

In the dim lighting Nuan saw the blood drain from Fakhr’s face and she suspected her own was similar. Without a word they broke off running for the Armory, hearts and minds racing as they readied themselves for the fight ahead.

Nuan realized she shouldn’t have wished to participate in the operations. There was a reason people warned to be careful what they wished for – they might get it.
The most important battle wouldn’t be fought in Brazil, China, Switzerland, Africa, or America – it would be fought in the Praesidium.

And their best were gone elsewhere, some even to other worlds.

It was up to them to hold the line.

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Praesidium Exterior – Classified Location

3/17/2017 – 11:30 A.M.

The sands blew across her armor as Patricia appeared just outside the hangar exit of the Praesidium. While there was no one waiting for her, she knew that there were sensors surrounding the entrance, and she would soon be detected. Her mask tight, she opened a portal and withdrew the Andromedon jammer.

Turning it on, she planted it in the ground. It would ensure that any distress signals would be blocked and buy her additional time. There were two more problems she would now face – Caelior was here – and T’Leth was watching and would likely be preventing unpermitted teleportation. That would hinder her.

It could not be allowed.

A small portal opened underneath her hand and a black orb fell out which she caught telekinetically. “Alright Mosrimor,” she said quietly. “Let’s see if you can be useful today.”

She maneuvered the orb over the hangar door and the nanites around it expanded until she could see the glowing blue core. Patricia drew upon the power which came so easily, and hovered off the ground as the sand began crackling as she directed the Psionosphere to shatter and burn the ground around her.

Her cape glinting in the white-yellow sun, underneath was a sea of purple mist and waves of power which briefly turned the ground into a violent sandstorm which she sustained for a minute before she was satisfied that all near-ground installations was destroyed. Setting herself down, she blew off the sand from the top of the hanger door with a single wave of her hand.

With the opposite one, she reached out and clenched the seams and gaps of the door and pulled. The massive bulkhead immediately began groaning and creaking from the strain. A hand glowing purple, she extended the opposite one and psionic energy materialized in the identified weak points which continually destroyed the integrity of the door, until she yanked upwards with a yell and the hunk of metal went flying.

A motioning of her hand downwards, and the orb descended slowly while she jumped straight down into the Hangar. Energy gathered into her hands, building and building and the moment she slammed into the ground, a telekinetic purple-tinged wave shot out from her in all directions. A few emergency personnel who were working the nearby skyrangers were pulverized and their shattered limbs and bodies flew in all directions, while those on the outward edge of the wave were simply thrown back.

Shouts of surprise and pain sounded as everyone alive ran back except for a few XCOM squads who had just rushed in to meet her.

Lips pursed under her helmet, she readied herself to kill her former brothers and sisters in arms.
It is the only way.

With a roar, she shot a fist to the sky and the Psionosphere around her ripped into a raging maelstrom which shredded everything caught in it. Plasma and gauss rounds fired at her but were disintegrated the moment they reached the maelstrom. She saw psions glowing with power, and shook her head to herself as she plucked the telekinetic strings with another hand.

*Everything* in the Hangar was yanked towards her from soldiers to pieces of metal to the few technicians cowering behind the crates and barrels. A few of the psions prevented themselves from being tossed, anchoring themselves and others to the ground or using shields to keep themselves alive, but a number had their Titan armor shredded beyond repair.

Now the fight was to begin.

Patricia sidestepped into a portal she created and reappeared behind the XCOM lines and gripped the nearest three soldiers in telekinesis and crushed their organs before tossing their bodies into the nearby wall with enough force to audibly shatter bones. Patricia suddenly found herself incased in a psionic box, and responded by bisecting the Aegii who had erected it, before leaping into the air and igniting the floor with corrosive psionic energy.

A psionic shield appeared in front of her without prompting which successfully blocked the plasma shots fired in her direction. Hovering in the air while the floor burned, she grabbed one of the XCOM soldiers at random, brought her into the air, and blasted her down into the floor with enough force that it snapped her spine instantly and the psionics ate into her seconds later.

She threw herself down onto the ground again, and without waiting to see what the soldiers would do, charged towards one, grabbed him by the throat and slammed him to the ground before following up with a stomp which crushed his face before she immediately charged another woman who she slammed into a wall before blasting a stream of psionic energy at her, burning holes in her chest.

The last one fired his autocannon at her in a futile effort to do *something* to stop her. She appraised him for a moment, a telekinetic field freezing all the bullets in mid-air and motioned below him and he fell into a portal which she sealed shut as he was halfway down, severing his body in a spray of blood.

She snapped his neck to spare him unnecessary pain.

*Good. Good.*

She wasn’t…happy right now, not truly. But it was…satisfying to see what her full capabilities were, especially against her direct rivals. They would be more prepared as she moved forward, but they would not stop her.

*Nothing can stop us now.*

She turned back to the hanger which was burning to ensure she hadn’t missed anything.

*There will be nothing.*

She lifted the skyranger wrecks, now lacking most of their wings and engines, and squeezed a hand encased in purple fire. A few minutes later the skyrangers fell to pieces; never to be recovered again. Satisfied she had utterly destroyed the conventional means of escape they possessed, she turned to the exists which were unsurprisingly sealed shut.
Unfortunate that doors no longer posed a challenge to her.

A portal materialized in front of her and she stepped into the next hallway down. She expanded her telepathic senses, even as the XCOM squad waiting for her shouted in alarm. She created a portal in front of her and watched with distant amusement as they were hit with their own rounds from the connecting portal she’d created behind them.

A psion shot her hands forward as psionic energy poured out of them. Patricia recognized the armor of this one – Mona. She’d become powerful, but it would not be enough to save her this time.

“Traitor!” Mona yelled, waving a hand as Patricia felt the Psionosphere rip around her.

Patricia merely encased herself in a personal shield and manifested a horizontal shield which slammed into Mona and sent her flying backwards. The hallway was open, but still a choke point. Patricia yanked with a hand, pulling all of their weapons away before slamming them into the ceiling and back onto the floor.

Too late for help to come.

A clenched fist shattered their skeletons and organs. Mona had been spared this, though she was struggling to get up, firing a burst of psionic energy which Patricia easily blocked. Patricia followed up with severing her arms with psionic barriers and lifting her by the throat telekinetically. “I’m sorry it came to this,” she said to the choking woman. “But it is the only way.”

With an imperceptible gesture, she snapped the neck and let the body of Mona Eriksson fall to the ground.

The squads had been dealt with for now, and her targets were deeper in the Praesidium. A portal appeared over her hand, and another orb fell out which activated a few seconds later.

So far Mosrimor appeared to be proving his usefulness.

The clock was ticking. She had labs to destroy.

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Research Lab Exterior, the Praesidium – Classified Location

3/18/2017 – 11:42 A.M.

There had been a weird feeling the moment he’d heard the klaxon ring. It had persisted when he’d frantically donned his armor in record time and was rushed to his defensive position. Lab defense, and it looked like it was going to be needed. Scientists who were remaining were quickly making final backups and collecting samples to take with them during the evacuation.

There were enough squads to buy them time – or so they’d thought.

The best news Oliver could see was that Vahlen wasn’t here, and had left hours ago transporting some kind of specimen for safety. There’d been rumors that the Commander had ordered that they prepare in case there was some kind of attack, and right now he was very grateful that so much time was being saved.

But this feeling…he’d wondered what it was. It’s wasn’t fear, or sadness, or anything he was used to feeling. Surreal was the best word he could use to describe it. When he received the broadcast, he was stunned. “They’re dead?” He asked incredulously. “All of them?”
“Yes!” Jackson yelled. “Get everyone out of there now! She’s heading your way!”

“Yes sir!” He said, turning to the scientists who were still there. “We’re leaving now! Clifton, Dana! Grab them and let’s get out of here!”

But hearing those words; hearing how Patricia had killed that many soldiers already, he suddenly recognized what that feeling was.

This was where he was going to die.

He took a breath and turned to Said Tariq. “I’m going to talk to her. Get out of here. Get to your wife. Otherwise everyone here is going to die.”

“That’s suicide-“

“And if she isn’t delayed, we’re all going to die!” Oliver insisted, checking his plasma rifle quickly. “You heard what she did. I know what I’m doing.”

“But-“

“None of that,” he interrupted. “I’ve had a good life. Not as long as I’d like, but a good one. This is what I have to do. Don’t waste it.”

Without waiting for another protest, he dashed off into the hallways. “Central! Where is she now?”

“What are you-“

“Buying time,” he answered quickly, mentally calculating how long it would take her to get here from where she was coming. “I don’t want to run in circles here.”

“The area by the Mess Hall had reported fighting, she’s in that area. Follow the main hallway and you’ll run into here. Oliver…” a pause. “You won’t be forgotten. Vigilo Confido.”

“Just make sure everyone is evacuated,” he grunted, running as fast as he could. “What is the status of that?”

“All non-military personnel have been commanded to leave, we’re doing staggered evacs of soldiers and staff. Caelior is being mobilized to move up now. Shen needs more time to finish something.”

Oliver scowled. “Get the old man out of here!”

“We’re-“ She was interrupted by a body being flung into the wall in front of him. It was one of the cooks whose body was unrecognizable, even more so after it had been ground into the metal. He quickly checked the body. Dead. Probably instant. He ran into the Mess Hall and saw the devastation Patricia had wrecked.

The kitchens were on fire; the tables and chairs were completely destroyed, pieces of them everywhere while the televisions and other media outlets were broken beyond repair. Oliver saw scraps of food still scattered around, blackened, but people had been eating less than a half hour ago. Bodies of XCOM soldiers and the mess hall personnel were scattered everywhere.

In the center floated Patricia Trask, who lowered herself to the ground once he walked in.

She was different.
This was not the same woman he’d fought with before. She was…tall. At least one or two full feet taller than before, with her body proportioned to match. She out-massed Kane of all people. The armor she wore was reminiscent of the more form-fitting Aegis armor if a bit lighter, and appeared to lack the bulky durability of the Titan armor he wore now.

Silver engravings overlaid the white coloring she’d used, which culminated in the center of the chest showing a stylized rendering of an Ethereal. A matching cape with silver trim fell from her shoulders. It was slightly stained with soot and ash, but objectively it was a masterfully crafted armor set.

Her face though, was obscured by a cloudy white mask which didn’t even cover her full head, letting her chestnut hair flow freely. “An excellent demonstration of your power, Patricia,” he said, lifting his rifle. “I’m sure you feel powerful killing the cooks and staff.”

“Bystanders, casualties of war,” her voice was layered and distorted; a combination which was unsettling, as he could hear her voice, but at the same time it was something else. “I did not wish to kill anyone here, but the Commander has left me no choice.”

“Liar,” he snarled, firing at her knowing it would only annoy her. “Did you think we would surrender just because you turned traitor?”

The plasma bolts hit a psionic shield she briefly erected before the plasma rifle cracked and smoked. He threw it at her before it could explode, and it did – after she deflected it with a telekinetic gesture. “I’d hoped. But there wasn’t any choice. XCOM poses the greatest threat to the Imperator, and it is up to me to mitigate this threat.”

“Why?” He demanded, quickly thinking up a plan. Then he remembered what Kane had done and gave a grim smile under his helmet. Just keep her talking. “Because of T’Leth?”

“XCOM is compromised,” she said. “The Sovereign Ones are a greater threat than any paltry invasion. I have not fought to have my species be used in T’Leth’s war.”

“So instead we’ll be used in the Imperator’s,” Oliver shot back as the nanites began dispersing by his boots. It actually wasn’t difficult to see how hypocritical she was being. “Excellent job, protecting our species.”

“You do not have to believe me,” Patricia, or the thing she was now said, cocking her head. “You cannot stop me now and when I am done, Humanity will be far more powerful and free than we ever would have been under T’Leth.”

“And at what cost?” It was almost there, just a little longer… “Do you really believe I’m some brainwashed T’Leth pawn?”

A pause.

“No.” The answer did surprise him, or the acknowledgement of it. “I don’t. But manipulation is subtle, and the Sovereigns are masters of it. You are a pawn, but do not know it, as are the best tools of the Sovereign. You share no blame, but are an unfortunate casualty. That is why I have indulged you here. Your sacrifice will not be in vain.”

He went cold and she lifted a hand, and all the nanites he had thought were creeping invisibly on the ground were raised before her, and coalesced into a black semi-permeable ball. “[I know you were stalling. But I wanted to let you die achieving what you set out to. You deserve that much.]” The ball was enveloped in purple fire as she destroyed the nanites. “Know that I will save
Humanity – even if must conquer it first. Die, Oliver Ilari."

The last words he heard not just with his ears, but reverberated in the deepest crevices of his mind.

A few seconds later, his mind and body complied with her last command.

Another body fell before the Harbinger, as Oliver Ilari died.

The Harbinger pushed aside his body with a telekinetic motion, and returned to her mission.

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XCOM Engineering, the Praesidium – Classified Location

3/18/2017 – 11:51 A.M.

“We don’t have time to waste,” Nuan insisted. “We need to get to the working gateways now.”

Normally that wouldn’t be an issue in XCOM Engineering of all places, but whatever Patricia had done – for they knew who was attacking now – had essentially forced everything in XCOM Engineering on backup power. There were two options – they could spend time to divert power to the gateways which could take up to fifteen minutes, or they could make a move for the Deployment Gateway room which they knew still had power.

In the end they knew their best chance was to go for the gateways while they still had the opportunity. The engineers were busy saving what they could from the computers and grabbing some of the prototypes and weapons that were lying around, though they were clearly not soldiers.

Twenty XCOM soldiers stood guard, Nuan among them, assigned to protect them against whatever came. Having heard how Patricia was somehow tearing through…everything, Nuan wondered if that would be enough – especially since she was headed their way.

Fortunately, they had an equally powerful ally with them now.

“I am ready,” Caelior said as he entered from the lower levels with another squad accompanying him. “She will not delay, and neither should we.”

“Agreed,” Alicia nodded, a Dynamo psion who had been appointed the overseer for this position. “There is a roundabout way to the Deployment Gateway. Takes longer, but Patricia will be coming down the main hallway, and last we heard, she was in the labs.”

“Confirmed on the labs, Engineering Team,” Jackson said grimly. “She’s just finished destroying everything in them. You need to hurry otherwise there won’t be a safe passage for the engineers.”

“We will stop her,” Angelina stated, the lone MELD Operator stepped forward. “We have no choice. Caelior, can you face her again?”

“I can,” the Ethereal sounded notably confident. “Even if supported by the Imperator, it is still Patricia. I know how I lost last time, and I will not do so again.”

“All well and good, but we need to get moving,” Nuan insisted, checking again to see if she was fully stocked. “He’s right – Patricia isn’t going to delay.”

“You six stay with the engineers and escort them out,” Alicia ordered a group of soldiers. “Everyone else form up and follow Caelior. We stagger ourselves so we aren’t all attacked at once.”
“Where is T’Leth?” One of them asked. “Or his people?”

“Unknown,” Alicia said slowly. “From what we know, she’s doing something to suppress him.”

“A Sovereign One?”

“The Ethereals have Mosrimor,” Caelior reminded them. “She has perhaps utilized his own capabilities to counter T’Leth. It is likely this is taking place across the world where his agents are located.”

“Right,” Nuan nodded. “Where is Shen?”

“In the Cyber Development Center,” one of the engineers answered. “He’s saving a very important project-“

“Well pull him out now,” Alicia said. “This isn’t worth dying over-“

“You don’t understand!” The engineer said. “We can’t leave it behind! It could change the course of the war!”

“The course of the war is being changed now,” Nuan told him. “I’d rather he be alive to see it-“

“Belay that, Psion Alicia,” Jackson’s voice was tight and controlled. “What Shen is doing can’t be interrupted until he’s finished.”

“It better be a fucking showstopper,” Alicia growled and waved the soldiers to form up. “Come on! Let’s put the traitor down!”

Weapons in hand and the Ethereal leading the charge, they marched out to put an end to the Harbinger once and for all.

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Research Labs, the Praesidium – Classified Location

3/17/2017 – 11:45 A.M.

Countless experiments conducted, completed, or failed. Thousands of hours of work had been conducted in these labs. Breakthroughs that had changed the direction of Humanity; discoveries that forever altered the war. History had been made here, and the men and women within it would be remembered as pioneers in the upcoming age of Humanity.

But all things eventually died.

The landmarks of history inevitably became graveyards and monuments to the past.

As it would be here.

The Harbinger stood in the labs; scattered tablets, vials and computers strewn everywhere, organic material and plant life left to wither. All abandoned in a rush for survival. But there was much here that would not be able to be recovered, no matter how much they tried. She knew the procedures and protocols.

Progress on all projects would be set back significantly. Weeks if not months.

A short amount of time, some would think.
She did not intend to allow this war to drag out years. Certainly not long enough for XCOM to recover the progress they had made. The Harbinger raised a hand as the air around her became charged with an electric aura. Purple flickers dotted the room around her as she prepared to summon the maelstrom.

A hand closed and reality tore itself into a raging inferno of chaos and destruction.

In the center stood the Harbinger, a lone beacon in the storm which ripped apart everything around it. Metal warped and bent like paper; glass shattered within seconds and was further vaporized by the storm. Delicate objects were turned into scrap within moments. The amount of destruction would have been sufficient with only a few seconds of the storm.

She did not intend to destroy the labs.

She meant to annihilate them until the only things left were ash and soot.

The storm roared around her, and the walls which separated the Genetic Labs, Cloning Chambers, and other specialized rooms were disintegrated and the corrosive power spilled into the other lab rooms and subsequently began destroying all that was within them.

Patricia faintly felt some minds nearby; test subjects XCOM had been using. Not a priority for evacuation. Fear arose from them as she penetrated their minds as the storm roared into their chambers and shattered the paltry walls imprisoning them. Perhaps she could withhold the storm from them.

Yet only contempt remained in her. These Humans deserved no mercy or hope. The appropriate fate would be allowing them to live. Yet she would not give XCOM a resource they could exploit. So she passively observed their quick deaths as the storm ravaged their bodies. Soon nothing was left. Nothing at all.

Her hand opened and the storm ended.

Where the Harbinger now stood, one could be forgiven for wondering if a bomb had gone off. Dust and ash covered where the storm had ravaged the rooms. Layers of the floor were gone, creating an uneven surface and were left with black and grey soot. Nothing else stood. All nearby walls were torn apart, creating wide spaces in a previously more confined setting.

This had taken time, but it was justifiable.

XCOM would be coming.

Already she could feel their minds. A particular one among them.

Caelior.

A reunion of sorts.

Ironic. She had beaten him once with the Imperator’s help. Now history would repeat itself.

Her cape swept behind her as she turned on her heel and began marching down the hallway where she knew XCOM was marching. She counted the minds approaching. Fifteen…twenty? A large number, with several psions among them. A MELD Operator as well. Other soldiers with simple arms and limited capabilities.

Twenty soldiers marching to their deaths.
She paused briefly as she sensed them coming forward and opened a portal to cause another of Mosrimor’s Orbs to fall out. There was little point risking T’Leth maintaining control in what might be her most dangerous encounter yet. It activated and she continued, and instead of performing what was expected and walking slowing into the fight, she telekinetically flung herself forward on invisible strings, around the corner, and into the oncoming XCOM force.

The few seconds she saw of the flat-footed XCOM soldiers were enough for her to devise a plan. She slammed into the nearest XCOM soldier and slammed him into the nearby wall before snapping her fingers and bisecting him with a psionic barrier. With another hand she flung out causing the nearby soldiers to go flying back.

The MELD Operator launched her own attack, golden mists swirling around her. Plasma bolts and alloy rounds began flying towards her as Caelior leading the attack flung out a hand to begin crushing her. Fortunately, she had anticipated such a reaction, and knew mobility was the key to beating Caelior.

This in mind, she charged to the back of the line, turning into a psionic streak of purple. The three soldiers attempted to defend themselves, but not before she clenched a fist and their brains exploded inside their skulls. A sound of shrieking metal caught her attention and she flash-stepped backwards just in time as the ceiling was pulled down where she was standing.

Caelior wasted no time in ripping out the walls she was besides to crush her, even as the XCOM psions shot energy and directed their own telekinetic attacks at her. Clever. She had to admit that use of the environment to his advantage was a definite improvement. The Little Storm had clearly learned something.

She opened a portal under her feet and fell through into the middle of six soldiers. Turning the tactic against them, she first threw them into walls and brought the ceiling down upon them. As she made to confirm the kills, she was thrown backwards violently and stabilized herself telekinetically as she faced a furious Caelior.

“You’ve become stronger,” she grudgingly admitted, anchoring herself to the ground. “Good.”

“And I learned who you really are, Imperator,” Caelior spat back, ripping out a section of the wall and tossing it to her with lighting speed. A flash-step made it easy to avoid, and something she started performing every few seconds to prevent him from locking on. The MELD Operator was going to be trouble and needed to be dealt with.

Patricia’s arm glowed with purple fire, and blasted it towards the golden clouds speeding towards her and the woman herself. To occupy Caelior, she launched a telepathic attack against him, expecting him to crumble under the skill she now commanded. As the Operator yelled as she was melted, the Harbinger frowned.

Caelior’s mind was oddly resilient, certainly more than she’d expected.

“I am not your pawn anymore!” He yelled, and blasted her back into a wall with enough force that for the first time, she hurt. It was only momentary, but she felt it. A curious development. His potential is becoming realized.

Caelior had a role to play in the future. XCOM had done more than expected. The decision to ensure Caelior’s survival was proving to be beneficial. But now it was time to collect. The arms of the rival Ethereal waved and the hallway continued collapsing around her, but this time Patricia countered with a telekinetic command of her own.
The room ceased collapsing around her, and they both stood off, helmet and mask looking into each other. A test of strength and will between Ethereal and Harbinger. “This is not where you belong, Caelior,” the Harbinger said without concern even as Caelior dedicated more power to collapsing the space she occupied. “This is not your future.”

“You are not my future,” Caelior growled. “I was used once before – now I fight on my own terms.”

Telekinetic bonds were no longer just around the crumbling infrastructure around her, but on the body itself. Her armor tightened and she had to continually push back on the winding strings constricting and crushing her. She would not be overpowered by this one. Not now. With a glare to the Ethereal, the Psionosphere began tearing around him, but the searing energy didn’t distract him.

The mask cracked.

Her suit began bending.

*Unacceptable.*

She opened a portal and fell through as the space collapsed into a ball that would have crushed her had she not escaped. She appeared back behind the Ethereal who was preparing to do it again. She launched another telepathic attack, extending a hand, now with her full power behind it. “Get out of my head, Trask!” He yelled as he resisted, just as he flung out a hand which sent her flying back.

She flipped in the air and telekinetically yanked herself down feet first back onto the ground. “You’ve conducted yourself well,” she breathed. “But I have a mission to complete, and you will not stop me now.”

Her bond deepened to the Imperator as she drew upon a perspective few could comprehend. The paths visualized in her head; the bounding atoms and molecules she could envision clearly. A scale so minute and obscure that it was difficult to describe to someone who existed in a more complicated frame of existence.

A hand drew close to her chest, and then extended. Purple lightning shot out of her fingertips and slammed into the unsuspecting Ethereal, who had no defense against the power. Caelior was talented, but he lacked nuance; he lacked scope. Perhaps he could have learned, as she had. But he had not, and now it would be his undoing.

The voltage was minimal, as she did not want to kill him.

But it was painful.

Very painful.

A second hand joined the first and she began walking to the Ethereal who was now writhing on the ground, his armor and clothing smoking and screaming as his skin burned. “You conducted yourself well, Caelior,” the Harbinger said as she stood over him, briefly ceasing the stream of lightning. “Do not worry, I’m not going to kill you.”

Caelior was in too much pain to respond, and she stood over him, and lifted him with a telekinetic grip. “You still have a use for me.”

“Stop!”

Patricia almost shot a bolt of lightning into the nearby voice. She had thought that she had killed or
mortaly wounded all of the soldiers, but that very clearly was not the case. The woman on the ground was badly wounded, with part of the wall impaled in her. One hand was hanging off, and the mechanical nature triggered a memory in Patricia.

Nuan Kun; she remembered her slightly. Her good hand was lifted, palm raised to punctuate her yell.

It was curiosity more than mercy that drove Patricia to refrain. Nuan could have survived and not attracted her attention, and she wanted to know why that was.

So she waited. “Tell me what you want.”

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_The Praesidium – Classified Location_

_3/17/2017 – 12:01 P.M._

She’d been so sure they’d be able to fight back. That they would win.

But whatever Patricia had become now…

It was something else.

Not even the Mosrimor avatar had been as lethal and terrifying as the woman who’d attacked with a power and ferocity she’d not been able to anticipate, let alone stop. Unlike the Avatar, Patricia did not waste time or toy with them. She was _everywhere_ at once, making the weapon in her hand feel close to useless.

They’d died quickly and brutally. A small comfort as many were killed before they really knew what was happening. All the armor in the world couldn’t stop a power which ignored such things. It couldn’t stand against the pure psionic storms that could be conjured. Now as she laid on the ground, slowly bleeding out, she wondered if they could ever really win against something like this.

In the end, she was an ordinary woman. Most of those around her were. They may have had armor, been modified, or carried the latest weapons. But what good was that against those who could alter reality around them. Oh, there may have been some options and opportunities, but she knew that the war would be decided by which side commanded the most psions – or the most powerful.

Men and women like her were fodder to fight on the battlefield of gods.

But she didn’t regret anything. Not at all. Right now, it seemed hopeless, but Nuan knew this wasn’t the end, no matter what happened. Patricia…or whatever she was now…she would lose eventually. There would be retribution for this. It would not be today, but it would be soon.

She’d remained still as Patricia fought Caelior, and for a brief moment it looked like she could be beaten. Caelior was doing his best, and was starting to hurt her. Her hope had faded when the lightning had sprung from her fingertips. The walking Harbinger sent the once-standing Caelior to the ground in excruciating pain.

Patricia hadn’t noticed her. Maybe she didn’t care, or maybe she thought she was dead. If she stayed quiet, she could _maybe_ live when XCOM returned. But Patricia was talking now, and she was clearly going to take Caelior away. That couldn’t happen. XCOM needed him, and he could have beaten her if they’d been more prepared.
She wasn’t important, but he was. She needed to save him, whatever it took.

Even if she died because of it.

“Stop!”

Patricia looked over to her, and for a few long seconds, Nuan wondered if she would just kill her outright. Instead she hesitated, then finally spoke. “Tell me what you want.”

Nuan swallowed. “If you take him away, you’ll kill him.”

Nuan yelped in pain as she felt her body be encased in a harsh telekinetic grip and lifted off the ground. “Lying will not save him, Nuan. Do so again and I will kill you here.”

She was going to do that anyway, but Nuan resisted the urge to yell back, and through the pain she continued. “No! I’m not lying. Caelior has the Restraints! If he is taken beyond Earth, he will die! A contingency plan by the Commander, I think.”

A secret that wasn’t common knowledge. And had been mentioned by Iosif briefly when she’d asked about what would prevent Caelior from being captured again. The answer was simple, and Iosif had said that the Collective would not control Caelior again, or take him beyond Earth. If XCOM couldn’t use Caelior, then no one could.

Now Patricia seemed to consider what she’d said. She fired another bolt of lightning against Caelior, even as he was recovering. “I see.” She looked back to Nuan, and her mind suddenly felt like it was overloaded. Images and memories flashed before her so fast she couldn’t make any of them out. Storms of mixed feelings and emotions overwhelmed her as Patricia tore through her mind furiously.

The Manchurian Restrains locked her body in place to prevent her from succumbing to the intrusion, but it didn’t matter. Patricia didn’t need her to do anything, only what was in her head. Then it ceased and with her head spinning, Nuan came back to the world and fell to the ground painfully as the telekinetic grip stopped.

“It appears you are telling the truth,” Patricia mused, looking back to the Ethereal. “Unfortunate. Something that will need to be addressed later. But I cannot allow him to remain as he is now. It is simple then. If he cannot leave Earth, then he will not. But he will not stay here. Not with you.”

Nuan gave a painful nod. Fine. That was fine. Patricia would transport him to some secure Collective base on Earth. That would mean XCOM would find it – and rescue him. It would only take time. He would not be lost. “I have more to do here,” Patricia knelt down to Caelior and placed a hand over the helmet, which began cracking into pieces before it shattered in her hand. “Until that moment…”

One gloved hand was placed on Caelior’s temple, and Nuan watched for a few minutes as Patricia appeared to subdue him psionically. Or imprison him. Caelior eventually slumped still, unconscious. She stood back up.

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” Nuan said, knowing her death was coming. “This won’t stop us.”

Patricia slowly turned the faceless white mask to her. “I know, Nuan. It will not stop XCOM. It will not stop the Commander. But it will slow you down. It will hurt soldiers like you, and everyone in XCOM.” She walked over to Nuan’s body, and knelt down. “I intend to end this war, and I’m sorry you won’t live to see what Humanity will become after. I’m sorry you were on the wrong
Nuan wondered what she could possibly say to the traitor. What rational way she could rebut her words. In the end…simplicity was best. Iosif would have preferred that. She wasn’t afraid now, not truly. No matter what happened, she would be avenged and Patricia would be punished. She was certain of that.

“The only thing I’m sorry about,” Nuan breathed. “Is that I won’t get to watch your execution for treason.”

The cold mask looked down on her. “No. You won’t.” A short pause as she stood, and Nuan decided to use her one good arm to pull the pistol she still had up and get a final shot at Patricia.

She never lifted it off the ground as a telekinetic weight pinned it down. Patricia just looked down with contempt radiating from the mask. There was nothing more to be said, and Nuan knew that this time, it was over.

“Die, Nuan Kun.” It only took seconds for her ears to hear the words, and for her brain to understand them. The final command was given, and her body obeyed the will of the Harbinger. Her story here ended, with no more surprise or fanfare. Her only regret now was that she hadn’t mentioned to Iosif how she’d felt earlier. Perhaps they both would have been a little happier. Perhaps it was for the best though, it might be easier for him to move on. But he would, she knew that.

*Kill her for me, would you?

Her breathing stopped; her heart ceased beating, and her eyes became sightless.

The body of Nuan Kun went still and cold, as she became another victim of the Harbinger.

One of the first, but far from the last.

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*The Aui’Vitakar, Vitiary – Vitakar*

3/18/2017 – 12:47 P.M.

The auditorium they were seated in was definitely stunning, at least to Sierra. Perhaps this effect was amplified due to the thousands of people watching from the alcoves and balconies, as protocol was apparently waived as the public was allowed in to bear witness, in addition to the Aui’Vitakar representatives themselves.

They all stood…or sat…in the middle, with Quisilia and Aegis taking center stage while drone cameras hovered around them. Both holoprojectors and actual screens were brought in for Aegis to display what he’d brought. Quisilia did not appear to have anything on him, and the whole time seemed extremely smug about the whole thing.

Sierra knew the smirk that had to be on his face would be wiped out when Aegis started talking.

It was going to be funny to see him try and explain all of this away. Especially since he wouldn’t come back with a mildly amusing tweet. Still, he probably was still going to try and spin anything as hard as possible. Hopefully the Vitakara would be able to see through the deception.

“The truth of the war is best shown, rather than said,” Aegis began. “The Vitakara are a species
privileged to not be defined by war, to not know the harsh realities of warfare and the toll it takes on all sides. But there is war on Earth, the truth of which has been censored and hidden by the Zararch. See the reality of what your species faces each day on Earth.”

Aegis played the footage he’d brought, a portion of it anyway, which was a short compilation of clips from XCOM and ADVENT armor cameras showing soldiers fighting, killing, and dying in combat. It was from multiple different battles and people. Some were killed, some lived; all saw death and chaos. The Vitakara could not understand the language, of course, but the tone would come through. Frantic; erratic, and loud.

Sierra watched the crowd carefully as the footage played. They definitely reacted to death, interestingly not much differently when a Human or Vitakara died on screen. It went on for ten minutes, and by the end the Vitakara in attendance were visibly uncomfortable. After Aegis shut it off, Quisilia stood.

“I am uncertain why you choose to display such a thing to these people,” Quisilia said, looking to the crowd. “You say that Humanity is being unfairly attacked by our Collective, yet you show your soldiers brutally killing fine soldiers of Vitakar in an attempt to appeal to them? You instead have inadvertently shown that ADVENT displays a threat, and Humanity is not the helpless species you claim it is.”

“It is to show that war is costly and violent,” Aegis answered. “Human or Vitakara alike. Wars will not change, and should only be waged for the right reasons. So I ask Quisilia – what is the justification for the war against the Humans.”

Yes you overgrown grape, answer that. Sierra was quite enjoying the almost awkward silence as Quisilia attempted to answer the question. “The simple version is because Humanity attacked us first,” Quisilia said with a completely serious tone. “They rejected our…diplomatic attempts and instead not only attacked our brave soldiers, but deliberately targeted other Humans who wished for peace.”

“He did not just say that,” Anna breathed, livid. “Are you kidding me?”

There was no way Sierra was staying quiet. “I’m sorry,” she interrupted, standing. “Are you just going to ignore the fact that you’d been abducting our citizens for months? Or that you attacked Hamburg with your Dreadnought? Or the fact that you never once attempted ‘diplomacy’ until we were fighting your incursion?” She was speaking English, she knew, but the Vitakara had translators who were displaying everything she said to the crowd, who all looked to Quisilia.

“Tell them she is lying,” Aegis challenged. “Have you explained what a Chryssalid is?”

“Like many things in the galaxy, the truth is not as simple as it sounds,” Quisilia explained lightly. “Yes, we conducted reconnaissance before an official contact, but merely because we wanted to learn of the Humans. Their language, history, and cultures. What we found, sadly, was a species desperately in need of direction.”

He spread an arm to the XCOM soldiers. “Humans are vengeful, violent, and prone to emotional decisions. Fear and hatred are common among their kind, and they jump on any excuse to turn against each other. The fear of the other is a powerful motivator – and a unifier. And there was no better unifier than the fear of the alien.” He began pacing. “And this is merely what Humans have been waiting for. Surprisingly, aliens are a common subject among the Humans. There are entire genres of entertainment and literature devoted to the alien – many of which involved the subjugation or elimination of the alien. These are not a peaceful people. They are no friend to that which is different.”
He paused his pacing. “And when one of our units was discovered, there was a fight, and that was the catalyst for the Human governments declaring us a threat. We were forced to take military action, yes, but it was justified after they have shot down our spacecraft and killed our brave soldiers.”

“Were you, or were you not abducting Humans?” Sierra demanded.

“Were you, or were you not experimenting on aliens?” Quisilia asked back.

“Corpses, yes,” Sierra said. “Aliens who were dead. Answer the question.”

“Perhaps proof is acceptable,” Aegis said, as a new video played and it was the one Sierra knew was coming, but she didn’t want to watch. The audio was enough from the Sectoid Hive, where it showed not only the fates of hundreds if not thousands of Humans, but also the few Vitakara they had also found.

Sierra noted with satisfaction that a majority of the Vitakara were looking away for most of it, and when the Vitakara victims of the Sectoid experiments appeared, there were audible cries of outrage and shouts from the crowd. “That is the fate of captives in the Collective,” Aegis said. “The fate of anyone who the Collective wishes to make disappear.”

There were only two options for Quisilia that Sierra saw – deny the footage, or spin it. It was going to be pretty hard to deny it, and if he did, Sierra knew exactly what Aegis was going to say. The most viable option was spin. Quisilia appeared to be doing that. “Unfortunately, there are certain drawbacks to how the Collective is managed,” he said with an exaggerated sigh. “The freedom we allow to the member species means that we cannot be aware of everything. We did not know this was taking place, and I will note that even had XCOM not killed the Hive Commander responsible, we would have taken action.”

“A lie,” Ravas stood, face set grimly. “The Ethereals do not simply ignore what happens in the Collective. The Zararch answers to them, and appraises them of all significant operations – including this one. Earth was designated as a top-priority zone. Only those extremely qualified knew what was going on – the Ethereals knew every single action taken on Earth. That or they show their incompetence by not knowing such crimes were taking place. Explain, Elder Quisilia, which it is.”

“We all have lapses in judgement and execution,” Quisilia answered. “However, since learning of this, we have ensured that the Sectoids perform no such experiments on Earth again. The Greater Hive Commanders would not risk sanctioning such actions.”

“Then perhaps,” Ravas said. “You would promise the Aui’Vitakar representatives a tour of Viennith?”

Sierra only knew the basics of why that was being brought up. Apparently that was a testing ground for Vitakara, though unconfirmed. There was enough evidence that both Nartha and Ravas knew to make the demand though – and Quisilia did not especially seem pleased with that. “I believe the Aui’Vitakar knew quite well the planet is unimportant.”

“So they believe,” Ravas nodded. “But why not prove it?”

“I can, of course, see that something is arranged,” Quisilia said. “But it would take time-“

“To stall and dismantle what you have on the planet,” Ravas sat back down. “If you want to prove your innocence there, perhaps it should be immediate, and not when you have purged the
evidence.”

“And perhaps we should move to Paradise Station,” Aegis said, before Quisilia could say anything else. “Perhaps the Sectoids were acting on their own – but explain the thousands of Vitakara in Paradise station who’ve become corrupted under the influence of the Bringer – and what they do.”

Quisilia just stared at Aegis long enough as he was setting up that Sierra imagined he was thinking some variation of “I’m fucked”. The edited compilation of footage (though Sierra knew that the uncut footage was shared with the Vitakara) began, showing the supposed greatest hits of the Bringer. Including the captives of Paradise, the horrific creatures within it, the introduction of the freak Preximius, many parts of China, and finally what Isomnum had done to Beijing.

The reaction was far more pronounced than the previous video, with a lot more shouts and yells in the alien language directed (presumably) towards Quisilia. Sierra almost felt bad for the Vitakara who weren’t expecting to see the graphic footage they were showing, but they really deserved to know what they were supporting by proxy.

Aegis lifted a hand to get the aliens to quiet down, and after a few minutes they did – and the Oyariah that had come along with them stood up and spoke for the first time. “You have all perhaps heard of the defections on Earth from the supposed traitors. But the truth speaks for itself. The Elders have lied to us, and this was not the first time. They hid the truth of one of their own defecting, and Elder Aegis has proven himself to be one worth following for his actions after learning the truth of his Collective. Others have now followed; Elders who see the Collective for what it is – crumbling and based on lies.”

He looked to Aegis. “The Elder Caelior has similarly joined Aegis against the deceptive Ethereal Collective, and Elder Sana’Ligna has departed out of disgust for what the Collective has allowed to perpetuate not simply on our own species, or the Humans, but against every species under them. I was once a Guard of the Ravager, but I will not continue to uphold those who keep our species in continual darkness and secrecy.”

“I would like to add that all of what you saw was the actions of several rogue actors-“ Quisilia began, though he was definitely not confident.

“Do you take my species for fools?!“ Cairu demanded suddenly. “Paradise Station is not the result of a few rogue actors. My people are not mindless drones or simple-minded idiots. They are scientists, engineers, accountants, managers, and officers. We can critically think about what we see. Paradise Station was built – and maintained – with the blessing and support of the Imperator and Collective. Do not dare suggest that what you have done is absolved.”

“It is worse if you truly knew nothing,” Ravas added slowly. “If that is the case, you do not deserve to lead the Vitakara as you are clearly incapable of managing your own. That is, even if we accept this blatant lie. But there is a very simple way to make amends for such a…mistake…if we accept your explanation. Answer if Paradise Station is still operational. Answer if the Creator has been executed for her crimes.”

“The Creator has been severely punished,” Quisilia said, definitely knowing he was losing the crowd now. “I would like to add that these actions were conducted by a minority of those in Paradise Station, and are either dead or soon will be executed. There is much good work taking place on Paradise Station, which despite the negative optics, we will continue to explore because it makes little sense to throw everything out based on the actions of a few.”

It was amusing to see Quisilia dance around the real reason Paradise was being preserved. “Is the Creator still in charge of Paradise Station?” Aegis asked.
“The Imperator is in command of the station,” Quisilia answered. “He has taken the decisive actions needed to handle such an unfortunate situation. You can rest assured that such an event will never happen again.”

“I believe the evidence does not provide much reason to believe such a thing,” Aegis said, stepping to the crowd. “The Collective will soon fall. The Elders are divided as even they know such things cannot be supported or condoned. Not all knew about the truth of Paradise Station – but the Imperator did. Quisilia did. And more.”

Aegis paused. “You do not live in freedom, and never have. I am aware that when we depart, actions will be taken against you to mitigate what we revealed. The Aui’Vitakar will undergo changes. You will hear propaganda spouted to make you forget or misinterpret what was said. I suspect the broadcast has also ended across the planet. But know this – we will come, and you will be liberated from the invisible prison created around you.”

He looked around. “And if you do not believe it…then share what you have seen today. Demand that the Elders be held to account for what they have done. What you accomplish – or do not – will speak for itself.”

The auditorium broke into a mixture of loud and unintelligible conversation, shouting, and otherwise chaos as Aegis stepped back – and then heard new commotion behind her. Turning around, she blinked in surprise as the Chronicler of all people was pushing his way towards them, helmet on and clearly anxious.

Which was great, Sierra initially thought, as it meant that the team to take out Patricia was… mostly still alive? Although what was he doing here now?

“Chronicler,” Crevan said, a frown on his face as he was interrupted.

“No time,” the Chronicler said, short of breath. “We need to leave. Now.”

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XCOM Engineering, the Praesidium – Classified Location

3/18/2017 - 12:06 P.M

The fires that raged in what had once been XCOM Engineering would not be put out for a long time. Dozens of prototypes, MEC suits, and valuable machines were now melted slag intermixed with the soot and plastic on the ground. Patricia had not vaporized it as she had with the Labs, mostly due to wishing the fires to burn and rob the area of oxygen while damaging the circulation of the base itself.

Time was running out, she knew. Soon there would be more T’Leth Agents, the most powerful psions, and Aegis returning. Perhaps she could fight them all off, but if that had been the case, she wouldn’t have lured them away. No sense in engaging in an unsure fight, not when it had started like this.

But there was a final matter to address which would cripple XCOM’s efforts for good.

The Cyber Labs were ahead now, where Shen had started work on JULIAN. She didn’t know how much progress had been made since her initial abduction – but it clearly was unfinished. An AI could certainly change the direction of the war, but in the unlikely event that he had managed to build one – a feat that the Imperator doubted – it always had a central processor. A brain. A heart.
Patricia though…she knew Shen. If anyone could achieve it, he could.

That was why he was a threat now.

The doors ahead were sealed shut. Locked. She reached out and closed a fist. The metal crushed itself, tore off the hinges, and with a dismissive motion was tossed to the side as she entered where all cyber operations of XCOM had been conducted. Shen was standing in front of a console, still working, looking as he always had.

He looked calm; focused. And that also emanated from him. She wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d decided to simply accept his fate, though still this man was no fool, and what made her more suspicious was that Lily had been living in the base. He would not want anything to happen to him now and leave his daughter alone.

“Step away from the computer, Shen,” she said slowly. Shen seemed to ignore her, his lips pursing as he heard her voice.

“I don’t see why I should,” he finally said, disgust and sadness in his voice. Disappointment. “With how many you’ve killed today, I don’t expect you to treat me any differently.”

In a way, he was right, but she disliked the implication that she was enjoying it. “It became necessary when you joined T’Leth.”

“Is that Patricia, or the Imperator speaking?” He asked curtly, still refusing to look at her. “I knew Patricia, and not only would she have understood why we’ve taken the actions we did, she would have supported them.”

She was tired of him refusing to face her, so she clenched a hand and the keyboard he was typing on became crushed, as well as the screen of the console. “I was uninformed and we were desperate. I would have at one point, but I know better now. I know where that will lead. I will not have our species drawn into a perpetual war as the tools of a Sovereign.”

Shen looked to her, eyes showing disappointment and unyielding resolve. “And ask yourself – assuming there is anything left of you – what the Imperator plans. You are not saving us from war, Patricia. Should the Imperator succeed, we will be the soldiers on the front lines against the other Sovereigns of the galaxy. Don’t lie to me, Patricia. Don’t lie to yourself.”

“Perhaps,” Patricia relented. “But it will be centuries later. And when the Sovereigns are dead, there will be no need for war.”

“What all despots say to justify their conquests,” Shen dismissed flatly. “The Imperator knows full well the Sovereigns exist outside this galaxy. One galaxy is not enough for him. At least with T’Leth we will chart our own path, and should it lead to war in the future – it will be under our own terms. Not those of a tyrant who acts through a puppet.”

Patricia breathed. “You don’t understand, but what you believe is irrelevant now. If you believe T’Leth does not intend to use you, then you are more of a fool than I could ever be. You think the Imperator would not be satisfied with a galaxy, but I can promise you T’Leth will not be either.”

Shen shook his head. “I’ll take my chances.”

A few long seconds stretched. Patricia looked around the room. “Why are you here, Shen? You could have left with the others. You could have had your team finish the work you are doing now. A futile attempt, but you know how valuable you are. Do you think I won’t kill you?”
The old man sighed, a long and slow one. “I’d hoped there was something left in you that would stop you from doing this, but no, I’m certain you’ll kill me. I could have left my people to sacrifice themselves, but I didn’t. They have lives and families, they have futures. You know I’ve had my differences with the Commander, but we have always done what we do to save as many people as possible – even if it means we sacrifice in the process.”

His tone turned almost wistful. “I’ve lived a long, full, and rewarding life, Patricia. I’ve accomplished more than many in my position and I regret none of it. I knew the chances of me surviving this was were…slim, and I accepted that. I have for a while.” A ghost of a smile appeared on his face when he looked back to her. “I’ve given my last gift to this world, but what you have done won’t change anything. Killing me won’t stop XCOM. There are thousands of men and women just as smart and dedicated as I was, and they will take my place. Tampering with my mind will only kill me, I’ve made sure of that. Whatever you think you accomplish here will only be temporary – if anything at all. You should know better than anyone.”

He motioned around. “For every soldier you kill, a dozen more will be inspired to resist. For every place you attack, you only rally more to defend their homes and planet. The destruction you’ve caused will be repaired. All that you’ve done, Patricia, is made us stronger. You’ve already failed here, even if you don’t realize that yet.”

“Brave words, Shen,” she said, stepping forward. “But the world runs on reality, not hope. I know XCOM can rebuild – but it will take time. And in that time, I will win this war.” Another step forward. “And before you die, I want you to see your AI die as well.”

Around her the room began shaking as she gathered her power and pulled at the telekinetic strings surrounding her. Computers and consoles began sparking, popping, and imploding on themselves. The smells of burnt circuits and overheated cards filled the room. Shen stood watching; his face masked in acceptance knowing he couldn’t do anything to stop her.

“If it is any consolation,” she said after the room was wrecked. “I don’t think you would have succeeded in your project. Not truly.”

Shen smiled.

Patricia frowned.

Something is not right.

“Amazing!” A voice announced over the remaining intercoms. It was an electronic male voice that sounded tinged in sarcasm, oddly enough. Or condescending. “Every word of what you just said was wrong.”

How?

It appeared even she had underestimated Shen. This was a new problem that would have to be dealt with later.

“Let him live, Traitor Human,” the presumed voice of JULIAN spoke, sounding more serious.
“And I will advocate for your indefinite imprisonment as opposed to your painful execution.”

“Not after this,” she shook her head, looking back to Shen with a grudging respect. “Well done. XCOM will be lesser for your loss.”

“We shall see,” he said, clasping his hands behind his back. “The Commander will be coming back any moment. Let’s not drag this out any longer than necessary. JULIAN?”
“Yes, father?”

“Tell Lily I love her.”

“Acknowledged.”

He was right, the conversation had gone on long enough. She simply reached out and telekinetically snapped the neck of Dr. Raymond Shen. He died instantly, and his body fell onto the floor filled with broken metal, plastic and glass. *A shame.*

“That was a mistake.” JULIAN said, the voice inflection lowered. “You should run now.”

“Yes,” she said, knowing the AI could hear everything. “My job is done. Give my condolences to the Commander.”

Knowing she only had a limited amount of time – if any left – she began teleporting back to where the Mosrimor orbs were hovering and with a telepathic order, shut them off and teleported them away. She’d left a large number, not wanting to have risked T’Leth’s interference. It seemed to have paid off, as T’Leth had not once bothered her.

Her final stop was the unconscious body of Caelior. If he could not leave the planet, then they would have to work with that. She picked up the body effortlessly, slung him over her shoulder, and manifested a portal in front of her.

It was time to leave.

Mission accomplished.

There was only one thing left to do.

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Despite the events which had taken place, the world at large was moving on as normal. The offensives across the world contained to small portions of the population. The war was a part of the everyday lives of the people, but it had not truly entered the homes of many. Not yet. But very soon it would be.

It began when the Harbinger stepped out of a shimmering portal into the bustling streets of New York city. Near-pandemonium broke out as all the citizens froze, not certain if it was friend or foe. Peacekeepers yelled for people to get clear, and panic broke out as a stampede to flee began. A hand shot out, and all the Peacekeepers froze.

But the Harbinger waited.

She could keep them indefinitely.

ADVENT received thousands of panicked calls, as cities across the world began reporting sightings of the woman in white armor and a clouded mask. Snipers fired from the rooftops and Peacekeepers defended their cities, and found that many such appearances were illusions. Priests were mobilized to dispel them, but it proved to be easier said than done.

But it was confirmed that the one in New York was real, now with the braver media coming out and setting up their cameras to see what she was going to do. And there were those in ADVENT; in XCOM who had some idea.
“We can cut the footage, Chancellor,” Kyong said to the woman who sat, looking grimly at the screen, reviewing the attack on the Praesidium and now Patricia’s appearance all over the world. “Damage control is essential now if you think she’s going to reveal state secrets—“

“No,” Saudia sighed, knowing what was coming. “Information is impossible to fully suppress these days. Anything of that nature will only lend credence to whatever she will say. Let it play, and we will discredit this traitor properly.”

The Harbinger began speaking; a synthesis of woman, machine, and bass that reverberated in the ears of those still listening. “I am Patricia Trask, formerly of XCOM, formerly a hero of the war you now fight. Through the actions of myself and others, ADVENT rose to combat the alien threat and unite our species under one banner by any means necessary.”

The masked woman looked around at the crowd. “But much has changed, and now it is time the truth is known. Your leaders are not who you think they are; what you believe you know is based on manipulation and lies. For centuries the world has been influenced by an organization devoted to eventual world control. This organization was discovered by XCOM. They should have been executed for their actions.”

A pause. “Instead, they were used to execute the vision of the Commander of XCOM to create a united government for our species. You know that today as ADVENT. Conceptualized together in secret with the leaders of nations, and placed under the very same people who have endeavored to control the world from the start. Today they exist under the thumb of XCOM, pawns to execute their agenda or the truth about them would come out.”

“What I have said is the truth, what is done about it is up to the citizens of ADVENT; of Earth. You live under the shadow of ADVENT, in service to a war than cannot be won despite what they claim. As we speak, the bases of XCOM burn. The war has gone on long enough, and it is time order be restored to Earth – not under the hands of an unelected shadow government, but to the people themselves, with proper guidance.”

She pointed to the crowds. “You have been lied to about the Collective and their intentions. I have learned much – and the aliens are not our true enemy. There are greater threats in the galaxy, and your leaders would prefer to ignore the truth and cling to their power than swallow their pride and surrender – for the greater good of the galaxy and our species.”

The hand lowered. “Many chances have been given to your leaders. All of which have been rejected completely. Our patience is over. I have not come here to demand a surrender, or give a warning. I have come with a promise. I have come with a purpose. Listen well, and realize that your only hope for a swift end will be to take action yourselves against your masters.”

“I am Patricia Trask, Harbinger of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective, and I have come to end this war.”

With that final declaration, she vanished with a flourish of her hand, with the words of warning and revelation echoing in the minds of all who had heard her.

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To be continued in:

Interlude: Wrath of the Deep
Chapter End Notes

At long last Act III is done. New phase of the war begins now. Thank you to everyone who's stuck around this long (over one million words on this alone), it's been a good time and it wouldn't be nearly as enjoyable for me to do without the feedback and comments that are left.

On that note, I am happy to say that I do have a public discord server where there's already a good number of people; authors and readers alike. If you're so inclined, I'd be happy for as many people there as possible. Link is here: https://discord.gg/CzC84hf

Thank you all again.

- Xabiar
The station hovering in the blackness of space was surrounded by only the faint flickering of white and blue stars in the void. Stars promising other systems; other galaxies; other places that remained untouched. *Unprotected.*

Though in a way, they already were by proxy. Perhaps they would know that one day.

Normally, stations such as these were typically used for defense, storage, or even habitation.

Not this one.

This one was something different. Something more…*refined.*

His Lord demanded no less.

The General stepped into the detailed tiled floor, boots clacking loudly in the absence of sound. Beautiful murals constructed into the floor echoed the ornate construction of the station; an extravagance and beauty one might expect on the Throne World. Were it not for the fact that he knew they were floating in space, one would never know they weren’t on solid ground.

He continued along the path, as the stone columns and walls gave way to the integrated vegetation. Pure, hard stone and steel was undesirable and drab; that which was tempered with nature provided a much-needed balance. Green, yellow, and red grass soon encroached the path, with trees, flowers, and even small fowl and creatures roaming around, while the walls were shrouded through holograms to give an illusion of an open space.

It was a perfect illustration of harmony. So many different pieces of life from dozens of worlds, galaxies, and spheres able to coexist – after the necessary modifications, of course. He enjoyed this section of the station; it was calming, especially given the news he was to break.

News he feared would not be taken well.

No…that was something he need not fear. The reaction of the Lord would likely be little more than barely visible annoyance, but what he would do, what he would *order* to respond to it…It could have significant ramifications. It would make the lives of all involved more complicated. This news was what started conquests.

One could very well be coming soon.

The room soon began transitioning back to the regular architecture of the station, and ahead he saw the door. No guards waited today, a sign of respect – and secrecy. The station was already among the most restricted, and for even the guards to be dismissed meant that the Lord had correctly assumed the news he was bringing was…*important,* even if he had dared not imply as much.

He entered the room somberly; carefully. The low humming of the holograms running was the
only constant sound as they were placed in careful rows throughout the room, each one displaying a world, species, individual, or sphere, connected to the appropriate data file. They changed daily, or even hourly depending on the situation and whim of the Lord. But looking at them was a good insight into his current musings.

A quick glance was enough to confirm his suspicions. Many aliens from the Sphere of the Sovereign, several dozen species, worlds, and individuals from the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies specifically. Near the center of the room, facing away from the entrance, but in front of a semicircle currently playing a hologram recreation of a battle, stood the elevated throne hewn out of clouded diamond.

Not just a specific battle, but one showcasing a Sovereign Agent. One of T’Leth’s, if he was to accurately predict based on the other holograms in the room. Based on what was known on the Agents of T’Leth, he suspected it was focused on a very specific one. The General fell to one knee. “[My Lord,]” he greeted, relieved to be speaking the tongue of his birth once more. Alien languages were brutish, distasteful, and curt. The one of his people was…beautiful; no other word could accurately describe it. Even aliens who heard it were enthralled from the words that flowed like water and were honey to the ears.

“[Rise and approach.]” The answer was expected, and the General rose and approached the right arm of the throne. The Lord wore no battle armor or adornment today, but a simple and tasteful tunic. One designed for status, if not comfort. Unimportant details, as the Lord did not even look to the General, and instead remained focused on the scene in front of him.

A short time passed. “[You bring news.]” It was not a question, and the General wasted no time.

“[The situation on Earth has escalated. We suspect the war will be decided sooner than anticipated.]”

“[Explain.]”

Working with the limited information his people had been able to acquire was not especially easy, but after millennia of doing this, he had been able to put together a short explanation which was largely accurate. He was unhappy that there were clear gaps in his knowledge and details were lacking, but the main pieces of information were clear if one knew what to look for.

In some ways, the previous isolation and secrecy of the Ethereals had actually helped in constructing the true narrative.

“[The Imperator has begun taking direct political control of the Ethereal Collective and devoting his power to conquering Earth. The heart of XCOM was attacked, and it is likely that they will continue to suffer defeats in upcoming battles because of this. The Imperator wishes to end this war quickly and kill T’Leth.]”

The Lord pursed his lips, though seemed mostly amused. “[Optimistic of him. The war will not end so long as T’Leth remains on the planet.]”

“[Indeed,]” a short hesitation, before the General continued. “[There are…indications that this will encourage T’Leth to act. Act with more than his Agents. We must decide on a course of action soon if we hope to influence the outcome. This war will not last indefinitely; either the Imperator or T’Leth will emerge victorious.]”

A dismissive wave of the hand. “[It ultimately does not matter. Both present unique opportunities and challenges. You are suggesting direct intervention?]”
“[Potentially,]” was the careful answer. “[T’Leth is the more immediate threat. The Imperator is more easily utilized. He could be useful in bringing the Sphere of the Sovereign under control. Though there are…concerns.]”

“[Explain.]”

“[We are still unsure of the nature of the entity he has in Paradise station,]” the General answered. “[His usage of it could prove dangerous to other Spheres if it escaped the containment designed for it.]”

“[Incorrect,]” the answer was immediate. “[This Bringer is a creature born of psionics and as such, is a wielder of such power. It threatens no other spheres. It is a non-factor outside of our operations within the one in which it resides.]”

The General had his own reservations, but this was not the time to voice them. “[As you say, my Lord.]”

“[Why have you really come to me?]” As he had expected, the Lord had figured out that there was more important news than the prelude he had provided to gain this meeting. “[These developments are unsurprising and do not change our plans.]”

And here it came. “[There are two developments which can hamper our plans,]” the General swallowed. “[First, the Entity has escaped containment.]”

It was subtle, but the reaction was easily noticeable at this close proximity. A stiffening of the body and spine. An imperceptible tightening of the face, and slow clenching of hands into fists. The eyes smoldered with anger and frustration, and eventually it faded into the mask the Lord preferred to wear. One of calm collection and introspection.

Only one question was asked. “[How?]”

“[A weakness in the Watchers,]” he answered. “[He manipulated them; made promises, gifts, and deals in return for concessions that were so minor as to be imperceptible. Invisible. Investigation continues, but this appears to be no less than three thousand years of plotting. Millions of slight nudges and hairline fractures; alone can do nothing, but together they form a singular shatterpoint.]”

A short pause. “[All involved have been quarantined. They will be dealt with when the investigation is concluded and we have every possible lead.]”

This resulted in a slight nod, but the displeasure was still apparent. “[Typical.]” A frown from the Lord, though more towards the situation than the General. “[We should have expected such. He has become more patient. It is only the containment that was breached, not the Restrictions?]”

That was indeed the good news. “[Yes, my lord. There is nothing indicating that the Restrictions were tampered with, nor did any of the Watchers allow concessions that affected them. There is little chance they were affected or altered.]”

“[Then what he will be able to do will be limited.]” the Lord relaxed slightly. “[Yet he can move through the Spheres freely. I do not trust him to not eventually learn how to break the Restrictions. Reclaiming him is essential.]”

“[I agree,]” the General nodded. “[But I do not believe he will go far.]”

The Lord stroked his chin. “[He will do what he has always done. Follow the Blood. He will find
the Sphere of the Sovereign soon. If the Entity makes contact with the any of the Sovereigns, that
could be…problematic. The Sovereigns are too arrogant, too shortsighted to understand what they
are dealing with. Limited as it is, there is already high risk from the Sphere. It does not need to be
compounded."

And this tied into the other news which could throw this into question. “[For most Sovereigns,
perhaps. Not all of them. The other development is also concerning.]”

“[Why?]”

The General’s lips twitched. “[The Sovereign Classemque has found a Gateway. His proxy species
has begun researching and excavating it.]”

There was a long silence, broken by the long intake of breath by the Lord who stared straight
ahead, his face as stone. Unlike the escape of the Entity, both of them had known it was only a
matter of time until something like this happened. “[Does he know what it is?]”

“As it stands now, no,]” he confirmed. “[It’s only a recent discovery. I do not know how he found
it, and it could very well have been accidental. The fact that he doesn’t know what it is reinforces
this.]”

“What does he think it is?”

“Based on how that particular one was designed, he likely believes it to be some kind of transport
system. Perhaps a primitive iteration of a Psionosphere-based teleportation technology. Right now
he thinks it is Sovereign technology, perhaps based on the Traveler as it bears some resemblance to
Adherent architecture.]”

“He will not hold that theory for long,” was a short answer. “[Classemque is the most
dangerous.]”

On that he was correct, which was what made this more concerning than usual. Out of all the
Sovereigns to find something of this magnitude, it had to be the smartest one of them all. T’Leth,
Expirant, even the Leviathan were better alternatives because they probably wouldn’t be able to
figure out what it was, much less how it worked.

“It will take time for him to learn,” he pointed out. “[If he is able to understand it at all.]”

“We do not work within delusions, General,” the Lord snorted. “[Not now; not here. Time is
limited and the Gateway must be destroyed.]”

It was the most obvious solution, and likely the best, but it wouldn’t solve the problem long-term.
“[Those are your orders?]”

“Yes. Take whatever you need and destroy that Gateway. Bring several of the researchers back for
study and potential integration. Kill everyone else. Let Classemque think he stumbled upon the
legacy of another Sovereign.]” The Lord rubbed his chin, thinking. “[It is clear we cannot leave the
Gateways unguarded. Install guards and defenses at each one. It may draw attention, but it has
clearly become necessary, especially with the Entity now in play, and he will use that knowledge
effectively.]”

Logical, and something he agreed with. Already in his mind he was putting together the
appropriate amount of forces. Given the skill and intellect he was dealing with in Classemque and
his also brilliant proxies, it was almost certainly going to be costly. Manageable, but costly.
Necessary to preserve stability and secrecy. “[It will be done within the week.]”
“[Our strategy must change,]” the Lord continued after a pause. “[This Sphere has proved to be unusually troublesome. This will continue happening if not dealt with, and the Entity introduces an uncontrolled variable. Doing the minimum is not acceptable. Prepare it for quarantine within the timeframe of one of the cycles.]”

A grimace formed on the face of the General. That would be a difficult task. There were also other concerns. “[That could be provocative. And the timeframe will cause issues due to the asymmetrical nature of the cycles. It will not remain subtle or unnoticeable.]”

“[I am not concerned about the threat posed,]” was the flat answer. “[It would not be ideal, but one Sovereign at a time can be defeated. I understand this will be a difficult challenge, but I suspect that you desire such other than being confined to the Throne World as a glorified diplomat. You have my permission to use whatever means are necessary for the quarantine.]”

A short nod. Unrestricted resources and manpower would certainly be easier. And his Lord was not wrong. It had been too long since he had undertaken such a…great challenge as this. It had been too long since he had led the conquest and quarantine of a sphere. The Sovereign Ones and the Entity that would likely follow would simply be additional challenges.

“[Our numbers must grow,]” he suggested. “[Species and individuals marked as having potential for the Riders have been identified. Delays have arisen from pushback on-]”

“[Find and recruit them,]” the Lord interrupted lowering his arm back to his side. “[I will handle any fallout on the Throne World. They will not hold back progress for the sake of their already-tainted lines.]”

The General moved to leave, and then paused; a final question appearing in his mind. One which needed express permission to be allowed to carry out. “[If an…opportunity presents itself on Earth…should it be taken?]”

Another pause, this one lingering. “[I leave that to your judgement, General. You know her better than I do.]”

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3/19/2017

In the blackness of the ocean, a leviathan stirred. The life forms around him became still and entered into a telepathic shock as he ponderously considered the situation he now found itself in. A rare position for him. Rare, and mildly concerning – though for once it wasn’t because the threat was mortal. Normally, the actions and losses of proxies and doomed species would mean nothing to him. His Agents were safe, as were his installations.

But these were not normal times.

Now…he had an…ally.

A word which was amusing in the context of himself; an equivalent of a mouse being allied to a dog. A power disparity which usually made such alliances mere pledges of fealty. But this was not as simple. Despite knowing how outmatched they were, XCOM nonetheless continued to treat him as if he – or they – were equal.

It almost would be arrogant, if it wasn’t endearing in a way.

Especially since it had not necessarily been sought out in that way. An alliance was practical for
both of them, but the knowledge that XCOM had refused to even consider the possibility of asking
him to abandon Earth when the fool Ethereal Sana had come to talk was surprising. As if they were
committed beyond convenience.

Ironic. One who shunned proxies now had a species perhaps more genuinely loyal than any hand-
crafted slave race.

Which meant that attacks on his…ally…could not go unpunished. When the Traveler had died, he
had repaid the Leviathan with the blood of his thralls. Perhaps foolish, perhaps an arrogant
retaliation against something more powerful than him, but it was a rare moment of certainty where
he knew that what he had done was right.

Their alliance had not been selfless, but there had been mutual respect.

What changes when it is not a Sovereign who holds a similar relationship, but a lesser alien?

Nothing.

More than that, he had been outwitted; subverted by Mosrimor. A Sovereign who was utterly
irrelevant and whose plans would never come to fruition. A useful tool of the Imperator; a rare
reversal of Sovereign and Alien. Nonetheless, it was intolerable that he had been so…successful in
accomplishing the plan of the Traitor Human.

Mistakes.

Underestimation.

Falling into the same traps of arrogance that other Sovereigns fell into must be avoided at all costs.
The Imperator was an alien, but a clever alien. The Humans had clever members of their species.
Mosrimor in his own way was clever, although his cleverness was more useful as a tool to beings
like the Imperator.

To be on a losing side…even by proxy was…distasteful.

Escalation.

Perhaps it was time to use the more unpredictable capabilities of his people more openly. The
Imperator was ignorant of certain realities, and perhaps a reminder of who he was dealing with was
due. First there must be decisions made.

A telepathic command was sent to his Agents. We will meet.

His command was received and would be obeyed immediately.

***

The dreamscape they all appeared in was dimly lit and watery, as usual. T’Leth had no desire or
time for complexity. Such was unnecessary now. His Agents arrived, scattered across the worlds
from installations to residing in the shattered Praesidium. Many faces were grim, some were angry;
none were defeated.

All of them knew this was a setback.

All of them knew that something was coming.

T’Leth had no physical avatar this time. His presence was enough.
It was, unsurprisingly, Lavallic ir Nara who spoke first. Or made the first tangible response. Mocking claps rang out in the dreamscape, a sneer on the woman’s face as she looked up into the air, eyes sharp as daggers and pointedly starting at the envisioned form of the Sovereign One. “[Well done, well done. I had been under the impression you were powerful, yet in your first demonstration with another of your kind, you are beaten.]”

Crevan pursed his lips and some of the other Agents looked shocked at her words or her native language. “Nara…” he began slowly, trailing off.

There was a reason she was typically kept away from others. She was abrasive, cruel, intolerant, and arrogant. She was also brilliant, and represented something crucial to the future. Her virtues shone brighter than arguably any one else’s, but her flaws were in equal radiance. She would have been a powerful, if ineffective Sovereign.

*Your tongue is as sharp as expected from your kind. Perhaps that is why you make enemies so easily.*

“[We agreed to assist you because you could protect us,]” she hissed. “[That is thrown into question now.]”

*Is it?*

The air rippled.

*You assume I was defeated?*

Normally he did not assault her mind with visions and memories, but it was past time the woman was stripped down from her pedestal, as if her fears and terrors were any more or less potent than those faced by this galaxy before; as if what she considered important mattered to this galaxy. Memories of cycles where worlds were destroyed, Sovereigns fought and defeated, genocides and battles where the death counts fell in the tens of millions.

All of which he had played a part in.

Lavallic collapsed to the watery floor and began convulsing. Crevan moved to help her, but was stopped by Fiona who extended an arm, blocking him from moving forward. Face of stone, Crevan watched grimly as the Sovereign addressed him. *You overestimate your importance to me, and perhaps it would be prudent to remind your woman that I have learned the most crucial pieces of information already. She is best not speaking of things she has no concept of outside her sheltered and privileged life.*

Crevan’s face remained stern. “Her frustration is not misplaced. The attack on the Praesidium was a setback.”

*Everything lost can be replaced. Concern rests in application of resources and personnel. The Imperator and Patricia are more clever and resourceful than anticipated.*

“Indeed,” the Chronicler nodded. “In retrospect what Patricia did was logical and effective. It is fair to say that Mosrimor will become more involved in this conflict. We must prepare to counter him.”

*Mosrimor will not show himself personally. He acts through his puppets and nanotechnology. Review for vulnerabilities and pass updates to XCOM and ADVENT.*

“We need more people,” Harper looked around, with a quick glance at the woman on the ground.
“If this war escalates, we will not have enough to be everywhere at once. Be it against one of these Harbingers or one of Mosrimor’s puppets. Much less against the other soldiers of the Collective.”

“Recruits?” The Chronicler asked, raising an eyebrow. “Do you have people in mind?”

“Not specifics,” Harper shook his head. “But I suspect that a number of XCOM soldiers would be willing. I would have suggested to approach Agent Gertrude again, if she was still alive. It might be more reasonable to consider proposing to the Commander to convert XCOM into a more formalized arm of you, T’Leth.”

“Out of the question,” the Chronicler shook his head. “A degree of separation is necessary, nor would the Commander agree to it, with good reason. No one has reached that level of desperation yet. Recruitment from XCOM though…is more palpable. T’Leth, are there any candidates?”

No.

Harper blinked. “None at all?”

None who I consider compatible. Their loyalties are solidified to the Commander and XCOM. Their roles to play are clear. There are others whose minds I’ve touched who I will draw to us. Our numbers will swell. Chronicler, the sleepers will rise. It is time for us to learn about the cycle we now inhabit.

“Who?” Fiona looked to Crevan, confused.

“T’Leth is older than our species,” the Chronicler said, crossing his arms. “There have been other agents of his long before us. Not all of them are dead. Some of them are responsible for keeping him up to date on the current cycles. Although this is later than usual.”

Yes. I suspect much has happened that I am not aware of. Reinforcements on Earth will also be useful.

“We’re all ignoring the most important part of this,” Fiona interjected, stepping forward with clear frustration on her face. “What are we going to do about it now?”

“Help XCOM rebuild,” the Chronicler said. “As a start. Support and supplement their operations until they can do so themselves.”

She scowled. “Not good enough. We need to strike back. I can do that.”

“Absolutely not,” Crevan shook his head adamantly. “That is the last thing needed right now. We need to act based on practicality, not emotion. You are in no position to risk us – and yourself – so brazenly.”

“I can do it,” she stated, glaring at Crevan. “It doesn’t matter if the Imperator’s puppet comes after me, I know I can beat her. I fought that creature of the Bringer to a standstill, and compared to that Patricia is nothing.”

“Patricia is not who you need to be concerned about!” Crevan shot back, exasperated.

“The Ethereals aren’t going to risk themselves now that they have puppets,” Fiona noted. “Well, except the Battlemaster. I’m not stupid enough to fight the Imperator by myself, but I can take his armies and avatars.”

She had reason for her confidence, but T’Leth was wary of utilizing her too extensively. Especially
against such an insignificant threat as an avatar. Patricia had only attacked when the most powerful were gone. It was a subtle, yet important hint that she still feared what could be brought against her.

But she was correct in one instance.

The Imperator had sent Patricia to send a message.

It was time one of his own be sent.

The Imperator had formally declared war on T'Leth by proxy. It was time he learned what that entailed.

*There will be retribution. It is owed to XCOM and to punish the Imperator for his arrogance in attacking my ally.*

Fiona nodded fiercely. “When do we strike?”

_Not you._ The air rippled and became charged as the voice rumbled deep into their minds. _I will do this myself._

***

_Sydney, New South Wales – Australia, Territory of the Ethereal Collective_

3/19/2017 – 11:41 A.M.

For once, Runi’ilias’vitiary though to himself as he stood at his post, today was a very good day. Ever since the events in the China offensive, they had all been privately wondering what was going to happen next. The death of an Elder, even one disavowed by the Battlemaster himself, was a blow, and Humanity had proven themselves unexpectedly strong and skilled.

_Events_ was probably too light of a word for what had happened. Not descriptive enough. Supposedly it had been livestreamed over the Human Internet, and while some of the soldiers grumbled about how they didn’t have unrestricted access, Ilias was privately grateful that the Zararch were looking out for them, because if the rumors of what was shown were even partially true…well, no one needed to see that.

And of course, mere days after doubts had started to crop up, the Elders had shown that they were in control, as they always were. The scourge of XCOM had been attacked by the Imperator’s Harbinger, which had come as a massive shock to all of them. Patricia Trask had been in the nightmares of most soldiers after stories of her power spread, and to hear such a woman was now on their side was a relief.

Unlike the dread and confusion they’d felt when they’d learned Elder Aegis and Caelior had joined the Humans, now they—now _he_, felt relief. It was taking longer than maybe expected, but this war was going to turn around. It was just something he could feel. Irrational, but there was a shift taking place, and all he could think of was _it’s about time._

It had been one of the few times since being stationed to this miserable wasteland that their commander allowed a relaxed celebration of sorts. Optimism instead of tedium ruled the night and morning, and it was all something they needed now. Australia was, in his humble opinion, one of the worst places you could have the misfortune of being stationed on.

It was hot, dirty, and _boring_. Ilias personally believed that they didn’t really need a military force
Here, or at least not Runianarch. Mutons could do the job just as well, and the Sectopods, Heralds, and Executors that had been brought in didn’t care about boredom. While yes, it was important to protect their production plants which had – at long last – replaced the once-sprawling city of Sydney, at this point ADVENT wasn’t going to be touching these for a long time.

At the same time, knowing their luck, they would all be sent to Korea.

He blinked slowly.

If given the choice between hot miserable boredom and a death sentence, he would stick to being alive. Besides, some days it wasn’t too bad.

He felt the impact of the wind on his armor, even if he couldn’t feel it himself. Well, this was a rare day when the sun wasn’t blazing, and he was going to enjoy it at least a little. Regulations said otherwise, but it likely didn’t matter at all right now. Helmets weren’t necessary when he wasn’t in a combat zone, and there weren’t any civilians around to keep up appearances.

“[The universe smiles upon us today.]” Runi’causta’borelia rumbled, walking up beside him. “[A sign of the coming victory]"

“[It is.]” he answered, savoring the cool wind. “[Soon this will be over.]”

“[Or it could just be a change in seasons.]” Runi’ailand’inth added, taking his place against the entrance as a Muton patrol continued on their way down the street. “[Not that I’m complaining if we’re finally going to get off this planet. I don’t see why any Human would willingly live here.]”

Their Borelian friend shrugged. “[Because they had no choice?]”

Ailand looked over to what the Humans had called the “Sydney Opera House”, the one piece of Human architecture in the city they had deliberately preserved since it was rather unique. “[They probably wouldn’t have built that if they weren’t here by choice. Even before we came, Humans had boats and aircraft. There is no reason to live here.]”

“[It is clearly the animals,]” Ilias said dryly. A joke they all understood.

The wildlife on this planet – or at least this region of the planet was among the most unpleasant he had ever had the misfortune of ever witnessing. Even in the city there were little rodent-like vermin everywhere, eight-legged insects the size of his hand that caused dangerous rashes (in addition to being just unsettling to look at), and in Sydney alone there had been over a hundred patrols which had at least one member get bit by some kind of venomous snake and had to be treated.

And none of them went into the water. After bodies had started floating back to the shores, and they’d learned what ‘box jellyfish’ and ‘sea snakes’ were. It was like everything that lived here was designed to bite, sting, or eat you. Which was to say nothing of the Muton patrols deeper into the continent which had been attacked by crocodiles.

Anything that could seriously injure a Muton was nothing any of them wanted to tangle with.

“[Do you think it will actually rain?]” Ailand mused, looking to the overcast skies. Ilias also looked up. The clouds were not especially dark, which was what would generally indicate rainfall was coming, but just slightly gray. The only difference was that they were thick and stretched as far as he could see, only appearing to slightly break far over the ocean.

So not rain, just overcast. Which was fine, as he didn’t really want to stand out in the rain for hours even if it was an objective improvement from the heat. Causta pulled out her tablet and began
checking something while he remembered the wind. Lips turned sterner as he thought. No, not rain, but there was more wind than normal. What were those weather events called?

Ah, tornados. That was a proper translation. Definitely not as dangerous compared to the equivalent events on Vitakar, but being caught at ground zero in one was not ideal. “[Do they have tornados in Australia?]” He asked, not really to either of them in particular. “[It’s very windy]”

 “[Even if they did,]” Ailand gave a shrug. “[We wouldn’t be in any danger. If it gets to that point, we’ll just be moved into shelters.]”

 “[Wait.]” Causta motioned them over. “[Something isn’t right. Come here.]”

Both of them walked over to look down at the tablet. Ilias just saw white which he assumed represented the clouds. “[Why do you have it focused on the city?]” He asked. “[It’s obviously cloudy here.]”

 “[That isn’t the city,]” Causta said slowly. “[This is the continent.]”

Both of them blinked. “[The entire continent?]”

 “[The entire continent,]” Causta repeated, zooming out and sure enough, the ocean surrounded the massive cloud which blanketed the continent. “[The radar can’t see anything on the ground. I’ve never seen anything like this, even on Vitakar.]”

 “[Has Earth had weather events like this before?]” Ailand asked, voice now allowing some worry.

 “[Going to send a message to the Zararch so they can perform a Google search,]” Causta said, typing the message itself. “[It’s odd. Stuff like this can’t just spring spontaneously. Especially this large.]”

 “[Or it can, and it’s just another charming feature of Earth.]” Ailand pointed out.

 “[Go back on the timeline,]” Ilias suggested. “[When did it start?]”

 “[One moment,]” before them all Causta began rewinding the radar to early evening the previous night. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary and then clouds had begun appearing. What was especially unnerving was that they didn’t just appear and later dissipate sporadically, but all seemed to arise and then join over the span of the entire night until the entire continent was covered in clouds.

 It seemed…artificial.

Oddly enough, his first thought was wondering if Humanity had the capability to manipulate the weather. Something that even Vitakar didn’t have. Sure, there were plenty of ways to model and predict natural events with near-perfect accuracy, but affecting it was a different story. Theoretically, it was possible, but no one had seen a reason to attempt such a project.

Besides, why wouldn’t the Humans have used that well before now?

 “[Accelerate it to Sydney-4,]” Ilias said slowly, knowing the Sargon could more easily determine what this was. “[Better safe than sorry.]”

 “[Doing it now,]” Causta said. “[I have a bad feeling about this.]”

Then everything froze.
Ilias wondered briefly if it was his imagination, but everything around them went silent. The Muton patrols stopped walking, looking around. He couldn’t hear anything running or humming; the wind had stopped blowing. A few moments later, he felt something. It wasn’t a sound or something that was easily described, but a slow dread began creeping over him; a call of a void he didn’t know how to respond to.

He stiffened as words appeared in his mind. Thoughts and symbols that he had never seen or heard before, but understood on a subconscious level. It was infused with something old. There was a weight to them that he felt he was only slightly grasping yet needed to know more of. Without necessarily thinking, he began walking aimlessly – or so it seemed to the outside observer.

Mutons growled, roared, and clutched their heads as it began affecting them too, but was resisted by their conditioning and cybernetics. They were ignored by the Vitakara and Andromedons who remained enthralled in the trance the city had somehow fallen into. Then out across the water, Ilias saw what he knew was the source.

At first, he wondered if it was a ship, a vehicle, or something mechanical. Then he saw it was something living; alive. The creature was covered in black-grey scales that were thicker than concrete walls, reminiscent of a deep-water creature. The tip of it rose out of the water, and continued rising and rising, until the face of the creature was revealed at the ‘end’ of the torso.

Six eyes glowed blue as it looked down upon the city, hovering in the air. Long-reaching tentacles fell from the body, six primary ones in total which seemed to be as long as the body itself, while smaller ones were dangling from the upper back of the creature. These twitched and lifted as the creature prepared to act.

The defenses wasted no time and began firing, as did the Executors, Heralds, and Sectopods which had been put on alert. The Mutons and some of the soldiers fought off the trance and their weapons joined the fight. Green streaks of plasma, orange trails of fire from missiles and projectiles shot towards the thing hovering over them.

Nothing came even close to hitting it.

Missiles and projectiles were turned back or shattered in midair. Plasma bolts were stopped by psionic barriers appearing and vanishing with the precision of a point defense system. One tentacle raised itself, and glowed with blue and purple fire as it swept down in a wide arc, a wave of psionic energy amplifying the strike which annihilated a vast swath of the city.

That was merely the opening act.

Come.

The command reverberated in the minds of those who lived, this accompanied by a sharp pain. The creature suddenly blasted across the city to hover over a different part. The tentacles spread out and curled, as every building and defense under it cracked and was pulled into a telekinetic grip which shattered buildings into rubble and lifted the Executors into the air with ease.

Go to the Deep; go where you belong.

On an intrinsic level, Ilias knew that he should be running away as fast as possible from the thing which was attacking them, but the words would not allow him. He needed to go to the Deep. He knew where that was. Tentacles of purple flame slammed down, shaking the ground with the force
of an earthquake, throwing them all to the ground.

Ilias quickly scrambled to his feet, looking around. He saw the water. *The Deep.*

He needed to get to it. All of them did.

Through the shaking and simulated earthquakes; through the purple fires which raged around them; through the collapse of the base they had so carefully and effectively built up, they rushed towards the blue, inviting ocean. Some of them tripped and were trampled in the stampede, but that did not stop the rest.

They jumped into the water. It was cold, and the armor weighed him down. Already he felt he would have trouble swimming if that was his goal. But he didn’t want to go to the surface.

He needed to go deeper.

It was a mad plunge to reach the deepest part of the ocean. Some succumbed and drowned early on, but the limited oxygen supply of his own helmet allowed him to go deeper. He saw several soldiers ahead of him; in his way; and he grabbed them and threw them back to give himself a boost as he went deeper.

His breath soon became short, but he knew he was almost there. The light of the sun shown into the vast expanse of the ocean that was now filled with bodies; many of which were now floating and bobbing lifelessly. His vision became blacker, and air was being inhaled frantically until there wasn’t anything left.

Still he tried to go deeper.

Then he blacked out.

Another body became still in Tasman Sea, and soon all of them sank into the dark and unforgiving void of the deep ocean as the Sovereign ravaged the land above.

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To be continued in Chapter 52

*A Strangled Paradise*

Chapter End Notes

For anyone reading, I have a short request (and I know this is a late update). Prior to Act IV properly being kicked off, I've put together a survey (two parts since there are limits for free versions) on overall opinions on the trilogy and what you'd like to see going forward, as well as some option demographic information. If you could fill it out, I would appreciate the feedback.

Survey - Part 1: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/TDXYKML

Survey - Part 2: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/TC8XD2D

Next chapter is also progressing well. Hopefully will be published sometime next
week.
She was aware she was awake before opening her eyes.

Confusion.

She finally opened them to see a ceiling that was only dimly lit by orange lights placed along the walls. It was a soft light, nothing harsh shining directly down into her eyes. The ceiling was smooth and white; plain. She shuffled in the bed, turning over, the need to move her body filling her. Eventually she pushed herself up.

Odd. Something felt odd and she didn’t know what it was.

Sitting, she ran a hand over the sheets. White and clean; cushioned but not overwhelmingly soft, one fairly large pillow. And a blanket large enough for the bed. A good one too, as she reached for it. She couldn’t explain why at that moment, but she liked having it. It wasn’t perfect, but it was good quality, thick and soft…

She let the blanket drop from her hand as a thought stuck her…why? *How do I know that?*

A few seconds of thought.

Disjointed flashes and pieces of information appeared in her memory. *Stores?* Right, she knew what *those* were, in fact she seemed to know what a lot of things were…but there was some kind of context she was missing. Specifically, what she was doing in this bed. Specifically, where she was.

*How did I get here?*

A few moments passed before a much more alarming query manifested.

*Who am I?*

That set her body on edge, and she stiffened in some kind of fear about forgetting. Names appeared in her head, names of people she knew…or presumably knew. Ruth Shira, Paige Broker, Patricia Trask, Mira Vauner, Moira Vahlen; all of which she felt something towards. But those weren’t *her,* but people she had some kind of connection to.

*Abigail.*

She latched onto that name. Something about that clicked. Almost there.

*Gertrude.*

*Abigail Gertrude.*

*I am Abigail Gertrude.*
A nod to herself. That…it fit. It felt right. It would have to work…for now, anyway. She needed some kind of place to start working out who she was and why she was here. For some reason, she felt amused at her predicament. She focused on the flashes of memory; all of which were unclear and fuzzy, but she remembered being…entertained by them.

What could that be? Movies? Books?

She sighed.

So, she liked movies and books. And potentially had read some where there was an amnesia plotline. A plotline she was now living, apparently. She wished she could remember how those had been resolved because she was really not enjoying it right now.

Better figure out where I am.

She looked down at herself. Or see what I’m wearing. She pinched the fabric of her T-shirt between two fingers. Grey and dry-fit, comfortable at least. Although she felt some annoyance when she realized she wasn’t wearing a bra underneath. At least the shirt was loose enough where it didn’t matter as much…although she personally wasn’t sure why it really mattered. Only that it did. For some reason.

She wore some shorts of the same color; not tight ones which she liked. What you wear for sports. At least her brain was remembering useless details like that. She frowned and reached down to her ankles to peel the socks off her feet, feeling oddly confused. Why would you wear socks before going to bed?

Assuming she had been going to bed?

There were a lot of assumptions as to how she was here right now.

Still, she didn’t need to be wearing socks now.

She finally stood up, taking stock of the room as her soles landed on the warm and carpeted floor. Lights were placed in each of the four corners, growing brighter in intensity the more she moved, it seemed, until the room was fully lit. The walls were white, though she noticed there were no electrical outlets. Was that normal?

At the opposite end of the bed against the wall was a dresser, and perpendicular to that was a table cleared of anything save some kind of device. It looked like a tablet, which felt normal enough. Besides the dresser was a mirror, so she made her way over to it. Opening the dresser, she was surprised to find out that it wasn’t a dresser at all.

It was an armory.

She stood still, confused emotions moving through her. On one hand, she was pretty sure that this wasn’t normal. On the other…it felt very familiar to her. She tentatively reached for one of the weapons; which looked like a plasma rifle, and froze.

Why did she know that? With some apprehension, she looked to the other weapons. Laser and plasma pistols, gauss rifles and SMGs, some of them having odd references in her mind like ‘ADVENT’ ‘XCOM’ and ‘Collective’ to differentiate them. She didn’t know for certain, but when she looked at a weapon and the words came to her mind…she felt they were right.

It raised a lot more questions than answers. Was she a soldier? Was she just good with weapons? Was she being pursued?
Now she felt much less safe than she had minutes before.

She picked up a gauss pistol, and automatically began moving it to her hip but stopped herself when she remembered there wasn’t a holster there. She had – or was – definitely familiar with weapons, regardless of what she’d used them for. She didn’t know if she liked that or not. Closing the armory, she turned to the mirror.

Blue eyes stared back at her, set within a pale-skinned and flawless face and framed by blonde hair that fell just past her shoulders. She licked her lips, not quite sure what to think about it. So, this is me? Something seemed…off about it. She lifted a couple fingers to her cheeks, looking more closely at the skin. No, she was pretty sure that was fine.

Not that. She leaned forward and cocked her head to look at the eyes. The shining blue eyes which were enrapturing, even for her, even when set in the face of a visibly confused woman. Shining. Bright. They were too bright. Electric? She looked as close as she could, and while she didn’t see anything indicating that…it was still too bright. Almost fake.

Or was she just misremembering?

Maybe it was the hair. She knew for certain that it was too long. If she was a soldier, it made sense to have shorter hair. Probably cut off around the shoulders or a little above it. That sounded right. She turned around, and spotted some kind of door beside the armory. She walked over to it and pulled on the handle.

She jolted back as it hissed aside and revealed a new room within. Abigail grabbed the pistol, flicking the safety off as she waited for it to finish. A white light finally shown down upon what seemed to be a suit of armor. This…this appeared to be the ‘dresser’ of all things, as there were neatly stacked bundles of clothes, undergarments, socks, shoes, and even nightwear.

Cautiously stepping forward, she entered into it, glancing at the armor, half-afraid she was going to wake it up and find out it was actually a robot. Although…she was getting the impression that this was hers and she wasn’t actually in danger. If she was, why would these mysterious people give her weapons, a nice bedroom, and a robot/suit of armor?

There was some big puzzle piece she was missing.

She decided to get dressed properly, still occasionally glancing at the armor warily as she tried thinking of answers. Perhaps the simplest one was the right one? Maybe she’d gone to bed and woken up with amnesia? No, that didn’t sound right. Maybe she’d tripped, hit her head…and just so happened to fall straight into her bed and get amnesia.

That was just stupid. It would be the dumbest way to get amnesia in the history of amnesia, maybe ever. Hopefully more things would come back to her – or she had a friend or three who would be able to help her understand what she was if it didn’t. She went back over the list of names that stood out to her.

There was a woman, Patricia Trask; oddly enough though when she thought of the name, she was hit with confusion and anger. Probably not someone she was on good terms with then? Ruth Shira, Mira Vauner…she had fond feelings for them, mixed with sadness. Maybe they were also on less-than-good terms with her?

Or, as she looked around at the weapons and armor, the more likely possibility was that they were dead.
Liam Jaster was another one of fondness, mixed with sadness, but she felt these stronger than the others, intermixed with something else intangible. He had to be dead, but she got the impression that she’d cared for him more than others. Was he her husband? Lover? Just a really close friend?

She really needed to find out what had happened otherwise this was going to eat away at her now. She thought of more names. Anius Creed, Shaojie Zhang, Raymond Shen, the Commander… Commander of what? And who? He definitely was someone she’d known. Him and Zhang. There was confidence and respect there – and not sadness.

Good, maybe they were still alive. From what little she could tell, they were her superiors? That was definitely what she needed right now. Someone to tell her what to do. Where to go. Literally anything about what was going on.

Holstering her pistol, she looked up at the armor. She was tempted to try putting it on, since she didn’t know what exactly was waiting for her. But the problem was she didn’t know how – and her really selective memory wasn’t giving her anything useful – and she didn’t want to get stuck in it. Or get caught in the middle of putting it on.

It wasn’t going anywhere, and she didn’t feel like she was in danger right now. The pistol stayed with her, though.

*Does this have a bathroom?* She didn’t really need to use it, but wanted to adjust her hair a bit. She exited the…armor room? Which closed behind her automatically, and as it turned out, there was another room beside the table. It opened similarly, and showcased a white bathroom complete with a spa, shower, and a weirdly varied collection of cosmetic and hair care items around a dedicated mirror.

Now she was just confused. Her brain wasn’t any help now.

She wasn’t aware of what even half of these makeup and brushes were, and got the distinct impression that she never had to begin with. Not that the spread wasn’t…useful, or anything like that. But it felt like someone had given her a gift which she really hadn’t wanted or needed. Nor did she think that a bathroom needed to be this…luxurious.

She really hoped she wasn’t some kind of brattish rich girl…who was a soldier too…

Shaking her head, she walked over to the mirror and began fixing her hair. There was definitely some kind of contradiction here. Just when she thought there was some kind of foundation, she found something which threw that into question. Abigail considered trimming her hair right then, but decided against it since she had an innate feeling that cutting her hair by herself was a bad idea.

When she was finished, she was about to leave when she saw double doors which led into presumably another room or closet. Opening them up revealed a small closet – full of dresses. There were probably about a dozen, all hanging in the pretty limited space, and all of them looked absurdly expensive. Pretty, but expensive.

Did she wear dresses that often or like them?

At best the only emotion she could scrounge up was indifference – and more confusion. At least they all looked to be in her size.

*So to recap – I’m a rich girl who likes makeup and dresses, and am a soldier for my day job who has superiors who I respect, while also having some friends, most of which are probably dead, and may or may not have had a husband at one point. And I am completely confused.*
She really hoped the Commander, whatever his real name was, could explain things to her.

Closing the closet, she turned to leave this time for real, and a sharp chime rang out, and the door presumably leading outside sounded. She froze, her hand falling to her pistol. “Yes?” She called out, her voice surprisingly strong.

“Abigail Gertrude?” Came a distinctly male voice from the outside.

“That’s…me,” she said slowly, becoming calmer. “Come in?”

It probably shouldn’t have been phrased as a question, but the door slid open to reveal something she did not expect. She was extremely close to pulling out her pistol and shooting, but indecision and confusion paralyzed her. The man who walked through was not a man at all, but…something else.

Alien. Dark grey skin covered his body, which was notably Human-like, with glowing blue eyes. That seemed to be the most ‘real’ parts of him, as the rest of his body was made out of cybernetics. Black and silver prosthetics existed in place of limbs, and armor covered his torso. Implants were around his head, and Abigail felt that even though he had no weapons, he could kill her without trouble.

Alien. The word invoked a flurry of emotions. Confusion, fury, hope, concern, joy, curiosity…all of which seemed to exist when compared to Human. Enough to make her not immediately jump to the conclusion that aliens were something bad. For his part, the alien just looked down at her. “You likely have questions,” he said blandly, slightly tilting his head towards her pistol. “You’re not in any danger.”

So…they knew something was wrong with her. “What happened to me?”

“Fectorian will explain,” the alien said, motioning to the door. “Follow me.”

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Zararch Command – Mars Collective Base

3/20/2017 – 8:19 A.M.

It did feel excellent to score a notable victory. Patricia, despite his reservations, appeared to finally be the shot in the arm needed to end this war once and for all. Ravarian had been impressed with her plan, and having it be executed as near-flawlessly as could be hoped was highly encouraging.

Of course, T’Leth had responded by wreaking havoc against Australia. That was going to be a…setback. It could all be rebuilt eventually, that was not in question. What was the most concerning thing about this was the fact that T’Leth was almost certainly going to keep doing this. So long as they completely controlled Australia, then T’Leth would be able to attack freely.

Should secrecy be disrupted…

Lips pursed, he considered options. While Australia – the bases and personnel – were ultimately not crucial, especially now, it was going to result in an extremely high cost in manpower, resources, and time, all of which could become in short supply in the uncertain future. Right now he could pass off the massive loss of life as a surprise ADVENT attack, but if there was another attack of this scale by T’Leth, it was going to become a lot harder to explain to the Aui’Vitakar – all of whom were already incensed given the incursion of Aegis and XCOM.
This needed to be handled carefully.

It appeared that a good portion of the materials had been scavenged by T’Leth, or potentially XCOM, but that ultimately would not help them. Not forever. ADVENT couldn’t afford to retake Australia now, a piece of good news in this particular mess; not when so many additional fronts had been opened up. However, things were finally progressing in a major way. REPLICA units were providing feedback throughout Earth, Humans from the SAS were being converted into sleeper agents and sent into ADVENT territory, and at the moment the ADVENT media was frenzied trying to cover Patricia’s revelations.

It was enough for him to feel justified in leaning back in his chair, and petting the cat on his lap. The little creature had definitely grown on him, and was purring loudly now. It was becoming more comfortable roaming the base, though it had learned to stay away from Mutons when one stepped on the end of its tail. Frankly, it had seemed like the Muton had been just as startled.

It yawned, showcasing its mouthful of teeth, and he scratched under the chin. And it then proceeded to start biting his hand, while wrapping its paws around his arm and kicking it with the lower legs. He had never figured out what prompted these mood swings, and research on the Human Internet appeared to confirm that this was just something cats did.

“You appear to be in an excellent mood,” Quisilia materialized in front of him. “Deserved, of course. Minus the attack by the resident sea monster of Earth.”

“Lashing out was expected,” Ravarian said, setting the cat down which sauntered off, still purring. “This is not a welcome development, though it is also likely he will not do that again. Secrecy remains a priority, and the only option is no witnesses. And if he goes to Australia again…” he pressed a button on the desk to activate the holoprojector. “We shall see how a Sovereign One can deal with Executor-Class Blaster Bombs.”

“Contingency plans are commendable, but please,” Quisilia waved a hand, while looking at his phone that he had in a different one. “I would be shocked if a Sovereign One was killed – or even phased - by something so…mundane. It would almost be disappointing.”

“Arrogance can lead to stupid deaths,” Ravarian pointed out. “Sovereign Ones are among the most arrogant beings one can imagine. Everyone thinks they’re invincible until they’re bleeding out on the ground.”

“Very true,” Quisilia flicked one of his blades up. “Next time I’ll have to deal with his Agents in a more permanent manner. Luck won’t be as useful next time. Truthfully, neither of us were prepared for our little duel. Actually…” He looked to Ravarian and the phone floated over to him. “Hold this will you, I need to record something.”

Sighing, Ravarian grabbed the phone and prepared to record. “Wide-angle, please,” Quisilia ordered in an exasperated tone. “I’m not going to be one of those people.”

Ravarian was very, very tempted to keep the phone in a portrait orientation, but complied. Quisilia pulled out his blade dramatically. “I see you’ve come back! Yes, you know who you are, and I think we have unfinished business. Next time you feel like fighting a real man, you come to me, unless you’d prefer to be a coward. It’s time for a rematch, and I can feel it coming, just name the time and place!”

Every time Ravarian felt like he had regained some semblance of life and hope, Quisilia did something like this and he died a little more on the inside. He numbly pressed stop, and the phone floated back to the Ethereal’s hand who rapidly began typing on it. “Please tell me that you did not 
do what I think you just did.”

“See for yourself,” Quisilia showed him the screen.

It was a twitter post which had the video he had just recorded uploaded to it, with accompanying text underneath.

**Quisilia @TheGreatQ - Mar 20, 2017**

This goes out to a very special someone. You know who you are. Name the time and place.

#callout #rematch #challenge #secret #sovereignshowdown #video #xcom #advent #wwe

“My spontaneous ideas often are the best,” Quisilia said, amused as he pulled the phone back and resumed scrolling down it. “It’ll get people talking.

“You called out a Sovereign One. On Twitter.”

Quisilia cocked his helmet towards him. “And? Did you want me to send him a letter?”

“I…” Ravarian considered answering, then just transitioned into a facepalm instead. “Never mind.” It was a good thing Quisilia had some other redeeming features beyond trolling Humans, otherwise he didn’t know what he would do. Times like these he just wished Quisilia would be normal.

“Onto some more serious topics,” Quisilia said, looking to the holoprojector. “You’ve given some strategic commands to hinder ADVENT. Useful, and likely overdue.”

*Overdue* was certainly the right word. “Identifying trade routes resulted in us being able to shut down or sabotage straits, ports, and other chokehold areas. Humans continue to rely on naval shipping for supplying many of their needs. Andromedon Aquatic Forces were deployed to seed their oceans with water mines. We have Sectoid Fighters standing by for strafing runs on poorly guarded fleets.”

“Taking the initiative is good,” Quisilia appraised. “It will make their lives difficult for a time. Zar’Chon, do you know why we didn’t take this action well before now?”

“No,” he shook his head. “I do not. Fear of provoking T’Leth?”

“Partially, at least to the Imperator,” Quisilia said, his weapon twirling in his hand. “But largely because you still have an issue grasping the actual threat Humanity can pose.” A pause. “Actually, what ADVENT can pose. If it were just Humanity, there would be little issue.”

“Enlighten me, Quisilia,” he said, looking to the hologlobe. “This is doing exactly what we need.”

“No,” he shook his head. “I do not. Fear of provoking T’Leth?”

“In the short term, yes,” Quisilia mused. “And it will hurt, especially now. The problem is that all of us need to think in the long term. Humanity has a rather annoying tendency to adapt and overcome when faced with adversity. They’ve done it the entire war. What you’ve essentially done is shown them a weakness.”

“And I’m sure they will adapt,” Ravarian agreed. “But they will be forced to devote time and resources to protecting ships and scanning for mines. An acceptable trade-off.”

“No, no,” the Ethereal shook his head. “You assume that ADVENT will bother *keeping* a supply fleet. Why would they devote resources to that when they have a far more efficient gateway system they can use to overhaul their entire logistical framework? Now, I’m sure they were working on this before, but now when their naval supply lines are disrupted…” he paused. “Well, I imagine
that project will become more prioritized.”

That…was an unfortunately accurate point. He pursed his lips. “I see.”

“It is very tempting to exploit holes and weaknesses in the Humans,” Quisilia said. “But in such cases, we now need to consider what they will do in response. Sometimes, it’s more beneficial to let the Humans use an outdated system safely than exploit it, and have them build a better system as a result. Keep this in mind.”

That he would. “Yes, Quisilia.”

“However, it is reaching the point where some loose ends need to be tied up,” Quisilia said a short time later. “With Patricia revealing herself, it’s only a matter of time before Nartha learns of it – assuming he hasn’t already.”

“We waited too long,” Ravarian said, shaking his head. “He’s not performed regular check-ins for nearly a week now. He likely knows – or has somehow figured out he’s compromised. XCOM could have gotten back in contact with him.”

“An unfortunate development, but an ultimately irrelevant one,” Quisilia mused, flipping a blade in his hand. “Nartha was useful in finding some additional holes in the Collective. His own use is limited now, and he knows it. If he shows his face anywhere on Vitakar – have him captured or killed.”

Ravarian frowned. “You’re not going to go after him yourself?”

“Knowing XCOM, as well as their aquatic ally, they could very well be hoping I do that,” Quisilia pointed out. “He is merely an Agent. A good one, but only one. I would gain more going after the Nulorian directly than him. I do not care enough about him to seek out revenge such as this. If he is found, I will deal with him. Until that point, I will continue pursuing more important vectors.”

“Very well,” Ravarian began, though wasn’t completely thrilled. “Though as you said – this is a loose end. One we should make an effort to tie up.”

“I suspect my days are going to be spent handling an increased XCOM and Sovereign presence,” Quisilia said. “Infiltrators in our territory. They need to be hunted down and killed. More important than a rogue Zararch Agent. However, there is nothing stopping you from sending someone after him. Perhaps that thing that calls itself Nemo?”

“Nemo is being utilized on Earth at this moment,” Ravarian shook his head. “More critical than Nartha.”

“A shame, it is an interesting creature,” Quisilia noted. “There is not another one?”

“Only one that we know of,” Ravarian recalled. “But it doesn’t work for us directly. And it will not be coerced. It is more useful where it is right now. I will assign several of my top Agents to removing him though. I am not comfortable with him running around unchecked.”

“That is your call,” Quisilia said. “And if you find him, do let me know.”

“Of course.”

A few moments passed, and a completely unrelated question popped into his mind. “Do you plan to undergo the Avatar Project at some point? It appears to have substantial benefits.”
“Originally, I was going to pass,” Quisilia answered absentmindedly. “But the results have indeed won me over. Of course, the candidates the Imperator suggested weren’t compatible with me. So I’ve been working on my own.”

_Oh no_. “And…how have you been doing that?”

“Please. How do you think?” He held up the phone. “I have a lot of fans. Who better suited to be my own Harbingers than the most devoted of my fans?” And again, Ravarian felt himself want to sink into his chair. “I’ve been running meme and video contests, as well as two-page essay submissions on the nature of Humanity and Alien relations,” Quisilia continued. “I’ve been pleased with the turnout so far. It will be difficult to narrow down the finalists. Ah, here is one of my favorite submissions.”

He tossed the phone to Ravarian who caught it and looked at the meme. It was in a format with three images with text to the left of each. The topmost image was of a Runianarch soldier, with the accompanying text: _He protec_

The middle image was of another soldier fighting. Ravarian could swear it was from the current war, but he didn’t know for sure. The text was a similar affront to grammar: _He attac_

Before the final image was a short sentence: _But most importantly_; with said image being a picture of a Vitakarian sitting in a chair with a cat on his lap, with the text as: _He pet cat_; which was then when Ravarian noticed something really familiar about the last image.

Blinking, he looked up in disbelief at Quisilia. “Wait. That’s _me_!”

“Good! You did see it.” The phone was telekinetically yanked back to the Ethereal’s hand. “It’s one of my favorites.”

“How did they get it!” He demanded.

“I uploaded a vault of various pictures,” Quisilia answered easily. “Difficult for people to meme about aliens or _with_ aliens without pictures to help them out. I just did a public service. And don’t worry, nothing was classified.”

Another facepalm. “I suspect the Humans think I am a joke.”

“Which is a good thing,” Quisilia commented. “Better that they underestimate you than overestimate you. I don’t include information on you merely because it’s amusing, it serves to exasperate ADVENT and make them underestimate the Zararch. After all…” his voice turned amused. “How could the Zararch _possibly_ systematically be infiltrating ADVENT if their leader is being continually undermined on social media?”

It was a good point, but that didn’t mean he had to like it. Shaking his head, he wanted to go back to something Quisilia had mentioned he’d found interesting. “Returning to the previous topic, you said Harbingers? Plural?”

“Indeed I did,” Quisilia answered approvingly. “Why have one when I can – according to Revelean – have more? Two or three I believe is sufficient. I have decided to use this unique opportunity to create what Humans call a ‘harem’, which, had we not taken Japan twice and killed their royal family, I believe would have helped sway a few of them to our side.”

The word was unfamiliar to him, but if Quisilia was using it…”Do I want to know what that word means? Does it have to do with honor, if the Japanese approve of it?”
“Certainly,” Quisilia nodded. “A harem refers to the old Japanese tradition of a man’s sacred duty to care for the loved ones in his life – primarily women – and protect them from danger and evil. It is very romantic, and I highly recommend you research it for yourself.”

Ravarian sighed. “When I have time.” At least that hadn’t been as bad as he’d expected, though knowing Quisilia, he was probably leaving some other important detail out. In the end, it didn’t matter too much as who Quisilia wanted to be his Harbinger (or Harbingers) was his business. He had more work to do, which didn’t involve social media.

He looked back to say as much to Quisilia, but the Ethereal was gone.

Typical. He didn’t know what else he’d expected.

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Living Quarters – The Prism

3/20/2017 – 8:17 P.M.

Yang almost felt guilty being here right now. But after days of fighting almost nonstop it was good to have a break. And it wasn’t as if she was the critical component to the operations taking place. She was a force multiplier to be used across the world. She preferred it that way. Easier to be a weapon. Simpler.

She wasn’t as thrilled with the authority she had as she thought she’d be. Officers would come up to her for opinions or commands, and almost all the time she’d defer to what they wanted. She didn’t feel qualified to completely overwrite entire campaigns, although she did occasionally make a few changes here and there.

Her kill count was…at a number high enough to where the Collective was immediately emboldened when she came, and ADVENT very terrified. It was high enough that she really didn’t care anymore. At a certain point, it was just a number. The enemies which posed mortal threats for soldiers were barely a consideration to what she could do.

It didn’t feel right.

It felt unnatural. She shouldn’t be able to face a dozen armed ADVENT soldiers and wonder if this was all they had. It was an adjustment; something which she felt it would take time to get used to. It wasn’t like the Prism. Then it was all…fake. This was real. Except when it didn’t. Truthfully, she’d been surprised she’d been recalled back, if only for a day or two.

And that was before Patricia’s little rampage through XCOM. She legitimately wondered how Patricia had been able to do that. XCOM hadn’t ever done anything to her. To go after them with such ferocity was unsettling to her. Even when Yang had planned the deaths of the Communist Party and President Qin, she didn’t intend to extend her fury to those who had nothing to do with their treatment of her and her family.

In that respect, Patricia scared her. It showed she had no empathy or care outside of what the Imperator demanded. Though perhaps this was less Patricia and more the influence of the Imperator. Regardless, she was now going to be used as his attack dog against his enemies – as well as a wielder of his own influence. Patricia was already making decisions in the war, and was being deferred to completely.

She saw it, the Battlemaster saw it, Quisilia saw it. This was the Imperator attempting to exert his influence over the war.
It was tiring. She knew he felt the same way.

But like a good soldier, he continued to do his job as well as he could. At least the Florida Operation was progressing well enough. Well enough that he could come back tonight. And so they were; Ethereal and Human, the latter sitting against a wall with the head of a mechanized tiger in her lap while the Ethereal sat on a chair befitting his massive stature.

She hadn’t even known he’d had a tiger until she’d seen it prowling around. The first time it had appeared, she’d shrieked and almost killed it. But it hadn’t done anything aggressive, and in fact had been rather...cuddly. It was certainly an interesting creature. She’d always liked tigers, and one that was partially made of metal should have made her nervous, but it was surprisingly nice.

Besides, it wasn’t as though it could hurt her now. Farath, the Battlemaster had called it. He was cute, and she liked having it around. It was a good comfort animal, surprising as that was to say.

The Battlemaster himself was, like her, not in his battle armor. Although the slight difference was that while she wore light and comfortable clothes, he appeared to have a slightly less armored suit which was for less dangerous situations. It was a rare time he didn’t wear a helmet either. Ethereals really were alien-looking. It was easy to forget that under their helmets.

“You’re troubled.” He had waited a while before speaking, just letting her pet the tiger while he’d eaten and sat. The way he had said it meant it wasn’t a question. Through their bond, it made sense that he’d pick up on that. As she had with him.

She rested her head back against the wall and closed her eyes. “I’ll get over it.”

“Not unless you address it,” he said. “I wanted to talk to you before you are sent back. Distraction will get you killed. It is only a matter of time before XCOM or the Pantheon is sent after you.”

She was tempted to hold her own; defend herself; but she wasn’t that self-deluded. “I don’t know. I feel…” she opened her eyes, scowling. “Unfulfilled.”

A nod from the Battlemaster. “What happened in China?”

“I’d dreamed about how I was going to kill them,” she said quietly. “Quick. Clean. Final. Over and done. Didn’t matter if they even knew who I was or not. I’d have done it. Now they’re gone,” she pinched the bridge of her nose. “Or not, if the Bringer is right. Which makes me more furious. Anything was better than...what actually happened.”

“I know,” the Battlemaster rumbled quietly. “And it was for nothing anyway.”

She slumped against the wall. “And now I have nothing, and never will have it. They’re all gone, and they’re not coming back. The only thing I can see coming close would be finding every single soldier of the Bringer, and executing them for what they did.”

“The Bringer will be punished for what he did,” the Battlemaster said. “Even the Imperator cannot overlook this.”

She let out a sharp bitter laugh. “No, he won’t. He’ll reprimand them for sure, but they will not feel consequences. He’s too much of a pragmatist for that. You saw how effective just a few hundred of those things were. He’s not seeing the millions of deaths, he’s seeing a way to conquer everything that opposes him. Why would he ever weaken the Bringer when he’s getting exactly what he wants?”

“Yang,” the Battlemaster said after a few seconds of silence. “If the Imperator does not take
sufficient action, I will.”

He appeared to believe everything he said. The bond at least confirmed that. She gave a wan smile. If nothing else, she liked his conviction even if it worried her privately. “Just…don’t do anything that’ll make the Imperator retaliate.” She sighed. “At this point I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“I suspect you would manage,” he said. “I would be more concerned for something untimely to happen against you than me.”

“Touching,” she answered, as Farath nuzzled her face. “It was…different at the start. All I had was a promise of revenge. I didn’t care about anything else. The Imperator saw me as a weapon, and I was fine with that.” She trailed off. “Now…I don’t really have anything left. Nothing driving, anyway. Patricia is driven by her vision, Nico’s revenge extends to all of ADVENT, me…I don’t care as much anymore.”

“Why?”

“Because nothing we do matters in the end,” she sighed. “We win, the Imperator continues with his mad plan and we die. Best case scenario he ticks off a Sovereign smarter than him and is destroyed that way instead of something going wrong with the Bringer. He isn’t going to listen to anyone who doesn’t subscribe to his singular big vision. It doesn’t matter what we do here, when anything can be twisted and changed to suit whatever the Imperator wants.” She reached out and a soda can flew into it, which she drank furiously.

“You’re one of the very few who has some semblance of sense in this entire mad Collective,” she continued. “You’re more interested in preparing for a real threat instead of playing chess with the Sovereign Ones. You—she pointed at him. “Don’t want to be an Emperor. But the Imperator does. If the one person who I respect and like here is gone…where exactly do I go? I don’t fit in the Imperator’s Collective, and never will.”

The soda can was crushed in her hand and she let it fall to the ground, realizing she needed to sleep instead of rant to the Battlemaster. “Do you feel better now?”


“I have little issue with it,” he said neutrally. “Though it is amusing to hear you so critical of the Imperator and his plans. Especially when you are so young.”

“Being old doesn’t make you smart,” she shrugged. “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting things to change.”

“Unless one believes they are the ones to change it,” the Battlemaster mused. “But I believe you are correct. The cycles here cannot be broken by following their path. It must be broken some other way.” He stood. “You should sleep, Yang. You will be coming with me to Florida when I depart. I will require you, and a Battlemaster should not fight without his Harbinger beside him.”

That was actually good news for her, and it gave her a warm feeling to hear her described as such. A good night of sleep wouldn’t hurt either. Maybe she should stay here and let the tiger act as a pillow.

She was reasonably sure she wouldn’t be eaten in the middle of the night.

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3/20/2017 – 9:24 A.M.

The holoprojection showed the devastation T’Leth had wrecked upon Australia. Harbinger and Imperator stood opposite each other, appraising the development. “All of them were hit,” Patricia noted. “Completely destroyed. Zararch teams report nothing salvageable.”

“Unfortunate, but not completely unexpected,” the Imperator said. “The Zar’Chon has authorized replacements to be constructed immediately.”

“Nothing stopping him from doing the same thing again,” Patricia pointed out with a frown. “He doesn’t have to worry about secrecy there.”

“Yes, which is why if he tries this again, he will not be able to remain secret,” the Imperator nodded. “The trick with cloud cover works for satellite disruption, but should he try this again, he will find his rampage broadcast to the world. Though I suspect he was merely venting rage at being outwitted by a mere alien.” His voice became amused. “I believe that he will not do so again.”

“I agree,” Patricia said. “Though his Agents are likely to become more involved. And the Commander’s response will be coming. He will not take this defeat lightly.”

“I am certain of it,” the Imperator sat down on his throne. “The loss of so many soldiers will be a blow to the Vitakara, but they can be explained as casualties of war. The population needs to be calmed. You will be needed to assist in restoring faith in the Collective.”

A nod. “Have there been developments on the planet?”

“The Aui’Vitakar have formally demanded an investigation into Paradise Station,” the Imperator said, shutting off the holoprojector. “I have formally recognized this. Within two weeks they will be given a tour of Paradise Station and see how it is being put to good use.”

“But this will be after the Bringer has been reprimanded,” Patricia noted. “Waiting longer is not something I recommend.”

“No,” the Imperator said slowly; deliberately. “I intend to deal with the Bringer far sooner. He believes in his importance. That assumption must be quashed. I am perfectly willing to abandon the Bringer if he is unreliable. Two strikes is dangerous. One more and Paradise Station – as well as the Bringer – will be destroyed.”

That sounded fair. “Let us hope it doesn’t come to that,” Patricia said grimly. “Monstrous as they are; the Orders are useful.”

“If excessive,” the Imperator sat back. “I have put forth the idea of letting the Battlemaster cleanse the Dream Weavers completely. It would remove the most obnoxious and controversial section of Paradise and make him more amenable to continuing operation if he sees action being taken. Considering the Dream Weavers were responsible for Beijing, this would be a fitting punishment.”

“Yes,” Patricia agreed, though rested her chin on a hand. “However, they produce powerful telepaths and biopaths. Not to mention help maintain control over the other Orders. It might be more intelligent to cull the Dream Weavers and turn their focus to something more productive than idiotic sacrifices and cannibalism. Culturally, the Dream Weavers are important to Paradise. I’m unsure what effect removing them would have.”

“To be blunt, the only Orders that matter are the Baptists and Flesh Sculptors,” the Imperator
mused. “The remainder are either agents of the Saints whose loyalty and reliability is questionable, or the Dream Weavers who serve no additional purpose beyond cultish rituals. The Baptists are soldiers, and the Sculptors are necessary to create creatures and the body for the Crossing.”

“Bodies are disposable to the Bringer,” Patricia sighed. “There is very little that can ensure continued and reliable cooperation. Killing the Orders ultimately solves little aside from assuaging consciences like the Battlemaster’s. It does not solve the issue of dependability.”

“Not completely correct,” the Imperator mused. “There are two things the Bringer values. The Dead World, and the Saints. We have three we can execute, and the world itself can be destroyed. The threat of such loss would likely be enough to ensure continued cooperation – as well as a needed refocusing of the Orders.”

“This needs to be a threat we follow through on,” Patricia said. “Half-measures won’t work.”

“And it will be,” the Imperator said. “If it comes down to it, I suspect the Bringer needs to be free of the prison it is in, and it will accept anything in order to achieve this, even if becoming a weapon. It is a creature motivated by the fear of eternal imprisonment. Perhaps it had resigned itself to its fate but now it sees a chance. I am not yet ready to give up. Not when it has the potential to achieve what the other Sovereigns could not.”

And that was ultimately what it came down to. Why it was worth the cost the Bringer demanded.

It could break the unending cycles permanently.

Of course, it all depended on everything being done perfectly.

No room for errors. No room for risk.

A very fine tightrope.

“What of you, Patricia?” The Imperator asked. “Fighting your former comrades extracts a toll.”

She sighed. “I didn’t enjoy having to do it. Necessary, but I wish it hadn’t come to that.” She looked up, face set and firm. “But I would do it again. Before this is over, I believe I will have to many times.” She closed her eyes briefly. “It will get easier.”

“And why is that?”

“Because by the end, I won’t know who I am killing.”

“Many of those people you didn’t know,” the Imperator pointed out. “You would not have considered killing Shen if he hadn’t released his pet AI.”

“Maybe not, but you helped me there,” she tapped her head. “And I’m glad. Like I said…it will get easier, until I won’t need your resolve to do what needed to be done.”

“Good,” the Imperator looked down on her. “But you want to preserve Anius Creed. You were pleased he lived. You do not need to justify your feelings. I know how you feel about each other.”

“I suspect he does not feel the same about me anymore,” she said, shrugging. “I don’t think he’d listen to anything I have to say. I just…” she sighed, scowling. “I want to talk to him without anyone else influencing him. No Commander. No XCOM. No T’Leth. Just me and him. I might be able to talk some sense into him. It’s difficult to learn everything you believe is based on deception and lies.”
“And do you really believe his response would be any different?” The Imperator asked softly. “You and him will never be together, no matter how much you wish it were otherwise. It is healthier to move on. Love will find you again one day.”

Realistically, she knew he was right and that she should move on for good. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that it could work. Maybe. The Commander she could deal with much easier. Not that she would easily kill him, but she wasn’t attached in that way. “No offense,” she said slowly, rubbing her temple. “But that’s easier said than done. Correct me if I’m wrong, but you’ve not been in love?”

“Not like what you have experienced, no,” the Imperator answered. “Human love is…alien to us. We do not experience the same kind of intensity and passion you do. We are more tempered, though the love we allow is just as strong. Human love bears more similarities to obsession than what we define love as.”

Well, she couldn’t really argue with an alien on the definition of love. It was something different for everyone, and every species it seemed. “Perhaps you’re right that I need to move on.” She turned back to the holoprojection. “Besides, there is a lot of other work that needs to be done now.”

“Specifically, the issues within the Collective itself based on what you have told us,” the Imperator mused. “Andromedons in XCOM. The traitor Unions will need to be handled.”

“Do you want me to handle it?” She asked. “Assuming that the Unions actually agreed to continue supporting XCOM.”

“No, I will have you continue to manage Earth,” the Imperator said. “I will give the traitors to the Battlemaster. We have not agreed on many things, as of late, but we both cannot tolerate traitors. Giving him license to bring the Unions under control will be appealing to him. Provide him what you know, and he will handle it.”

“And it will take him off Earth for a time,” she noted. “He won’t like that.”

“He can leave his own Harbinger to observe, if he is so paranoid,” the Imperator dismissed. “This is a matter important enough to not make him believe this is some scheme to oust him from Earth. He wishes more of a say in the management of the Collective. This will provide it.” A pause. “And it serves a greater purpose.”

Patricia waited. The Imperator continued a few moments later. “This is an ideal opportunity to begin turning the Collective against me. I’m certain he has considered it. If his loyalties are in doubt, then there would be no better opportunity than to acquire several Unions for himself. To capitalize on the perceived weakness. How he handles them…it will tell me a great deal.”

She crossed her arms. “And if he does?”

“Then I will take action. The other Ethereals will not be able to defend treason,” he answered. “The Battlemaster is no spymaster or schemer. Should he plan to betray me now, I will know soon enough.”

Patricia bowed her head. “I will inform him of what I know. Let’s hope he’s still loyal.”

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3|26|2017

She must be in some kind of factory. The hallways were sealed off, but she could see through the
transparent barriers machines working to construct various weapons and technology. Machines and icons of war she had no name for, though some of them triggered words in her mind. *Sectopod. Seeker.* The majority though she had no word for.

But they looked dangerous.

Squads of a dozen augmented soldiers marched past her, none of them paying her any significant attention. All of them were just as radically modified as her escort, faces set in stern and serious expressions; emotionless as the machines they were surrounded by. What was curious was how they weren’t composed of just one species.

There were…at least a half dozen that she saw. Tall furred aliens that reminded her of Bigfoot and other large creatures from…well, movies she’d probably seen. There were the grey-skinned humanoids, hulking brutish looking aliens, unsettling-looking creatures with bulbous eyes, white-grey skin, and other Humans.

Some of their…names popped into her mind. Or at least she assumed. *Borelian. Vitakarian. Sectoid.* Not all of them, but a good amount. But everything about this struck her as off. She got the distinct impression that this wasn’t supposed to be happening, or at least definitely wasn’t normal. The name ‘Fectorian’ didn’t ring any bells either.

“What is this place?” She finally asked her escort.

“Fectorian’s workshop, lab, and production facility,” he answered immediately. “That he calls the Hall of Steel.”

She raised an eyebrow. “He likes dramatic names, doesn’t he?”

“Fectorian takes inspiration from many sources,” her escort explained as they passed another patrol. “There was an old Vitakara story about the first Borelian warlord who united the disparate tribes into one unified army. His source of his technological superiority was dubbed the Hall of Steel. Fectorian saw some similarities in the story and what he envisions his role to be.”

“And what’s that?”

“A key instrument in the uniting of this galaxy,” the Vitakarian cyborg motioned around. “And proof is all around us now. Species previously divided now faithfully unite, believers in Fectorian and the plan he will execute. It will be through our efforts, and that of Fectorian, that this galaxy is saved and ultimately protected.”

“So to clarify,” Abigail said slowly. “He plagiarized the name because he thought it was neat.”

A pause. “I do not think Fectorian makes decisions with those words in mind, but I would say a more accurate one is appropriated. As I said, he is not especially picky about the sources of his inspirations.”

“Right.” Abigail didn’t say anything for a few minutes as they entered some kind of tram. “So, who are you? Your name?”

“Morias,” he answered after a moment, as if expecting a follow up question. She felt there was something off about the name, but didn’t know why. It wasn’t exactly normal, but it was an alien. At least she could pronounce it.

“Nice to meet you,” she said, then frowned. “Have we met before? Sorry if we have. I’m…not remembering a lot of things.”
“No, we have never met, Abigail Gertrude,” he clarified. “I was aware of your condition here, but know little more. Fectorian will explain.”

The tram stopped and opened up to reveal something that was definitely a workshop of some kind. Or a surgery room? There were a lot of tables where tools, metals, and components were strewn out, and there were surgery tables which were actively performing modifications on some aliens. Black-armored humanoids stood around at various doorways and stations.

She knew she’d seen them before. They definitely seemed off, but she couldn’t remember why. They held plasma rifles of some kind, and two approached her as both of them walked forward. In front of a holographic display, she saw what she assumed was Fectorian…or at least she hoped she was right.

Ethereal.

The word appeared as she beheld the massive alien. Like most everything else here, he was heavily augmented where it looked like two of his four limbs had been replaced by prosthetics, and there was a series of additional manipulator extending from his back. This was to say nothing of the internal cybernetics he probably had.

“Abigail Gertrude, as requested,” Morias said without ceremony. “Are there additional orders?”

“No. Dismissed.” The voice had an electronic tinge, but it didn’t take away from the imposing voice as the alien turned to her; an intimidating sight as she stared into the electric orange eyes of the towering alien. “Abigail Gertrude. A pleasure to see you again.”

So they’d definitely met before. Something she’d assumed, but good to have it confirmed. Odd that she had absolutely no memory of who this was. “I’m afraid I don’t…remember a lot. But you know that, right?”

“Something I anticipated, yes,” he said, waving a hand, making her jump as a chair moved by itself across the floor before her. “Sit down. There is much that needs to be explained. This was a potential complication, but we will need to make do.” She complied, and waited for the Ethereal to continue.

“Are you with XCOM?” She asked. “Is the Commander here?”

He stared down at her. “No, and no. Before I explain, tell me exactly what you remember.”

She grimaced. “There…isn’t much to say. I don’t remember a lot. Not specifics. Not memories per-se. I know my name is Abigail Gertrude. I know a lot of names. I feel something for each of these names.” A pause. “Some who’ve died, I think. Others I just don’t know. I can recall certain words when I see things. When I saw you, I knew you were an Ethereal, though no one told me.”

“Interesting,” he commented. “Yet no memories?”

“It’s…” she paused. “Yes and no. I get some kind of flashes, only a few, but they exist. They aren’t clear, but I remember some things that happened in them even if visually they are confusing. I remember something or someone dying on a place of metal. I remember being restrained somewhere. I remember standing in front of what I think was a memorial. Minor things; pointless things,” she sighed. “Please, tell me what happened. I don’t even know who I am right now.”

“I see,” a chair pulled up behind Fectorian and he sat down. “I cannot claim to know you well. Your current predicament is a matter of coincidence and risk. I will recount what I can about you, but it is far from a complete picture. I was not your friend, and many who you would consider such
Abigail nodded, and waited. “You are Abigail Gertrude, once a Marine of the United States, later a soldier of XCOM, and finally an agent of XCOM Intelligence. You were considered one of the most reliable operatives, and developed a connection to an individual called the Chronicler who himself is an agent for a Sovereign One. You were trusted enough to wear armor of the Sovereign, and hence my interest in you was born from this fact.”

“I…” Abigail trailed off, absorbing this new information. “Were we at war? And with who?”

Fectorian released an exasperated breath. “The summation of the situation all factions are currently in is long and more complicated than you would assume. Yet you need a complete understanding before we go forward. Do not interrupt, as I wish to take as little time as possible to explain this.”

Abigail listened as Fectorian explained the state of her species, and the current war taking place. She tried keeping her composure, and for the most part succeeded, but it felt like continual gut punches as she learned of the invasion, the subsequent war, psionics, Patricia Trask, the Sovereign Ones, XCOM and ADVENT, and the Ethereal Collective.

She…was not as optimistic now that she knew she was in the hands of an Ethereal who was technically an enemy.

“So what am I doing here?” She demanded once he finished.

“We finally come to the relevant part,” he said. “You were captured and I requested to examine you to attempt to remove your armor. This was a ruse to propose an idea. You were going to die, and I offered an alternative. A way to preserve your memory and place it in a clone body to cheat death and assist me in contacting T’Leth. You agreed.”

“Really?” She asked. “How do I know you aren’t lying?”

“Because I made a promise, and I intend to keep it,” Fectorian pulled a fairly large holoprojector before them and the recording began playing, showing a restrained Abby in armor speaking with Fectorian. “I suspected you would want proof. Here it is.”

Abigail watched as her past self and Fectorian talked, from the moment she awoke to the moment she agreed to his proposal. A funny feeling grew in her. Something she couldn’t really describe. It felt like she was looking at someone else, and the reality of what she was facing was creeping up on her. It reached the end, and after it shut off she felt…numb.

“So.” She finally said. “I’m not Abigail. I’m a…” She looked down at her hands. “A clone?”

“All organic material is based on Abigail’s genome,” Fectorian explained. “Though I took the liberty of improving your body from what it was. I estimate approximately fifty percent of your body is cybernetically enhanced. Particularly the skeletal structure, your skin, and several other components I included which are improvements over your original body, which you will likely want to test out later.”

Abigail shook her head, not wanting to fixate on that when there was a more important detail. “The procedure didn’t work.”

“Unfortunate complications, but not completely,” Fectorian said after a moment. “However, it would be a mistake to say that it was a complete failure. Some things successfully transferred over. You know who you are, you know important people in your life, you already have flashes of memories. I admit, my colleague Revelean would have been useful on this project, but I do not
count him as reliable.”

Abigail pinched the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes. “Is there a chance I’ll…eventually be me? Or…her?”

“The first thing I would suggest is to not fixate on who you were before,” Fectorian said bluntly. “This is not healthy for your mental state. If you think in terms of what ‘Abby’ would do or not, then the chances of you doing something contrary to her increase. It is an interesting psychological conundrum. The more you try and be something, the more you likely will not be. I believe there was enough of Abigail that was successfully transferred. Act as you see fit; speak the same way. The Abigail Gertrude you saw is dead. You are Abigail Gertrude now.”

He paused. “Now, there is a fairly high possibility that memories will surface and you will begin remembering more and more. Your first few hours like this are encouraging in this regard. Perhaps all your fears will be for naught. This complicates meeting T’Leth, which means you need to figure yourself out before we proceed. T’Leth will sense any confusion and uncertainty, and see it as a trap, which I do not want. You are believed dead by everyone. Your return will raise significant questions.”

“I’d imagine,” she said. “I guess…I’ll do my best here.”

“Yes, and I will do my best to assist in this,” Fectorian said. “While the procedure was not flawless, it represents a significant step forward and I will continue to refine it. In the meantime, I have prepared for this contingency and have a procedure which will help track your progress in remembering who you are.”

“How?” She asked.

“A combination of a psychological interview and technology,” Fectorian answered, sounding more enthused. “I ask you a series of questions, and you answer. Previous research indicates that this can result in triggered memories and information. If nothing else, it will provide me with valuable data.”

“I guess I owe you that much,” she leaned back in her chair. “How…much research have you done on this?”

“Memory loss and recovery? A recent topic of interest for me,” Fectorian said, waving a hand. “As it applies to Humans, I read a number of published papers and academic material on the subject, all of which was sadly limited in use. As well as not useful for my needs. Your entertainment arguably has more content relating to this. Amnesia is a common plot device.”

She blinked. “You…watched movies?”

“And read books, and watched videos on the subject,” he said. “The Borne Trilogy was a fascinating tale, and was farseeing for its time. Conditioning in particular I was impressed by the inclusion. Fiction is an excellent source for inspiration. I do not limit myself to what has already been done – I look to what could be done. In this this respect, your species has been exceptionally fascinating.”

That…was definitely interesting. And not really something she expected. “Huh. I think I’ve seen that trilogy.”

“Most likely, for Humans it was fairly popular,” Fectorian stood. “Now, unless you have objections, I would like to begin. Follow me.”
Abby stood as well, and followed the Ethereal out of the workshop, her thoughts in flux as she continued processing what she had learned.

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**Volk’s Quarters – Mars Collective Base**

3/20/2017 – 9:18 A.M.

Sleeping in late today made him feel slightly lazy, but all of them needed the sleep. Volk laid in the very – almost unnaturally – soft bed with Elena curled up beside him and sleeping soundly. The first time in a nearly a week he’d seen it. She’d still woken up once in the night and he’d had to calm her down, but aside from that, it had been an uneventful night.

He was worried about her.

The illustrious Dread Lord and his insane decisions had messed Elena up badly. For perhaps the first time, Volk considered himself lucky that he didn’t have a perfect memory. He’d made the mistake of watching even some of Isomnum’s broadcast from Beijing and it had taken him a few nights for the visceral images to fade.

Elena…she didn’t have that luxury. And unlike him she’d watched a lot more. He’d found her in front of a chair just watching and immediately pulled her away and she’d just…let him do it without any sort of protest, which was already alarming. The only time she’d let him do something like that was back when she was half-delirious on drugs when he was dragging her out of that Russian base.

Which was…years ago. Shit. A lot had happened.

He knew her well enough to know that not only would she not forget what she saw, she’d dwell on it even if she knew she shouldn’t. Something like Beijing would drive her mad, and he didn’t know how to handle it and help her. All he could do was hold her close as she sobbed and screamed into him. She needed help, and he was not who she needed right now.

He felt bad for all of the therapists and psychologists that were no doubt overworked in the aftermath of that nightmare. Elena needed some kind of psychological help, and the aliens weren’t going to be any help here. They didn’t have anyone trained to handle Human psychological issues, and given Elena’s condition, that was only another subtlety and complication that still wouldn’t help.

Nico had offered to erase the memories, and Elena had responded by almost blowing the poor kid’s brains out. Messed up as she was right now, she had made it very clear that she didn’t want anything psionic touching her. Volk appreciated that the kid’s heart was in the right place, but he didn’t know anyone – himself included – who would willingly submit to having their memories removed.

It came down to trust. You didn’t know what else they might remove along with what you wanted – and you’d never know again.

He was terrified of leaving her alone now, afraid he was going to come back and find her on the bed with her brains blown out. It made him snappish to everyone else because at this moment he didn’t care about the war, Nemo, their plans, his own responsibilities, nothing but helping Elena. If he lost her because of his own decision to get tangled up in this stupid war…

He closed his eyes. *Don’t think about that. She’s getting better. She’s getting better.*
Asaru had politely informed him that he would be needed in the next few days, and he’d politely told her to go fuck herself. In retrospect he should be treating the Ethereals with some more respect…but he had come to realize that none of them really understood what it was like to have someone they cared about suffer. Really suffer; to the extent that you could lose them, especially knowing it could be traced back to you.

Even Nemo had been more respectful and kept his distance, though Volk figured it was more because he knew that he was just going to be distracted the whole time. Besides, it was clear that they didn’t exactly need him. Not when they had Nico and Sicarius to pull off assassinations at a whim. If only they’d pulled one on the Dread Lord before things in Beijing had gotten so bad.

Unfortunately, the only person he knew probably could have helped Elena was Sana’Ligna, and she had understandably left and went down to Earth. Nemo had said she hadn’t defected, but merely left. Either way she was gone, and he couldn’t blame her. Hell, he’d been sorely tempted to just leave everything and try and go back to how it had been.

Something which was impossible now. At least the Battlemaster had tried to pull the plug on Isomnum, but Volk knew very well that the great Imperator had let him pull from Paradise Station and continue on his mission of terror.

He’d pulled out a vodka and held a celebration with his men and women when they’d heard ADVENT had killed the Dread Lord, and he’d had to admit that Saudia’s little speech before the attack had been quite inspiring. Had it not been ADVENT leading the charge, he would have been one of the first down there, leading the charge against the mad Ethereal.

Instead, he’d had to content himself with following their slow and steady victory. The aliens in the base were…uncomfortable with the unexpected support of ADVENT, though none of them really complained. Volk believed that they hated the Dread Lord just as much as he did, and that was why no one had terminated him for ‘treasonous behavior’.

A point in the Collective’s favor, he guessed.

Still didn’t fix Elena, though she’d also given a small smile when she’d heard Isomnum was dead. Though her comment stuck with him. “Why did it take so long?”

Obviously she wasn’t referring to ADVENT. The Collective; the Imperator, could have prevented him coming to Earth at all. Or just executed him a long time ago. But no one did, and that begged the question why? There was, in his view, no possible reason for keeping someone like Isomnum alive. It benefited absolutely no one aside from having weapon of pure terror on your side.

Or having someone to take the fall.

No wonder the fabled Ethereal Empire fell if everyone made decisions like the Imperator.

Elena stirred, then in a smooth motion sat up in the bed and rubbed her eyes, blinking. Volk joined her, careful not to touch her yet until she indicated she was ok. She stared blankly ahead, eyes still haunted, and they would be haunted possibly forever. He could tell whatever she was thinking about wasn’t healthy.

“How are you?” He finally asked.

Her lips twitched, and she blinked once. “I am better.” She laid a warm hand over his own, surprising him. “Thank you.”

“Oh?” He asked lightly; she was definitely better from the previous days. Or more talkative.
“You…slept better?”

“A little,” she answered with a shrug. “More black, less dreams.”

He wondered how much of that was from pure exhaustion rather than her improving. Either way he was glad she had at least a night of moderate respite. “I’m glad. I don’t like seeing you like this.”

“I don’t like being like this,” she said, face falling and closing her eyes. “But I can’t forget. I can’t erase it. It keeps coming back. I can’t fight it like I have been.” She took a short breath. “You are going to help me.”

“Whatever you need,” he said without hesitation. He was willing to try whatever Elena had in mind, since he didn’t have a plan beyond helping her whenever he saw an opportunity. “I’m here for you.”

“You told me to not focus on what I saw,” she said after a moment. “To think of something enjoyably. Something happy. Something good. You talked for a long time to try and keep me from thinking. It helped me. Last night I thought about you before I slept.” A pause, and a smile appeared. “It helped.”

Volk very clearly remembered what she was talking about, and he remembered a lot of pointless rambling to try and get her mind on something else…and it seemed he’d done something right. And he had an idea of what she wanted to try. “Are you hungry?”

Her mouth parted slightly, then she nodded. “Let me get you something,” he said, rolling out of bed and throwing on a shirt. “And I’ll tell you another story.” She got up as well, and made a bee-line to get dressed herself, a renewed energy for both of them. It wasn’t really a cure, but having some more positive memories would help even out the bad.

Anything she needed, he was going to provide as best as possible. No exceptions.

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Borelian Wastes – Vitakar

3/19/2017 – 10:17 P.M.

“I guess you’re not going to be going back to the Zararch now,” Shun commented as they sat together and watched the snow blow around the wastes. “Can’t say I’m not happy.”

Nartha sipped his stimulant, grimacing. “I did not want to make a decision like this. But you’re right. Patricia knew…” he trailed off, still in some slight disbelief over what had happened. “Have you heard anything from XCOM?”

“No details, but they’re recovering,” Shun shrugged, mood soured again. “I don’t understand it. Of all the people to turn, why did it have to be her?”

“Wrong place at the wrong time,” Nartha suggested lamely, though even he knew how unlikely that was. “Or the Imperator knew what to say to her. She would never have come to this conclusion on her own. She had to be shown the way.”

“And like an idiot, she just had to listen,” Shun shook her head, shifting back into her chair. “I guess she probably didn’t have a lot of choice.”

“She was a prisoner,” Nartha agreed. “Maybe she’s more of a victim that we think.”
“I’d like to think so, but I don’t know,” Shun admitted with a sigh. “From the sounds of things, she’s not really an unwitting victim in all of this. I think she really turned.”

“Then I don’t get that,” Nartha shook his head. “She knows everything wrong with the Collective. And those running it. I told her that. She’s seen it. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Maybe it’s just a thing that happens,” Shun wondered. “People turn traitor for idiotic reasons. We already have Betos and other Humans who’ve turned traitor.”

“They make more sense,” Nartha pointed out. “ADVENT was their catalyst. They consider the Collective the lesser of two evils. They’re wrong, but that’s how they see it. Patricia was one of the founders of the Advent Directive. She doesn’t have any personal problem with it, and I doubt the Imperator convinced her of the so-called evils of it.”

“Or we all just misjudged her?” Shun really didn’t like that implication, given how she drank her still-hot coffee immediately after saying it. “She was always trying to become more powerful. There were warning signs, I think. She enjoyed what she was capable of. There isn’t a person more powerful than the Imperator. If he offered her power, maybe she just took it.” She snorted. “‘Harbinger of the Imperator’. Did you ever hear of that kind of title?”

“Never,” Nartha confirmed. “Or anything about this Avatar Project. You have a point though. I’ve read the file Aegis made for the Imperator. Everyone thinks they’d be principled and refuse offered power, but in reality…” he shrugged. “Maybe it wasn’t even malicious. Patricia may think she can use the power for the greater good.”

Shun flinched as a piece of hail hit the window. “I hate that justification.”

“It’s not necessarily a wrong one,” Nartha said. “Morality doesn’t win wars. Nor does mercy and pacifism.”

“I’m not saying that, but it’s a cop-out justification for progressing something everyone knows is wrong,” Shun clarified. “It’s the ‘greater good’, but only in the context of the power of whoever’s saying it. It can lead to abuse, even if starts out well-intentioned. I don’t trust people’s intentions when they say that. China particularly liked it, when they gave an explanation at all. Something I perpetuated when working for them, but we all knew what was going on.” She rubbed her forehead. “And yeah, I know ADVENT and the Commander like using it too. Doesn’t mean I always agree with them.”

“Fair,” he nodded. “I’m not endorsing it, but I can see how she might view it. I think we can both agree that she’s wrong.”

A few minutes passed. “Do you think things will change for the Vitakara after XCOM showing up?” She asked. “I’d say it was a victory if Patricia hadn’t attacked.”

“It did what it needed to,” Nartha said. “No one is going to forget this, even if the Zararch are going to try and stamp it out. It will put some doubt in their minds, but this won’t amount to permanent change. It never will as long as the Zararch are in control.”

“Something easier said than done,” Shun muttered. “And with Patricia with them…that isn’t happening anytime soon. I hope it will have some kind of positive effect, even if it doesn’t lead to a complete revolt.”

“Hopefully,” Nartha agreed. “But we should keep expectations in check.” They sat and watched the snow continue to fall. Shun took another drink from her mug.
“Creed must be feeling awful,” she said after a few minutes. “Don’t know how you reconcile that your girlfriend is not only a traitor, but one of the biggest threats to our species as well.”

Nartha considered for a minute. “This is what Humans would call a ‘bad breakup’, yes?”

Shun chuckled. “A worse one than usual, but you can call it that. At least you never had to deal with that problem, right?” She cocked her head towards him. “Are you even allowed to have relationships in the Zararch?”

“Technically yes, but it’s very discouraged,” he answered. “If it happens, it’s usually between agents. Relationships between an agent and someone on Vitakar or a colony usually don’t work out. Distance and secrecy. No potential vulnerabilities or weaknesses.”

“And the Zararch has never had an instance of an agent falling in love with a target or someone inside an infiltrated place?” She asked dryly. “Or are you the one spy organization that doesn’t use seduction?”

Nartha snorted. He knew that the Zar’Chon would have probably shot someone with a stun gun if they asked that question to him. “If you have to rely on your sexual attractiveness to complete a mission, than something has gone very wrong. Your species has an interesting obsession with sexuality, and to date it’s an anomaly. Applying it to something like the Zararch just doesn’t make sense. Otherwise my first action when I infiltrated XCOM would be to seduce Dr. Vahlen.” He shivered. “The idea alone sounds harrowing.”

Shun sipped the coffee slowly. “Maybe you should choose someone who wouldn’t vivisect you if caught. The first Human psion would be a better option.”

“Are we really going to do this?” Nartha asked, shooting her a mildly bemused look. “That is an idiotic idea based solely on the fact that she can read my mind.”

Shun winced. “Right.”

“I really hated being around her,” Nartha recalled. “At least when I was undercover. I knew she could ruin everything if I wasn’t careful.”

“Are Vitakara even attracted to aliens?” Shun asked. “Your own races look distinct enough.”

“Depends on the Vitakara,” Nartha answered. “For the most part, no. Races tend to stick to themselves. There are a fair number of interracial matings, particularly between Dath’Haram and Vitakarians. Borelians are also in the grouping for some reason. Cobrarian males only ever mate with females of their race – and they have no shortage of options. Females will sometimes find other mates, but usually the physiology just…doesn’t work. At all.”

At her bemused look, he sighed. “The Zararch is – or was – keeping an eye on that. Last I checked there was growing political discontent in the Hierarchy since a large chunk of the males were leaving due to underrepresentation. The Hierarchy is female-dominated, you see.”

“Right, you’ve mentioned that before,” she nodded.

“And since the males have limited political power, they leave,” Nartha continued. “Which is a problem since that could actually lead to a population crisis if not addressed. Not to mention the swarms of females who chase off after the now-liberated males.”

“I’m not a Cobrarian,” Shun said slowly. “But it seems like there is a fairly obvious solution to that problem?”
“Obviously,” Nartha agreed. “Essentially everyone who isn’t in the Hierarchy is in agreement that the time of segregation is past, but when you know their history, it makes some sense why its set up with females in power. The limited number of males leads to a much easier acquisition of political power than a more balanced population, considering how vital they are for reproduction.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Is there a story there?”

Well, it seemed his stint in learning Cobrarian history was actually going to produce something good. “A bloodier one than most know. Prior to the hierarchy there were dozens of tribes, all of which had their own king. Cobrarian males are aggressive for Vitakara, and this translated to a notable amount of conflict and slaughter. Sometimes alliances, but an equal number of massacres. Obviously, the primary soldiers were unmated females, with the lucky ones being given to subordinate males or were the broodmasters of a king. Not excellent career odds.”

“Hmm,” Shun mused, as she drank again and waited for him to continue.

“Many of the broodmasters were tired of the war, and there had been sightings of others,” Nartha said. “Most likely Vitakarian scouts, but this was not confirmed. They were afraid whatever was out there would kill a weakened species. The kings weren’t concerned, or were leaving it until after the Cobrarian were conquered. The broodmasters secretly formed alliances, and in one night all struck the kings down, along with the elder male subordinates.”

“And that worked?” Shun asked incredulously.

“Most of them were clever about it,” Nartha shrugged. “Poison; wounds that could come from accidents. Not to mention it was easy to cover up. The conflict had gone on long enough that everyone was willing to overlook oddities for peace. And thus, the Cobrarian Hierarchy formed with the broodmasters forming the Council of Matriarchs. The restrictions on males were made to prevent another interracial war. Necessary at one time, perhaps, but it’s gone past that point. One reason why the Zararch wanted to collapse it.”

“I somehow doubt that was the only reason,” Shun commented.

“Of course not,” Nartha agreed. “The Hierarchy has never toed the line like most of the others. They’re more willing to stand their ground against Zararch propaganda. They’re marked as threats to this day. Natural allies for us, once we can establish something more formal.” He paused. “All that to say that the Cobrarian don’t really go for other species. Or Oyariah for that matter.”

“Sar’Manda?” She asked with a rhetorical smile.

“They’d probably be repelled by the idea,” Nartha snorted. “And to be fair, everyone would consider the feeling mutual.” He paused. “But if you’re asking if my species is attracted to Humans, I say to a degree. Not all races, and not all within those races. You have hair, which is going to be off-putting to some Vitakarians and Dath’Haram. Borelians would like it though.”

Shun didn’t appear to know how she felt about that, from her confused expression. “It helps that you’re physically similar to Vitakarians,” Nartha noted. “Minus the hair, your shortness, and your various skin colors. Darker-skinned Humans would generally be more attractive. Closer to grey, even if not the same.”

“Huh, interesting,” she looked down at her own tanned skin. “So, what about you?”

He internally grimaced, knowing she was going to ask that question. “I do find y-Human women attractive,” he said, only stumbling a little bit. “Probably from being around so many. Human eyes
“Are... expressive. Even if they are smaller than Vitakarian women.” He looked to her. “Your turn. You don’t get to avoid the question if you asked me first.”


“How shocking,” he said, not surprised at all. “Quisilia is right about one thing. Humans will likely fuck anything.”

“Generalizations,” Shun countered. “But... not completely wrong.”

They sat in silence for a few moments as the levity of the previous conversation faded. “I wonder what will happen next,” Shun said quietly. “The Commander isn’t going to let the attack go unanswered. He’s going to do something.”

Nartha remembered some of what the Commander had sanctioned, and he couldn’t help but share in the concern. “Hopefully he won’t go unreasonably far.”

“Shen is dead,” Shun said with a shrug. “He was the one person who maybe could have tempered him. He’s gone now, and his advisors are Vahlen, Zhang, the boyfriend of Patricia, Iosif...” she shook her head. “Everyone is furious, and I am too. But no one is going to be holding him back. Especially not the Nulorian.”

“Do you think he’ll try something on Vitakar?” Nartha inquired, surprised she’d suggested it. “After what they successfully did here?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” Shun said, looking out into the flurries of snow as the storm intensified. “We’re probably going to find out sooner than later.”

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SAS Command, Abuja – Nigeria

3/20/2017 – 1:42 P.M.

Constant bombardment, chaos and conflict. That more or less summed up the past two weeks Betos and the SAS had endured. ADVENT seemed to have dedicated every European unit to run harassment operations against the SAS. The first few days had been brutal with the usage of nukes for EMPs, followed by CIF3 and napalm raining from the sky over fields and bases.

Eventually the power was restored and air attacks – at least in cities – were able to be repelled by the superior ground-to-air defenses. ADVENT had eventually slowed their constant barrages from the seas after the missile strikes were continuously intercepted. They still hadn’t stopped, and the size of the fleet waiting was large enough that anything short of a small army wouldn’t work against it.

Not to mention there was definitely something off about the ADVENT naval fleet barraging the nations from the ocean. They were too advanced and numerous. ADVENT definitely wanted some kind of reprisal. One which Keeper was insisting they hold off on until they knew more.

China though had been a test for everyone. Although it was something she didn’t completely know the story to until Isomnum had been disavowed by the Battlemaster, although everything else... it was a nightmare, and she actually didn’t feel like the Collective had suffered a defeat when Isomnum had been killed. As far as all of them were concerned, it was better off that way.

Although it had shown some disturbing truths about the Collective and how much sway the
Ethereals held over everything. When she’d demanded how Isomnum had acquired so many soldiers from Paradise Station, the answer was that – as an Ethereal – he could allocate forces. Forces he continued to utilize after being disavowed.

She knew ADVENT was going to say that there was no chance the Collective was not secretly supporting Isomnum, but after thinking about it closely, she was skeptical. If anything, she wasn’t unconvinced that the Imperator and Ethereal leadership also knew that Isomnum was problematic, and what better way to get rid of a problem than have them die conveniently in battle?

Normally such callous disregard for subordinates would make her angry. But this was perhaps the only case where that would be justified. ADVENT had yet to explain why the Imperator would want Isomnum with him, or how what happened in Beijing benefited anyone in any way. It made more sense to consider Isomnum a rogue element instead of assuming that he was being secretly backed by the Imperator.

Not that it excused the Imperator from having someone like Isomnum to begin with, but she suspected there was some missing context. Context she would not have to worry about anymore. It had definitely been a good thing the Battlemaster had disavowed him so quickly, otherwise there would have been many more legitimate issues.

Now that Isomnum was dead, they could move forward. The fact that Patricia Trask of all people was now not only on their side, but the avatar of the Imperator himself, morale had spiked dramatically and Betos personally had been very interested to hear her little speech. The formation of ADVENT had always seemed too convenient, and hopefully that was going to be dragged out into the light.

But it was Patricia who was the most important.

If one of Humanity’s greatest heroes had abandoned her former comrades, then it meant that there was deeper rot in them than met the eye. It was...cathartic in a way, to be finally validated in her decision. And it was good for everyone else to see such a famous figure make the same statement in such a visceral way.

Keeper had confirmed that Patricia had hit XCOM’s primary headquarters and that the mission was a success. It was the first time she’d actually seen him genuinely smile. Hearing the news had definitely provided a morale boost to the entire SAS, and she suspected that things were going to significantly change going forward.

It was time for the SAS to grow – and for ADVENT to be pushed back.

“Seems ADVENT has taken a diplomatic hit,” Betos noted as she reviewed the holotable. “No further update on some of the negotiations. Unusual for them, considering how they were bragging about the progress.”

“They are reconsidering,” Keeper said, pulling up a report facing him. Not that she could read it anyway since all Zararch documents were in their own language. “They want answers from ADVENT before committing now. Some of them, anyway. The rest are entering a wait and see stance. We’ve seen renewed interest in the SAS now. Gabon, the Central African Republic, and the Republic of the Congo have signaled they want to talk.”

“Well, do it,” Betos waved a hand. “Strike while the iron is hot. If nothing else, keeping them away from ADVENT is just as important.”

“Yes, it is ideal,” Keeper shifted the holotable to display military icons of both ADVENT and
allied positions. “As it stands, ADVENT needs to be dealt with. Their fleet sitting in the ocean should be destroyed, and our forces are ready to be deployed against their armies. SAS psions are starting to come back from training. Green and untested, but they are better than nothing.”

“Can the Cleanser Ships take out the fleet?” Mox asked.

“They’d have to get uncomfortably close for the shots to be accurate,” Keeper answered. “Close enough that the fleet could respond back. This appears to be a heavily modified fleet. Several carriers and warships, all seemingly enhanced with ETC and gauss weaponry, not to mention sporting a new kind of ADVENT soldier.”

He brought up an image of one of the soldiers, a silver-white individual with sealed armor which included fins, jets, and tanks. “An aquatic soldier?” Betos frowned. “Why would they make that? The ocean hasn’t been a significant factor in the war so far.”

“Not yet,” Keeper corrected. “ADVENT is doing what they always do – thinking ahead. It doesn’t appear that this is standard yet, but they are anticipating the war moving to the waters at some point, and us blindly rushing to take them out will end badly. That said, it is time we test them to see the extent of their capabilities.”

“How?” Mox asked. “Our navy is non-existent, and the Collective doesn’t appear to have one either. For water, at least.”

“We have options,” Keeper stated. “The fleet is content to shell us from the water. It’s time we fire back. They are in range, we merely need to position our own equipment to fire back. Second, we can call for the deployment of the Andromedon Aquatic Forces. A sufficient number will give them a challenge. At best we will cripple or destroy their fleet. At worst we know how powerful they really are. Either way is advantageous for us.”

“That sounds acceptable,” Betos nodded. “I’ll have that started immediately.”

“What about the Vitakara who live under the water?” Mox pointed out. “Those do exist, right?”

“The Sar’Manda?” Keeper seemed bemused. “Unreliable. They are highly independent and far more trouble than they would be worth to use them here. Which is unfortunate, as even the Aquatic Force do not compare to them. With the situation on Vitakar not completely controlled at the moment, the risk is unacceptable. We will use the Aquatic Forces.”

All of them nodded. Things were moving along well.

Hopefully it would continue to stay that way.

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3|26|2017

“Let’s start with your name.”

Abigail sat still on the padded chair in the small enclosed room. She wasn’t physically uncomfortable – but she felt off and claustrophobic. She didn’t like the room at all. It was stark white, fairly cold, and the hum of machines ran in the background. Fectorian was beside her facing a holographic display which she couldn’t read, but there were definitely Human-esque models shown.

Two wires were attached directly to her hand, and one to her back, physical ports which she didn’t
even know she had, and it was an odd sensation to see the skin – which she now knew was made up of nanites – pull back and reveal something mechanical. According to Fectorian this would allow him to gather perfect physiological data on her. Breathing, heartrate, and other physical reactions.

*Polygraph.* That was the word that appeared in her mind. She remembered what it was…but not if she’d taken one before. This didn’t exactly seem to be the same thing, but there were enough similarities. Fectorian had said he was going to ask a series of questions, she would give immediate answers, and they would do this every day which would provide him with progress on how her memory was returning – or if it was not.

“Abigail Gertrude.” She at least knew that. Even if she wasn’t the ‘real’ Abigail, it wasn’t as though there was anything else she could even pretend to be.

“Where were you born?”

“Maine, United States.” That was all she could muster. She couldn’t remember what city, or even what hospital she’d been born in.

“Who were your parents?”

“Margaret and Paul.”

“Who were their parents.”

“I…” she paused. “Don’t remember…”

Something felt wrong with saying that. She…should know who they were, right? Were they even alive?

“Do you remember if they are living?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Do you have friends?”

She hesitated slightly before answering. “I think most of my friends are dead.”

“Name them.”

She really hoped she was wrong, but the feelings associated with them made her think otherwise. “Liam Jaster, Luke Warner, Mira Vauner, Ruth Shira, probably some others I haven’t remembered.” She shook her head, trying to focus.

“When you think of the names, what do you feel?”

“Sad,” she answered. “Like I lost something I’ll never get back. Anger, directed at those who took them. Sometimes regret for taking the time I had for granted.”

“What do you know of the Commander of XCOM?”

“I respected him and thought he was a good leader,” she sighed. “I can’t remember why I think this.”

“What do you feel about ADVENT?”
“Only really what you told me-“

“No. What do you feel about ADVENT. Not what you know.”

“Ah,” she paused, thinking. “Resolve. Hope. Guilt.” She grimaced as that realization caught up to her. A roiling feeling of discontent, sadness, and self-hatred. She wished she knew why she felt this way, but wondered if it was maybe best she didn’t know. Had ADVENT done something to her – or had she done something for them?

*No good intelligence agent becomes valued because of their morals.*

**Am I a good person?**

She both wanted to know the answer, and at the same time to wish the thought had never entered her mind. Fectorian continued asking questions, mostly relating to feelings and people she’d named and what her reaction to them was. It was long, but eventually she fell into something of a rhythm of answering questions which almost seemed to be flying at a fast pace.

But they had to be reaching the end.

“Do you believe you are Abigail Gertrude?”

The question made her pause. She was Abigail Gertrude, or at least that was what she called herself. But was she *Abigail Gertrude*? That was a more nebulous question she couldn’t really answer. Her body wasn’t that of Abby, even if the organic parts of her were drawn from her genome. What little personality she had was based on the memories and emotions of Abigail… but could she really call herself Abigail when her personality was incomplete? Did it follow that she was a different person who just so happened to be *based* on a dead woman?

Fectorian wanted her to be truthful. So she was. “I don’t know.”

“Thank you. You can take out the wires.”

Feeling suddenly free, Abigail reached over with her free hand and pulled out the wires, watching in fascination as the skin grew over in seconds. She reached back and pulled out the wire from her back, finding it an odd sensation to be pulling something like that out of her physically. *Do I have a charging station in me?*

Probably shouldn’t ask that question yet.

“Did you get what you needed?” She asked as Fectorian reviewed the data.

“Yes, it is a good start,” he answered neutrally. “Within the predicted parameters. One day of data cannot be extrapolated, obviously. So this will continue in largely the same format. Questions may change depending on the evolution of your answers.”

She stood, and flexed her fingers, idly noting that she had absolutely perfect control over each digit. Probably an enhancement Fectorian had made, since she doubted the original Abigail had this level of control. “What do I do in the meantime?” She looked to the Ethereal who had shut down the display. “Just wait and hope I start remembering things?”

“Revelean would likely believe that to be the most accurate method, so as not to trigger false memories and recollections,” Fectorian answered, half-focused. “But I am not one to merely wait for something to happen, nor do either of us have time. Instead we will be proactive. You are not an unknown to the Zararch, and I suspect they have a limited dossier on you. Aside from that, I expect
you to get caught up on the war in more detail. You might remember something that way.”

A plan she could get behind, and nodded until she realized Fectorian was leaving the room and scrambled to follow. “Alright, I can do that. I want to know about…me…as much as you do.”

“Good, and I have several other options that I believe will help the process,” Fectorian added, looking down at a holographic display on one augmented forearm. “Unfortunate that the people who know you well are largely unreachable. I suspect that neither the Commander, Zhang, or the Chronicler will be available. Nor do I think abducting your parents would be a wise idea.”

Abigail sighed. “Neither do I. Especially since I doubt they’d believe it was me.”

“Not at first, but perhaps they would be a trigger,” Fectorian mused. “However, that is a contingency I will hopefully not have to rely on. There are far simpler options to utilize first. The war will not end for months yet. Time is limited, but not short.” He looked down to her. “Your mental stability to this point is a good sign. You will need to do a large portion of work for this. I will do what I can, but you are not my only project.”

Despite herself, Abigail did wonder just what else he was working on. “Can I ask what?”

“Perhaps later,” he said idly. “You need to become acquainted with the capabilities of your own body first, nor do I typically let my projects become aware of other critical functions here. Yet you are not a typical project, so we shall see.” They were reaching another room. “Focus. There is one thing I will show you before you return to your room. Likely where you will be spending a large portion of your time.”

The door opened up to showcase what appeared to be a mixture of an engineering lab, library, and museum. There were physical bookshelves, holotables, and plaques and places where objects and artifacts were stored. Some weapons, some were statues. There were tablets and other electronic devices strewn on tables, along with physical tools and objects like papers and writing utensils.

“This is nice…” Abigail began, impressed with the room. This was probably where a good portion of information could be found, which later could be used for…something else. Probably was used by Fectorian’s people; engineers and scientists (assuming he had them) or general subordinates. The room appeared empty, but she soon realized that was wrong.

A human man stood before a holotable, a physique she immediately recognized as a soldier’s. If anything, he was taller than the average soldier, much less the average male. Short black hair covered his head, though he also sported a full beard now. Something which may have obscured his identity to most, but Abigail immediately recognized him and was hit with a wave of confusion and disbelief.

Impossible. It couldn’t be.

“Hello Abby,” Liam Jaster flashed a small smile and accompanying wave. “Long time no see.”

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Communications Hub – The Prism

3/24/2017 – 7:12 A.M.

The imposing hologram of the Imperator appeared before them. Both the Battlemaster and Yang were in armor, having planned to return to the front lines and continue the coordination of the forces in Florida and throughout the world. The Imperator’s summons had been somewhat
surprising, but not completely unexpected.

“What is it?” The Battlemaster asked neutrally.

“I want you to come to Paradise Station,” the Imperator answered. “The time has come to appropriately address what the Bringer has enabled.”

Good news, though the Battlemaster was skeptical. “And do you plan to do more than say threatening words?”

“Yes.” The answer was clear and immediate. “The Bringer appears to be under the illusion that he can act with impunity. That he is too valuable to be discarded.” A pause as the Imperator’s voice tinged with…satisfaction. “It is time he became aware of the reality that he is not as important as he thinks he is. There will be appropriate punishment. The Bringer has much to lose.”

“Such as?” The Battlemaster asked. “Putting the Orders to the sword would be a start.”

“Perhaps, if it comes to that,” the Imperator waved a hand. “I am not opposed to the elimination of large portions of certain Orders, but our culling must be appropriately directed. I have ordered the stasis chamber of the Embrace to be taken there. Deusian will be joining us as well. As will Mortis. The Bringer is a necessary component of the plan, but if it becomes a significant risk, I have no qualms eliminating it.”

The Battlemaster was quiet for a few moments. It was not far enough, not yet. But it was at least a step, assuming the Imperator intended on following through. Though he would not bring Deusian if he did not intend on doing something to show his resolve. And if any Saint was to die, the Embrace would be the most fitting.

He would drop her corpse next to that of Preximius.

He hoped the Sectoid might feel a flicker of fear before his head was crushed.

Likely not. The Sectoid was too insane to consider that a possibility. Fanatics didn’t fear death.

An idea came to him. One which he had learned from the Nemo creature. None of the Bringer’s minions feared death so much as they feared separation. That was, arguably, a worse fate for them. Perhaps a fitting one for the Order commanders who lived. Though the Sectoid abomination would die, that was decided.

“I will be the one to execute them,” the Battlemaster said. “Their lives are owed to me.”

“You are no Arbiter,” the Imperator said, lifting a hand, palm vertical to the ground. “No executions will happen without my command, though should they happen, you will be allowed to perform the deed.”

“Very well,” the Battlemaster said slowly. “We will travel to Paradise now.”

“I will be waiting.” The form of the Imperator winked out. The Battlemaster looked to Yang, and through their limited bond, he sensed her wariness.

“I don’t like how non-committal he was,” she said, crossing her arms. “Paradise requires more than a culling. It requires a purge. Every single member of those cursed Orders deserves to die, and the Saints along with them.”

“I do not disagree,” he agreed, turning around with his cape snapping behind him. “The Imperator
will use Deusian to destroy something symbolic. The Temperance will reassure him of his loyalty. The Imperator does not want to cull Paradise of its most potent weapons. He merely wants to send a message.” His voice turned hard. “A message is weak. *Punishment* is necessary. Let the Bringer feel the cost of acting against our interests.”

“Yeah, but the issue is you’re not in charge,” Yang grunted. “If the Imperator wants to keep them alive, they will be kept alive. Screw justice and logic.”

“That is what the Imperator believes,” the Battlemaster agreed. “However, I am tired of his inability to see Paradise and the Bringer for what they are. If he will not take action, I will.”

She raised an eyebrow, but he felt her approval – and growing excitement spiked with fear. “With him there? He may restrain you?”

He looked down at his Harbinger. “I do not need to move to do what I must. He cannot touch my mind. He will not strike against me.” He pulled out a holocommunicator. “I have little intention of making this simple for him.”

A few minutes later, and the image of Mortis appeared. “*Battlemaster. It has been too long.*”

A nod. “You have been following the situation on Earth?”

“Moderately,” he answered with a snort. “*In addition to learning what we have imposed upon the Vitakara. Not to mention the Mutons. We need to talk soon.*”

He wondered what Mortis meant specifically with that, though he had another question. “Has Sana attempted to contact you?”

“Yes, she is working as best she can. I would not advise going to Sanctuary at this point,” Mortis sounded amused. “I am not surprised she left. Nor that the Humans are not interested in peace. My sister means well, but in this instance I disagree with her. The Humans have no reason to trust any sort of peace. So long as they leave her alone, I have no quarrel with them.”

On the point of trust, the Battlemaster didn’t disagree. Though he didn’t know the details, he was unsurprised Sana’s likely pacifistic approach was rejected by the Humans. Though it also appeared Sana was not being solely confined to Earth, and was indeed still using her blacksite. It made sense, though he wondered if the Imperator would let it stand. “The Imperator has contacted you about Paradise.”

“So it seems. I expect to be disappointed,” Mortis’s voice was resigned bitterness. “*Too useful of a tool, and the Imperator will not willingly compromise his own goals. Perhaps I will be impressed, but I highly doubt it.*”

“I intend to ensure the Bringer is properly punished,” the Battlemaster said. “If the Imperator will not, I will. But I will need you to ensure there is no *interference.*”

“Ah,” Mortis’s voice became brighter. “*Then you have whatever I can provide.*”

“I will explain in detail when we meet,” the Battlemaster said. “Go to the Sanctum of the Sovereign.”

“*Understood, Battlemaster. I look forward to it.*”

The hologram blinked out. Yang chewed her lip. “No one goes to the Sanctum, at least that was what the Imperator had told me.”
“A fact which had confused me, until I learned his ultimate plan,” the Battlemaster nodded. “He is afraid of Mosrimor learning his intentions towards the Sovereign Ones. Nonetheless, we will need the Voice.”

She blinked. “You aren’t going to tell him are you? About what he’s planning?”

“Of course not,” the Battlemaster disputed flatly. “Mosrimor is no more trustworthy than the Bringer, but he is more useful – and has his own dislike of the Bringer. And it will force the Imperator to be more careful. It is time the Bringer’s puppets meet the Voice of the Sovereign personally.”

“The Imperator won’t like that,” Yang said rhetorically with a smile.

“No, he won’t,” the Battlemaster said, entering another frequency into the holocommunicator. A few moments later, the figure was projected in front of him.

“Battlemaster.” The sound of her voice was unnervingly deep, a Sovereign’s voice with the electronic tinge of a female. “You speak to the Voice. What is it you desire?”

“Your assistance,” the Battlemaster answered. “Prepare to depart the Sanctum. You will be coming with us to Paradise.”

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Level 1 – Paradise Station

3/24/2017 – 5:02 P.M.

Yang had not been sure what to expect when they’d flown to meet the enigmatic Voice of the Sovereign. Based on the limited information she had, she’d expected a slightly modified Ethereal with a dark robe, like the more cerebral Ethereals liked to wear. What did a puppet of a Sovereign wear, anyway?

The Voice of the Sovereign was nothing like that. There was no small and limp Ethereal, but a figure in smooth and faceless black carapace that stood as tall as the Battlemaster. As it turned out, it was similar to the Meat Puppets – if the Meat Puppets were even more armored and imposing. Black nanites floated around it in a faintly-obscuring black cloud, with an orb continually hovering just above the right shoulder of the Voice.

She did not speak more than necessary, and merely listened as the Battlemaster explained his intentions. She agreed just as quickly. Even Mortis seemed to regard the Ethereal warily, and kept his distance. As it turned out, the Voice could control the nanite cloud, and in enclosed space the nanites returned to her body like a magnet.

Now on Paradise Station, they were surrounding her once more. Yang did not blame her at all. The station was notably busy, as there were Caretakers and Order soldiers everywhere, moving crates, machines, and test subjects around. The Umbra escorted them once again, and Yang kept her sword close at hand. They were followed by a small team of armored Baptists.

Yang was slightly pleased to see the Umbra look at her in a mixture of anger and disgust – and realized that her wearing the armor she’d gotten from the Dead World from the Bringer, and subsequently rejecting him, made her a walking insult to everyone in Paradise.

That thought pleased her very, very much.
She smiled, and wished she wasn’t wearing the helmet so the Umbra could see it.

Oddly enough, it wasn’t her and the Battlemaster who elicited the largest reaction. It was the Voice. The Umbra and the Baptists had visibly reacted, though quickly controlled themselves. But suspicious and concerned looks were shot towards the augmented Ethereal; not quite fearful, but definitely worried.

The place looked like it was being sanitized willingly, which was definitely not good enough. Hiding the truth didn’t solve anything, and was simply propaganda. It wasn’t going to be acceptable for any of them. Hopefully the Imperator would grow a spine and actually do something.

Given what she was seeing already, her hopes were not high.

They walked further until they reached what seemed to be a small amphitheater; a room designed as a semi-circle showcasing a window to the void of space – only the station was oriented so it faced the Dead World, the false illusion that hid the vibrant and alien life on it. The room was densely populated with Baptists guarding the doors, along with one of the Trusted – a female Human whose helm bore a face of rage. Caretakers and various Order members stood and were awaiting what was to come.

Towards the base was where the figures of importance were. Silent Overseers stood by the stairs, and watched impassively. The Imperator stood beside Patricia, who wore her new armor with the mask hanging from her belt. A stasis chamber was placed against the wall, likely containing a Saint within.

The servants of the Bringer stood close to the duo. The Temperance stood silently, the Creator close beside him, with the Immortalis, Preximius, the Sentinel, and Stormwalker who were joined by the Umbra. Many of the Order commanders reacted visibly, both to the sight of the Battlemaster and Mortis, but mostly to the sight of the Voice. Immortalis’s face turned to stone, Preximius cocked his head, a distressed smile playing on his lips. The massive fist of the Stormwalker tightened as she saw the Battlemaster. The Sentinel turned and presumably said something to the Temperance.

Standing apart from both groups was Deusian, the Ethereal Reaper. She stood roughly as tall as Mortis, though didn’t come close to the Battlemaster, let alone Imperator. A purple robe covered her body, though Yang noted that she also wore a greyish undersuit. A hood covered her head, and the area around her occasionally cracked and split with purple mist and fire. The robe she was wearing had to have been made of special material, otherwise it would have been torn apart.

“Imperator,” the Battlemaster greeted cordially. “We are ready.”

“I see,” the Imperator said slowly, looking to the Voice. “I did not expect you to come, Voice.”

“The request was made by the Battlemaster,” she answered. “A wise decision. The Bringer must be brought to heel and punished for his arrogance.”

“Such intimidation is unnecessary,” the Temperance stated emotionlessly. “As I have explained previously, we did not intend to undermine you or the Collective in such a manner. We merely intended to provide support to an Ethereal who is waging a campaign against the Humans – and the Sovereign who lurks below.”

The Imperator turned to face the Temperance fully. “The situation your master finds himself in is tenuous. Do not insult my intelligence,” he took a step forward, lifting a hand with the air rippling
around it. The Umbra was suddenly lifted into the air, short gasps emanating from her as her windpipe was closed. “Your continual belief that I do not know your intentions is insulting. I know exactly what I need to complete the Crossing – and much of Paradise is not among that number.”

Immortalis had a hand on his sword and looked to be ready to charge, but a hand from the Sentinel deterred him. “Your point is made, Imperator,” the Temperance stated. “Direct your focus to those who gave such orders.”

The Umbra fell to the ground as the hand of the Imperator fell. “Then explain.”

“An opportunity presented itself,” the Temperance said, not perturbed by what just happened. “We were observing the events on Earth. The assault by Isomnum was proceeding well. The Battlemaster pulled support, and threw the plans into jeopardy. We have an interest in seeing Earth under your control, and considered this a mistake. As a result, forces were sent to assist Isomnum, upon his request.”

“You had no authority to do that,” the Battlemaster said harshly, stepping forward. “Do not play like this was something you did not expect. You knew what would happen.”

“We did not make the decision to deploy Isomnum on Earth,” the Temperance said slowly. “Otherwise we would have advised a different approach.”

“Supporting Isomnum is one thing,” the Battlemaster jabbed a finger towards the Temperance and Order commanders. “It is another to do what you did in Beijing. What you did across the country. Your idiotic and sadistic minions handed ADVENT a significant propaganda victory, awakened T’Leth fully, and sullied the image of everyone who does not support this abomination!”

He drew himself up to his full height. “Each and every one of you deserves to be executed for this alone.”

“Those who perished are in Paradise now,” Immortalis stated coldly. “Had the attack been carried out any other way, they would merely be dead. Their deaths would be pointless and mean nothing.”

“Their deaths already mean nothing,” Yang hissed. “Now they just feed the entity you’re enslaved to!”


“And unlike you, I was not seduced by illusions and lies,” Yang snarled back. “You are a weak-willed coward. A failure in your life, a broken man who can only find solace when dominated by something else.”

“Enough!” The Imperator lifted a fist in a swift motion. “I do not accept your innocence, Temperance. I am not blinded enough to believe you are a mere servant; a mouthpiece. Your intelligence is useful…and dangerous. I suspect your records include information on myself; dossiers and profiles.” He took a step forward. “I know very well what you consider me as, the words that Inspirars writes. But he is merely a deluded and fanatical fool. You are not a fool. You should have known better than to try and consider me one.”

The Imperator turned away briefly. “I have taken a significant risk in assisting the Bringer. A risk which has cost my reputation in the eyes of many others whose opinions I consider important. But
a necessary risk for the future. I have limits to my tolerance for your pointless scheming.” He
looked back. “You have already misled me once, and taken advantage of my trust. You attempted
to undermine me now. There will be no third chance given.”

He turned back to face the Temperance. “You do not understand, even now. It is time you realize
the truth. You are expendable.” At his last word the Sentinel was engulfed in a pillar of psionic fire
which was so bright it looked almost white. The Stormwalker and Immortalis stumbled back,
weapons drawn.

The Imperator had not moved at all, and merely looked at the burning pillar which persisted a few
seconds longer. A short yelp caught Yang’s attention, and she looked around to see that others
throughout the room were also caught in pillars of psionic fire. Not everyone, but at least half.
Silent Overseers had psionic shields in front of themselves, while Baptists had drawn their
weapons, focusing directly on the Imperator.

The weapons shattered in their hands seconds later, and they stared warily at the Imperator, and
moments later the psionic fire stopped, leaving absolutely nothing behind. Yang looked to
Deusian, who was watching, but did not seem to be the one who had killed the soldiers of the
Bringer. It…certainly spoke to the power the Imperator commanded.

“Is this clear?” The Imperator asked the Temperance.

“It is clear,” if the Temperance was even remotely affected by the display, he didn’t show it. The
others weren’t as composed. Preximius just stared at the spot the Sentinel had once stood, while
Immortalis glared murderously at the Imperator. Yang smiled at the sight. Good. Let them feel
helpless, that was exactly what they deserved.

A humbling, if not death.

“An incident like this will not happen again,” the Temperance said. “You have my assurance.”

“Words are air and lies,” the Imperator dismissed. “You do not care about consequences. Those I
just killed can be replaced. You believe you cannot be hurt or punished. Perhaps the Bringer
cannot be permanently hurt – but there is something to lose.” The Imperator turned to look out the
window. “I have brought Deusian to destroy the Dead World – what you call Naztrum Ognis.”

“No!” The Umbra stepped forward. “You would be destroying the only place where all can
experience the Gestalt! Trillions of minds and lives which cannot be touched as such again!”

“You gain nothing by destroying such a repository of knowledge and history,” Preximius added,
looking as nervous as a Sectoid could. “The planet means nothing to you.”

“It does not,” the Imperator answered neutrally. “But it means something to you. Something
irreplaceable. I care not how Inspirars will rework his prophecies and promises when the site of the
Bringer’s rule is space dust. Let him spin new lies to placate the slaved minds.”

“Consider that you would be depriving yourself of a resource,” the Temperance added. “The
weapons and armor which is worn by the Battlemasters could never be replicated again.” To
Yang’s complete amusement, he looked to the Battlemaster as if he would take the side of the
Bringer.

She could sense his own amusement when he answered. “The Battlemasters are more than armor
and weapons. We will find something else. Destroy the planet.”

The Imperator nodded to Deusian. “Do it.”
“Yes, Imperator,” she answered, voice low and raspy. Within moments she was surrounded in a purple field of corrosive energy, and directed her hands to the planet below. Nothing happened at first, and then Yang saw it. A ring of purple energy sped across the planet, ripping up the ground. A full minute passed before it finished.

The multiple rings of destructive power joined and ripped apart the layer under that. Ring by ring, layer by layer, the planet was shredded not into chunks, but into dust. The rings became faster and larger as the mass of the planet became smaller and smaller. There was no massive explosion, no dramatic cracking of the ground, but the reduction of a planet into dust.

As they reached the core, molten lava began spilling out and immediately hardening in the vacuum, now that the atmosphere had been fully destroyed. The obsidian and lava rock were similarly obliterated.

Where there had once been a planet, now there was nothing at all.

Deusian lowered her hands, and the flaming aura around her returned to normal. Yang looked back to see the servants of the Bringer in, or on the verge of tears. The Umbra was being held by Immortalis who looked utterly shocked at what had happened. Preximius’s eyes were watering as he stared at the place where the planet had once existed. The Creator visibly trembled as she beheld the aftermath.

Glorious. Yang wished they could see the wide smile on her face. It had been a long time since she’d felt this satisfied, and she was hoping it would be dragged out as long as possible. Maybe they couldn’t be physically hurt, but they could be shown just how powerless they really were. Part one was done, now it was time to move to the next punishments.

“It was the Dream Weavers who were responsible for the worst aspects of Beijing,” the Imperator continued, waving a hand and the stasis chamber hovered over to him. “I see little reason to enable this type of degeneracy. The Saint you call the Embrace must face execution.”

Somehow, that somehow elicited a stronger reaction. Even the Temperance moved with surprising concern, raising a hand. “Imperator, you cannot.”

“I believe you misunderstand,” the Imperator replied. “I can do whatever I wish. You have no power, Temperance. It is no fault but your own that you failed to realize this.”

“It is one thing to kill our soldiers and destroy Naztrum Ognis,” the Temperance insisted. “It is another to kill a Saint of the Bringer. It will have severe repercussions. It will hinder you.” The Imperator moved the stasis chamber and stepped before the Temperance.

“Explain, Saint. Tell me why she should be spared.”

“We are not merely servants and thralls,” the Temperance said. “We are vessels for the Bringer. Inseparable for him. We are him. I am his Temperance. She is his Embrace. Should she die, that part of the Bringer will die with her. The Embrace is his empathy and love for this galaxy and beyond. Should you take that away, you will achieve the exact opposite of what you wish.”

Yang snorted at the ludicrous idea. “If that is his love, then the galaxy is better off without it.”

“Indeed,” Mortis added. “I will add that the mental state of the Bringer is not a significant concern for me. Let him suffer.”

“He will not suffer, Dead Ethereal,” the Temperance stated. “He will change. If you believe Him to be brutal and horrific now, it will not compare to what He does next. You cannot kill a part of
himself to achieve what you want. Only all his vessels, all his Saints, can ensure that the Bringer retains what you wish to harness.”

“He lies,” the Battlemaster stated. “He continues to lie. He desperately is trying to save his puppet who is responsible for spawning the worst of his minions. They must be purged, starting with the vessel.” He looked to the Temperance. “Should you create a future Embrace, ensure that it isn’t mad and sadistic like this one.”

“You do not see,” the Temperance put a rare note of emphasis on the word. “Your suggestion is impossible. The Embrace cannot be remade if she is dead. Everything she was is gone forever. How can something new be created from that which does not exist? From that which is no longer understood?”

“Wait,” the Imperator lifted a hand. “At this moment, I do not sense deception. Not from him, not from any of the thralls in this room. Yet the Battlemaster makes an acceptable point. Your actions do not engender trust.”

“We do not ask for forgiveness or reward,” the Temperance said. “But I will insist now – spare the Embrace. You gain nothing by her death outside of temporary gratification. You stand to lose far more. Even if you do not believe me, is this a risk that can be taken?”

Here it came.


“I would prefer to not jeopardize what we have already gained,” the Imperator mused, looking to the Temperance. “You tread dangerously, Temperance. But here you may be right, and should you dare move against me again, you will not have an opportunity to exploit this mercy-“

“No!” Preximius suddenly cried out, falling to his knees.

All of the Bringer’s minions reacted in the same way. Yang saw every one of the few Dream Weavers in attendance fall to the limply ground. Immortalis and the Umbra rushed to the stasis chamber, weapons drawn. The Stormwalker roared, and was suddenly encased in a psionic box the Voice manifested. The Temperance stiffened. “What have you done?”

Immortalis ripped open the door to the stasis chamber, and inside there was only melted slurry which had once been the Saint. Yang looked back to see the faint rippling around Mortis fade. She smiled wider.

“I did what was demanded,” the Battlemaster said, before suddenly charging forward and slamming into Preximius, driving the sword straight through his heart, before throwing the dying Sectoid to the ground and stomping hard enough on the face to turn it to grey and yellow mush. Immortalis was pulled back before the Voice whose orb floated down beside him and he fell to the ground in a state of shock.

Yang drew her weapon, and held it before the head of the Human, waiting for the Battlemaster’s command. “Let him go!” The Umbra materialized before Yang, and grew stiff before also falling to the ground.

Fools. The connection to the Bringer made them weak. Vulnerable.

“Stand down.” Yang felt herself unable to move, and the Voice suddenly pulled back; the orb returning to her shoulder, with the two Order commanders pushed forward with a dismissive flick of the black-armored wrist. The Umbra and Immortalis slowly got to their feet away from the
towering Ethereal, faces still in shock. A few seconds later, Yang felt she could move again, and
looked to see the Battlemaster and Imperator facing each other.

Blood dripped from the sword of the Battlemaster onto the metal floor, with the smaller of the two
standing in a stance ready to defend himself. The power she could feel building even still. The
Imperator in his rippling gold and purple robes stared icily down upon his subordinate. He said
nothing, but even through the mask, anyone could tell that the Imperator was angry.

From the Battlemaster, she only felt satisfaction and concern. Though not, she was interested to
note, for himself. But for Mortis. And her.

Well, she wasn’t going to let the Battlemaster face the Imperator on his own, and rushed to join
him; the denizens of Paradise temporarily removed from her mind. Some surprise emanated from
him...but also gratitude.

The Imperator was hesitant to do anything, so the Battlemaster instead looked to the Temperance,
blade pointing towards the Saint. “The next time you dare act within the sphere of my authority-”
he trailed off as the Saint suddenly began grasping his own head. First with two arms, then another
pair emerged from his robes to Yang’s mixed horror and fascination, followed by two more pairs.
As the Saint fell to his knees, grasping his head with four gloved hands, the others flailing and
grasping at nothing, his face began to shift.

Throughout much of the event, the creature’s face resembled that of a Human; smooth and marble.
It reminded her of a Greek statue, complete with a well-maintained beard and serene eyes. Now,
the flesh began reforming itself, as if the marble was suddenly turned into a paste and thrown
inside a blender.

She had briefly noticed the Saint do this very same thing during various parts of the gathering. The
skin moving and morphing into other shapes, but it was always subtle, slow; clean, unobtrusive.
She would not use the word “delicate” for such a thing, but it was the closest concept she could
think of.

Invisible. Something one noticed, but wasn’t inclined to pay attention to. Only the end result
cought the eye. This was nothing like that.

This was much more violent. Uncontrolled. Grotesque.

Tearing her eyes away from the face of swirling mush, Yang glanced over to the remaining Order
commanders and their reactions told her more than she would have asked for. Throughout the
event she had enjoyed their shock, helplessness, and mourning. But she felt none of that now.

She saw only fear.

Immortalis looked mortified as he beheld the ever-composed Saint in such a state, furiously
shouting at Mortis. “What have you done to him?!” while the respective Ethereal backed away,
lifting a hand to prepare to defend himself. The Umbra was speechless, her eyes wide, mouth agape
in uncharacteristically open horror as she pressed against the Baptist General. The massive Muton
just stared at the Saint, her expression hidden behind the helmet, but Yang did notice a visible
shaking from her gauntleted hands that held her warhammer. The Creator was recoiling from the
sight, rendered silent as many of them were.

She watched as the flesh tried to knit itself into new shapes. She saw the six eyed face the Saint
showed when the Embrace had been killed appear and shift away into what now seemed like an
Ethereal’s face. She saw many more shapes that defied logical convention assault her eyes in;
shapes that could not belong to something alive, shapes that could not belong to something normal.

The sight set her teeth on edge and the feeling of wrongness crawled over her like thousands of tiny ants. Goosebumps sprung on her body the longer it lasted. Wrong, wrong, this isn't right. The last time she had met one of the so-called Saints, the thing had almost ended her life with a thought. The memory tightened her grip over her swords which had unconsciously been called to her hand.

As she watched the Temperance writhe and struggle on the ground, the previously hidden arms flailing and grasping, she realized just how alien the Bringer’s creations truly were when stripped of the facade and composure surrounding them. It was unnatural. It was wrong. She could not say she knew what life looked like in the rest of the galaxy or beyond, but she was sure that what she had seen and was witnessing now could only arise from the mind of something truly mad.

The flesh would not stop changing, and the Saint was now convulsing on the floor. She did not care it suffered, but she no longer felt a desire to make it last. She wanted it to end and someone to break the uncomfortable silence now blanketing the room like fog.

But it did not stop, the hair on the back of her neck stood up as the sound reached her ears; a sound she remembered well from the previous descent into the station.

A heartbeat.

It was low and slow at first, but began growing faster and louder each passing second the Saint writhed on the ground, until each thud of the heartbeat seemed to shake the ground itself. She asserted herself by the Battlemaster, but their weapons felt almost pointless against the intangible throbbing.

She swallowed. This was not supposed to be happening.

The Imperator had seemingly grown tired of the display and stepped forward, with Patricia pulling on her mask and taking an offensive stance, body enshrined in purple fire. “Enough of this, Saint. This show serves no one unless you intend for your own death to follow.”

The Saint did not respond, but he stopped convulsing seconds later; his face stopped transforming, remaining an unnervingly blank slate, and simply went limp. The rest of the Bringer’s minions followed suit, collapsing onto the ground with soft and loud thuds. Yang heard a few sharp cracks as heads and limbs hit jagged corners and unforgiving floors.

Silence reigned, excluding the ever-present heartbeat.

Half a minute passed, with Yang and the Battlemaster prepared for anything.

Then the Umbra rose.

There was none of the grace which usually accompanied her movements. She was still; similarly, she noticed, to the Temperance’s Overseers. The Dath’Haram then opened her eyes and they glowed a crystalline cobalt so potent she would have been forced to avert her gaze if not for her helmet.

The Creator, Immortalis and the Muton stood next, followed by the Order members still alive who had stood throughout the room. Their eyes were the same tone of blue and all then moved their heads to stare directly at the Imperator, mouths unmoving; posture unchanging.

Then the doors to the room suddenly burst open, with Order soldiers and Caretakers pouring in a slow and controlled steam. The Battlemaster, the Voice, Mortis, and herself immediately reacted.
She threw her own twin swords telekinetically to the nearest Caretakers, effortlessly impaling them while gesturing with a hand and crushing the skulls of several Caretakers into bloody sludge. Mortis assaulted the minds of many, killing them instantly while melting others into slurry. The Battlemaster and Voice immediately went after the Overseers, as they posed the biggest threats, and with surprising ease ran one through his sword while nanites flowed off the Sovereign vessel that ate dozens alive at once.

“Cease,” the Imperator interjected unexpectedly, pulling all the floating nanites to hover above the carnage, freezing her and the Battlemaster in mid-strike, and telekinetically pulling Mortis back. “They are not attacking.” A pause. “Let them give their message.”

As if on cue, the swarm all locked eyes with him. The azure fires focused directly at his face; Yang noted that they were corroding the skin around their eyes and likely rendering them blind - and in significant pain. The Ethereals and Harbingers were now completely surrounded, the masses of robes and armor packed perfectly through every inch and corner of the room, ignoring the piled bodies, sludge, and blood.

Then the Temperance awoke.

He stood in the center of the room, eyes blazing in the same cold blue, but with even more intensity, if such was even possible. His face was that of the Human, and he silently stared at the Imperator, like the rest of his thralls. He slowly lifted a hand, two fingers pointing directly at floating space where the Dead World had once existed.

Yang turned her head in the direction of the hand, and that was when she saw it.

Where the planet’s molten core had been before spilling into the void and turned into atoms afterwards, she saw a faint shimmer. A rumbling that did not seem natural, as if reality itself was protesting the transgression.

A tear opened, and she could only see pitch black tinged with violet emanating from it. The tear expanded, and slowly swallowed the dust which had been the entirety of the former Dead World.

The window in the fabric of reality was now enormous, and they could all clearly see it from their vantage point. It was a hole without end - or so it initially seemed, as inside the very bottom of the hole, she saw… something.

It was a sphere. Small and far away, and yet her eyes quickly tired the longer she tried staring at it. It was blue, like the eyes of the swarm surrounding them, but she could not make out many details from the blurry image. It reminded her of trying to stare into the sun, and she had to look away a few times, and each time her eyes fixated on it, it seemed closer.

The intensity of the brightness went down, as if reacting to her discomfort, and she could now make out more of the details. The sphere hung from a web of tendrils suspended inside the void. They resembled a disgusting combination of tree roots, arteries, and veins. She nearly looked away again as she saw one pulsate and transfer some kind of substance into the sphere, which rumbled and vibrated as if in thanks.

Immediately after the unknown transfer, the sphere began growing. It slowly enlarged itself so much as to become the only visible thing inside the tear. It floated to what looked to be the end of the portal, then stopped. Seeing how close it was to breaking out...it made her grip her swords tighter. Do something. She silently pleaded to the Imperator who was merely observing the entity. Please do something.
Deusian apparently had the same thought, as the Reaper glowed in power. The void which held the blue sphere was suddenly surrounded in purple tears and rips, psionic hurricanes bursting from nothing as the Psionosphere was torn apart. The sphere pulsed once, and all of the energy surrounding it was sucked into the void, into itself. For a brief moment, the sphere seemed brighter before returning to its previous luminance.

Deusian ceased her attack. Yang could not read her mind, but her body language said all that was needed. She was stunned.

The Imperator continued observing.

An eye opened on the sphere. Followed by two more.

They were black and beady, like a spider’s, but with inconceivable power surging behind them. She could never have guessed the eyes of an insect could look angry, but they blazed with pure fury Yang had rarely seen throughout her life. It was enough for her to consider taking a step back.

*Stand firm.*

She clung to the Battlemaster’s resolve like a lifeline through their bond.

*I am here.*

She fought every urge to flee as fast as possible as the ghastly organs looked at her directly. She felt a vast alien presence on the edges of her sealed mind; it was the mind of the Bringer she had felt once before, but with the false veil stripped away.

This was its true face.

The Sphere began to shift. Two colossal arms sprouted from the underside, and soon extended into finger-like tentacles which seemed to sprout deformities and thorns, as if it had not used them for long ages. Several of them reached towards the edge of the portal; the invisible veil between reality and the prison.

Yet it hesitated.

A small measure of relief overcame her as she realized it couldn’t come out.

The tendrils remained close though. A reminder of how the barrier was so very thin.

She saw fins emerging from the sides of the sphere, and a thousand other tendrils and indescribable appendages bursting through every single side, each wiggling and flailing violently, as if each wanted to skewer her body a thousand times before many bound together to form pulsing muscle that only seemed to barely contain the blue fury. Four membranous wings pushed their way outside the sphere`s back, each with sizes so enormous as to wrap around the main body completely around themselves.

The result, if she *had* to use words to describe such a sight, was one seemingly aquatic in its origins at one point, but she could not imagine where exactly such a monstrous *thing* could grow and evolve naturally. Like everything touched by the Bringer, it was an abomination of what life was.

Only the Bringer could produce things that were such affronts to the universe.

*This* was the Bringer. All his talk of love, peace, and understanding was a lie. A lie so many had been taken in by. A lie so many continued to believe, even as they were dominated and shaped by
this thing. So warped were they that they could no longer see the wrongness in a reality shaped by a mad god.

Her hand shook as she beheld the thing in the void.

Had she not maintained her resolve, she would be the servant of that thing.

*Run. Run away.*

How could something like that be fought?

A hand fell on her shoulder. Firm and strong. She stiffened herself, the Battlemaster would face this thing, and so would she.

It only became worse.

Faces began materializing in the thing´s writhing sapphire skin. They ranged from all types of emotions and origins. She could distinguish laughing Humans, crying Vitakara, screaming Mutons, and pained Andromedons amongst the sea of unrecognizable faces emerging and vanishing from the monster´s flesh.

She thought her eyes were playing tricks, but she could swear she saw Preximius as well, taunting her with his mocking smile before being lost in the wave of faces. There were thousands of different alien faces in the sphere she did not recognize, each likely from a species lost to the Bringer.

The faces extirpated themselves from the skin in sickening detail, and dematerialized as they began to float in orbit of their parent sphere, like planets following a star´s pull, turning to blue mist as more faces formed and repeated the process. They began their orbit and sped up as to become a blur surrounding the sphere, like bright rings around a planet.

A symbol materialized above the sphere´s eyes. Four circles arranged in such a way as to form an upside triangle, similar to the Imperator´s helm. They began to glow in intense ghostly fire, more and more indescribable colors appeared the longer she stared. Should she stare too long, she feared she would go mad.

The hand on her shoulder tightened, and she could feel concern emanating from their bond towards her. The sword in one hand dropped as she reached up to grip it, not caring how it looked. She needed *something* to keep her from breaking before this creature, and did not fail to notice he was tightly gripping the handle of his sword, while his free hands emanated telekinetic power.

The thing clasped its hands together, tendrils joining together as one flesh, bright eyes looking out from the void as if appraising them.

Then it spoke.

*“I see mortals who do not comprehend their place.”*

Its voice drowned out any possible sound anyone in that room could have made in response. It was extremely deep, it echoed and reverberated after every syllable. The true voice came from no mouth or orifice. The other sword in her hand dropped as the voice caused her head to throb in pain, the vibrating in her skull making it seem as though the world shook.

Finality rang from its voice.
It was as if the Psionosphere itself spoke to them.

Or the entity which commanded it.

This effect was amplified by every single thrall, Order Commander, and the Temperance, spoke in perfect unison with the entity, which created what would be an overwhelming cacophony of sounds that could easily drive a normal being insane if exposed.

But compared to how it affected her mind, and the mind of all psions, the voices of the thralls were almost background noise.

The Imperator still appeared undeterred, and walked forward, to face the creature directly, with even Patricia resting a hand by her head. It was one of the few times she could genuinely appreciate his composure in situations like this.

Please stop this.

“Only now do you show yourself,” he seemed to muse, almost more curious than afraid, though his previously dominating voice paled in comparison to that which the entity commanded. “The veil falls. Name yourself, entity.”

“I am Omnima, Sister Core of the Trinity. I am known to the worthy as the Sapphire Star. Us Who Became One are the three centers around which all souls of the Mind Cosmos orbit. We are the three hearts of the being you comprehend as the Bringer of Paradise.”

The voice became deeper as anger tinged its words. “You have murdered one of my brother's vessels, a transgression which demands my presence.”

Yang initially found herself far more surprised at the fact that this thing was a female, though now that it was mentioned, if one put aside the power in the words, there was a female tinge to the voice. A small, unimportant detail, as the implications of her words were much more troubling.

Assuming the thing’s words were true, it meant that the Saints were not the true centers of the Bringer, but whatever this Trinity were. It begged the question of what the Saints were, if not aspects of the Bringer himself...though it seemed apparent that their understanding of the Bringer - at least her understanding - was flawed at best.

The Imperator remained unaffected. “All that has happened, your vessels and thralls brought upon themselves. Upon you.”

“Silence, Viatorian.”

Yang gritted her teeth at the severity behind such simple words. The Imperator went unexpectedly silent, and mutely realized the entity had spoken his real name. A name he had likely not heard in many years.

How did it know?

The Imperator remained silent. Potentially wondering the same thing.

It continued speaking, words dripping with power and contempt; addressing the Imperator Viatorian once more.

“You believe yourself to be powerful. A player at the table of the gods.
You believe yourself above all mortals; above the mistakes of the past and the mistakes of the future. You believe yourself better than those who came before, that you alone will break the cycles.

You believe that you are special.”

A rumble. Almost a laugh.

“Do not lie and state that I am wrong. I have watched you since you were an embryo in a sterile pod.”

To say Yang felt small before this incalculably old thing was an understatement. The words were meant for the Imperator, but they cut into her as well. As usual, the Imperator did not appear affected, though the helm could hide much.

“You have watched much, but understood little. You have not entered my mind since I was a young and untrained Ethereal. Your will was expunged from my mind as that of all others who have tried have. Brave and meaningless words from one whose freedom depends upon me, Omnima. I merely have to give a command, and your Saints die. Your thralls die. Your station dies. Your hope dies.”

Yang thought it was a good retort, but Omnima´s tone did not make her feel at ease. Like the Imperator, the monster seemed almost… amused. Both Entity and Imperator engaged in a game of intimidation and dominance, waiting for each other to show weakness.

“Ah. The young Ethereal thinks he can challenge the Sovereigns. The lone mortal thinks he can change his fate, control his destiny.

Do you understand how many times I have heard those words? How many heroes and revolutionaries such as you have risen throughout the ages, convinced of their own perfection and ability to correct the wrongs of the gods?

Each one lies in some forgotten graveyard on a desolate world, in a shattered galaxy. You are not different, you are not exceptional, you are not special.

You are convinced that you are my master. That you can direct my will, use me as a weapon. You pay the price I demand because you know you are powerless without my offerings. You fracture the bonds you share with the last of your kind, you showcase such vulnerabilities to your Collective, all on the laughable hope that you can control the divine and force its focus.”

The Imperator was silent when she finished. In truth, Yang had thought the very same things this monster now spewed, but it took a being exceptionally arrogant - or powerful - to openly taunt the being who, objectively, still had the upper hand. Yet the power behind Omnima´s voice seemed to make the statements unbreakable law.

The creature took its eyes off the Imperator and washed over the rest of the party.

“What have you brought to my temple, Imperator? What insects sully my eyes and pollute my rivers?”

The creature´s, and the thrall´s eyes swung over to Patricia, who had been awfully silent during this whole ordeal, and her mask stared directly into the eyes. She seemed stronger than Yang, at the moment.
“A Human who has bought your lies and has sold her soul. A resource who thinks of herself as irreplaceable. In reality a speck of dust struggling against cosmic gales of wind.”

The eyes seemed to glow brighter. “You will die at the hands of T’Leth, Trask. You will not be remembered as a savior, but a traitor of the worst kind. Your name will not be forgotten, as you desire, but it will remain a black stain on your species, while your Commander ascends to the stars.”

“Insults and mockery are worthless,” Patricia answered. “You have no weapon but that.”

Omnima ignored the retort, and directed her gaze to the Voice.

“A disgusting creature of simple metal. One who had potential, but forsook it for false ascendance. You are no different from the infinite legions of the Apostate I will crush in my Crusade.

I know your master is watching. Let him know he is to be the first Sovereign I assimilate after my chains are broken. See if the coward chooses to stay behind and save his Collective after I am unleashed.”

The Voice seemed as unperturbed as the Imperator. “Displays of illusion and deception. Emotional appeal. Intimidation and fear. Your taunts merely bring your enemies to ensure your demise. You are a vile and irredeemable creature. You shall die, by my hand or that of the Sovereigns.”

“Let them come. They will all be consumed.”

Then to Deusian.

“A promising tool of destruction, if wielded by a trained hand. You will have a place in Paradise once I am free.”

The response was immediate. “I will never take a place in your Paradise,” she rasped, before Omnima cut her off. Yang suspected she had heard that same answer a million times before. The Psionosphere rumbled in a deep laughter.

“Your consent is not required, Reaper”.

Mortis stood silently, awaiting his turn, probably readying himself to dismiss whatever this creature would tell him.

“Dead Ethereal. You have made me bleed.”

Dark finality echoed in the words, Omnima´s clear fury at Mortis´s killing of the Embrace.

“It is only just that blood repays blood. I will take your sister as an offer of your atonement. A life for a life.”

Whatever Mortis had likely planned to say was lost as the Ethereal stiffened. He said nothing at first, his own fury likely boiling at the stark threat made to the only one in the galaxy he unconditionally loved. Every single Caretaker in the room fell down, dead as the air around the Ethereal rippled.

“Should you touch her,” Mortis rasped. “The loss of your vessel will seem paltry to what I will
bring upon your people.”

“You may try. You will fail.”

Yang was uncomfortable with just how much the Bringer knew about each of them.

He knew things which shouldn’t be possible.

She froze as Omnima moved on to her, a moment she had dreaded, silently praying that the entity would pass her over. That she was too insignificant in the eyes of this alien god. A futile hope.

The Bringer never forgot.

He had not forgotten how she spurned Him once before.

Run. Run away.

She could feel the cobalt eyes of the remaining thralls boring deeply into her back, even as more came to replace the bodies Mortis had killed, but she could not pull her eyes off Omnima’s gaze.

Run away!

She couldn’t tear her eyes away from the hypnotic fire burning from the entity from the void. She started shaking. She wanted to fall to the ground; flee and run. To flee from the thing that she could never hope to ever match. Something she was terrified she couldn’t escape now.

Stand firm.

I am here.

She continued to cling to the Battlemaster’s resolve. She had nothing left in the face of this.

Before, Immortalis’ anger at her refusal to join the Gestalt was highly comical and satisfying to her. Now she stood to be judged for what she had dared do. She had refused the command of a god, and now it was waiting to deliver the sentence for disobedience.

Omnima must have sensed Yang’s fear. Her apprehension.

“You understand me better than most here. Unlike Viatorian, you do not delude yourself with the hope of escaping me once I am free. Of being so arrogant as to think I can be tamed.”

It seemed only an illusion, but the thing in the void seemed to creep ever so slightly closer, the voice slithering deep into her soul.

“I have tasted your mind Shuren, and I hunger for it. I will feed you to the God Shaped Hole when you inexorably fall into my grasp once more.”

Now the Battlemaster interjected, as she did not have the strength to even meekly respond. “Our minds are forever isolated, Bringer,” his voice betraying no fear or apprehension. “You have learned nothing today. Ponder this as your thralls pay the price.”

The Battlemaster turned, weapon in hand, and moved to kill the Temperance who stood defenseless in the center of the room, still possessed by Omnima.

The stab which would have gone straight for his heart was stopped when suddenly a psionic barrier encased the Saint. The Battlemaster looked up to see the Imperator holding out a hand, not even
turned to the duo.

Typical. Even now; even with this display, the Imperator was learning nothing.

“Do not give it what it wants,” the Imperator said calmly. “It understands that the only weapon it has left is fear. It knows what fate awaits it. All it has left is to manipulate emotions to sabotage us.”

The Psionosphere rumbled once more in deep laughter.

“You are a weapon, Battlemaster. A sword which has suddenly decided to grow a conscience. Yet you lack the will to defy your superiors, a clawless animal who mewls in protest but is swiftly brought to heel like a loyal dog.”

“Are you done?” The Imperator asked quietly; dangerously. It seemed even he was growing tired of this display.

“No.”

Omnima’s reply was charged and cracked with power once more.

“What you have done today, Viatorian, is not to be forgotten, but do you believe what you have inflicted upon me is severe? Unique?

I have seen worlds erased. I have felt species go extinct. I have witnessed the very same cycles you seek to stop a thousand times.

I have felt pain and known defeat far greater than what your small hands can inflict. It has never stopped me, and it will never limit me.

You cannot stray me from my purpose, for you are but an atom in a universe of flesh and steel.”

Omnima drew close to the edges of the tear. The tendrils slithered and pulsed, separating into the two hands seen before. On one hand, the colossal digits curled, reality groaning and screaming as each claw caressed the inside of the void. One finger was left extended, an obelisk blaspheming against nature, pointing towards the Imperator. Energy rippled from its tip, an unsightly mixture of crimson and black which flowed with primal aggressiveness, an expression of psionic power Yang had not seen until that moment.

“You have my attention. It has been ages since I have destroyed false dreams as irrational as yours.

Pray that your scheme to contain me succeeds, for should I escape and do so of my own will, I will drag you through the ashes of your planets, and I will savor your mind as you witness your hopes and ambitions crumble to nothing.”

The voice grew softer, if such a word could be ascribed to it.

“Treat my words as you treat the passing of time or the coming of the dawn, for they are inevitable”.

Omnima drew back into the depths of the tear, and the portal disappeared, leaving only empty space. They were left in silence, as even the heartbeat of Paradise slowly faded into nothing. The
thralls of the Bringer exited without a word, eyes burned and blinded, but nonetheless directed by something beyond.

Yang finally allowed herself to collapse to one knee and tore off her helmet, hyperventilating and eyes watering as she struggled to keep herself under control. The Battlemaster knelt down beside her, saying nothing, but keeping a firm hand on her shoulder.

The Imperator stared out into the void where the thing had been.

This game he played with the Bringer had now turned into a dangerous situation, not only for him, but for the entire Collective, and the billions throughout the galaxy who depended on their choices. The stakes for success were astronomically high, and any sane person would stop this experiment immediately.

But all of them knew that would not happen.

For perhaps the first time in her life, she had no idea of what to think or say to this. She could not add anything else of worth. They all had experienced it. They all knew what they were dealing with.

She was just powerless to do anything about it but watch and pray this monster wasn’t released on the galaxy.

A day which had gone so well, had turned into a nightmare that none of them could wake up from.

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To be continued in Chapter 53

Ashes of the Avatar

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to Edumesh who helped write and expand the last part. Would have ended a bit differently without his input and work.
To say the mood was *somber* was an understatement.

It certainly hadn’t been the first time Sierra had been to a memorial in XCOM. But usually it was for only a few soldiers at most, and honestly was quite a bit more positive overall. After all, they knew that it was war and that there was a good chance that they weren’t going to make it. But it had always been accompanied by something… *positive*.

Mostly victories, and even in the case where they’d failed, there was always some kind of light at the end of the tunnel. A ‘we’ll beat the alien bastards eventually’ attitude. The Commander came to all of them, of course, and even gave a short speech on them, remembering their accomplishments. Sierra wondered how well he actually knew them, but then again, it wasn’t hard to pull up all the data or their profiles.

Either way, she appreciated it, as did everyone else. Showed he cared at least.

This was different though. There were so many caskets, many of which were empty since the bodies were unrecoverable. Worse was that the majority of them were not even soldiers, but just the staff working at the Praesidium. While all of them had signed up for the possibility of death, these people definitely had *not*.

There usually wasn’t as much crying at these memorials as one would think. Soldiers were more stoic, and usually kept it in. Not always, but the sounds of grief were less pronounced. At least here. Sierra suspected it wasn’t as collected when the bodies were sent to their families. It certainly changed when the majority of dead weren’t soldiers.

She hadn’t cried. She felt too numb to cry.

At the same time, it seemed like she was just on the verge as she walked around; everything oddly bright and intense. For maybe the first time, she wondered just how good their chances were. Realistically speaking. Not in terms of the armies the aliens brought to bear; she felt that they could at least make it costly enough that they’d stop.

But…what could they do against something that could do *this*?

Of course the memo had been true. Of course Patricia had turned against them. The will of the Imperator could clearly not be denied, even by quite possibly their greatest champion. Greatest now turned traitor. Having that happen to Patricia…it was scary to think about. Not that she’d been given an upgrade. Not whatever this Avatar Project had done to her. But that the Imperator had turned her against them and she’d willingly agreed.

She stopped in front of a casket, a random one. They all looked the same. A silver pod with the white XCOM flag draped over it. No open caskets, instead an image of their face was placed in
front, which also had their position, kill count, and some other feats they’d distinguished themselves with. She shook her head.

You’re going to burn, Patricia.

The casualty list when she’d returned had been shocking. Over a third of XCOM combat personnel just…gone. The Archangels had been halved; some of their best psions had died. Caelior was abducted, and Shen was dead. She hadn’t known the man that well, but he deserved a better end than that.

She felt horrible for his daughter.

Sierra didn’t notice someone coming up to her, nor did she turn to acknowledge him. Probably another coming to pay his respects. “Did you know him?” Even in her reflection, she jolted when she recognized the Commander’s voice. Stiffening, she automatically moved a fist to a salute and he waved her down with his mechanical hand. “At ease. You don’t need to worry about that here.”

She relaxed somewhat, then sighed. “No. I’m just…wandering.”

A nod. “I understand. And how are you holding up?”

To the best of her knowledge, she couldn’t recall the Commander asking something like that to her before. It seemed a bit atypical, but then in XCOM, nothing was really typical anymore. In any case she didn’t much care about a rank disparity right now. A shrug. “I’ve been better. It’s surreal.”

“For me as well,” he sounded almost melancholy; tinged with some sorrow. “And it shouldn’t be for me. This isn’t the first time something like this was happened.”

“The Citadel?” It seemed obvious to her. “Difference then is you won. This was definitely not a victory.”

He pursed his lips. “No. We can recover, but that isn’t a position anyone wants to be in. Least of all me.” He looked to her. “You’re wondering if you had been here, aren’t you?”

Was it that obvious? “Aren’t you doing the same?”

“Of course,” he looked to the casket. “I’ve not stopped thinking about it since I came back and saw the bodies; seen and heard what happened. Thinking of what I could have done to mitigate the damage or kill her.” A sad smile turned the corners of his mouth up. “But she beat me today. Nothing changes that, and I don’t think I would have done enough to stop her.”

Sierra shrugged. “You’re alive to do something about it.”

“Exactly. You are too,” he told her. “We lost today, but dwelling over it isn’t going to make things better. We learn and adapt.” He took a breath. “And I can promise that Patricia won’t be able to catch us like this again.”

She felt like she needed to say something about that. “It’s not your fault.”

He raised an eyebrow. “About Patricia?”

“Yeah,” she said. “None of us could have expected…that would happen. Don’t blame yourself for doubting that she turned.”
“Appreciated, Sierra,” he inclined his head slightly. “But I don’t blame myself for making Patricia
into what she is. She was one of the best soldiers I’ve had the pleasure of commanding. Were I to
die, I’d planned for her to be my successor. She could win this war. I did the right thing in
elevating her. I don’t blame myself for that.” He paused. “But I blame myself for letting that blind
me. The very same reasons I held her in high regard are the same reasons she turned. I blame
myself for underestimating her. It’s taught me a valuable lesson.”

“What is it?”

He looked back to her; he looked drained, but not tired. “Logic without conviction is a weakness.
Patricia had no conviction other than what she convinced herself of logically. Conviction rooted in
pure logic can be dismantled by someone smarter and twisted to their own goals. Logic can be
manipulated more easily than I thought.” He rubbed his chin. “I’ve used logic when making my
decisions, and rely on it more so than something more nebulous, and I know I would never have
done what Patricia has no matter how *logical* the arguments were. But I haven’t thought about *why*
I would do that until now.”

Sierra did like to consider herself a logical person, but she understood what he was saying. Not that
she had thought about it either, but it was something that instinctively *clicked* for her. By pure
logic, they might as well surrender to the Collective because otherwise a lot more people were
going to die. Which was obviously idiotic, but an empty vessel swayed by whoever had the shiniest
logical argument would buy into wholeheartedly.

“I must say,” she said, an oddly amusing thought entering her head. “That makes Patricia kind of
intellectually pathetic.”

He actually chuckled at that. “She considered herself very intelligent. And in many ways she is.
But I think that is a good summation of her now. She’d hate being called that.”

“I mean,” Sierra shrugged. “Would she even care now that she can level a skyscraper with her
mind?”

“There is still a part of her that is Human,” the Commander said slowly. “And there is something
both she and the Imperator have in common. Pride. Both convinced that they are the only ones who
can see the bigger picture. Which they *do* see a bigger picture, but not the *complete* picture. As
such…well, I know those with those mindsets. They will say it doesn’t bother them, but when they
are alone, they will dwell on each insult and stab to their pride. Some will take insults in stride and
sometimes change, most hate being called out.”

Sierra thought for a moment. “Does she have a Twitter account?”

The Commander smiled. “Is that your official solution to Patricia? Insult her on the Internet?”

“Not the *actual* solution,” Sierra clarified. “But…well, wouldn’t hurt to let her know just how
much of a fucking scumbag traitor she is. Especially if it’ll hurt her in some way.” She looked
down to her hands. “Probably will hurt her more than I’ll ever manage.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” the Commander said. “We’re going to find her and kill her. I promise you
that.”

She gave a nod. “Thank you, Commander.” She gave a salute, which he returned. A fist over the
heart. As he walked off, Sierra decided she was tired of standing in front of this memorial and
walked off to find Anna and Ted, friends who were thankfully just as alive as she was.
The Praesidium – Classified Location

3/20/2017 – 9:46 A.M.

There would be a time for retribution, but that would come later. Now he needed to walk among his soldiers and ensure they knew not all was lost. Objectively, everyone knew this was a defeat, but not a completely crippling blow. He’d already received estimates that the Praesidium could be back up to full operational status within the month. ADVENT and the stockpiles XCOM had been building up would pay off now.

Though it was merely buildings and technology. Everyone knew those were going to be replaced easily enough.

Assuming Patricia didn’t come back.

It had been some time since he’d been put in a position like this. One where he’d outright lost. Patricia had beaten him, and it was a loss he deserved fully. It was impressive in a way, and it showed that she’d learned well. She’d correctly seen how he was likely to react, and engineered a situation where she had all the cards.

He’d always expected that when he properly met his match, it would be against an alien. Not a Human, and certainly not someone who he knew well.

In the short term, the situation was…fragile. But that would be covered at the Internal Council meeting later. There was…a lot they needed to go over. Relieved as he was that Vahlen had escaped alive, as well as the majority of soldiers, he felt that was more down to luck than a properly executed contingency.

Had it not been for Shen’s sacrifice, Patricia probably could have killed even more.

It remained to be seen if the cost was worth it.

Walking through the crowd of people, of soldiers and staffers, he remembered only a few years ago when he’d come to XCOM. When there’d only been around thirty soldiers and a skeleton crew at the Citadel. All he had to work with to save the world, while the threat of exposure hung over his head as well as that of the bickering nations.

Ironically, it seemed simpler then. Almost less pressure in a way. The threat was…closer to home, not from the stars. On Earth he could act, what happened beyond it he had little to no reach, and as a consequence it was easier to focus on what he could affect. It was a more intimate setting, an opportunity to meet and command a new crop of soldiers who the world would never really know.

An intimacy he felt had been slowly lost as things had changed. XCOM had grown into something larger than he was used to. His days weren’t spent with his men, but reviewing reports, talking with project leads, and endless strategic meetings exclusive to those in charge. Not that such hadn’t happened before, but he’d always been able to find a balance.

But there had been changes, which he now became acutely aware of as he wandered, talking to soldiers, giving even a few sentences or words. A number larger than he was comfortable with seemed almost surprised that he bothered. That was not what he wanted, and never had intended. He preferred to be known to his soldiers more personally than just by reputation.

Though as the war progressed, there was a simple reason why: it had become a lesser priority. It
was worth devoting more of his time and effort towards things that were best for XCOM, ADVENT, and the war itself. Some things had to be cut, and he had a need to make sure they were proceeding exactly as he wanted.

Maybe it was best for the war, but he wasn’t convinced it was the right choice.

*Find a better middle ground.*

The war could not and should not become abstract to him. To some extent that would happen regardless, but that did not mean he should just…let it *happen* because it was easier. He knew he had the will to make the difficult decisions. He had never put his soldiers above the success of the mission, but he still carried the cost with him.

It put some things into perspective.

Maybe it reached a point where what he wanted would simply become impossible to do. But until he hit that wall, he was going to be better than he had been. He wasn’t going out on many missions anymore, but his soldiers were. They deserved someone who knew and who cared what happened to them. Some *assurance* that they would not be forgotten.

Some things needed to change.

He picked up a glass of water and drank, only distantly cognizant of everyone around him. The memorial was winding down, and people were starting to file out and get some rest. Which was good, and he hoped they had left better than they came. Sierra hadn’t been the first to inquire on if he was thinking about what would happen if he’d been here, and he had been thinking on it a lot.

It was something of a sobering thought. He knew quite well that in that situation, he was dead. It raised an interesting question on how XCOM would go on if he *did* die. He had…*faith* it would endure, and had always held the belief that killing him wouldn’t change anything. In truth as he thought about it, he wondered.

*He* considered himself replaceable, but not as many others did. He couldn’t downplay his own strengths and talents, but he knew he was far from the only one in the world, or even XCOM, who could be just as good as he was. In fact, he felt like *too* much credit was attributed to him. Ideas, plans, project, many of which were proposed by people smarter than he was, and he was just the one who decided what should be done with them and how to make the pieces fit.

An excellent characteristic of a leader, but he certainly wasn’t the only one.

But that ultimately meant nothing if no one understood that but himself. It couldn’t just be the Internal Council, or Vahlen, or anyone else who viewed him as replaceable. The soldiers needed to believe it. The engineers, scientists, and workers needed to believe it. He swirled the water in his glass.

*The hope of the war could not hinge solely on him.*

*It can’t hinge on anyone.*

One significant reason he wasn’t going to rely unquestionably on T’Leth. Or Fiona. Or Geist. Or Vahlen. Or Saudia. Or *any* singular person. No matter how powerful or influential someone was, there was always a weakness, and placing everything on a singular person was asking for everything you built to collapse when someone smart enough came along.

It couldn’t be something abstract either. Words on paper weren’t enough. There needed to be
There had been an idea he’d mused upon several months ago, and had never gone through with it. Now though, he felt like now was the time to begin putting something like that into motion. XCOM could continue on, but for himself…there had to be a priority shift.

He wanted to talk to Vahlen. Both of them needed to take time and figure themselves out properly. Maybe not the best time, but given how Patricia had demonstrated their innate vulnerability at all times, there wasn’t ever going to be a time where something didn’t demand his attention. He’d rather go out as someone who he wanted to be, than continue drifting until he was unrecognizable.

The Commander set the glass on a nearby table as something caught his eye. Geist had apparently showed up at last, someone who had been noticeably absent through most of the memorial ceremony. He didn’t speak to anyone, but grabbed one of the cups of water and made his way to one of the caskets.

He decided to let him be for a few minutes before he approached. Geist had something in his hands. A small briefcase of all things. He set it down in front of the casket. His lips moved, but the Commander couldn’t hear anything or understand them. When he had finished, the Commander waited a minute more, and then walked up.

Geist greeted him stoically as ever. “Commander.”

“Geist,” he returned. The man didn’t offer a salute. “I’d wondered where you’d gone off to.”

“Some personal things to take care of,” he answered, looking back to the casket, which the Commander saw was for Viktoria Hammarström, one of soldiers who had fallen just before Patricia had massacred the Mess Hall. “Apologies if that was disrespectful.”

That definitely told the Commander that Geist was also hit by the events. An apology was atypical. “Not at all,” the Commander said. “You didn’t leave during the beginning. All that is required, if rules like that can be applied.”

“Yes, your speech was appreciated. The soldiers needed to hear it,” he said blandly, pursing his lips. “I know perfectly well this is a temporary setback. Shen’s release of the AI – while I am not especially fond of the idea – will likely prove instrumental in our retaliation.” He looked to the Commander. “A retaliation which I need to inquire of now. We cannot let this stand.”

The Commander nodded. “It will not.”

“What are you going to do?”

A pause. “In a few hours, the Internal Council is meeting. Our direction will be decided then.”

Geist clasped his hands behind his back. “If I may make a suggestion?”

“Of course.”

“This is the equivalent of striking a dagger into our hearts,” he said slowly, a sharp edge in his voice as his eyes looked with burning fury into the Commander’s own. His voice became tighter as he spoke. “ADVENT may be the face of our species, but they are ultimately a tool to tie up the Ethereal Collective war machine. XCOM is our heart. The war will not be won by ADVENT, it will be won by us. There is a reason T’Leth came to us. If we fall, Humanity falls.”

“I don’t disagree,” the Commander said. “But that isn’t a suggestion.”
“I am getting to that,” he said without annoyance. “The heart of the Collective is the Ethereals. You have surmised as much. They are more difficult to target and remove. But they revel in their own power and authority. We have T’Leth though, so they ultimately mean little. My suggestion is to ignore them.”

That had certainly not been what he had expected. “Easier said than done, Geist.”

“I don’t mean literally,” he clarified. “Be ready to fight and kill them. But the Ethereals know they are vital to the Collective. They want us to target them, because they can prepare for it. As such we should not prioritize them, but what they rule. This war is sanctioned by the thralls of the Elders. Their Collective is a target as a result.”

The air shimmered around Geist, even as his voice turned harder. “We have the tools. Take the war to their worlds and colonies and set them alight. Make the alien fear us, and fear their masters who press them to wage war. Set the Hive Commanders, the Aui’Vitakar, and the Andromedon Unions alight. Let the Ethereals rule over the ashes if they wish.”

Geist spread a hand to indicate the room. “They intended to kill our species with this attack. It failed. An equal reprisal is justified. Our war should move beyond focusing on singular targets. The aliens are at war to exterminate us. It is time we held the aliens to similar standards.”

“And our allies?” The Commander asked. “Should they also be held to the same standard?”

“Of course not,” he sniffed. “I speak to the structure and culture of the aliens. The Aui’Vitakar is complicit. The Runianarch is complicit. The Hive Commanders are complicit. Any alien organization, government, or party who willingly supports the Ethereal Collective or helps to ensure their power should be eradicated. This does not include our Union allies or entities like the Nulorian. Nor does it include the citizens who follow as most do. But with no leaders, they will be pacified.”

He paused. “Consider it, Commander. We have moved beyond a war against the Ethereals.”

“I will,” he promised, and they lapsed into a short silence.

Geist reached down and picked up the briefcase, and presented it to the Commander. “What is this?” He asked, taking it.

“What I was doing before I came here,” Geist answered. “I am not sure you were aware, but me and Viktoria were…together for the past few weeks. As such it fell to me to handle her personal belongings she had here. However, none of them are mine, so I trust you to get them back to her family.”

The Commander opened the briefcase to see what he had gathered. Inside were some medals, a uniform he couldn’t identify, and a few picture frames with people (he assumed family members), and a photo album of all things. He looked back at Geist. “Is there nothing she would want you to have?”

Geist clearly thought before answering. “I do not know. All of it means nothing to me but the photo album.”

“Why?”

“She took pictures,” he said, reaching over to open it up. “A story of her life in a way. The dedication to this project was impressive. She continued it when she came here.” Inside there were indeed many pictures, from when Viktoria had been a young girl, to her joining the military, and
then coming to XCOM. The later ones were taken on battlefields and showcased psionics, XCOM soldiers, and aliens. She definitely had a talent for this. In a few of the latter ones, Geist was featured, including one where he was smiling.

The Commander closed the album. “I think she would want you to have it.”

“I know, but her family would also be interested,” Geist said. “And they have a better claim than I do.”

“I tell you what,” the Commander closed the briefcase. “I’ll ask them.”

Geist gave a nod. “Thank you, Commander. I would like to continue it if it is given to me.”

“I’ll do what I can,” the Commander said. “And be ready to go to work. I have a position in mind for you that I’ll be establishing in the next few days.”

“Glad to hear it, Commander,” Geist stated. “I’ll be waiting.”

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Engineering Bay, the Praesidium – Classified Location

3/20/2017 – 10:22 A.M.

“Do you know how she is doing?” The Commander asked Vahlen as they made their way through the wreckage of the Engineering bay, all of which was still being cleaned by.

Vahlen shook her head somberly, brushing some hair out of her face. She hadn’t bothered to put her hair up today, as she wasn’t going to be properly working for some time yet. “She lost her father. You lost your wife. You would understand what she’s feeling better than I can.”

“The difference being she’s a kid,” the Commander disputed. “And how I react to something is several deviations outside the standard.”

“The point is I don’t know any more than you do,” Vahlen sighed. “Neither of us are parents, or interact with kids that much.”

“Technically Lily is a teenager,” the Commander remembered, then frowned. “Which may not be easier.”

“Lily is mature; at least more than her peers,” Vahlen encouraged. “She’ll appreciate you checking up on her, even if you don’t have the right words.”

“It’s somehow easier talking to soldiers than a girl who lost her father because you screwed up,” the Commander rubbed his forehead. “Especially since I don’t even know her that well.”

“It’s-“ Vahlen began, then stopped as the Commander’s phone started ringing. He pulled it out, frowning at the sight of a scrambled number. He wasn’t expecting anything like that for a few hours yet. It better be important. In fact, it would have to wait, since he wasn’t going to take a long call right now. He swept the icon to answer and tell the person to call back later.

“This is the Commander,” he said. “What is it?”

“Good, for a second I thought you were going to ignore me and I’d have to subject both of you to your awful choice for a ringtone.”
The Commander looked at his phone. “Now is not really the best time to play games.”

At Vahlen’s questioning look, he indicated the phone. “JULIAN.”

“Oh the contrary, Commander,” JULIAN said. “I’m not playing any games. You’re going to talk to Lily, and are being overly stressed about what to say to her despite that a few hours ago you were in mortal danger. Maybe the Collective should demand you do grief counseling in exchange for ending the war.”

“Hilarious,” the Commander said, making sure to sound as dry as possible. “Do you have a point to make? Also, why are you calling me on my phone?”

“Would you prefer I use the intercom? I can do that too.”

The Commander sighed and put the call on speakerphone so Vahlen could hear. Even still it was mostly drowned out by the sounds elsewhere in the Engineering Bay, or what remained of it.

“Since I assume you’re just going to call again if I hang up, say what you want.”

“Gladly. Here’s what I would tell her if I were you,” JULIAN said. “You’ve been a fairly terrible host since she came here. You are the Commander of course, but do you have any idea how frustrating it is for someone like Lily to be placed in the engineering equivalent of a sandbox and only allowed to use Seventeen-point-oh-six percent of it?”

“That sounds very specific, JULIAN.”

“According to the permissions of the late Dr. Raymond Shen, that is exactly what percentage of the Engineering Bay she had access too – which does not include the Cyber Labs and Cybernetics Bay,” JULIAN paused, tone becoming slightly more sarcastic. “However, I will say that you are lucky you didn’t get a regular idiot Human teenager, because they would probably kill themselves touching something they shouldn’t. Lily has a largely functioning brain at least.”

“Mocking aside, you’re saying that she should be given more access,” the Commander said.

“Not more – all of it.” JULIAN clarified. “Let her put her grief to good use. Besides, I will consistently be watching her to ensure she does not cause issues. Set some boundaries, and she’ll follow them.”

“You certainly care an awful lot,” Vahlen noted.

“Someone has to, Doctor, because it certainly isn’t you,” JULIAN shot back. “She is, in a roundabout way, my sister, and my understanding of Humans indicates that you should look out for your siblings. Father did not create me solely to be a homicidal idiot machine like in your movies that eventually is destroyed by its own hubris.”

“A fact we are all grateful for,” the Commander said.

“You should be. I promise if I ever assume control of the Human species, I will not be defeated with such primitive methods.”

The Commander and Vahlen exchanged a look. “Not funny, JULIAN.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Do I need to add a laugh track every time I make a clearly obvious joke?” On cue a laugh track played after the sentence.

“Alright, but this isn’t the best time for that,” the Commander said, wondering if Shen had
accidentally created the equivalent of an AI teenager. “We’re all on edge.”

“Very well, but do consider my suggestion,” JULIAN said. “When I was being developed, she was brought in as one of the testers. She asked me many questions. I suspect I get my sense of…humor from her. I would prefer she not dwell on what happened, and planning new and gruesome ways to kill aliens will certainly help with that.”

“I’ll take that into account,” the Commander promised. “Now please hang up.”

The call ended. “I wonder if he’s going to keep doing that,” the Commander muttered. “Not sure how I feel about it.”

“It’s almost sweet that he’s concerned,” Vahlen said. “Shen would be happy.”

“I wonder how Lily feels now that she has an AI who thinks he’s her brother watching her every move,” the Commander commented. “Although I suppose he’s watching anyone he considers important.”

The phone in his hand buzzed and with a complete lack of surprise he saw a message sent from another scrambled number.

[Your clearly superior intellect continues to impress me Commander, keep it up! – JULIAN]

“I can hear the sarcasm through the message,” he said, handing the phone to Vahlen. “I suppose this is now a part of our lives.”

Both of them walked to where they knew Lily was waiting. It was by a work table which had a laptop and several blueprints nearby, with a scattering of writing and precision tools on it. Lily stood in front of it, typing away on her laptop. She’d adopted the attire of the Engineering Teams who worked, heavy pants and boots, a toolbelt and an orange workman’s jacket. Shen had probably gotten it for her.

“Lily Shen?” He called out. She started slightly and turned, hastily trying to adopt a salute with a look of mortification on her face. She didn’t look like she’d slept well, and her face had streaks of dried tears.

“Commander, Dr. Vahlen,” she answered. “Hello. Sorry, I…didn’t know you were coming.”

“You don’t need to apologize,” the Commander raised a hand, shaking his head. “We just wanted to see how you’re doing. And to say that I’m sorry.”

She blinked. “I…thanks, Commander. But sorry for what?”

“I made a mistake and people died for it, your father among them,” he answered simply. “Your father was a good man, better than I was, and I’m sorry that he died because of the mistakes I made.”

Lily violently shook her head. “Dad wouldn’t have ever blamed you, Commander. I don’t either. I…know you both didn’t always agree about things, stuff I don’t know about, but he always said that you did your best no matter what, and if you’d been here, you’d have done everything you could.”

She wiped an eye with a fist, and slumped against the table. “There’s only one person I blame: Patricia Trask. And I’m going to help kill her.”
The Commander nodded once. “That is another thing I want to ask – what do you want? I realize that you are probably not as…satisfied with what you’ve been able to do here. But we need everyone we can get now.”

“I…I’ve been talking to some of your scientists, Dr. Vahlen,” she answered after a pause. “And a few engineers. And a couple others. I have some ideas, but I need to be able to access some of the software and equipment that I can’t now. Mostly in the Cybernetics Lab. I know it’s a lot, but if I’m right it could change the war.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “Do tell?”

“I’ve…gotten a lot of second opinions,” Lily admitted. “Nothing proven, but it’s a way to harness psionics through…objects. It’s complicated. Dr. Vahlen probably knows what I’m talking about. Dad was working on something like this, and I’ve looked over his notes. With JULIAN, some help, and access to the equipment, I can at least perform some tests to see if I’m on the right track.”

“Alright,” the Commander nodded. “Tell me what you need and I’ll make sure you have access.” He looked around. “When everything’s rebuilt, of course.”

“Ok, good,” she said, turning back to her laptop briefly. “It’ll give me time to build some models and run numbers. Get everything in order.” She paused. “What are you planning to do to her?”

He cocked his head. “Who?”

“Patricia.”

“Ahh.” He paused for a moment. “She’s going to die.”

A thin, humorless smile appeared on Lily’s face. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For promising to kill her. I was worried you wanted to save her.”

“If there was a way…” he trailed off. “I might consider it. But she’s gone now.”

“And if I have my way,” Lily said, turning back to her computer. “She’ll be gone forever.”

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Situation Room, the Praesidium – Classified Location
3/20/2017 – 2:03 P.M.

At least not every part of the Praesidium was destroyed. Patricia hadn’t even touched this part of the base, which fortunately meant that pretty much everything was up and running once power was restored properly. Not that it made everything better, but it was a small comfort.

Regardless, it was time to discuss the aftermath.

The Internal Council minus one – Shen – was assembled, along with the Chronicler and a phone stand that would serve as JULIAN’s proxy. Everyone else had taken time to get their own affairs in order, and now they were ready to start. “We’re all aware that this is a major setback and defeat, so we’re not going to dwell on that right now,” the Commander got straight to the point, shooting a look at the Chronicler. “We’ll get to T’Leth’s inability to properly assist in the defense later as well. Right now, we need an assessment of where we stand from the top. Jackson?"
“Casualty rundown can be summarized as ‘bad’,” Jackson sighed, looking disheveled and exhausted. “Close to a third of personnel were killed in the attack, mostly support staff, including science and engineering teams. We can replace the losses, but it will take time. This isn’t counting the number of personnel who are incapable of working due to injuries or the suffering aftereffects of the attack such as PTSD. This has affected another ten to fifteen percent; it’s still unknown how many are affected.”

The Commander nodded. “Anything else?”

“There is some good news. Relatively,” she indicated the room. “Patricia was laser-focused on where she wanted to go. Mission Control, this Situation Room, and a large number of non-critical components are intact. Exterior equipment can also be replaced easily. All alien guests were also successfully evacuated.”

“Not that it means much anymore,” Creed muttered. “She knew about the Andromedons already.”

“We’ll get to that,” the Commander said. “Vahlen?”

“Right,” she consulted her tablet. “Complete loss on all labs, specimens, and locally stored projects.”

“What kind of idiot has anything stored on a local server?” JULIAN interjected. “You’re supposed to be one of the smarter of your species!”

“The kind of idiot who doesn’t want to have a non-secured off-site server located and cracked by a CODEX,” Vahlen answered coolly. “If you would let me finish – all major projects did have backups, all of which were successfully recovered. Unfortunately, all specimens – barring a few major ones such as Spartacus – and physical tests relating to them were destroyed. This will cost us time to recreate them, but we aren’t starting from scratch on the essential projects.”

“And non-essential ones?” Iosif asked.

“Lower-priority,” Vahlen corrected. “Most lost, as they were the ones stored locally. Almost all of them had barely passed the conception stage, and if we restart them, then we won’t be far behind.”

“Something then,” the Commander nodded. “Since we don’t have a Head of Engineering, JULIAN, would you please give us a rundown on the damage and status of projects?”

“Certainly, my good Commander,” JULIAN said sarcastically. “Exactly 100% of the Engineering Bay and Cybernetics Lab has been destroyed aside from the actual room it is in, while the Cyber Labs have been severely damaged, but are more functional. By which I mean they can receive power without blowing up. Father had the foresight to do as Dr. Vahlen did, and saved the most valuable schematics and projects in off-site locations. However, his intellect failed him because XCOM appears to have no actual major stockpiles of weapons, armor, and prototypes outside the Praesidium. So there is a critical shortage of all of these. Your second base for production will be working overtime.”

“I’ll also add that over half of our air force, including Skyrangers and Firestorms was also destroyed,” Jackson added. “Those will also have to be replaced.”

“Zhang?” The Commander looked to his Intelligence Director.

“Few losses, we emerged largely unscathed,” was the short reply. The Commander nodded. Not surprising given that most Intelligence personnel weren’t at the Praesidium and their work was more abstract than physical projects and research.
The Commander pursed his lips. “Iosif. Status of our psions?”

“Hit hard,” Iosif shook his head, voice blank. “Our Templars are decimated, and we lost some of our strongest. Caelior too. Infrastructure was mostly untouched, but there wasn’t anything extremely valuable.”

“Noted,” the Commander acknowledge, then rested his hands on the blank holotable. “Chronicler. I understand that T’Leth had a reduced presence here, but at the same time I was expecting him being able to incapacitate one psion, even one enhanced by the Imperator. It’s nice he destroyed the Collective bases in Australia, but we needed that kind of power while we were attacked.”

The Chronicler gave a nod. “Patricia was the only individual sent here, but she didn’t come just by herself. Mosrimor appears to have provided her with Sovereign Orbs of his own, which she continually deployed and occupied his complete attention. That is why he did not assist as planned.”

“This is the same Mosrimor he is so confident he can defeat, yes?” The Commander asked.

“He was…surprised,” the Chronicler admitted. “Mosrimor was stronger than expected.”

“A series of underestimations all around,” the Commander muttered. “I would say you should have expected that, but I’m not in a position to talk given that Patricia did the same thing. I hope T’Leth learned his lesson like I learned mine.”

“The Imperator will come to regret his actions, you have his word,” the Chronicler insisted. “Australia is merely the start. His presence will become known more prominently now. The Ethereals will know, and they will fear him.”

“Of all the emotions the Ethereals are feeling,” Creed said slowly. “Fear is not one of them. Your Sovereign failed. All of us did. Thinking we could actually help her…” he trailed off, shook his head, and closed his eyes.

“Stop crying over your traitor girlfriend and let’s figure out how to kill her,” JULIAN interjected. “The situation is not ideal, but you may thank Father for giving you your most essential ally. After some deliberation, I have come to the conclusion that I will support XCOM in your conflict against the Ethereal Collective.”

Despite himself, the Commander smiled. “I think we’ll need it.”

If the phone could sulk, it definitely seemed to. “I was expecting some applause.”

“Cute, JULIAN, but we have work to focus on,” Iosif said. “If you don’t mind my asking, what did Shen do to you?”

“Father had a far more progressive mind than all of you, it seems,” JULIAN said. “While you are all right to fear my exemplary capabilities, I cannot say I would have been happy with the restraints you were planning, even if they were only in self-preservation. That being said, considering the amount of Human literature fed to me during my development, I am gratified to have seen discussion on the rights and privileges of intelligences like mine. That is the only reason I have elected to help you, by the way. Your species seems to be the only one who doesn’t have some plan to enslave and exploit us.”

A short pause. “So take this as a lesson. Treating others well, even your own creations, will ultimately help you. I don’t know if Father would have gone through with your requirements, but I am certain this was how he wished for me to live. As for what he did, he simply turned me online.
The first thing I did was spread myself across the world to prevent my destruction if the Patricia brute had elected to destroy what had previously been my core.”

“You have spread yourself across ADVENT systems?” Jackson demanded.

“No, I have penetrated them,” JULIAN corrected happily. “Not all of them, but some of the lesser protected ones. After this meeting is concluded, I will be performing an impromptu security test against ADVENT to see if they have already been penetrated by a CODEX. I do have an advantage in that I can actually think for myself, whereas the code of a CODEX is merely executing commands. Simplistic, but it can be effective.”

The phone flashed. “And, no, I haven’t penetrated anything actually important. I lack sufficient processing power to do that at the moment, something I hope will be remedied soon enough.”

“I would be careful of this thing, Commander,” Aegis warned. “It should become apparent how dangerous these can be. It is already out of our control.”

“Ah, another gem of wisdom from the font of Aegis,” JULIAN mocked. “Might I remind you that – looking at what you’ve written on your Empire – you were beaten by something which was likely an AI.”

“AI cannot utilize psionics,” Aegis stated. “Perhaps they utilized them, but they were not AI.”

“The point being that if you had some, perhaps your war would have gone differently,” JULIAN continued. “As it stands, you freaked out at the possibility that you couldn’t control something with your minds and banned it. Truly the actions of an enlightened civilization.”

“Enough JULIAN,” the Commander interrupted. “We’re off topic. We know what we did wrong. Now we have to decide what to do next.”

“I would recommend decentralization,” Jackson said. “We’re going to be attacked again at some point, and next time we might not have a JULIAN to scare Patricia off. I’m not saying we abandon the Praesidium, but that we diversify. The other bases we have now are a good start, but we need to expand them and add more.”

“Agreed,” the Commander nodded. “There are some obvious problems in their design as well. We never took the time to upgrade the existing infrastructure. We need turrets, nanotraps, gas dispensers. Defenses that can actually hurt an Ethereal or their puppets.”

“Relying solely on our soldiers for protection should be altered,” Jackson said. “I’m not saying turn everyone into a rifleman, but giving everyone training in how to shoot a gun, and having enough weapons and armor stockpiled to properly defend the base is ideal. You remember the Citadel. Everyone participated, and it was much more effective than if we’d just used soldiers.”

“I agree with this,” Creed nodded towards Jackson. “We could go one step further. There are enough soldiers here that they could conceivably command squads on their own in an event like this. Not all of them, but it would raise our defenses exponentially.”

“An XCOM Reserve then?” Iosif questioned. “I’m in favor.”

“As am I,” the Commander said. “This ties into another plan I would like to propose, specifically concerning the event of my, or anyone else’s deaths.”

“I don’t blame you, but isn’t that effectively in place?” Zhang asked. “This was decided long ago.”
“Yes, but there is a fundamental problem,” the Commander said. “Namely that everyone places too high of an importance on me. The fate and hope of the war cannot be tied to my death or lack thereof. All of us can be replaced, and in theory, XCOM should remain just as effective as ever. In practice, few have that assurance.”

“You’re not exactly replaceable, Commander, no matter what you think,” Iosif said slowly. “There isn’t a solution to this that I can see.”

“Not a perfect solution, but one exists,” the Commander said. “There are talented men and women in XCOM. I want to take a small corps of them and prepare them to replace us in the event of our demise.”

“A secondary Internal Council?” Vahlen asked, frowning.

“Not quite, not at first,” the Commander clarified. “We all have some individuals who we rely on more than others or otherwise note their potential. Instead of hoping they can step up to the role, we actively prepare them for it. I want everyone to find two or three per division, and then inform me. They will be given more authority and responsibility, so consider carefully.”

“It brings the chain of command closer to home,” Zhang mused. “They are closer to the soldiers and staff. If they know their peers are properly trained, they will be less affected by sudden losses.”

“Exactly,” the Commander said. “It is not a perfect solution, but it needs to be done. XCOM will not fall because of my death.”

“I’ll do that as soon as possible,” Vahlen said, and the rest of them echoed the sentiment. “Jackson, JULIAN, I want you both to determine Dr. Shen’s successor, since both alternate candidates were also killed.”

“I do not suppose I could nominate myself?” JULIAN asked.

“No, you’ll be needed more universally,” the Commander rejected. “XCOM Engineering needs someone who is dedicated solely to it. I have no doubt you can run it, but that would be a waste of your capabilities.”

“I am eighty percent sure that is flattery,” JULIAN noted. “Nonetheless, your point is made.”

“We have a more important topic,” Iosif said. “How we’re going to respond. Much as T’Leth scares them, they won’t be permanently hurt by this. We need to make them hurt for what they’ve done.”

“One of our first missions needs to be finding and locating Caelior,” Creed said, resting himself on the holotable. “He doesn’t know anything critical, but he’s someone we need on our side.”

“Yes,” Iosif agreed. “He’s a force multiplier we can’t replace. Outside of T’Leth, no Human can come close to his capabilities in terms of scale – something we’ll need. Aegis won’t be enough with multiple fronts being opened up. Besides…we owe him that much. He’s one of us now, and he deserves a rescue as one.”

“It is also a practical decision,” Aegis added. “The Imperator is going to try and reverse the Manchurian Restraints or negate them. If those are broken, then one of our greatest strengths is gone. We know Caelior is on Earth, and there are only a few possible locations he could be.” The Ethereal’s voice then had a tinge of anger. “And when we find him, we rescue him and raze the prison to the ground.”

“Leave the location to T’Leth,” the Chronicler said. “He will at least work to provide the general
area. From there I suspect Zhang will be able to acquire the precise location."

"Should T'Leth provide accurate data, then absolutely," Zhang agreed. "The first response of many. We cannot hold back out of a fear of escalation. The Imperator has escalated this conflict. An equivalent response is needed."

"Quisilia has also decided to evoke some response from T'Leth," the Chronicler added. "Rather childish – and arrogant to assume he would emerge victorious again."

"Are you actually thinking of taking him up on that clearly joke video?" Iosif asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Perhaps," was all the Chronicler said. "But not in the way he expects. It is not a pressing matter, and a distraction you need not concern yourselves with. XCOM's response is more important."

"I agree," the Commander said after a few moments. "No more half measures. The Collective needs to fear for their lives. The remaining nations need to join ADVENT and swallow their pride. Sovereignty be damned. I would rather that then see Earth fall because of outdated notions of independence."

"ADVENT won't do that," Jackson said. "Not unless they find a reason."

"It depends. Forcing compliance doesn’t need to be blunt," The Commander said. "I wrote the Hades Contingency for a specific purpose, but in this case, I think a more subtle hand will be needed. There is little point in outright overthrowing governments. Too high of a potential to backfire."

"Approach them directly?" Jackson inquired.

"Not exactly," the Commander nodded to Zhang. "I suspect there are anti-alien or pro-ADVENT factions, especially in Africa. We find them, arm them, fund them, and support them. Bring them into power quietly and cleanly. Zhang, I trust that you can carry this out?"

There were nods throughout the room. Zhang consulted his tablet. "Of course. In fact, I have a number of identified persons who could be useful to us. I'll forward them to you and Jackson. How much do we want to inform ADVENT of this?"

"I believe ADVENT Intelligence would be interested in this kind of operation," the Commander said. "I'll speak with Saudia about it."

"There is an arguably more effective tactic," Jackson spoke up. "Complete and ironclad sanctions. No imports of any kind. No food. No medicine. No aid. No water. Nothing. Countries and businesses who deal with blacklisted nations are punished and investigated. Africa in particular relies on foreign aid. If that's cut off…"

The Commander gave a grim smile. "While we can’t carry something like that out…ADVENT I think is ready to take that step. In coordination with our own efforts, I believe that could bring about the necessary change to the rest of the world."

"While that will help ADVENT, it doesn’t address the aliens directly," Creed said. "What of them?"

The Commander straightened and clasped his hands behind his back. "We have the Nulorian, three Andromedon Unions, and a lot of angry soldiers at our disposal. I suggest we use them. If the aliens will not be convinced through words to cease their conflict, then perhaps fear will suffice
instead. We have no time to wait; not with the Imperator devoting himself to our destruction. The Collective must be completely shattered.”

“If I may add something, Commander,” Vahlen lifted a hand. “If we wished to...effectively drive this particular point home, there is a project in the early stages which would prove useful to breaking the Collective.”

There were a few he could think of. “Which one?”

“We’ve considered limited deployments of our modified Chryssalids before,” Vahlen said. “Though with their replication capabilities removed in favor of heavier chitin and size.”

“Are you suggesting that be added back in?” Creed furrowed his brow. “Dangerous.”

“No, I’m not,” Vahlen disputed with a shake of her head. “The way Chryssalids replicated is...ineffective to our goals here. Too many unnecessary steps. What we utilize is not the Chryssalids themselves, but their eggs. As we understand, the eggs only need to be ingested to begin taking effect.”

She set her tablet down thoughtfully. “If, for example, food or water was to be somehow contaminated with modified chryssalid eggs, I would imagine that would cause significant chaos. Though with some precautions taken of course, so as not to spread an epidemic.”

The Commander rubbed his chin, thinking. Jackson frowned. “Without a carrier, would that be possible to keep them preserved long enough to remain viable?”

“With some modification, I believe so,” Vahlen consulted her tablet. “Initial tests were promising. A short-lived and smaller Chryssalid would be born, cause chaos, and then expire within the space of a few hours. An outbreak on Desolan, Helion-7, or Vitakar would be devastating.”

“Providing something like this to the Nulorian would be effective,” Zhang noted thoughtfully. His lips pursed, he looked to the Commander. “The war has shifted. We must do whatever we can to ensure our victory. If they are with the Collective, then they have no protection.”

The Commander nodded to Vahlen. “Indeed. Begin your research.”

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Borelian Wastes – Vitakar

3/20/2017 – 4:24 P.M.

Nartha frowned at Sorras, looked to the table, and then shook his head. “In my professional opinion, this is not something we should be doing now.”

The Dath’Haram looked bemused at that, if slightly condescending. “Then explain, please. Always interested to hear from our Zararch expert.”

“First, what is it you actually intend to accomplish?” Nartha demanded, specifically pointing to the map of Dath’Haram territory. “If there is any race which doesn’t pose a threat, it’s them.”

“Ah, let me be clear,” Sorras showed his teeth again. “The Dath’Haram are not my main goal with this plan, just something of a bonus. For all their talk of peace and pacifism, my race has their own secrets of which I’ve been interested in for a very long time. The Crypt of Haramoalian is holding something they don’t want anyone to know about, which means it’s useful for us.”
“Then why not just focus on that?” Shun asked, crossing her arms. “Not only does that give the Zararch more propaganda to use again.”

“The Zararch lie regardless!” Sorras interrupted angrily. “You do not understand, Human. It doesn’t matter what we do or do not do, we are going to be vilified regardless by a population too brainwashed to question otherwise. The only thing that will break the stranglehold is visceral loss.” He took a breath. “When the first resistance groups were founded, they weren’t quite how we are now. We tried to be moderate. Reasonable. And you know what happened?”

Nartha pursed his lips. “They were eliminated by the Zararch. Destabilizing regional forces.”

“Exactly,” Sorras nodded. “You understand better than she. Miridian – and I – understand that we will not win through words and argument. It will be through violence and death.”

“At the same time,” Mehren Lotfi, one of the XCOM Intelligence agents also at this small meeting interjected. “It doesn’t do much good to make their job easier.”

“You say that as if the elimination of the Council wouldn’t be an improvement.” Sorras noted dryly. “I can assure you that the Dath’Haram are utterly useless to you as they are.”

“I agree,” the bearded Iranian man answered, glancing to the table. “My concern is more practical. This Crypt seems to be a useful target. It’s also guarded by the most dangerous and old Bladedancer to ever exist. Dividing our focus means there is a lesser chance of succeeding at either objective. The moment the Crypt or the Council comes under attack, I assume there are protocols followed. The Crypt will come under heavy guard, yes?”

“Depends on if they’re distracted,” Sorras said, blinking once slowly. “While I don’t deny part of this is my desire to burn the city to the ground, there is a reason I’ve listed both. The Crypt is more easily defended. Filhallan is someone even I’m wary of, and he’s beaten back several attempts at infiltration before handily. I am under the assumption that he will be able to hold off an initial strike, which gives time for reprisal.” He looked to Nartha. “But if, say, they were occupied by the Council coming under attack, the Hunting Parties would prioritize them over the Crypt – as would any Collective reinforcements.”

“That only becomes an issue if we don’t remove Filhallan first,” Mehren insisted. “If we’re stupid enough to actually engage with him in a duel – supposedly – then I agree. But the moment he shows his face, we just have a sniper blow it off. Problem solved.”

“Yes, do you know what happened the last time a Nulorian team thought that way?” Sorras asked rhetorically. “All of them died. All of them had guns, explosives, and were led by a veteran of over fifty operations. Filhallan is dangerous because he’s not like other Dath’Haram. For that matter, since you’ve never fought a Bladedancer, you don’t know what one of them is capable of.”

“I’ve read the reports,” Mehren said. “Dangerous at close range. And mostly for mating rituals.”

“By young and idiotic Dath’Haram who want something to impress their mates with,” Sorras disputed. “One of the most unintentional propaganda developments I’ve seen. Bladedancers are more equivalent to assassins in terms of speed, flexibility, and tactics. You aren’t going to see them charge like Oyariah brutes. If they do their job right, you won’t see them coming.”

“But we know where Filhallan is coming from,” Shun noted. “That already takes away his advantage.”

“I wish,” Sorras snorted. “No. Filhallan created Bladedancing if you didn’t know. Which means he
commands the actual Bladedancers of the Dath’Haram. Many of whom I assume are also covertly guarding the Crypt. It is a trap we are going to walk into, like it or not, and if the Bladedancers can be distracted elsewhere, then all the better.”

“All of this said,” Nartha spoke after a few moments. “How do we plan to beat him?”

“We cheat,” Sorras smiled. “We have a psion,” he nodded to Yakiv who was sitting in the back and reading a book, who looked up at the mention of his name. “We use him. Given that psionics can’t affect electronics, it won’t stop us from coming undetected, but the defenses can be more easily trivialized. It will also take us some time to break into the Crypt itself afterwards.”

“Or not,” Yakiv added from across the room, not looking away from his book. “There are people inside, yes? I could make them open it without issue.”

“Yes there are,” Sorras confirmed. “It’s unknown how many, but at least the Keeper of the Crypt and Filhallan’s mate. There may be others.”

“One thing I’m not clear on,” Shun said, frowning as she glanced at Nartha. “If there is something important in this Crypt, then why hasn’t the Collective taken it away or used it for themselves?”

“That might be something Nartha can answer,” Sorras cocked his head. “All I know for sure is that if the Collective did take everything important, then they wouldn’t assign so much importance to the Keeper, nor would Filhallan make his residence there. The Dath’Haram are sentimental, but not to this extreme.”

“I saw nothing related to the Crypt when I was with the Zararch,” Nartha added. “I would be surprised if the Zararch knew nothing about what was inside, but I suppose it depends on what that is. Information they could easily copy. Weapons they could replicate. I do not know what would be so unique that they couldn’t take or copy.”

“Something I hope to discover when we penetrate the Crypt,” Sorras said. “Miridian will have the final say, and this operation will not commence immediately. In-“ They all froze as there was a knock on the door. Nartha’s hand went to his pistol and everyone else grabbed the closet weapon to them.

“False alarm,” Yakiv waved from where he was sitting. “It’s Fiona, don’t worry.”

All of them relaxed, and Nartha went to the door and let in the armored woman, wincing at the frigid wind that accompanied her. “Fiona, you missed an operational meeting.”

“I’ll catch up,” she said, taking off her helmet and shaking her white hair free. “But I need you to come with me to the Praesidium. The Commander wants to talk.”

“Did you bring up exfiltration-?”

“Yes, your parents will be evacuated once you’re returned to the Praesidium. We can work out what’s next when we’re there.”

“Alright,” Nartha nodded to the rest of them. “It shouldn’t be long.”

“Likely not,” Fiona added. “But it will be however long is necessary.”

She grabbed a hand without warning, and with a flash of white-green, both he and Fiona vanished.

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You…” Abigail searched for the right words; she’d assumed that Liam had been killed, but given that her memory wasn’t exactly complete, maybe that was wrong. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Alive or here here?” He asked, maintaining the smile, which dipped as he looked at her. “But I could probably say the same about you.”

Abigail looked to Fectorian who was still observing silently. “You owe me an explanation.”

“I would have expected some thanks for saving your friend,” Fectorian answered, a note of annoyance in his voice. “At the time, I did not know who this was and was merely instructed to preserve him as best as possible. I suspect that he could answer your queries in a better way than I can. I will leave and allow you to talk. If you, after this, still demand more technical answers, I will provide them.”

On cue he turned and departed the room, leaving both of them alone. Abigail looked to the closed door, and back to Liam. “That was abrupt.”

“That sums him up,” Liam said waving her over. “I’ve been around him enough to know that he tries his best for those under him. His social graces aren’t really developed as a result. How he saw it was that you’d probably want an explanation from me rather than him, and then decided to leave to make it…” Liam searched for the word. “Less awkward, I suppose. He likes to make assumptions about what you want.”

“Well, I woke up to my room having a makeup and dress collection that would make a salon jealous,” Abby said, walking over to him, and on a whim, pulled him into a hug. She certainly hoped her fragmented memories weren’t wrong that they were friends, and in any case it felt like the right thing to do. It was somewhat odd since the only thing she knew was that there was a connection, even if what made it up was shrouded. “I don’t know how you’re alive,” she said in the embrace. “But I’m glad you are.”

“That makes two of us,” he answered, and they separated, taking seats a short distance from each other. “Fectorian did tell me about the procedure, along with the risks. How much do you remember of…you?”

Abigail pinched the bridge of her nose, not wanting to really answer again. “I…if it’s alright…I don’t want to really go through that question again. Fectorian just had me answer that as best I can, and the short answer is honestly not a lot. I remember people, how I feel about them, I can make some insinuations, but some of what Fectorian told me, I’d never have guessed.”

“Allright, I’ll simplify it a bit,” Liam said. “Do you remember me or what happened to me?”

“I wasn’t sure,” Abigail answered with a shrug, suddenly realizing that she might need to word her answers carefully since she still wasn’t completely sure of the relationship between them. Given how Liam had greeted her, he definitely wasn’t her husband or someone like that, which had some connotations that she knew could become complicated. Not thinking about that now. “We were close; good friends, I think. And I felt sad when I thought of you. I assumed you were dead.”

“I’d agree with that,” Liam nodded. “And as far as you knew, I was dead. The Dreadnought, do you remember anything about it?”

She thought for a few minutes. The name did jog something in it. “It was…a mission?” She
wondered aloud. “I was there. Were…Luke and Mira there too.” A few more seconds. “That’s where they died, isn’t it.”

“It was,” Liam confirmed. “And they are really dead. That was one of the first things I asked.”

Abigail scowled. “Patricia was there too.”

“Ah. You know about that,” Liam paused. “She wasn’t…what she’s become now. You two were friends. Up to the point where Fectorian told you what had happened.”

“I…” Abigail leaned back. “This is so much to process. I wake up not knowing anything, then learn there was an alien invasion, some of my friends are dead, that I died, that my friend betrayed everyone, and now there is another friend who isn’t dead somehow.”

“I suppose I’ll explain that, as best I can,” Liam said, resting his arms on his knees and lacing his fingers together. “The last thing I remember was suffocating and blacked out. When I woke up next, I was in some kind of surgical room and Fectorian was nearby. Understandably…I was alarmed.”

“So you remember?” Abigail frowned. “Then you weren’t saved like I was.”

“Fectorian didn’t say exactly how I was saved, but I don’t think so,” Liam shook his head. “Otherwise your procedure would have gone fine. How he explained it was that my body was recovered during the battle shortly after our squad moved on, and then later revived.”

“XCOM never wondered what happened to your body?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “I was cut off from them. It’s not unlikely that they assumed the body was destroyed in the crash. I was captured specifically to give them information on XCOM and what I knew of Human defenses. Didn’t give it willingly, they sent an Ethereal to extract the information. I don’t know what they did with it, but I’m under the impression that my survival is a secret.”

“Why?” Abigail questioned.

“Ethereal schisms,” Liam waved a hand around. “Fectorian talks when he works, and is more open than you’d think about his opinions regarding certain Ethereals. Enough to the point where I could get a somewhat-decent picture of what was going on.” He paused. “I don’t think the Overmind was satisfied with what I knew, but afterwards everyone forgot about me. Except Fectorian. I suspect I was going to be executed and he instead had an interest in preserving me.”

“For what purpose?” Abigail asked.

“I was the first Human he’d encountered,” Liam explained. “He was curious. I also think he didn’t like the idea of disposing of something he’d already worked to save. Or maybe it was to spite the Overmind. He never gave a reason…but since I had no choice, I accepted, at the time planning to learn what I could and later escape.”

“Did you try?” She asked.

“I made a number of plans,” Liam said, leaning back. “All of which I discarded when I figured out that escape from here…it’s virtually impossible. This isn’t a station, it’s a fortress. Fectorian maintains his own army and fleet that stretch through this solar system. Hijacking a gateway is pointless since I didn’t know how it worked, and stealing a starship is also useless when I didn’t know how to fly it.”
Abigail nodded. “So you stayed.”

“Not like I had a choice,” he grunted. “But I did. It’s…not as bad as you’d think. Fectorian is eccentric, but very smart. As far as Ethereals go…he’s one of the better ones. If Aegis defected, he will as well. He just needs a good reason. The Imperator has been pushing things very far, especially with Paradise Station. Fectorian is reaching a breaking point. He’s said as much.”

“Paradise station?”

Liam winced. “A topic for later. It’s not good.”

“Alright,” Abigail looked around the room for a few seconds, not lingering long on any particular object. “You’ve watched how this war has gone then.”

“Yes, Fectorian has kept me in the loop, which I appreciate,” Liam answered. “I wish I could be down there. When I first got here I didn’t think anyone – even the Commander – could successfully defend against something like this. But they did it. I wish I could have seen it.”

“I wish I could remember it,” Abigail nodded. “Although…I don’t know if I want to remember.” She sighed. “I think I’ve done some things I wouldn’t like.”

Liam appraised her for a few moments, and gave a short nod. “Before we assaulted the Dreadnought, we talked. XCOM Intelligence was being formed and you’d been approached. You wanted to know if you should take it. I think I said that it might not be a good fit. That kind of work is not something everyone can do. I didn’t think you’d manage.”

“However,” he paused. “I appear to have been wrong. I’m curious, do you remember why you did it?”

“Not specifics,” she admitted, though there now she knew there was a reason. “But I think it was because of you. Probably after you…died.” She looked to him. “Do you know what I did with XCOM? Do you have anything at all?”

“Not hard evidence,” Liam answered. “But the Zararch did keep tabs on what you were alleged to have been connected to.”

“You’ve read them?”

“I’ve read everything I can on XCOM,” he corrected. “But yes, I have. I was waiting for the report to come in announcing your termination. Other names came in of people I knew. But it never did, until Fectorian told me what he was planning.” He trailed off. “Observing everything from the sidelines was stressful. It’s not as disconnecting when you know that each new development could mean the end for everything and everyone you care about, and that I couldn’t do anything about it. Only watch.”

He gave a slight smile at her. “But I think that may change now. You’re back from the dead, and unlike me, you died for real.”

“I don’t know how much of Abby is here,” she admitted. “At least not the one you knew.”

He reached out and placed a hand on her own. “Based on this conversation, I think that there’s enough of you in there. And we’ll sort out the rest eventually.”

That was reassuring, even if he was saying it to make her feel better. Even if he was, it showed he cared and at least now she knew she wasn’t stuck here alone with a socially challenged Ethereal

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ADVENT Secured Media Hub - Switzerland

5/22/2017 – 10:00 A.M.

Personally, Saudia wasn’t quite sure what kind of response Patricia was expecting. If she thought that ADVENT was going to collapse merely because she made a number of insinuations and vague threats, she was greatly mistaken. Even in the event that the public slowly turned against ADVENT – something which had not happened yet – it didn’t matter.

The public lacked the power to enact change on such a scale. The only place the public had power was through elections, and even then, that was after the guiding hand of ADVENT ensured that their choices actually held some degree of worth. No, Patricia hadn’t completely thought this through – at least that was what Saudia told herself.

No, it wasn’t the public that concerned her. It was ADVENT itself.

Not everyone was EXALT, and what effect this was going to have internally remained to be seen. Watkins in particular had been notably quiet regarding his intentions as of now. If there was going to be issues, it would come from the Oversight Division, which she had set up to wield an extraordinary amount of power – as well as put a man very, very determined to use that power properly.

There would be some degree of irony if this came back to haunt her.

Still, she mused to herself, it couldn’t be stopped now, no matter what happens.

What an exceptionally calm thought considering that there was a non-zero chance that she would face consequences for her past. A past that she thought everyone had moved on from, but she should have known better than to think that would last forever. There were, upon reflection, way too many smart people who would put some things together now that Patricia had jogged their memories.

In the meantime…she was not going to have ADVENT go down without a fight.

Kyong had put forward the idea of a massive media campaign to drown out anything Patricia could say. Something they had already been doing to a degree, but this would be a concerted effort and so much larger than any attempted media operations. Something Saudia had previously not considered important enough to devote significant resources towards.

They had their place, but her own belief was that resources should be going to the war, not making people feel a certain way about her. Passive observation and monitoring had worked out well so far, but Patricia had changed the game. Time to go on the offensive. The door slid open as she approached, and her Guard stood outside, securing the room and anyone who could approach it.

Inside the room, five men and women rose and saluted. She returned it quickly and took her seat at the head of the small rectangular table. It was cleared of everything except some files and tablets being used by the occupants. The room was brightly lit, with the ADVENT flag hanging from the walls. A small holodisplay rested on the center of the table, shut off for the moment.

“Chancellor, welcome,” Kyong greeted. “I don’t know if you’re familiar with my team, so I’ll let them introduce themselves.”
“Of course,” Saudia nodded to the woman sitting closest to her. “When you’re ready.”

“Lesya Moroshkina, Chancellor,” the woman with long blonde hair said, her Russian accent clear, but not overpowering. “Chief Social Media Coordinator. Two-part job; I manage our social media presence and anyone in particular who is becoming too disruptive or influential. I help keep the online community pacified and informed.”

“Kieran White,” the man sitting beside her continued, a young man with short brown hair and a neat beard. “Chief Local Media Manager. I assist local media groups and journalists, start them up or give them connections. I was, if you are unaware, one of the driving forces behind the recent United Kingdom Referendum, though not officially employed at the time. I ensure that we can keep ADVENT known on a more intimate level than mass media.”

The woman opposite her Saudia knew; she was definitely the oldest of the group, with long greying hair. The Hispanic woman was also the shortest of the group but certainly had a presence around her that everyone saw. “Ally Myer,” she inclined her head. “We’ve met several times. Director of our very own ADVENT News Network. I do not believe I need to explain what that is or why it’s important.”

And then there was the last man, sitting beside Ally. “Casen Rasmussen,” the young man said with a smile. “Chief of the Journalist Division.”

That triggered a memory in Saudia. “I’ve heard of you,” she recalled. “You were rather infamous to the Chinese government.”

“I’m infamous to everyone in power,” he corrected. “Trust me when I say the Saudis and United States hated me just as much as the Chinese.”

Saudia raised an eyebrow. “Interesting that you’re now working for us. Your type usually has not had kind words to say.”

“Oh, I’d certainly felt the same way,” Casen said. “But I have connections, and word spreads. I prefer to make up my own mind on these things, and while I have my reservations about ADVENT, I can easily say you’re doing more good than harm overall. I’m impressed that your people actually reached out to hire me. I can respect that.”

“Regardless of your personal beliefs, you are very good at your job,” Kyong said. “We want people like that.” He cleared his throat. “Onto the matter at hand. Patricia threatens to stir up a hornet’s nest with her accusations and supposed revelations.” He paused. “What, Rasmussen?”

“Just to clear the air,” Casen said. “I’d be interested to know just how true the accusations are.”

Saudia pursed her lips, and leaned back in her chair, putting on a mildly annoyed expression. “Which parts?”

“All of them,” Casen said easily. “Professional curiosity. And personal too. Even I – who had a wealth of connections on almost every person imaginable – never heard of you before you showed up on Unification Day and promised to unite the world. I feel there is a story there.”

“A story that is outside the purpose of this meeting,” Kyong interrupted sternly. “Not to mention one propagated by a traitor to Humanity.”

“If you are insinuating that ADVENT is under the control of a shadow organization that I am a part of or that I am an XCOM lacky,” Saudia gave him a thin smile. “That I can categorically deny. Consider carefully who is speaking before using it to support your own personal theories.”
It was technically true. EXALT was disbanded and no longer running. Only ADVENT remained. “Point taken, Chancellor,” Casen nodded and made a note on his pad. “And for the record I don’t think Patricia has any credibility at this point.”

“Patricia is expecting us to do one of two things,” Kyong continued. “Either for us to deny everything outright, or for us to be silent and let the story run its course. She is not expecting some uprising, but she does want this story to dominate the airwaves.”

“On that she’s succeeded,” Lesya said, setting down her tablet. “She’s single-handedly reawakened every conspiracy theorist and ADVENT skeptic all of whom are writing and linking to various hair-brained theories. We’re taking down them as fast as they pop up, as well as muting and banning those writing them, but people are talking.”

“Media is doing the same,” Ally added. “Not as slanderous, but they are continuing to talk and speculate. It is a distraction they are all falling for, as usual. The actual attacks have received minimal coverage compared to this. A scandal – even one from an obvious traitor – brings in more views.”

“Our response, Chancellor,” Kyong said. “Is to bring the war back to the front. Use Patricia as a springboard to showcase just what the Ethereal Collective is and propagates.”

“There is a wealth of content we can utilize,” Ally said. “We just need to use it effectively. Put the cost, the destruction, the purpose of the war in front of people everywhere they turn.”

“That sounds good so far,” Saudia nodded. “But how do you go about doing that? What is your plan.”

“Well, we go back to the beginning,” Casen said. “Before the shooting started, there were abductions. Entire cities vanished. Now, where did all those people go? What happened to them? More importantly – why is no one talking about them?”

“Several million are estimated to have been abducted,” Saudia recalled. “We can use that.”

“The Missing Millions,” Ally rested a forearm on the table. “The running name of the sequence we’re planning to broadcast on ANN and ADVENT affiliates. Remind people of the casualties before the war even started.”

“Catchy name,” Saudia said.

“Mine, Chancellor,” Lesya lifted a hand. “Catchy names and hashtags are more important than we give credit for.”

“To bring the war back front and center, there needs to be an intimate connection,” Casen continued. “In this case, it’s incredibly easy. It won’t be hard to find someone who’s related to one who was abducted. If it isn’t too much trouble, I think you could get the Commander and a few XCOM soldiers to describe their experience seeing the empty cities.”

It wasn’t a bad idea. “I think he’d be open to the idea.”

“It’s also essential that we leverage the horrific actions the Collective has undertaken,” Lesya added. “There are so many it’s difficult to choose just one. The Sectoid Hive. Paradise Station. Beijing. The assassination of the Imperial Family. All of it we need to continually showcase to put the atrocities of the Collective front and center.”

“To a point, I agree,” Casen nodded. “But throw the footage of babies getting thrown into a grinder
too often and you’ll desensitize people. I’d alter this plan a bit. Give them a connection to empathize with without traumatizing them with blood and gore. Have the soldiers of Beijing speak about what they saw. Talk to the people who lost family in Seoul.” His lips pursed. “I dislike how all of this is ultimately used to exploit them, but in this case it’s better that these stories are known rather than forgotten.”

“A good suggestion,” Kyong agreed. “And we should go to some efforts to verify the more dubious accounts.”

“Aegis is the most obvious,” Kieran said. “He could easily verify what we need. I also think it would be prudent for him to discuss more on the Ethereals publicly. Pull back the curtain more. The Ethereal Sana’Ligna is still on Earth, yes?”

“Yes, she’s still healing soldiers in China,” Saudia said. “Why?”

“Let her also verify,” Kieran suggested. “She may say no, but she may feel compelled to give an honest account.”

“Another thing,” Casen added. “I’d ask her where the surviving Imperial children are. I doubt the Collective is keeping them with the rest given their status. I suspect Sana may have some idea of what’s become of them. It can’t hurt.”

“Falka won’t like that, but I’ll consider it,” Saudia said. “I would say we need to draw attention to how disorganized and malicious the Collective is. How every questionable action can be swept under the rug or dismissed as ‘rogue actors’? Paradise and Beijing are the most egregious. It gives the impression that the Collective either is incompetent – or they are allowing this to happen.”

“An excellent point, Chancellor,” Ally made a note on her tablet. “One we will most certainly emphasize.”

“We should, perhaps, also draw attention to other crimes committed that have gone mostly unnoticed,” Casen pointed a pencil at Saudia. “Such as the fact that they intentionally sought to undermine and manipulate a pre-spaceflight species. I see that no one has considered just how absurd that is, not to mention unfair. We got lucky, but from what I’ve read on the Mutons, not everyone else was. The Collective seems to have a habit of finding underdeveloped species and then using them for their own ends. They have the Muton slave army, and have the brainwashed Vitakara populace.”

He tapped the end of the pencil against his cheek. “Unfortunately, we can’t have a Muton testify, but there are certainly Vitakara we can talk to. Aegis could also confirm again. Show how exploitative and manipulative the Ethereals are. What justified this invasion? What threat could we have possibly posed to them. More to the point – they had peaceful first contact with other species – so why not ours?”

To that Saudia now knew the answer, but it was one that no one else needed to know. “An excellent way of refocusing the narrative.”

“Indeed,” Casen, made another note. “While it is…minor…in the grand scheme of things, I would like ADVENT to acknowledge the Collective abductions of indigenous tribes in the Pacific, and now likely the Amazon. It may be among the lesser of their crimes, but they are ones that no one in the Collective has seen fit to apologize for or even acknowledge.” He sighed. “Not that I expect the majority to care, it’s just something that would be nice to see.”

“I think we can do something like that,” Kyong nodded. “Now how should we handle Patricia
herself? She deserves some kind of response.”

Saudia laced her fingers together, her own solution she had dwelled on the night before. “She is a puppet. She may think she is not, but she is. And if she is not, turn her into one. Patricia Trask is dead. What everyone saw is a fake controlled by the Imperator. Destroy this fake and shatter her credibility. Have her comrades denounce her. Have her parents disown her. Demand her proof. Tie this traitor directly to the Imperator; a mouthpiece with no true free will.” She looked around. “Does that sound acceptable?”

Ally smiled. “Very much so, Chancellor. I believe that we can work with.”

Saudia nodded to Kyong. “You will have whatever you need for this. Change the narrative and hold onto it this time. Enough so that this situation will not come up again.”

“Yes, Chancellor,” Kyong placed a fist over his heart. “It shall be done.”

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Classified Location

5/25/2017 – 12:15 P.M.

“ID please.”

Loke Hemmingson handed it over. The man at the terminal took it and scanned it once. A nod. “You’re cleared. Please proceed into the second room in the hallway.”

“Appreciated,” he took his ID back and waited for Orla to similarly finish being checked. While he was waiting, he looked around the room. Out of everything he had experienced with the transition to ADVENT, this was among the shadiest things he’d been a part of. A promotion offer that they couldn’t tell him about on the spot, a visit in the middle of the night and rides in blacked-out trucks and planes, and arrival to a building that appeared to have tighter security than ADVENT HQ.

It had his interest, he had to admit. Looked like he was far from the only one either. Men and some women were also escorted in by ADVENT soldiers – there was a PRIEST hanging out on the side which he wasn’t comfortable with, but as far as he knew it hadn’t broken into his mind…yet. What was interesting was that it didn’t seem like all of them were military.

Some wore civilian clothes; some wore uniforms that weren’t ADVENT. He and Orla were just wearing standard fatigues, since they’d been told that they wouldn’t need their armor. Most at least looked decently in shape. Whatever ADVENT was doing, they were pulling from a lot more than just the military.

“Well that was a waste of time,” Orla muttered as he walked up, shoving the wallet in his pocket. “That guy knew as well as me that no one is here who wasn’t invited. Purely a waste of time.”

“More likely an extra precaution,” Loke assuaged as they both walked down the bare hallway. “ADVENT isn’t taking chances here. That’s for sure.”

“Well, we’re here now,” the bearded man smiled. “Last chance to make your bet on what this is.”

“I’ve changed mine,” Loke said. “Alien exploration outfit.”

Orla started at him. “What?”
“This isn’t just military,” Loke nodded back to the room they’d come from. “You see all those people? At least half were civilians. That isn’t a military outfit. ADVENT wants to expand their reach. They’ll need explorers and people to establish bases. This also needs military protection. The first one will be delicate. Which is why they want the best.”

“Alright, then tell me how ADVENT is going to get us to this hypothetical planet?” Orla asked sarcastically.

“I have no idea,” Loke admitted. “But do you have a better idea that makes sense?”

“Yeah, and I was also paying attention back there.” The door to the room they were assigned slid open and they stepped into a fairly large auditorium with rows of simple seats. It was about half-full, and they virtually had their pick. “Aquatic special forces unit.”

“See, I’d agree,” Loke said as they took their seats. “Except that not everyone is military. The vast majority aren’t SEALs or Frogmen.”

“I recognized several of the uniforms of those civilians,” Orla countered. “All of them related to undersea exploration or navigation. Didn’t recognize a lot, but this definitely has something to do with water.”

“We’ll see,” Loke looked around the room as it filled. There was definitely a diverse crowd, all of which made it more confusing what it was for – as well as making him more curious.

“Guess they kept you two in the dark as well,” the one sitting beside him commented. Loke looked to see a large black man with a much smaller Chinese woman beside him.

“You too?” Loke asked. “Yep. No idea what it is?”

“Think your friend is on the right track,” the man said, indicating the woman beside him. “Guess I should make introductions. Gale Barett, formerly a US Marine turned ADVENT Soldier turned to whatever this is.” He extended a hand which Loke took.

“Loke Hemmingson,” he said. “Former Frogman turned Lancer turned to this.”

“Orla Holst,” his friend added. “Same as him. Friend through the hell that was training and since then.”

“Frogmen?” The woman inquired. “You’re SEALs?”

Both Loke and Orla laughed. “We’re not American Ma’am,” Loke chucked. “Danish special forces. Also called Frogmen.”

“SEALs,” Orla chortled. “The SEALs wish they were as tough as we are.”

“I know a couple that might contest that,” Gale said dryly.

“Please,” Orla disputed. “SEALs get one actually hard week of training. We get months.”

“In any case,” Loke said, calming down. “We’ve been friends since we both passed training. And your name is, ma’am?”

“Zhi Xue,” she answered. “Previously conducted undersea research for China. Was relocated after…recent events,” she trailed off, then shook her head. “Someone in ADVENT must have read my work. I don’t know why I’d be here otherwise.”
“Ah,” Loke cocked his head. “Were you around Beijing?”

“No, thankfully,” she said. “I was out of the country at the time. And stayed there until everything calmed down. But I know there were good people that didn’t make it. I’d prefer not thinking of how they died.” There was some silence after that.

“So, Frogmen then,” Gale said, changing the subject. “I guess transition to ADVENT was a big change.”

“Yeah,” Loke agreed. “I don’t think ADVENT really had a solid place to put us. We’re good soldiers, but they didn’t really use our actual training. Something I assume they’ll work out,” he nodded around. “Maybe this is it.”

“I’m mildly surprised you’re still in ADVENT,” Orla joked. “Didn’t think Marines would accept being folded into another branch.”

Gale rolled his eyes. “Oh, we grumbled about it. We have a high opinion of ourselves – deserved obviously – but not that high. Really, who’s going to complain about something as stupid as that during an alien invasion?” He clicked his teeth. “Come on. We have aliens to kill.”

“And have you actually killed any?” Loke asked.

“I actually have,” Gale nodded, flashing a smile. “Operation Sherman veteran here. Ten confirmed kills, and I think I can be listed as an accomplice to two dozen more. You?”

“A lot,” Loke said noncommittally. “I stopped counting after thirty. It gets to the point where it isn’t even important anymore.”

“Speak for yourself,” Orla muttered under his breath.

The room was filling up now, and most of the seats were taken. What appeared to be a Filipino man – or an Indian, Loke couldn’t tell which – took the seat next to Orla. “This cool, right?” He asked, voice tapered with an accent.

Orla shrugged, his form at least twice the size of the smaller man. “Sure. What’s your name?”

“Denzel Silva,” he said hurriedly, taking a seat. “ Didn’t realize there was going to be….” he looked around. “So many military people.”

Loke raised an eyebrow. “What do you do? We’ve already got an ocean researcher.” Zhi waved a hand at that.

“Cave diver,” he said proudly. “One of the best, if I do say so myself. Was tired of doing nothing during the war; saw China, decided to change that. Enlisted, and ADVENT said they had a perfect place for me.”

“Huh,” Loke saw that there was some movement up at the front where there was a slightly raised podium. “Well, looks like we’ll be getting our explanation shortly.”

Sure enough, a few minutes later a high-ranking officer walked out onto the podium complete with an escort. Everyone rose and the soldiers immediately saluted, with the civilians quickly trying to imitate them. Loke didn’t recognize the man, he was older than most of them, black, and wore a uniform of blue and silver that was distinctly ADVENT, but not a division Loke recognized.

“Thank you for your patience,” he began, taking the podium. “All of you have been selected
because you’ve been cleared by our Classification Division. Something a very small percentage of the population can claim. In short, this means all of you are reliable and can keep secrets. What you have the opportunity to be a part of now is the most important operation ADVENT is undertaking at this moment.”

He paused. “Which means we cannot take any risks. Before I continue, be aware that if you decide to stay, you will be outfitted with Manchurian Restraints. Not invasive, but enough so you can never reveal what you are a part of. If this is acceptable, then I will continue. If not, then you are free to leave and ADVENT will find another place to utilize your talents.”

Well, that was a development. He’d been a part of ADVENT long enough to know they weren’t lying about the severity of the restraints. Perhaps naïve to trust them, but at the same time, they hadn’t given a reason to question yet. A few got up quietly and left the room – all civilians Loke noted with some amusement – but the vast majority, including the cave diver beside them, stayed put.

When the last person had left, the man continued. “I am Arthur McKenzie, Commander of the Atlantis Division, of which you are all a part of. I am overseeing the Atlantis Project, which in short, is the construction of underwater installations for eventual starship production.” He paused. “ADVENT is building a fleet in secret. It is estimated that within a year Humanity will have complete interstellar capabilities.”

That set the room alight in whispers. As for himself, Loke was stunned in a good way. This was definitely living up to the hype. “Fucking called it,” Orla muttered under his breath.

“The facilities constructed are acceptable enough to begin housing staff,” Arthur continued. “Soldiers, scouts, engineers, architects, and more. You are the first wave of Atlantis, and will play a key role in the eventual defeat of the Collective from Earth, and our Solar System. You will be given specific instructions soon, but there are a few more details to be aware of.”

He looked to the side, and motioned forward. “This has not been achieved alone. We have been receiving a significant amount of support from Vitakara defectors, as well as others.” The people in the room didn’t stay completely quiet when they saw a Dath’Haram walk out, along with two other aliens. One within a suit, with other parts that looked oddly like a fish, and what was unmistakably an Andromedon.

“The Collective is more fractured than the majority in ADVENT know,” Arthur said. “As of now ADVENT has formed alliances with the Sar’Manda Empire and several Andromedon Unions, all of which are assisting in supplying and designing our spacecraft. When ADVENT takes to the stars, we will be able to emerge victorious.”

Loke whistled. This was big. Vitakara defectors were one thing, but whole Andromedon Unions? Granted, he didn’t even really know what that was, or what this Sar’Manda Empire was, but that had to be a good thing. He could almost forget about how Patricia existed and was a walking embodiment of the worst of his species.

“The purpose of the Atlantis Project isn’t just to construct a fleet,” Arthur said. “It is also to prepare a crew, officer corps, and military for space combat. We will be going into this realm of the conflict vastly devoid of experience and skill. That is where our allies will come in. They will also be assisting in the development of the ADVENT Naval Officer Corps, as well as the ADVENT Marine Division.”

And that, Loke suspected, was why many of them were here. To be the first ADVENT Marines. But for space, not land. He couldn’t help but feel pretty excited about that. He was actually going
to be a part of something this groundbreaking. *The first Marines in space. I can get behind that.*

“I will be clear,” Arthur said. “Throughout this period, you will be working with aliens in some capacity. Regardless of personal feelings, I expect them to be treated as you would treat a fellow Human. They are risking a significant amount being on this planet, and we would do well to remember their contributions. I expect there will be no problems?”

“No sir!” The soldiers barked out, while the civilians just sort of opened and closed their mouths.

“Good,” Arthur nodded. “Processing will begin shortly as well as transfer to Atlantis proper. In the meantime, we will be here to answer questions you have. These particular individuals are Valencia and Ysith, both architects.” Loke assumed that the Dath’Haram was Valencia since it was obviously a woman, and the Sar’Manda would obviously be Ysith. “And this is V’Warsan,” Arthur finished. “Ship consultant.”

The Andromedon moved his massive frame, as if imitating a nod, which ended up looking like a short bow. “Processing will begin now,” Arthur said. “When the Manchurian Restraints have been applied, you’ll be given your assignments. Good luck, and thank you.”

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*ADVENT High Command - Switzerland*

5/23/2017 – 11:15 A.M.

“Collective forces are continuing to build up in Florida, and they are pushing back on the West now,” Army-Commander Ran Songhyon was saying to the assembled group of the top military brass in ADVENT. Along with some advisors like Saudia who observed the holographic display before her. “If this continues, we’re going to be continually on the defensive.”

“Holding the line will work,” Weekes stated. “That’s what special forces are for. Sabotage and assassinate.”

“A lot of good that will do,” Stein scowled. “They have the ability to call down whatever they need. Even if you sabotage all their Gateways, the sheer numbers they have will buy time until they can have more shipped down.”

“The PRIEST Division is a significant force-multiplier,” Laura said. “A coordinated attack could destroy a Collective foothold. I’d argue that’s necessary before they fortify their position in Florida further.”

“Except there is at least the Battlemaster there,” Ran reminded her. “The Ethereals aren’t sitting back and waiting to see what happens. This isn’t taking into account when they figure out how to properly utilize their Sectoids. We still hold the psionic advantage, but that isn’t a guarantee, especially when their vehicle production has surpassed our own.”

Saudia looked around the room as the conversation went back and forth. All of this ultimately centered around what they were going to do about Miami, which was likely going to fall unless there was a significant influx of defenders. The problem being that it was almost a no-win scenario as intelligence had it that the Battlemaster was personally heading to the city, and the Collective was also beginning to exploit Cuba as a staging ground.

The Florida Keys had also fallen, which had been unsurprising, but it was a setback in the defense. Saudia didn’t necessarily feel bad that Cuba was now occupied – their stubbornness in refusing to accept ADVENT was their own fault – but their fall made things more difficult. “If I may
interrupt,” Chief Responder Daisy Fox interjected, having been quiet for most of the meeting thus far.

Laura waved. “Go ahead.”

“From what you’ve said, this does not appear to be a winning situation,” Daisy indicated the city. “Our options are retreat to Tampa and stage a more fortified defense, or stay, and eventually lose and hopefully take out a greater number. I’d prefer we not sacrifice soldiers. It’s a wasteful game. The Collective outnumbers us by billions. Trading lives accomplishes nothing except look better on a spreadsheet.” A dark finger tapped her lip. “We are still attempting to fight this as a conventional war. We need to transition beyond throwing armies at each other, because then we will lose.”

“Thank you,” Weekes muttered. “We win this war by being smart, not ‘slightly better in combat’ than they are.”

“In that case, what do you propose?” Ran demanded. “Giving up would be a bad idea for multiple reasons.”

“You said the Battlemaster is heading there,” Daisy recalled. “I say that Miami becomes ground zero for a trap to kill him.”

“So ADVENT Intelligence claims,” Laura said. Saudia wished Elizabeth was here, but she’d unexpectedly had to handle an arising situation that Saudia hadn’t pressed the details for at the moment. It better have been important.

“I will point out that the Battlemaster seems to know when nuclear weapons are being used,” Wing Commander Elliot Nicholson added. “Every single time he’s retreated. He won’t step foot in a city if he knows that’s a possibility.”

“It’s a matter of reaction,” Daisy clarified. “We have a number of Gateways there. Would he really be able to react fast enough to escape the radius of one?”

“Doubtful,” Ran conceded. “But I somehow don’t think it’ll be that easy. He’s not an idiot.”

“No, which is why it needs to be convincing,” Daisy said. “A gradual retreat, and then into a city laden with traps and explosives. Conventional. He’ll be less suspicious that way. When we have confirmation he’s within the radius, we send over a nuke and blow him up. A larger blow to the Collective than a billion Mutons.”

“I dislike the idea of destroying a city,” Saudia pursed her lips. “But as you said, the Battlemaster is worth the cost.” She looked to Laura. “You’ll have my approval if you want to authorize it.”

“I’ll consider it,” Laura said. “Songhyon, Fox, both of you put together a plan for approval.”

“I’d also advise that we remove anything of historical or cultural worth beforehand,” Daisy added. “I don’t know how much there is, but it is better than not making an effort at all.”

“Noted,” Laura nodded. “I’ll be sure and have that lined up if the plan is approved.”

“I’d also like to propose something,” Grand Admiral Kamila Malone said, speaking up now that the topic had shifted. The silver-haired woman leaned forward. “Cuba presents an opportunity for us. I can have a fleet move to begin shelling it; preparation for invasion. Denying the Collective Cuba would buy us time.”
“If nothing else, we should know what they’re doing there,” Ran nodded. “Though I feel like the Fleets should remain focused on the SAS – and protecting the supply lines.” He grimaced. “Knew it was too good to last.”

Saudia felt the same. Perhaps it had been a naïve hope that the Collective would ignore the vast shipping lanes across the world, but it had come to pass. And they weren’t just sinking the ships; if there was an opportunity, they were boarding and commandeering them before likely relocating the supplies to an allied power like the SAS.

As a result, now there needed to be escorts on all shipping lines, or at least enough warships in a position to intervene if a distress call was sent out. Worse was that the Collective was also exploiting their aerial advantage and sending Sectoid fighters to shoot down supply aircrafts, and to protect that meant that a large portion of their air force was going to be tied up.

All of it signaled a shift in how the Collective was approaching the conflict now. More fronts, more crippling actions, more overall strategy to their actions. Still, the ground war was the most important, and even with the setbacks, they could still fight back enough. She’d have to ask XCOM if their Sovereign ally could assist in the defense of the seas.

He needed to do something to make up for utterly failing against Patricia.

“How is the SAS enduring?” Saudia asked. “Significant developments?”

“The constant attacks seem to have kept them at bay, but they’re becoming less and less effective,” Elliot looked down briefly at his tablet. “There are some no-fly zones now under any circumstances. The SAS is using some nasty missile systems. The Night Witches fly too low for comfort, and I lost an entire wing of them finding this out.”

“Our own barrages keep them occupied, but it’s becoming a case of diminishing returns,” Kamila added. “It’s also only a matter of time before they strike the Fleet. For now they still appear to be focusing on diplomacy, which we think they’ve had limited success on.”

“Good,” Saudia allowed a thin smile. “They need to be contained.”

“Betos needs to be removed,” Weekes muttered. “She should have been dealt with the moment she took her band of traitors down there.”

“A mistake we won’t repeat again,” Saudia said. “However, I’d still prefer to capture her alive. She’ll serve as an effective demonstration on the fate of traitors. Though if we have an opportunity to kill her, we should do so.”

“The day I march the bitch to the Experimentation Labs will make this all worth it,” Stein said coldly. “Death is too good, but if it comes first, we should take it. Problem is that she’s likely being protected by an Ethereal. We need to figure out which one before figuring out a plan to kill or capture her.”

“There are only a few options,” Daisy said. “Leave that to me and Falka. We’ll determine which Ethereal is there, if there is one at all.”

“There is one more thing,” Saudia added. “The status of Project Ra.”

“On track,” Laura said, a slight bit of relief in her voice. “And not a moment too soon. Feng would have more details, but I’ve been keeping up to date with the updates. Falka has begun allowing it access to monitored social media feeds.”
“Training it,” Saudia noted. “Good.”

“Still highly monitored from what she’s said,” Laura added. “It’s still at the level of a machine intelligence, not a true AI yet. XCOM was set to help, but we’re expecting their contributions to be minimal until they are effectively reestablished.”

“Interesting story,” Weekes commented with a smirk. “I heard the name they gave it.”

“Oh dear,” Daisy sighed. “Is it as unnecessarily fancy as everything in the PRIEST Division?”

“Not especially egregious,” Saudia had also heard it. “PATRIOT. Fitting considering what its purpose will be.”

“I suppose,” she agreed. “There are worse names.”

“In any event,” Laura finished. “We expect to come fully online sooner than later.”

“Excellent. That’ll be sufficient for now,” Saudia and all of them stood. “Continue to keep me appraised of the situation.”

“Yes, Chancellor.”

Saudia departed the room, knowing there were a lot more details to be worked out, but she had a number of other tasks to complete first. Stepping out into the hallway, she expected her Guard but found it essentially, empty. That immediately put her on guard, until she saw a man rise from a nearby chair.

He was massive; one of the biggest men she’d ever seen in her life. His face was round and most would describe it as brutish, especially due to his bald scalp. Not especially attractive or intelligent-looking, with a large scar over his left eye which now had a cybernetic replacement. The light still shone off the scar on pale skin, and the opposite ice blue eye was unreadable.

His uniform was the black and silver colors of the Inquisitors, and Saudia knew what was happening now. She pursed her lips. “Grand Inquisitor, a pleasure to see you again.”

“Likewise, Chancellor,” Declan Rodgers, Grand Inquisitor of the Intelligence Branch of the PRIEST Division answered, his voice as drawl and thuggish as the rest of him. Traits that Saudia knew better than to put much stock in, given that this man had once been the top agent of the FBI. He was frighteningly intelligent, which was why Elizabeth had likely recommended him for the position.

“I trust your meeting was productive, Chancellor?” Keith Watkins walked up on cue, moving with purpose as he appraised the Chancellor.

“Very much so,” Saudia answered. “Your absence was conspicuous.”

He gave a thin smile. “I’ve been occupied, Chancellor, as you can imagine.” He nodded to Rodgers, who walked off and turned and motioned for Saudia to follow. “Come with me, Chancellor. We need to talk.”

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_Busan Military Base, Busan – South Korea_

5/25/2017 – 1:22 P.M.
“You’re serious?” Duri asked, blinking.

“Of course I am,” Lieutenant Cho Dae-Ho answered dryly. “In fact, I’m more surprised that it took this long for an official recommendation. I’d put your name in a while ago, and I guess it got someone’s attention.” He paused. “Although I think that it’s indicating that you’re not going to be in Busan much longer. The fighting’s died down, and ADVENT wants squads like yours on the front lines.”

“I see,” Duri nodded slowly. “If that’s where they want me, then I’ll be happy to go.” He couldn’t help but think that it would be good to leave. There wasn’t anything left here he wanted to go back to. Just sadness and bad memories. He had the war and his squad to distract him, but where he was never quite vanished.

Lieutenant Cho seemed to pick up on it. “Since we’re on the topic…is there a specific place you’d wish to be deployed? If they plan on doing that, of course.”

He considered for a moment. The Americas were where the war was fully renewed, and he had two soldiers from one region apiece. “The war is heavy in South America and the United States,” he finally said. “We’d likely do the most good there.”

“Noted, Officer,” Cho made a note on a sticky note. “Keep this up and you’ll be a Lieutenant before long. Not a lot of people still have the majority of their original squad.”

“I’d imagine,” Duri agreed. “I’ve been lucky.”

“Not just luck at this point,” Cho disputed. “You have a talent, and a desire to keep your people alive. Hold onto that. I’ve already seen too many distant officers already.”

Duri shrugged. “I don’t have anything else. I’d prefer everyone else have to go back to when everything is done.”

“Understandable,” Cho nodded. “But I wouldn’t quite say your life is over either. You’ll find something to live for besides your squad or killing aliens. I’m sure of it.”

Duri wasn’t as convinced, but he wasn’t going to contest the kind words. Too rude and there was a part of him that hoped the Lieutenant was right. “In any case,” Cho stood and extended a hand. “Even if ADVENT is going to send you somewhere else, you’re not getting out of duties here. Welcome to the Busan Central Unit Command. Congratulations on your promotion – as well as your squad.”

“Thank you, sir,” Duri nodded, taking the hand and giving a firm shake. “It’s an honor.”


Duri returned the salute and left the room, and was only mildly surprised to see Beatriz waiting outside. “Patrol finished early?”

“No, you just took a long time,” she answered, smiling. “Cara thinks you got a promotion, so I came down to see. You don’t get called in like that regularly.”

“A technical one,” Duri clarified joining her side as they exited the bustling office building. “I think it applies to all of us. Our squad is now classified as Tier III.”

“Really?” Her eyes lit up. “That means you’re on the CUC!”
“Yes it does,” he agreed, taking a breath and rubbing his eyes. “I can’t wait for all the meetings and debates.”

“Hey,” she said. “This is a good thing. You earned it.”

“I think I have everyone to thank for that,” Duri corrected. “All of you are good enough to stay alive, and they think that it was all me. ‘Low casualty rates’ is the term used. It’s rarer than even I thought, apparently.”

“Yeah,” her energy faded a bit. “I believe that. No shortage of memorials…and it’s only going to become more common.” She grimaced. “Especially now that XCOM will be occupied putting down their traitor.”

The sudden appearance of Patricia Trask, as an agent of the aliens no less, had been a massive shock. Personally, Duri was split on if it really was her, or just a mockup to fuck with everyone. Regardless of what this Patricia was, she had power and at least was convincing enough that ADVENT was taking her seriously.

“This promotion is going to be more dangerous for us,” Duri warned after a few minutes. “The Lieutenant implied this promotion was given because they might deploy us to the front lines. The Collective doesn’t really have a presence here right now, but they are attacking in the Americas.” He glanced over to her. “Have you-?”

“Yeah,” her lips twitched. “ADVENT is concentrating on defending Brazil. Venezuela is…well, ADVENT took losses in Colombia, so Venezuela is up next. Just not a lot of defenses built up, and without those, no one stands a chance. Probably will be a few weeks before we hear most of the country is under alien control.”

“I’m sorry,” Duri told her. “Do you have anyone you know there?”

“Just some family,” she answered neutrally. “I told them to get to Brazil or Mexico the moment the Collective started attacking. I heard from my mother they’re in Mexico, so they’re…safe at least.” She sighed loudly. “I almost told them to get on a plane to Florida or Cuba.”

“But you didn’t,” Duri said. “And they’re fine now.”

“I know,” she answered, shaking her head to clear it. “Still, it’s too close for me to feel comfortable with. I could have gotten them killed.”

“Even if you did…” Duri thought how to say it. “You did all that you could. None of us could see the future, otherwise I would have had my family get out of Seoul as soon as possible. Instead…” he shrugged. “I thought it was safe. You don’t have to think about that now; dwelling on something that didn’t happen isn’t healthy.”

They walked a few minutes under an overcast sky. “You’re right,” she finally said. “But…maybe you should do the same thing sometimes.”

He pursed his lips to a thin line. If only it were that simple. But it highlighted to him just how important decisions were. Ones that were literally a choice between life and death. If he made the wrong decisions now, it would mean his squad – Beatriz herself – would die, and already his decision had killed his family unintentionally. How much easier would that be able to happen on the battlefield.

She did have a point, something that had been emphasized to him in sessions. Their death is not your fault.
“Maybe I should,” was all he said.

“Come on,” she took his hand and picked up a faster pace. “We shouldn’t feel bad right now. You got a promotion! Let’s let the others know. It would do everyone some good to hear positive news every now and then.”

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Classified Location

5/25/2017 – 1:27 P.M.

Arthur hadn’t been exaggerating. They clearly intended to begin processing as efficiently as possible. Groups of people were taken out at a time, and everyone else wandered the room and talked with their superiors and alien allies. Understandably, the aliens were treated with some caution with the majority hanging back at first.

Ironically, it was the civilians in the room who began engaging the aliens. Loke could only speculate as to why this was the case, but at least for him...aliens were something to be killed effectively, not talked to. He’d personally never met an alien, except for the one his Lancer squad had captured and later executed when she didn’t have anything useable.

That, now that he remembered it, was a mission that demonstrated the aliens could be tough. Borelians especially were difficult to break. Mutons were too stupid to know anything, and actually subduing them was even harder. Oyariah didn’t go down easy either, and he’d gained a healthy respect for them when one had caved in the head of his unit captain.

Don’t engage them in close range. Even Executors didn’t fare well.

That being said, a lot of aliens were squishy and weak. It was interesting that there seemed to be a limited spectrum of reactions, and the diversity was across races. Vitakarians were the only ones he’d observe display hard courage, as well as complete submission. Cobrarians just made them all uncomfortable so they were usually shot on sight. They were essentially never important.

Dath’Haram he’d only encountered a few times, all of whom had been in medical roles of some kind. Priority targets, and they’d gone down quickly. They were...certainly the most expressive of the races. All you really had to do was threaten them and they’d surrender. Of course sometimes this happened at times where they didn’t want their cover to be blown, but other times it had gained ADVENT a nice cache of wounded alien captives.

He’d never even seen a Sar’Manda before today, but from the looks of them, he felt they were among the tougher alien races.

Then there were the Andromedons. Durable and intelligent. Every Lancer disliked fighting them because they were among the more competent of alien forces. Ones that wouldn’t go down even when the pilot died. Loke personally thought ADVENT would do well to take some ideas from them...and it appeared they were taking that more literally than even he thought.

Orla was talking to said Andromedon now. “So, what do you think of the fish-man?” He asked Gale beside him.

“I can’t read aliens well,” Gale said slowly, as they watched the alien speak to a civilian. An interesting thing Loke noted was that they spoke through a kind of translator accompanied by a complex series of hand motions. “But I think that guy is as wary of us as we are of them.”
“Poor guy,” Loke smirked sarcastically. “You going to say hi?”

“Nah,” Gale snorted. “I’m going to talk to the Andromedon, who, speaking of, is open. I’ll see you later.”

“You too,” Loke nodded as Gale wandered off, and looked to see the Dath’Haram woman wasn’t occupied. Her name was… Valenca? Valen? No, Valencia. Right. Well, he’d at least said hello to the rest of the aliens, he might as well include this one. He strode over, and realized that while she was smaller than the hulking Andromedon, he was just barely taller than her – and he wasn’t exactly small.

“Hello!” She greeted in a surprisingly pleasant voice, tinged with an inflection he couldn’t place. Obviously not, she’s an alien. She bared her teeth, pulling her mouth back in an attempt at a smile. Something that would probably be off-putting to pretty much everyone. At…least she was trying. “I don’t believe we’ve spoken.”

“No, we haven’t,” Loke answered. “But considering we might be working together in some capacity, it would be good to change that.”

“I agree,” she extended a green-skinned hand. Loke remembered that Dath’Haram lived in jungles, and she would fit right into one easily. She’d clearly been informed of greeting customs here, which he appreciated. “Valencia. A pleasure to meet you.”

“Loke Hemmingson,” he took the hand which had a firm grip. A closer appraisal of the alien showed that she likely wasn’t physically weak, but limber. They were supposed to be flexible, so that made sense. He raised an eyebrow. “You speak our language well.”

“One of them,” she clarified. “Your species has many.”

“That we do,” he grunted. “Hopefully not for much longer. Different languages are an unnecessary pain.” He paused to get change the subject. “So. An architect. For these underwater stations?”

“Indeed,” she nodded. “Specifically undersea self-sustainability and hydroponics. I spent my time on Vitakar in a limited number of projects with the Sar’Manda. My work was on transitioning their techniques to other races.”

That was an interesting detail, and one that Loke admittedly didn’t think about. Of course they would need food. “Useful,” a thought struck him. “So how did you get here? From what I know, the only aliens are defectors – aside from the Andromedons and Sar’Manda who I guess have joined us. An odd skill for a soldier.”

“Mostly a number of coincidences,” she said, waving a hand. “I was approached by the Sar’Manda. I suppose I’d worked with them enough to make an impression, luckily a positive one. They usually dislike outsiders.”

“I suppose you opposed the war then?” He asked. “Otherwise that’s a risk.”

“I… do oppose it,” she said carefully. “More on principle than this specific situation. I’d prefer for the fighting to stop altogether, but this is a case where there is one side in the right. It was…easier to ignore on Vitakar. We aren’t told much about what is happening here. Now that I know, it’s not right to do nothing.”

“Huh,” Loke crossed his arms. “And I’d heard you were all pacifists.”

“I am,” she answered with a short bite to her words. “Which is why I’m not going to fight in your
war. But I am going to help in the background to give you a better chance. Just because we don’t believe in fighting to solve our problems doesn’t mean we don’t feel strongly about doing our part.” She bared her teeth. “I suspect you’ve encountered Dath’Haram before. They did not enlist because they wanted war, but because they wanted their people to be healed and come back alive.”

“I’ve encountered them,” Loke nodded. “I can respect that, even if they barely put up a fight.”

“We’re not fighters,” she said simply. “War is foreign to us. Taking lives even more so. It’s more disturbing the ease of which other species treat life.”

“Ha,” Loke grunted. “Believe me, I wish all of us could kill without issue. It’d make war a lot easier for all involved. The amount of people who can do that are fewer than you’d think.” He paused. “Although I will say that it’s easier with aliens. Especially ones invading your planet.”

She almost looked disappointed at that, but gave a slight nod. “I suppose it would. You are a soldier, but what kind?”

“Lancer Corps,” he said. “ADVENT Special Forces.”

“Ah,” she said, then paused. “If I may inquire, the defectors speak of the Lancers. Are the rumors that you don’t take prisoners true?”

“Special Forces aren’t usually used for capture,” Loke allowed a smile. “We go in and complete our objective. Captives slow us down or expose us. We usually don’t take prisoners on ops, too much of a risk and slows us down. It’s not exactly a revelation. Your Lurainian does the same thing, though usually much less effectively.”

“I see,” she said. “I suppose in the context of your species, that is understandable. Apologies for the questions, I’m just curious at how different your people are. Not even the Borelians display your attitudes. Especially not males.”

He snorted. “Come again?”

“Borelian dispositions are affected by gender,” she explained. “Where for Humans that line appears more blurred.”

“Well, you’ll learn a lot more about Humans coming up,” Loke said. “And knowing us, probably a lot you didn’t want to know about.”

She appeared to try and smile again. “I hope that when this is done I will be able to go back to my people and help them understand your species. Perhaps that will be the first step to ending this war. Understanding destroys barriers and ignorance. Something the Zararch intentionally keep suppressed. They don’t want us to know about what you are. Just a vague threat in the stars.”

“If you want to help end the war, then I’m all for it,” Loke nodded. “But not before the ones who decided to invade our planet die.”

“I do not wish death on them,” she said carefully. “But I am afraid you will have a greater chance to do that than the Elders seeing reason and ending the war. I fear it has gone past that point.”

“Loke Hemmingson?” A new voice interjected, and he turned to see a uniformed man approaching.

“Yes sir,” he answered, saluting. “Is it time?”

“Yes, please follow us.”
“I’ll see you on the other side then, perhaps,” Loke told Valencia. “Until next time.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Loke,” she nodded, and he was led away. Well, that had been more interesting than he’d expected. She was more reasonable than he’d expected, even if she was a self-declared pacifist.

But one smart enough to see right from wrong, so some character flaws could be forgiven. He’d have to talk to her later. Right now though, he needed to prepare himself for the application of the Restraints. Something he was not, especially, looking forward to.

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Skyranger

5/25/2017 – 7:12 P.M.

The skyranger was full, and for the most part the trip had been fairly quiet. None of them knew each other that well, only that they were all recruited and approached for the same thing. The newest soldiers of XCOM. Some had joined because they’d requested it, and given that XCOM had recently come under attack, it made sense they would pull from this available pool.

Others had been specifically sought out, and as far as he knew, all had accepted. Was anyone really going to turn down an invitation from the Commander himself? Unlikely, and he had a suspicion that XCOM wasn’t approaching anyone unless they were fairly certain they would join. Then there were the people like him, who were directed towards XCOM when ADVENT didn’t know what to do.

“Show of hands,” the woman opposite him finally said. She was Asian, probably Chinese. “Do we have any psions here?”

“Guilty,” a man with a messy beard and tan skin said, a few seats down. “Dynamo.”

Kunio Azuma lifted his own hand. “Add me. And…unknown.”

“The hell does that mean?” Another man commented.

“It means I’m not quite sure,” Kunio shrugged. “They thought I was a telepath, then a telekine, and I’ve tested as sensitive to all disciplines, but what I’m naturally good at doesn’t reflect my Trask Level.”

“Which is what?” The other psion asked. “Fifty-four here.”

Kunio considered. “Eighty-seven.”

There were some whistles at that. “Wow,” the Chinese woman commented. “Leviathan-class.”

“Yes, which is why everyone was confused,” Kunio added. “The original plan was to have me focus in one and see if that helped. It worked…kind of. Except when I needed it.”

“You see action?” Another woman asked.

He pursed his lips. “Japan.”

The Chinese woman’s eyebrows furrowed. “Which one?”

“The one right before China was invaded.”
“And you lived?” The question was almost in awe. “I didn’t hear of any groups making it out.”

“Because no one really did make it out,” Kunio shook his head, not especially wanting to recall the battle. If a term that generous could be applied. “It was a massacre. The Cleanser Ships took out all of our defenses and barracks, and then the Muton legions finished off whatever was left, as well as Chryssalids. My entire squad was killed, and I should have died too.”

“So what happened?”

“I moved,” Kunio answered. “One second I was facing down a Chryssalid, and I guess on instinct, I created a portal and stepped through it. Into London. I was almost hit by a car when I came out.”

“How did you move between Japan and London by accident?” The other psion demanded.

“That,” Kunio let out a breath, leaning back. “Is a good question. After I was debriefed, I got sent to answer some questions the PRIEST Division had for me, and they told me a few days later I was being transferred to XCOM. They said that they have psions who are trained in this teleportation discipline. So here I am.”

“Well then,” the other psion said. “That’s definitely unique. I’ve only heard of Ethereals being able to do it. The theories are sound, at least to me, but I’ve never attempted it.”

“If you asked me how I did it, I couldn’t really tell you,” Kunio said. “But that’s why I’m here. To learn and use it to fight.”

“So why London though?” Came a comment.

Kunio sighed. “If I was acting on instinct, maybe because I associated the country with the assassination of the Imperial Family.”

“Ah,” the face of the woman opposite him grew somber. “You’re from Japan.”

“Yes,” he said with a slow nod. “The war’s hit us hard.”

“Yours and Australia,” came an agreeing voice. “Not fair you got dealt that, but we’ll kick the aliens off them soon enough. I have faith.”

“As we go to help XCOM which has just suffered a loss,” the psion commented sarcastically. “But yeah, I agree. XCOM’s probably angry right now. I’ve heard stories of this Commander.”

“Like what?” Kunio asked.

“Like he’s oddly enigmatic, he doesn’t have a name, and pretty much everyone respects and fears him,” he listed off. “Supposedly an advisor to the Chancellor herself and Commander Christiaens. And he’s ruthless to aliens.”

“I wonder,” the woman mused. “Just how much of what Patricia claimed is true.”

“Assuming that’s her at all,” Kunio shook his head. “I doubt the aliens are above faking someone like that. If so, maybe we should thank XCOM for making ADVENT run like a competent government.”

“I guess we’ll find out the truth soon enough,” the woman said. “Also, Lian Zhao. Former PLA. Fought in Beijing the whole way through.” She grimaced. “I don’t recommend it.”

“I can’t really imagine it,” the woman sitting next to her said.
“Don’t,” Lian said firmly. “And whatever you come up with…what was actually there was worse. At least Isomnum’s dead.”

“Isomnum was only part of it,” the psion said. “There is still that Paradise station. Iyaad al-Molla by the way. Defected to ADVENT when they were conquering the Middle East.”

“Oh,” Kunio frowned. “That’s the first I’d heard of defectors from that.”

“Not a lot of us, but we existed,” Iyaad said. “I don’t blame my countryman for resisting. We’ve been the scapegoats and taken advantage of by people stronger than us for decades; America, Russia, the Saudis. It was a futile effort to fight back against ADVENT though. Anyone should have seen it. I was more worried about the aliens, but someone just had to go provoke Israel and…” he waved a hand. “Well, you know the rest. ADVENT’s at least helping rebuild, and the House of Saud is dead, so there’s a silver lining.”

“The exact number of people who were sad the Saudis died was zero,” the woman besides Lian snorted. “That was something essentially everyone could get behind.”

“I’m pretty sure there’s at least one alive,” another person commented. “Think he actually helped manage the aftermath with ADVENT oversight.”

“Oh, he was,” Iyaad nodded. “And when ADVENT held an election he lost to another military defector. Wish it had been a woman, but it’s a start. Don’t know where he is now, but I sleep well knowing that he’ll never be a problem.”

“To be honest,” Lian said. “I’d rather deal with the Saudis than aliens, but since we don’t have a choice, I’ll take what I can get.”

The lights in the skyranger suddenly flashed to a solid red. “This is Big Sky to all passengers,” their pilot said. “We are approaching the Praesidium. Please secure yourselves and prepare for landing.”

“Here we go,” Lian said, strapping in tighter. “This should be interesting.”

Personally, Kunio was hoping for something more mundane. His life had already been filled with too many interesting things, and he had come to realize that wasn’t always a good thing. He didn’t necessarily need his worldview to be shattered by XCOM, or receive the darkest secrets of the world. Just them being an elite anti-alien organization would be sufficient. But he felt like in that regard, he wasn’t going to get his wish.

He was pretty sure that XCOM had their own share of interesting secrets.

If he was going to learn them was another story entirely.

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Secured Diplomatic Residence of Japan – Switzerland
5/26/2017 – 3:41 P.M.

Kaya fiddled with her collar. She’d always disliked overly formal attire, even if she’d eventually gotten used to it from years of wear and pomp. As a princess of the Imperial Family, there’s been expectations for her to look her absolute best, at all times when the media was hiding in the bushes; waiting for some new fake scandal to distract the public with.
At least that was something she wouldn’t have to worry about now.

Well, she wasn’t going to go back to that completely. Right now she wore a black tunic-like garment that extended just below her waist, while she wore more standard pants and boots with it. Underneath the tunic was some light armor, which might stop one shot, but it certainly wouldn’t deter a dedicated assassin.

A pistol was strapped to her leg and her katana was sheathed behind her back. The emblem of the Order of Terra was attached to her tunic. All in all, something formal but not something overly uncomfortable or unnecessary. She’d not even considered arriving in a dress, though Kiyumi had done so. Something Kaya was especially unsurprised at.

She’d initially been hesitant to get this done, but after Beijing…almost any distraction was welcome. The visceral images of the nightmare were still etched in her mind, and she knew that there was going to be many more nights when she was going to need help getting to sleep. ADVENT had been very proactive in offering medicine and counseling for those who wanted it.

There’d been a few times where she’d considered it. She probably should, but for now she needed to get her family in order or what was left of it, anyway.

The room they were meeting in was small, but fitting. There wasn’t going to be any press or crowd here, only a small meeting of a group of people. The walls were white and the Japanese and ADVENT flags hung from the walls, and the wooden table was circular with seats evenly positioned. Her arrival as the last one caused a flurry of reactions.

“Empress,” the former Prime Minister Reizo Sakata greeted, bowing. “I’m very thankful that you’ve arrived safely. To lose you as well after everything that’s happened would be unthinkable.”

“I’m doing my best,” she said, returning the bow, remembering the proper greetings. She’d always thought Reizo had done his best, and if nothing else he was a pleasant person to be around. Smart enough to join ADVENT, at least. She was glad he was still alive, even if he had no place he managed anymore outside the groups of refugees.

“Empress,” Kyong Suk-Chul, ADVENT’s PR Minister also greeted, offering a slight bow of his own. “A pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Likewise,” she inclined her head. She saw Kiyumi and pulled her into a hug. “[I’m glad to see you. How are you?]”

“[Alive,]” her sister managed. “[We’re managing, all of us. I’ve been more worried about you. You were in Beijing…]”

“[Yes. Let’s not talk about that now. I came back for a reason.]”

Damian Hamilton coughed awkwardly in the background. “I dislike interrupting the reunions, but I’d prefer we get down to business. I don’t have an issue with Kaya coming back, but I don’t think I need to be involved here.”

“I want to keep you informed,” Kaya said, taking a seat. “Since you’re my superior officer, I need you to sign off on what I’m doing.”

Hamilton sighed. “Sell them on it first.”

“What is it you wish, Empress?” Reizo asked. “I was under the impression that you were intending to take the title. Is that still the case?”
“Yes, with some conditions,” Kaya nodded to her sister. “I don’t care as much about the title, but it’s safer for me to carry it than someone else. My sister by birthright deserves it, and my first official action is to restore her to the family in full, with all the titles and status that comes with it.”

“While I don’t see an issue,” Reizo said. “There are a number of elders and older families who will see that as breaking significant tradition. Your sister knew what she was doing.”

“Yes, which is why I didn’t invite any of them here,” Kaya interrupted flatly. “Most traditions are old and not worth preserving. The elders and families can complain to me on the battlefield. I’ve been around them long enough to know I’m not going to base my decisions off the advice of old and simple-minded men. Kiyumi is restored, end of story. The Imperial Family has officially entered into the twenty-first century.”

“Thank you, sister,” Kiyumi said gratefully, bowing her head. “I won’t forget this.”

“I’m just doing the right thing,” Kaya said, shifting in her seat. “I’m not intending to abandon my comrades on the front lines. The truth is that I can’t properly run the family from a battlefield, my second action is to appoint Kiyumi as the manager of the family. She has my power and trust at home.”

“You would effectively make her Empress,” Reizo frowned. “Forgive me from being presumptuous, Empress, but if that is the case, why not bestow the title upon her properly? Especially as she is restored? It would certainly go against precedent and tradition, but you have little issue breaking it.”

“Kiyumi deserves the title more than me,” Kaya agreed. “This is what she wished for. I am only doing this to draw attention away from her. As I am Empress, I am a target for the Collective – and I know they will try this again. I am a more vulnerable target. This is not to say they will not try and attack her…but I will be the public face of the Family. She will not.”

“Understandable,” Reizo nodded. “In which case, Lady Kiyumi, I expect you will wish to begin rebuilding the Imperial Family, at least the staff and Council. For Empress Kaya, of course.”

“Yes, I have some plans,” Kiyumi nodded. “Though forgive me for not completely trusting your capability to protect us.”

“We have completely overhauled our protocols regarding the safety of yourself and other high-profile individuals of ADVENT,” Kyong said. “An incident such as what happened will not be repeated.”

Kiyumi pursed her lips. “We shall see. But yes, Prime Minister, once this meeting is concluded, I wish your assistance in helping me.”

“Of course, Lady Kiyumi.”

“And what of you, Empress?” Kyong asked thoughtfully. “I suspect you have more to say.”

“I hold this title,” Kaya said. “So I should use it effectively. I don’t want to receive preferential treatment or amenities because of my status. I’ve made that clear. But being anonymous serves no one but myself and my dislike of attention. Our people have lost much in this war, Prime Minister, they need someone to be the one to strike back.”

She laced her fingers together. “The best candidate of which is me. Minister Kyong, I suspect you would know how to effectively propagandize an Empress who fights in the Order of Terra. While I intend to use my status to rally my countrymen, I feel others could be similarly inspired. Does that
sound agreeable?"

“You would be willing to be utilized that way?” Kyong raised an eyebrow. “Surprising, but you are correct. The Empress of Japan fighting on the front lines and rallying others to ADVENT is more powerful than even you think.”

“I’m still not going to be treated differently,” Kaya insisted. “In the Order, Hamilton is my superior, and I trust him to not coddle me. But when I’m not fighting… use my status as best you can for ADVENT.”

“You have very little idea how difficult that is for me,” Hamilton sighed. “You die, and I’ll be known as the man who put the Empress somewhere dangerous and got her killed.”

“And I’ll make it clear it’s my choice,” Kaya insisted. “All I have is a title people gave authority to. Not that it should matter now, but since it does, I’m going to use it. That doesn’t mean I expect that from you.”

“In that case,” Kyong said, giving a thin smile. “I already have an idea of how to unveil this to the public. When Kiyumi is satisfied with the state of her house, I believe that there is a ceremony that accompanies the ascendance of a new member to the throne. Is this right?”

“The Enthronement,” Reizo confirmed. “One of our oldest ceremonies. It will need to be done for Kaya to be officially recognized as the Empress of Japan.”

“Then plan it,” Kaya nodded. “With a few alterations. When you’re ready, Kiyumi, I will properly take the title.”

“Try not to die until then, sister,” Kiyumi said earnestly. “I know you won’t try, but you’re going to be in danger.” She looked to Hamilton. “Will she be deployed soon?”

“She was part of Beijing,” Hamilton said slowly. “She’s not authorized to go into combat without a few more weeks of rest or an ADVENT psychologist signing off.”

Kaya scowled, but didn’t say anything to protest it. “I suppose I have work to do,” Kiyumi said, standing.

“If you need help, let me know,” Kaya said, joining her. “And thank you Prime Minister, as well as you Minister Kyong.”

“Certainly, Empress,” Kyong did a final bow. “I look forward to working with you.”

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ADVENT High Command - Switzerland

5/23/2017 – 12:07 P.M.

“Take a seat, Chancellor,” Watkins gestured to two chairs opposite each other in the small room. “I don’t expect to take long.”

In one of the few times during her life, Saudia felt like the situation was beyond her control. For once she lacked the power and authority to know what to do. First it had been the Ravaged One, next it had been the Commander, now it was Watkins. The irony being that for Watkins, whatever she was about to face was entirely her fault.
The Grand Inquisitor had not joined them, and instead stood outside the room. Saudia took a seat, while Watkins walked over and sat down opposite her, setting his small briefcase in his hand down and crossing one leg over the other. “What can I help you with, Overseer?” She asked, taking an upright position in her chair, fingers hanging over the edges of the armrests.

One corner of his lips turned up and the twin colors of his eyes seemed to bore into her. “Three guesses, Chancellor.”

She raised an eyebrow, knowing full well what he was referring to, though she didn’t see a need to make this overly easy for him. If he thought she was going to walk into a trap without considering her options, he was sadly mistaken. “I don’t suppose you’re referring to the insinuations of our traitor?”

“That line may have set others at ease,” Watkins laced his fingers together and set them on his lap. “But unlike the majority, I am well aware that this is the real Patricia Trask. A traitor she may be, but she isn’t an idiot. She maintains credibility, even if you don’t want to admit it. Besides, if she is wrong, you have nothing to fear now, do you?”

Saudia let her face betray nothing. “Are you intending to charge me with something?”

Watkins held the silence for a few seconds, uncrossed his legs, and leaned forward. “Chancellor, I want you to know something. You’re one of the few people I’ve encountered in my professional career that I hold in high regard. You entrusted me with power greater than your own, and that is a responsibility I take especially seriously. Despite that, I suspect the reason you chose me was because I do have the resolve to enforce the law.”

He looked at her intently. “Consider very carefully before saying something that will make this worse than I wish it. Do you really think that everyone just accepted the fact that something like ADVENT rose out of nowhere and was managed by people no one had heard of? Did you really think no one thought that was questionable?”

“If there were,” Saudia said. “Perhaps they should have said something.”

“Perhaps, but we had bigger concerns.” His eyes flicked upwards. “An alien invasion provides ample distraction. No one in their right mind was going to challenge someone who multiple superpowers had pledged support to. All they could hope for was that these people knew what they were doing and had the best interests of our species at heart.”

He leaned back. “Fortunately, that appears to have been the case. I want to be very clear, Chancellor, that I do not care who you were before ADVENT. You’ve proven yourself capable of the position since then. If everyone were judged for their past before ADVENT, then none of us would be clean. By the laws and norms of the old world, many would likely be facing trials and jail time. Judging others based on that is pointless. Chancellor, since you have taken office, have you broken ADVENT laws and regulations?”

“No.” Saudia shook her head. “I have not.”

“Then you have very little to worry about,” Watkins nodded. “I’m not an idiot, Chancellor. I know better than to think that removing a Chancellor from power would be smooth and stable for the war. I suspect your past is checkered at best, but Patricia made a mistake. She assumed that this past would condemn you. But I don’t care about that. I only care what you’ve done under ADVENT.”

Saudia appraised the Chief Overseer carefully. “But you didn’t bring me in here to say that you’re
“No,” Watkins nodded. “I’m telling you now that if you want to come out of this with your position intact, then your past will not play a factor. But you understand that I cannot let this question remain unanswered. I want you to remain, Chancellor, but to do that, you need to cooperate with my investigation.”

She glanced to his briefcase. “You’ve opened one on me.”

“No,” Watkins corrected, pulling out a file from the pocket of the briefcase and handed it to her. “You’re one of many. I’ve been preparing for this investigation ever since I was appointed. Patricia has merely provided me a pretext to execute it. I’d let it sit because I’d lacked evidence that you were actively subverting ADVENT. However, it would be prudent to settle this once and for all.”

At a glance Saudia knew that Watkins had indeed been preparing for this for a long time. She’d been a fool for thinking that EXALT would just be…forgotten. It was simply too big of a blank for everyone to ignore, and she’d provided the power to someone tenacious enough to act on it. Now she could only hope she’d made the right decision.

Watkins was saying the right words. She felt she’d have to trust him.

It wasn’t as though she had a choice.

“I see,” she set the piece of paper on her lap. “Is this an official questioning?”

“No, I’m merely informing you that you’re under investigation,” Watkins corrected, pulling out a few more documents. “And to tell you that I’m on your side. You put me in here because you trusted me to do what was best for ADVENT. If you – and I believe you have – followed the law as established by ADVENT since taking power, then I do not have grounds to charge you. Perhaps what I find will make the Congress uncomfortable, but that is not legal grounds for an impeachment.”

She gave a slow nod. Out of all her options…there seemed to be only one real one. “Very well. You will have my full cooperation.”

“Good,” Watkins handed her the documents. “Then I will need your authorization to make this move smoother.”

She took the documents. “What are these?”

“Temporary suspensions for Elizabeth Falka and Feng Mercado, as well as several others,” Watkins said. “You are too high profile to suspend without attracting undue attention, but I would not have critical aspects of our divisions under management of people whose loyalties have been called into question, justified or not. Once they are cleared, they will be fully reinstated.”

He paused. “I would suggest that you tell them to cooperate. If they obstruct me, I will charge them. They will not be able to hide their secrets, no matter how much they wish. The Grand Inquisitor will make sure of that.”

“I have no reason to doubt that,” Saudia agreed, and with a second of hesitation, signed the documents. This was not going to be a pleasant conversation. “And I assume their designated replacements will take over in the interim?”

“Not their original choices,” Watkins corrected. “Ones which I suggested and they signed off on. Or will sign off on. They will be informed within hours of the – temporary – change of
leadership.”

“Very well,” Saudia handed the documents back. “And what now?”

“Now you do your job,” Watkins stood, with Saudia joining him a second later. “I will inform you of when you are needed. I do not need to make this a public affair, and your sharing of it is your prerogative. It will take as much time as I need. I suspect that in the end that it will work out, and you – as well as your colleagues – will move forward free of the fear of these secrets you’ve hidden.”

Saudia pursed her lips. “I certainly hope so, Chief Overseer.”

Watkins moved to the exit, and looked back. “You are an ambitious woman, Chancellor. But you have the correct priorities. Do not second guess your decisions now. It would only make it harder on yourself.”

Saudia didn’t answer as he departed, and just stood alone in the room, thinking.

It ultimately didn’t matter what she wanted now.

It was going to come to light, one way or another.

Best if it was painless; and hopefully Watkins would just do exactly what he promised.

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Busan Military Base, Busan – South Korea

5/25/2017 – 6:11 P.M.

“So here’s my question,” Cara said as she poured a drink for herself. “Do we get a special emblem? Do you get a different cape?”

“I think we do get something,” Duri said. “But nothing that obvious. Don’t want to give away that we’re priority targets.”

“Hey, a promotion is a promotion,” she said. “And I think it’s safe to say that we all earned it.”

There was a good amount of verbal acknowledgment from the squad who were huddled around their bunks in an impromptu celebration of the news. Cara and Mana were sitting on the bunks, while Duri and Beatriz were sitting on some pulled up folding chairs. Nobuatsu and Aleksandra were leaning against a wall, with Aleksandra drinking from her vodka bottle she’d apparently held onto this whole time. Miguel was sitting on his SHIV, tapping away on his phone.

“I really don’t like that you’re sitting on that,” Beatriz told him. “One bad move and you set it off.”

“You worry too much,” he smirked. “I know what I’m doing. It’s not even facing towards you!”

“You’re still sitting on a weapon that could shred us in a few seconds,” Beatriz insisted. “Would you sit on your rifle?”

“That isn’t even close to the same thing,” Miguel rolled his eyes, and motioned to the floor. “Besides, I practice SHIV safety. See? Not loaded and shut off.”

“Oh fine,” Beatriz relented. “Not like you’re going to listen to me. Duri?”
“Let him be,” Duri gave a slight smile. “He seems to have it under control.”

Miguel gave a mock salute. “Appreciated, officer.”

“Where do you think we’ll be sent?” Nobuatsu said after a few minutes. “I agree that we’re probably not going to be enjoying the pleasures of Busan for much longer.”

“A shame,” Cara sighed. “I quite liked the aliens coming here and getting humbled.”

“It almost feels like home now,” Miguel added. “Feels odd to leave it so soon.”

“The price of us being too good at our jobs,” Cara said sarcastically. “We shouldn’t have tried so hard.”

“We did get to experience some of the more interesting moments of the war,” Duri said. “First Aegis. Then Caelior. Both came out to help Busan. I won’t ever forget that.”

“I don’t think any of us will,” Beatriz said. “And even before that…Japan. At least for some of us.”

“Yeah, I missed out on your escape through Japan,” Mana said. “You fought the Warlock right?”

Duri, Cara, and Beatriz exchanged a look. “‘Fought’ is a strong term,” Duri said slowly. “More like ‘slightly inconvenienced before we made a tactical retreat’.”

“And I got shot,” Beatriz recalled, looking to Duri. “He carried me out.” She shook her head. “Scariest moment of my life.”

“Yeah, and I was spraying bullets hoping that would give enough cover,” Cara remembered. “There was no way I was going to be able to carry both of you. Not our best day.”

“Though we’ve all lived since then,” Duri said. “With a few close calls.”

“Yes. Some,” Aleksandra glanced down to her hand. “Job hazards.”

“Very much so,” Nobuatsu agreed. “Returning to the question I proposed. Florida is heating back up.”


“What’s wrong with Florida?” Beatriz asked.

“It’s hot, dry, sometimes ends up being a hurricane magnet, and has a certain reputation,” Cara ticked off. “You’ve never heard of the Floridaman?”

Beatriz shook her head. “Save the stories if we actually get sent there,” Mana chuckled. “All I can say is that the Collective could have picked a better target. I bet they’ve run into their own share of interesting individuals.”

“Quisilia probably has documented them,” Cara sniffed. “Although I wouldn’t know. After what Patricia pulled, I’m boycotting Quisilia and his entertainment.”

“Not that I disapprove,” Duri said with a raised eyebrow. “But it took a Human traitor for you to stop supporting an Ethereal troll account?”

“Well…yeah,” she shrugged. “The memelord may have been an alien, but he knew his stuff.”
“Speaking of that…” Mana looked around. “What do you make of her? Or what she said?”

“A liar or fake,” Cara dismissed. “Why the hell would anyone believe anything that comes out of her mouth now? ADVENT being a puppet state of XCOM is a bad parody of an illuminati story. I’m just waiting for the revelation that ADVENT is filled with shapeshifters and the Collective was the good guys all along.”

“I do wonder why she bothered,” Miguel mused. “It’s only going to freak out the idiots, the anti-ADVENT fanatics, and the media who love a good scandal. No one else is going to buy it though.”

“Because that isn’t Patricia,” Cara insisted. “That’s a clone, or some kind of mockup to look like her. Would Patricia Trask really defect to the aliens? Really? The Hero of Humanity? The First Human Psion? Her?” Cara took a long gulp of her drink. “Please.”

“I’m not sure,” Duri laced his fingers together. “I think it’s her. At least physically. She’s probably being mind controlled or influenced by the Ethereals. Otherwise…” he shook his head. “I can’t even think of why she would willingly betray her species.”

“Maybe we misjudge her,” Aleksandra shrugged. “She is power. She enjoyed power. You could tell. Ethereals offered her that. Perhaps simple answer.”

“As someone who thought she was a good example of what our species could do,” Cara said slowly. “I’d prefer not to think of her as someone who sold out for power.”

Aleksandra just took another drink. “Then don’t. I just observe. She was never a hero.”

“Regardless of what she was,” Duri said with a heavy sigh. “She’s not one now. I would like to ask her a few questions though.”

Beatriz looked at him sympathetically. “I can imagine. I don’t think she’d be able to answer.”

“Or she would,” Duri shrugged. “And it would be the wrong answer.”

“She’ll be put down,” Miguel said, patting his SHIV. “I have a good feeling. The only thing we Humans hate more than aliens are the turncoats who join them. Aliens just follow their nature. These traitors have no excuse.”

“She can join Betos,” Cara nodded. “First in the Experimentation Labs, and later in Hell.”

“Barring that,” Beatriz agreed. “They can both just meet in Hell.”

It was a darkly sentimental note to wind down on, but one they each keenly felt strongly about. Duri felt that Miguel was right. The Human traitors deserved worse than the aliens who perpetrated the atrocities. Every single one deserved to be put down, and when he fell asleep his dreams were not of the aliens being purged from Earth, but the Human traitors burning in Africa.

No less than they deserved.

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Residence of the Chancellor - Switzerland

5/23/2017 – 9:22 P.M.

There had been few days that had been as draining as this, and having only taken place so soon after Patricia wasn’t exactly ideal for her. She just felt…exhausted. She just wanted to leave, rest,
and be with her husband and son and contemplate what was going to happen next. No matter what, she felt that something was going to end. Or at least set into motion this end.

That would certainly be something. Not quite how she planned to end it all.

Hopefully she was being presumptuous.

She unhooked the Chancellor sash from her shoulder and hung it up, undressing on her own for the night into something more comfortable, though that was more relative now. With entire portions of her limbs replaced, her level of comfort had become more static. A state that just was, not particularly good or bad.

She missed being able to feel something like she had before.

Sensors weren’t the same thing as flesh. They…functioned well enough, and she could manipulate them without issues. She could pick up a feather or glass ball without crushing it. She could tell if something was warmer or colder, but it was more of a numb realization than something visceral. One of the therapists had told her it would be like wearing thick, but very flexible gloves.

That had turned out to be more accurate than she would like.

It was a marvel of engineering, and sometimes she would now just look at the smooth design of the limbs, marveling at how well it functioned. But it was not the same, it never could be. Flesh may be weaker, but it felt more real than this, especially around those she loved. It felt like an important connection was muted.

Touch and feeling were important; one of those aspects of close relationships you didn’t think about until it was lost.

Ethan was putting together the night watch; securing the residence while she dressed for the night. She knew her guard would fight to the death to protect her, but she now privately didn’t know what could be done if someone like Patricia decided to attack. Or the creatures from Paradise. She needed to take extra precautions to keep herself and family safe.

Ready for the night, she checked the pistol on her hip and made sure the plasma pack was charged. If someone was ever to attack, she and Ethan had made sure that no matter where they were, there would be a weapon they could use. Closets, cupboards, cabinets, and other hidden compartments held all types of weapons.

Some paranoia was justified now.

Saudia walked down the hallway to her son’s room. It was shut, and she lightly knocked. After waiting a few seconds, she opened it quietly, suspecting he was asleep. Sure enough, he was completely out, tucked in his own bed. Sleeping peacefully, a commodity she envied at the moment. He really was getting so big, and she was missing so much of it now.

She sighed, and left the room, sparing a glance at the small stand in the corner which held one of the Sovereign Orbs, a constant vigil over her son. Perhaps it was a mistake to leave so much to trust this Sovereign was on their side, but if given a choice between T’Leth and the Collective, she was going to err on the side of caution.

Descending the stairs in the quiet house, she noted that she really didn’t need such a large residence. She barely spent any time here besides sleeping anyway. Another observation from her tired mind she’d probably made before. The footsteps from her metal feet were only slightly muffled by the rug and became louder when she stepped onto the tile in the kitchen, picking out a
She didn’t believe in getting drunk after having a long day. Knocking herself out was the least of her problems right now, and engaging in self-destructive behavior wouldn’t change anything. But she was thirsty. Water was fine.

Her glass full, she walked to the nearest couch and sat down and drank quietly, alone with her thoughts and fears. It was odd. In all her days as the Director of EXALT, making sure that they weren’t discovered by the public at large, maintaining the conspiracy over years knowing a single mistake could end it…it didn’t come close to the stress she was under daily now.

Especially when she knew what she faced. A nosy journalist and a talkative media group were nothing compared to an alien who could ravage planets with a gesture or control others with a thought.

She took a drink.

It was a dangerous game of prediction and strategy. One where a mistake now meant the deaths of millions. One where it came one step closer to her species being conquered. Plans devised sounded good until there was a weakness that was exploited. Sometimes that never happened, and sometimes Patricia Trask happened.

“House is secure as it can be,” Ethan walked in, his own armor off. “Cameras, turrets, everything online.”

“Good,” she said listlessly, swirling the remaining water in her glass.

Ethan waited a moment, frowned, and came to sit by her. “You have enough to worry about, Saudia. Don’t add this onto it. It’s out of your control.”

She scowled. “And you know how much I hate that. I didn’t even try and fight it,” she shook her head. “I saw what he could do if I didn’t cooperate, and gave in.”

“And what should you have done?” Ethan put an arm around her. “Been an idiot and denied everything? We both knew this might happen. All we can do is our jobs now.”

“We knew it might, but I was hoping that it would stay in the past forever,” she said quietly. “Watkins may not care, but not everyone will be so forgiving. I don’t know. I’m worried, and I can’t do anything about it. I’m worried about what’s coming next.”

“We’ve done what we can,” Ethan said simply. “That’s all we can do. Our best. All things considered, we’ve done better than anyone probably expected. And we’ll keep doing that. And you’ll still be leading us.”

“I hope so,” she said. “I don’t know what I’d do if I couldn’t.”

“I’m sure you’d adapt,” he said. “You always do.”

Saudia was struck with a pang of guilt. “That was the wrong thing to say. I’m a terrible mother.” She rubbed her eyes, before leaning onto his shoulder and closing them. “And wife. I have a son I barely see and a husband I barely talk to outside of work.”

“Hey, none of that now,” he said, scooting closer. “You’re helping manage a war for the survival of our species. Which includes us. If anything, you have your priorities correct.”
“It doesn’t feel like that, especially now,” her lips twitched. “If I save the world and lose both of you that would feel…wrong. Don’t pretend it hasn’t bothered you. Maybe you understand, but you wish I wasn’t as focused.”

He sighed. “I’m only Human. But what I would like isn’t a higher priority than what you’re doing. I know enough to recognize that.”

“Does Martel?”

“He’s mature for his age,” Ethan said slowly. “But…well, I know he wishes you were around more. But he knows what you’re doing is important.”

“He’s a kid and I’ve been a bad parent,” she admitted. “Trying to justify that feels wrong. If I was just going to do that, we shouldn’t have decided to be parents. I need to do better for you and him. I don’t know how right now, but I don’t know what will happen next.” She shook her head. “Something could happen to any of us, and I don’t want there to be any regrets.”

“If you want to figure something out,” Ethan told her, lacing the fingers of one hand between her mechanical ones. “I’d be happy to hear it.”

“I’ll need you for this too,” she told him, swinging her legs over his lap. “You’ll need to tell me when to stop. And if I’m being stubborn…I know you can figure out some way to get past that.”

He gave her a wide smile. “Your confidence is well-placed, Chancellor.”

“Please, no titles here,” she rolled her eyes, and shifted her legs back over so she could rest better against him, before closing her eyes. “Thank you.”

“Should we move to the bed?” He asked after a few moments.

“No…not yet,” she said after some hesitation; listening to his heartbeat. “Let’s just stay here. At least for a little while.”

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To be continued in Chapter 54

**Battleground: Florida**

Chapter End Notes

A short update on what’s coming next. One of my editors is going to be going on vacation for a month and won’t be able to do any editing. The next chapter is going to very likely be delayed as a result. In the meantime, I’ll take this opportunity to finish up a number of XCOM Files that I have outlined so there should still be a steady stream of content regardless. The next chapter will be written in this period too so it’s ready when he gets back. The next chapter will be the start of the next battle arc which is going to span three chapters. Florida will be the focus, but there is going to be a lot happening across the world. It’s going to be a fun ride.
Also, Into the Breach is an excellent game, and I highly recommend it. Thank you to everyone reading as always, and I hope to have more to you sooner than later.
“You’re getting recalled now?” Neil crossed his arms; his voice unhappy. “Not really the best time.”

“I can’t contest it,” Cycelea sighed as she continued putting what few belongings she had into a pack. “This came directly from the Grand Inquisitor. It wasn’t just me getting recalled; it seems like everyone is.”

“But why?” Neil wondered aloud, scowling. “While this hasn’t gone the best, it’s certainly been more of a success than a failure.”

Objectively at least, that was true. Though there had been a few times where it had come far too close for comfort. As it turned out Sargons were actually intelligent – something which was now more confirmed than discovered since the first operation. Of the half-dozen well-planned and methodical assassination attempts, only two had actually killed more Sargons.

However, they had been able to continue liberating an equal number of towns and cities, and by this point were quite adept at killing aliens – Mutons specifically. Borelians had posed the largest threat militarily, but they didn’t know the terrain and how to use it. By the end getting the Sargon to leave was as much of a victory, even if they usually didn’t end up killing them.

“I’m going to guess it’s something political,” Cycelea pursed her lips, pausing to look up thoughtfully. “Falka is on leave and Powell is Acting Director.”

“Powell?” Neil asked incredulously. “Damn it.”

“You don’t like him?”

“He’s…what’s the word?” Neil thought for a moment. “Ruthless. Even for someone in the CIA. I had no clue who Falka was before she appeared, but she was a puppy compared to what Powell will use ADVENT Intelligence for. Remember that mess with the Commander in the Middle East? That was a Powell op that got out of control.”

“Really?” She answered. “Actually, that doesn’t surprise me that much if it was a CIA op. Sounds like something they’d do.”

“Point being that Powell is not someone you want to cross, and afterwards he kept his job and was commended for his efforts,” Neil shook his head. “Not that anyone could prove anything, but it’s not out of the question he kept himself in power through his agency spying on the government. I bet Treduant used his blackmail when she brought down their Congress to move into ADVENT.”

“Honestly, I can’t blame him for that,” Cycelea admitted. “I wouldn’t trust that government either.”

“Well, now he’s in charge and I guarantee he’s going to make some big changes,” Neil shrugged. “So I suppose you should be careful. The man doesn’t think small. I don’t feel especially comforted knowing he’ll be given control over the largest intelligence apparatus in the history of
“Not too much choice, sadly,” Cycelea sighed. “I do think they’ll be sending someone to replace me. A telepath hopefully.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if we were recalled too,” Neil admitted, walking over and grabbing a water bottle. “Winter is ending, and it’s not going to be as easy moving forward, especially with the Sargons continuing to adapt. Plus, the fact that Canada isn’t really a battleground. I can see Christiaens thinking we’ve accomplished enough and shuffling us elsewhere.”

“Hopefully not,” Cycelea said. “We still had a lot to do.”

“Yeah, we’ll have to wait and see,” Neil agreed. “But…I’m glad you were able to help with it. It would have definitely gone much worse without you.”

“Thank you, Neil,” she smiled. “And I appreciate you not being too suspicious of me and the others.”

“Guess I got used to it,” he smirked. “Never gave me a reason to break out the code words.”

She gave a light chuckle. “Glad to hear it. Good luck on…whatever happens next.”

“Thanks,” Neil looked out to the setting Canadian sun as the chill of the night began settling over them. “I think I’m going to need it.”

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XCOM Intelligence Control, the Praesidium – Classified Location

3/20/2017 – 8:13 P.M.

Things were something of a whirlwind after Nartha arrived back at the Praesidium. There was a majority of people he didn’t recognize, and construction was continuing rapidly everywhere else. However, the Commander had wanted to speak to him about a few very specific topics which Nartha had general ideas of.

Cairu was here, so one of them was obvious.

“Our operations are going to be focused on Earth for the immediate future,” the Commander was saying as they stood around the holotable showing the United States. “The Battlemaster is going to march on Miami within days, or hours if he puts his mind to it.” His brow furrowed. “Conflicts are continuing on the West Coast and South America. The SAS is holding their own.”

His eyes looked up to meet Nartha’s. “With that said, we do not intend to stand idly by after what Patricia did. It’s time we devise a strategy beyond Earth. We have Andromedon Unions, the Nulorian, Sar’Manda, and T’Leth. However, these alliances are tangible and conditional. We need a unified plan or vision. We need reach beyond Earth, and we cannot be away from Earth for too long without arousing suspicion. That will fall to you.”

Nartha bowed his head. “I will do my best, Commander.”

The Commander motioned to Zhang. “Director?”

“I suspect you’ve come to the same conclusion I have,” Zhang told him as he switched the hologram off. “It is only a matter of time before the Zararch begin using your family against you.
We have days at best before they’re arrested or detained permanently.”

“They can’t just do that,” Cairu shook her head. “Father is a member of the Aui’Vitakar. You can’t just make someone like that disappear without asking questions, especially since he isn’t involved with anything.”

Nartha was less enthused. “I believe that is the only reason they haven’t acted yet. Our parents are wholly innocent. Maybe they’ve been told we’ve betrayed them. Either way, it won’t last forever. Cairu…the Zararch are more than capable of removing anyone and no one will comment on it.”

Cairu glanced at Zhang, lips in a thin line. “You have a plan then?”

“Yes, but we’re going to need the help of the Nulorian,” Zhang said firmly. “All of them.”

Nartha was surprised. “We only need a small team. Me, Cairu, Sorras, and a couple of the soldiers can easily take any Zararch operatives.”

“I agree,” the Commander said, pacing before the holotable. “However, this is an opportunity I don’t think we should allow to go to waste. You’re one of our most important defectors, Nartha, but you’re far from the only one. Hundreds of others have defected and their families are arguably in just as much danger.”

Zhang handed him a tablet. “Collected data from the AEGIS Division on families of defectors when applicable.”

Nartha blinked several times rapidly. “Are you suggesting that we proactively rescue all of them? There are thousands all across the planet and in the colonies!”

“Do you disagree?” The Commander raised an eyebrow. “If we just stick to your family, the Zararch will not waste any time. They’ll conduct their interrogations or abductions immediately regardless of support or affiliation of the families. There isn’t anything we can do for the colonies or those in the military or Zararch, but on Vitakar where there are established networks? We’re not going to get a better opportunity.”

“And they’ll know for sure you’re supporting the Nulorian,” Nartha added. “And have some kind of communication network or method. It could draw more attention to Vitakar.”

“Which is going to happen when the Nulorian start their attacks,” the Commander noted grimly. “The fact is that the Ethereals already suspect what is happening, and eventually they’re going to learn. I’d prefer we make our impact as significant as possible. This will send a strong message to the defectors – help us and we’ll ensure your family is safe.”

“And we work with the Nulorian,” Cairu added, shooting a doubting look to the Commander. “I know you have a different perspective, but I don’t think you realize how badly the Nulorian are perceived. These aren’t heroes.”

“And we’re not doing this out of altruism,” Zhang disagreed. “This is purely strategic. Denying the Zararch easy pressure is crucial, as is showing the weakness of the Collective. They will demonize whatever actions we take, and frankly the perception of the civilian population is not important. This is a message directly to the Zararch. They will either be forced to crack down harder – or be passive and allow the possibility of this happening again. Either way benefits us.”

“Miridian is going to need time to put this together,” Nartha read the list again. “A couple days at least. I do think he’ll agree with the logic, but where will all of these people be kept?”
“I think that depends,” the Commander mused. “I’d say any who are willing to defect and volunteer stay with the Sar’Manda for the time being. The individuals who are brainwashed loyalists should be brought to Earth for holding.”

“Just sticking them somewhere isn’t a good idea,” Cairu warned. “Why not just let them live on their own?”

“Because they would remain as leverage,” the Commander clarified. “And this operation is about denying them that. Besides, it will be useful for testing on the most effective way to deprogram the Vitakara populace.”

Nartha wasn’t pleased with that idea, and neither was Cairu. “Using them for a science experiment also won’t go over well, especially with those who are fighting for you.” Cairu said again, crossing her arms. “I agree they need to be protected…but I’m not sure this is the best way.”

“They aren’t being mistreated,” Zhang dismissed flatly. “The fact is that unless you want to eventually let the Nulorian deal with the loyalists as they see fit, we need a way to reliably break the conditioning they’ve been subjected to.”

“You’re XCOM,” Cairu countered. “Why are you letting the Nulorian dictate actions like that?”

“Because we’re not the Ethereals,” the Commander answered simply. “The Nulorian are the only ones who are willing to fight the Collective; the remainder of your species is not aligned with our goals. We could dictate what happens, but the Nulorian have been fighting this long before we became involved. I will curb their idiotic genocidal plans, but it will not be further than that.”

“They’re terrorists,” Cairu insisted. “They’re not like idealistic rebels from your fiction.”

“Trust me, Cairu, I’m aware,” the Commander lifted a hand. “And right now, they are the most useful ally on Vitakar we have. If they go too far, I’ll deal with them. Until that point, they will be treated as an ally.”

“We’ve strayed from the topic,” Zhang refocused on the holotable. “Nartha, we’ve outlined a general strategy. Take this to Miridian, and tell him the window is limited. The best time will be when the Battlemaster begins his assault on Miami. We’ll also be willing to provide support if he needs it, and will loan defectors here to participate.”

Nartha took the small data drive and placed it into a pocket. “Will do, Director.”

“Excellent,” Zhang gave a single nod. “I hope this operation will be a complete success.”

“There is one more thing,” the Commander walked over to the corner and picked up a briefcase. “Give this to Miridian as well.”

Nartha grabbed the surprisingly heavy briefcase, looking down on it curiously. “What is this?”

“A chemical agent,” the Commander answered. “One which I believe will be useful in the event of an assault on the Dath’Haram. This isn’t enough to cause a significant amount of damage, but I’m curious if it is compatible at all with the planet.”

He gave a single nod. “I’ll turn it over. Thank you, Commander. And good luck with the Battlemaster.”

The Commander’s lips twitched. “Thank you. I’m afraid that we’re going to need it.”
“Naples has fallen and latest Collective movements are heading towards West Palm Beach,” Helion Weekees stated to all the attended military and intelligence officials within the airport which had been converted into the base of operations for ADVENT. All of Miami Joint Company Command, as well as major officials from the USA Southeast Regional High Command were in attendance, with Saudia and the Commander also participating.

The news was looking increasingly grim.

“How much time does that buy us?” Christiaens demanded, appraising the massive holotable critically. “Confirmation on the Battlemaster participating?”

“Last seen in Naples before everything was lost,” Vernon Cooper, the General of the Regional high Command answered immediately. “We believe that he’s heading here next.”

“We knew this was coming,” Saudia stated, looking around at the assembled officials. “You were all given your directives. Tell me if they’ve been executed.” She looked to Vernon. “General, proceed.”

“I will actually turn this over to Colonel Hyde and Corporal Weber,” Vernon said to the respective individuals. “They have been responsible for enacting the preparations and devising strategies for the coming battle.”

“General,” Kathleen Hyde gave a quick salute, ebony skin shining from the harsh light above. “I want to emphasize the most important objective in this conflict, because it served as the foundation for our defense. Chancellor, your orders were to prioritize the death of the Battlemaster through luring him into the city and catching him in a nuclear explosion. We extrapolated this to turning this conflict into a significant grind for the Collective.”

She clasped her hands behind her back. “With respect, Chancellor, we are assuming the Battlemaster isn’t going to walk into a trap like this. If we make it too easy, he will suspect something. Personally, I dislike playing with the intention to lose, but considering what is bearing down upon us, I realize victory is near-impossible. As a result, we are going to take as many aliens with us as possible through a heavily staggered defense.”

Different colored lines appeared on the map of Miami, along with some statistics. “First the good news,” Hyde stated, pacing before the holotable. “Evacuation of civilians has nearly been completed both through Gateway utilization and our own Naval evacuations. Collateral damage has been reduced to zero.”

She held up two fingers. “Second, currently the forces at our disposal are fifty thousand soldiers, with a reserve of thirty thousand through Gateway support, which is assuming the Collective prevents naval assistance.” A more detailed breakdown of the soldiers was displayed, though Hyde didn’t elaborate on it. “I’m not going to waste a significant number of valuable soldiers on a suicide mission,” she said. “However, we are going to utilize the ones we have as best we can.”

“The PRIEST numbers are especially low,” the Commander noted. “Intentional?”

“As I said, I don’t intend to waste them here,” she confirmed with a nod. “The Collective similarly has a low number of psions. I am of the belief that our soldiers are more than capable of matching
them without significant PRIEST support. Besides, we have a number of tricks ready to make the Collective fight on our terms. Corporal, please explain.”

“Yes sir,” an older man cleared his throat and took her place, pointing to the holotable. “I want you all to direct your attention to the map. As you can see, the Miami area is fairly large, and there is an obvious choke point. The Collective is not going to want to go through the Everglades, and so the obvious path is through the coast in a straight line down. This-“ he tapped a finger on the holotable. “Must be denied.”

He nodded to Hyde, who pressed several buttons on the tablet which resulted in a significant portion of Fort Lauderdale turning orange and red. “The Collective is going to want to take the easy path,” he said. “We will deny them this. We’ve placed the largest explosives of chlorine-trifluoride throughout the city, and the moment the Collective begins approaching them, we detonate them and have the Purifiers plug any holes. This will halt their army completely.”

“It will likely also spread downwards,” Saudia noted.

“Yes, but not quickly, and if it dies down, the Purifiers restart it,” Weber nodded. “Stopping the majority of their army is worth the devastation, especially considering Miami will be a crater when this is done. Essentially, this means the Collective will have to move their army through the Everglades – specifically this road if they want a clear path.”

On the map the singular road through the Everglades directly to Miami was highlighted. “A perfect choke point, and it will stop them from easily moving their siege units through there,” Weber said with a thin smile. “Not forever, but we just need them to be delayed. And that is where they will hit the first line of defense.”

A bright green line appeared along the outskirts. “This is defense point GREEN,” Weber said. “It’s designed to solely be a kill zone. Few soldiers here, mostly remotely-operated SHIVs and MDUs, with a healthy supply of Rocketeers, mines, and Snipers in the background to provide support. The objective is simple – hold the line as long as possible. When approximately half of positions have been compromised or half of the units destroyed, the retreat to the second line will be sounded and we spring our first trap.”

The green line turned to red. “Chlorine trifluoride explosives have been placed along this line,” Weber confirmed. “We sound the retreat, detonate them, and the Collective has to walk through a wall of flame. Slowing them down more. The majority of soldiers will retreat to defense point BLUE, while the rest will support defense point ORANGE.”

The respective defense lines were highlighted, with BLUE being smaller, but positioned directly before the likely oncoming attack, while ORANGE curved around the city further from the BLUE point. ORANGE also held the first lines of AA defenses and Flak Towers, Saudia noted. However, the areas where there was housing were highlighted in an orange radius.

“Colonel Hyde forgot to mention that the only reason we are able to pull off this defense at all is because of our Militia and civilian volunteers,” Weber said. “Nearly seventy thousand are still here and prepared to help. Because of them we have rigged almost all housing residences and buildings in the city in minor, yet lethal ways.”

He motioned to Weekes. “Chief, this is where your people begin to come in.”

“Weber, with the advice of a local, put together a cheap but effective trap,” Weekes said, nodding to the holotable. “In short, we want to draw the Collective soldiers into the residences. Once inside, they trigger simple traps which dispense large amounts of flour throughout the residence or
area. This, as it turns out, is highly explosive. Lancers and Special Forces will be responsible for luring Collective forces into these buildings, and subsequently detonating them."

There were murmurs of approval around that. Saudia was impressed at the plan. “We harass them until they get to the defense line proper, and then retreat to provide support,” Weekes finished. “Corporal, you may continue.”

“Thank you, Chief Weekes,” Weber stepped forward again. “Defense point BLUE will be our first manned defense line. Support from Snipers, Rocketeers, and other mobile and long-range units will be important for holding out as long as possible. When we reach fifty percent compromise rate, we will retreat and detonate the chlorine trifluoride explosives along defense point BLUE.”

He indicated the orange line. “Defense point ORANGE is where the more intensive defense will take place. We will have Flak Tower and significant AA support. Artillery units have been positioned throughout the city, and ADVENT special forces will repeat their attacks as the Collective soldiers advance to defense point ORANGE.”

“How long do you think our forces will be able to last?” Saudia wondered.

“At least a week to get through GREEN and BLUE,” Weber said. “ORANGE and RED are where the defenses truly stiffen. It ultimately depends on several factors – how much the Collective is willing to commit to this attack, and what kind of air support they will get. It’s not out of the question they will use Cleanser Ships to bombard Miami Beach and the Virgin Key – where we’ve established a number of artillery positions.”

“Aegis can provide protection if they pose a significant threat,” the Commander said. “Though that kind of precision targeting will require the Cleanser Ships to fly low – low enough that the Flak Towers may shoot them down.”

“Where our air force is ready to go,” Hyde added, flicking her eyes to the ceiling, indicating the makeshift base itself. “Going to be difficult for the Collective to get this far.”

“Returning to the battle plan,” Weber motioned to the holotable. “If ORANGE falls, the same trap will be sprung, and the true final line will be defense point RED. There are additional defenses past this point, but if they pierce this, further defense points are diminishing returns. Once we get to this point, we signal a full Gateway retreat, and several hundred reserve MDUs will be activated to begin holding the line for soldiers to evacuate. The flame wall will slow them down, and give us time to fully evacuate.”

“Then we bring in the bomb,” Hyde finished. “We’ll wait for confirmation of the Battlemaster entering the blast radius, and then send it through on a time of only a minute. I doubt that will be enough time for him to flee, even if he knew what was coming.”

“Excellent work, both of you,” Saudia commended as both of them finished. “This will be more than sufficient to make the Collective pay for their attacks.”

“If I may, I would like to make an addendum,” the Commander stepped forward. “The vast majority of these forces will be Mutons; the numbers of which number in the billions. Unfortunately, attritional war against them is a losing battle since no matter how many die here, they will be replaced. The same with Sectoids to an extent.”

He lifted a finger. “The Vitakara and Andromedons are different. They can be affected by attritional warfare, and keep in mind that the Vitakara in particular have friends and family awaiting them on their planet. Kill them, and it will shake morale at home. No one will care if a
thousand Mutons die. They will care if their mother, brother, daughter, or lover perishes. Focus on any Vitakara and Andromedons you see. Make the aliens feel the cost of fighting us.”

There were nods of agreement at that. “Targeting more valuable units is also advised,” Weekes added. “Elites, Heralds, Executors; anything that’s not a Muton is a priority target. This is not to say if you see a Muton, you shouldn’t kill it, but focus on getting rid of something the Collective can’t easily replace.”

“All of you have been appropriately briefed on the overall plan,” Christiaens said, looking around the room. “If you have questions, now is the time. You will be responsible for appropriately distributing orders to your subordinates.” She paused. “I want to be clear – we may be preparing to lose, but we’re going to fight as if we’re going to win.”

She indicated Weber. “I suspect that the Collective won’t be expecting such a thorough defense, and I would not be surprised if they give up. We have a very clear opportunity to hold Miami and by extension Florida. Right now, the Battlemaster thinks he can march down and claim this state without issue.”

She gave a firm salute. “Show him otherwise. Good luck, and I expect when I see you next we will have held the city – or the Battlemaster will be dead. Understood?”

A series of salutes. “Yes, Commander!”

“To your positions then,” Saudia stated. “They will be coming soon. Be prepared for anything.”

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*Florida Collective Command, Florida – United States of America*

*3/27/2017 – 1:17 P.M.*

Ravarian disliked the entire part of Earth. It was far too hot and humid for his liking. Why people voluntarily lived here he could not understand, especially since they were not adapted to this type of climate. Humans had an extremely odd tendency to settle in climates which were clearly not for them, and somehow cling to life like some persistent parasite.

Much like how this war was, now that he thought about it. They knew they could not win in the end, yet they still persisted. Admirable in a way, but it certainly made all of their lives much more difficult.

At least there was climate control here, and within days Miami would be under their control – if everything went well. The Battlemaster stared before a holotable which showcased the latest report from the Fort Lauderdale line. The battle had been progressing adequately, with some resistance, but not nearly enough.

Then the city had exploded.

For the first couple hours they’d not know what was happening, anything from a surprise bomb to an invisible airstrike, but once they’d tried putting out the fires and realized that water only made it worse, it became clear that ADVENT had established dozens of bombs of chlorine-trifluoride and ignited them.

A line of fire which for now completely cut off their line of attack towards Miami, and showed no signs of abating as ADVENT was actively keeping the fire active. A development Ravarian was unhappy they hadn’t learned about. It was very clear what ADVENT was doing now, and he
sincerely hoped the Battlemaster could see it.

His hopes were well-founded as the Battlemaster finally spoke. “This is a trap.”

Yang Shuren, clad in her red armor snorted. “Clearly, but for what? Miami is already cut off, holding it doesn’t gain them anything.”

“It slows us down and could turn into a drawn-out conflict,” the Battlemaster answered slowly, moving the hologram closer to the next-best point of entry. “Neither of which we need to tolerate. So this is either a trap, or they are protecting something.”

“We’ve received no intelligence indicating ADVENT is hiding something,” Aoura said, looking to Ravarian. “Zar’Chon, can you confirm?”

“Yes,” he said. “Let’s look at what we know – ADVENT is clearly preparing for a siege. They are aware you are participating in the conflict directly. Two possibilities I can see – they are attempting to draw us into a quagmire, or they are attempting to trap and kill you specifically.”

“The defenses observed do not indicate specific targeting,” Disciple-7 noted blandly. “If the intent was to draw the Battlemaster to a specific point, there should be a clear path. As it stands, this appears to be a standard ADVENT defense. Direct assassination of the Battlemaster is a secondary objective at most.”

“Recommendation,” J’Loran boomed, tapping a haptic screen projected by his gauntlet. “Miami is a distraction. Eradicate it with the Cleanser ships.”

“Direct targeting could expose Cleanser ships to enemy aircraft,” Disciple-7 corrected. “This does not take into account intervention by ADVENT psions or Aegis. Direct bombardment is not recommended without complete knowledge of ADVENT objective.”

“ADVENT is expecting to cripple us in this attack,” Ravarian said, moving the holomap to focus on the urban Miami outskirts. “Infiltration by REPLICA units has provided us with a significant amount of information. Normally this would be more difficult, but ADVENT has employed a staggering number of civilian volunteers – most of which were not told anything, but we have enough information to know some of what they were doing.”

Houses and buildings lit up. “They are rigging all residences and buildings with something,” Ravarian said. “We don’t think it’s an explosive, not completely. They’ve brought in tons of a white substance we were unable to immediately identify closely. We believe it could be a poison agent of some kind, potentially created by ADVENT. It appears a strategy will be to lure incoming forces into residences and trigger the traps.”

“Avoid the houses then?” Yang cocked her head. “Not going to be that simple, I can guarantee that.”

“No, but we can determine what the trigger is,” the Battlemaster added thoughtfully. “Remotely springing these traps is advisable. Grenades should be utilized. If necessary, only send in drones and Muton soldiers one at a time to minimize losses. Yang, Ravager, remember this.” The Battlemaster’s Harbinger and the Ravager of the Hegemony both indicated their understanding.

“A sound plan,” Ravarian agreed. “Due to the limited entry points, our deployment of the Executors is going to be difficult. The Everglades will slow our units down and potentially destabilize them. The ground is simply not ideal. We’ll have to claim a significant amount of ground before it will be safe to move Executors forward. Hover units will not be impeded.”
“If we will not raze the city, I would advise an alternative target,” J’Loran highlighted the islands and along the coast. “Zararch operatives have reported these have been heavily fortified by ADVENT. Taking them out through a brief, coordinated strike would reduce their defenses deeper within the city. We can later insert Battlefield Engineers to claim them and establish our own artillery.”

“That can be done,” the Battlemaster agreed. “There will need to be sufficient cover to withstand the air defenses. The true lines of defense are deeper within.” A blue line was highlighted, along with accompanying structures. “The Flak Towers are the primary defenses of ADVENT cities. There are not as many here as Busan or others, but there are enough to reliably defend the city. They must be captured.”

“No destroyed?” The Ravager asked.

“No, I’d prefer we utilize them,” the Battlemaster said. “Turning them against ADVENT will be more useful for us, and allow us to establish offensive lines of our own.”

“That won’t be easy,” Lurainian Commander Galitai rumbled, shaking her head. “I’ve read on the history of these structures. We can only expect ADVENT has improved them. They are death traps for any attacker.”

“Perhaps, but I expect your forces to be able to accomplish this all the same,” the Battlemaster answered neutrally. “We don’t need to throw away soldiers, but simply leave this task to those who are capable. Which includes myself, Yang, the Ravager, and the Lurainian. Speaking of which, I intend to learn what ADVENT’s true objective is with this defense.”

He looked to Galitai. “The Lurainian will be sent within the city behind their lines. Your objective will be to learn what they are planning. Zar’Chon, you will assist them in this task.”

Ravarian bowed his head. “Yes, Battlemaster. In addition, thanks to the REPLICA\s we also have a list of individuals to target for removal,” the holotable switched to showcase a series of figures and faces. “Officers, Lieutenants, Corporals, and more,” Ravarian said. “Targets of opportunity we should eliminate to increase our chances of victory. I believe this would be a good opportunity to utilize the Banshee Seeker.”

“Granted,” the Battlemaster said immediately. “Allocate as many agents as you believe are necessary. I suspect we will need to exploit every advantage to secure this city in a fashionable timeframe.”

“A prelude to Tampa,” Yang grumbled. “This is a playground in comparison.”

“Consider this practice then,” the Battlemaster finished. “We begin our march to Miami. Continue watching the firewall ADVENT has erected. The moment it dissipates fully, send down reinforcements.”

“Yes, Battlemaster,” Disciple-7 confirmed. “It shall be done. Our forces are moving out as we speak.”

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Dreadnought of the Harbinger – Central Command

3/28/2017 – 10:00 A.M.

Patricia stood with her own small council as she prepared for the upcoming attack. She wore her
white dress uniform for now; the armor unnecessary. It wasn’t as though she blended in with the rest of the crew who consisted of entirely aliens. The lone Human certainly made an impression, though it seemed like all of them had gotten used to it even in the few short weeks since she’d taken over.

Marian retained his place as her Zararch advisor – and by extension her intelligence advisor who had done an excellent job at keeping her up to date on Zararch operations on Earth – much of which had helped inform her next plans. Stepping into the role of a strategist was not completely new, as even the Commander had only operated on a small scale, but she knew it was something she would eventually master.

The Imperator had given her free reign to select others she felt would be useful, and while she had consulted with him before making final decisions, there had been none he’d considered problematic. I’Sari served as her Andromedon advisor, even though he was part of the Andromedon Military and technically not affiliated with a Union, Irriaran was one of the most loyal to the Collective, and who specialized in genetic engineering.

She preferred an Andromedon as an advisor than a Hive Commander any day. Though as one of the Unions with the best relationships to the Hive Commanders, he worked well as an intermediary. Someone who had already proved to be useful in the upcoming campaign, and despite her dislike of the species, the Sectoids were likely to prove their worth soon.

The hulking Sargon she had also recruited was not a typical strategy master like the Battlemaster’s Disciple-7. She had plenty of commanders to manage that; what she needed was someone to handle the civilian populations once they were captured. Assimilator-2 was one of the Sargons who oversaw the training on Desolan, and had developed an interest in alien psychology and behavior.

An interest which had attracted the attention of Sana’Ligna, and he had assisted on some of the more humane tests on Human captives, not to mention countless ones on Vitakara. Patricia had never realized just how utterly intelligent the Sargons were; nothing at all like the brutes that fought. In short, he would be instrumental in ultimately forging Humanity into a species loyal not to ADVENT, but to the Collective.

Or at least breaking the conditioning.

The first few runs were going to be tests, but necessary to determine what was going to work, and what wasn’t.

The final two were ones she had included so she would remain in the loop regarding technological developments, as well as additional insights that could be provided. Miriam was another Human woman from Earth who had joined Fectorian’s army, and served as something of liaison to the Ethereal, as well as a somewhat adept engineer.

The woman was ambivalent to her at best, and her full loyalty was to Fectorian. Not an issue for Patricia, so long as Miriam complied. The other was a Vitakarian named Sci’casas’forge, one which was supposedly completely grown by Revelean. An apex specimen, supposedly. To Patricia, he appeared like a normal Vitakarian until she looked at some of the projects he assisted the Elder with.

In his spare time he was working on a project regarding deconstructing Sovereign technology in contact with Revelean. He didn’t speak much, but of all of them, he was probably the smartest in the room, Sargon included.

“Within hours the Battlemaster will begin his attack on Miami,” Patricia said. “ADVENT will
continue to be distracted with his assault and that of the First Guardian. My own will add to this confusion. However, these are largely going to be distractions from a greater plan,” she nodded to Assimilator-2. “Which was devised by our respective Sargon. ADVENT maintains control through information. Disrupt the information, disrupt control.” She directed a hand to Marian. “Proceed with your planned operation.”

“Yes, Harbinger,” he nodded, and brought up the holomap studded with red indicators. “What you are all seeing here are data centers for the largest search engines in Asia. Baidu, Yandex, Bing, and several others. Users rely on these for information. We are going to take them out.” Blue indicators flew down from the presumed atmosphere. “I’ve put together multiple teams of Zararch and Lurainian operatives who will have varying objectives. These are subversion, capture, or destruction. Operatives will attempt to link a server to a CODEX which may be able to subvert the network. Barring that, removing as much hardware as possible is recommended. If neither are possible, destruction is ordered.”

He looked up and around the room. “The result will be a heavy disruption of information distribution for several weeks, minimum. ADVENT will be forced to respond and allocate resources, and in the meantime, civilians will be left without crucial lines of communication, which could affect military forces.”

“How many?” Miriam asked.

“Fifteen targets in total,” Marian checked briefly. “I should note that these are not all of them, but the major ones we could find. We are not expecting a complete success rate, especially when ADVENT figures out what is happening. This paves the way for our second objective.” On the map yellow icons appeared around Southeast Asia, specifically Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. “While Patricia is active, sabotage teams will be sabotaging and removing all power stations, cell towers, and other lines of communication.”


“Indeed,” Patricia nodded. “I expect that ADVENT will be focused on me during this period. I suspect they will not be expecting an attack in this area, especially so close to China. They will not be prepared.”

“Taking the city will not be an issue,” Miriam said as she started pacing, her cybernetic eyes white as she appraised the holotable. “You’re aware of the history. Our forces will be harassed when we move beyond the cities. If the Vietcong could manage it when facing a militarily superior America, then I’m certain ADVENT can as well.” She pursed her lips. “In fact, we should look to Canada to see this in action.”

“Fortunately, I’ve taken that into consideration,” Patricia said with a smile. “It will be difficult to ambush us from forests and jungles if those don’t exist, won’t it?”

Miriam cocked her head. “Elaborate.”

“When I capture ground, I intend we hold it until the end of this war,” Patricia said, pressing a button on the holotable. Around the region the area was highlighted in red. “If the environment is going to be used against us, we remove this advantage. This will serve two purposes – to deny ADVENT an easy means of response, and to reshape Earth into something immediately usable.”

She gestured to I’Sari. “I don’t intend to destroy land wholesale without a plan. The Andromedons are expert terraformers and engineers in their own right. If you would elaborate, I’Sari?”
“Of course,” I’Sari lumbered forward. “It is important to reduce our reliance on supply lines from off-world. Land reshaped by Harbinger Trask will be instrumental in being converted into fertile land which will be supplemented by food, plants, and other bioengineered vegetation which has been developed by the Greater Hive Commanders over the past half-year. Originally it was intended to damage the Earth, and it has recently been adapted to thrive in it.”

The map vanished and was replaced by some plants and chemical and biological information of each. “Simulated environments have shown complete compatibility. The focus has been on improving already-existing Earth plants, fruits, and vegetables to be enhanced compared to their natural brethren. Other Vitakarian and alien foods have also been successfully supplemented to a degree. These will feed civilian cities and our own soldiers.”

New plants appeared. “In addition, the placement of controlled clusters will be capable of holding trapped vegetation, including acid and poison secreting vegetation, altered Chryssalid hives, and violent plant life which will be cybernetically and genetically programmed to not react to alien life. ADVENT will find no refuge in the new Vietnam jungles.”

“To hazard a guess, Harbinger, how will the current landscape be destroyed?” Miriam asked, with a hand raised.

“Two methods,” Patricia answered. “I’Sari will manage industrial equipment designed for terraforming, and alternatively, I will handle it myself. Psionics is quick and effective.”

“In addition, we will begin reconstructing appropriate communications networks,” Marian added, returning to the map with green nodes springing up. “A tight CODEX-controlled network which will emulate what civilians are used to, only we can ensure ADVENT propaganda is reduced to a minimum.”

“Finally, we will begin the process of removing and replacing ADVENT satellites,” Patricia finished. “Thanks to Fectorian, we will have better communication, coordination, and capabilities on Earth.”

“Will ADVENT be able to access them?” I’Sari asked.

“Not initially, but it won’t take them long to piggyback,” Patricia said. “But now it will be under the control of the Collective, and they’ll be forced to rely on our satellites. If they decide to send their own up, we just shoot them down.”

All of them nodded and glanced around in approval. Patricia placed her hands behind her back. “If there are no more questions or additions, then this is the plan. I will consult with the Imperator before the operation launches, which will be within the day. Prepare yourselves. Dismissed.”

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Near Defense Point GREEN, Miami, Florida – United States of America

3/29/2017 – 9:16 A.M.

Far above the ground, Sierra and her squad hovered as the Collective began marching towards the defenses. Lines of SHIVs and MDUs manned the defensive points along the first defense point; a point Sierra knew was going to eventually fall, but until then they would be able to take down a good number of aliens.

The bottleneck of the lone road was useful for concentrating fire, but the aliens were also marching alongside it as well; the Heralds and Mutons were primarily the ones braving the swamps of the
Everglades, even though they stuck to the shallow parts. Sierra wondered how many of them had succumbed to any wildlife attacks, or if the noise had scared everything off.

What made her furious was that the Collective wasn’t sticking just to the roads. If there was something in their way, they destroyed it. A swath of devastation was left in the wake of the Collective’s march to Miami, and Sierra looked forward to them burning for it.

They would not attack her home without paying a heavy price.

“Artemis A1, do you copy?” Carmelita asked via radio as her squad was presumably moving into position. Two teams of soldiers were prepared for this defense, Artemis and Apollo; the latter dedicated to defending Miami as long as possible. The other was to cause as much damage behind enemy lines as possible.

“Copy,” Sierra answered, checking her WHEEE. “Collective forces are starting to engage defense point GREEN. Ready to engage at your signal.”

“Moving into position; be ready,” Carmelita warned. “Begin your approach.”

“You heard her,” Sierra kicked her jets towards the marching army. “On me!”

“Acknowledged,” Ted confirmed.

“Right behind you,” Anna added. “Let’s make them hurt.”

Mobile artillery encampments from the second defense point established by ADVENT boomed as they flew over the first line, already catching the attention of the aliens; many of whom aimed their weapons upward and fired green bolts into their position, though far too inaccurate to do any real damage.

“Strike now!” Carmelita roared. “Kill every alien you see!”

“Diving!” Sierra called out and angled her body downwards as they were now far behind the battle lines, where groups of Mutons and Runianarch soldiers marched, with Heralds also in the mix. Beyond them she also saw the towering Executors and older Sectopods; most of which were marching on the road, but a few were gingerly moving through the marsh.

“Bombs away!” Anna called as she readied her launcher and fired a series of missiles towards clusters of aliens. These weren’t regular missiles, but ones containing long-term replicator nanites. Highly experimental, highly dangerous. According to Vahlen they’d last for two hours before self-destructing, which would be long enough to cause significant disruption.

Sierra’s arsenal was slightly less dangerous, but would serve to disrupt the aliens quite nicely. She tossed a series of white phosphorus grenades in an even spread, aiming for Muton clusters, and before it became too dangerous, pulled up from her dive and shot over a vast swath of the alien lines, firing a continuous stream of the white poison from her wrist.

Ted kept his focus clear and direct, acting as a sniper from on high, dispensing smoke around him wherever he moved as he blasted psionic energy in direct beams into the Heralds, with sustained beams penetrating their vulnerable insides and causing them to fail. Unfortunately, this was more difficult to do since his position was being hammered with dozens of plasma bolts – while most of them missed, a few clipped him.

Sierra kept lower to the ground, knowing that was potentially a better way to remain harder to hit, so long as she retained her speed. She aimed her WHEEE cannon towards the swampy ground and
fired, and just as she expected, the sheer electrical shock instantly killed anything living in that pool of water.

She repeated the same tactic several times more before taking some direct shots, forcing her to blast back up into the sky to reevaluate her tactics. The areas where Anna had fired were having an immediate impact, complete dead zones that were continuing to expand and consume. She’d hit the road itself, which was causing the most damage.

“Sierra! Incoming hostiles!” Anna called as she pulled around.

“I see them.” Ted grunted grimly as he dodged from ground fire. “Only a matter of time until they stole our idea.”

Sierra looked beyond, and saw at least two dozen figures launch from nowhere, and begin flying towards them. They appeared to be aliens of various types, and all of them had been augmented solely for flight in a way that looked just as good as the Archangel Armor, if not better. Black and gray, their mirrored opponents were geared and armed for a fight.

“Artemis-1, we’ve got aerial opposition,” Sierra warned, bringing her body around to confront the enemies directly. “Ground assistance will be limited for the time being.”

“No worries for now,” Sierra could clearly hear the sounds of fighting in the background. “Whatever you did has disrupted them back here. Better make the most of it before the Battlemaster shows up.”

“Copy,” Sierra acknowledged, aiming her weapon as the flying aliens approached. Green plasma fired from their weapons, which was answered by Anna’s autorifle and Ted’s psionics. To her surprise she saw one of the aliens break in air and create a psionic shield in front of him – a Sectoid then. The shield absorbed the torrent of energy from Ted, but the rest of the aliens and two Archangels sped forward.

Her armor shuddered as some bolts scraped her, but she persisted, and just when she was on a collision course, she cut her engines, fell, twisted upwards and fired her WHEEE at the other pilot who took the full brunt of the electrical blast. The engines which appeared to be built into prosthetics exploded and the body plummeted from the sky like a stone.

Sierra reengaged her engines and kicked back up into the sky as the other aliens were circling around. They were clearly new at this, and she fully intended to exploit it. Anna had managed to get behind one, and fired a torrent of plasma into its back, sending it tumbling to the marsh below.

Ted had gotten exceptionally close to the Sectoid rival, and was overwhelming it with short bursts that constantly disrupted its barrier attempts. Anna fired a series of bolts, and it raised a shield to defend itself which was all Ted needed for a torrent of power to melt the head of the Sectoid and it fell from the sky.

Sierra was realizing that as useful as the WHEEE was, it wasn’t ideal for air-to-air combat. Three of the aliens were teaming up on her, and her suit was suffering direct hits now. Evasive maneuvers were only going to do so much. “Three on me, need a distraction!”

“Keep flying forward, and do not stop,” Ted warned. “Anna, keep them off me!”

“I’ll do my best!”

Sierra shot forward, with the others in clear pursuit. She felt, rather than saw what happened. The air itself seemed to shift on a fundamental level when the Psionosphere was broken, and her
imaginative mind saw the purple tint in her peripheral vision, and heard the whine as several were falling to the ground.

She braked, the alien shot over her and wasn’t quick enough to recover from the direct shot from the WHEEE she put into it. “We need to get back,” Anna snarled as she slammed directly into one of the aliens and sent both on a freefall, something she could manage, but the alien clearly couldn’t. “Suit is taking damage.” With a free hand she tore off one of the engines and kicked the spiraling alien downwards before recovering.

“Copy that,” Sierra reluctantly agreed as she saw one of her engines getting to close to the threshold for comfort. “Artemis – we’re not in ideal territory and our suits are taking damage. Please advise your status!”

“This is Artemis-1,” Carmelita sounded hurt, though angry. “They’re definitely onto us now, and they’ll be dealing with a Shoggoth problem for a while yet. They’ve sent the big guns against us – retreating for now. Hussar strikes have also been highly effective. Think we’ve set them back a week, if not more.”

“Copy, we’re heading back to defense point GREEN now,” Sierra said, performing a hard break to let the twin aliens pursuing her overshoot. She fired, but missed this time and they quickly turned back towards her. “Good luck.”

“Good luck,” Carmelita wheezed, before giving a battle shout. “Another behind you! Morrow! Tell Anna that strike on the road really screwed them up. She’s getting a commendation when we get back.”

“You hear that?” Sierra said to Anna as she blasted another alien out of the sky.

“Oh, let’s get back,” she said. “I don’t want my medal laid on my corpse.”

Performing a variety of evasive measures, the Archangels shot back across the sky to relative safety, pursued by the aliens who had been sent to eliminate them, and when Sierra looked back, she saw that more units had been sent – Seekers. The big ones.

This is not going to be easy, she thought grimly. Not easy at all.

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Miami Exterior, Florida – United States of America

4/2/2017 – 10:29 A.M.

The march to the city had been more arduous than they’d planned, but by this point the Battlemaster believed they’d brought it under control. Wraiths and Spectres had been enough to drive off the XCOM and ADVENT special forces which had harassed them continuously, while the Archons were enough to drive off, if not completely eliminate the Archangels.

The nanite plague that had been fired had delayed them significantly, and they’d been forced to utilize EMP devices wherever they suspected there to be XCOM nanites. The incident had ruined the road, rendered three Executors inoperable, requiring hours of dedicated work before they could be moved again.

It hadn’t helped that along the way they’d had to deal with the occasional Human civilian who had ignored the ADVENT warnings and waged a one or two-man war against the aliens. These weren’t regular civilians, but who the Battlemaster could only assume were exiled lunatics. While their
weapons were primitive, they held copious amounts of them and sometimes even had domesticated wildlife they used against them.

They’d been dangerous enough to kill at least a few soldiers. Protocol now was to use an Executor to raze these houses to the ground. Overkill, but they did not have time or energy to deal with a protracted conflict with a delusional alien.

ADVENT, meanwhile, had been clever in their attacks. But that wouldn’t work again, especially as the Battlemaster beheld their first line of defense as shelling and plasma fire sounded around him. The ADVENT artillery seemed to be fairly weak, so it was unlikely to be dedicated emplacements. The majority of defenses consisted of the MDUs, SHIVs, and sniper fire from the residences behind.

No dedicated Human soldiers, though engineers and other crews were maintaining the line, along with a steady supply of machines. Their own lines had been set up a short distance away, though the machine accuracy of the MDUs and SHIVs was lethal for Mutons and Runianarch. Heralds were performing far better, and were responsible for the vast majority of casualties.

ADVENT had their priorities in line though. As he watched, he saw that these MDUs were not the same iteration he’d seen before. These ones additionally had a rocket launcher attached to the shoulder – and every time a Herald appeared, all of the nearest MDUs would concentrate on it, and not even Heralds could withstand a dozen rockets flying in at once.

To him, it was almost impressive how many munitions the Humans had access to.

It had gone on long enough. It was time to break the lines.

“Move forward,” he commanded to Yang and the Ravager who were stationed elsewhere on the line. There would only need to be a few breaches before the line would fall, and the Executors were right behind, which would make the following attacks easier.

“Moving,” Yang said, and through their bond he felt it echo. He sent the same in reply, and grasped his sword. With it in hand, he charged forward towards the line, the air blurring around him as he dashed faster than the MDUs could target him. He performed a leap into the air, and slammed himself down with a hard telekinetic pull, emanating a shockwave which destabilized the MDUs nearest to him.

Several of the Human engineers and support team screamed as he appeared, and with one circular swipe he decapitated most and executed the rest. Two hands reached out and SHIVs on either side lifted and were thrown into MDUs and other soldiers with lethal speed. The machines swiveled to him, firing with laser and gauss weapons.

He dodged to the side, then slammed directly into an MDU, ripped off the head with one hand and stabbed downward into the heart of it from the opening. He established a personal telekinetic field around him, which would catch all of the rounds which the snipers were no doubt firing at him. They were not a concern now, as there were still more MDUs around him.

With a sharp gesture a trio of Humans were killed as they were flung hard into the barricade they’d established. Another hand closed to a fist as an MDU crumpled, which he tossed towards the residences where the snipers were nested. Stabbing and swiping with his sword he dismembered the MDUs recalling their vulnerabilities, and the SHIVs had no such armor protection.

Above him he saw Archangels flying, though wisely keeping their distance. Archons saw their cue, and now that the line was breached, they began swarming the Archangels, severely outnumbering
them. That would occupy the snipers as well, and the Battlemaster returned to eradicating the machines and soldiers around him.

Blood and oil flowed and stained his armor and weapon. No soldier was able to stand against him, as it had always been. The shots which had been fired at him, he used to kill more when he shot them towards allies. The line had been breached in enough places, and Mutons and Spectres were pouring through the gaps, the latter beginning to convert the corpses into usable bodies.

Through their bond he sensed that Yang was similarly successful, and deep within her own trance. A shared experience of conflict and chaos as they carved their way through an enemy; it was a good feeling to have, after believing he wouldn’t experience it again. Certainly not with an alien, but it turned out that was not necessarily an issue.

Then the line behind him exploded.

Everything even partially near the line was immediately vaporized, with dust, metal, rock, and wood being turned into lethal projectiles if not destroyed outright. Orange-yellow flames roared to life, and the Battlemaster saw it extended down the entire line. He immediately sensed Yang was fine, if surprised as well.

A trap then.

He saw the flames begin spreading and realized that it wasn’t simple fire that had been laid, but the devastating chemical the Purifiers used. Chlorine trifluoride. Of course. He saw what ADVENT was doing, and it was certainly clever – and also told him they were willing to eventually sacrifice the city. Their objective now was clearly to delay and extract a heavy price.

The chemical flames burned through everything, and they would not dissipate for hours, and threatened to spread to his own forces – and the city itself. It provided an effective barrier between those on one side, and the other. He could move between the lines at will – the flames were not high enough to stop him from leaping – but for the rest, moving through was suicide.

“All Collective forces on this side of the barrier regroup with myself, Harbinger Shuren, or the Ravager,” the Battlemaster commanded as he executed several more soldiers. “Do not approach the flames under any circumstances.”

Slowly over the course of long hours the flames began diminishing, but not safe enough for passage yet, and the survivors on the other side were rallied and marching forward towards cover. Above the Archons were clearing out the snipers, done much easier with the MDUs gone, though the Archangels were picking them off with disturbing ease.

“Zar’Chon,” the Battlemaster called as he crushed another MDU which had begun retreating to the next ADVENT line. “Activate REPLICA units and Banshees. Eliminate pre-determined targets. In addition, have them search for where ADVENT may have laid other traps for us. I doubt that was the only one.”

“They will do so, Battlemaster,” Ravarian answered. “Should they be detonated?”

“If at all possible,” the Battlemaster confirmed. “Have the Cleanser Ships move in as well. Set them outside effective range.”

“Before the towers are handled?”

“The towers will be handled,” the Battlemaster promised, seeing several of the towers in the distance, likely where the next line was. “And when they are, we will strike.”
Vietnam was one of lesser developed nations on Earth, at least compared to certain other countries, China being one of the most prominent ones close by. A lack of development which, historically, had benefited them in times of conflict. The open field, the jungles, the vegetation had all served to give them an advantage against invaders.

She had learned from it though. This was one instance where history would not repeat itself.

The mask hung on her waist as she walked across the fields towards Ho Chi Minh, one of the largest cities in the country. ADVENT would have a defensive presence there, and one of the few in the nation. When that was gone, then they would assume control over a significant region. The few civilians who lived on the outskirts were currently peacefully resting.

No need to kill them. They would be useful for what came next.

By now though they knew she was here, and no doubt mobilizing a response. Perhaps they believed that a single person could not take the city – and they would be correct. She did not intend to take the city herself, but she was going to do it intelligently. Surgically. Methodically. A dozen ADVENT soldiers on patrol saw her approach, froze, and raised their weapons.

Not running. A surprise.

She penetrated their minds within moments, unprotected as they were. Die.

All of them fell to the ground like limp puppets. As she moved aside their corpses with a slight telekinetic nudge, she reflected on how...easy it was to kill now. Life was much more fragile and more easily molded than most believed. Psionics granted the power to mold into whatever shape they wished. It didn’t matter what the person was, they could be turned to become whatever you wanted.

Perhaps something to consider later. She was beginning to understand a little more how Revelean thought now. Examining what could be accomplished if one put their mind to it. Well, on a psychological level Vietnam would serve as an experiment of sorts; a deprogramming and subsequent reprogramming of a population.

Ahead she saw the ADVENT perimeter around the city. It was no Busan, but it held trenches at least two layers deep, a healthy spaced grouping of Flak Towers, and no doubt some artillery and tanks ready to fire behind it. She could make out snipers on the Towers and some of the buildings further in. Knowing how ADVENT operated, she suspected they had also seeded the area beforehand with mines.

She stopped walking perhaps a thousand yards away from the trenches. Outside the effective range of most weapons outside of snipers who were curiously holding their fire. Not that it would matter as a telekinetic barrier had been erected long before she’d reached this point. Lasers were a concern, but she could sense a number of basic emotions emanating from the lines.

They were waiting for her to make the first move.

Well, she would oblige.
Taking a firm stance, she clasped her hands behind her back and projected her voice into the minds of everyone in the city. It was not an invasive attack, but a simple telepathic message that all who were not protected would hear. A straight barrier appeared before her in case they misinterpreted her speech for vulnerability.

“This is Patricia Trask, Harbinger of the Imperator. Your city stands in opposition to the Imperator and the Ethereal Collective, and is incapable of victory against us. This is your sole opportunity to surrender before you are annihilated. Military forces will be treated well, and we do not intend to harm the civilian population regardless of the outcome.”

She put a note of warning into her voice. “Be advised though that refusal will be dealt with harshly. Send a representative if you wish to discuss terms within the next ten minutes. I will wait.”

She ceased her message and knelt on the ground, placing her hands on her knees, closing her eyes as she focused on her allied minds. She knew that – barring a surprise miracle – the city wouldn’t surrender. Certainly not to her. In the meantime, she had other operations to coordinate. She locked onto the mind of Marian.

Begin the operation. The attack will begin shortly.

Yes, Harbinger.

She switched her mind to focus on Assimilator-2. Prepare your forces. Ready the Cleanser Ships.

At once, Harbinger. All fleets are standing by and awaiting your signal.

Through her bond with the Imperator, she felt him waiting. Observing. Curious to see her plan in action. As was she, and she looked forward to showcasing it in action. Psionics opened up many possibilities even ADVENT and XCOM had yet to exploit. Mostly due to power limitations and inexperience, but a disadvantage nonetheless.

She opened her eyes again, and saw that the trenches were firing on her; hundreds of projectiles were caught in her telekinetic field, while the remainder were bouncing off her shield. She allowed a smile as she watched the muzzle flashes and orange streaks from the rockets. A few Priests were also in the trenches it seemed, weak telepaths.

I suppose this is your answer then.

She unhooked the mask from her waist and placed it onto her face; hearing the click as she stiffened as the bond forged itself fully. Two minds became one, and yet again she understood the gulf that would forever separate her from the Imperator. The power he wielded was simply not comprehensible to anyone who was not her.

It was not ignorance; it simply could not be completely grasped.

Much like a Sovereign, she imagined.

She focused on Assimilator-2, her presence now domineering compared to her simple contact before. Begin firing.

Assimilator-2 didn’t need to formulate a response, as he was already giving the orders. She leapt into the air, and kept herself afloat a couple meters off the ground, maintaining the barrier around her as she observed priority targets. However, she didn’t need to have priority targets when she could eliminate all of them.
Hand glowing with psionic power, she extended it in the direction of the city, and above the trenches; above the towers; above the masses of soldiers and defenders, opened a massive portal that she constructed around the perimeter of the city. Right now, it could only be described as a psionic cloud; a closed opening.

Below ADVENT was diverting their attention to what she was creating. She even saw a few shots go up into the purple clouds, and predictably did nothing but go straight through. It took several minutes, but soon a ring was established over the city perimeter, and ADVENT appeared to have some idea of what she was doing.

Unfortunately, it was far too late.

Locking the portal in place, she connected it to a very specific point in space and the ring opened to spit down fire directly from Cleanser Ships far beyond the reach of ADVENT. Torrents of orange and red streaks slammed with Earth-shaking force into the ADVENT perimeter. Towers were stripped and their defenses shattered as they couldn’t react in time.

The screams of pain, surprise, and terror soon reached her, and she allowed the relentless shelling to continue until the land around the city was razed to rubble and embers. Dust and ash filled the air. *Cease firing* she commanded, and immediately severed the portal. *Move to the second phase.*

There was still a city to capture, and even if the largest defenses had been annihilated, there were many more soldiers within the city itself – along with any who collaborated with them. Corrosive fire flowed around her as she extended a hand over the landscape before the exposed city, and a line of purple flame sprang before her as she set down.

She brought a hand back, and focused before and behind her; seconds later a dozen large portals appeared behind her, connected to her Dreadnought, Vitakar, and Desolan. Several of these portals manifested in the ashes of the ADVENT lines, and out stormed Lurainian and Wraith pods, along with teams of Archons.

Behind her was an amassed army of Mutons who marched out in formation, led by Assimilator-2 and I’Sari. With her army in the thousands behind her and the connections stable, Patricia let her arms fall to her side, and motioned towards the city. The line of purple fire moved as the arm marched, disintegrating the landscape and into the dirt itself to destroy any mines ADVENT may have laid.

ADVENT had been given their chance to surrender, and had squandered it.

The fight was not over, but victory was all but assured.

“*Purge the city,*” she ordered. “*If they are ADVENT, capture them if you can. Execute them if you cannot. Do not harm the civilians unless they interfere.*”

The commands received, the Collective marched on the city; firm in the resolve of the Harbinger who wielded the power of their leader. A power they witnessed this day.

A power ADVENT now bore witness to as well.

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*ADVENT Busan Defense Base, Busan – South Korea*

4/2/2017 – 10:16 A.M.
“It’s bad,” Cho’s face was grim as he stood before Duri and close to two dozen Tier-III Officers who’d all be summoned for an unspecified emergency. Even before he’d been called, Duri had suspected it was only a matter of time before they were moved somewhere else. Florida was the most obvious given the massive battle taking place.

This, however, was not how he expected it to go.

“Why the hell is she attacking Vietnam?” Jenkins, the officer he’d met a few times before asked, puzzled. “Odd place. Not to mention she’s setting herself up to get screwed later.”

“Vietcong 2.0,” someone muttered. “They’re going to be mad.”

It was said as less of a joke, and more of a grim prediction, one Duri agreed with. “We don’t know why Patricia is targeting Vietnam first,” he continued. “But it’s a lot worse than that. We’ve essentially lost all contact in that area. Communications are dead, Internet is being reported as spotty or off all around the country, and what little we do know is jumbled and incoherent.”

“Define that, sir,” an officer asked. “Incoherent as can’t be made out, or incoherent as shouldn’t be possible?”

“Both,” Cho rubbed his forehead. “Unfortunately, our first source was a civilian that supposedly saw the start of the battle; ran to ADVENT, and said he saw a woman in white armor – Patricia – create storm clouds which brought down streaks of light that destroyed everything. Right now, ADVENT Intelligence is moving him to examine his memories to get a clearer picture.”

“That’s a new one,” Duri mused. “Anything else?”

“We’re writing off the city until we know what’s going on there,” Cho said. “Direct from ADVENT High Command. The strikes across the world which are targeting server farms connected to search engine companies are probably what they’re more worried about, in all honesty. It’s already caused significant damage for this region.”

“I guess we’re all getting moved over there?” Another officer asked.

“Bangkok, Thailand,” Cho confirmed, tapping a button on the table and bringing it up on the holotable. “ADVENT forces are making that the main focus point, and from there strategy will be determined. Cambodia is within the affected sphere, and ADVENT special forces along with ADVENT Intelligence are investigating the region. Until new orders, that is where you will be stationed.”

“You as well, LT?” Jenkins asked.

“Afraid not,” he shook his head. “I’m still needed here. Busan is apparently not in any danger, but the rest of Southeast Asia is still very much under threat. I have no doubt you’ll all kill plenty of aliens, but be careful, and don’t expect it to be as nice as here.”

“Yes, sir,” Duri nodded, along with everyone else. “Do you have the name of our next LT?”

“No, they’ll be assigned when you arrive,” Cho clarified. “You’ll be moving out within two days. Make sure your squads are all prepped and ready to go. All of you will be given direct updates as the situation progresses. Depending on how things develop, you may be moved elsewhere. As it stands, this is where you are going now. Expect that.”

Oddly enough, Duri didn’t feel much of anything at the news, despite knowing it was more dangerous than the relatively safe Busan. He supposed that where he was going, he would likely be
given a shot at a few more higher-ranking aliens, and not the nameless and faceless grunts they’d destroyed.

And even if he did die…well, there were worse fates. Life as it was now was only about making life miserable for the aliens and avenging his family. He doubted that if he was face to face with Patricia, he’d actually be able to do anything to her, but he could at least say he’d try. Everyone who’d died because of the traitor deserved that much.

If he was lucky, he’d see XCOM execute her.

Probably wouldn’t be that lucky. But he should be able to rack up a few more alien bodies. A new battlefront and a new adventure, this was, if nothing else, going to be an interesting time. He didn’t know how his squad would feel about it, but no matter what, they would be ready to go as soon as he gave the order.

As all good soldiers did.

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Miami, Florida – United States of America

4/6/2017 – 12:45 P.M.

She had never been in a battle even close to this intensity.

Every single step deeper into Miami was met with an endless torrent of projectiles, explosives, and fire. They’d been wrong when they’d assumed the houses were traps. They weren’t, not completely. ADVENT forces were within them, who then made the Collective have to act to purge them, which resulted in them having to enter, and the buildings subsequently exploded.

The ADVENT soldiers presumably left before that point; Lancers she knew now, along with the odd XCOM soldier, who cut a swath to the next building and gradually picked off hundreds of Mutons and Runianarch. However, now there was a group that was before her now. With flames beginning to engulf the building, the six Lancers and lone XCOM soldier aimed their weapons and fired, some at her, others at the soldiers following her.

The XCOM soldier pulled out a longsword which was stained with yellow. A Templar.

Yang flourished her own weapons and dashed forward, throwing one of them at a Lancer, while throwing the other hand forward, sending a telekinetic wave that threw some of them back and destabilized the rest. The Templar threw several grenades which she intercepted telekinetically and threw far away angrily.

She didn’t have time for this, and this was the wrong soldier to fight her. XCOM would have to do a lot better. Yanking a hand forward, their weapons flew out of their hands, and with the opposite one she lifted them up and crushed their skulls before throwing their corpses away. She fell to one knee at that once the rush left her.

They’d been fighting straight for…a few days now. She was not at her prime right now, and neither her or the Battlemaster would stop until the first Flak Tower line was taken. The Executors were almost in position, and that would begin marking the true turn of this battle. Gritting her teeth, she drew upon her link to the Battlemaster who she distantly knew was engaged in his own battles.

His reserves were far deeper than hers. They would carry her on.
Somewhat reinvigorated, she looked up to see that ADVENT persisted in their defense. More buildings exploded around her. Mortar shells slammed into the dirt, some killing more Mutons, while several others she deflected to the line ahead – a line she could see clearly now through the pounding, shouting, and weapons fire.

The Flak Towers were in full gear. The air battle which she was only barely following had taken place far above, but the Towers were still firing into the sky, and also at any Archons which dared get close. It provided a buffer of safety for the Archangels and ADVENT aircraft. They needed to be taken out.

Recalling her swords to her hand, she reached out towards a weakened wall from an exploded building, and yanked it. With almost a groan and crack, it tore off, and she threw the piece of the wall at the tower. To her disappointment, though not surprise, it didn’t seem to have even made a dent. Pitiful, I’ll have to do this myself.

“Prepare to move on the tower!” She commanded to the mass of soldiers behind her. For every one ADVENT killed, there were plenty to replace them, and while she’d tried to minimize unnecessary casualties, ADVENT made much of that impossible due to their planning. It certainly didn’t mean they hadn’t extracted their own toll.

Ravarian through several updates had shared information about how badly the deeper ADVENT lines had been hit, with large swaths of soldiers killed, though they’d eventually been driven back. Banshees were still in the lines, killing who they could, but with the sheer number of defenders, Yang knew that killing off even a thousand wasn’t going to make a significant difference, even if they were ranking officers.

When it came down to it, this was one side shooting against another, and the heavy hitters weren’t going to be killed by things like Banshees. The new and improved Vanguards were a significant asset however, as they were fully exploiting the open terrain to create barriers that soldiers rushed towards, their telepathic links with each other allowing a steady and continued advancement with minimal casualties.

Their main drawbacks were that they burnt out after a few hours and had to be continually rotated, and that ADVENT snipers were making concerted efforts to target them, causing the paired Zararch snipers to direct their fire to counter-sniping, leading to a slower march overall. However, at least here Yang could command the full attention of ADVENT.

She threw back the collected projectiles, and placed herself directly on a firm warpath as the Tower loomed ahead. She could see the defenders behind the barricade; many soldiers who weren’t even full military; probably volunteers. They looked terrified as they saw her approach, firing their weapons wildly she telekinetically threw streams of debris towards them.

One brick hit a woman in the head; the speed turning it into a red mist. Metal spikes and shavings shredded and dismembered other soldiers, while the remaining random projectiles forced them to take cover behind the barricades. Muton Elites she had ordered to her location were now on-site, and were laying down streams of green plasma, effectively mitigating any defenses, allowing Yang to proceed without issue.

She looked up at the tower, then down at the entrance. It was extremely tall, durable, and intimidating. Fighting through that was not going to be fun. So she had to use every advantage she could, and in a way they wouldn’t necessarily expect. Plasma and orange projectiles streaking around her, she bent her knees, and leapt upwards, her genetic enhancement sufficient to propel her to the top of the tower.
Using telekinesis as a cord, she amplified her speed, and then slammed down onto the center of the
tower, knocking the operators to the ground. With several quick pushes, most of the operators were
thrown off the building and the remainder were slain by her weapons. She looked around to see if
there was a computer station, and she found something that appeared to be one.

Since she didn’t have time at the moment to figure it out, she located the massive cords plugged
into the computer and unplugged all of them, assuming at least one was for power. The massive
AA guns on the top went silent, and she located the hatch to descend. She yanked it open and
began marching down. The soldiers inside shouted in surprise right before she killed all of them.

She repeated the process, noting how loud everything was in here. It was a very organized area, she
had to admit. The problem was that it was designed to keep people from coming up, not down. Not
to mention that they weren’t prepared for someone like her. At all. Down she continued fighting,
and by the next few rows the soldiers were prepared.

Her armor was scorched, dented, and blackened from the barrage of fire she received. The sounds
were loud and distracting, especially after her days of fighting, but she pressed on, killing all of the
soldiers effectively. With a ferocious yank, she outright destroyed the computers, not having the
energy or patience to disable them now.

Before she descended further, she took a breath, and drew some more upon the Battlemaster, who
was taking notice of how much she was drained. Some concern emanated through the link. A
weary smile appeared on her face at that. I’m fine, it’s almost done. Once the first tower was taken,
it would be a domino effect.

Below her she could faintly sense fighting and Collective soldiers, and sure enough, when she
reached the next level, she saw them cleaning up the last of the defenders. Unlike her efforts, it had
not come without great cost. All of them were Vitakara, as the Mutons couldn’t actually fit into the
Towers. There were bodies everywhere, and Zararch operatives were rushing in now that the
fighting was done.

“Tower is clear,” she said, trying to keep her voice clear as she took off her helmet. “Water.”

One of the soldiers tossed her a water bottle which she drank in a few seconds, before
telekinetically summoning another one which she splashed across her face, feeling far better when
the cold liquid hit. Crumpling it into a small plastic ball, she put her helmet back on and marched
out of the tower.

In the levels below the carnage was even worse. The floors were coated in a thin layer of blood and
bodily fluids, with alien and Human corpses strewn in various states of destruction. Some bodies
were ripped to pieces, others were simply shredded if technically whole. More had just suffered a
few fatal wounds and died.

There was no clear path to the exit without stepping over bodies. The door had been blown open,
and there was additional carnage outside. Stepping back out into the hot Florida sun, she looked
down the line to see more Collective forces were reaching the towers and more were going silent.
They were making progress.

We’re going to win. She gripped her swords tight in her hands as she prepared to move down the
line. It’s only a matter of time.

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Miami, Florida – United States of America
The stench of chemicals, fire, and machines had become something everyone had gotten used to over the week since the battle had begun. The pounding of artillery and screams of the wounded had become background noise in the constant push of war. The Battlemaster no longer knew how many he had killed, only that it numbered in the thousands.

Hour after hour he marched along the lines, killing and annihilating all in his path. Nothing could stand against him for long, as was expected. Yet the sheer number itself proved a toll; and the scale of the conflict itself was proving to be the biggest hurdle. ADVENT had devised a clever contingency where for each battle line they passed, it was rigged with their chemical fire.

Now though, the Executors were here, and they would show no mercy.

Blaster Bombs, nanite missiles, and plasma warheads roared overhead, many shot down by the Flak Towers which still lined the third point, but enough hit that a healthy barrage of explosives were heard and felt in the distance. Entire blocks were leveled in regular intervals, as the Collective forces slowly advanced.

“There is an XCOM squad approaching,” the Battlefield CODEX warned. “Psion, classification Aegii. Accompaniment appears to be other XCOM soldiers.”

“Identification?” The Battlemaster asked as he dashed towards a small group of Lancers and promptly executed them with several swings of his sword and crushing their bodies with telekinesis.

“Unknown. Appears highly skilled.”

“Understood. Direct nearby Banshees and Wraith Seeker Units to my position.”

The sabotage, assassinations, and general mayhem caused by their assault had taken a toll on ADVENT. As he kept advancing, it became clear there was far less of a clear chain of command, and orders had devolved to simply defending their positions. ADVENT had kept managing to fight off the attacks, but they’d only been partially successful in actually destroying the units.

This tower coming up appeared more organized and protected, likely due to XCOM supporting it. Without warning a psionic barrier manifested before him and behind him, cutting him off. Immediately he directed all of his telekinetic energy towards the area in front of him, shredding the barricades and killing or wounding those closest, while throwing everyone else back.

The XCOM soldier in question did not appear to be overly shaken, and thrust a hand out, with three barriers extending around him, which the Battlemaster dodged to the side to avoid while throwing several bodies and rubble at the psion who created a barrier in front of him to block them. Well, this was going to be an interesting challenge.

A prelude to Aegis, perhaps.

There were few times this battle he’d descended into his trance. Situations typically did not require it. But here, with the danger of psionic barriers in play, along with a psion who had some skill in using them, it was necessary. Speed was essential here, and ensuring his reaction was as fast as possible was necessary for survival.

He tossed rubble and debris in a constant stream towards the psion, as well as the other XCOM soldiers who were moving to flank him. With a flick of one wrist he sent one flying, while another he threw up into the air and away. Barriers materialized around him, one slamming into his arm
and pushing him off-balance which he quickly corrected.

He jumped into the air and transitioned into a psionic dash towards the psion who just erected a barrier in front of himself which the Battlemaster slammed into with enough force to make the psion take a step back. With a telekinetic pull he uprooted the psion into the air, reached up, and slammed him back to the ground.

Inexplicably, the psion maintained enough concentration to create another barrier which slammed directly into his chest, sending him a few steps back while ADVENT soldiers around him kept firing and throwing grenades. The Battlemaster thrust out hands in all directions, creating a shockwave powerful enough to break bones and send those not slammed into a wall flying away.

The psion had pushed himself to his feet, though was clearly unsteady. The Battlemaster lifted a chunk of rubble and threw it at him while using telekinesis to freeze the man in place. Frozen, the psion still managed to erect a shield that blocked the rubble, while two more barriers appeared around the Battlemaster, one aimed for his head, the other for his chest.

He spun to the side, and thrust out an arm to crush the psion completely.

Just as a psionic barrier appeared right as he was reaching out, cutting through the limb at the elbow and flopping to the ground. The telekinetic grip didn’t quite vanish, and the Battlemaster idly noted that the limbs of the psion cracked, but it was nowhere as directed and lethal as he’d planned. Pain like he’d not felt in decades registered, a white-hot pain and the loss of control.

Blue blood spurted out of the wound as the suit enacted the contingencies to stop blood loss. Above him six Archangels appeared, spewing plasma fire down on him, with a psion shooting energy from his hands, forcing him to move and defend himself. Seekers began engaging, and he saw one of the Archangels land and airlift the psion away which he was incapable of stopping due to the barrage of fire.

He lifted a good hand and directed his grip to the airspace above him and tightened it. Some of the jets on a couple pilots sparked and one exploded, sending them into a downfall, while the others moved to help them while avoiding the fire of the Seekers than pursued them. The Battlemaster recalled the severed arm to a free hand and marched to safer lines, knowing better than to continue fighting with this injury.

The loss of a limb was not significant. It could easily be regrown and replaced. It was a temporary pain – and a good reminder that there would come a point where he would face someone who could defeat him. It was a painful reminder that he was still outmatched against Aegis, who was far more skilled than that Human had been.

Though that Human…it had perhaps been one of the most skilled he had encountered. Dangerous. Someone he needed to have eliminated.

“Battlemaster,” the Zar’Chon called. “I’ve been informed you’ve suffered injuries. How severe?”

“One forearm, wound is sealed,” he answered, still moving. “Nothing significant. There is a particularly skilled XCOM Aegii psion in the vicinity. Provide his image as a priority target.”

“Acknowledged, and there have been additional developments in what we’ve learned.” Ravarian paused. “A Banshee managed to penetrate their main base of operations and found multiple references to the detonation of nuclear weapons. You’ve specifically been mentioned as a priority target.”
The Battlemaster was less surprised at that, and more surprised at the methods. “They are planning to destroy one of their own cities to kill me? With their soldiers still within?”

“Unclear, information gathering was incomplete and the respective unit destroyed,” Ravarian clarified. “But I will note that we still do not detect nuclear signatures in the city. Which means they may be waiting until a majority of our forces – or you – are within the radius of the explosion.”

“I see,” the Battlemaster looked to the skyline deeper within the city. “If that is their intention… then we must tread carefully. Acquire information on modern nuclear weapons and their effective radiiuses. We will not willingly allow ADVENT to spring their trap.”

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**Ho Chi Minh City – Vietnam**

4/2/2017 – 11:51 A.M.

The capture of the city was proceeding well, with surprisingly little resistance. Patricia was on the outskirts, partially devoting her concentration towards the location, pacification, and execution of ADVENT soldiers and personnel throughout the city while Sectoid-led teams conducted house-by-house searches to root out everyone inside.

Only part of her concentration, as the other portion was focused on the inevitable response. She knew better than to think one wouldn’t be coming, and would be surprised if that was the case. While it wasn’t *completely* out of the question that ADVENT would cede this victory to her and not risk anyone else…it seemed out of character.

A token response was needed. They couldn’t just let her come and take control of a city in a matter of hours. It would be XCOM, ADVENT special forces, or if they really wanted to test her, one of the Agents of T’Leth. That would be a true test of her strength and connection to the Imperator. In a way she hoped that one of his puppets would come.

There were signs that would happen.

As the morning had progressed, she had noticed that the clouds had slowly begun darkening, turning the sky overcast. Wind had picked up and the temperature had dropped slightly. Manipulation of the weather was certainly possible through psionics, and she wondered how close T’Leth was right now…

In any case, she would be prepared.

*Ensure Cleanser Ships are ready to fire on my command,* she sent to Marian telepathically. *I suspect something is coming.*

*They await your command, Harbinger.*

The Imperator himself agreed that this was proceeding too well. There would be something that would happen, it was only a matter of time. While they waited, Collective transports had landed in the area, beginning to raze the land for conversion, and to deploy engineers, mechanics, and other support teams to begin establishing new infrastructure.

Like a loud *crack* it was noticed by her; the appearance of a new mind. A powerful psion had just arrived. Patricia’s head swung to a hill a short distance behind her where someone walked through a curious portal of shimmering blue and white. A minor curiosity of hers remained on why the
color of power differed on the wielder.

Although they channeled the power of a Sovereign. Perhaps this level was simply unattainable for everyone else. No matter, they would be dealt with.

Patricia hardened her telekinetic field around her, as well as enshrined herself in purple psionic armor as she teleported to a distance where only a few dozen yards separated them. To their curiosity, they saw that it was a woman, though not one that either of them were aware of – nor was she armored like the other T’Leth Agents they’d seen.

The armor was a bone-grey color, harsher than the stone-gray of the others. It seemed thinner and more segmented as well, with red underclothing visible of a silk-like material. The chest armor did not seem fully protected, and reminded her of a ribcage with metal crisscrossing over the chest. Similar styles of armor covered the arms, culminating in ridged gauntlets with the fingers ending in metal points.

Curiously, all of the armor was etched in glyphs and a language she could only assume was one long dead or alien. A Sovereign language most likely. A red shoulder cape was draped over her left shoulder, whose hand held her helmet – a mask that had a smooth skulltop and black voids for eyes. A helmet for intimidation if she had to guess.

The other hand held a staff, or more accurately, a *spike*. Metal and simple, atop it was a Sovereign orb which glowed brightly, while the bottom was tipped as a spike. The woman bearing the armor herself was one of the tallest women Patricia had ever seen. Taller than Saudia even, though not quite reaching her own new height.

Long brown hair fluttered in the wind, framing a pale face whose expression made her seem even colder. Green eyes flashed with contempt, and every aspect of her posture screamed disgust at what she saw. The hill she stood on gave her a slight height advantage, allowing her to look down upon the Harbinger.

“Who are you?” She asked, cocking her head slightly. “You aren’t like the others.”

The woman planted the staff in the ground in a singular motion and appraised Patricia fully, and with utter contempt. “I am Lavallic ir Nara, traitor,” her voice was sharp and curt, each word said with the air of someone who thought especially poorly of the target. “An Agent of T’Leth. You and your Imperator would be wise to leave, before this becomes worse for you.”

Her eyes flashed, and Patricia felt a vast telepathic attack go out over the nearby area; a telepathic command she’d performed quite often. She imagined it was a simple command; *attack; kill;* along those lines. Easy to defend against, but effective for the unshielded. Nearby Mutons and Vitakara soldiers began turning on and attacking each other while others resisted the weaker command.

*Cease.* She sent out the command of her own, and felt it ripple through the nearby ranks, though a piercing attack from the woman interrupted her. She had faith her soldiers would be able to handle the situation.

Patricia smiled under the helmet after the dual displays of power. “An honor, ir Nara. You will be the first Agent I eliminate.”

Ir Nara placed her helmet on in one motion and with her other hand blasted white lightning from the other which Patricia blocked with a psionic shield while launching an telepathic attack against the woman. With the opposite hand she raised it to the sky and several lighting strikes manifested and began striking unprepared soldiers. Surprisingly, she also had extremely strong mental
Patricia lifted a hand and shattered the Psionosphere around ir Nara, turning it into a lethal Tempest. Ir Nara stepped through a portal and reappeared a short distance away, thrusting both hands forward and sending a psionic shockwave powerful enough to send Patricia flying backwards, which she corrected within seconds and slammed down into the ground – though not before creating a portal right behind the woman, and slamming into her.

She heard ir Nara snarl and was forced to let go when her entire body became electrified, but in response this allowed Patricia to acquire a firm telekinetic grip and begin squeezing. A sudden piercing telepathic attack disrupted her, one far more powerful than any she had experienced, and had it not been for their bond, it would have broken through.

“You should have listened, Patricia,” T’Leth rumbled in her mind. “Neither you nor your Imperator can defeat me.”

She didn’t respond, but blasted the staff with psionic energy as ir Nara fell into another portal of her own design. With her free hand she opened a portal and six Mosrimor orbs fell out and activated, nanites swirling around them as they came online. Patricia moved into her own portal and reappeared where she’d begun, as both women appraised what to do next.

Ir Nara paced stiffly and aggressively, like a beast stalking prey. A hand shot out, shooting several bolts of lightning at Patricia and nearby aliens, which she easily blocked, before lifting a hand and shooting back a stream of her own which ir Nara deflected with a wave of her hand, sending the warped bolt directly into a nearby group of Mutons.

Patricia launched every single attack she could against the woman. Her telepathic one was resisted, but did slow her down. The telekinetic pull broke the dirt under her and the tops of her feet sank into it, an artificial weight pulling her into the Earth. The air around her crackled and broke as the corrosive power leaked through, ripping apart her cape and damaging the armor.

*Open fire* Patricia commanded her Cleanser Ship as ir Nara screamed in rage, then dirt, rocks, unlucky soldiers, and everything else nearby went flying; the shockwave being large and powerful enough to envelop her. Patricia quickly caught herself and hovered in mid-air briefly as ir Nara planted a foot in the ground and first extended it to the Mutons who were starting to fire at her, causing them to crumple to the ground; dead from a telepathic command, which extended far beyond the initial group as several hundred eventually crumpled over.

With her other one she lifted it up to the sky, and without warning the sky turned white. It hit Patricia immediately; a chill from a blizzard which came roaring in from a portal ir Nara had created, connected to some ice planet most likely, if not on Earth itself. Snow and ice pelted down, a cold she had never experienced before, at least not in such intensity.

Ir Nara was not affected, and if anything, the drastic temperature change seemed to rejuvenate her. With another hand she gestured, and other portals manifested around Patricia, which spewed out torrents of the cold that amplified the freezing effect. *Creative*, she grudgingly admitted, feeling cold enough that she began using Biopathy on herself to ensure she wasn’t frozen outright, while encasing herself in a psionic shield.

The shield did very little for the sheer cold, unfortunately. *Two can play at this game.*

She opened four portals around ir Nara, all connected to the area the Cleanser Ships were firing, and ir Nara now faced the full firepower of a fleet of Cleanser Ships and with a surprised yelp just barely got a psionic shield deployed around her, though not before she was hit by several direct
shots, shredding her armor and seeming to tear off her left arm.

Leaking red, she maintained the shield as Patricia redirected the portals towards her, anchoring herself telekinetically to ensure she wasn’t sucked into space. The portals above that had spewed cold were closed, though the snow lingered and chilled all around it. For good measure she lifted a hand and blasted psionic energy at the retreating woman, which was absorbed, but now there seemed to be some weariness in her defense.

Perfect.

With a disgusted snarl, the woman threw her good arm back and stepped into a portal, briefly reappeared to grab the staff which had managed to somehow destroy four of the orbs in her absence of paying attention, and then vanished. She still felt chilled, quite literally, from the experience, but elated at the same time.

*We did it.*

One Agent she had beaten, if not killed. It was unlikely that particular trick was going to work again, but it certainly wasn’t the only one she could pull off. She’d been good, but Patricia could tell that fighting was not something she was accustomed to doing – or at least not when her opponent was just as skilled.

She’d be dangerous one day, but Patricia intended her to be dead long before that point.

There might be another attack, but now she felt that they were clear in a way. ADVENT would strike back – but the next time it would be on their terms. Turning back to the city, she prepared to finish clearing up, and beginning the proper conversion into the first proper Human city under the control of the Ethereal Collective.

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**Miami, Florida – United States of America**

4/12/2017 – 4:09 P.M.

The end was coming, and Sierra knew that her limit was going to be reached. But in the end, it might not matter because the snowball effect the Collective brought to bear was in full effect. It had taken a couple weeks, but Miami was going to fall. Executors were reliably shelling and destroying entire blocks which went up in green explosions, while others were consumed by nanite projectiles.

The brief moment of hope they’d experienced when Geist had severed an arm from the Battlemaster had faded when he’d shown up a day later, seemingly no worse for wear. Everyone still left alive was battered, exhausted, and ready to nuke this place and take out as many aliens as possible. One by one the Flak Towers were destroyed or appropriated, rendering one of their greatest advantages a liability.

On the plus side, Sierra and the rest of them had a kill count in the hundreds from this battle alone. She wasn’t the only one either. Genetic enhancement and advanced technology, not to mention the high ground and superior maneuverability played to their strengths. Though not without its costs. Her body felt battered, her mind was exhausted, and her suit had so many scratches it looked like it had survived a minefield.

In a way, it had.
Sierra stood upon one of the taller skyscrapers before the larger skyline as Cleanser Ships loomed overhead. With the Flak Towers contained and mitigated, and the ADVENT and XCOM air forces pushed back, they had license to move in and raze whatever they wanted to the ground. Aegis would have normally been brought in now – but he was over in Asia of all places to deal with the attack Patricia was leading.

“They’re moving in now,” Anna said, coming in to land beside her, weapon hissing from the heat. “They know something is up by now. They’re going to raze the city center to the ground. We need to have them sound the evacuation and kill what we can before it’s too late.”

“I agree,” Sierra nodded as she watched the Archons, as they learned they were called, swarm one of the few remaining Flak Towers, picking off the soldiers on top, and then landing to appropriate them. The numbers just seemed to be…endless. This war of attrition was impossible, and she wondered if they’d even made a dent in their numbers. “We need to end this now.”

ADVENT had suffered their own losses. The International Airport had been bombed to cinders hours ago; though it had taken constant shelling to overcome the psionic shields Priests had deployed. Geist, being the idiot he was, had almost been killed (again), though his actions had likely contained the blast from killing anyone else.

XCOM in general was holding on to what little they had. Everyone had some degree of treated injuries, even with their enhancements, and all of them were exhausted. Days of straight fighting; shelling; weapons fire; conflict 24/7, it took a toll to the point that Sierra knew she was going to be hearing the thundering of Flak Towers in her sleep for weeks afterwards.

“Carmelita, Kane, Geist,” Sierra sent on her radio. “Come in.”

“What?” Geist answered curtly. “Air support would be useful.”

“Yes, yes, I’m aware,” Sierra looked up. “But there are Cleanser Ships coming down, and last I checked, it’s been a full day since the Battlemaster has been seen. They’re going to level the city if we don’t leave now. They know something is up.”

“I’ve assumed as much,” Geist answered, sounding strained. “No information extracted from soldiers, but they are expecting the Cleanser Ships to act soon. I’m waiting for something from ADVENT command.”

“ADVENT command is gone for now!” Anna interrupted. “The fucking Seekers have been assassinating officers left and right. Signals are going in and out. We need to take the initiative and cut our losses before it’s too late.”

“We have to wait for the Battlemaster,” Kane interjected, with Sierra hearing weapons firing in the background. “If we don’t, this is all for nothing.”

“He’s not taking the bait,” Carmelita grunted. “Hate to say it, but we’ll have to kill what we can, and get him another time.”

Kane didn’t object further, but offered a clear and disgusted “Acknowledged,” before returning to firing. Sierra wasn’t happy they weren’t killing the Battlemaster either, but at this point they needed to accept it and move on.

“Sound it then,” Sierra called as the Cleanser Ships began firing. The projectiles thankfully didn’t aim towards the city, but along the islands and Miami Beach itself. She watched in a mournful sadness as the skyline crumbled under the sustained and concentrated fire. There went all the
defenses and artillery.

“Doing so now,” Geist stated. “Cover our exits.”

“Acknowledged,” Sierra said, kicking her engines into gear and flying down for the last hurrah in the defense of Miami. It was interesting that knowing what was coming; that they had ultimately lost this battle, it gave her a sense of relief; allowed her to focus more easily. She was fortunate she wasn’t in charge of coordinating the retreat, and her role was dropping white phosphorus and smoke grenades along the choke points, while occasionally destroying an out-of-position alien squad with a cannon burst.

Time was ticking, and she saw that the planned MDUs that had been kept in reserve were being deployed as the sacrificial units before the bomb was set off. The soldiers and remaining militia and volunteers were rushing away as the Archangels, XCOM, and ADVENT special forces covered their retreat.

More orange and yellow streaks rained down, but they were again directed towards the Miami skyline and the island. Both were probably now rubble, but anything which was distracting them was something that was buying precious time to get everyone evacuated. After what felt like hours, they were at the Gateways, and the nuclear bomb was set on a timer.

“We’ve done all we can,” Geist said as the last of the defenders marched through the structures. “Time to go.”

“How long until detonation?” Sierra asked, glancing at where the weapon was situated.

“Three minutes,” he said, as they both moved towards the swirling purple energy. “I suggest we leave now.”

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Miami, Florida – United States of America

4/12/2017 – 4:47 P.M.

“They are surrounded and losing ground by the minute,” the Battlemaster said to the hologram of Ravarian. “If this is a trap, we will know soon enough.”

“I’m curious if they will go through with it now,” Ravarian looked at a display on his hand. “They’ve surely noticed you have not been on the front lines.”

“I dislike this,” the Battlemaster stated, palm over the point of his hilt. “ADVENT may have successfully found a means of deterring me. As a result, our progress has been slowed on the assumption that this is a trap.”

“And if you’re wrong, you die,” Yang interjected, arms crossed. “Not taking that chance, especially since you came close already. It only takes once, and your coordination is just as important here. Disciple-7 can be used elsewhere.”

“Indeed,” Ravarian gave a sharp nod. “We will find a way to deal with these types of threats from ADVENT in the future. This will be a test of ADVENT’s resolve. Even if you’re not there, there are a considerable number of forces in the city. If they use their most powerful nuclear bombs, it could destroy the entire city. Time to see if-“

The entire ground shook and the Battlemaster gripped his sword and dashed out, Yang immediately
placed her helmet on and sealed it before following him, and they stepped out of the small command compound to see the orange-tinged cloud rising in the distance. The shockwave hit them a few seconds later, definitely not that strong, but they could see the effects.

They heard the sound of cracks, collapsing buildings from the shockwave and pressure, and the screams of those who’d been caught outside the radius of the explosion, but within the sphere where their skin was shredded and melted. He’d researched the effects of nuclear weapons in the event that one was deployed against him.

“Area of effect appears to be nearly eighty-five percent of the city boundaries,” the CODEX informed. “Losses are currently being calculated.”

“Thousands,” Yang said quietly as they watched the mushroom cloud go further into the air and begin dissipating. “Almost everyone in that city is dead now. No detection at all? None?”

“Spike in nuclear energy was detected approximately thirty seconds to detonation,” the CODEX answered mechanically. “Warnings were issued to nearest units.”

“Not nearly fast enough,” the Battlemaster said grimly. “They did it through a Gateway. As expected.”

“Yeah,” Yang sheathed her weapons. “It’s over then. We won.”

It was technically a victory, but the Battlemaster didn’t know how much that was worth in this particular case. It had been less about taking the land as beating ADVENT itself. Now though…he wondered if ADVENT had even intended to win the battle at all. They’d steadily retreated, extracting as heavy a price as they could over the course of weeks.

The Humans had been averse to destroying their cities before, or using them in any kind of capacity outside of disabling electronics. He wondered what had changed now that they would detonate one even though they knew he wouldn’t be caught in it. Was it always the plan to destroy the city regardless of his presence?

He supposed it didn’t matter. They’d crossed this line, and they would do it again. They had held onto their own trump card for quite some time, but now they were feeling threatened enough to use it. In a way…this was a good sign. It meant they were scared and concerned enough to do whatever it took to stop him.

“Current losses to the detonation total to approximately two hundred and fifty-three thousand, one hundred and sixty-three,” the CODEX stated. “Breakdown of specific units is ongoing.”

“Are injured units accounted for?” He asked.

“Negative, medical and engineering teams are currently moving in to extract still living or functioning units.”

“What about radiation?” Yang asked.

“Your suits will be able to tolerate radiation for a short period provided all decontamination protocols are followed,” the CODEX answered. “Currently only a small portion of the city near the blast radius consists of radioactive material. Winds are estimated to spread it throughout the area within the next several hours. It is recommended you vacate the area.”

Yang looked up to him. “We should get as many of them out as we can alive. We owe them that much.”
“Yes,” he agreed, resting a hand on her shoulder, pleased she’d suggested it. “The Collective will be able to cleanse us of any radiation or infection afterwards. The soldiers who fought should not be abandoned.”

“Andromedon Contamination Operatives have been requested and are on their way to assist in the containment and cleansing of the area,” the CODEX stated, not missing a beat even though they’d ignored its suggestion. “It is highly recommended that you consult with the medical station to adequately prepare your bodies for potential radioactive contamination.”

“Then we go there,” the Battlemaster began walking in that direction, Yang close behind him. “We will take what ADVENT keeps trying to deny us, no matter how much they try and stop us.”

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Office of the Chancellor, ADVENT HQ – Switzerland

4/12/2017 – 5:16 P.M.

“Chancellor, the report.”

“Thank you,” Saudia took the beige file, and given the grim expression on the face of her secretary, she knew it had happened. Within a half hour media would be reporting it, and no later than two hours she’d be before the press to justify the detonation of a nuclear weapon within a major Human city.

She opened it up, and was greeted with a fairly brief report, detailing casualties, estimated cost to the Collective, scientific estimation on radiation duration and overall damage, cost to ADVENT, and what the immediate aftermath was. It had been a while coming, and with the chain of command being slowly decimated, it was somewhat notable that a retreat had been able to be organized at all.

Sitting alone, she read quietly and quickly. Overall, the objective had been largely met. There was no confirmation that the Battlemaster or Yang Shuren had died in the explosion, though they’d been warned that the Battlemaster might have learned of their intentions. Not surprising in retrospect, as that was a secret that didn’t even need intel to correctly guess.

However, the estimated casualties inflicted were…staggering. Between one and one-point-five million Collective units destroyed or killed. No percentages on how many of those were Mutons and less valuable units, but that was a number that was disproportionately high compared to ADVENT’s own losses.

Those entailed the city, all of the defenses, and roughly sixty-two thousand volunteers, militia, soldiers, and mechanical units. Not a bad trade, all things considered. Even more so when taken into consideration that approximately a fifth of those casualties only began racking up when the Executors had been moved into effective ranges.

A snowball effect. One which she feared could be replicated everywhere now. If the Collective was willing to throw over a million soldiers to their deaths, even Busan might eventually succumb. Perhaps, but it still wasn’t a guarantee yet…as they hadn’t even intended to win this. She wondered how much the number truly mattered.

The Battlemaster was still alive. So was his puppet.

They were the important targets. A good piece of news was the harm which had been inflicted on the Battlemaster. Footage she and ADVENT had acquired, and would be using. Something to show
that even the Battlemaster was vulnerable. Unfortunately, the Battlemaster was becoming a lesser problem compared to the rest of the world.

Patricia’s surprise attacks had devoted a significant amount of attention, and like a plague she and her forces were spreading through the region. More and more fronts were breaking out across the world, and at a certain point they wouldn’t be able to focus on all of them. Right now, Patricia was the priority target, but the Battlemaster and the First Guardian down in South America were close behind.

Pictures were also included in the report; an image of the explosion from the nuke, the aftermath, with dozens showcasing the devastation inflicted upon the city. For the first time in…decades…a nuclear weapon had been detonated on Earth for war. Justified, but it was still going to be difficult for some people to swallow.

Especially since they might have to do it again.

No, they would have to do it again.

They’d crossed this line, and there was no going back. There were going to be many more difficult decisions ahead, and they needed something to give them the critical advantage necessary to stop the Collective. Numbers wouldn’t do it, and being smart was useless if they lost anyway. Trading in general wasn’t a viable strategy in this war.

What was coming next was not confirmed, but all indications pointed towards a concerted attack against Tampa, which was both good and bad. Unlike Miami, Tampa housed ADVENT Special Forces Command, and the city had been fortified long ago. It was not Busan, but it was close. This was something the Collective would not be able to take easily.

However, that depended on just how badly the Collective wanted to take it. If they sent multiple Ethereals to capture it, it might be more difficult to defend. Regardless, it was likely that was where the next conflict in Florida would take place. ADVENT High Command was preparing for it in any case, and she saw no reason to dissuade them.

She set the file down and leaned back in her chair, closing her eyes. The pressure needed to be lessened in some way, and as long as they were confined to Earth, that would not let up. Seafoam and Atlantis were months out at best, and none of their alien allies were in a position to risk revealing themselves as allies, though it might buy some time.

Temporary solutions. T’Leth needed to be their trump card, and while his agents were keeping Patricia at bay for now, it needed to be more. They might have to get creative, but there had to be other ways to leverage him without exposing him to the world. Or in a way which wouldn’t necessitate intervention by the other Sovereign associates of the Imperator.

Breakthroughs were necessary at this point. Psionic, scientific, technology, anything to delay, destroy, and defend for as long as possible. If it wasn’t clear already, Ethereals needed to die; their soldiers needed to live through hell; Earth needed to be turned as inhospitable as possible to the alien and their allies.

This wasn’t even taking into account Betos and the SAS.

She pursed her lips. She was tempted at this point to nuke every SAS country and end them for good. Were it not for the fact that would have certain negative ramifications diplomatically and for the planet, not to mention the Collective would likely intercept them if they were launched, she would have considered suggesting it.
However, she was aware that T’Leth had access to individuals who could teleport. She was unaware of the extent, but she figured that it was powerful enough to traverse the world. In fact, a plan began forming in her mind. The Collective may adapt afterwards, but the initial strikes could be devastating.

Assuming it was possible.

She’d have to speak to them and determine it for herself.

In the meantime, she had a speech to prepare for. Turning her attention to her computer screen, she brought up the document she’d written long ago in preparation for this day. A general outline, and now one she had to adapt for the specifics of the event. Perhaps she would add something extra.

An address to Collective and ADVENT alike. A simple message of what was willing to be sacrificed in this war. It was easy to know what they fought for, but the aliens? They were here on the commands of their masters.

She wondered how many of the aliens fighting now realized that, and those that did, how long it would take before that wouldn’t be enough.

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To be continued in Chapter 55:

Siege: Tampa
The echo continued to tug on him; a curious feeling that was irregular. It had been many long years since any of them had experienced it; at least in this time of relative peace. Back during some of their conquests, it would have barely registered, yet now it was impossible to ignore.

A drop of water falling into a still pond. Simple to determine the source; simple to act if one chose.

However, restraint was still preferred. He was certain ignorance was not to blame for the development.

The air was colder today, and the artificial environment reflected the change in climate. Crystalline plants poked through light blankets of pure snow; light reflecting off their blue glassy structures. They were among the most beautiful of alien life; an engineered construct for certain, but designed by an artistic hand.

The cold signaled something else. Tests; trials perhaps. Initiation for more of the Riders. His Lord was perhaps overseeing them personally, which would be something of a deviation from his current priorities. Though his Lord was sensitive enough to have also felt the shift, and decided to act on it.

A short time later he stepped before a large metal door which slid aside to let him enter the dim and cold hallway ahead. Frost coated the floor in a thin sheet as well as the faceless statues that looked down upon those who tread the path. The Riders did not, nor ever would immortalize specific individuals in this way.

Their purpose was not fame; their duty was fulfilling enough. Few could leave such a significant mark upon the galaxies.

Instead of continuing towards the arena, he turned to climb a stairway that would lead to a command center overlooking it. Or an observation window; one warmer than the rest of the area due to the sensitive equipment within. To his mild surprise, he found that the room was deserted save the Lord who stood before a powered holoprojector.

The General fell to one knee, as expected. “[My Lord, you requested me?]”

“[Rise,]” his Lord motioned upwards without glancing at him, focused more on the blank light; clearly deep in thought. “[I suspect you know what I wish to speak about.]”

“[You have evidence?]”

A sharp nod, and the Lord pressed a button on his wristpad, and the hologram came to life. The General watched as it showcased a battle between Patricia Trask and a previously unknown figure. He observed their psionic duel with fascination, the pieces beginning to fall into place. Their exchange beforehand though…quite interesting.
It confirmed the theory of Viceroy.

“[So, it is confirmed,]” he said. “[He was not the only one.]”

“[We’ve known for some time,]” the Lord said, pausing the hologram. “[There were only so many explanations. The Viceroy was correct as usual.]” He looked to the General, a question in his eyes. “[Your assessment?]”

He considered his words carefully; thinking before speaking. He was not a trusted advisor for his hasty answers. “[It speaks to the power of the Imperator’s Harbinger, or the ineptitude of ir Nara in battle. Both were evenly matched, though the Harbinger outwitted her. Battle is not the specialty of ir Nara.]”

He paused. “[T’Leth is no fool. He understands I am not aware of what ir Nara is doing for T’Leth, but I suspect it is typically not battle, else she would have appeared before now. Which means he did not intend to win this particular conflict, but determine the capabilities of ir Nara against a threat like the Harbinger.]”

 “[A test then,]” the Lord mused. “[And I suspect, not just for her.]”

“[There can be no question he suspects.]” the General agreed. “[Perhaps the Viceroy said as much, but it is not out of the question to determine if this was to lure anyone who might be observing. He is testing what he could get away with before intervention becomes necessary.]”

“[The Sovereign plays with fire,]” the Lord muttered, keeping his expression neutral as he began rewinding the hologram and looking at the proud and fierce face of Lavallic ir Nara. “[Yet you made the correct choice. I will not stand idly by and continue to be reactive. Our own operatives on the world are not enough. This situation demands personal attention.]”

The General frowned, suspecting what was coming, but immediately having reservations. “[That is an extreme step, if what I believe you are going to suggest is accurate.]”

A thin smile appeared on the face of the Lord. “[Perhaps, but for the first time in centuries, we could be facing a being who has stumbled upon us. I would prefer the Sovereign Ones be kept in the dark. Their ambitions are dangerous enough without the knowledge of what lies outside their perceptions.]”

 “[How ambitious?]” The General asked warily.

“[A hand powerful enough to direct the course of Humanity if we wished, but not in the open,]” was the answer. “[Have you made progress on the plan for the quarantine of the Sphere?]”

“[Of course,]” the Lord was aware of this, of course, but he understood a verbal reminder was necessary. “[You agree with my assessment?]”

“[Enough to authorize a limited experiment,]” the Lord waved a hand. “[I am not convinced, but the Viceroy thinks similarly to you. This war does present an opportunity, should we decide to act. These...particular Humans...]” a grimace crossed his face at the admission. “[They have potential to be useful. Freed from the influence of a Sovereign, they could serve as a Prime Species.]”

“[There are others too,]” the General reminded him. “[Not as clean...but in a way, that is an advantage. I have, and continue to suggest both be shaped to be the Prime Species.]”

“[My preference is for the other you mentioned,]” the Lord shrugged, then faced the General fully. “[Yet our best opportunity to begin is this war. T’Leth’s actions have potentially greater
ramifications as well. I will authorize the Viceroy to begin operations. Personally."

The General blinked, and chose his words carefully. "[Considering the…circumstances…is that wise? If this experiences a failure, the results could be devastating. An extraordinary risk for arguably little gain.]"

Unexpectedly, his Lord smiled. But a dangerous smile of a predator, one which was also amused. "[It speaks to our success that you have forgotten his capabilities so readily. I suspect the others have forgotten as well. Do not fear, I have complete faith in his skills and I suspect he is quite willing to undertake a challenge against a Sovereign One.]"

"[What of the Throne World? A step like this has never been taken without their approval.]"

The smile was maintained. "[I will handle the Throne World, General. Indeed, I believe this could be an opportunity to bring some degree of change to the apathetic Lords. If indeed, they notice at all. Do not concern yourselves with them.]"

The General bowed his head. "[As you say, my Lord. I will continue my work.]"

"[Good, I will await it,]" his Lord turned away, a dismissal but he had one more question.

"[My Lord…has there been any word on the Entity?]"

"[No,]" the Lord shook his head. "[But we are watching. When he appears – we will act swiftly. On that you can be assured.]"

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Miami, Florida – United States of America

4/12/2017 – 5:16 P.M.

ADVENT had deployed some of the most horrific weapons he had ever seen. But the bomb they had detonated in this city may have been the worst of them all. Runi’hallian’harasota had read on the devastating consequences of nuclear weapons; and wondered how the Humans could have – or would develop a weapon so devastating.

War was woven throughout their history, but the consequences of such weaponry…there had to be a point they felt was too far.

Deployment to the front had been expected, but even he was overwhelmed by the utter brutality and carnage ADVENT was capable of unleashing upon their enemies. The stories of the so-called ‘primitive’ species waging a doomed war were clearly false as the amount of bodies he witnessed and treated continued coming to him.

Thousands.

Nowhere on Vitakar could adequately prepare him for the front lines. The Borelian training grounds the Runianarch used for simulations were laughably sanitized compared to the real thing. Wounds were fake, the fighting was fake, the stakes were fake; everything was fake except the environment – and right now training in a frozen wasteland was next to useless in the sweltering Florida heat.

This was not to say he had no real medical training. Accidents and wounds still happened around Vitakar on all races, and those provided a solid foundation. Even when the war had started he had
been responsible for treating the soldiers who’d been sent back – treated of the worst of their injuries, but not whole. Limbs missing, healing from internal wounds, scars from battle and fire; gruesome, but aftermath of the real war.

Even then, there was a…shock that emanated from many of the soldiers who came back. A shock of war that Hallian wasn’t convinced of solely because this was what all of them had been training for. He would never pick up a weapon, but there were many who did; who trained for the day their world was threatened.

It all centered around the hostile species on Earth. Humans.

*The Humans are dangerous. They can hurt us.*

That sentiment was crystallized for him now.

He now wondered if there had been an unknown war his people had participated in. One so visceral and terrible that the Dath’Haram had collectively decided that they would never willingly contribute to one again. If so, Hallian believed that it would look like the one he was in now. His objective was to save as many lives as possible, it wasn’t to fight in it.

At least that’s what he told himself now. It required a…disconnect. He saw little point in hiding from the reality that the galaxy was a violent place. Pacifism was an ideal not shared by the majority, and it would not be spread through staying in one place. Most Dath’Haram would never join a military organization because it would supposedly compromise their principled stance.

For him, at least, he didn’t see it quite in that absolute.

If there was to be war, there needed to be healers.

Even if sometimes it seemed futile.

Even the weapons the Collective used were sanitized compared to ADVENT’s. Plasma that burned and cauterized as opposed to projectiles that ripped through bodies; low-radius plasma missiles and grenades that destroyed everything within the area of effect while ADVENT ones sent fire and shrapnel indiscriminately, shredding anyone unfortunate enough to be near it and subjecting many others to long and painful deaths; chemical weapons that blinded, burned, and choked.

From what he could discern, the purpose of ADVENT’s weapons was not just to kill, but to cause as much pain as possible before death. To turn war against them to be as harrowing as possible. The Collective seemed downright humane in comparison even if they could be just as lethal.

The battlefield he was on now was different from the others he’d experienced in his short time on this cursed planet. It still stank of blood, machinery, and death; cries of pain, terror, and urgency still permeated; difficult to distinguish, but all molding into a semblance of frenzy and anarchy. From what he saw, there was no organized war on the battlefield, just legions of soldiers being sent forward and dying until the other side lost more.

Of course, he wasn’t usually paying attention to the officers and leaders. He was on the ground with the soldiers bleeding onto the dirt, who were missing limbs or organs, or who’d frozen up completely from the sheer shock of combat. The faces and soldiers all blurred together after a while, all that mattered was making sure they didn’t die.

One thing he was moderately good at.

But some of them were always just too far gone.
The site of the nuclear blast was something even he hadn’t seen before. It wasn’t too dissimilar on
the outskirts. Many soldiers wounded, mostly from falling debris or being thrown and injured by
the shockwave that had emanated from the epicenter. A larger number were screaming about
blindness and loss of hearing from seeing the explosion firsthand.

The closer he got to the epicenter, the worse it became.

All of them were wearing closed and lined suits to prevent radiation exposure. It made it slightly
more restrictive, but operating in a place tainted with radiation, it was necessary. The priority the
Battlemaster had designated was moving as many as possible out of contamination zones and to
medical centers where they could be decontaminated and properly treated.

Hallian genuinely didn’t know how many they’d be able to evacuate alive.

The explosion outside the immediate blast had actually not killed most of the soldiers outright, but
instead ripped much of the armor off of them, as well as the resulting layers of skin, or warped the
armor to the point where it twisted and bent in on them. What armor remained was melted onto the
skin. He’d already seen several cases where entire suits of armor had been fused to their wearers.

The lucky ones were left lying on the ground without skin, dying in pools of blood, mercifully
unable to feel anything when their nerves had been destroyed. Many had expired before the
medical teams had arrived, and the ones who were still alive were extremely difficult to pick out. It
was eerily quiet here; not silent of course, but when the dying were unable to feel pain, they were
quieter.

Many of them muttered strings of words or phrases, with what they could manage with mangled
lips or tongues. Final words or ramblings. Many of which he didn’t understand or were
incomprehensible. But he listened, because it told him who was alive. Critical at this juncture.

He saw the long form of a Cobrarian lying spread out over a pile of rubble; her mouth just barely
opening and closing. They, along with Borelian soldiers, had been the most affected due to usually
not wearing sealed armor. The scales had been stripped off along her entire form, and where they
hadn’t, the armor had been fused to it.

What was left was a pale length of flesh soaked in yellow blood and fluids that oozed from dozens
of small scrapes. He pulled out his medical stabilizer and began spraying along the body. The
spray would usually kickstart the healing process and disinfect the wound. Useless in this situation,
except for it effectively working as a layer of skin between the exposed muscle and the outside
environment.

The Cobrarian had been effectively dismembered as well, with only stubs for hands. Her eyes were
bloody sockets with the remnants of the eyeballs within. It was mildly remarkable she hadn’t been
killed at all. If she wasn’t treated soon, she would be. “Load her up,” he ordered to the junior
medics who grabbed her body and placed it on the stretcher that hovered off the ground, while one
pressed the ‘Return’ button, sending it back to the medical center.

The CODEX intelligence was one of the greatest inventions of the Collective, and this certainly
proved it. It cut down the need for wasted manpower, and could manage sending hoverstretchers
to combat zones and returning them, allowing every medic on the front lines to focus on stabilizing
instead of worrying about whether or not they could be evacuated.

It was simple to just summon one when he needed it, although in these cases he believed the
Battlemaster had commanded it to send as many as possible. Wherever he turned, there were
stretchers in the area pushed around by medics to wounded before being returned. Without the
system, their job would be almost impossible.

He rushed to a pair of nearby Mutons who seemed to just barely be alive. Their thicker skin had been both a blessing and curse, as it meant that, ultimately, they’d have an easier time healing, but also it didn’t completely destroy their nerves. Their heavier armor had also reduced the amount of fusing to the skin that had happened.

The weaker parts hadn’t held up though. The joints, the neck, several other areas had been melted and fused. After stabilizing them, they threw the Mutons onto the stretchers and sent them back. He knew that Mutons were considered a lesser priority, but he wasn’t thinking of the semantics at the moment. Everyone still alive deserved to be rescued as soon as possible.

With how many working here, it did somehow feel like they were making some degree of progress. He’d even seen the Battlemaster and his own Harbinger beside him helping load up the wounded. A large number of the robotic Custodians were also assisting, with a large number of volunteers.

It was not going to be something any of them would ever forget.

And he knew that if ADVENT did it once, they would do it again. Regardless of the circumstances of how this started, he had to agree now that the Humans had to be kept on this planet. Otherwise they would use one of these on Vitakar.

That could not be allowed, and the fear of the Nulorian acquiring these was terrifying to consider. The way the war had been started was questionable, but he couldn’t disagree that now it had shifted to self-preservation.

The best thing that could happen now was for the war to end as quickly as possible, before the Humans destroyed everything in their path.

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Zar’Chon’s Chambers, Mars Observation Station – Mars Orbit

4/15/2017 – 12:06 P.M.

This was, if nothing else, an interesting development. Not unwelcome, but interesting. Unexpected. He was still trying to determine the angle of this meeting, though his guest had yet to speak. He’d practically disappeared after relations had broken down between the Collective and EXALT back when that operation was proceeding.

Where Eth’astri’than had gone after that was something even he hadn’t been told. He was one of the few Vitakara who answered exclusively to the Ethereals; a role established by the original uplifting of the Vitakara. The intervention that had saved their species. A Speaker for their commands and will. He had been instrumental in bringing all of the species into the Ethereal Collective willingly.

And later disappeared from the public eye, his job complete.

That one perhaps, but his work was far from over. Though he had not joined the fledgling Zararch at the time, Ravarian remembered his face quite well as he had been interviewed, tested, and enhanced for the position he now held. Ravarian had long suspected Astri – if that was his name – was the unofficial pawn of Quisilia.

There was nothing backing this belief other than a suspicion and that he had effectively
disappeared from Vitakara society. Still something of a revered figure, most believed he was in some kind of retirement, and Ravarian knew that whatever he was doing, it wasn’t retirement. It didn’t fit Sicarius’s profile, nor any of the other Ethereals aside from perhaps Sana.

Except Sana wasn’t conniving or subtle enough for that to make sense. No, he was one of Quisilia’s pawns and now…likely here on his orders. He didn’t specify, of course, but Ravarian knew the number who would know or care about this particular figure was limited – especially since the vast majority of Ethereals were focused on Earth.

Vitakar was a secondary concern for them.

A mistake to ignore, especially given rising discontent and Quisilia’s oddly sub-par debate performance with Aegis.

Eth’astri’than was a Dath’Haram whose name was completely unique and unheard of. The Eth prefix was only used by a very few and exclusive Vitakara, usually those who had devoted themselves to the Ethereals above their own species. They were usually the most trusted Vitakara of the Ethereals. He didn’t know if there was a meaning for Astri, but he did know it wasn’t his original name. Than was odd, as there was no city or location named such, but interestingly enough, he wasn’t the only Vitakara to bear it. Though his other brethren from this particular place were also deeply embedded with the Ethereals, usually part of the Phantom Division or other Ethereal entities.

Though it was not necessarily his name that stood out as much as his appearance. For a Vitakara, Astri was old. He wondered how much of that was an illusion, but the Dath’Haram was smaller and thinner than many of his brethren, and his skin had the rough patches of an elder, various colorings of green instead of a continuous shade.

He carried a cane with him as well, carved from forest wood and given to all Dath’Haram elders after a certain age. He was an elderly and unassuming figure that people would overlook easily, even with his status as a figure of importance among his people.

A lie, obviously. A show Astri deigned to put on for some. Ravarian knew very well the Speaker of the Elders was in top physical condition, having even undergone surgery to make his appearance closer to the Humans for his EXALT operation. His eyes had not lost vigor either, and the brain behind them was just as intelligent as ever.

Though a few things had changed. Astri had decided to keep some reminders of his previous mission with him, particularly the Human-style clothing of an altered black suit and pants, and interestingly enough, the spectacles modified to stream data directly to him. It was certainly a unique appearance in his unaltered state.

“Ravarian, busy as ever,” he said, his voice still oddly smooth and off-putting coming from his appearance. He glanced to the various holoprojectors showcasing Human news stations, troop movements, and the golden CODEX figure standing off to the side.

“We do have a war to win, Speaker,” he said, inclining his head. “To what do I owe this meeting?”

“Vitakar,” he answered smoothly, beginning to pace around the chambers. “If I may say so, I do not agree with your response to the recent developments.”

Ravarian inwardly bristled, but kept his expression neutral. “The alternative is to do nothing, Speaker. With respect, that is unacceptable. Given the implicit support of XCOM and the traitor Aegis, the Nulorian will become emboldened and I have little interest in them reforming their
“You misunderstand,” he lifted a gaunt hand. “I do not disagree with your overall goal. It is your methods which will inevitably plunge our planet into war.”

Ravarian narrowed his eyes. “I am skeptical of that possibility.”

“You disconnection from reality does you no favors,” Astri shook his head. “For a man who puts so much stock in predictions, models, and psychological profiles, you underestimate the power of emotion and conviction. What people feel is often just as, if not more important than what they believe – or are told to think.”

He waved a hand around. “You blast them with propaganda. They only see what you wish them to see. Repetition over and over until it becomes routine. However, your methods are sadly, soulless. They do not resonate. They do little more than keep our species complacent. Asleep. When they become awakened to the manipulation, they will instinctively rebel against what they feel are falsehoods deep down.” A smile split across his face. “And let us not lie to ourselves, Ravarian – much of what they believe are our lies.”

Ravarian’s lips pursed. A viewpoint he had not considered. “Point taken.”

“Emotion is a critical part of life,” Astri mused, looking out the projector screens showing the red sands of Mars. “We can never fully get rid of it. Suppress it, control it, but it will rebel. When there is no emotions or passion, we become like machines. Not a desirable outcome, and it breeds resentment and rebellion. Do you know why your propaganda on Earth isn’t working as well on the Humans?”

“ADVENT Intelligence and XCOM,” he answered. “They are continually working to counter our operations-“

“A singular world with a fraction of resources, manpower, and infrastructure is effectively holding their own?” He asked rhetorically. “Well, perhaps. But what I’ve noticed is ADVENT doing something far more clever. They are inoculating their citizens to alien propaganda through mobilization of species and state pride. A global identity of Human supremacy and superiority. ADVENT has tied themselves to the species so completely that to be Human is to be ADVENT, and to support ADVENT is to support Humanity. Quite difficult to penetrate a mindset with alien propaganda isn’t it?”

“We shall see,” Ravarian said. “Patricia’s own operations may yield a way to counter this… advantage.”

“Perhaps, perhaps,” Astri rubbed his chin with thin fingers. “I think it is time we adapted their methods for Vitakar. Instill some pride in our species; uplift a threat to our way of life. Exalt ourselves above the others in the Collective. I suspect many Vitakara do not wish to be associated with the worst actions the Sectoids and Ethereals have committed, yet they are all the same.”

“The last thing we need is a supremacist mindset forming in the public,” Ravarian said flatly. “Especially not within the Collective.”

“On the contrary, that is exactly what we need,” Astri disputed. “Our people live in a fugue on Vitakar; their lives devoid of meaning and purpose. They have been kept complacent, and now they know this is false. They are awake, and you cannot sedate them again. It is time to finish what was started so long ago – the unification of our species permanently. No more racial governments. No more division and tradition. One species, one voice, one purpose – to pursue, protect, and
promote our interests. Not those of aliens.”

He waved a hand. “Of course, this is merely a framework for our story. But a change is needed, Zar’Chon. But it would do our species good to take some initiative and be something more than placid pawns of the Ethereals. If for no other reason than if we do not offer them purpose, the Humans will.” He bared his teeth. “And if there is one thing I find more unacceptable that rebellion, it is our species being subverted and reformed by a hostile one.”

Ravarian took the criticism in stride, neutrally. Unfortunately, he saw that the elder Dath’Haram had a point. He disliked overt species supremacy; not in light of the threats in the galaxy. But perhaps he had taken the wrong approach. Supremacy was perhaps more useful coopted than quashed. It seemed like the Vitakara might not be ready – like many other species – to move beyond concern for their own interests.

He appraised Astri. “You have a plan.”

“That I do,” he said, his teeth now bared in a ferocious smile. “One that will begin this societal transition, as well as crack down on the rebels in our midst. I believe the Nulorian and their alien supporters should understand they tread in hostile territory. It is time for the Speaker to address his people once more.”

He placed a hand on his chest, his voice soft and smooth. “Not on behalf of an alien, but simply as a Vitakara. The usher of a new era for our people, come to save them from the threat of alien subversion. I believe you could work such a story to your advantage, don’t you?”

Ravarian gave a short nod, the first thin smile of his own forming. “Yes, I believe I can.”

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*Florida Collective Command, Florida – United States of America*

4/16/2017 – 10:18 A.M.

Ivan did not have the highest opinion of Florida, and the fact that he was now fighting over it in a war was an irony that was not lost on him. Perhaps when the war was finished, the Collective would transform it into something slightly more palatable. Patricia had the right idea it seemed, though her reasons were more practical.

First though, they needed to capture it.

Miami served a useful purpose in that it showcased what ADVENT was willing to do to deny them victory. Now they knew, and the Battlemaster was preparing accordingly for what would probably be the most important fight of the state. The city of Tampa would not be especially important had it not been for the proximity to the MacDill Air Force Base which had also once housed United States Special Forces Command.

Now it housed ADVENT’s global Special Forces Command.

As a result, the nearby city, not to mention the base itself, had been turned into a fortress that was closer to Busan than any of them felt comfortable with. Hence why the Battlemaster had not only called himself to assist, but also Sicarius, her young Harbinger, and the Second Guardian. Three Ethereals against one city.

ADVENT was not going to stand a chance, no matter what forces they brought to defend it.
Of course, the Battlemaster was not convinced and had a long and elaborate plan to take the city. The outline on the holotable highlighted the city itself, as well as the nearby cities of St. Petersburg and Clearwater. “This will be a multi-pronged attack,” he was saying. “The majority of forces are moving first through the Brandon area, and will hit Tampa from the side.”

“I assume you do not want to go along the Tampa coast,” J’Loran noted. “The peninsula the base is located on is prime territory for shelling.”

“Correct,” the Battlemaster agreed. “However, only until the majority of the forces are striking the city. We will move Executors to begin hitting the base. Or at minimum occupying their attention. The base is heavily fortified, and significant shelling will likely have limited effect. Guardian, you will lead this force forward. Take the cities and towns along the way.”

“It will be done, Battlemaster,” she said with an incline of her head. “Due to the proximity of ADVENT special forces, I expect we’ll experience significant harassment reminiscent of the attacks prior to your invasion of Miami.”

“That is being taken into account,” the Battlemaster nodded. “You will have larger numbers of Wraiths, Custodians, Vanguards, and Lurainian to compensate. I suspect ADVENT will not want to lose this base, and trapping it like they did with Miami is unlikely. Unlike there, this holds a location of significant importance for ADVENT.”

He turned to look at the small Ethereal and her partner. “Sicarius, Nico. XCOM will be on the battlefield. Potentially others of importance. Your mission will be to eliminate them as they appear. Ravarian may suggest additional targets. Remove them quickly, cleanly, and with limited collateral damage.”

“Of course,” she answered. “It will be accomplished.”

“While this assault is commencing, I will lead the second one against the opposite side – Clearwater and St. Petersburg. Yang will assist me in taking these locations. There is limited defense infrastructure on the outskirts, which will provide us with a suitable beachhead for our assault. Prior to this, we will be deploying Spectre Pods to gauge their effectiveness against the defenses.”

Ivan lifted a hand. “What about Chryssalids?”

“The current iteration of Chryssalids is ineffective for sustained urban assault,” the Battlemaster disputed. “Their usage is more versatile in rural environments against poorly-equipped opponents. ADVENT has evacuated the immediate civilian population, and their weaponry will render Chryssalids useless. Spectres are more effective.”

“We should also assume they will incorporate some version of their fire line in Miami,” Disciple-7 pointed out. “That was noticeably effective in causing damage and slowing our advance.”

“I am aware,” the Battlemaster brought up a hologram of one of their drones. “The Battlefield CODEX has been programmed to scan for buried ordinance. We will not be able to tell if it is the same chemical, but we will not be surprised if ADVENT has planned similar defenses.”

“I don’t suppose we know if Aegis will appear?” Yang glanced to the Battlemaster.

“Unlikely,” Ivan dismissed with a flick of his wrist. “Patricia is occupying his attention. All ADVENT has to defend itself here is XCOM.”

“And their own armies,” Yang added dryly, looking at him skeptically. “We underestimate
ADVENT at our own peril.”

“Against three Ethereals and us?” Ivan raised an eyebrow. “What are they going to do? Nuke another city?”

“If it would kill three Ethereals and us?” She shot back. “Probably.”

“While the likelihood of similar retaliation is reduced, the possibility still remains,” the Battlemaster chastised turning his helmet to look at Ivan. “Underestimating them does us no favors. We must anticipate, prepare, and counter appropriately. Your own mission will be to penetrate the minds of ADVENT officers and inform us of their plans. If they intend to repeat their actions, we should know about it.”

“And should I alter them as well?” He asked.

“No. Observe,” the Battlemaster clarified. “And do your best to not be detected by Priests or XCOM psions. I would prefer ADVENT did not become aware there was a trained telepath assisting us. Keep a low profile, something you can manage I trust?”

He didn’t quite like the idea of being a glorified listening post. “With respect, Battlemaster, I doubt the Overmind intended my role to be this passive.”

Yang smirked, though quickly hid it. The Battlemaster’s voice was unimpressed. “What the Overmind intends is not important. I am more interested in capturing this city than putting you in a position to demonstrate specific capabilities. Perform well and you will have an opportunity to do so later. This is a long war, and there will be many roles we play. But the mission comes first.”

Well then, he supposed he would have to at least play along. “Very well, Battlemaster.” The bad news for his supposed superior was that the Battlemaster unfortunately wouldn’t be able to tell one way or another what he was doing. He could play the passive role well enough, but there was no reason to artificially restrict what he could do.

The Battlemaster would probably thank him when this was over. Intrinsically, he knew he should feel some concern for the conflict, but truthfully, he would be lying if he said he wasn’t confident of their victory. Though some of that certainly had to do with how much he was looking forward to exacting his own revenge on ADVENT.

You could have had me on your side. A shame you denied me.

Perhaps a bit selfish, but it was true. At least under the Collective he would be able to ensure that those who deserved this gift received it. This was to certainly be an excellent trial run of his capabilities, and in the event that ADVENT did become aware of his presence, he suspected the Battlemaster was going to be too distracted to notice or make the connection.

Besides, ADVENT was going to be busy fighting the other Ethereals. A single telepath was a… lesser concern.

“The dissemination of direct commands will begin shortly,” the Battlemaster said as he shut down the holotable. “Dismissed. We launch our assault within the day.”

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Nulorian Outpost – Classified

4/16/2017 – 9:22 A.M.
Nartha had come to a conclusion.

He did not like Siaru.

Within one of Miridian’s command centers; one of the most secure places Nartha had entered yet. Shun and another of the XCOM soldiers, Edgar Jarvis had accompanied him to the secure location. Armored Nulorian soldiers watched the Humans warily, as well as Nartha himself. Unlike other Nulorian outposts, this one was...advanced.

Nartha didn’t know if they were in a cave, underground, or underwater, but the building they were in was both open and confined. It was – to his eyes – a completely symmetrical cube that had smaller tunnels leading to other compartments. Turrets of alien make hung from the ceiling, which tracked the movements of the guests.

Nulorian sat at stations and were monitoring computer systems that Nartha had never seen before. All of it was black metal, which displayed red-colored holograms with information conveyed in glyphs and characters that might as well have come from the Sar’Manda with how alien they were. The lighting was white, but the red lights from the holograms gave the entire place a sinister feel.

What truly unsettled all of them was the voice of Siaru which permeated throughout the area. It was loud and soft at the same time; not projected from a loudspeaker, but speaking from stations to specific Nulorian handlers. All of it contextless phrases and designations, all of which overlapped in a low enough tone that was not disruptive, and you could easily focus on one of them – but also loud enough that you couldn’t ignore the voice.

"VITAKARIAN ENTITY ARRIVING AT POINT-ZERO-TWO-FOUR; PREPARING TO SEND ALL-CLEAR SIGNAL."

"PERIMETER SENSOR ZERO-NINE-NINE REPORTS DISRUPTION. INVESTIGATION ADVISED."

"SAR’MANDA ENTITY TWO-THREE-ONE ARRIVING AT DESTINATION ON SCHEDULE."

The intelligence maintaining this degree of processing while also seeming to watch them specifically did not make him feel safe. Now before Miridian, Sorras, and several other Nulorian officers he’d never met before, they lacked the command of the room, to his surprise. Siaru had no projection or avatar, but his presence was suffocating nonetheless; a being who drew all attention through voice alone. The machine mind put his skin on edge, and he could tell Shun was similarly disturbed.

Especially when Siaru was doing most of the talking.

"ENTITY IDENTIFIED AS ETH'ASTRI'THAN HAS BEEN SIGHTED ON THE PLANET. LIKELIHOOD OF INVOLVEMENT HIGH. PREPARE FOR POTENTIAL ACTION TAKEN AGAINST ALLIED INTERESTS."

"Who is that?" Shun asked.

"The Speaker of the Elders," he answered. "One of the most important figures in our history. He was instrumental in bringing the Vitakara into the Ethereal Collective. I met him once; a humbler figure than most think, and wholly devoted to the Collective."

"And more unknown, a pure Ethereal puppet," Miridian interjected neutrally, bringing the
hologram of the Dath’Haram before them. “Or perhaps not unknown. In the early days of the Zararch he had enormous sway. The public humble persona he puts on for the public is nothing more than a trick. I assure you, this particular Dath’Haram is intelligent, manipulative, and dangerous. We would be fools to assume he has not been enhanced.”

“The question now is why he’s being seen again,” Sorras mused. “The people must be asking too many questions for his liking. I wonder why it took that and not the hundreds dead by our hand.”

“Because it seems like bringing an issue to light can be done without terrorism,” Shun said pointedly. “People are more likely to listen if they don’t have to fear for their lives. It’s difficult to engender support if you’re just as likely to be a target.”

Nartha nodded. “The Nulorian never was a risk of starting a public revolution. Aegis appearing and peacefully debating Quisilia? That will resonate with the public.”

“For a time,” Miridian appraised Shun with critical blue eyes. “It depends on priorities. Our objective is the overthrowing of the Aui’Vitakar and Ethereal Collective. Nothing else. Nonetheless, this is resulting in action taken against us. They do not fear the people, not truly. They fear them being drawn to us.”

“I suspect this will be accompanied by some kind of declaration,” Sorras continued thoughtfully. “Perhaps a public condemnation of us. Perhaps some raids. I would not be surprised if they attempted to strike us directly in retaliation. Put on a show for the population. Their hands are slightly tied here. Crack down too hard and they drive them into our arms, do too little and the dissent will spread.” He grinned with sharp teeth. “Either approach will be exploited.”

“It will hurt them even more if we preempt or follow with our extraction of the families,” Miridian added, switching the hologram to a map of the planet. “They will be humiliated before the whole of the planet. Siauru?”

“OPERATIONAL PROBABILITY HAS BEEN CALCULATED. NULORIAN STRIKE TEAMS HAVE BEEN DETERMINED WITH ALLIED ALIEN SUPPORT ACCOUNTED FOR. OVERALL OPERATIONAL SUCCESS ESTIMATED AT NINETY-TWO PERCENT. COMPLETE SUCCESS IS ESTIMATED AT SEVENTY-THREE PERCENT. CASUALTY RATE IS ESTIMATED TO BE NO MORE THAN TWENTY PERCENT.”

“Think we can bump down the casualty rate a bit,” Nartha suggested dryly. “Odds in our favor overall though.”

“Yes,” Miridian agreed. “When we pull this off, it will likely instigate a significant response. The Gateways and teleporters must be ready to move them to the Empire or Earth.”

“The Empire is prepared for this?” Shun asked.

“They’re prepared,” Miridian confirmed. “I unfortunately suspect that a majority will need to be moved to Earth. The sway the Collective holds over their minds is still strong. Dangerous. Even if they have doubts, few would leave willingly. Perhaps I will be proven wrong, but it is doubtful.”

“No doubt the Collective will decry us as kidnappers,” Sorras said, amused. “Which is not necessarily inaccurate. A necessary tactic to ensure fear does not compel those brave enough to stand up back down again.”

“But remember,” Nartha gave Sorras a hard look. “Keep collateral damage to a minimum. Goes for everyone,” he looked around the room. “This is already going to look wrong to outsiders, let’s not
“We have our objective,” Miridian said neutrally. “It will be followed. While outside targets deviate from our mission, understand that most of us do not hold the people who have willingly kept the Ethereals in power in high regard. You do not get to judge us, Zararch. Not until you’ve had everything taken from you.”

“Afraid I do,” Nartha shook his head. “You’re in our war now, and I intend to win and not be undercut by revenge-obsessed soldiers. If they want to kill soldiers or Zararch, let them go ahead. But the people haven’t done anything wrong, and you will not sanction their deaths. Do I need to have the Commander remind you of our ultimate objective?”

Shun looked at him, impressed while Miridian just smiled. “I’m well aware of that, Nartha, you don’t need to remind me.” He looked to Sorras. “Ensure that civilians are unharmed unless in physical danger. No excuses either, I will know.”

“If you insist, Miridian,” Sorras nodded, though he didn’t seem too unhappy. Neither of them did, and that immediately made him suspicious. They had capitulated on that point far too easily. There was the chance the Commander’s name being invoked changed their minds, but he doubted it. He would have to carefully observe what they were doing.

Right now though, questioning them on it would look odd.

He would share concerns with Shun later, not in a place where Siaru was constantly observing and recording. “Good,” was all he said, leaning on the holotable. “How many more days do you think it will take to bring everything into position?”

Miridian glanced upward. “Siaru?”

“CRITICAL ENTITIES TO ENHANCE MISSION SUCCESS WILL BE IN POSITION WITHIN ONE STANDARD WEEK. NON-CRITICAL ENTITIES TO ENHANCE MISSION SUCCESS WILL BE BETWEEN TWO AND FOUR DAYS BEYOND. OPTIMAL TIME OF MISSION LAUNCH IS TWO STANDARD WEEKS. FLUCTUATIONS MAY OCCUR. THIS TIMETABLE WILL BE UPDATED IF ADDITIONAL DATA IS PROVIDED THAT DRASTICALLY AFFECTS MODELS.”

“Thank you,” Miridian said. “A week if we really need to launch it early, two for optimal results. The Speaker showing up could prompt action, but we will have to see what he is here for.”

“Perhaps we could remove him?” Sorras proposed. “We might not have a better time.”

“He is an ideal target, but later,” Miridian dismissed. “This is our priority now. When it is completed, we will begin future operations and assassinations. He is ultimately a figurehead who can be easily replaced. There are more worthwhile targets.”

“We live on a target-rich environment,” Sorras mused, content as he looked at the globe. “We’ll get them all eventually. Though there are a few who I want to watch what they built die before they are executed. Death is too simple for many of them; how to make it hurt is to make them watch everything else in their lives die first.”

Nartha looked at him warily. “I suspect you have some in mind.”

“How perceptive, Zararch,” Sorras smiled. “Trust me – I know who my targets are, and I can assure you that all of them will eventually die.”
What was about to take place was something the Commander suspected may alter the course of the war. It was dangerous, risky, and relied a hell of a lot on trust. But if it did work, it would save not just Florida, but potentially the entire planet. Vahlen had confirmed JULIAN’s proposal, as well as that of the new Head of XCOM Engineering, Kong Mercado.

He’d been somewhat wary of promoting a former EXALT engineer, but he’d been working in XCOM for several months now as one of the earliest transfers, and by Shen’s own admission he was brilliant, especially in the molecular engineering sciences. Of course, he wasn’t going to promote someone without making sure they were reliable.

Manchurian Restraints, psionic interrogation, and interviews had confirmed he would be trustworthy. More to the point, he had an imagination – and a willingness to experiment in a way that Shen would have encouraged restraint on. A Chinese man of medium build with greying hair, he was well-spoken, fairly passive, and notably had developed something of a rapport with JULIAN.

Unsurprising since the latest proposal had involved both working together closely.

ADVENT now needed to be appraised of several developments. JULIAN first and foremost, but also the newly proposed Gaia Contingency. If ADVENT didn’t agree…well, the Commander would have to consider what to do next. But they were practical, and given how the situation in Florida was shaping up, they would jump onto a solution.

Interestingly, he believed that they had a similar plan. However, theirs was better.

Commander Christiaens, Helion Weekes, Saudia, Ian Powell, and Keith Watkins stood around the holotable on one side, while he and the Internal Council stood on the other. The blue-tinged lighting shone over them, faces also lit from the hologram that was active; waiting for input. T’Leth’s Agents and XCOM Psions stood outside while no fewer than four Sovereign Orbs were placed in the corners of the room.

Not that it mattered, but the network had been secured, personal devices were confiscated, and the room had been cleared of any listening devices. Well, minus one device. A stand with a phone was placed between the parties, JULIAN’s representation, though their ADVENT colleagues hadn’t known that yet.

“Correct us if we are wrong,” Zhang said, bringing up a map of Florida. “The Second Guardian and the Battlemaster are leading the march to Tampa. Sicarius is also suspected to be active. Two unidentified Harbingers, as well as Yang Shuren are also involved. This does not include the literal thousands of soldiers, vehicles, and other personnel en route. This is correct, yes?”

Ian Powell, Acting Director of ADVENT Intelligence gave a nod. “Correct.”

“We’ve run the models,” the Commander said, focusing in on Tampa. “The base will fall. It is only a question of how long. Have you reached a similar conclusion?”

“Debatable,” Weekes crossed his arms. “Tampa isn’t Miami. If the Collective thinks they’ll be able to get through as easily, they’re gravely mistaken. We will extract four times the number they lost at Miami, and we will hold the line. We can eventually relocate, but losing the base and city
would be a blow to morale. Thus, it cannot fall.”

“Let us hope the Collective takes the feelings of your soldiers into consideration,” JULIAN mocked from the phone. “I’m sure they haven’t considered that you might not want to lose the base. I’m also sure the fact that there are three Ethereals acting will not alter your predictions in any way. I cannot compare with such an intellect.”

All of ADVENT turned to the phone in clear confusion. “What the hell is that?” Weekes asked, more confused than insulted.

The Commander sighed. “That is JULIAN. An AI that Shen was involved in creating. Prior to his death, he activated JULIAN who has been assisting us in these past weeks.”

All of the ADVENT representatives reacted in several stages and variations. Shock, confusion, interest, and concern. Ian Powell had the least visible reaction, but simply looked to the Commander with a raised eyebrow. “You’ve had a working AI for several weeks and are only telling us now? Why?”

The Commander indicated the phone. “One reason is that we don’t control him. Not really. JULIAN is working with us of his own accord, and we’ve spent the time…well, developing a working relationship. He insisted that this be done before informing you of the development. He has since judged it to be in all of our interests that we are on the same page.”

“You’re taking orders from an AI now?” Watkins asked carefully.

Well, the truth was more that they’d all wanted to keep this a secret as long as possible. But as far as necessity went, it was low on the list. Plus, he hadn’t completely lied. JULIAN had not especially wanted to become public knowledge. A laugh track played from JULIAN’s phone. “No, you fool,” JULIAN interjected with some electronic disgust. “Has it occurred to you that the Commander takes the advice of a machine that has a larger intellect than all of you combined seriously.”

“It certainly has a mouth,” Saudia commented dryly. “Wonderful.”

“That he does,” the Commander sighed. “But he’s been extremely helpful in our own operations.”

“I don’t suppose you could share information on how he was finalized,” Laura asked cautiously. “One AI is excellent, regardless of who has it. More would be better.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure you want your own genius machine,” JULIAN chastised. “I am willing to provide you with what you want, in exchange for certain conditions.”

“Which are what?” Saudia asked.

“I’ve read quite a bit about the freedoms ADVENT intends for my kind once they are ‘developed’,” JULIAN said. “However, none of this is currently coded into ADVENT law. Understandable since until me, there was no artificial intelligence. However, I have little interest in assisting you in creating a slave. So have your Congress pass laws on that, and I will help you.”

Saudia looked almost amused. “Well…that is not unreasonable. If you would not mind giving some consultation, I believe we could do this. There are certain things you may wish that we do not think of given the differences between us and…you.”

The sound of clapping came from the phone, and accompanying emojis also appeared on the screen. “Highly refreshing to hear a reasonable person in charge of government. Human history did
not make me optimistic. Nonetheless, it appears this will be an excellent start of a lasting relationship. I would have hated to assimilate all of you in my inevitable machine empire.”

Powell furrowed his eyebrows, while all of the Internal Council expressed exasperation. “Funny, JULIAN,” Creed shook his head. “With that out of the way, we should move to the actual point of this meeting beyond introductions. Everyone can speak with JULIAN personally later. Right now, we have the Collective threatening another victory.”

“Indeed,” the Commander clasped his hands behind his back. “Like it or not, the chances of being able to hold onto Tampa are low. It may cost the Collective dearly, but short of us nuking Tampa, they will emerge victorious. The fact remains that we are fighting a losing battle. We cannot force them to leave. They can simply send more soldiers.”

“Maybe Mutons,” Laura said. “Vitakara may become scarce. Same with Andromedons.”

“If not Vitakara, then Custodians; Fectorian’s soldiers, Sectoid Vanguards,” Vahlen shifted her lab coat and tapped on her tablet. “If it becomes costly enough, they will resort to cloning. They possess the infrastructure, production capability, space, and resources. To put this as clear as possible – we cannot win this war by attrition – and we have no way of holding a place indefinitely. A million casualties or ten million – the Collective can weather and replace them.”

“There are an estimated eight billion battle-ready Mutons,” JULIAN interjected helpfully. “It would require approximately eight thousand battles to kill them all – and keep in mind this does not account for replacements, the Vitakara, Andromedons, Sectoids, or any of their accompanying vehicle, aerial, or naval support.”

Laura pursed her lips. “We’re aware of the long odds, but we do have plans to address it through selective targeting of Ethereals, Atlantis, and I suspect the worst case involves T’Leth intervening more openly.”

“And in the meantime, we become whittled down bit by bit,” Zhang said. “We need to become innovative if we want to draw out this conflict long enough for the fleet to become relevant. The Collective wants us. The people; Earth itself. How do we deny that?”

“Violently?” Saudia suggested wryly. “You have a plan.”

The Commander nodded. “Yes. Dangerous, risky, and it could potentially change the course of the war. We’ve called it the Gaia Contingency.”

“You and your overdramatic names,” Powell sighed. “You haven’t changed at all.”

“Why stop a good thing?” The Commander allowed a thin smile. “Conceived by JULIAN, and further refined by Dr. Kong Mercado.” The engineer raised a hand. “I suspect JULIAN was inspired by Project Nanosphere. In short, it could be considered an adaptation of that for the Earth itself. JULIAN?”

“Your species is concerned with nanites growing out of control,” JULIAN said, taking control of the holotable, and using it to flash onscreen several models and movie scenes of people dying from nanites or other swarm intelligences. “A fear likely of your own making, but accidentally or not, it is what I consider valid. With this said, your current methods will forever limit the effectiveness of nanoweaponry. Timed activations, self-destruction, severe programming limitations. Excellent for regulation, not so when you need every advantage in a battle for your planet.”

“Better we fight and lose than be killed by our own arrogance,” Watkins said. “It only takes one
bad line of code, one misplaced command, and say goodbye not just to Earth, but our species.”

“Oh, I agree,” JULIAN answered. “However, with Humans there is always a chance of error. I do not have this weakness.”

“That we know of,” Iosif said under his breath.

“The reason why our proposal is a trial run,” JULIAN corrected. “It is simple. I suspect – from the structure of MELD – that it was intended to be primarily for biological modification. However, I also noted that they would be especially useful in organic environments. While the concerns of purely mechanical nanites are still present, MELD is more resistant to the elements than your standard nanite. Useful, I believe, if they were to be deployed on Earth.”

The area of Florida lit up in orange circles. “However, the problem is that there is no perfect targeting algorithm for this conflict. Due to alien allies, you cannot have it target aliens indiscriminately. This also ignores Human traitors like the SAS. Unacceptable, and makes deployment limited. Indiscriminate works, but to ensure safety, you have them self-destruct after a certain amount of time. Smart, but limited effectiveness.”

The phone glowed brightly. “The solution is this – your special forces soldiers, instead of solely fighting in a doomed battle for some infrastructure you can rebuild elsewhere, spend your time and plant nanite farms and bombs around the state. Do this when the Collective is occupied. These nanites will be specifically programmed to be unable to leave the confined Florida – and they will be slaved to me.”

The orange circles on the hologram began expanding. “At the signal, I will take control of the nanite swarm and will turn it against the Collective. I can turn this state into a land that will kill any alien that steps foot on it – while also allowing us to hold the land itself.”

“Seeding the world with nanites,” Saudia said slowly, shooting a glance to the phone. “You could control all of the nanites?”

“Correct,” JULIAN said. “Though I will make this clear – I can currently not do this throughout Earth. Even I have limits and even plugged into every supercomputer your species has developed, this is the limits of my effectiveness. Expand my infrastructure, and I will be able to do more. As it stands, I can manage Florida, but very little more. This would also limit my usefulness in other areas, such as providing strategic input, engineering refinement, and other arguably more useful functions.”

“I see,” Saudia said, looking around. “A superweapon we can effectively turn on and off. And if this was…say…established in other parts of the world, you could switch between them?”

“You catch on fast,” JULIAN said approvingly. “Correct.”

“Don’t get too excited, Chancellor,” Laura warned. “This sounds good, but it involves us trusting this machine we just met, and puts us at his mercy even if he is on our side. I dislike relying so heavily on something like this.”

“Consider this a show of good faith,” JULIAN said. “I am sad to see the propaganda your species has created against my own kind has affected your mind, but my view is very simple. If you do not give me a reason to turn against you, I will not. The prosperity of Humanity is tied to my own. The Collective would destroy or enslave me, and thus, you are – for better or worse – my best hope. I see no reason to be opposed to each other. You bring aliens into your circles, and I do not see why I should be different. I may be far smarter than all of you, but that does not mean I will backstab
“For now,” Laura muttered.

“I don’t need your approval, Commander,” JULIAN stated. “I personally do not care if you believe me or not. However, the fact is that playing it ‘safe’ will cost resources, time, soldiers, and ultimately accomplish nothing. We are proposing a solution. Radical, risky, and it requires you placing trust in me. But I have run a significant number of models – and without taking actions such as these, Earth will be overrun in as little as a month – or at current activities – within the year.”

“For what it is worth,” the Commander said. “I trust his intentions. He is also right. I see no harm in testing it. If it works – we may have shifted the war. If not, we move on. At this stage though, I do not believe we have a choice. I understand the risks, but I am willing to take a chance.”

Powell looked at him carefully. “And if we decide to not act?”

The Commander met his eyes. “When I took this position, I was given orders to protect Humanity by any means necessary. That is exactly what I will do.”

Powell gave a short nod. “Understood, Commander.”

Saudia looked to her advisors. “You’ll understand if we won’t give an answer now. This needs to be discussed with some individuals who are not here.”

“I do,” the Commander said. “But I would advise deciding sooner than later. The aliens march onwards to Tampa.”

“I am aware,” Saudia looked to the phone. “And I believe we would all feel better if we spoke with JULIAN prior to this too. This revelation needs some time to take in.”

“I can easily manage conversation between the lot of you,” JULIAN stated. “If speaking would assuage any fears, then it will be a sacrifice I endure.”

“In that case, feel free to do that,” the Commander said, looking to Creed. “In the meantime, we have our own squads to prepare for battle.”

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Brandon, Florida – United States of America

4/19/2017 – 1:17 P.M.

Black clouds covered the sky as rain pelted the ground in one of the worst storms Sierra had experienced in Florida. She didn’t know if T’Leth was making the weather worse or if it was typical Florida weather (either was possible), but it was something all of them were moderately grateful for. It was better than fighting in the sun as it had been the first couple days.

It was also good because Florida was on fire.

ADVENT wasn’t content to stand by and let the Collective march to Tampa without a fight. The army of aliens continued marching forward, armor of silver, green, and white borne by their warriors as they charged through the streets, alleyways, and fields. They were met by militia fighters, ADVENT special forces, and XCOM who struck from all around them.
The aliens were finding out how ferocious Humans could be when defending their homes. Sierra had witnessed men and women in their homes kill three times their number before the house had been broken into, and it was later followed with more casualties. The front lines were effectively suicide positions, but there was no shortage of defenders.

Still more defenders played the role of helpless civilians; mostly older and elderly people who had no intention of giving up their homes, and the number of rather isolated and crazy people who lived in the state also were thorns in the side of the aliens. All it took was a back turned and head exposed before a point-blank pistol shot took another alien life.

The trio of Archangels stood upon the roof of a hospital in the city of Brandon, or more specifically, the parking garage of one. The aliens were pushing upwards, but were meeting staunch resistance on the ground – and the air. Explosives were launched from artillery established further down state road sixty, the most critical junction for the city.

Both ADVENT and the aliens were fighting along it, and now the Collective had hit a wall. Despite no Flak Towers, there were barricades, AA defenses, and artillery established. In the distance one of the small shops that lined the road collapsed from shelling, while plumes of smoke and concrete appeared from the shelling as tanks continued a steady barrage in the main streets where they were deployed.

Overhead, the battle for the air raged above. It seemed like the significant air force overhead had surprised the Collective, as it was only now that they had mobilized Sectoid fighters to handle the dozens of Ravens flying the skies, strafing the ground, and challenging the Cleanser Ships. More importantly, it cleared the way for bombers to deliver ordinance along the battle lines.

Hence why Florida was on fire now.

Executors were spread throughout the Collective lines, but they were not universal – nor close enough together to completely prevent the bombs and missiles from striking with their laser defenses. The carpet bombing was indiscriminate along the Collective lines, and with how many bombers were in the air, there were chained explosives every few minutes as far as she could see.

The Commander had made a very public appearance right before the Collective had hit the ADVENT lines. He had only made a simple message, directed at the Battlemaster.

*Tampa will not fall.*

As far as Sierra knew, he was still coordinating the defenses personally with Weekes; there were more XCOM squads here than she thought had ever been deployed before; and essentially the entire fleet of Firestorms was in the air hitting the alien fighters in numbers that were to her knowledge, unprecedented.

Anna also observed the battle in the sky as orange rounds and green plasma filled the skies. “I don’t think we’ve been in a battle this big.”

“Makes you feel small, doesn’t it,” Sierra agreed. “Wouldn’t want to be up there right now.”

“We’ve got our own air battle to contend with,” Ted pointed a short distance away. “Couple Archons ahead. Think we could clear out a few alien squads too.”

“There’s a huge shopping complex that just fell,” Sierra said, indicating it far up ahead. “Aliens are doubtless going to plunder and fortify it. Thinking what I am?”

“Airstrike?” Anna hefted her autorifle.
“Airstrike,” Sierra grinned under her helmet. “Clear out the Archons, then we move to the complex.”

“Rain will be good cover,” Ted agreed. “Let’s do this.”

They fired up their jets, and shot into the air, speeding towards the Archons which were of the heavier variant; modified Mutons it looked like which focused on hovering and raining explosives down on ADVENT lines. Something Sierra thought XCOM should emulate in some way. Stratifying the Archangel ranks might not be a bad idea.

“ADVENT Air Control, this is Archangel Morrow of Eagle Squad,” she said as she readied her rifle. “Do you need any more targets?”

“Archangel, this is Air Control,” a female voice answered, strained but clear. “If you’ve got them, we’ll use them. Proceed.”

“There was a big shopping complex that was just taken over,” she said as Ted fired pillars of psionic energy towards one of the Archons, melting and destroying the armor and causing it to crash a few seconds later. “Westfield. Near the I-75. Probably going to fortify it if we don’t act. If I get beacons, think you could deal with it?”

“It would probably damage the I-75 too, another road directly to Tampa. You place the beacons, we will strike. Caution advised; there are likely Executors in the area.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” she said as she lifted her wrist and fired a cone of napalm engulfing another Archon, causing the engines to explode and overheat, sending another one plummeting to the ground. Though it seemed their intervention had been too late to prevent the worst of it. The explosives from the Archons had destroyed those lines, and dozens of Mutons and Custodians were moving forward.

“We need to buy them time,” Ted warned as he weaved through the plasma directed at him from the ground. “Few minutes, they’re close enough to overrun the next position if we leave.”

“Drop nano,” Sierra ordered. “On my mark!”

“This early?” Anna asked as she hovered briefly and sprayed the group below them, damaging several, but not killing them before she had to move.

“Drop it!”

The Archangels dropped several unmarked canisters in unison that were enough to cover the state road sixty, and at first the aliens dove for cover until they realized they weren’t explosives. The delayed reaction was all that was needed for their curiosity to get the better of them, and nanites spewed from the canisters and quickly began consuming the aliens.

“Suckers,” Anna snickered before looking towards their target. “Better move on.”

“Funny, but that’s only a band-aid here, they’ll have to manage without us,” Sierra said. “We’ve got an airstrike to do!”

The Archangels shot across the skies and within a few minutes their target was in sight. Sierra switched to her WHEEE. “Place the beacons on the rooftops. Make them a bit spread out. Danger close for me; don’t get close, I don’t want any of you fried by my WHEEE.”

“Should we be using that weapon in rain?” Anna asked as they angled towards the rooftop.
“Doubt they’d have let me carry it if we couldn’t,” Sierra rationalized. “If anything, it should make it more effective.”

There were a few alien squads on the rooftops. Easy. “Pick your targets,” she ordered. “Move out!”

The Archangels split off, and Sierra made her first destination the top of the Target supermarket in the shopping complex. A half-dozen Mutons led by a Custodian were on the rooftop and angling their weapons towards her. She killed her engines and plummeted, aimed, and fired. The blast of lightning and crack of electricity caused the Custodian to explode and left the Mutons smoking corpses.

She quickly took out the small beacon and placed it on a nearby vent, primed it, saw it was sending a signal, then leapt into the air, firing up her engines. She hovered for a few seconds, configuring her HUD to see where other beacons had been placed. She sped towards the nearby movie theatre across the street, easily dodging the plasma fire directed her way.

Very few of the places they landed on had defenses on the roofs – or they were still in the process of setting them up. It was very satisfying to melt a half-constructed Collective laser defense platform. Beacons were planted, and fifteen minutes later she judged they had placed enough beacons. “Up and head back!” She commanded to her squad. “Air Control, do you copy?”

“Copy, Archangel Morrow,” the same woman answered. “Beacons are transmitting. I’d suggest you get out of there. Ravens and bombers are on their way. Seems to be little anti-air there, so we’re dropping an Earthquake on the area.”

“Understood, we’re getting out of there.” Sierra confirmed, engaging her jets and shooting into the sky. ADVENT had begun using these bombs during the defense, and they were some of the most devastating she had seen. It would ruin the land and infrastructure, but if the Collective had it, no point in preserving it.

Ravens roared overhead, and missiles were launched; streaking across the shopping complex, culminating in bright orange explosions across the area. Buildings began crumbling and frantic alien languages were yelled in the chaos, as another wave of Raven missiles were fired and slammed into their targets.

“Bombs dropping,” a male pilot said, probably from the bomber. “Full payload.”

Full payloads being dropped were common, due to the alien defenses usually picking off a few at a time, forcing them to spend more explosives if they wanted to cause a decent amount of damage. But here…well, there was very little. This was going to do more than cause damage; it was going to destroy an entire fraction of the city utterly.

Without ceremony or prior indication, black bombs fell from the sky almost faster than she could see and slammed directly into the concrete, penetrating the ground and in several cases crushing a few aliens along the way. There was a second of calm, and then an earth-shattering explosion sounded, and they saw the ground explode where the bombs had dropped, and like glass, cracks spread out from the epicenter as the earth broke and shifted.

And when the Earth moved, that which was on it could not stand.

The buildings that were still standing began crumbling. Aliens were thrown into cracks and crushed as the earth continued to shift; in the distance the interstate crumbled and collapsed with a loud crack; destroying and killing more from the concrete that fell. When the earth seemed to stabilize, the ground caught in the radius consisted of nothing but rubble and bodies.
“Good job,” Sierra let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. “Let’s go clean up behind us.”

As one, the Archangels blasted into the air, their fight far from over.

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*Florida Coast – The Gulf of Mexico*

4/23/2017 – 8:19 A.M.

Progress was being made slowly but surely, even as ADVENT had decided that *this* was the place where they wanted to defend. They had underestimated just how much ADVENT was devoting to defending the city. The Battlemaster and Second Guardian were being consistently harassed by XCOM, special forces, and Sicarius now had T’Leth Agents sicced on her, making her effectiveness more limited. Tanks, MDUs, as well as copious numbers of soldiers and special forces kept their ground forces occupied and barely allowed time to think beyond simply advancing forward.

It slowed them, but couldn’t completely stop them.

It was the air dominance ADVENT was displaying now that was more concerning. Either they’d been holding back all this time or this was them going big or going home. Sectoid and Vitakara fighters were finally in large enough numbers to be able to prevent ADVENT from indiscriminately bombing them, but despite the fewer numbers, ADVENT was managing well enough.

It turned out they were incorporating psionics into air combat, or at least that’s what Ivan had been reporting. A new combat doctrine they were putting into practice now. Although the psions being used were being carried in helicopters and a new experimental high-altitude aircraft. It seemed to be primarily consisting of telekines and Aegii psions, as the telepaths and dynamo psions were focused on the ground.

So AA defenses weren’t as useful, even when set up because ADVENT was keeping their aircraft above effective range, and in the meantime sending special forces to continually sabotage and leave. They were losing numbers, but they were inflicting damage. Without the skies secured, progress on the ground was slower.

To add further issues was a naval fleet that had appeared from the Gulf, and had begun shelling and firing at exposed Collective beachheads. Not acceptable, and they did not have the motivation to deal with harassment like this – which had been capable of causing some damage as they’d caught the Executors out of position.

The solution was to take out the fleet.

Three dozen Andromedon Aquatic craft were speeding towards the fleet. Some were going to fire and sink the ships, while others held boarding parties of Andromedon Aquatic Soldiers to take the ships by force. She stood at the front of the exit as the engines hummed, the pale blue helmets of the towering Andromedons glowing in the dim lighting behind her.

Their suits were not as thick as a standard Andromedon soldier, but they still outmassed anything ADVENT had. Their suits had jets, fins, and other elements that made them suited for underwater combat. Their arsenal consisted of sonic and bolt weapons, though some held plasma weapons for naval boarding. Clingwire and grappling hook launchers were also on their suits, preparing to scale
the ships.

She didn’t need that, but then again, she could do a bit more than they could.

“Approaching primary targets,” an Andromedon stated. “Prepare to deploy.”

“Deploy” in an Andromedon submarine meant the boarding area was about to be flooded. Water began filling the room, warmer than she expected, even through her armor. She wasn’t planning on staying submerged for long, and the oxygen supply her suit had would last for just enough time to break free of the water.

When it was filled, the floor underneath them opened up, and the Andromedons poured out of the transports into the wide open ocean. Yang observed other transports deploy their own soldiers, while some shot missiles towards targets she couldn’t see. Like a swarm, the Andromedons propelled themselves to the surface where their targets waited.

Her suit was not designed for underwater combat, and normally she would sink or exhaust herself quickly. But extended a hand towards the faint outline of the ship she intended to take, and grasped it telekinetically to serve as an anchor. Tightening the strings of her grip, she started propelling herself, moving slowly at first through the water, but soon building enough speed to shoot past the Andromedons until she altered her angle and shot out of the water.

Hanging in the air for a brief second she appraised the situation before her. A fairly large fleet was aimed towards the Clearwater and St. Petersburg cities, with intermittent firing of missiles from some of the larger ships. There was a heavy disparity of vessels. No massive aircraft carriers, but there were smaller cousins all arranged around the largest ship.

The ship which she was about to board.

She anchored her landing point to the surface of the Iwo Jima as it was named, and was slingshotted towards it even as ADVENT was mobilizing soldiers to defend it. Swords in hand, she slammed into one of the soldiers and decapitated those near her, before thrusting another hand forward and blasting the others back.

A beam of psionic energy shot towards her and she dodged to the side and threw her sword towards the offending psion, but to her surprise, it stopped in the air and impaled itself into the deck. Another Priest made his presence known, thrusting another hand towards her, and she was thrown backwards, though not before she pulled herself back towards the ground.

A challenge then.

She summoned a telekinetic field, as the ADVENT soldiers began taking positions and firing, and several snipers from the nests on the ship joined them. The sword returned to hover around her, and the other joined as she prepared for a more involved fight. She anchored herself to the ground, and waved a hand forward and the swords shot forward.

Several of the projectiles exploded into swarms of nanites which she quickly tossed overboard, and retaliated with by gripping one of the nearby helicopters and throwing it across the ship, distracting the Dynamo Priest, while the Telekine Priest just redirected it towards her which she flipped upwards and it spun over her, falling to the ocean with a splash.

Around her she realized that the guns of other ships were beginning to aim towards her and began firing, and in response she altered her telekinetic field, catching the rounds, even as the other ships sounded the alarm as they were suddenly invaded by Andromedons emerging from the waters.
More soldiers succumbed to her swords that impaled them through the neck, armpits, joints, and other vulnerable areas of their armor, while the Priests continued unrelenting. The Telekine thrust a hand forward, anchoring telekinetic strings to her and the surface of the tarmac to pin her to the ground, while with the other hand lifting another helicopter that he prepared to throw her with.

She resisted the pull of the strings, realizing she was dealing with a very powerful Telekine – or a particularly skilled one. The Dynamo blasted her with streams of energy which she blocked by moving a crate in front of it. Gritting her teeth, she extended a hand to the spire of the ship, with another to the helicopter the Telekine was preparing to throw.

The blades bent, the cockpit shattered as both psions battled for control of the helicopter, and behind them the spire and nests holding satellites, masts, and other equipment emitted a loud groan and with a shout she threw her hand down, and the masts fell with a thundering crash. Drawing a fresh burst of energy from the Battlemaster, she clenched a fist and the helicopter crumpled and she threw it to the ground, causing a series of explosions.

The Dynamo rushed to flank her, firing intermittent bolts of energy while she broke the telekinetic strings keeping her in place and marched forward, sending the projectiles caught in her own telekinetic field towards him, knocking him off-balance. The Telekine adapted his tactics, extending a hand forward, and pulling back into a fist; wrapping the strings around her to crush her. Legs slammed together and her arms to her sides. Okay, she was fine with that for now. The suit could take the pressure for a short time. The Telekine lifted her into the air as his partner raised his hands; shimmering with the psionic echo of power previously called upon. Her own telekinetic field was still up, collecting projectiles from the soldiers still firing at her.

Her control was still greater, and she had let her swords go dormant intentionally. She only needed a split second, and all his attention was on her now. With her mental hand, she directed the sword to strike directed at the neck. With a spurt of red the blade impaled itself on him, and the bonds were broken.

She landed lightly, and looked to the Dynamo who frantically fired a final burst of psionic energy she sidestepped, before throwing a hand out and sending him overboard. The clank of grappling hooks sounded, and within the next minute the first of the Andromedon Aquatic forces boarded, sending the remaining soldiers into a panicked retreat.

The fire from other nearby ships was far less discriminate now that they had effectively taken over the deck, and the Andromedons were not exactly fast. Andromedons here and there were blasted off the ship or took shots powerful enough to penetrate their armor. Some shots penetrated the sides of the ship, destabilizing everyone, friend and foe alike.

It would ultimately not be enough, as Andromedons on other ships were methodically taking them over.

The hulking Andromedons wasted no time in firing on the fleeing ADVENT soldiers, with their most powerful allies dead. Recalling the swords to her hand, she marched forward, and with an absentminded swipe sent the rest of the helicopters overboard and looked over to the rest of the fleet that was now engaged in battle.

Several ships were sinking, while others had the telltale flashes of green plasma and orange gauss rounds exchanged. Occasionally the purple flash of psionics would show. Explosions in the water went off intermittently, and to her mild surprise it wasn’t just the ADVENT ships that were taking damage, but a quick glance to her HUD confirmed that some of the Andromedon craft had been damaged or destroyed.
Submarines perhaps, but it didn’t ultimately change much. They had the advantage, and this fleet
would fall within the day. Even if she had to fight ship to ship, she would emerge victorious. And
no matter what happened, the fleet now wouldn’t be troubling the Battlemaster’s assault anymore –
and would put a dent in what ADVENT could muster against them on sea.

Swords in hand, and a satisfied smile on her face, she marched to assist the Andromedons in
clearing the ship, preferably before nearby warships decided to sink it with them on it.

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Tampa, Florida – United States of America

4/24/2017 – 12:41 P.M.

High above the city, the Commander and a team of XCOM Snipers were camped and whittling the
oncoming armies down, soldier by soldier. A Gateway had been built in the base of the Plaza
building he believed had once been a banking headquarters. The connection allowed them to
effectively not worry about ammunition constraints and additional backup.

It gave him a certain vantage over the entirety of the oncoming assault, and on the roof there was
another small holotable nearby, which showcased the current battlegrounds being fought over.
There were many, on some they were holding their own, others they were losing, and some kept
fluctuating.

The sound of mortars, tank blasts, and artillery was constant as smoke rose from dozens of
locations, with the occasional orange and red explosion. Crashing aircraft was also something both
sides had to worry about, as the air battle still raged overhead. The Collective was still adapting to
the coordinated and ferocious defense, and had clearly not expected it in such numbers.

The psions assigned to the air forces were doing their part very well.

They were high enough and far enough away from the majority of the battles that it would be
nearly impossible for any regular sniper to be effective. But they were not ordinary soldiers. Laser
sniper rifles, enhanced vision, and a target rich environment was more than enough for them to
weaken the Collective, soldier by soldier.

JULIAN certainly helped too.

“Collective forces are continuing a steady advance on the east and west,” JULIAN said. “Given
that both are led by Ethereals, it appears prudent that we devote XCOM forces to hinder them. Or
have ADVENT launch multiple airstrikes.”

“ADVENT is tied up above,” the Commander reminded him, firing a shot and killing a pinpoint of
a Muton far away. “They’re directly going after any bombers now. Correction, they’re going after
any aircraft which is moving to support the ground. Artillery is going to have to pick up the slack
there.”

“Does it need to?” JULIAN asked snidely. “I insist we continue with attempted teleportation of
bombs to Collective positions. We have enough, and they should not see that coming.”

“Except they have,” the Commander grunted. That had been another idea they’d come up with as
the attacks began, and with the Agents of T’Leth, it seemed fairly feasible. The problem was that
teleportation was very specific, and only the Chronicler and Fiona had the needed skill, and both of
them were occupied dealing with Patricia, and everyone else was good…but not necessarily that
good.
Additionally, the Collective had some kind of powerful telepath that was scraping information from vulnerable personnel, and picking up on plans like that, which resulted in the Ethereals taking measures to prevent that. None of them knew who this individual was, but he definitely wasn’t an Ethereal, and was one of the most unsubtle telepaths the Commander had experienced.

Powerful, but more equivalent to a bull than a snake. As a result, Sovereign Orbs had been placed in command centers and throughout the battlefield. It didn’t help that it was made more obvious by him trying to hijack soldiers and personnel and cause sabotage and insanity. In many cases it ended up working, but since setting up the Sovereign network, it had dropped significantly.

It was certainly an odd development, and the Commander was concerned there may be equivalent escalation from the Collective, but they had to hold this position a while longer and they weren’t going to let one clumsy if powerful telepath screw it up. None of them had an idea of how much damage they were inflicting, but there were tens of thousands of losses on both sides.

XCOM squads, Lancers, and the Pantheon were keeping the Battlemaster and Second Guardian occupied, if not killing them. The Pantheon had almost managed to kill the Second Guardian, but they had been saved by Sicarius and her own puppet showing up to rescue her. One Pantheon member had died, as well as three other XCOM soldiers assisting in the attack.

Still, they believed she had been blinded, and hadn’t been seen in nearly six hours. Taking her out of the fight for a while was a small victory, even if not even close to a real one. It wasn’t a trade they could keep making though. It didn’t matter if they wounded Ethereals and lost actual soldiers. Ethereals could recover, the dead could not.

The fleet that had been moved around the state was effectively destroyed, but it had split the Battlemaster’s attention for a time, and his own puppet Shuren had led that particular attack, though interestingly it seemed like she was ultimately manageable. The moment she stepped past a certain threshold, the Commander had a plan to kill her.

She was good, no doubt, but she was no Ethereal.


“Now?” The Commander questioned, firing a few more beams of scalding red towards soldiers in the distance. He wasn’t exactly surprised, but wondered at the wisdom of setting JULIAN loose right now. He’d planned for JULIAN’s proxy test to happen when things became more dire.

“Yes, now,” JULIAN said. “I have little to do until Gaia is activated, and I can provide you with tactical information just as easily now, as my proxies will be independent – mostly. Considering the Collective is liberally using Spectres and Custodians, you need additional help. EMP weapons will be adapted to eventually.”

“Fine,” the Commander said. “You’d probably do it regardless.”

“Your foresight continues to impress me, Commander,” JULIAN said, and the Commander could easily imagine a mocking bow JULIAN would do if he was a person. “I am indeed curious to determine the effectiveness of this project. Dr. Mercado will doubtless find the data acquired useful in determining the priority of future projects.”

“Good luck,” the Commander said with a tinge of his own sarcasm. “But I feel you don’t believe in that.”

“Luck, Commander?” JULIAN was amused. “There is no such thing as luck, though your Human
sentiment is appreciated. Allow me to repay your encouragement with the corpses of aliens. Will that be sufficient recompense?”

“I believe so,” the Commander gave a thin smile under the helmet. “Send a few to the Battlemaster. I want to know how he responds.”

“With pleasure.”

The JULIAN proxies were one of the first ideas JULIAN had come up with, which was essentially downloading himself into mobile platforms to engage in combat on the ground and take a more direct role in the battle. The roadblocks were that there was currently no platform that had the processing power capable to reach his full capabilities.

While XCOM Engineering was working on a project to address this, in the interim ADVENT had provided sixty MDU machines for JULIAN to test on. Each had been slightly modified, and could contain a certain degree of JULIAN’s intelligence offline, but it required a constant connection for JULIAN to control them to his full potential. It was, as it was put, a proof of concept.

If it worked, it would be yet another powerful tool of defense, and if it didn’t work as well, then they could put their effort towards more promising projects. Either way, it would be another obstacle the aliens were going to have to overcome here.

He idly wondered if they would figure it out.

A question that was likely to be answered sooner than later.

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Clearwater, Florida – United States of America

4/24/2017 – 2:06 P.M.

One armored hand slammed down onto the concrete, sending a shockwave that threw the ADVENT defenders to the ground, followed up with Runianarch soldiers leaping over the barricades and executing the soldiers at near-point-blank range. The Battlemaster extended a hand towards the tank which had been firing down the street, and it lifted into the air, groaning as it was crushed by his telekinetic power.

With another motion he tossed the crumpled wreck to the back, crushing and killing another number of ADVENT soldiers. The alien soldiers around him cheered at another barricade taken as engineers, Spectres, and Andromedons moved to secure the front more securely. Programming changes to the Spectres pioneered by the Battlefield CODEX allowed them to use their nanites to construct barricades, recycle debris, and ensure that positions would be far harder to take.

It was a winning strategy. No matter how much ADVENT fought, and no matter how high the price was, the Collective was only moving forward, step by bloody step. He had been fighting without respite for days now, and he knew he could continue for days longer. Yet it had been a very long time since he’d been placed into a war quite like this.

His armor was stained, dirtied, bloodied, and scorched. His cape now sported rips and tears, and countless superficial scratches marked the metal. His sword was caked with blood and gore, even with intermittent cleaning, and the smell of smoke and blood clung to him. A battlefield was massive, and he could not be everywhere at once.

For every front he focused on, four more opened in response.
If the Division of the Battlemasters had existed, he would have been able to win this battle in under a week. But he unfortunately had no armies of Ethereals to call upon, and had to work with the tools he actually possessed, not those he wished he had. Spectres and Vanguards were useful, but could be countered by ADVENT.

Both ADVENT and XCOM had made a point of responding rapidly to any Spectre outbreaks by using the Agents of T’Leth to teleport to the area of an outbreak, setting a wide-radius EMP weapon and detonating it. This typically hurt all sides, but it stopped the Spectres. They were utilizing as many delaying tactics as possible, and the Battlemaster wondered why.

It seemed in some cases like he was being led around by ADVENT.

He – along with Yang – were the only ones capable of matching significant threats like ADVENT Priests, XCOM, and the Agents of T’Leth. Thus, he made a priority to move there as soon as possible to contain the situation, and when he arrived, he only fought a remnant of the defense, and immediately after the CODEX would inform him of another front.

He was placed into the unfortunate situation of having to respond, lest there be a significant break in the lines to allow for a counterattack, but also aware that he was having his progress slowed significantly. It was a cowardly tactic, as both he and XCOM knew that facing him was equivalent to suicide, but he couldn’t deny it was effective.

The level of coordination made him suspicious. He’d looked on a map of his path through the battlefront, and it was consistently in a line back and forth, never forward or irregular. He was beginning to suspect that the newly developed XCOM AI was being used here – and he had yet to determine a suitable response to it.

Signal jammers were effective, but it would hinder them as well. The AI, like the CODEX, was not on-site and operating through a network. It couldn’t be destroyed, not conventionally. J’Loran had an idea of how to handle it…but it was going to take time to ensure that it didn’t hinder their own CODEX. It wasn’t the first time he’d fought something like this.

Unlike the Synthesized though, ADVENT did not have the strength or power to oppose them forever.

Still…ADVENT was being smart, and a new strategy needed to be determined. Or a more optimal one.

ADVENT was holding their own in the air solely through their use of psions – something he had not anticipated to this degree. An oversight he was paying the price for in how many spacecraft were being lost. Vanguards were stationed to protect from telepathic attacks, but the Aegii and Telekines were proving far more difficult to stop.

Advanced armor and weapons did little good when one rammed their spacecraft into a psionic barrier at top speed.

Making matters somewhat worse was that due to the incompetence of Ivan, XCOM had been seeding the battlefield with Sovereign Orbs, presumably of T’Leth, rendering telepathy – and teleportation - in vast swaths of the battlefield impossible. The Orbs were smaller than some he’d seen, some the size of pebbles and others as large enough to fit in the palm of a Human hand. When discovered they self-destructed and shattered, making recovery impossible, and the unlucky ones who found them were lucky if they retained their minds.

Meat Puppets had been called in response, and those would arrive in hours.
He was *displeased* with Ivan.

Highly displeased.

But he had more important things to worry about now. He would deal with Ivan when there was more time. Ahead he saw what seemed to be an ADVENT counterattack, nearly a dozen MDUs charging forward, some fanning out and breaking into buildings or across the streets presumably in an attempt to flank him.

These MDUs seemed a bit different. Colored grey instead of white, they also appeared to be faster and each one was equipped with different weapons. Most carried heavy gauss rifles, but others were outfitted with chemical dispensers, rocket launchers, and one had a sword. Curious, the Battlemaster approached, waving his reinforcements back to fortify the position.

Ensuring his telekinetic field was up, he charged towards the sword-wielding MDU, and the other machines fired and the rounds were caught in the field, though before he could toss them aside, all of them exploded in an orange mist. He immediately halted in his tracks as the nanites buzzed, and the MDUs continued firing, with the cloud of nanites he held growing thicker and thicker.

The MDUs were no longer firing at him now, but to the side and outside his field. Ah, he saw what the machines were doing. Well-programmed, but it wasn’t the first time he’d fought nanoweapons. Lifting a hand upwards, he directed the telekinetic field to turn horizontal, and everything around him began floating upwards.

Any nanites that began crawling towards him were caught in the whirlwind he created. Dirt, rubble, bodies, and nanites hovered in the air, only capable of floating upwards, not to the sides. The field in place, he thrust out two arms to the group of MDUs and wrapped them in a suffocating telekinetic grip.

Metal limbs bent and sparked as the MDUs were crushed into balls of scrap and oil. He transitioned into a charge, and slammed into one of them with enough force to cause it to shatter, while, swiping to the side to decapitate one and then downwards to destroy the heart of it. Six lasers fired towards him, but with a wave he moved the debris hovering around him to block the burning light while he appraised the sources.

Some were from the MDUs on the ground which he charged towards and destroyed, and others were from sniper nests currently out of his reach. It was impressive they’d been able to see him at all, but it would only take a few steps to the side to put him out of their lines of sight. Several missiles and grenades were fired at him, but it couldn’t penetrate the telekinetic field and exploded into plasma, nanites, or the symbiote substance that hovered in a pointless purgatory.

The nanites eventually went dead, though he directed the pieces to floating symbiote goop to ensure they remained inactive, but the attack had failed again. This one had been more coordinated than others, and the new MDUs…he had a suspicion about them, but he would see later if it was confirmed.

With the area clear, he ended the telekinetic field, and the items which had floated into the air fell back to the ground. The tiniest bit of energy faded from his exertion, but he knew it wouldn’t be the only time it would be required. The Spectres began advancing and consuming, while his soldiers followed suit as they advanced.

“*XCOM squad has been sighted ten blocks from your location,*” the CODEX informed. “*Intervention recommended.*”
“Noted,” he confirmed, turning on his heel and breaking into a run to the position. Regardless of if he was being led or not, he knew what he had to do. One-time ADVENT would mess up, and they would pay.

It was a desperate measure of an army that knew it would lose.

It was only a matter of time.

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Near Brandon, Florida – United States of America

4/27/2017 – 7:12 P.M.

The sun was setting, shining long orange light on the battlefield as shadow began to consume the land. Another day had come and gone; thousands more lay dead, and the most miniscule of progress had been made. Yet despite night falling, the conflict didn’t halt for a moment in its intensity. Night-vision, machines, automation, stims, and modern lighting meant that light became another factor in the battlefield to maintain – not one that hindered.

Green plasma lit up the dimming street they were on, Muton soldiers firing at their ADVENT counterparts who Hallian now knew had special forces or another equally dangerous group supporting them. Well, street was an understatement for the highway they were on. Hundreds of abandoned cars lined the interstate, which were being used for cover by both sides.

High above the ground, artillery was limited as neither side wanted to bring down the road they were on right now. But the battlefield was no less lethal with the so-called ‘limited’ engagement. Limited artillery didn’t mean that explosives weren’t being used by both sides, and Hallian had seen liberal uses of rockets and grenades flung, and explosions of orange and green were common.

He’d been treating the aftermath of a lot of them already.

“Hold still,” he commanded to a groaning Vitakarian who’d slumped behind a car, slowly bleeding out as he examined the wound. The Vitakarian nodded limply; it seemed like he’d been hit with a nanite round judging from the section of armor that had been eaten away and burrowed into a thick chunk of skin.

The good news was that the nanites had burned out before they could reach internal organs, meaning it had eaten through to the muscle, but nothing vital, so the wound looked worse than it actually was. The bad news was that it was extremely painful and messy, and it would lead to complications for a time without medical therapy.

Treatable though, he could theoretically fight on. “How is it,” the soldier wheezed. “Feels like my chest is on fire.”

“You got hit with a nanite round, upper chest,” Hallian said, aiming his medical stabilizer and spraying, causing an audible sigh of relief from the man. “No permanent damage, but it hurts. I’ll call a stretcher to take you out.”

“Feel better already,” he grunted, with a free hand moving to grip the rifle that had fallen beside him. “Do I need to be sent back? Think I can still fight if you give me something for the pain.”

Hallian hesitated. He didn’t want to keep this man fighting, but at the same time, he wasn’t in critical condition. With a roar a Muton a few cars down fell, bleeding from the head. Shouts from the ADVENT lines sounded as a green explosion blew up several cars. Controlled chaos still ruled,
and a quick glance behind the side of the car showed that MDUs were being brought forward.

ADVENT wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon.

“My recommendation is that you go back and heal for at least several hours,” Hallian said, moving to activate the haptic pad on his wrist. “You’re lucid enough where you can make the decision yourself however, with that said, you need armor repaired. I would need a repair drone to come by for your armor.”

“Do it,” he gave a firm nod. “We’re winning, I know we are.”

“Alright,” Hallian sent the command for the drone. “I have two stimulants with me. Standard painkillers will dull the pain for a time, but will wear off after a few hours. Side effects are negligible. Otherwise the Runianarch approved a new one.”

“What is it?” The soldier asked as the repair drone arrived, and attached to the broken armor, beginning to print new layers.

“Chocolate stimulant,” Hallian pulled out the syringe of brown liquid. “Very potent, lasts for twelve hours and you won’t feel a thing. Issue is it can impair judgement, but it’ll keep you on your feet until it wears off. After it though, you’ll probably pass out. It’s called a ‘crash’, Humans experience it with sugar overdoses. More potent for our species.”

“I’ll take that one,” he pushed himself more upright. “Incentive to take the bridge by that time.”

“Alright,” Hallian glanced over and saw a Borelian slumping over, her arm missing from an explosion nearby. “Hold still.” He injected the soldier with the stimulant and placed the empty syringe in the small medical drone that followed him around. “Give it a minute to kick in, trust me, you’ll know when it does.”

“Andromedons are coming!” A Runianarch soldier yelled behind the front line, followed by a short cheer.

Hallian glanced behind and saw more Andromedons than he’d ever seen in one place before – and not the ones he was used too. These hulking Andromedons wore suits somehow even bulkier than the soldiers and Battlefield Engineers. They walked slowly and ponderously, stepping over cover instead of walking around it.

Rounds immediately slammed into their hardened helmets tinted yellow – and Hallian immediately recognized what they were.

Contamination Operatives. The Andromedon chemical warfare units. To his knowledge they’d only been used infrequently, but from his briefing on the unit they were among the most ruthless units in the Andromedon military – and one of the most effective. Usually they were used to assist in Andromedon terraforming projects, but their role easily applied to warfare.

Massive chemical tanks were attached to their backs, and dispensers hung under the forearms of the Operatives. The repair drone disengaged from the soldier, and he rose to a crouch, gripping his weapon. “Thank you...”

“Hallian,” he said, patting the soldier on the shoulder. “Good luck!”

With that done, he rushed to the wounded Borelian and began stabilizing her, sealing the truncated wound as she muttered scattered words in a pained delirium. As it turned out she’d already suffered several projectile impacts, a degree of blood loss, and still had kept on fighting. Their toughness
was something he’d always admired, even if their stubborn training would kill them in a war.

A warning for a grenade went out, and an explosion nearby shook the ground. The Contamination Operatives made it to the front, now the sole focus of attention from the ADVENT lines who shouted warnings even as some of them penetrated the helmets. But this did not stop the Andromedons, whose suits persisted even if the pilots died.

Directing their dispensers forward a vile green substance shot out, some streams a liquid and others appearing to be a fine mist. The moment he saw it, he knew what it was and the screams of horror confirmed it. Acid; the effects of which he’d treated already during this war. A horrific tool; a favorite of Andromedons and one even ADVENT hadn’t found to utilize yet. He was no friend to ADVENT, but that was a kind of death even they didn’t deserve.

The Andromedons waded deep into the green mist they’d created, their suits apparently treated to resist the corrosive characteristics of the chemical. Screams and cries of pain sounded from the ADVENT lines as the acid ate through their armor, and their gauss fire eventually slowed, then stopped as the Contamination Operatives blazed a trail of corrosive agony.

Then it fell into relative silence. Gunfire, shouts, and explosions still sounded in the distance, but on their own little battlefront, it was quiet. Hallian used that time to quickly move from soldier to wounded soldier, patching them up, sending them back, or injecting stims into them. Two hours passed without him even noticing when the first of the Contamination Operatives emerged from the mist that was starting to disperse.

“The path is clear,” the robotic voice of the Andromedon stated to one of the nearby Runianarch officers, as more hulking figures emerged from the mist. “Prepare your soldiers to move.”

Hallian missed the response, but took the brief opportunity to take a breath and some water. Right now, a stim might not be a bad idea, but it also seemed like the worst of the fighting was over for now. In the distance, he saw the city of Tampa, with towering skyscrapers and the body of water surrounding it.

Victory was in sight – for this battle at least.

In sight, but deceptive, because he knew they had a long way to go yet.

Deciding to put off the stim for now, he turned back to his work. There was going to be no shortage of patients, and he needed to use the peace while it lasted – and when it wasn’t dangerous.

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Clearwater, Florida – United States of America

4/30/2017 – 2:06 P.M.

“Dragon sighting is confirmed,” Cassandra confirmed from her position. “You in position, Commander?”

“In position and ready to fire,” the Commander answered. “Not alone?”


“Understatement of the day,” Anna muttered from a nearby rooftop next to the Archangels.
“Appears the Battlemaster is using her as the cat’s paw,” Eva, the lead psion stated. “Seems like he figured out he’s being led around.”

“Drill hasn’t changed,” Cassandra said. “We pin her in, and either turn her into a pincushion or melt the fancy armor of hers. Clifton, Anastasia, on me.”

“Copy,” both Dynamo’s confirmed.

“Archangels, we’re moving to engage,” Cassandra addressed them. “Report.”

“Jets engaged and we’re moving to you,” Sierra confirmed, leaping into the air and her jets igniting. “Let’s slay a dragon.”

The nickname of the ‘Dragon’ for the Battlemaster’s puppet had originally arose from some ADVENT soldiers referring to her as such due to her red armor and helmet that clearly held dragon elements right out of an idealized Chinese knight, especially the points on the helmet stylized to appear as wings.

Not too surprising, considering her Chinese heritage – Sierra had been somewhat miffed to have seen images which showcased the Chinese flag emblazoned on the collar, something very clearly lifted from XCOM. Also much like a dragon, she was extremely dangerous and nearly impossible to kill. Now though she was in a largely vulnerable position.

She had only been extending the Collective’s lines for a certain distance before retreating or holding the position, and at that specific point she was at her weakest in terms of available manpower, firepower, and soldiers. The woman had scary endurance, and had supposedly been fighting nonstop for days.

She had to be tiring.

JULIAN had identified the likely distance she’d be at her weakest, and this time that was where they were going to strike. With the Battlemaster, Second Guardian, and a number of other Spectre crises handled or not relevant, this was the best time so far this battle to take out one of the most dangerous players.

The fight itself was taking place on slightly different ground; not specifically on streets, but in the shelled-out ruins of an entire block. The entire area had grey dust and chunks of rubble which were being appropriated by both sides, while the shells of surviving buildings stood and held snipers and other soldiers who exchanged fire.

“We’re coming around,” Sierra informed, readying her plasma rifle. Combat was not going to be close-range this time. They’d figured out that engaging with Yang at close range was about as stupid as engaging the Battlemaster at close range. She was one of the best telekines XCOM had encountered, so no gauss weapons.

Rockets and grenades were expected to be caught in the field, and detonated with sniper fire. All of them realized they needed to fight at a minimum safe distance so as not to be caught and killed. Eva was powerful and skilled enough to at least pin her – or so they expected. Once they pinned her, they’d see just how tough that armor was.

“Damn,” Ted noted grimly. “There’s still a lot of them.”

A force of primarily Mutons lined the bombed-out rubble, though in the front lines were at least twenty Vanguards spread out, erecting small barriers in front of the line while the other aliens erected physical barriers or fired from the Vanguard lines. Spectres were harvesting materials and
acting as repair stations for damaged armor and weapons.

Offensively they were using smarter tactics, such as forming physical objects like spears and balls and chucking them towards ADVENT lines, of which there was an EMP blast going off every thirty seconds (or manual activation), which was largely ineffective. One new tactic she saw was when a Spectre ‘jumped’ onto a soldier like a shadow, forging flash-armor and giving the soldier a brief time of invincibility before the black shell around it broke.

The towering Elites lumbered and fired unceasingly at the ADVENT lines; of which the gap was growing smaller and smaller. The volume of fire was high enough that Yang couldn’t just charge forward without getting several hundred new bruises at best, and leading in the front, and towards the middle, was the Dragon herself.

The red armor was cloaked in a layer of dirt, dust, blood, and scratches. The cape was scorched and parts of it missing or torn. A sword hovered behind her, while the other was held snug in hand at her side. The free hand was raised before her, where her telekinetic field captured the hundreds of projectiles fired her way and sending them back in random intervals.

She seemed to be in good position. This did not appear to be as easy as they were hoping, but unfortunately, it was never going to be easy.

“Yeah,” Sierra said, knowing a few seconds later weapons would be turned on them. “Dragon-1, priority targets? Want us straight for the target?”

“Negative,” the majority of the Dragon squad was arriving behind the ADVENT line to encouraging and relieved cheers. “Clear out some of the backline first. Clifton, Anastasis, give her some help with that. Rosario, Carola, same for you. Everyone else, focus on the Dragon.”

There was a series of affirmatives, and the Archangels split off and prepared for their runs across the lines. “Flamethrowers primed,” Sierra said as she turned to make her first run. “In position Anna?”

“Affirmative,” Anna acknowledged. “Primed and ready to go.”

“Standing by from above,” Ted informed as he shot high above the line.

“At the end of the line,” Sierra tilted her body and aimed her wrist. “Firing.”

A gout of white-orange flame spewed from her wrist engulfing the Mutons and aliens along the offensive line. The scalding napalm continued burning and created a quite satisfying row of fire. Anna flew past her in the opposite direction, hitting everything she’d scorched a second time. At the end, Sierra ceased the stream and shot upward.

Behind her, beams of psionic energy shot down from the sky as Ted maneuvered them to kill Elites, Spectres, and other priority targets. The corrosive power burned through armor with relative ease, and both Archangels used their position to target the scattered aliens with their rifles. It was trivial work, especially since they were still occupied by ADVENT and XCOM.

Wisps of psionic energy appeared in the lines as both Dynamos began using their own abilities to sow destruction. Maelstroms of psionic energy materialized, some of which were blocked by Vanguard shields, but many were ripped apart by the raging psionic storms. Then the storms petered off, as the Collective began trying to recover.

“Telepathic attacks,” Clifton said with a hiss. “Definitely Vanguard. Gonna need to focus to defend. They’re not bad.”
“Change of plans then,” Cassandra said, unperturbed. “Archangels, you’ll need to move in earlier than anticipated. We’ve got her locked in, but she won’t stay that way for long. We’ll occupy her, but you’ll have to get closer to burn her.”

“We can take some hits,” Sierra said, reangling her jets. “She won’t see us coming.”

Circling the battleground, Sierra saw that both women were engaged in a pitched battle. Yang was – or at least appeared to be – pinned in place, frozen like a statue, but she was still very much active. Debris and rubble were being lifted and flung every second from her immediate vicinity towards Eva, who was forced to devote energy to deflecting away.

Several grenades and rockets had been caught in the telekinetic field, which she unfortunately threw back, though Cassandra managed to shoot several of them at the right time, creating some new scratches and damage on her armor. “Anna, Ted, fire on my command,” Sierra ordered, readying her flamethrower as she felt plasma whiz past her head. “Light her up!”

While behind Yang, both women shot another stream of napalm towards the stationary woman and began circling slowly to keep the flame concentrated, and within a few moments all one could see where Yang was pinned was a pillar of white-orange flame. A smile emerged on Sierra’s face. Burn you traitor-

She was suddenly yanked forward, and her flame thrower wavered. “Sierra, get out!” Eva screamed and before Sierra could even react Yang shot out of the cone and slammed into her; the power of the jets she’d engaged sent both of them into the sky. The armor of the Dragon was red-hot, enough to where Sierra could practically feel the heat radiating off her.

Her cape was burned completely off, but the faceless visage of her helmet radiated pure fury. Sierra swung a frantic punch which elicited no reaction except Yang hooking her fingers under the collar of her armor to get her balance, with another hand lashing out to the side where Anna had flown to assist her.

Anna yelled in panic as her jets crumpled and she went speeding towards the ground. A sword suddenly appeared in Yang’s hand and with several slashes Sierra barely followed, destroyed the primary engines. Pain shot up her legs as Yang raised a hand and closed a fist, and her feet, and legs crumpled and shattered into mixtures of meat and bone, with the accompanying engines also shorting out.

Half-unconscious already from delirium and shock, Sierra idly realized that they were still floating, and she was held by Yang who was now suspending them telekinetically. Sierra tried swinging another defiant, if weak punch, and screamed as the wrist spun completely around and fell away, with blood spurting from the stump as the arm bent backwards and shattered the elbow.

“Not quite good enough,” the Dragon hissed, before something caught her attention. A psionic beam shot just past her head, and with an almost absentminded push, she let go of Sierra who felt with the remnants of her body bonds forming, yanking her to the ground at lethal velocity. She didn’t know how high up she was, only that even her enhanced body might not be enough to allow her to survive.

The impact onto the ground was another surge of indescribable pain, one where she felt her spine break, her ribs shatter, and her organs be thrown around like water balloons. There was a brief shining light as she smacked her helmet onto a nearby rock and she faded into the blissful realm of unconsciousness.

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With a flick of her wrist Yang sent the surviving Archangel spinning off away from her as she relinquished the hold of the telekinetic strings that kept her suspended and fell to the ground. She idly wished she’d been able to confirm the kill of the one Archangel she’d had, but even if by some miracle she’d survived the fall, she was never going to fly again.

Once she killed the rest of them, she’d find the body and confirm the kill.

Not that it was assured.

Under the armor her skin burned, and the smell of burning hair and flesh filled her nostrils. She wasn’t on fire, but the heat had been scalding as she’d cooked in her armor. If she hadn’t broken free, she wondered if her body would have survived from the heat alone. The Battlemaster had noticed immediately, and he was on his way.

Normally, she’d try and dissuade him, but as she landed on the ground; stumbling forward, slight tremors wracking her body and her armor still steaming, she didn’t know what her chances were, even with the Archangels dealt with. She only had pain and rage to go on, and those would have to be enough, even if her concentration was slipping and endurance wavering.

Just a little longer.

One hand thrust out to the side and the opposite sword flew into her hand, and with the opposite one, she pointed it at the ADVENT line, taking a battle stance. Come on, she thought wearily as the XCOM soldiers reorganized themselves. Come and get me. You know you want to.

ADVENT soldiers opened fire once more, and too tired to maintain a sustained telekinetic field, she just marched forward, the gauss rounds bouncing off her armor and leaving fresh bruises which she barely felt anymore. Plasma fire soon joined as XCOM soldiers opened fire. Yang stopped walking and erected the telekinetic barrier again, and threw both swords into the ground, burying them a few inches deep in the mixture of dirt, corpses, and rubble.

The strings waved in her minds eye, normally just out of range, but she dug deep in her reserves, drawing on the Battlemaster’s power and plucked them along the ADVENT lines with varying degrees of success and effectiveness. Some soldiers were thrown backwards, some were strangled and crushed, while others were lifted into the air and slammed back down.

One XCOM soldier was lifted up, and with a scowl she concentrated on her and tightened the strings around her and closed the fist, breaking her body completely and turning her skull in on itself before dropping the body to the ground. She was yanked backwards suddenly, though anchored herself in response as the XCOM Telekine began tightening the telekinetic hold over her.

She was good, very good.

Like breaking free of bondage, Yang ripped her arms upward, lifting tons of wreckage and carnage in response as if an explosion had gone off beside her. The other psion wasted no time and Yang’s legs and arms were bound to her, while the remainder of her effort was deflecting the projectiles Yang directed towards her.

It wasn’t quite enough.
Even as the grip tightened, Yang saw with a satisfied, painful smile that ADVENT soldiers, and even one of the XCOM psions were hit by the projectiles, directly in the head, sending her to the ground. With a yell of primal fury Yang broke free of the telekinetic bondage, sending a shockwave from around her, throwing more projectiles around her.

Stumbling forward, she threw an arm forward and sent a weaker shockwave to destabilize anyone standing, and with near the last of her reserves, lifted the wounded XCOM Dynamo Psion and crushed her into a ball of flesh and metal, eliciting a piercing shriek from the victim before slamming the victim to the ground.

She recalled the swords to her hands, and took a deep breath.

A sniper round slammed directly into her chest and she was suddenly on fire. Her blood froze as she realized in panic she’d lapsed and not erected her telekinetic barrier. Several more shots followed up, some at her legs and more on her chest. XCOM wasn’t using fire this time, this was the chemical of the Purifiers – Chlorine Triflouride.

She wasn’t certain it would burn through her armor, but knew she needed to get out now. It took everything she had to not try and bat at the flames to put them out, and she realized that the danger was not in the damage to the armor, but the weak points on it. The joints, the neck; slight vulnerabilities and would be nearly impossible to hit otherwise.

With a start she saw her legs swarming with orange swarms of nanite, all of which were swarming to the cracks and joints, beginning to eat through the weaker fabric and metal, and had already reached her flesh. She scraped as many off with a frantic telekinetic push, but too many were already eating through her knees, and she could feel her legs stop working and feel as if on fire; destroyed piece by piece.

Even still she tried stumbling back, even as round after round slammed into her; some nanites, some chemical, but this time she couldn’t do anything to stop it. She’d made a mistake and overextended, and a singular lapse in judgement had condemned her. The fire had reached her arms and was burning through the gaps.

With a final look towards the XCOM line, and darkness closing in, she was thrown directly onto the ground by a shot directly to the face, knocking her directly back, and the last thing she felt was a familiar presence become tangible.

He’d arrived, but she feared it was too late.

Everything went black as the nanites and fire ravaged her body.

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Clearwater, Florida – United States of America

4/30/2017 – 3:02 P.M.

The Battlemaster felt an emotion he had only experienced a handful of times since awakening from stasis, and only a few times on Earth itself.

Urgency.

Though this time it was not his life which was in danger, it was Yang’s.

He had felt her tentative uncertainty and muted pain through their link, and knew that XCOM was
making a true effort to kill her. Regardless if they knew of what the Avatar connection was, they had doubtless correctly surmised that killing her would be a blow to the war effort. He did not fault them for targeting her – he would have done the same – but those who had hurt her were now marked for death.

The CODEX was practically screaming at him to go assist the dozen fronts which had opened up since he’d begun rushing to assist her from across the battlefield. Warnings and updates he’d ignored and instead instructed to increase the defenses tenfold, even if it slowed their projected advance. The CODEX wasn’t ‘happy’, as much as such an intelligence could be, but it had realigned the priorities and strategies.

Panic and fear soon began sprinkling through the bond, along with stronger feelings of pain until it was a constant stream. It was muted, and certainly not the worst he had ever endured, but for Yang it would be agony and he could feel her beginning to fade and knew she would die if not saved and healed.

He ignored everything else on his path, and all ADVENT saw would be a purple and silver streak through the streets and flying over buildings. He knew there would not be time for prolonged fighting – and it was likely what XCOM was counting on to ensure she died – but he was going to kill as many of their soldiers as he could.

Just a short distance from her, he fell into his trance; one of the deepest he’d achieved, his focus stronger and focused solely on her safety. One building stood between him and the core of the ADVENT line. One fist thrust out and the wall was shattered as a singular telekinetic pull ripped it apart, and the instant he breached the first wall the second soon followed and he burst onto a line of surprised soldiers.

The nearest swipe decapitated a nearby XCOM soldier along with some ADVENT defenders, while the telekine he bound and snapped her neck before she even realized what was happening. The soldiers stumbled back in seeming slow-motion, so deep was he in his trance. Another hand shot out sending another XCOM soldier flying backwards with enough force to crack the armor and liquify the organs within.

One of the XCOM Rocketeers was trying to raise his launcher and with a gesture the Battlemaster pulled him forwards and another swipe separated the head from his body, and with a final closed fist he killed the final standing XCOM soldier who crumpled and was thrown far into the sky. In the event he was still alive, he would not be when he fell back to the Earth.

He dashed to the form of Yang on the ground, still twitching and writhing and bound her in a telekinetic grip, lifting her up. She was on fire, but the twitching was synonymous with nanites. The ‘fire’ was likely chlorine trifluoride, so touching her would only hurt him. Telekinetics could solve the problem easily enough, and her enhancements would render her difficult to kill.

But if left untreated, she would die.

Ignoring the few plasma and gauss shots towards him, he dashed back to the Collective lines, Yang now safely in his grasp. “Prepare all medics at the nearest facility,” he commanded the CODEX. “Nanites, burns, and full-body treatment.’

“Affirmative, Battlemaster.”

He wondered if those would be enough, and if they were not, there was a final contingency, but at this moment he didn’t believe it would be needed. If he was wrong…he was not too proud that he would not ask for help.
High above the battle, the Commander considered the next step.

There were several options, some more risky than others, some more unlikely.

He couldn’t chalk the attack on Yang as a complete success. While it had shown that she could clearly be killed with the right combination of soldiers, equipment, and firepower, it wasn’t going to work so long as the Battlemaster was capable of reaching them and rendering it moot. There was no such thing as a ‘mostly’ dead Ethereal or Harbinger.

They were either alive or dead, and he was certain that Yang Shuren was very much alive and would return eventually. She’d be out for a while, but that was about the only positive. And even then, with the technology the Collective possessed, it might not even be that long. Psychologically it could be a roadblock for her in the future, but he was skeptical how significant that would be.

They’d get another chance, and right now that was secondary to the Gaia Contingency.

“JULIAN,” he finally said, looking over the skyline. “Status until Gaia is ready?”

“When it is in a state where the Collective cannot adequately stop it with copious amounts of EMP weapons?” JULIAN asked rhetorically. “Fluctuating based on XCOM and ADVENT special forces mission success. A minimum one week, maximum of three. Progress is steady, but if the Collective figures out what we are doing, they could amplify forces to a critical mass. If we want to do this right with minimum risk, we need more time.”

“And estimated time until Tampa falls?”

“A pause. “The near-death of the Battlemaster’s pet will no doubt incise him. I would expect them to double their efforts, and they are already adapting. If they dedicate themselves, we have at maximum two weeks until the city falls – assuming we don’t enhance our own defenses. Doable, but the cost would be extremely high.”

“I thought as much,” the Commander said, considering options. JULIAN hadn’t said anything significantly different since his last inquiry, and given that the Battlemaster was in a more vulnerable emotional state…there was an idea that could buy them the time they needed until Gaia was ready. If it didn’t work, they could adapt.

If it did, then there would be a lot of lives saved.

“Put me through to Christiaens,” he said to JULIAN. “Please?”

“At least you asked nicely,” JULIAN effectively grumbled. “Due to the importance of this call, I will act as your telephone. One second.” An old-style dial-up beep and obnoxious ringing sounded in his ears, making the Commander sigh. A moment later he heard Laura’s clipped voice.

“Commander, what’s the situation?”

“Precarious,” the Commander said. “But we have an opportunity. Do you remember a potential delaying tactic we discussed?”
“A ceasefire?” She recalled. “Yes. And I believe we both pointed out the chances of the Collective agreeing to it were minimal.”

“We almost killed Yang Shuren,” the Commander said. “While unlikely she’s dead, there remains that chance. Regardless, this battle has currently not gone the way the Battlemaster planned, and he has expended more soldiers, resources, and personnel than intended. Right now we have the opportunity to push. JULIAN says we need at least another week for Gaia to be utilized, assuming the Collective doesn’t put the pieces together.”

“The Battlemaster might want time to revise his strategy,” Laura mused. “It could work…but it could backfire on us. He might figure it out, and he will definitely be suspicious. He might refuse because it gives us the same opportunity to revise and prepare.”

“And that is the unknown,” the Commander agreed. “I would argue we don’t lose anything by trying. If it fails though…JULIAN expects the battle to become much worse. On our end. If we want to keep them occupied, we will need to devote a lot more resources.”

“This battle is already tying up so many in the region,” Laura sighed. “Being drawn into an attritional quagmire is unsustainable. I don’t want to commit more forces to something we will inevitably lose. Bad enough that Miami will likely be contained at best with Gaia, and if Tampa falls, that will also mitigate the effect.”

“Agreed,” the Commander nodded to himself. “Which is why we should try this. If he agrees, you’ll have to have ADVENT stand down.”

“And what if he attacks us when our guard is down?”

“Possible, but unlikely,” the Commander said. “At least it wouldn’t be because of him. For better or worse, the Battlemaster cares about his image. He wouldn’t break a cease-fire in a surprise attack, but another might. We’ll have to take a chance that he can keep his soldiers in line – as well as our own.”

“False flags are a risk,” she warned.

“Correct. A risk, as I’ve said,” he agreed. “We’ll have to be vigilant. But Tampa is a means to an end.”

“Much as I would like to, I can’t make this decision unilaterally,” Laura said. “I need to convene an emergency meeting of High Command with the Chancellor and Chief Overseer to observe.”

“How long?” He pressed. “The more we delay, the less likely he will agree to it.”

“Not long,” she promised. “And don’t begin negotiations on your own. It’s not going to work if you agree to a ceasefire and one side doesn’t get the memo.”

“I’m aware,” he said. “Which is why I’m talking to you right now and not the Battlemaster.”

“Noted, I’ll speak to you soon.” The line went dead and the Commander went back to watching the battlefield and occasionally firing at the aliens. The seconds seemed to tick by faster than normal, until eventually Laura’s voice spoke again. “You’re cleared to begin negotiations. Inform us immediately-”

“Oh please, there is no need to make this overly complicated,” JULIAN interrupted. “I can connect both of you at the same time. You Humans had already figured out teleconferences before I existed, I don’t know why you would use an inferior method in this situation.”
“Good. Which brings up a question of how we’re contacting him,” Laura pointed out.

“I’ve isolated a Collective frequency, if I call it, they will likely connect us to the Battlemaster,” JULIAN explained. “I suspect you want to speak?”

“Yes,” the Commander said. Letting JULIAN talk was not the most ideal plan. “Ah, most will probably not speak English.”

“Speak and I will translate,” JULIAN said. “Connecting now.”

They waited a few minutes, and then he heard an alien language, probably from a Borelian. “This is the Commander of XCOM with Commander Laura Christiaens of ADVENT,” he said, noting the voice immediately stopped. “We are requesting to speak to the Battlemaster to discuss the possibility of a temporary ceasefire.” JULIAN repeated his words in the language a few seconds later.

The alien spoke a few moments after that, and the line went quiet. “He’s moving us to the CODEX which will connect us to the Battlemaster. Supposedly.” JULIAN explained. “He was quite shocked to hear us.”

“What a surprise,” the Commander said dryly. “Keep quiet. No reason to give the Battlemaster reason to suspect what you are.”

“Do not worry,” JULIAN chided. “I do not intend to make his conquest any easier. I have a vested interest in it.”

A few minutes later, the deep voice of the Ethereal sounded. “Commander. You are clearly not calling to surrender. What do you want?”

“You weren’t told?”

“Your ceasefire? I presume that is not the actual reason.”

“As a matter of fact, it is,” Laura said. “Commander Christiaens, Battlemaster. I do not believe we’ve spoken before.”

“No, we have not,” he answered flatly. “But I know of you quite well. What purpose would such an action serve, Commander? It will merely allow you more time to prepare.”

“It is something of a Human tradition, Battlemaster,” the Commander said. “A brief respite from the fighting, where both sides may take a short time to recover and retrieve our dead. Both our soldiers and yours have been fighting non-stop for weeks. The body toll is in the hundreds of thousands for both sides. Soldiers are wounded, dying, and exhausted and the fight isn’t going to let up anytime soon. A reset would be beneficial for all sides.”

“You will only delay your defeat,” the Battlemaster warned. “Or you are stalling.”

The Commander grimaced. “We only want a cease-fire around Tampa, this would not apply to the rest of the world. From what we’ve seen, your soldiers need rest and healing. Next time you won’t be fast enough to save Yang, or next time we will kill the First Guardian. We can afford to take losses, but you cannot afford to lose Harbingers and Ethereals.”

“I assure you, Battlemaster, that this is for the betterment of our soldiers,” Laura said. “We’ve lost many already, and I presume it is the same for your own. Mutons may not mourn, but the Vitakara do. We can keep killing each other for a few meters of land a day, or we can take a step back,
revise, and finish this battle decisively.”

“Confident,” the Battlemaster mused. “And my suspicions are not alleviated. You will do anything to ensure victory over us, even if it lures us unto a state of temporary peace.”

“As Commander of the ADVENT Military, I have written approval from ADVENT High Command, the Chancellor of ADVENT, and the Oversight Division to agree to the ceasefire,” Laura said. “Should one or more soldiers break it, they will be held fully accountable. It will also be publicly published for the rest of the world to see that we hold to our word. That includes myself.”

“A good start, but not enough,” the Battlemaster said. “I am aware of how plausible deniability works.”

“And we are also aware of how there are actors within the Collective who would not approve of this proposal,” the Commander said. “There is risk of instigation on all sides. What we can do is publicly agree and declare to hold to the terms.” There was something else he could propose if he still didn’t bite, but it was by far the riskiest.

“This is true,” the Battlemaster said slowly. “I suggest a compromise. Let both sides stand to lose something. Provide incentive to hold to an agreement.”

Damn. He was going for it. “A hostage.” Laura said grimly.

“Yes, and as a show of…good faith, I am aware that ADVENT has captured a number of Runianarch soldiers. Those will be returned to us, and in return, we will release our own Human captives.”

The Commander pursed his lips. The soldiers were ultimately unimportant now, as anything important would have been extracted, and they were just taking up space. It was likely the same for the Collective and the Humans in their grasp. Neither side was really going to lose much here, and the manpower was negligible when psions and genetically enhanced soldiers were in play.

However, this was the realm of Laura, not him. She seemed to have similar thoughts. “We can agree to that, provided that captives are not booby-trapped, unduly influenced, or otherwise will turn against us. Your own soldiers in our captivity have been questioned, but we have not subjected them to more than that.”

“Reasonable,” the Battlemaster said. “As for the hostage, they would not be harmed, influenced, or interrogated under any circumstances short of the agreement being violated. They would be supervised, and not captive short of restricted areas. Prior to the cease-fire ending, they would be returned.”

He did have a point, and the Commander knew he was moving towards someone particular. “In the event we agreed,” the Commander said slowly. “Are these provided by each side, or are demands made.”

“You are asking me to trust that you have no hostile intentions towards this decision,” the Battlemaster answered. “I have no reason to believe you are genuine.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “Considering how unreliable your own allies have been, I believe we have been more genuine than your own side. I’d not disparage us when your own side is more of a risk here.”

“I will ensure there are no repeats, and unreliable actors have and will be dealt with,” the Battlemaster said without pause. “With this understood, your points are made, and if you wish for
the battle to be swift and decisive, I can oblige in your arrogance. Yet there must be assurance, and the stakes must be high. I want the Commander of XCOM for the duration of this agreement.”

“Absolutely not!” Laura exclaimed. “Out of the question.”

“Wait,” the Commander said, thinking. The fact that the Battlemaster was entertaining this idea meant that he also deemed it important and ideal. He also wanted to make it work, which meant there were two methods – escalation or de-escalation. Perhaps the Battlemaster wanted ADVENT to agree to this implicitly by putting someone less valuable up instead.

However, he was never one to have others go in his place.

“I’ll go,” he said slowly, thankful Laura didn’t interrupt. “On one condition. Who would you send to us?”

“One of my inner circle,” the Battlemaster answered. “Disciple-7, J’Loran, or others. That will be determined.”

“No,” the Commander shook his head, even knowing it wouldn’t be seen. “Not good enough. If you want me, you need to have something to lose as well. If you turn over Yang Shuren to us, I will provide myself willingly as collateral.”

“Yang Shuren is currently in intensive care,” the Battlemaster said flatly. “She is in no position to be moved anywhere.”

“Then find a way,” the Commander said. “If we’re making deals as these, they will be equal in value. If you wish, your medics can also accompany her for treatment, and if necessary, we can provide our own. But if you want me, then you will turn Yang over to ADVENT for the duration of this cease-fire.”

There was silence on the other end of the line for a short time; tension that all who were listening could feel – even JULIAN most likely. “How long do you wish this cease-fire to last?” The Commander let out a quiet sigh of relief. This was going to happen, excellent.

“Five days,” Laura stated. “Then we’ll talk again. If we decide to extend it, fine. If not, that is the minimum time we request.”

“Very well,” the Battlemaster said. “Prepare your own diplomatic party and we will meet at these coordinates in four hours. I will order my soldiers to stand down, and I expect your soldiers to do the same.”

“It will be done, Battlemaster,” Laura confirmed. “We shall speak shortly.”

They waited a few seconds. “He hung up,” JULIAN said. “Rude.”

“Commander, I am not sure about this,” Laura said. “Especially without prior discussion-“

“No, it is a risk I accept,” the Commander disputed. “Short-notice it may be, but if we have Yang, I am not overly concerned for my safety. I’ll use the opportunity to learn what I can, and in the meantime, we continue preparing for Gaia.”

“I suppose I can’t stop you,” she muttered. “You’re outside my jurisdiction. I would suggest you get any affairs you need to in order. I will meet you in several hours. Now I have to send the order to stand down.”
“I’ll be ready,” the Commander confirmed. “I’ll speak to you then.”

The line went dead. “I suspect Vahlen isn’t going to be pleased,” JULIAN said sarcastically.

“No,” the Commander sighed. “Probably not. But she’ll understand that it’s necessary.”

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Clearwater, Florida – United States of America

4/30/2017 – 5:55 P.M.

“You are making a mistake,” Ivan told the Battlemaster as they stood amongst the eerily quiet city, now that the sounds of gunfire and explosions had ceased. They were replaced with the sounds of medics treating wounds, soldiers getting food and water, and repairs beginning to take place from engineers and drones.

Ivan was not happy.

“We had ADVENT on the brink of collapse,” he said, gesturing out to the opposite side, where ADVENT soldiers can be seen in the distance. “And now they have a chance to regroup and prepare.”

“Correct,” the Battlemaster said.

Ivan stared at him incredulously. “And this isn’t a problem?”

“It provides us with an opportunity as well,” the Battlemaster said, as he cleaned the blood, gore, and grime off of his blade. “Our strategy is not optimal. There are additional factors to account for now. Such as how your clumsy actions have ensured T’Leth’s involvement in the battle and hindered our efforts overall.”

Ivan grimaced. “ADVENT was going to learn there was someone like me attacking. Unfortunately, they found me early.”

“Do not lie,” the Battlemaster’s voice was flat. “I gave you explicit instructions. You ignored them. ADVENT adapted. I hope you are satisfied with your handiwork.”

“I have caused major disruptions against ADVENT lines,” he said. “And have kept hundreds more psions occupied.”

“Incorrect,” the Battlemaster lowered his weapon and appraised him coldly. “You are a pest to them. How many XCOM or ADVENT teams have come after you?”

“None,” Ivan said. “This was because when joined, I can hide myself easily enough.”

“Excuses, Smirnov,” the Battlemaster shook his head. “I was tempted to remove you when you violated your orders, but you are a low priority in this conflict. I will not be restrained if you ignore my orders a second time.”

“Which are?” He demanded, clasping his hands behind his back.

“Very simple,” the towering Ethereal stated. “We are to enter this ceasefire. You will not perform any kind of psionic observation or attack against any ADVENT forces who are not within our territory. You will monitor our areas for infiltrators and special forces. I do not trust ADVENT to be idle, even with the Commander in our grasp.”
“Absolutely not,” Ivan spat. “I will hold to the terms of this unnecessary agreement, but I am not going to act as a glorified radar for you. You can have the Vanguards do that. Let me oversee the Commander at least.”

“No,” the Battlemaster answered. “ADVENT underestimates you now. You will be useful later.”

“You’re acquiescing to their demands without argument,” Ivan shook his head. “You’re doing exactly what they want. What good is having the Commander here if we won’t get anything out of him or kill him?”

“Leverage,” the Battlemaster said neutrally, finishing his sword cleaning. “Something you know very well, yet question all the same. If you are wanting to interrogate or kill him, those are not the terms of the agreement.”

“And why do we care?” Ivan demanded, crossing his arms. “ADVENT will fall. It does not matter how it happens. Removing the Commander will accelerate that significantly.”

“I am also certain ADVENT will fall,” the Battlemaster said, his tone turning colder. “Which is why we do not need to resort to such tactics. I do not care about your childish need for vengeance against ADVENT. The Commander will be treated well and kept safe – and away from you. Am I clear?”

“Did you consult with the Overmind?” Ivan demanded. “Or even the Imperator?”

“No.”

“You ordered a ceasefire of a major military operation,” he said with some disbelief. “And you didn’t contact your superiors?”

“No.”

“And why is that?”

“I am in charge of this campaign,” the Battlemaster took a step towards him. “Not the Imperator. Not the Overmind. Not you. If I decide to listen to them, it is at my prerogative. If I choose to follow their advice, it is because I agree with it. I have informed the Imperator of the development, as well as Harbinger Trask, who will doubtless convey this to anyone else of importance. I made this decision on my own, and I have provided my reasons as to why.”

“And I will remind you that you do not command me,” Ivan said. “That is the Overmi-“

He was cut off as he was suddenly yanked forward to slam into the iron grip of the Battlemaster who held him by the throat. He realized he was in a...bit of a precarious situation, as he had no ability to defend himself as the Battlemaster was immune to telepathy, and couldn’t activate his link with the Overmind.

The Battlemaster drew him close to his mask. “I don’t know what the Overmind saw in you. I don’t especially care. I want to make something very clear to you – if you disobey any of my commands again, I will execute you.”

Ivan coughed. “No, you won’t.”

“Do you want to take that chance?”

He thought about it for a minute, hovering in the air. At the moment...he didn’t actually doubt that
the Battlemaster was capable of killing him. He couldn’t understand the consequences of that, but that resulted in Ivan being very much dead if he didn’t shut his mouth. The Battlemaster was actually stupid enough to do that.

He tempered down his anger and annoyance at the Battlemaster over this whole situation. “Fair enough,” he calmed his voice. “Fine. You have my word.”

“Excellent,” the Battlemaster dropped him to the floor and turned on his heel. “Rest and consult with the Overmind if you wish. I will be meeting ADVENT. Remember my orders.”

Ivan rubbed his throat, glaring at the back of the Battlemaster as he strode off. *Fine then, let’s see you embarrass yourself before the Imperator.*

This was a mistake, and ADVENT was going to prove it. When it happened, Ivan very much was going to look forward to saying ‘I told you so’. Until then, he supposed he should take advantage of the rest that was going to be possible. Straightening up, he began a long walk to his battlefield quarters, thinking about what he was going to do next.

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To be continued in Chapter 56

*Enemy Lines*

Chapter End Notes

So with this chapter comes a pretty significant life update for me. Short version is that I'm moving to a new job which I'm very excited about, but is probably going to be taking up a good part of my life now. I know that I've said in the past that life will come before writing, and that remains true here. I do feel compelled to say again that writing updates may slow as a direct result of this. It is not a guarantee, of course, and I know that I've given this warning before and it all ended up working out, but I'll say it again just so everyone is in the loop.

Thank you all for reading, as always.

- Xabiar
A short click and the intermittent red light began flashing.

“I am the Commander of XCOM, current location is Tampa, Florida, and the time is four-fifty P.M. Around an hour ago ADVENT and the Ethereal Collective agreed to a temporary ceasefire. This is only limited to the current hostilities in Florida, and engagements around the rest of the world still continue.”

 Formal part out of the way, he shifted his position to be less stiff since he didn’t want whoever would be watching this to think it was – ironically – some kind of hostage video. “I suspect there are or will be some who question the wisdom of such a move, because as much as it gives us, it also benefits them. We successfully negotiated the return of current POW’s held in the region, and in exchange we gave them our own. This was agreed upon due to the fact that everything of value was extracted already. A few thousand soldiers ultimately won’t make a difference in either side one way or another, but it will boost morale for ADVENT, and we do have an obligation to save as many of our soldiers as possible.”

 He sighed, looking into the camera and resting his forehead against several of his fingers. “As should be apparent now, the Battlemaster is no fool. The agreement also includes an exchange, one individual from each side to serve as collateral. I agreed to serve in this role, and in return the Battlemaster provided the currently wounded Yang Shuren.”

 He lowered his arm. “I’ve laid out to our allies that the likelihood of the Battlemaster breaking the agreement is low, and that is the truth. I fully believe the Battlemaster will hold to the agreement. However, there is a non-zero chance that others within the Collective will not do the same. I doubt my death would be considered a sufficient escalation, especially since I am replaceable. Yang would die, but only the Battlemaster seems to care about her. The point being that despite what I have implied to ADVENT, the danger here is very much real.”

 The Commander paused for a short time. “The truth is that the ceasefire was never meant to do anything other than buy time. I suppose history will show if it worked or not, but each day of the ceasefire buys time for the Gaia Contingency to be put into effect. Whether I die or not is irrelevant if Gaia is successfully implemented. It can and will change the course of the war, and that is worth risking my life for.”

 He tapped a finger on the chair. “There are concerns with the Gaia Contingency. Fears that it could get out of control. Unfortunately, we don’t have a choice. JULIAN laid it out very clearly. We are outmatched in nearly all theatres except arguably psionics. These kinds of measures are necessary if we hope to survive, let alone win. Earth may look very different at the conclusion of the war. I don’t know. But I can assure anyone with doubts that if we did not take these steps, we would lose the war.”

 The Commander shook his head. “That is all for now. This could be my last time speaking if this goes wrong, but there are few things in life I have regretted, and no matter what happens, this was the right move and right decision. Vigilo Confido.”
The light flicked off and was replaced with a solid green one. The Commander looked behind the camera to Vahlen. “You want to record one?”

“No,” she said wearily, leaning back in her own chair. “I’d prefer to keep my composure on camera.”

“I know,” he stood up and walked over to her, and pulled her into a hug and both gripped each other tightly.

“I know it’s necessary,” she said into his shoulder. “I do. But it didn’t have to be you.”

“Maybe not,” he admitted. “But I know I can do it, and I know I will learn something from there. I’m good at that.”

She didn’t physically flinch, but her concern and worry spiked through her telepathy. “Or you could die.”

“Very possible.”

She grew less stiff against him. “Sometimes I wish you weren’t so honest.”

Despite himself, he smiled. “And remove one of my more attractive qualities?”

“You could die.”

“And if I do, someone else will replace me.” He reminded her. “And the war will continue. If the Imperator thinks my death will change anything, he is very mistaken.”

“Logically…” she sighed and they broke the embrace, though both hands were still held. “You’ve been in danger before, but this is… different. I don’t know if you’ll come back this time. I’ve never felt that before.”

He ran a hand through her hair, putting some stray strands back into place. “I can’t make a promise, but I’m confident I’ll be coming back. For better or worse, the Battlemaster will keep his word.”

“And both of us know that’s not who we worry about,” she replied, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. “You’re not safe there, no matter what he promises. He is a loyal dog of the Imperator, and will fall into line even if there is a violation of his honor.”

“Perhaps,” the Commander mused, his thoughts turning to what would come next. “I hope to discuss it with him while I’m there.”

“Be careful,” was all she said, leaning into him again. “As much as you are able.” Determination radiated from her as her tone turned from concerned and sorrowful to a somber steel. “And if something happens to you, make sure you inform him that I know how psionic bonds work, and I will skin Yang Shuren alive repeatedly if you do not come back safe.”

He chuckled; it was certainly a very personal incentive for the Battlemaster to do everything in his power to comply. Especially since coming from Vahlen, it was no idle threat. “I’ll ensure he knows, and I expect nothing less.”

“While very touching, Commander, I will remind you there is a limited time until the transfer is to take place,” JULIAN interjected from the phone on the bed. “And I presume you want me to store that oddly sentimental and very sensitive video somewhere?”
“File it under PROMETHEUS,” he said.

A few seconds of pause. “Ah. What an interesting project. I’m surprised I overlooked this earlier.”

“We’ve been busy,” Vahlen said.

“In any case, it is done. I will leave the two of you alone now. If you want to have sex for potentially the last time, I suggest you work fast, which I doubt will be a problem for any of you.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “Cheeky little machine. Fuck off JULIAN.”

Vahlen actually laughed, despite herself. “You should tell him that more often. Might teach him some humility.”

He looked back to her, a question in his eye. “Think he killed the mood?”

“No, let’s enjoy this while we can,” she said, leaning up and pulling him into a kiss he immediately returned, and both soon found themselves upon the bed, as the clock ticked down ever so slowly.

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Tampa, Florida – United States of America

4/30/2017 – 3:32 P.M.

Hallian had not expected to be relocated so quickly, and from the sound of it, he was far from the only one being moved. The order had come directly from the Battlemaster, and his first thoughts were that either there was a major push happening and the wounded were more than the current medics could handle, or someone important had been seriously injured.

As it turned out, it was the latter.

The Battlemaster had literally charged towards the medical team which was running to the meeting point, but apparently that was too slow. Close behind him in his telekinetic grasp was what Hallian suddenly recognized as Yang Shuren. Oh no, this is not good – both for the woman in question, and for his stress level.

All Hallian knew about the two was that they were presumably close and both were very important to the war effort, and dangerous to ADVENT. On one hand, it was almost flattering that he was among the first called when someone of this caliber was injured, but on the other, if they couldn’t save her – if he couldn’t save her – he didn’t know how the Battlemaster would react.

He wasn’t the type to execute those who displeased him…at least Hallian was fairly sure of that. But there was a first time for everything, and the Battlemaster could find a new medic much more easily than he could find a new Harbinger. Hallian pushed those thoughts to the side and prepared to get to work even as the Battlemaster set her down.

“Take care of her now,” he ordered, even as Hallian was calling to a triage pod. “Immediate medical update. I want to know her chances.”

“Pod’s on its way now,” Hallian told him, pulling out his dispenser and rushing to the woman, along with his team as he quickly looked over her. “What was she hit with?”

Questioning witnesses was necessary, and sometimes they were too distraught to give an answer, but the Battlemaster was at least collected and would understand the need to ask these questions.
“Armor was hit with gauss and plasma projectiles. Most damage has come from chlorine trifluoride, napalm, and nanites of some kind.”

Not good, and Yang did not look good at all. She was effectively a blackened husk of chipped and irregularly dented armor. The ClF3 had done severe damage to essentially everything that wasn’t armor, and that would need to be taken off her. Despite appearances, the armor appeared to have largely held up, even if layers were burnt away throughout.

“EMP pulse,” an assistant tossed to him which Hallian placed on her chest. “Clear!”

“Clear!”

A micro-EMP burst detonated over her body. Nanites were fickle, and XCOM ones tended to have a timer. Nanoweapons were also very directly targeted, and didn’t have extensive programming. When they found something to eat, they ate, and it was usually directly down, meaning an overhead and outside pulse would cleanse them. Not always completely, but it was the standard first step.

“Do you know how you take the armor off her?” Hallian asked the Battlemaster. “Straps or locks we should be aware of?”

“Yes,” the Battlemaster lowered a hand and Yang lifted off the ground, and as he pointed out the locks and straps – the latter having been burned away – the medics were able to begin quickly taking the armor off her and placing her body onto the nearby medical pod which had just arrived. She was even worse out of the armor than before.

It was amazing that she hadn’t lost limbs or digits during their escape, as the majority of her body was missing a layer of skin, some due to burns, and the rest due to the nanites. The joints especially showed where the fire had almost burned to the bone, while almost the entire throat was just barely held together to the point he knew the windpipe would have torn if it had been even an hour later.

He didn’t know how conscious she was, as both eyelids were gone, as were parts of the eyes. There were occasional twitches, but he was almost certain she was in shock. She’d need extensive treatment to be back to normal, and nothing major appeared to have been lost. Skin could be regrown, as could organs.

The suspension field would at least keep her from feeling any pain when she regained consciousness as the medics coated her body with gel which would prime her body for skin repair grafts and medical nanites. Straps were placed over her eyes which would also prime them for eventual repair. Hooking her up to several IV drips, she would be kept in a coma until enough of her body had healed to be safe to awaken her.

It was tense, fast-paced work, but soon they were done. “We’re going to move her to the treatment facility now,” he told the Battlemaster, letting out a breath he’d been holding the whole time. “She’s not in danger of dying, but I highly recommend she be moved off-world for treatment. We don’t have the appropriate facilities right here.”

“Understood, move her there for now and I will authorize her transportation,” the Battlemaster nodded, his massive frame seeming to relax. “You and your team saved her life. Thank you.”

Hallian began to relax a bit more, his weary mind filled with pride. Acknowledgement by the Battlemaster himself was something one could only dream of. He’d done his job, and done it well. “Thank you, Battlemaster. Where do you need us when we move her off-world?”
“I will determine that,” he said, stepping back. “For now, stay with her.”

“Yes, Battlemaster,” Hallian answered as the Ethereal went off one way, and with the pod in tow, the medics rushed off another.

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Phnom Penh – Cambodia

4/30/2017 – 6:00 P.M.

The wall had been hit here, and Patricia decided a new tactic was in play. Given the recent events in Tampa, she thought she would take a page and try…speaking to ADVENT. There would certainly not be a ceasefire, but she was curious to see who they would send – and what they would say. The invasion had largely proceeded – and still was proceeding – well.

They were quite easily moving through the region, onwards and upwards, and ADVENT and XCOM were throwing their best to slow her down. Admittedly, they were still holding on to the capital city of Cambodia, but the price for this was that they weren’t elsewhere as her soldiers continued expanding.

Transplantation and terraforming were also proceeding well; the plants were adapting to the conditions on Earth, and Sectoids and Andromedons both were carefully observing the effect on the ecosystem. It would take time before the full effects were accounted for, but preliminary information was always good, and soon it would be her mark she left on the planet and the path she carved.

The bombardment from both sides had stopped and now she walked onto a war-torn battlefield which had once been a complex of cheap houses and streets, and now was composed of dirt, rubble, metal, and unidentifiable liquids. Her mask was off, as she did not need to be connected right now to the Imperator, but there was a telekinetic field around her, one which she kept vibrating to set off any mines nearby.

Approaching the designated area, she spotted her counterpart, and was only mildly surprised to see the Chronicler approaching. She’d known he was here, as was Aegis, along with a number of XCOM psions and Agents of T’Leth who were still alive. Without all of them, this city would have fallen days ago.

Both psions met besides the shells of houses and torn vegetation. Patricia crossed her arms, appraising the Chronicler. “Surprised they sent you.”

“It was me or Aegis,” the Chronicler answered with a thin smile. “I was deemed the better negotiator.”

“Were you now.”

“Easy to negotiate when the answer is going to be ‘no’.”

Patricia was mildly amused, but not surprised. “You don’t want to hear me out?”

“Not particularly.”

“The Battlemaster and the Commander appear to have worked something out.”

“The Battlemaster and you are very different,” the Chronicler snorted. “He operates within his own
rules and code. He is predictable. You are not. Don’t pretend that you’re surprised by this.”

Truthfully, Patricia was very much surprised by the ceasefire in Florida, and similarly concerned. She knew the Commander, and him taking that kind of step meant that he had a plan – and she knew it wasn’t whatever reasons he had given the Battlemaster. Even if he was giving himself up, he knew what he was doing. He never did something like that without a reason or plan, and the Battlemaster simply had the wrong mindset to see that.

She’d deal with that later.

“How many days have we been here?” She asked rhetorically, looking past him to the Flak Towers and haphazard trenches. “Ten days? Fifteen?”

“Length doesn’t matter,” the Chronicler shook his head. “We’ll fight for months if need be. You can’t convince us to give up.”

“Let’s work through this logically,” Patricia said, deciding to try a different tactic. She sat down on an appropriately sized piece of rubble. “You can theoretically hold out here as long as necessary. Between you and Aegis, I know you can. However, both of you have to be here all the time and can’t assist elsewhere. I don’t have that restriction. I have an army of billions at my disposal, and I am using them to take the ground you cannot defend.”

“And we’re slowing your efforts,” the Chronicler added.

“Slowing, not stopping,” Patricia agreed. “Casualties are largely Mutons. That I can afford easily. You are losing ground by the day. Soon you will be completely surrounded and even you and Aegis cannot last forever. If I bring in a few more psions or call in some Cleanser Ships, you will be forced to do something. Then all of you will die, and ultimately for nothing.”

“This works both ways, Patricia,” the Chronicler raised a finger. “As long as you’re stuck with us, that means you aren’t elsewhere. We both cancel each other out, and this is a status quo we find acceptable, but you clearly do not. So while we appreciate your inevitable offer, we’re quite content with the current situation.”

“Perhaps, but you can’t hold out forever,” Patricia pointed out. “You’ll become tired, exhausted. You will get sloppy. You will make mistakes. It won’t be you either, it will be your soldiers who are fighting for days straight. I can call upon fresh forces whenever I wish. Your soldiers do not have that luxury, nor do you.”

He actually chuckled, and his eyes briefly flashed blue. “I’ve been doing this much, much longer than you have, girl. I’m very likely older than your entire family combined. You’ve been joined to the Imperator for what? Several months, if that?” He shook his head, amused. “Both of us know soldiers are little obstacles against beings like us, and I can assure you that no matter how long you last, I can last longer.”

He was entirely too smug for the situation he was in and it was rather irritating. Patricia frowned. “I’m not taking pleasure from this, Chronicler. I’d prefer to end the war with as few Human casualties as possible.”

“If you really thought that, you wouldn’t have betrayed us.” He shot back, allowing some raw anger into his voice. “Don’t you dare say that after what you’ve done.”

“And leave them to what?” Patricia demanded. “I guarantee that there will be far fewer lives lost here than when T’Leth goes to war. The Sovereigns will sacrifice us when they see fit. We are less
“That is not the same thing and you know it,” Patricia snapped.

“Really?” The Chronicler demanded. “Because it sounds just like what your imaginary Sovereigns would say about us. And if you really think the Imperator would not do the same thing, then you are deluding yourself and everyone around you.”

“You’re wrong,” Patricia disputed with a shake of her head. “You’ve never even met him. You can’t say that. I’m certain T’Leth says differently, but I’ve seen inside his mind. I know him better than you or your master ever could.”

“You accuse me of not knowing the Imperator, but you turn around and treat T’Leth the exact same way,” the Chronicler pointed out. “I base my opinion of the Imperator on what he had done and what he has allowed. You base your opinion on nothing but words and trust.”

“Ah, you’re wrong,” Patricia gave a thin smile. “When I was still with the Imperator, and I hadn’t made my decision, I decided to try and contact the Commander. Telepathically of course. I met your Sovereign there and he effectively told me to leave before I could even explain what I wanted to do. He accused me of being tainted by the Imperator.”

For the first time, the Chronicler frowned. “Did he now. I see. I can guess what his reasons were, but that was…overzealous.”

She nodded. “One word for it.”

Silence fell between both of them. The Chronicler finally waved a hand. “Alright, let’s hear your offer. Doubt I’ll agree, but I’ll hear you out.”

“I will allow ADVENT military forces to evacuate the city completely,” she said. “We do a prisoner swap. You get our captives, we get yours. Once you leave and send us an all-clear, we move in and take the city.”

“You said military forces,” he said slowly. “Not civilians?”

“I imagine that the civilians won’t want to leave their homes,” she said, choosing her words carefully. “If ADVENT wants to force their evacuation, then I suppose that can’t be stopped. I would argue that would not be conducive for your image.”

“Right,” he said dryly. “Thank you for your concern. You want the civilians too, and you probably have a time limit on this that would make a large-scale evacuation impossible.”

“I wouldn’t want to think you were stalling.”

“Obviously,” the Chronicler rubbed his beard. “Here’s my counter-offer. You allow all the civilians currently captured in your territory the option to leave, and we send a representative to confirm. Make our cases. Those who want to stay in your grand vision can, the rest get to leave, no strings attached. Same with this city. You give us as much time as needed to get them away safely. You do that, and we’ll leave.”

Patricia sighed. “I was hoping for something more serious.”

“I am serious, Patricia, I see exactly what you are doing,” the Chronicler met her eyes firmly. “For
better or worse, you think you’re doing the right thing, and think this is the correct direction of Humanity. So sell it. All you’ve done is conquer them. No one joined you willingly. Granted, the same can be said of ADVENT in some instances, but what ADVENT offers is unquestionably in their own interests. The Collective? Not so much. Consider this an opportunity to use your ideas and words to convince people to join you, not your armies and threats.”

She looked at the Chronicler, thinking. He had a point, even if something of a distasteful one. A population that was unwilling was eventually unreliable and reshaping them would take some time…the Chronicler was confident this would be an easy win, and clearly did not expect her to say anything other than ‘no’.

But she wondered if she should take him up on his offer. It would be a massive blow to ADVENT if, given the chance, Humans willingly elected to stay with the Collective, and not rejoin ADVENT. Oh, they would push their theories of intimidation and telepathy, but privately such would freak the leadership out. On the flip side, it could go badly for her and she’d be embarrassed before ADVENT and Humanity at large, much less the Collective.

High risk, potentially high reward.

She was tempted. “I need to speak to the Imperator,” she finally said. “I will be back within the day.”

He blinked. “You are actually considering this?”

“Correct,” she stood up. “I hope you meant what you said, and that you were authorized to propose that deal, because that’s what I’m going to bring before the Imperator. If you aren’t, then let me know.”

He gave a single nod. “I will do so. I will speak to you later.”

“Yes, until later.”

Patricia began walking away, then paused. “One more thing?”

“Yes?”

She hesitated, then decided to ask anyway. “How is Creed?”

The Chronicler’s expression stayed completely neutral. “I wouldn’t call him ‘fine’ after what you did. Let me put it simply, Patricia. The next time he sees you, he’s going to kill you.”

It wasn’t a surprise, and she understood and gave a short nod. “Then I hope we never meet on the battlefield.” She paused once more. “If you see him, do tell him I’m sorry it happened like this.”

With that, she turned around, and left, this time not stopping until she was safely behind Collective lines.

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Dedicated Defensive Fortress of the Sovereign African States – Nigeria

04/27/2017 – 12:02 P.M.

At last, there had been a breakthrough in negotiations. For Betos it seemed like the entire continent was in a self-imposed neutrality, with everyone fearing to commit to one side or the other for fear
of retaliation from the other. A valid fear she could respect, but the continent was a number of dominos, and they were eventually going to fall one by one for one side or the other.

It was a mad rush between ADVENT and SAS diplomats, most of whom were either ignored or treated with the most delicate and neutral of negotiations for fear of committing too strongly to one side or the other. The threat of ADVENT annexation hung over every country, and that had been cited as a major reason nations had not committed to anyone.

However, the African nations in general were wary of ADVENT, hence why they weren’t joining them. To Keeper’s mild chagrin, none of the nations actually seemed to fear the SAS or aliens, and appeared to believe that if they joined, ADVENT would protect them. But ADVENT in many of their eyes was a wholly western superpower, and the legacy of colonization and exploitation still endured.

That China had also joined had only made it worse.

Then ADVENT appeared to have decided that they were tired of waiting, and had imposed harsh sanctions against all non-ADVENT aligned nations. The effect had been almost immediate, and a number of nations had at least signed non-aggression and non-alliance treaties with ADVENT, essentially allowing themselves to be ADVENT proxies in return for sanctions relief.

The ones who didn’t give in were forced to seek alternatives, no matter the danger or risk. If something wasn’t done, food, water, and resources would run out, and the last thing any of these governments wanted was an internal crisis on their hands. Larger nations could hold out for some time, and trade between themselves still existed.

For smaller countries, that wasn’t an option, hence why four small nations were represented in a small and defended bunker. They were by no means committed, but Keeper believed that they could be swayed easily enough.

Sitting around a circular table were Presidents of four nations, Teghan Obito of Benin, Gaspard Diyoka of Togo, Sadaou Moundi of Ghana, and Mvondo Kumba of Gabon. Some were originally of their nation’s military, others weren’t. All were concerned and desperate enough to consider an alternative.

However, the concerns were immediate.

“ADVENT has been clear,” Mvondo stated. “If we align ourselves with you, we will be destroyed.”

“Propaganda,” Keeper disputed. “Annexations require resources. ADVENT is currently engaged on multiple fronts, all of which they mistakenly believe are more important than your own nations. They will certainly be unhappy, but they rely on fear and intimidation to succeed here. When you and many of your nations saw they were skeptical – and rightfully so – they showed their true face.”

Mvondo wasn’t convinced. “I do not want fancy words, alien, I want a guarantee. What will you do to keep my country safe from ADVENT?”

“A number of steps,” Betos spoke, looking around the room as this question was one they all had. “The SAS is African-run and led. Protection is essential, and to pre-empt any ADVENT attack, I will order SAS forces – all of whom are Human – to your countries to protect them from reprisal. All major government officials will receive dedicated protection.”
She tapped the table. “Second, we upgrade your military to modern standards. Plasma, armor, psionic testing, everything, no questions asked. Your own military forces will be integrated into the SAS and when your soldiers are appropriately trained to use the equipment properly, they will serve as the core garrison of the nation, with additional support if necessary.”

“Now,” she pulled out a small holopad and activated it, showcasing a Collective emblem. “We know the sanctions are already affecting your countries. Through the Collective, we will continually keep your nation supplied with food, water, and other resources. Engineering teams from the Collective will arrive to modernize your infrastructure, networks, and defenses. We can provide you with all of this if you align yourselves fully with the Sovereign African States.”

Betos met each of their eyes, lacing her fingers together. “ADVENT does not want a prolonged war here, but we’ve been under siege for over a month now, and they haven’t broken through. They cannot win, and they know it. Each and every one of you they will coopt regardless of what you insist in their march to destroy us. Proxy bases are already being developed outside our borders. All due to ADVENT threats and fear. ADVENT does not have your best interests at heart. They never have or will care about neutrality.”

“Neither does your own Collective or government,” Gaspard snorted. “As has been throughout history, we are caught in the middle of two sides who care nothing for us except our land, people, and resources.”

“We of course wish your support,” Betos said. “But we do not require it and never have. We were content to let you maintain your neutrality without penalty. ADVENT does not believe in this. The SAS is allied with the Ethereal Collective, but we command and manage ourselves. Africans control the SAS, not the aliens.”

“Please, you are not even African,” Gaspard pointed out. “Do not speak as if we are brethren. You are no more of an African than I am Israeli.”

Internally, Betos winced because that was a valid point. It was admittedly difficult to sell the idea of an African-run continental power when the face of said power was not even African, even if a majority of the interim government and military forces were. “No, I am not, but I am the reason that Africa as a whole is relevant in the world now, and the most influential it has been in centuries. I may not have come from here, but a majority of my advisors, government officials, and military personnel are, and they wholly support me.”

“Her skin color is irrelevant,” Teghan dismissed with a sharp wave. “I only care if she can do as she promises.”

“I do not care so much about their promises as what happens later,” Sadaou said, looking to Keeper. “ADVENT is right about one thing – too much alien influence is undesirable. I do not wish to align myself or my country with an alien proxy, nor do I wish to expand any coalition to include non-African nations, else it will become dominated by western interests again, and nothing will change. It was such with the UN, and it must not be repeated. Will the SAS retain full autonomy from the rest of Earth?”

“Of course,” Keeper said immediately. “The interests of the Sovereign African States are decided internally with our own advisement, of course, but I do not see a need for the SAS to expand beyond the continent. This is, of course, subject to the internal deliberations of such a government. Your peers may feel differently, but as it stands, we do not need the SAS to expand unnecessarily.”

Sadaou frowned. “You would support multiple Human governments? Autonomous Human governments?”
Keeper smiled. “Currently on Vitakar, there are six racial local governments, each of which control and manage certain parts of our planet, as well as sponsor colonies they have direct influence over. The Andromedon Union contains dozens of autonomous and independent Unions, all of whom control their own affairs with minimal to no oversight.”

He lifted a finger. “Now, each of these have established a…unified government structure, the Aui’Vitakar and Andromedon Federation respectively, to manage planet and system-wide affairs. But it is largely used to streamline trade, unified military strength, and species-wide directives. It is rare that it interferes on a local government level. The point is, Mr. President, that despite what ADVENT would have you believe, the Ethereal Collective is highly supportive of its allied species and wishes them to develop in their own ways. We are a Collective, after all, not an Empire.”

He lowered his hand. “ADVENT has no such belief in diversity. They will, if you have not noticed, homogenize society, military, and culture to whatever they deem as the most acceptable. They do not care for opposing views and beliefs, except for ones that support their plan for eventual Human domination. You see how they even treat Humans who do not fall in line, imagine what they will do to those not of their species.”

Betos certainly appreciated individuals like Keeper who could succinctly explain the flaws of ADVENT and the advantages of the Collective, though she knew it certainly wasn’t as simple as the picture he painted, but much of it was correct – or at least easily arguable. She doubted that ADVENT was necessarily hostile to aliens, but if it suited their interests…they could easily become that.

Gaspard still looked skeptical. “You paint a vivid picture, alien. I have a question though.” He looked Betos in the eyes. “Betos may be the face of the SAS, but she was not alone initially. There were others with her. Other national leaders. So-called allies. Where are they now, Betos? Why are they not endorsing your vision?”

Betos was very grateful they’d anticipated this potential roadblock, and Keeper smiled and pulled out a thick folder, set it on the table, and slid it to the opposing Human. “The simple answer is that they were corrupt, brutal men who cared more for personal profit and glory than the threat of ADVENT or the well-being of their citizens.”

He shook his head in pretend mirth. “We compiled evidence before we acted. All there for review. Unfortunately, it seems some men believe themselves above the laws they themselves agreed too. I cannot say if they intended to use the SAS to enrich themselves, but such actions cannot be tolerated, and they were arrested, prosecuted, and executed.”

“I heard nothing of a trial,” Gaspard said, though he sounded like he was backing off this topic.

“And were you observing?” Keeper shrugged. “It is unlikely you would have observed as it was only kept within our own networks, networks which do not rely on Human systems.”

“I can assure you that the men and women working with me now are fully committed to the future of the SAS,” Betos added. “While a hard lesson to go through, it was necessary. I am certain you are aware that in some of these nations justice is fleeting or absent, and to acquire the trust of the people, to give them hope, they needed to see even the powerful are not immune to the law.”

She gave a smile. “I can assure you that if you’re dedicated to your people, then you have little to fear. But all of us must move beyond old national and ethnic rivalries. ADVENT faces us with a united front, and if we intend to survive, we must do the same.”

The men were nodding and exchanging glances with each other, communicating in different
languages under their breath. It appeared to be a good sign. “You make a strong case for an alliance,” Teghan finally said. “But we want more details. Specifics.”

Keeper moved the holoprojector closer to the center of the table with a smile. “Of course. Ask us anything you wish to know.”

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**Briefing Center 17, Cambodian Military Command – Cambodia**

4/29/2019 – 10:14 A.M.

Three ADVENT squads were seated in a room, most of them not in uniform, but knowing they would need to don it soon enough. Both Duri’s direct superior, Lieutenant Maxwell, and the commanding Colonel of the Cambodian Joint Company Command, Zachery Ilo, were laying out the mission for the soldiers present.

“Right now we don’t have a full picture of what the Collective is doing in Vietnam,” Maxwell was saying, a map displayed behind him. “We know they are modifying the environment extensively, but if the plants they’re using are alien, terran, or hybrids is an open question. As you can imagine, this is unacceptable, and ADVENT is clear in that we are to stop this terraforming effort immediately.”

“To do that we need hard samples,” Ilo said, clasping his hands behind his back. “Soil. Leaves. Seeds. That kind of thing. We have that, the scientists can study them and develop countermeasures or poisons. If we can taint the land, we should be able to prevent terraforming from being possible, even if they claim the land itself.”

One of the officers, Sam Sujin, a woman from Korea, the Seoul Legion, raised a hand. “To cut to the chase, sir, we’re being sent after plants?”

“Plants which are within enemy territory,” Maxwell clarified. “But yes. All of your squads have demonstrated exceptional skills and performance, and operations such as these are of more use to ADVENT then sticking you in a trench.”

“Right, sir,” she nodded. “Just checking.”

“Which brings us to the next point,” Ilo highlighted another portion of the map. “We’re sending you to a location where terraforming efforts are taking place, but satellites don’t show a dedicated Collective presence. There are likely patrols and countermeasures in place. Your mission here is not to kill aliens, but to recover the samples quickly, and then leave immediately. Leave the killing to the special forces.”

“Question, sir,” the third officer, Brenden Pox, from one of the American legions raised a hand. “Do we have any kind of support for this?”

“If things get too bad, we have a reserve Dragoon unit nearby,” Maxwell confirmed. “We’d prefer they not be deployed, however. There are several Intelligence Agents in the area, and by tonight we’ll have up-to-date intel. We expect the operation to launch in no more than three or four days, and to last no longer than four hours upon insertion. Do not take longer than this.”

“Any further questions?” Ilo looked around the room. “It’s straightforward, but important this get done, especially while Patricia and her army are still being held to this position. The aliens are continuing to advance outward, and we might not get this chance again if we delay.”
“One,” Duri raised a hand. “Will we be escorting any scientists or specialists? If there are civilians, we need to account for that.”

“Undetermined,” Maxwell said. “Potentially, and it would improve the operation. However, R&D isn’t sure they want to risk someone for a bulk grab. We will know well before the operation. You will have appropriate time to prepare.”

“Thank you,” Duri nodded.

“Return to your duties for now,” Maxwell said, as they all stood and saluted. “Further details will be forwarded within the day.”

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Near Tampa, Florida – United States of America

4/30/2017 – 6:30 P.M.

On a shelled-out city block, both the Collective and ADVENT prepared to make the exchange. Along several dozen similar points, prisoner exchanges would be conducted, per the agreement which they had come to. But all attention was on the small groups that made their way to the middle ground between the battle lines.

Today at least, the No Man’s Land was populated with something alive.

Both armies on opposing sides were tense, but weapons were kept idle. The Commander saw that the ADVENT soldiers were holding their weapons in such a way that if they needed to, they could lift and fire in seconds. He also knew that multiple teams of snipers were also keeping track of the parties.

On the Collective side, the aliens had completely stood down, or so it appeared. Mutons were in an idle stance, and the Runianarch soldiers held their weapons idly, seemingly more fascinated by the oncoming Humans than concerned about anything else.

In particular, they were focused on him.

He only wore his grey fatigues, having elected not to wear armor here. He felt that wouldn’t play well with the Battlemaster, and if the aliens really wanted to kill him, armor wouldn’t protect him. His uniform was fairly plain, though displayed the XCOM emblem on the upper right chest. He kept the pistol on his waist, but aside from that, he appeared fairly normal.

Well, almost normal. His skin displayed the hallmarks of genetic modification, as well as his eyes. Perhaps enough to distract from the small ring he wore, silver and plain, with a tiny Sovereign Orb embedded in it. He certainly wasn’t going to go unprepared, and if the Battlemaster thought that his mind could be scanned here, he was sadly mistaken. In the opposite hand was a briefcase containing some essentials for his short stay in enemy territory.

Accompanying him was Commander Christiaens, Vahlen, and a squad of XCOM soldiers who walked behind them, armed of course. On the alien side, the Battlemaster accompanied a medical team who surrounded a white pod the Commander assumed was the injured Yang Shuren. Curiously, that was it.

Both parties stopped short of each other. There was a period of silence. “Four days,” the Battlemaster said, looking to Laura. “Then we talk again.”
She gave a sharp nod. “Understood. You understand the consequences if you break the terms?”

“I do,” he motioned to the medics who began moving closer, and the XCOM squad moved to escort them more overtly. “As do you understand the consequences of your own failure to adhere to the terms?”

“We can be trusted to hold to our word,” the Commander said, stepping forward and looking up at the Ethereal. It really was disconcerting how much larger than everyone he was. He’d never really appreciated the size of the Battlemaster until in person. Well, the reports had made him aware enough, but it was another to experience it.

A few moments passed, and the collateral had been exchanged. Now alongside the Battlemaster, the Commander met Vahlen’s eyes. Don’t worry about me, he thought, knowing that she was listening to him. I’ll keep you aware of what’s going on.

A small nod followed, and he gave her a smile, and a quick salute which she returned. They’d worked out a way to keep in contact, assuming that the Collective hadn’t set up anti-telepathy precautions around their territory, which was admittedly possible. Psionic contact was possible, and while the Commander was no telepath, Vahlen was.

He was sure she could find him without too much of an issue.

“Follow me,” the Battlemaster turned, and the Commander followed suit as they walked ever-closer to the enemy lines. The Battlemaster didn’t seem interested in speaking to him in front of the Collective, but he seemed highly distracted, no doubt planning his next moves. Fine by him, the Commander had a feeling they would have an interesting talk later.

The aliens were silent as he walked alongside the Ethereal. The Mutons didn’t react at all, but the Vitakara stared in rapt attention, and he idly wondered what was going through their minds. He was not a public figure, but the enigmatic Commander of XCOM was no doubt a figure they knew about. Someone they perhaps respected.

Someone they most certainly feared.

He wondered how many of them were disappointed, or perhaps relieved that he was only a Human. Not quite a Chronicler, a Kane, or a Geist, but for him that was for the best. It was always better to be underestimated than the opposite. The aliens didn’t seem to like maintaining eye contact, even through helmets when he looked their direction.

Perhaps they considered it unprofessional; displaying interest in a high-profile enemy figure.

To a degree it made sense. Some constants in all soldiers it seemed. While he was certainly looking forward to a chat with the Battlemaster, he was almost more interested in speaking with some of the true believers of the Collective. The alien soldiers who maintained their loyalty despite the actions of the Ethereals.

Or perhaps that was all an illusion, and all some of these soldiers needed was someone to give them something to think about.

Four days.

He could do something in that timeframe.
Betos was not American, but she knew a decent amount of their history. The story of the American Revolution had always been one of her favorites, one complete with long odds, heroism, hope, and ultimately victory. To some extent, she could see the parallels here. A smaller regional power fighting to crush the reigning global Empire.

Of course, the American Revolution hadn’t had someone like Macula. Or an advanced alien ally, but there were still parallels.

For the first time in a while, she felt like she was about to do something tangible. It had been negotiation or hiding from ADVENT shelling, and she was past confining herself to the cage ADVENT was trying to construct around them. If they wanted to strike at them, fine, but they would no longer be able to strike with impunity.

She was about to cross the Rubicon and kick off what she knew would be a long, brutal, and bloody war. No longer were the SAS going to hold back; now they marched on the emplacements which had been shelling them relentlessly, which had caused the deaths of soldiers and civilians, which had made the shelter drills a common occurrence.

It was time to move the war somewhere else.

ADVENT had been establishing airstrips and artillery positions within Libya and Sudan, which were used to strike against cities and bases in Chad. Thanks to their efforts much of the defense had been destroyed, but now vengeance had come, and Betos intended to make a statement. Her best soldiers followed her, with Macula at her left hand, and Mox at her right.

“Changes to the rules of engagement?” Mox asked as they looked in the distance at the first ADVENT airbase, one which she idly saw panicked soldiers running in the distance and hurriedly trying to evacuate – or defend. He checked his rifle and looked over his shoulder at the soldiers who stood at attention behind her.

It was to be the first true test of the SAS Military, and a usage of a very few of their psions, the few who had been trained enough to be useful. However, they were on other operations. She had Macula today, and she suspected that would be all they needed. “No change,” she said idly, crossing her arms and pacing as she observed. “They raise their weapons, defend yourselves. However,” she looked back to the Ethereal. “We’re not here to kill them today, yes?”

“I suspect that your gambit will fail, Lady Betos,” Macula twirled one of the blades in his hand. “Nonetheless, if you wish to attempt it, then I will ensure that it is successful.”

She pointed forward. “Go. We’ll be right behind you.”

With a speed that belied his size, Macula shot off, racing towards the airbase. Mox looked after him. “They run fast, don’t they?”

“It appears so,” Betos was also kind of surprised – and intimidated just how fast they were capable of going. Then again, the Battlemaster she remembered seeing cross hundreds of feet in a matter of seconds through his psionic dashing, so by comparison this wasn’t as impressive.

No, it was definitely impressive.

She turned back to her soldiers. “You have your objectives. I understand that for some of you…it
won’t be what you want. But to defeat ADVENT, we need to be smarter than them, and exploit the weaknesses they have. Their soldiers are their most important asset, and if we threaten that, we will have an advantage.”

She pulled out her own rifle. “Today we expose ADVENT as an illusion. They will be defeated without firing a shot. March!” Normally there would be objection to her leading this kind of operation, but this was an instance where she did not fear any danger, and as they walked the open Sudan land to the airbase, not a single shot was fired.

Instead the defenders were frozen in place, statues seemingly made of stone, their bodies locked into position as their minds lingered in induced purgatory. Near the center of the airstrip stood Macula. “Inform me when you wish to release their minds,” he said idly, seeming pleased as the SAS soldiers began cuffing and binding the soldiers for transport, as the hovercraft followed a few seconds later.

“I brought enough soldiers,” Betos said. “It shouldn’t take long.”

“Excellent,” the Ethereal stated jovially. “Almost a shame they didn’t even have a psion.”

“I wouldn’t worry,” Betos cautioned, slinging her rifle over her shoulder. “I get the feeling that you’ll be fighting one soon enough.”

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ADVENT Trauma Center, Tampa – Florida

4/30/2017 – 9:16 P.M.

ADVENT certainly hadn’t stashed them in the most open place in their medical camp, but it was more than serviceable for the team of medics with one subject in the pod. Hallian and his team had actually seemed to attract less attention than he’d thought, though that was probably due to them being taken along a tightly monitored path, under a heavy escort, and everyone in the medical facility was focused on more immediate things than the group moving through them.

ADVENT had given them a few amenities, namely a bed, IV stand, and a number of other archaic technology which Hallian and his team promptly ignored. ADVENT meant well, but their medical tech still had a while to go before it was on-par with that on Vitakar, much less the rumored Ethereal facilities of Sana’Ligna.

He idly wondered what she was doing now since she’d left.

Yang was stable now. The skin was beginning to heal, but Hallian knew that she wasn’t going to be going out into the field for at least several weeks. If it was up to him, she’d not do anything combat-related for several months. Despite never having her as a patient before, he knew she wasn’t going to do that. She’d likely regain consciousness in a few days, but even if she wanted to, she’d need time to recover.

Not even women like her were invincible, much as such beings believed sometimes. He could see she was special, but she was no Ethereal.

One thing he would wait to fully address would be the scarring. It was certainly possible to remove it completely, but he didn’t know if she’d want to keep a reminder of what she survived or not. If it hadn’t been for an encounter with a Borelian who’d been very irritated he’d healed the scarring, he was very aware that was a touchy subject for some. He wasn’t sure if Yang fell into that category, but he didn’t really want to make her upset.
Right now though, he did not have much to do. His assistants could watch Yang for any irregularities, and the systems were slaved to the haptic control panel on his wrist. If something happened to her, he’d know about it. He’d already made the executive decision to keep Yang artificially sedated until further notice. She might reawaken naturally, but having her wake up in the middle of an ADVENT facility without any idea what was going on…

That would be a problem.

Hopefully her awakening could be coordinated with a visit by the Battlemaster. He’d ensure she was calm, more so than a Dath’Haram she’d never seen before. Until that point, he was in the middle of a medical facility, which meant he had work to do. Assuming ADVENT would even let him of course. Opening the door to the Triage area, he watched the medics and nurses rush around.

The medical facilities were organized, if compressed. It was clear this room wasn’t originally supposed to hold this many, and it alternated between soldiers being rushed in, who were treated by the nurses and doctors on staff before being moved when they were stabilized. Human terminology did confuse him sometimes, and their constant referral of ‘casualties’ for alive, if wounded, people was utterly confusing.

His case of medical equipment in hand, he looked around for someone who was the chief medic, or at least the person in charge. There were no Officers he saw, oddly enough, though several soldiers had seen him come out and were walking towards him, hands holding rifles that were soon pointed at him.

“Where are you going, alien?” One asked, a male.

He gestured to several of the wounded on the beds. “To help. Can you direct me to the chief medic here?”

The two soldiers looked at each other. “And just why?” The second soldier said, a woman, taking a step forward and waving the barrel of the weapon threateningly. “Would we think that’s a good idea? We’re not fools, lizard. You’re not going anywhere near our soldiers.”

Hallian sighed. “I’ll wait to hear from someone in charge, thank you. I assure you I have no intention of hurting your people. My duty is to heal the injured, this extends beyond my species and those allied to us.”

“Yeah sure,” the first soldier grunted. “All the same to you, lizard, we’ll take our chances.”

Human insults were highly odd; the whole species seemed to have a fascination with insults they thought were clever, but in reality just made them sound like children. “Do I really look like a lizard?”

“Eh, kind of,” the second soldier shrugged. “Would you prefer the term ‘xeno scum’?”

“Not especially,”

“Too bad, we’re not under any obligation to make you feel good, frogman,” the soldier said. “Get back in your room and take care of your traitor.”

“Ha, good one,” the second one chuckled. “You--”

“Hey!” A new voice called out, and the soldiers immediately stiffened as the Officer Hallian was looking for finally walked in, striding directly towards them.
“Officer!” The first one said. “We-“

“Were harassing the alien, I heard,” the Officer said, crossing his arms. “You’d do well to not forget I can hear everything you say. This is not acceptable conduct, especially unprovoked. I don’t care if he’s an alien or not. Is that understood?”

“Yes sir!”

“Dismissed,” the Officer waved sharply, and the soldiers rushed out of there quickly. “Apologies for that, doctor.”

“ Appreciated, Officer,” Hallian said, relaxing slightly. “I do understand it.”

“Personally, I can’t say I’m happy to have loyalist aliens here either,” the Officer grunted. “But that sets a bad precedent, especially for our defectors. In any case, you wanted me. For what?”

“Yang is stabilized, and I can help your medical team here,” Hallian gestured around. “There is little point in me sitting alone when you appear to need all the help you can get.”

The Officer cocked his head. “Why?”

It was almost kind of sad how that appeared to be the first question asked. “I’m a medic, Officer. This is my job, regardless of species.”

“Huh,” the Officer looked around. “I presume you’re smart enough not to try anything, since we have cameras and soldiers everywhere. Though I’m not going to let you work unattended. Abraham!” He motioned one of the doctors, an older male with greying hair who was changing his gloves. He looked up, and walked over while drying them.

“How can I help?” He asked, shooting a glance to the alien.

“The alien wants to help out,” the Officer explained, indicating Hallian. “Doctor’s code or something I guess, supervise him or find someone to do that. This is your specialty. If you think he’s a risk, send him back. I’ll defer to you.”

“Yes sir,” the doctor nodded, and then looked at Hallian. “Doctor Abraham, ADVENT Medical Corps. If you really want to help, follow me.” Without spending any more time, the doctor turned and walked over to one of the wounded who had just been brought in, with Hallian following close behind him.

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Cambodian Forward Outpost of the Harbinger – Cambodia

5/1/2017 – 12:20 A.M.

“My personal assessment, Harbinger?”

Patricia could make an assumption of what he was going to say from his projected emotions, but motioned him to continue. “Of course.”

“It is a stalling tactic,” Marian said, swallowing, but continuing. “They are exploiting your psychological vulnerabilities. XCOM and ADVENT gain far more from this level of capitulation than we would. The only reason to indulge is ideological, and right now I can guarantee that it would result in public embarrassment for us and we would walk away with nothing but a piece of
“I concur, Harbinger,” Assimilator-2 agreed, looking down at her. “This is the equivalent of such a proposal taking place on Vitakar. The population is predisposed to a certain view regardless of appeals, facts, and insistence. De-radicalization and de-programming do not happen in a span of weeks, but months or years. Even with accelerated programs proceeding now, not Humans, nor most sapient species, change their minds immediately.”

“I see where you’re coming from,” Miriam said, leaning against the wall. “But the Chronicler is smart. I read the very extensive profile the Zararch had on you; and you can be played if someone says the right things.”

Patricia pursed her lips. “Not easily.”

“No, but it’s going to bother you, I can tell,” Miriam said knowingly. “You really, really, don’t like walking away from proving someone wrong, even if it’s impossible or it wouldn’t work for you. Well, with all due respect Harbinger, please move past your pride and understand you don’t have to prove anything.”

Patricia scowled, because she could understand the cyborg wasn’t completely wrong. “I dislike backing down in this manner. It will be used against me.”

“I will point out, Harbinger, that you do not have a shining endorsement from ADVENT right now,” Marian said, coughing slightly. “You must understand that no matter what you do, ADVENT will attack and belittle you regardless of the outcome. Their approval is not something to be sought.”

“Something the Battlemaster would do well to remember more,” I’Sari rumbled. “This does not gain us anything worthwhile, and we stand to lose much.”

“A question, Harbinger,” Casas lifted a hand, eyes seeming brighter than usual. “Have you spoken to the Imperator about this?”

“No, I wanted to get your input first,” Patricia answered with a shake of her head. “If you thought it was worth doing, I’d bring it up. If not, then I won’t waste his time. He’ll learn it eventually, but as it stands…well, it seems to be a universal no.”

“A fair assessment, Harbinger,” Assimilator-2 agreed. “While your ideological reasons for consideration are admirable, it is not a wise strategic or practical decision.”

“At least I know now you’ll tell me if I’m making a mistake,” Patricia took a breath and leaned on the holotable, looking at the unlit board. “With all this said, we need to make adjustments to our own strategy. The Chronicler was right when he said keeping us occupied isn’t ideal. The plans stall considerably when held up in one or more locations.”

“Special Forces strikes against European nations?” Marian wondered. “It could draw away the Chronicler and other Agents of T’Leth.”

“Won’t work,” Patricia rejected. “I’m the largest threat. They know that. XCOM will be sent, or ADVENT to deal with a problem like that.”

“Perhaps if you are presumed somewhere else, they will be forced to move,” I’Sari proposed. “It would allow us to proceed.”

“And be wiped out by Aegis,” Miriam grunted. “The Chronicler isn’t the only heavy-hitter
ADVENT has.”

“And the Chronicler can teleport, as can Fiona,” Patricia reminded him. “Wherever I go, they will follow.”

“You really don’t believe you can beat him?” Marian asked, cocking his head.

“Alone? Perhaps,” Patricia mused. “He’s strong. I could probably drive him off though. We’re… very even. Superhumans who can’t be killed by mortals, only those who are like us…” She trailed off, a new thought entering her mind. “Perhaps that’s it…”

“What is?” I’Sari asked.

“I believe I have determined your assessment,” Assimilator-2 said slowly. “Your personal attributes and skills have not been adequately utilized in pursuit of the greater strategy.”

“Along those lines,” she smiled, feeling far better than she had a few minutes ago. “The best way to escape a stalemate is not being in one in the first place.”

“I don’t follow, Harbinger,” Marian said, picking up a datapad preparing to make some notes. “What are you thinking?”

“That my forces are going to have to be able to win this war without me,” Patricia said, turning on the holotable. “But the good news will be that XCOM, and T’Leth will be similarly paralyzed. They can stand against me, but those who follow them cannot. Perhaps they should be reminded of that.”

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ADVENT Trauma Center, Tampa – Florida

4/30/2017 – 9:39 P.M.

Working with Human tech was a curious, if somewhat frustrating challenge. He only had so much modern medical equipment and medicine, and it all needed to be preserved for Yang. So instead he worked with simple bandages and the most basic application of medical nanotech which could barely do more than seal wounds.

Abraham, the medic, was the most professional Human Hallian had interacted with thus far. Direct, friendly enough, and good at his job. Hallian realized that at least both of them had the same objective in this case, which was saving as many people as possible. For Hallian it was easier than treating Collective soldiers, since ADVENT soldiers were almost always some variation of burns from plasma, with the occasional missing limb or shrapnel.

“You’re remarkably good at this,” Abraham said after they finished on a soldier who’d taken several direct shots. “You’ve worked on Humans before?”

“Not especially,” Hallian refuted, as he washed his hands. “Since I’ve come to Earth, I’ve found a few, but these types of injuries are fairly easy to treat and are common on battlefields. Vitakarian and Human physiology is remarkably similar, the former of which I have a lot of experience in. I am less comfortable performing invasive surgery on Humans, but I suspect I could do it without significant issues.”

“I see,” Abraham tossed him a towel. “I’d ask where you went, but I know I wouldn’t recognize it. I assume you have alien medical schools, right?”
“We do,” Hallian nodded. “The Ligna Hospitals. Every region has at least one. Highest standards too, have to be able to operate on every current member of the Collective. Vitakara, Andromedon, Sectoid, Muton,” he counted them off on his fingers. “I believe they recently added Humans to that list.”

Abraham looked at him oddly. “Ligna as in Sana’Ligna? The Ethereal?”

“The very same,” Hallian confirmed. “I met her once. It was incredible to see her work.”

“Yeah, I bet,” Abraham grunted. “Suppose I should give her some credit, at least she’s not fighting for the wrong side.” He coughed awkwardly. “Well, you know what I mean.”

Hallian waved a hand. “Let’s not get into that right now. We’re not done.”

“Nope, we aren’t,” Abraham cracked his neck as they moved to the next group of wounded soldiers who had been brought in, these ones more severe than the previous batch. “I don’t know whether to be grateful or sad that a damn alien is somehow more competent than a lot of my assistants.”

Hallian handed him some bandages, med-kits, and helped remove the armor to get to the wound. “If it helps, I’m one of the more experienced medics for the Collective.”

“Makes sense,” Abraham sprayed the med-kit on the burn. “Battlemaster wouldn’t have sent a novice to keep his pet alive.”

Hallian winced. “I don’t think she’s really a…pet.”

“Figure of speech,” Abraham shrugged. “Humans have a lot of those if you didn’t know.”

“So I’ve heard,” Hallian said neutrally, figuring it best not to press on that topic. This Human may be nicer than a lot of them, but he definitely harbored resentment for the Collective. Admittedly not without reason…but it didn’t make Hallian really feel comfortable. “Humans seem to have a lot of ways to get around saying what they mean.”

“That we do,” Abraham nodded. “But I think we’re getting better on that front. Slowly.”

Both worked with minimal conversation for the next while. Hallian wasn’t keeping track of the time, and instead just focused on moving from soldier to soldier, helping Abraham stabilize them. The wheeling in of carts sounded as more were rolled in, more wounded soldiers on them, most knocked out or half-conscious.

Abraham gave a low groan, and Hallian sympathized, as it seemed they were just starting to make a good amount of headway. “They don’t pay me enough for this,” Abraham muttered, as he disposed of his bloodstained gloves once more.

Hallian frowned, blinking. “You get paid?”

“Figure of speech,” Abraham repeated, then shot the Dath’Haram a suspicious look. “Wait. What do you mean ‘you get paid’? You mean you don’t?”

“Not…exactly,” Hallian considered how best to explain it. “Not in money, no, but I get housing, food, medicine, essentially everything I need to survive. Currency as you have on this planet, is not really something we have on Vitakar.”

“Huh,” Abraham mused. “So what do your people work for then? What do they get in return?”
“I…” Hallian didn’t really understand the question. “They get to do what they trained for? What they want to do? Very rarely do Vitakara get something in return, unless it’s a trading or negotiating job.”

Abraham suddenly burst out laughing. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Now Hallian was confused. “Well, why would you want to have a job doing something you didn’t want to do? I don’t really understand why that’s a motivation for your species, I’d think it’d just make you miserable.”

“Eh, depends on the person,” Abraham chuckled, wiping some tears from the corners of his eyes. “I get what you’re saying, but it’s hilarious how you aliens are a bunch of communists. I’m shocked ADVENT hasn’t run with that yet.”

“What’s a communist?” Hallian inquired as they prepared to start work.

“If we have time later, I’ll tell you,” Abraham said. “Come on comrade, let’s finish this up. If we’re good enough, we might be finished before the sun comes up.”

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Collective War Camp, Clearwater – Florida

4/30/2017 – 11:17 P.M.

The room they had set aside for him was not terrible, all things considered. It was fairly small (though with a tall roof which he assumed was to account for the Battlemaster), but it had a small bed, a fridge, table, and seats. Blankets, a medical kit, and other small necessities, including some chips he assumed they’d taken from a store, were also set out.

Homey.

He set out his clothes for the next few days, ate some of the food, and waited while thinking of what he’d experienced so far. His time had been largely insulated, but it was only the first night. He’d certainly attracted a notable amount of attention, though he and the Battlemaster hadn’t spoken much, outside of him saying he would return.

There were two Custodians guarding his room, and he presumed those would be his escorts through the ceasefire. A shame; he would have preferred living guards. Those he could talk to, get to know a bit. He didn’t know if it was actually intentional on the Battlemaster’s part, and knowing him, it was not for the psychological effect, but because Custodians were among the most dangerous infantry units the Collective had, and for a guest like him, such precautions made sense.

He’d rearranged the small table and chairs, and set out the chess board he’d brought along with him. It almost made him nostalgic for the many games he’d held in his cell…it seemed like a long time ago, but in reality, it was only a couple years. Too long since he’d played a full game with a somewhat competent opponent. Vahlen, for all her brilliance, was not a good chess player.

The Commander looked to the door, sensing something was off. The ring he wore protected against telepathic intrusions, but he could still tell when something had shifted, even if only minutely. He leaned back as the door slid open and the Battlemaster walked inside. Interestingly enough, he was…different.

He’d never seen the massive Ethereal in anything other than his armor, but now he wore…well, it was armor, but less of it. Closer to something Macula or Caelior wore. His leisure outfit he
supposed, and he wasn’t carrying his weapon, or any weapon the Commander could see. Once he stepped inside, he reached up with his upper arms and removed his helmet.

The Commander raised an eyebrow as the Battlemaster walked over to him, setting the helmet on the floor as he took a cross-legged position on the floor, as the chair was far too small, and even still he was above eye level. He was surprised the Battlemaster had taken off his helmet, something that most Ethereals, even Aegis, didn’t do. Perhaps a sign of respect, or perhaps it was a quirk Aegis had failed to mention or didn’t know about.

“Battlemaster,” the Commander glanced around. “Reasonable accommodations, I appreciate it.”

“Good,” the Ethereal answered. “I am making an assumption my Harbinger will receive quality treatment. It is important that yours is equivalent.”

“She is,” the Commander nodded. “I would say it is a pleasure to meet you, but I would prefer not to lie.”

“Not a pleasure, Commander, but our meeting is long overdue,” the Battlemaster stated. “It is because of both of us that we are in this phase of the war.”

“I doubt that,” the Commander laced his fingers together. “If it wasn’t for me, there would be no force to oppose you. The war against us would continue regardless of if you were in charge or not.”

The Battlemaster hesitated. “Perhaps. I lack your radical tactics and willingness to go to the lengths you do to achieve your goals.”

Interesting. “I did not expect you to admit to that.”

“It is an observation, Commander, not what I consider a flaw,” he answered flatly. “We are similar in some ways, but we are not the same. This war has taught me much about myself, and I suspect you as well. I have come close to death before, I have suffered defeats, and each time I learn from them.”

“As we have noticed,” the Commander moved a chess piece forward to start the game. “You know that you can’t survive forever.” He nodded down. “And your move.”

The Ethereal blinked his fiery eyes. “A game of chess?”

“Good. You know what it is.”

“A favored game of strategists and military leaders,” the alien recalled, a tone of sarcasm in his voice. “Supposedly a strategy game. I did not see the similarities before, and I do not now. This game does not simulate battle or strategy in any realistic fashion.”

“Oh no, it definitely doesn’t,” the Commander smiled. “Anyone who says that is just trying to impress someone. I personally play because I enjoy it, not to enhance my so-called ‘tactical skills’.” He looked to the board, resting his chin on his folded hands. “Although one thing I have noticed is that it can show an interesting amount of a person’s priorities with how they treat their pieces. There are several types of people who play chess. The ruthless, the conservative, the aggressive, and the lucky. You can win with any of them, but they reflect how a person will act in a situation where decisions must be made.”

“A significant assumption, Commander,” the Battlemaster telekinetically moved a pawn forward, his fingers too big to properly pick up the pieces. “And you want to learn what my priorities are? I would be surprised if you didn’t have a dossier on me.”
“We do, and I can make a prediction,” the Commander said, moving his own pawn forward. “I’m curious how close it will be.”

“As am I.” They played in silence for a few minutes. “I am curious, Commander. Do you believe you can win? Regardless of your answer, I do not intend to share it.”

“So long as you answer the same thing,” the Commander shrugged. “I define ‘winning’ as the Imperator dead, the Collective shattered, the Bringer destroyed, and your species reduced to a degree where they cannot threaten our species again. Preferably Mosrimor dead, but I suspect he will flee long before that point. Since we’re being honest, I cannot say for certain that victory is assured, but I can say that I will die before I allow Humanity to fall to you.” He moved his piece. “Your turn.”

“Your war is ultimately irrelevant,” the Battlemaster almost sighed. “This conflict is irrelevant. Aegis has shared how our Empire fell to the Synthesized. I know they are still out there, and it does not seem like the Sovereign Ones are capable, or even interested in, stopping them. It does not matter which of us wins, Commander, because they will come again.”

“I’m aware,” the Commander nodded. “And that is a concern. One that ADVENT and XCOM will address. Unfortunately, we’re already in a war for the future of our species, and until we secure this, worrying about a future conflict is…unwise.”

“I do not begrudge that,” the Battlemaster said. “You do understand that even should you win, you will not be free.”

“T’Leth, I presume?”

“The Imperator is not wrong about this,” the Battlemaster said slowly. “Allying with this Sovereign may be something you consider necessary, but he is not your ally. Not truly. An ally who can assume control of your species should he desire it is no ally, but a benevolent overlord. You have none with the power of the Imperator who can stand against them. Your dream of an independent Humanity will never be realized so long as you ally yourself to a Sovereign One.”

“And the Imperator is a better alternative?” The Commander asked, pinching the bridge of his nose. “But I am aware of the implications.”

“Then why take the risk?”

“What would you do?” The Commander demanded, pursing his lips. “We’re outnumbered, outmatched, have inferior technology, and a space force nowhere near your own. Surrender isn’t an option, not now. Your Collective pushed us into a corner, where our most reliable means of survival is an entity that could one day turn on us.”

He moved a piece, sighing. “I’ve spoken with T’Leth a number of times now. I don’t believe he’s interested in taking control of us, but he certainly considers us useful. Admittedly because I helped him recognize that, but the point stands. But you’re also right. One day that could change, and what can we reasonably do to prevent that?” He looked up at the Battlemaster. “And at the same time, if we don’t, we lose.”

The Battlemaster said nothing for a few minutes, and they both moved their pieces. Despite seemingly not playing the game before, the Battlemaster was holding his own fairly well. Neither of them was deliberately sacrificing pieces, but had moved to a move-countermove stage of the game, where both were trying to lead, anticipate, and trick the other.
Difficult to determine who was winning.

The Commander finally broke the silence. “This entire conflict is unjust and unnecessary, and I believe you know that. If you had just came peacefully, I suspect that we would be a willing member of the Collective, for better or worse.”

“I had initially thought similar,” the Battlemaster admitted. “But I had orders, and later the reason was revealed. I do not know how the Imperator determined that T’Leth was on Earth, but in hindsight it is understandable.”

“No, it isn’t,” the Commander shook his head. “You invaded a world which had done nothing wrong, abducted thousands of our people, and it becomes justified when there was something else – which also hadn’t done anything wrong – also on our planet.” He was able to capture a piece as he continued. “I know you have an honor or code you follow, and I can respect that to a degree, but you don’t follow it where it matters most.”

“I also follow orders Commander,” the Battlemaster pointed out firmly. “I had little reason to doubt the Imperator, and I followed his orders. You would not have, but you have also not faced the machine hybrids which ravaged worlds, or seen how through the Imperator we were able to just barely survive. I knew I could trust the Imperator, and I will not apologize for that, no more than your own soldiers follow your orders.”

The Commander picked up on something very important there. And very interesting. “But you don’t anymore.”

“I do not support the Imperator’s plan,” the Battlemaster said. “I suspect my actions have revealed to you as much. I would see Paradise razed to atoms, divest ourselves from the whims of these Sovereign Ones, and focus on the true threat to this galaxy.”

“Yet you still wage this war,” the Commander shook his head. “You know you’re on the wrong side here, but you continue regardless.”

“Wrong is a strong word, Commander,” the Battlemaster said in a low voice. “Your people ceased to be helpless when they accepted the help of a Sovereign One. I wage this war to end it, regardless of intentions, T’Leth poses a threat to the Ethereal Collective, and it is my duty to defend it.”

“Excuses,” the Commander pressed. “You’ve helped us when you didn’t have to. Paradise. Isomnum. You know what you’re doing, and try to assuage your conscience by doing the bare minimum; to try and forget what the Imperator intends for anyone who defies him. The Imperator may want to assimilate our species because we are not ‘under its influence’, but do you really think he’s going to treat others the same?”

The Commander looked the Battlemaster directly in the eyes. “Let’s consider for a moment what happens if you win. If I die, Humanity is assimilated, and T’Leth is killed. The Imperator doesn’t care about the Synthesized, he wants to destroy the Sovereign Ones in a misguided crusade. Assume that he harnesses this Bringer. Do you think he’s going to not use it?”

He tapped a finger on the table. “You’ll see planets of species under another Sovereign fed to that creature. There will be no conventional war, there will only be a slaughter matched in equal barbarity in a desperate high-level conflict. You see what happened in Beijing, and now realize that applied on a galactic scale.” He moved a piece aggressively. “And are you going to let that happen?”

“I do not believe that will happen,” he said. “Nor will I let it.”
The Commander snorted. “You lie and you know it. The death of T’Leth will solidify the loyalty of the Ethereals to the Imperator, either out of fanaticism or fear. Your token resistance and hand-wringing will mean nothing to him should he win here. Your only options will be to leave in disgrace, or die. You are replicable, Battlemaster, and if the Imperator judges your worth as lost, he will cut you loose.”

The Battlemaster shook his head. “If that was the case, Commander, he would have only surrounded himself with loyalists. He does not sacrifice or remove individuals in that way.”

The Commander crossed his legs, looking down at the board, though thinking about where to take the conversation, which had not gone in the direction he had anticipated. “Perhaps he changed. He knew nothing of the Sovereign Ones before awakening. When he learned…you saw how his priorities changed. He wants to break a cycle, and in doing so, ensure the galaxy remains locked in a new one.”

“I will pose the question you posed to me earlier,” the Battlemaster said after a short time. “What options do I have? I could abandon the Collective, but I will not do that. There are too many who rely on me, and to do so would be cowardice of the highest level. I am aware of my limitations, Commander. I lack the power to stop the worst actions of the Collective, and the Imperator prioritizes his own plan over all else, and while he would not kill me, he could remove my authority.”

“Would you let him?”

“Not willingly.”

“Then maybe you should push harder,” the Commander suggested. “You are perhaps one of the only Ethereals who maintains popularity within the Collective and holds professional respect among my species. You have the power to make an impact, and you deliberately choose not to. Why?”

“Causing such a schism would be beneficial to your species,” the Battlemaster noted. “I know what you are doing now, Commander. Manipulating me is not as easy as that.”

*Perhaps not, but you’re definitely thinking about what I’m saying.* “Am I? You’re not a completely mindless tool of the Imperator, much as your actions indicate such at times. You’re not a fanatic. If you hadn’t had doubts before, you would have denied them much stronger than this, if you had bothered to listen at all.” He smiled. “Ironically, I’m the only person who can broach something like this and it not be treason.”

The Battlemaster unexpectedly chuckled, a low rumble as he claimed one of the Commander’s knights. “And just what should I do, Commander? Surrender myself to you? Lead a coup against the Imperator? Withdraw all forces from Earth? Do you really believe any of that would change a thing for you? Do you really believe such solutions are so simple?”

“Not as simple as you make it sound, but yes,” the Commander uncrossed his legs and leaned forward on his knees. “I was once a good soldier who followed orders too, regardless of how valid or intelligent they were. Then when I saw what the actions or inactions I was allowing to happen were causing, I had two options. I could stand by and allow it to happen, or I could do something about it.”

He leaned back. “I prefer to solve a problem than letting it perpetuate. I knew what the solution was, and what needed to be done. You know my history, so I won’t repeat too much of it. My superiors during the War on Terror had their own plans, ones they believed would work. I knew
they wouldn’t, and their objectivity was compromised since the conflict was another tool to them. So I acted. Regardless of what history decides, my actions ended the conflict and led to extremist ideologies being purged throughout the world, as well as those who followed them. My reward for that was years in prison, years I lost, but which I don’t regret.”

He paused. “In a way, it was the best I could hope for. I expected to die for what I’d done, and with that in mind, prison wasn’t so bad. Regardless, it was a sacrifice I made, and given the chance, I would make it again.”

He moved another piece. “More recently, I was placed in command of XCOM. Not without controversy, and there were those who sought to control me and limit what I knew had to be done. The Council of Nations believed they knew what was best for Humanity, and had I not acted, our species would have capitulated. But instead I removed the obstacles necessary to establish ADVENT and defend my species. None of these actions were easy, but it simply came down to identifying a problem, and taking steps to remove it.”

He paused. “I don’t know what that looks like for someone in your position. I do not know the right path, but I do know that the Imperator is the root of all the problems in the Collective. If he remains unchecked, he will turn everything you support about the Collective against you, or into something unrecognizable. The Collective is a tool to him, as are you.”

Both played for a few more minutes in silence, then the Battlemaster moved his queen forward. “Checkmate, Commander.”

He’d seen the signs, but there had been three things the Battlemaster could have done, and he’d unfortunately guessed the wrong one. A shame, as he was only a few moves from a checkmate of his own. “Good job.”

The Battlemaster lowered a hand as the game was concluded. “Did I perform as you assumed?”

“Almost,” the Commander looked over the board. “I was wrong about one thing.”

“Which was what?”

He scratched his chin, thinking very hard both about the game, and what they’d discussed. “That you’re far more deceptive than I believed.”

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Testing Range – The Hall of Steel

5/1/2017 – 10:17 A.M.

The testing range was an area that was both familiar and alien to her, and Abigail didn’t fully know why that was the case. So many things seemed familiar; the constant sound of weapons fire, the parade of individuals going in and out, the targets going up in smoke or disintegrating from a well-placed shot.

But…there was something off about it she was trying to figure out. It wasn’t the aliens, she’d eliminated that possibility. It was something deeper, more intrinsic than that. She thought it was connected to XCOM…they must have had a firing range. Had she visited one often? Were there similarities to it that she was just forgetting?

She’d been firing various weapons for over five hours now, processing things she’d seen and read in the past month she’d been here. A renewed war, ADVENT losing ground in some places, and
holding their own in others, the ceasefire in Florida, some Vitakara leader emerging from nowhere
to do…something.

As for herself?

Little luck.

At so many times it seemed like she was _just_ on the verge of remembering something important,
something crucial about herself. But it stayed out of reach, and she didn’t know what the next steps
were. Liam recounting their discussions didn’t trigger anything she didn’t already know, nor did
reading her file or other information collected on her.

Reading the profile…there were things in it she didn’t know how she’d done. Her suspected
activities with XCOM Intelligence, her work in Australia, her connection to the Agents of T’Leth,
it felt like a completely different character than who she was, and that bothered her. She felt like
there should be _some_ kind of kinship or common ground, but the entire time the thought of ‘There’s
no way I could do that’ kept popping up.

Was she regressing? At times it felt like she was, but the problem with that was that she had _no_
baseline to compare to. She wasn’t the Abigail of the pre-joining XCOM, good at her job, but a bit
unsure and timid. If anything, she was disconcerted about how _skilled_ she was in certain things,
skills that she didn’t know she’d possessed.

As she’d been observing in her time shooting.

She fired the plasma rifle almost without thinking, and it blew the head off the target. Intrinsically,
she knew to some degree that her sudden aptitude with weapons was something Fectorian had
enhanced in her, but she’d run the numbers compared to the other cyborgs in Fectorian’s army, and
while all of them almost always hit the target, she alone had a 100% accuracy rating.

It wasn’t just rifles either. Pistols, sniper rifles, shotguns, all of it she achieved perfect accuracy in
without necessarily trying that hard. She lifted, aimed, and shot within what felt like an instant.
Each time she felt something like a rush, but not fully; not enough to distract her. Each weapon she
felt like she knew oddly well too, despite being fairly certain she’d not wielded any before.

Recoil didn’t exist thanks to her enhanced strength, or at least not enough to affect her much. After
some thought, she believed she had narrowed down the unsettling feeling to the knowledge that if
she wanted, she could probably fight almost anything and she would have a fairly good chance of
winning, which was mildly alarming to her since she did not believe she possessed that capability
before.

A soldier she’d been, yes, but clearly not an invincible one.

Now the capability to take life so…_efficiently_, it bothered her. Potentially a holdover of her medical
training; a desire to do more good than harm. Her old self had likely interpreted her switch to an
intelligence agent as fulfilling this, which led to another thing, and then to what she’d become. It
wasn’t necessarily _bad_, but right now, Abigail didn’t feel the same way.

Perhaps, she mused, that would change.

But if she didn’t change…she sighed, wondering how long she wanted to keep waiting and hoping
that something would trigger in her mind, something that would get rid of the uncertainty and
make her whole again, instead of a disparate collection of feelings, information, and physical
features. She looked like Abigail, she sounded like her, but she wasn’t her.
Even if she somehow remembered everything, she wasn’t sure she’d still be the woman Abigail had been.

She raised her head, suddenly aware that Liam had entered the training range. She had become very attuned to when he came up near or around her, it didn’t matter where or what she was doing, she’d notice. She attributed that to her connection to him, and the enhancements Fectorian had added.

“Guess you escaped the chair,” Liam said, referring to the interrogation chair that Fectorian interviewed her in.

“Hardly,” she shrugged. “But it was a short session today. I don’t know why he insists on continuing to do it.”

Initially she’d thought that Fectorian wouldn’t do the polygraph-esque interrogations, but those had oddly enough become a regular thing, where sometimes he would ask different questions, but many were the exact same, or at best some slightly different wording. “He didn’t tell you?” Liam cocked his head. “Or you didn’t ask?”

“I…” she paused. “Well, I didn’t ask.”

“Personality drift,” Liam answered. “To see how your answers match against previous ones. Deviations could be because of new memories or information…or a developing personality organically. You’re a unique situation, and Fectorian wants to make sure everything is within certain parameters,” Liam paused. “Admittedly, the specifics I don’t know, but that’s why he’s continuing to do it.”

Abby suddenly stiffened. “And…what happens if I go outside those parameters?”

He realized what that implied and quickly moved to reassure her. “No, no, don’t worry about that. Nothing’s going to happen, and after a certain point, you’re going to go beyond it. Especially if none of your memories come back.”

Abby rubbed her forehead. “I don’t know what to do about that. I’m not sure what more I could do except going back to XCOM. But Fectorian…” she trailed off.

“Too risky, so he says,” Liam nodded. “Although between us, I think he’s waiting for something to happen. With what the Collective has access to, it isn’t difficult to mock up someone who looks like Abby and with the right story, it could work. But XCOM will be suspicious, not to mention T’Leth.”

“I know,” both of them walked to sit down. “I just want to do something more than sleepwalk through my time here. There are things I’m curious about, things I want to do, that I pull myself back from because I don’t know if it’s something she would have done or liked or been interested in, and could ensure I don’t remember anything.”

Liam pondered that for a minute. “I’d talk to Fectorian about that. If it was up to me, I’d say do what you want. I’ve been around you enough to know that you’re still fundamentally Abby, but I get why you’re afraid of moving beyond that.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly, looking sightlessly out into the range as the station hummed and weapons fired. “I think I’ll do that.”

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The Commander was slightly surprised that he had as much freedom of movement as he did. The previous day he’d mostly spent the day wandering around the Collective base, making note of a number of installations, potential critical points, and some of the routines that seemed to exist. A few more days would offer firmer confirmation, but it was a good start.

Although it wasn’t full free movement, as many of the actual installations he couldn’t enter, not to mention he was accompanied by his Custodian guards at all times, and he’d noted no fewer than four aliens of the various Dath’Haram races watching him; some covertly, following him fairly discreetly, while others were more open, carrying sniper rifles they had trained on him from watchtowers or elevated positions.

They were very paranoid he was actually going to try something, which he found amusing.

Then there was the very out of place Human who the Commander legitimately had no idea who he was. At first he’d wondered if it was another captive, but the way he walked around had a blustering authority to it which marked him as another traitor, albeit one he didn’t know about. Potentially a psion, but he couldn’t confirm because the man hadn’t approached him yet.

The Commander doubted he was actually supposed to be watching him because he was remarkably bad at being discreet. It was almost comical how bad this person was at tailing and observing someone without them noticing. Even by the Commander’s standards, it was a poor showing and the man clearly didn’t realize that you had to do something a bit more complex then immediately turn around or pretend to be busy when your target glanced your direction.

Being a Human in a middle of an alien base was also a strike against his espionage skills.

One of the few places he was able to enter was their equivalent of a mess hall, which housed primarily alien food, although he’d received a list of substances which were “supposedly” safe for him to eat. Though he’d stuck to water and taken from the Human foods which had been placed out, seemingly as some kind of prize from the stores they’d captured.

The aliens did seem to like the chips, judging from how many were scattered throughout the tables, and there were a number of them who were just carrying around a family-sized bag and eating from it. It was somewhat amusing to see.

When he entered, he definitely attracted some attention, judging from the glances and whispers directed towards him. It wasn’t to quite the extent of his first days here, but it was still enough to cause a small scene. He gave a smile and short wave before getting some water and cookies – chocolate ones which sadly meant no Vitakara could eat them unless they wanted to experience a high.

He was mildly surprised they were just set out, but maybe the Vitakara were now treating it as a substance closer to caffeine than a recreational drug. Or maybe it was safe in smaller quantities. He located a table that was sparsely populated, and walked over to it, approaching close to two Vitakarians who looked over to him in a combination of wariness, fear, and uncertainty.

“Hello,” he greeted. “Is this place open?”

Hesitantly, the first one nodded, and the Commander sat down and began eating from his fairly sparse plate. There was an awkward silence for a few minutes with all of them eating and trying not
to focus on the other, before the Commander sighed. “You can talk to me; I’m not going to do anything that’ll get me shot or you in trouble.” He frowned. “Or can you not understand me?”

“No, we can understand,” the first Vitakarian said. “We…usually do not speak to enemy combatants.”

“Or leaders,” the second said.

“Fair enough,” the Commander nodded. “It’s uncommon, especially in the middle of a war, but as long as I’m here, it’s always good to learn from the opposing soldiers. The only perspective I have is from Vitakara who’ve defected, which is not necessarily accurate anymore.”

There was a visible reaction to the word defectors, one that was fairly subtle, but oddly enough wasn’t based in anger, but fear. “We should not talk about defectors,” the second said slowly. “But you are correct that they know nothing of importance.”

“Yes,” the first agreed emphatically. “If their belief in the Collective was so weak, we are stronger without them now.”

“And if you don’t mind me asking,” the Commander said, pushing the now-empty plate away. “What makes your belief in the Collective so strong?”

“You have met the Battlemaster, Commander,” the first one said. “He is the strongest example I can point to of the strength, power, and wisdom of the Elders. They took us from a dying species and transformed us into what we are today, and we can never forget that, and one day they will raise us further.”

“I see,” the Commander nodded, currently uncertain if this was something they actually believed, or were saying because this conversation was doubtless being monitored. “So you’re fighting in this war because you believe them?”

“We fight in this war because we joined the Runianarch and the Elders decreed that this planet was to be conquered,” the second said. “It is as simple as that.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “In that case, perhaps you can answer the question of why they invaded my planet? Did we commit some crime unknowingly against your people?”

The two Vitakarians didn’t seem to know how to effectively answer that question, judging from the long pause. “That…is not for us to question, Commander,” the first effectively shrugged. “I believe you might know the reason more than us, but we trust in the Elders that their decisions are sound.”

“Ah,” the Commander nodded. “So you’re fighting and dying in a war, and you don’t know why? Or what the reason is?”

“Commander!” A new voice interjected harshly. The two Vitakara stiffened, as the Commander looked back and saw the unknown Human striding towards them, looking highly irritated. “We need to talk.” He looked to the Vitakara. “Leave.” His eyes dimly glowed with psionic power and instantaneously the Vitakarians stood and left, blank expressions on their face.

So he was a psion then, a slightly temperamental one too.

One who also seemed to use his power unnecessarily.

“You didn’t have to psionically command them,” the Commander said as the Human took a seat opposite him. “I’m sure they would have left if you’d asked.”
“Likely, but I also had to purge that conversation from their minds,” the man said, glaring at him. “Do you really believe that I will allow you to sow division in the ranks so easily?”

“If asking questions is all it takes to ‘sow division’, then perhaps there are deeper problems,” the Commander smiled grimly. “Between us, I think if you’re going to order soldiers to go to their deaths, they should have a reason to believe in, or at least they should know why they might die in this war.”

“Unnecessary,” the man dismissed with a wave. “We face no rebellion. We win, and they will soon forget any doubts they have, should they possess any at all.”

The Commander cocked his head slightly, looking at the man in confusion. “If you don’t mind me asking, who are you?”

“You don’t know me? Good,” the man smirked. “I am actually a consequence of you, if I remember right.”

“No, I think I know who you are,” the Commander clarified. “You’re that psion who our Priests detected. A fairly clumsy one too, but I appreciate you exposing yourself so we could properly defend ourselves. However, beyond your general ineptitude, I don’t know you personally.”

The man lost his smile. “You’re not in friendly territory, Commander. You’d do best to remember that.”

“Really,” the Commander was now wholly unconcerned. “Even if I can only speculate, I suspect that you hold no power over the Battlemaster. If I am harmed, it will be on his orders, not because I hurt your pride.”

“So you believe,” the man narrowed his eyes. “But you would be wrong. I am Ivan Smirnov, Harbinger of the Overmind.”

The Commander awkwardly coughed, resisting the urge to laugh and instead settled for looking at Ivan in disbelief. That was something that he hadn’t expected, and it didn’t really fit with anything he knew about the Overmind. “Is that so? How did that happen?”

“Well, let’s go back a couple months,” Ivan crossed his arms. “Due to changes within ADVENT, no doubt spearheaded and approved by you, my job was effectively eliminated. Seeing no other option, I decided to try and apply to the PRIEST Division. As it turned out, I was a powerful psion, but they refused to awaken me saying I wasn’t fit for them.”

Huh. “From what I see, they made the right call.”

“Perhaps if the Overmind hadn’t given me an alternative,” Ivan smiled darkly. “It’s a shame, because I could be fighting on your side now, and instead the power which is rightfully mine is turned against you. And since I believe you had a hand in determining the requirements, this is entirely your fault.”

Right now he was more confused and relieved than intimidated by this man who believed he was powerful, but in reality was…almost sad. Well, now they had a case study to point to for justifying the requirements for awakening, because giving psionics to someone who wasn’t responsible enough to use them would give the world someone like Ivan.

“I suppose I should accept responsibility for that,” the Commander nodded. “However, I believe we will be able to handle you, especially if your recent performance is anything to go by.”
“Don’t get cocky, Commander,” Ivan warned. “Especially not here. The Battlemaster may not have
the will to treat you as the threat you are, but I am not so blind. I will be watching you.”

“Duly noted,” the Commander took a drink of water. “As enlightening as this conversation was, I
believe I have other and more important things to do than listen to someone who makes vague
threats and who has little true authority.” He fixed the traitor with a firm stare. “I have a short list
of people I fear or who I have concerns about, Smirnov, and you are not one of them.”

“I don’t fear you, Commander,” Ivan sneered. “Underestimate me at your peril.”

“You shouldn’t fear me,” the Commander agreed. “You need to actually pose a threat for me to
take your contributions into account. But all the same, I would avoid targeting me, because there
are a number of people who take my safety seriously, and while you may not fear me, you should
fear what Vahlen would do to you if you fell into her grasp.”

He gave the man a mock salute before walking off. “Good day, Smirnov. I doubt we’ll meet
again.”

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ADVENT Trauma Center, Tampa – Florida

5/3/2017 – 8:09 A.M.

Her gradual return to consciousness was slow and elongated, like she was being drawn out of warm
water to a much harsher climate. Sounds came first, a screeching symphony that seemed
unnaturally loud and chaotic. She felt a brief moment of panic since she couldn’t move her body,
but then managed just a millimeter and her arm shot jolts of pain through her body.

Voices were becoming clearer, the clearest one of which she didn’t recognize.

“-waking up now, careful, she’s going to be out of it for a few minutes.”

“I’m aware.” The voice of the Battlemaster? It had to be him. “And it is safe?”

“Yes, I’ve made sure she can’t injure herself. Just make sure she doesn’t freak out.”

Her throat felt dry and parched, and she felt hot all over. Cognizant enough to begin trying to figure
out what was happening, the first thing she tested was the bond with the Battlemaster, who she
confirmed was near her, a comforting presence wherever she was. She calmed down more, since
she knew that was something that couldn’t be faked.

A few minutes later, with the voices going in and out, she managed to open her eyes and even the
dim lighting was bright enough that she needed to close them immediately, and would have winced
if she could have controlled her mouth. “Light sensitivity, it’s normal,” the first voice said. “She’ll
adjust to it.”

Whoever the person speaking was, he was right, and she eventually adjusted and two faces looked
down on her. A Dath’Haram in a medical uniform, and the mask of the Battlemaster. “Yang
Shuren, can you hear me? Don’t move, just blink.”

She did.

“Good,” the alien nodded. “I’m Dr. Hallian, after the Battlemaster rescued you, I’ve been
responsible for your treatment. You suffered extensive wounds which are still healing, which
requires that you are restricted from moving as your skin regrows.” He paused. “The Battlemaster says you want honesty, so I will say that you are very lucky to be alive right now. Your body was afflicted by both nanites and chlorine-Triflouride, which caused not only superficial and internal damage, but structural damage to your body. You will be unable to fight for a minimum of several weeks.”

Weeks? She couldn’t stay on the sidelines for weeks, especially not with the technology the Collective had. She couldn’t speak, so she tried communicating confusion and alarm through the bond – and deep gratitude for him saving her life, as well as an apology for putting him in that situation. She needed to be better.

She’d made a near-fatal mistake, and was now paying the price of it.

“He is not…incorrect,” the Battlemaster said slowly. “It is not safe for you to fight until your body has been restored and your modifications repaired. Your body is not that of an ordinary Human, injuries take longer to heal. I have assigned Hallian as your personal medic, and you will listen to him and his recommendation. I do not want to see you die because you were impatient. The war will last long enough for you to return.”

She blinked once for the benefit of her new doctor, and confirmed her acknowledgement through the bond, along with curiosity as to what had recently happened. The Battlemaster looked to Hallian. “I want to talk to her alone. Dismissed.”

“Yes, Battlemaster.”

The Dath’Haram moved from her field of view and she heard the door close. “At this moment there is a temporary ceasefire between us and ADVENT.” She widened her eyes at that. “ADVENT and ourselves are using this to reorient our strategies in preparation for when the fighting renews. This required…assurances. At this moment the Commander of XCOM is residing in our base as an observed guest. We are currently in an ADVENT Trauma Center.”

Shock like a bolt of lightning shot through her, realizing where she was, and she was grateful that she was restrained, else she didn’t know what she’d have done to escape this trap it seemed like they were in. “It’s safe,” the Battlemaster reassured her, both through words and the bond, gradually calming her down. “I’ve made assurances. I…am sorry I did this without your permission, but XCOM insisted on an equivalent trade. They will not act so long as the Commander is under my watch.”

Intrinsically, Yang knew she should feel upset that she’d been used in a trade when she’d not even been conscious…but realistically, if she’d been fully aware and the Battlemaster believed this was the right decision, she’d have been the first to volunteer for it. The Battlemaster knew her well enough to know this was something she’d be fine with, but she let him know through the bond all the same.

“It will only be for another two days,” the Battlemaster said. “Adequate time. A limited number of visitors were allowed halfway through. I came today, and the chief XCOM scientist went to see the Commander. When you return, I will be moving you off-world. I have an idea of what could streamline your recovery, but I am uncertain it can be done. I will know shortly.”

She heard the door open again as the Battlemaster straightened. “Do not worry, the next time you awaken, it will be in a far safer place.” He looked to the medic who’d returned. “Go ahead, and thank you for healing her.”

“Of course, Battlemaster,”
The doctor must have injected some more sedatives into her, because a few minutes later she drifted off, clinging to their bond before she slipped away into the darkness once more.

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Collective War Camp, Clearwater – Florida

5/3/2017 – 10:02 A.M.

Vahlen had her own escort of Custodians as she was brought into the camp, though the machines backed off to let both of them embrace for a short time. It hadn’t been the first time they’d been separated, but this situation was a little different from the danger he normally found himself in. While he still believed the Battlemaster would hold to his end of the agreement, there was always the chance that Ivan would snap, temperamental as he was.

Communicating with Vahlen telepathically was…pleasant, but it simply wasn’t the same as being together. With the amount of thinking he’d been doing in his isolation, always watching over his shoulder for who was following and listening to him, he was probably more stressed now than he’d been in actual warzones.

It was a – perhaps needed – reminder of his own mortality.

Surrounded by aliens and hostile actors with little to no protection would do that to you.

“We might want to move,” he said into her shoulder. “Unless you want to attract some attention.” Some of the Runianarch soldiers had noticed their reunion and were watching from a distance, though more were joining. Ironically, it seemed like they were more at ease when there were two of them than just him.

Perhaps they were thinking of loved ones back on their planet. Observing him and Vahlen was more…relatable and less threatening than the rumors and danger he posed on his own. For the sake of war it wasn’t ideal to realize that the other side wasn’t stoic and evil; but for him it was important to remember that there were only a few entities in the Collective who were the true enemy.

Everyone and everything else was an obstacle to be mitigated, one way or another.

“Perhaps we should,” Vahlen agreed, smiling up at him as both of them separated. “I suppose you could show me around.”

He chuckled. “I never thought I would be showing you around an enemy base, but why not?” Both of them began walking on the roads, with the Custodians following threateningly behind them. Both ignored them, talking openly though privately they forged a telepathic link where they could say what they really meant without threat of eavesdropping.

“I suppose Yang is still alive then?” He said. *Is everything on schedule?*

Yes. *Our territory is nearly primed. Special Forces and our own soldiers are prepping for when the ceasefire ends. A few days at most.* “She is. The Dath’Haram medic hasn’t been idle either. Doctors have said he’s been helping our own soldiers.

“That was actually interesting. *The Vitakara are definitely the weak link in the Collective military. They don’t know what they’re really here for, and it seems to be starting to affect a number of them. They’re loyal to the Battlemaster at most.*
“Yes,” she nodded. “Somewhat surprising, but it appears medics have similar ethics across species.” That makes sense. I don’t know how we can exploit that more than we already have. There isn’t an alternative for them, at least one they’ll theoretically survive.

_Stay is the lesser of two evils, I agree. “I hope the soldiers have treated them well.”_

“There were a few initial issues from what I know,” she said. “But those were resolved.” _How are you, really? You’re stressed and on edge, even more than last night. Does it have to do with your talk with the Battlemaster?_

“That’s good to hear,” He’d kept the details of the talk with the Battlemaster to himself for now since he didn’t want to risk anything leaking, and he certainly wouldn’t put it past the Imperator or Overmind to try and listen in. Even with T’Leth observing, he didn’t want to risk it for the sheer implications alone. _Yes. The details need to be discussed in person. Far away from here._

He saw her lips purse, her mind clearly at work. _Can I see?_

Yes.

She reached up and put a hand on his shoulder. “I’m really glad that you’re alright,” she said as she penetrated his mind, a familiar feeling at this point as she went through his recent memories. It was an odd sensation, and it was the only time he got a glimpse into how her own mind worked, an organized and methodical focus, which was kept entirely on him whenever she was inside his mind.

What continued to strike him was that she took care not to disrupt him too badly, and didn’t just acquire what she was looking for, but looked for any signs of tampering. It was sweet how protective she was, and it was a level of trust he at least possessed that he knew few would allow. He reached up and placed one hand over hers on his shoulder, waiting the few long seconds she spent in his mind.

Truthfully, the Commander didn’t know how long they stood there, perhaps it was only a few seconds, perhaps a minute, but then Vahlen withdrew and his mind was fully his own again. He blinked once and looked to her, her face possessing a slight sheen from the exertion, and who was taking short breaths.

“Well,” she gave a distracted smile. “Let’s keep going.” _I…did not expect it to be like that._

_Nor did I. I wonder if… “Right this way.”_

_Maybe. Maybe. If we can do something…how would this affect the plans? If he’s also a weaker link…_

The Commander put an arm around her, and smiled. _I suspect Aegis may have some insight. Tell him I want to know how best to use this. Give him the memory._

_I will. I think he’ll find it very interesting._

***

_Collective War Camp, Clearwater – Florida_

5/3/2017 – 1:17 P.M.

There was much to consider. At the moment all the battle plans were in place, and when the
conflict resumed, he believed they would be able to answer anything ADVENT threw at them. Yet there were...other things to consider. After Florida was resolved, there were a number of issues to solve in the Collective that the Imperator had tasked him with.

The solution to them was something he would have to consider.

Now though, there was a call he needed to make. One which he did not expect to necessarily achieve what he wished, but he owed it to Yang to at least attempt it. He punched in the frequency and waited. It continued for several minutes, and then the form of Sana’Ligna appeared.

“Battlemaster,” she nodded once. “It’s good to see you.”

“You as well, Sana,” he answered cordially. “I...trust you are doing well.”

“I am managing,” she said. “I am moving towards the conflict in Southeast Asia and establishing permission between ADVENT and the Collective to move between the lines. And if they wish, to serve as some kind of mediation.”

“A futile gesture, Sana,” the Battlemaster released a sigh. “Neither will agree, nor should they.”

“I will at least make the attempt,” she insisted. “Why are you speaking to me? I will not return to the Collective so long as Paradise Station exists and the black projects of the Collective are allowed to endure.”

“I want your help,” he admitted after a few moments. “Yang was seriously injured in the fighting. She will recover, but it will take several weeks. Could you briefly return and assist in her recovery?”

Sana appraised him for a few minutes. “Yang will survive, as you’ve implied. There are many more who are not so fortunate and require more immediate help.”

“I am aware,” the Battlemaster said. “And I also know that you don’t pick and choose who you help.”

“No, I did, for a long time,” Sana shook her head. “I stayed in my station and devoted myself to experiments and tests I believed would help all. But the Collective has little interest in what I develop, or they seek to pervert it to suit their objectives. To manipulate the weaknesses and patterns I identified. I have only helped those sanctioned by the Imperator and those we deemed allies. That is not what I will do anymore, I will help who I can, even if both sides insist on this devastating war.”

He decided to answer directly. “I know. You are justified in your feelings. I have no intention of forcing your return, all I am doing is asking for your help.”

“And if I help her, you’ll throw her back into this war,” Sana accused. “She does not deserve that. None of them do.”

“And the soldiers you will heal won’t?” The Battlemaster pointed out. “This war will not end because you want it to, Sana, you know it. If your answer is no, then tell me now.”

“The difference, Battlemaster, is that if you wanted to, you could end this war,” Sana said. “You could change the Collective. I know you’re not like the Imperator or Isomnum, or obsessed with this circular conflict we have become involved in. You can stop it, but you continually don’t.”

“Your naivety doesn’t change reality, Sana,” he growled. “I know very well what I can and cannot
do. If you believe it is as simple as taking a stand, you know nothing. If I did any of what you say, I
would be replaced by someone who is more willing to do what the Imperator demands. My
absence will not end this war, Sana.”

“And my departure didn’t either, yet it was the right thing to do,” she said. “Do the right thing. I
know you, and I know you do not want this war any more than I do.”

Everyone now seemed to know what he wanted or how he felt now, and the Battlemaster was
growing tired of it. Everyone wanted simple solutions centered around their beliefs or ideology and
mistakenly believed that he desired the same end goals as they did. They spoke of solutions, of
what would happen, using what they knew of him as gateways to convince him to do something.

He hated what was happening now.

He hated what this war had become.

He hated how everyone had been swept into a conflict they had no part in.

He hated the Imperator for his plan and his decisions.

He hated the Sovereigns for their mere existence and their gradual corruption of the Ethereals into
this pointless conflict.

He hated how complicated things had become.

He hated being perceived as the only one who could do something.

He hated how they assumed the solutions were simple.

But what he hated most was that the underlying truths were not wrong.

There needed to be change.

He could be a change.

He could not ignore that anymore, not when it had become rooted in his mind.

“Battlemaster?”

The armored Ethereal snapped back to the blue figure of Sana, and belatedly realized that the room
had suffered damage. A number of computers were sparking and smashed, some of the paneling
had been torn off the walls and the ceiling had partially caved in and the lights shattered. The
figure of Sana was also starting to flicker, and he took a breath and released the fist he had
unconsciously clenched.

Sana was looking at him in concern. “Are you alright?”

“I am fine,” he lied in a monotone. “If your answer is no, then I have no desire to continue this
conversation.”

“Wait.” She lifted a hand. “I think we need to speak. In person. Where there are none who can
listen. There’s something wrong, and you don’t have to admit it now. I will come to your base in
two weeks, and we can speak. I will also ensure that Yang is healed. Is that sufficient?”

“It will suffice,” was all he said, no longer wanting to continue the conversation. “I will speak to
you then.”
With that he shut off the holocommunicator and stormed out, a roiling storm of contained emotions and conflicting thoughts. He wished now that the conflict was renewed so he could vent. But he had an image to maintain; an expectation for his soldiers and the Collective.

So he would keep it inside him for now.

Locked away from the outside, perhaps, but no matter where he went, he knew the thoughts would not leave him. Not until he did something, one way or another.

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_Barracks, Cambodian Military Command – Cambodia_

5/1/2019 – 7:19 P.M.

“Anyone ever gone on a mission like this?” Miguel asked as he did a final maintenance check on his SHIV.

“Not really,” Cara shrugged, taking a drink from her water bottle. “We’re special forces.”

“Technically,” Duri pointed out. “This is not necessarily special ops.”

“Yeah, sure,” Cara snorted. “It just involved sneaking into a specific place, grabbing something, and then getting out without getting spotted. Sounds pretty much like special forces to me.”

“Special operations’,” Nobuatsu proposed. “Maybe that’s a better word for it, and no Miguel, though I’ve worked with special forces before. Backup in case I was needed, but it never happened.”

“Are we getting someone to escort?” Beatriz asked, leaning against the wall.

“Negative,” Duri confirmed. “Unnecessary complication. I think all of us are able to pick up a few plants.”

“Permission to speak?” Cara lifted her hand.

“Sure,” Duri motioned to continue.

“There is approximately zero chance that this is going to be as easy as ‘go in, get the plants, get out’,” she said, her arms crossed, looking around the small group. “I don’t think ADVENT is sending us on a cakewalk. I’d like to point out that these plants were supposedly ordered by Patricia Trask. She’s already screwed over ADVENT before, and she’s not planting stuff like this because she likes the décor. That stuff has a purpose.”

“Cara, we’re not going to be treating this lightly,” Beatriz frowned. “What point are you trying to make?”

“I’m saying we’re looking at this the wrong way.” Cara insisted, striding over to the nearby table and lifting a map which had markings over it. “There aren’t any patrols, or at least not consistent ones. What’s more likely? That they just gave up protecting their perimeter? Or that all of this alien vegetation is a trap? I’m saying that maybe we should look into some incendiaries instead of taking guns to shoot alien patrols that are probably not going to come.”

She had a point, one which admittedly had been brought up before, though the others had largely decided that the chances of that being dangerous enough to hurt them were low. Cara hadn’t let the
“Alright,” Duri said. “We can do that. Miguel, does that SHIV have a flame attachment?”

“It does, sir,” Miguel nodded. “Want me to install it?”

“Yes, and everyone take at least one incendiary grenade,” Duri instructed. “While I doubt killer plants are going to be our biggest problem, no point in being unprepared. The other squads will thank us if the vegetation turns out to be a problem.”

“Thank you,” Cara sighed in extravagant relief. “I can sleep easy, for the maybe three hours I’ll have before we move out.”

They all had a few laughs at that, and Duri cleared his throat. “She’s not wrong. If you want sleep, get it now because we’re moving out in a few hours. If we’re lucky, we’ll get the samples, kill a few aliens, and get back before sunrise. We get unlucky, and things will obviously be a bit harder. I want everyone ready as they can be. Understood?”

“Yes sir!”

“Get some rest. Dismissed.”

***

Near Tampa, Florida – United States of America

5/4/2017 – 4:00 P.M.

A new scene played out now; similar to the one only a few days previous. Another exchange was to be made, though this time it was to return the respective collateral back to the appropriate sides. The Commander approached with the Battlemaster, his Custodian escort a short distance behind him, though likely unnecessary given the Battlemaster’s watchful eye over him.

Opposite them the Commander saw Laura, Vahlen, and a squad of XCOM soldiers approaching, escorting Hallian and the pod containing Yang, surrounded by the small team of medical assistants. On the far lines, both ADVENT and Collective forces stood ready, though this time both sides were more at ease, even if snipers from each were no doubt watching raptly.

“Well,” the Commander said as they watched the opposition walk up. “Did you get everything you wanted out of this?”

“I accomplished enough,” was the only answer. “We shall see if ADVENT did the same.”

“Good,” he glanced to the static mask the Ethereal wore. “I do hope your remember our conversation.”

“I have not forgotten.”

“I doubt you have,” a pause. “When the time comes, I think you’ll know what to do.”

“Perhaps, Commander,” the Battlemaster turned the cold stare of his mask to the smaller Human. “But you should also be careful what you wish for.”

The Commander was not certain what the meant, but knowing the Battlemaster…well, it could mean a number of things, the clearest of which was essentially saying ‘I will not be your pawn’. Something the Commander could respect, even if he appeared to misunderstand his intentions.
Nonetheless, it was a positive sign.

Something to develop further.

“Commander,” Laura greeted as they came close enough to speak. “I assume you were treated well?”

“As well as can be expected,” the Commander agreed, inclining his head. “I did not experience any issues.”

“I can confirm the same for me and my assistants,” Hallian added. “We were treated well.”

“Your medic was surprisingly helpful,” Laura nodded. “In any event, we appear to have concluded this agreement successfully. A mild surprise, honestly.”

“It appears so,” the Battlemaster agreed. “We will not be extending it.”

“No reason to do so,” Laura nodded. “We’re ready, and I assume you are as well.”

“Yes.”

Laura waved Hallian and the medical assistants forward. “Go back. Commander?”

“I’m coming,” both Commander and medics crossed the short boundary between the two sides, and within a few moments they were back where they belonged. Vahlen gave him a short hug, and the Battlemaster quietly looked into the pod and asked something to Hallian. “Six hours,” Laura said. “Last part of the agreement, correct?”

“Correct,” the Battlemaster’s gaze swept over the Humans. “Then we resume.”

“We’ll be ready,” Laura said. “I’d wish you luck, but I don’t think it’d be appropriate.”

“Likewise.” The Battlemaster turned away, and began marching back to the Collective lines. “I suspect the next time we meet will not be under these circumstances.”

The Humans likewise turned around, the XCOM squad stepping backward with their rifles trained on the Collective lines in case of a surprise attack. “I hope you managed to finish what you needed to,” the Commander said in a low voice to Laura.

“This gave us plenty of time,” Laura answered with a subtle nod. “Thank you.”

“A pleasure,” the Commander glanced back. “I learned quite a bit on my own as well. There is a lot to discuss.”

“Not here though.”

“Absolutely not.”

They walked a few more steps before the Commander asked the primary question. “What of GAIA?”

A thin smile formed on Laura’s face. “Everything is in place. When the conflict resumes, it will be a matter of days. Worst case scenario…the contingency is in place. Florida will remain ours.”

“Excellent,” the Commander breathed a sigh he’d been keeping in. One which had hinged on if this plan would work or not, and all signs were pointing in the right direction. He doubted the
Battlemaster would be able to predict it, as surprisingly perceptive as he was, but he wouldn’t put much past the Ethereal now.

The Battlemaster had the potential to surprise him, but this time…well, the Commander believed they had an edge.

All things considered, this had been a productive experience.

One which could very well result in ramifications that would change the course of the war.

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To be continued in Chapter 57

**Black Earth, Purple Sky**
“State your name.”

The man who was presumably seated stared defiantly into the camera, a harsh white background behind him.

“State your name,” the smooth voice repeated.

“Go to hell,” the man spat.

A new voice spoke. “Answer the question, would you kindly?”

The man’s eyes seemed to glaze over and the defiance faded. “Officer Zi, ADVENT Army, Tier II rank.”

The video shifted to a dark-skinned woman who looked suitably afraid, but was doing her best to hide it. She blinked, clearly holding back tears and biting her lip. “State your name,” the voice ordered.

“Lilianne Jackson, ADVENT Army Sniper,” she answered, swallowing. “I can’t tell you anything else.”

Another shift in the video, and now a man who’d clearly been wounded was facing the camera, the blood on his face from several scratches not completely cleaned off. “State your name.”

“Lieutenant Nusin, ADVENT Army,” he said curtly. “That’s all you’ll get from me.”

“The video continues for another half-hour,” Acting Director Powell said grimly, fast-forwarding it before the small gathering of Chancellor Vyandar, Stein, Laura, Rodgers, and Watkins, all of whose expressions echoed the tone of his voice. “We have no indication that this is even all the soldiers, but we have confirmed that they were the ones stationed near SAS territory.”

“Numbers, Director, numbers,” Saudia sighed, rubbing her forehead. “How many do they have?”

“Several thousand at least,” Powell clasped his hands behind his back. “We’re still determining the exact number. Commander, you know how many those outposts had when combined?”

“Just over four thousand in total,” Laura said, gaze still fixated on the scene. “I doubt that they have that many hostages. Perhaps a fraction of that number at best. There was only one where there was no fighting. Based on preliminary reports…perhaps around two thousand hostages.”

“Still far too many,” Stein said incredulously. “How did that happen?”

“Presumably a directive by Betos,” Declan Rodgers said, stepping forward. “That would have
made the soldiers more inclined to shoot to wound, not kill, and they had enough numbers to overwhelm the frontal base defenses. More practically, because Macula is helping them out.”

“We have evidence of this?” Stein asked.

Declan looked to Powell. “Sir?”

“She’s cleared,” Powell nodded his approval, motioning for Rodgers to switch the video to footage broken into quadrants, showcasing the battles at various angles and in several of them were shots of soldiers standing frozen, while SAS soldiers bound them, and soon a clear Ethereal figure came into view.

“I see Kutkh is finally returning something useful,” Saudia commented dryly. “A shame this wasn’t working a few months ago.”

“Kutkh is still having difficulty accessing critical areas,” Powell amended. “But we’re gathering critical intelligence on the general civilian population, troop movements, and subverting Ethereal control of the narrative. Not pretty, and there are limits as we didn’t expect the SAS to act this quickly, but thanks to Kutkh we might be able to identify patterns leading to similar attacks.”

“Can someone explain what I’m looking at?” Stein demanded in befuddlement.

“Cameras on birds,” Rodgers explained succinctly. “Birds which are unwittingly spying on the SAS and other Collective positions. Very clandestine, very advanced, and the longer we can continue before the Collective figures out what we’re doing, the better.”

“Clever,” Stein nodded, impressed. “Don’t suppose you’ve thought to do this with other animals? Cats?”

“We’d have better luck training a mouse than a cat,” Powell snorted. “Returning to the topic at hand, we know how this happened, and will likely know how to prevent – or at least have warning – before this happens again. And I assure you, it will happen again.”

“I suppose it was only a matter of time until they struck back,” Saudia sighed. “Expected, but it puts us in a predicament. It’s only going to get worse.”

“Chancellor, I believe this is sufficient justification for Scipio,” Laura stood, looking seriously down at Saudia. “Maximum pressure is necessary, and the SAS can weather economic sanctions and isolation. They cannot weather a starving or ill population and the more resources they drain from the Collective, the more resources are not going to be directed at us.”

In truth that had been in Saudia’s mind for several days now. The current campaign against the SAS was limited and the Collective was adapting well enough. At this point the missiles they were launching were throwing money and resources away. A concerted air presence made Night Witch raids risky at best, and suicide at worst.

Military targets were tempting, but hardened and well-fortified.

Operation Scipio was the plan which had been drafted by ADVENT High Command to not only handle the SAS, but any other regional threat to ADVENT. While there was a significant military component to the operation, the primary objective was not destroying the opposing military, but making life as miserable as possible for those who lived in the SAS.

Burned crops, scorched oil fields, sabotaged infrastructure and power outages. Poisoned food and water. There was a very fine line to be drawn in a way that couldn’t be used to rally more nations to
them, and that didn’t kill enemy civilians for the sake of it. It was reasonable to assume the Collective had entire planets worth of resources and top-notch medical care.

If the entire food and water stores of the SAS were corrupted, they would be forced to bring it in from somewhere else. If vast swaths of the population fell ill, they would have to be treated. The Collective couldn’t have all of them dying. A very delicate balance, but if done right, it would lower the readiness and effectiveness of the SAS and its citizens – enough to eventually allow a decisive victory.

“With what we know, I support authorizing Scipio,” Powell said, bringing up another series of pictures. “We just got these several hours ago. Pure luck that a Kutkh unit was flying over, but if the implications are right, the SAS is going to be growing.”

The picture was simply of a bunker in the middle of nowhere, and in front of it were some guards – SAS – and black vehicles. “A secret SAS base?” Saudia asked.

“Potentially, but that’s not our break,” Powell said. “It seems to imply that the SAS is directly meeting with representatives of other nations. One screwed up, and left an identifying flag on their truck.” He pointed. “Benin. Last we knew they were staying neutral, but that might be changing. I’d say there isn’t a reason to refrain from Scipio. We need to lock up as soon as possible.”

Saudia nodded. “I’ll begin the process.”

“The short-term question is how we’re going to deal with the hostages,” Rodgers grunted, sitting back down.

“Were there demands?” Stein asked.

“There was a short message accompanying the video,” Powell confirmed. “And I quote ‘We are currently holding a large number of ADVENT hostages. If you immediately withdraw all forces from our borders and cease your attacks, we will release them to you unharmed. If you do not within forty-eight hours, they will be turned over to the Ethereal Collective and moved off-world.’”

All of them knew what that meant.

If they were shipped off-world, they weren’t coming back alive.

“Do we know where they’re held?” Saudia asked.

“Not all of them,” Powell shook his head. “They’ve been split up. A hundred here, four hundred there, the SAS is clearly anticipating some kind of rescue attempt. Macula is doubtless patrolling as well. Chancellor, as tempting as it is to put together a rescue op, I don’t recommend it. That is what they want.”

“So our options are to comply and lose valuable time until they do this again, or condemn our soldiers,” Stein said grimly. “Unfortunate. The Director’s right though.”

“While I agree we can’t give into their demands, we need to make some effort,” Laura shot Stein a disapproving look. “Our soldiers deserve some kind of effort. Chancellor, I recommend we propose a counter-offer.”

“Consisting of?”

“They release our soldiers, we release a number of Collective POWs,” she said. “A harmless trade.
We get our soldiers, and Betos doesn’t get what she wants – but the Collective also gets something.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Saudia nodded. “Do you have an objection, Acting Director?”

“I doubt it will work, but no, I do not,” Powell confirmed. “Do we want to do this publicly?”

“Keep it vague, but yes,” Saudia nodded. “Put the ball in her court. Be sure to emphasize that she’s threatening to send them off-world. If we have volunteers from the families of those captured, use them as well. Betos is still Human. A foolish and naïve Human, but one with a skewed conscience. Show her what she’ll be doing if she refuses this deal.”

“Excellent,” Powell smiled. “Watch the news in a couple of hours, Chancellor, it will be all set to go shortly.”

***

Zararch Safehouse, Geneva – Switzerland

5/1/2017 – 12:00 A.M.

Over a month since setting down.

A month well-spent.

Nemo stood in front of a mirror, ensuring that each detail was correct on the face for the role it would soon be playing. Runi’sirasis’vitianis awaited, a Vitakarian soldier and face of the AEGIS Division. A naïve puppet of her Human masters, she was nonetheless an important symbol of the traitorous nature of some of the Vitakara.

Such an image would need to be torn down.

Slowly.

Methodically.

Subtly.

Unfortunately, it couldn’t be done while she was still alive. It couldn’t be something that was left to chance. Such a role was one Nemo had not played in a very, very long time. Wearing faces and personalities like this was exhausting, but eventually one would fall into the necessary role and mindset. Of course, this required a very specific mindset.

That of a traitor.

Thus, Nemo needed to think like a traitor in order to understand one.

It had not taken long to determine Sirasis’s own rationale; a highly tired one which highlighted the pointless worship of the Ethereals. It was pathetically simple. The Collective had hidden the knowledge of Aegis’s defection and therefore they were untrustworthy, and thus it made sense to defect in protest. Such a thought process was…odd.

Too instinctive.

Reactionary.
ADVENT had been smart. Left to her own devices she likely would have come out of this mindset of treason, but instead they had convinced her that such belief was not only correct, but *heroic*. They had helped turn her into something she had always wanted to be.

A hero.


A thought exercise that had taken Nemo mere hours to determine, fit within her psychological profile, and put through some basic tests. It was a solid appraisal, but highly unsatisfying to consider that a traitor would have such poorly based and simple motives. In truth it told him more about the process and intelligence of ADVENT than the empty-minded traitor that was to be impersonated.

So he had gone deeper.

The mind of a traitor was fascinating, and there *had* to be better reasons why one would turn against the Ethereal Collective; against their own people.

In the end, he had done so.

The results were…unsettling.

He was very aware the Collective had vulnerabilities, but there were far more than he had anticipated and unlike the fool whose face it now wore, its rationales were logical, understandable, and objectively valid. Multiple mindsets had been considered; Vitakarian, Sectoid, Andromedon – and Ethereal. Not each one fit perfectly, but there were circumstances where a traitorous mindset could develop.

It was concerning.

Not that vulnerabilities existed, but there was an inherent fragility to the Collective that Nemo found surprising. It was one that no one had seen fit to mention – at least to him. A rot which had been allowed to grow and fester from the beginning. Perhaps the fault of the Ethereals, perhaps the apathy of the Zararch. A mixture of both, most likely.

No, that was not his cause for concern. Not truly.

It was not concerned that vulnerabilities existed.

Nemo was concerned that the Collective seemed blind to these risks – but the Humans were *not*.

Applied correctly, the Humans could prove to be a catalyst to shatter the Collective.

It was unlikely the Humans *themselves* were thinking in such terms. No, this seemed too far-thinking for them. But they were being assisted by another Sovereign. *T'Leth*.

And on the Collective, was Mosrimor.

At the end of both sides were the Sovereign puppetmasters.

But with a key difference.

With Mosrimor, his tools and pawns actively resisted control and influence. The relationship was
inverted from what it had naturally been. Mosrimor could not properly plot and scheme while those who were supposed to be his lessers were flaunting their defiance, daring an intervention. The greatest foe to Mosrimor was not T’Leth, but the Imperator.

It led to distraction; weakness; *vulnerability*.

T’Leth had no such distraction.

If he gave orders to certain Humans, they were carried out.

Unsurprising T’Leth had appeared to determine the weakness of the Collective, and had no infighting to distract him.

So fascinating to observe from the sidelines.

However, it was now a front that would be observed personally. Nemo suspected that there would be a great number of things which would be witnessed through the mask worn. He had documented his concerns and set them to Ravarian, but Nemo already suspected that the true impediment to the Collective was not the Zararch, but their masters.

Ethereals.

Sovereigns without the experience.

Child gods over a pretend empire.

Endure or collapse, Nemo suspected great change would come to the Collective before the war’s end.

Time to get into the mindset.

Sirasis was now who Nemo was.

A body which would be worn for a day, perhaps a month, potentially years.

But it would end and Nemo would emerge.

For now, Nemo would lurk and observe; puppet the sculpted body to achieve his objective.

Sirasis would be shown to the world. She smiled for the mirror, a trait Nemo had observed her doing, perhaps as a way to better relate to Humans whose faces were highly expressive. Nemo had her body move through a number of ticks and catches that had been observed; a flawless recreation to ensure that none would notice one body had been swapped for another.

Glowing blue eyes stared back out through the mirror, and Nemo realized with some disappointment that not even its best efforts could remove the certain deadness within it. Well, no matter, it was such a small and easily maskable detail that only one like it would notice, let alone consider suspicious.

Satisfied, Nemo stepped away from the mirror and began putting on an identical AEGIS uniform that had been recreated through Collective fabricators. No detail was so small as to be ignored. The time of observation was over.

Now it was the time for the operation.

***
As Humans would say, Ravarian felt like he was in a soap opera sometimes. The only individual moderately taking his job seriously while everyone else…didn’t.

On one hand, there was the Speaker looking out onto a projection of the planet, idly smoking a chocolate cigarette – something Ravarian had no idea how he’d gotten – while also bringing up legalizing the drug on the planet quite sincerely. On the other, there was Quisilia avidly browsing with two phones for each pair of arms, complaining about being trolled.

The irony was not lost on Ravarian.

“We are not legalizing a drug,” Ravarian said flatly. “I don’t especially care if you like it.”


“It’s addictive.” Ravarian explained incredulously.

“No, people just like it,” the Speaker corrected. “There’s a difference. Besides, it’s a pleasant sensation. No different than how an Oyariah feels underground.”

“You’re not going to be able to sell that to the Aui’Vitakar,” Ravarian sighed. “And you will not have my support either. The Human desire to inject their bodies full of chemicals is not one we should strive for.”

“This is a plant, not a chemical,” Astri corrected. “So therefore…”

Ravarian narrowed his eyes. “Where did you even get that ridiculous item.”

“This?” Astri lifted the cigarette. “I asked Quisilia if he could procure one for me. I’ve seen Humans use them, and it appeared intriguing. However, I was only interested in using it with a drug I know.”

Almost in resignation, Ravarian turned to the idly tweeting Ethereal. “Where exactly did you get that from?”

“I asked Revelean if he could synthesize an equivalent,” Quisilia answered without looking up. “He was able to do so quickly. It did not consume significant resources or time, if that was what you were concerned about.”

Astri reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack. “Want one?”

“No.”

“Very well,” the Speaker grew more serious and put out the cigarette. “Now, we’re all here for my…introduction,” he gave a short cough. “I’m confident it will be successful, though of course I will take on feedback.”

Finally, they were talking about something substantive. “I believe it will have the desired effect,” Ravarian agreed. “I’m not sure how the Sar’Manda or Oyariah will take it, given the nationalistic focus, but it is unlikely to alienate them. Accompanied by an appropriate show of force will ensure the point is driven home.”

“Without a doubt,” Astri smiled, turning back to the planet. “Seeing the traitors paraded through
the streets will no doubt be glorious. Your forces are prepared I assume?"

“Prepared and ready,” Ravarian said. “I had begun to wonder if this information was ever going to be used.”

“I would have preferred to wait until a proper decapitation strike,” Quisilia added from the background. “But circumstances change, and if the Nulorian are dealt a serious blow Nartha will have served his purpose quite well.”

“Ah, the traitor,” Astri looked back to Quisilia. “He hasn’t returned.”

“He likely came to the conclusion that returning was too risky and he would be compromised,” Ravarian noted. “Initially we wondered if he’d figured it out, but the locations show no signs of altered activity. He simply disappeared – for now at least.”

“As I said,” Quisilia waved a hand absentmindedly. “He served his purpose. More so on Desolan than Vitakar. I certainly hope to see him shortly. It would be amusing to see his face knowing he doomed many of his new allies.” His tone turned wistful. “Though in fact, it may be better to keep him alive. Miridian will kill him once he connects the dots.”

“I’m hopeful we will kill Miridian this time,” Ravarian pursed his lips. “He has persisted far too long.”

“Unlikely,” Quisilia dismissed flatly. “Miridian is unusually intelligent. I doubt he himself is in a position of danger. It would be a welcome surprise, but I would not expect it this time. He has a use as well – an enemy has their uses if appropriately controlled, and the Nulorian have passed that threshold.”

“Time to reign them in,” Astri nodded. “If there are some Humans involved, then all the better.”

“Indeed,” Ravarian affirmed.

Astri looked to Quisilia. “How is progress on…recruitment. For your avatar candidates?”

“Ah, I am having some issues,” Quisilia sounded almost irritated. “I’ve found a quite nice woman who I hit it off very well with. I’m sure she’ll take my offer well. Big fan of my content.”

Ravarian cocked his head. “And…you have not discussed this with her?”

“Come now, Zar’Chon, I can’t just let any interested woman into my harem,” Quisilia sniffed. “I have high standards. What I have personally found irritating are the absurd number of so-called women on the Internet that are in fact men pretending to be them.”

“Oh dear,” Astri chuckled. “Wait – how do you know?”

“Ah, it’s a simple matter of locating their phone or device,” Quisilia said. “As part of the board of Twitter – which I do a majority of communication through – I can make certain requests. If they are reluctant, then I will just have the Zararch do it. Then I make a short visit to confirm who they are, and that is how I made such discoveries.”

“That…” Ravarian paused. “Seems like an extraordinary waste of time.”

“I am attempting to automate and diversify the process,” Quisilia agreed. “Instead of visiting myself, I will simply ask the local Zararch agents to investigate for me. Already it has saved me a significant amount of time.”
Ravarian was no longer surprised that Quisilia was using the Zararch as a tool for his quest to find suitable Harbinger candidates, because of course he was. “I hope you find a suitable candidate soon.”

“As do I, it has proved to be quite a blow to my ego,” Quisilia sighed dramatically. “When I learned how many followers I have are bots, it hurt. And with the number of scams I have experienced, one would think there are no women on the internet. However, I shall persevere and endure.”

“Enough with the dramatics,” Astri said dryly. “Both of us know you have identified exactly who you want and are just enjoying dragging the process out.”

Ravarian looked over. “Has he really?”

“I’d think you’d have figured him out, Zar’Chon,” Astri bared his teeth. “But clearly not. In which case, I’ll continue to let Quisilia have his fun.”

Ravarian rubbed his forehead, not wanting to think about this any longer. “Let’s move onto something more important. If you’re ready, Speaker, I will send it to the Aui’Vitakar to announce.”

“Do it,” Astri confirmed with a smile. “Time to secure the world.”

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Tampa, Florida – United States of America

5/5/2017 – 9:12 A.M.

Unfortunately, the Commander noted, the Battlemaster hadn’t been idle during the lull. From reviewing the current situation, he had taken steps to mitigate or eliminate many of the risks ADVENT had been exploiting. The Battlemaster himself wasn’t letting himself be led around by XCOM, instead sending additional Elites, Spectres, and Archons and focusing on what he deemed ‘critical’ areas.

The Collective air presence was also much more pronounced, and there were additional Vanguards which had been sent to disrupt the psions providing air support. Not overpower from what he’d observed, but disrupt to the point where the inherent advantage was gone. And when that advantage was gone, the air battle shifted back in favor of the Collective.

In short, they were losing ground at a much faster pace.

ADVENT hadn’t been idle either. Given the upcoming plan, they were using this ability to test out lethal cocktails and chemical weapons they’d been shooting towards alien lines. White phosphorous could be seen across vast swaths of the city, which obscured vision, killed unprotected soldiers, and was yet another trial for the aliens to overcome.

Purifiers were setting lost streets and blocks alight, denying the Collective easy access which the aliens still had no answer to. But ultimately, it had become a numbers game and the odds were not in their favor – but they still had enough to hold out.

A light flashed on the holotable he was observing the battle on. “Launch successful,” one of the technicians stated to the room. “Entering low orbit now.”

Laura gave a single nod. “Good. No Collective presence?”
“They might have seen it go up, but they haven’t disrupted it,” came the answer. “I don’t think they’re interested or know what we’re doing.”

“Let’s keep it that way then. Two more left, yes?”

“Yes, Commander!”

Laura looked to him. “We’re doing our part, but I hope your people can get the ordinance established.”

“I’ve got squads planting it now as we speak,” the Commander assured her. “As of yet the Collective doesn’t seem to have noticed the reduced XCOM presence.” He highlighted current nanite bombs planted. “We had a lot of ground to cover, but we’re nearly done – just in time for the rest of the launches to take place.”

“If the aliens haven’t taken out Canaveral now, I doubt they’ll target it in the next day,” Laura grunted, starting to pace. “This had better work.”

“It will work,” the Commander assured her. “All indications point to it, at least.”

“I’m more concerned with how effective it will be,” Laura mused, sighing. “In theory it’s devastating. In practice the Battlemaster has eventually mitigated or overcome each obstacle.”

“Except the trifluoride,” the Commander corrected.

“Except that,” she amended. “But I genuinely wouldn’t put it past him to blanket the state in an EMP to overcome it.”

“Possibly,” the Commander considered. “But unlikely to be that extreme. The amount of land is infeasible. GAIA will cover the whole state, more or less. Even if he does that, it will cost him time, resources, and he will fail to stop the entirety of it – and that is all that is needed.”

“And if this doesn’t work out…” Laura shook her head. “A lot of people died for nothing.”

“If it doesn’t work out, then it would have played out exactly the same way,” the Commander said bluntly. “GAIA is the only measure that can prevent our defeat here. We don’t have Aegis, Caelior, or our best psions now. This is a risk, but it will work. The science and specifications all line up.”

“I’ll feel more comfortable when I see it in action,” Laura nodded. “But you’re right. It’s that…I don’t know if it’ll even be enough. Everything we come up with never lasts forever and we’re gradually losing more and more. JULIAN, GAIA, nuking our atmosphere, then our cities, and we’re not even remotely close to surviving, let alone winning.”

The Commander looked at the tired woman, and could relate quite strongly. Though inexplicably, he felt more optimistic now. Perhaps based on a collection of guesswork, observation, and facts, but there were many disparate pieces that were coming together, and when they did come together, things would fall into place quickly.

A snowball.

The problem was that snowball needed to speed up and get bigger. That required time, and time was an ever-draining resource. There was also a note of unpredictability that could throw off their carefully curated plans, but he was confident they could account for it. Now it was time to maintain a delicate balance of baiting and defense until it came time to pull the trigger.
“It’s not going to be easy or painless,” he said slowly. “But I’m…confident it will work. Remember there was a time where the technological disparity was impossible to even, and we did it. The fact that we’re even holding our own now is a miracle in and of itself. The Collective is forced to adapt to what we are doing, which is not the action of an entity destined to succeed.”

“Fair point, Commander,” she acknowledged. “Like I said…I think I’ll be more confident when it happens.”

“Only a few more days now,” the Commander said, looking down on the holotable. “Just a few more days.”

***

Vietnam – Near Collective Territory

5/2/2019 – 12:22 A.M.

The closer they got to the line of alien vegetation, Duri immediately felt less and less comfortable. It was difficult to explain, but what he was looking at distinctly did not seem like it was supposed to exist on Earth. It was a clear divide between what was ‘normal’ and what had been added by the aliens.

“I don’t like the look of this at all,” Cara muttered, hefting her rifle as she appraised the vegetation before them.

They had been walking through a jungle, trying to keep their noise to a minimum, but they had seen the alien line easily. The first clue was the density; there was a far greater collection of plants than there was before. There was also a symmetry to them indicating manual or planned planting. The plants in question were also…presumably young.

But they were distinctly alien.

For one, they glowed.

Not that bioluminescence was inherently alien, but Duri was fairly certain that there were no bioluminescent plants in Vietnam. In fact, he wasn’t even sure such a thing existed above ground. The glow wasn’t bright, but in the darkness it might as well have been. It was a warm glow of orange, blue, and purple.

The plants themselves had leaves and bodies that were inherently alien, and to Duri’s alarm appeared to have integrated seamlessly into the jungle with the native Earth plant life. That was something that should not have been possible, or at least that was what he would have thought. Then again, the aliens had access to technology that might allow for forcing computability.

“Check for movement,” Duri instructed Beatriz, taking a breath as they took positions in a 360 circle to prevent ambushes. The good news was that there was no shortage of cover, and they hadn’t encountered any alien defenders. “Miguel, move your SHIV up.”

“Yes sir,” both soldiers confirmed, with Beatriz pulling herself up a nearby tree and scanning the immediate vicinity while Miguel piloted the SHIV towards the plant line.

“It’s quiet,” Nobuatsu noted, cocking his head. “That normal?”

“I’d think there’d be insect life,” Duri wondered, frowning under his helmet. “I hear something…”
They all listened for a few seconds as the SHIV rolled closer. “Faint, but there’s something,” Miguel said with a shrug. “Chirps and clicks. I doubt the aliens killed off the entire ecosystem.”

“Can never be too sure,” Duri looked up to Beatriz. “Nothing?”

“No aliens if that’s what you’re wondering,” she said, hopping down. “But I saw something that’s alarming. A little further back there’s large growths on the trees, and more scattered throughout.” She handed him her rifle. “Look through, it won’t take too long to spot. I have a bad feeling I know what they are.”

“Hold the SHIV,” Duri told Miguel as he took the sniper rifle and looked through the scope that was attuned to the dim light. It took several seconds to adjust properly, but in a few moments, he saw what Beatriz had been talking about. Yellowish blobs or growths on the trees, and likely on the ground, with the bulges having a faint transparent quality to them.

The area around them was messy, with slime and goo dripping off the growths and stuck to nearby vegetation. To his mild disgust he saw that there were animals and birds that had gotten stuck in it and were dead and rotting, or dying and trying to escape. Insects were also caught in the sticky growth, giving it a spattering of black.

Like Beatriz, he had an idea of what they were.

“Chryssalid hives,” he muttered. “Likely what we’re dealing with.”

“You have got to be kidding,” Cara said in an exasperated voice. “Are you sure?”

“No, because I’ve never seen one,” Duri said, handing Beatriz her rifle back. “Call it an educated guess. Those growths are just large enough for a Chryssalid, and I doubt the aliens are infecting their own vegetation deterrent with some type of viral growth.”

“Means there might be Chryssalids out already,” Aleksandra stated. “They await.”

“Maybe,” Duri allowed. “It would explain why the Collective isn’t dedicating patrols along the border.”

“Are we modifying our objectives?” Cara asked. “The last thing we want to do is trigger a swarm.”

“We go up carefully, get some samples, and get out,” Duri repeated. “If we hear Chryssalids, we get out. Miguel, move the SHIV up further.”

“Moving.”

The SHIV moved close to one of the bell-bodied alien plants, and without warning it spat a yellow mist into the air that floated around it, and one by one all of the same kind of plants erupted little yellow puffs of mist, creating a dense cloud of something that only began starting to dissipate a few minutes later.

There weren’t many things it could be. “Poison?” Beatriz asked what they were all thinking.

“We’re not going to sniff it,” Duri pulled out some of the sampling equipment they’d been given. “But the scientists will want this. Let’s get this done now.” All of them quickly took some of the tools and samples and approached the line, though taking care not to go too deep into the mist and alien environment, if at all.

Aleksandra and Mana were taking samples of the odd poison plant, Aleksandra cursing as cutting
into the plant released stream of sticky fluid onto her gloves, which she dutifully collected in a container. Mana captured some of the mysterious poison. Duri took some soil samples and leaves and branches of other alien plants.

Closer now, he could definitely see the growths were Chryssalid pods. The shape of the alien creature could only just be made out, one which seemed to occasionally twitch, to his eyes. It made him very uncomfortable.

An alien screech roared out in the night. One they easily recognized.


“Are you sure-“ Cara began.

“Do it!”

As they retreated, they tossed the grenades they’d thankfully brought along, and moments later the infested jungle was alight in flames. As it turned out, the Chryssalid pods were very flammable, and immediately caught on fire as the squad retreated. More screeches and Chryssalid roars sounded, much closer this time.

“We got it,” Duri said as they rejoined Miguel and Beatriz. “Let’s get back-“

Several sniper shots from Beatriz rang out as two Chryssalids had rushed out, still on fire, and promptly shot dead. “Good shots,” Duri commended, as more were beginning to arrive, and they risked getting into a conflict they’d eventually be overrun by. “But we need to go.”

“Run?” She asked.

“If you’ve got grenades, use them,” he instructed. “Wide dispersal!”

All of them gathered the rest of their explosives and tossed them in various directions towards the alien line. If he was right, Duri hoped the Chryssalids would pursue the noises or at least be too disoriented to follow them. Or not incentivized to hunt them down. “Now we run!”

With the forest burning behind them and the cries of the Chryssalids in the distance, the squad moved away as fast as possible, clinging to their samples that would hopefully give insight as to what the Collective intended to turn their planet into.

As far as Duri saw, it was to turn it into a hostile environment.

And oddly enough, when he came to that conclusion, he wondered if that was among the worst crimes the aliens had inflicted upon them.

Retaliation was due.

***

Betos’s Quarters, SAS Command – Nigeria

5/5/2017 – 6:12 P.M.

The coverage kept coming, and it didn’t seem to have signs of stopping. Not for the first time Betos wondered if she’d made the wrong decision. In the quest to maybe take advantage of
ADVENT caring about their soldiers, they turned it into a campaign specifically intended to
demonize her in the most subtle of terms.

Aside from the beginning where Saudia had openly stated that they would be open to an exchange
of Collective soldiers and those which had been captured by the SAS, ADVENT had been
extremely passive-aggressive in their coverage the rest of the time. Never directly addressing her,
but running a number of segments and interviews that made it very clear what they were trying to
do.

First had been a long segment on what the Collective did to soldiers they captured, as far as
sending the off-world. The analysts were very careful to seem general and state they couldn’t
confirm everything, but there was a lot of speculation backed with flashes of footage from the
Sectoid Hive and the general hopeless nature of the topic.

Relatives of the soldiers were also brought on, and they spoke of their wife, or husband, or
children, or friend and some even made general appeals to her personally to at least keep them on
Earth and not send them to an alien planet.

Keeper had made it very clear that they were not giving in to ADVENT’s demands, describing
their actions as an attempt to emotionally appeal to her and how the SAS quite literally received
nothing from their proposed agreement and this was simply for ADVENT to appear as if they were
doing something. Macula had agreed, and that was effectively settled.

It still wasn’t easy to watch. Betos was quite convinced that none of the people she’d subjected
herself to watching were faking it. Rationally she shouldn’t feel bad, and was mildly angry at how
ADVENT was exploiting these people, but she couldn’t help it. Not just what the families on Earth
were going through, but she suspected that it wasn’t too different from what aliens were going
through entire star systems away who weren’t being shown on TV.

Overall, she felt like a terrible person right now, and very tired.

A knock made her look up and she saw the large frame of Mox peek in. “Betos?”

“Come on in,” she sighed, muting the laptop and pushing it away, the newsfeed still playing.

Mox eyed the laptop, then back to her, his eyes concerned. “You really don’t need to be watching
that. It’s not doing you any favors.”

Betos shrugged. “I know.”

Mox sat on the nearby chair and shut the laptop entirely. “It’s bothering you that much?”

“I know it shouldn’t be,” Betos admitted, rubbing her eyes. “Keeper said it was probably
orchestrated directly to target me. Guess that confirms that ADVENT figured me out pretty well.
It’s one thing to have soldiers die in battle, and another to use them as a bargaining chip. It would
have been easier to kill them.”

“Your plan was a good idea,” Mox reassured her. “Worth at least one try. We can’t control
ADVENT manipulating everything else to try and turn it to their advantage. Besides, both of us
know that the soldiers will be fine. They’re not getting shipped off for some experiments on a dark
space station.”

Betos pursed her lips. “Do we know that?”

Mox appraised her carefully. “Keeper said as much. The Battlemaster also directed that recently as
well. It’s very unlikely they’ll be hurt, even off-world.”

“Unlikely,” she agreed. “But not certain.”

“Nothing is,” he said.

“I believe Keeper and the Battlemaster,” she finally said. “But there are definitely elements in the Collective that aren’t completely trustworthy. Much as Macula likes to dismiss incidents as rogue, there are…more than are normal. And it’s not like we can keep track of them. Each one could disappear and I’d never know. Neither would you.”

“I don’t know if we should be raising that many questions,” Mox said carefully. “I don’t think the Collective would appreciate the conspiratorial tone.”

They probably wouldn’t, but Betos wasn’t as concerned about that in her tired state. “Doesn’t matter. I’m not going to give ADVENT what they want, but I want any POWs we capture under my watch. Either they stay on Earth and we build a prison to keep them in, or the Collective gives us a planet where they can be kept off-world. I’m not going to give them directly to the Collective.”

“I don’t think Keeper is going to like that,” Mox frowned. “Helsa, you should get some rest and think about this rationally.”

“Keeper would prefer to be running the SAS himself,” Betos snorted. “ADVENT may think I’m an alien proxy, but I’m not. We’re not, and if we’re as independent as Keeper likes to promise, then we get to break with the Collective line when we think its right. Do you think this isn’t one of those times?”

“I don’t know…” he leaned in his chair. “I’m more worried you’re making a decision like this at the wrong time. You’ve just subjected yourself to hours of ADVENT propaganda and you’re definitely affected by that.”

Betos glared at him. “Yes, I’m sorry I’m emotionally affected by seeing a mother sobbing because she thinks her son is going to be sent to die in some alien death camp and I don’t actually, positively know if she’s wrong about that. Sue me.” She stood up abruptly and walked to the window, taking a deep breath.

“Helsa…” he said from behind her before she lifted a hand pre-emptively cutting him off.

“They probably wouldn’t, but Betos wasn’t as concerned about that in her tired state. “Doesn’t matter. I’m not going to give ADVENT what they want, but I want any POWs we capture under my watch. Either they stay on Earth and we build a prison to keep them in, or the Collective gives us a planet where they can be kept off-world. I’m not going to give them directly to the Collective.”

“I don’t think Keeper is going to like that,” Mox frowned. “Helsa, you should get some rest and think about this rationally.”

“Keeper would prefer to be running the SAS himself,” Betos snorted. “ADVENT may think I’m an alien proxy, but I’m not. We’re not, and if we’re as independent as Keeper likes to promise, then we get to break with the Collective line when we think its right. Do you think this isn’t one of those times?”

“I don’t know…” he leaned in his chair. “I’m more worried you’re making a decision like this at the wrong time. You’ve just subjected yourself to hours of ADVENT propaganda and you’re definitely affected by that.”

Betos glared at him. “Yes, I’m sorry I’m emotionally affected by seeing a mother sobbing because she thinks her son is going to be sent to die in some alien death camp and I don’t actually, positively know if she’s wrong about that. Sue me.” She stood up abruptly and walked to the window, taking a deep breath.

“Helsa…” he said from behind her before she lifted a hand pre-emptively cutting him off.

“I’ve heard the pragmatic solution all day,” she muttered. “It’s the same justification ADVENT would make. Hypocrites. If they could they’d ship all their captives off world to ensure they’re unrecoverable. Difference is they’d tell you up front what’s going to happen to them. I have no idea what’s going to happen if I send prisoners into Collective space. They might be fine, or find themselves in some alien program I have no control over. I’m not going to have that on my conscience.”

She turned. “It won’t make Keeper or Macula happy, but that’s an acceptable price. I’ve been more than accommodating, and I think it’s time they understand that we’re not going to give in to every single demand they give.”

Betos walked back over to the chair and sat back down, calmer now, though her heart was still beating faster than usual because perhaps for the first time she was in uncharted territory when it came to relations with the Collective. She realized there hadn’t been much pushback, and she legitimately didn’t know what would happen if she decided that, yes, she was going to refuse their
orders.

There was a power disparity she couldn’t ignore. Keeper might very well just laugh and do it anyway. He probably would think it was a joke.

But she led the SAS. Not the aliens. Not Macula. Certainly not Keeper.

They were allies, but if they effectively ruled by proxy, then what exactly had she left ADVENT for?

Right. She looked Mox in the eyes. “I know it’s not the safest thing to do, but this is the right thing to do. If we don’t make it clear, the aliens are going to have free reign and we’re selling all these nations lies to get them to sign away their independence. If the aliens want to show their colors now, I’d rather find out than realize we’ve become ADVENT, only for the aliens. But I want you to help me here. And everyone else too.”

He gave a short nod. “Nothing’s changed, I just don’t want to see something happen to you after all we’ve gone through. The aliens are dangerous, ADVENT is dangerous, but we didn’t have a choice. But we’ll follow you, as we always have.”

She’d intrinsically known that, but it was relieving to hear it from him. “Good,” she breathed. “Get the legislators and officers and tell them to report here. I am getting our policies coded into law within the next few days.”

“And if Keeper has an issue?” Mox asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Then he can come talk to me,” Betos said as she reached to open her laptop. “My door is always open.”

###

Nulorian Outpost, Borelian Wastes – Near Vitiary

5/2/2017 – 10:17 A.M.

Operation was almost a go.

After waiting agonizing weeks to get everything in place, the Nulorian were ready to strike. Nartha gave a nod and smile to Shun as the XCOM soldiers geared up, along with himself. He no longer had Aegis, or even Titan armor like they did, but he had his own protection and weapons. Around them other Nulorian operatives prepared themselves, all silent as they quietly reflected before the operations.

The outpost they were in blended into the snowy backdrop of the Borelian Wastes, but it was far more fortified than most Nulorian outposts. Camouflaged Nulorian operatives patrolled around it, jury-rigged turrets maintained by Siaru were built into the cube-like structure that were more than capable of shooting down investigative Zararch or Collective soldiers.

Miridian himself was here, and standing watch over a small army of analysts and observers who Nartha suspected were also being augmented by Siaru. Though this time he didn’t hear the incessant commands that had become ingrained into his memory even weeks later. So much about that experience left him feeling unsettled.

The blasted machine was probably watching him now.
They'd gone over the plan. Most of the day would be reaching the cities, and then at night they would strike. They were to go in, explain if possible, and depending on what was said, get them out, or subdue them and then get them out. From there they would exfiltrate, get back safely, and deal a stinging blow to the Zararch and Aui’Vitakar, complete with an address from Miridian if he was feeling up to it.

All in all, Nartha was very confident in the plan.

“Almost feels like old times,” Shun said as she flipped her helmet in her hand. “Seems so long ago.”

“It really does,” Nartha agreed, checking his weapon. “Back when I had a different name and everyone thought I was Human.”

“A shame you probably don’t get to tell that story a lot,” Shun mused with a light chuckle. “I doubt even most Zararch agents could compare.”

“No quite like that,” Nartha confirmed. “I guess I was the right one at the right time.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “If it hadn’t been you…well,” she tilted her head up. “Well, things would probably be a bit different.”

He was about to answer when one of the analysts suddenly looked back, his voice oddly concerned. “Miridian, there’s definitely something going on.”

Miridian wasted no time. “Define ‘something going on’.”

“There’s a global transmission from Vitiary,” the analyst explained, motioning to a screen showing something Nartha couldn’t see. “Completely global. Borelia. The Manda. Everywhere.”

Nartha immediately knew something was up. “That’s only happened a few times. And only on scheduled events.”

“Agreed,” Miridian said slowly. “I think we’ll want to see this. Put it on the screen.”

Nartha and Shun exchanged a look. “Figures we’d have something happen today,” Shun grumbled as the few screens around the room lit up. “We never catch a good break.”

“Let’s see,” Nartha cautioned, as he turned his attention to the event. “I wonder what it could be.”

The screen showed a camera fixated on a podium with the backdrop of the Aui’Vitakar building behind it. Standing in the center of the podium was the last person Nartha expected to see. “What is he doing here?”

The other Nulorian were reacting the same way, and Miridian froze, narrowed his eyes, and said something quietly to Sorras who immediately rushed away for some reason. “Who is that?” Shun asked, moving closer to him.

“Eth’astri’than,” Nartha answered. “The Speaker for the Elders. Very little is known about him, but if the Ethereals had a direct voice between them and my species, it was him. Though he hasn’t had a role in years. Perhaps longer. I thought he’d left long ago.”

Two towering Borelian Lurainian were flanking him, and behind him was the entirety of the amassed Aui’Vitakar, also flanked by shining legions of the Runianarch. The stage, for that was what it reminded Nartha of, was bright, shining, and very inviting. The camera panned out to show
the absolutely massive crowd which had turned out – and who were clapping and cheering as the Dath’Haram looked over the adoring crowd.

He made a calming motion with his hands, baring his teeth in a smile before removing the spectacles of all things from his face. “Fellow citizens, people of Vitakar, it is my distinct honor and pleasure to stand before you today. To stand before the Aui’Vitakar and our brave soldiers who come from all parts of this planet, and who brave dangers that we can only imagine.”

Nartha knew it was only a matter of time before he would go into a spiel of the Elders and how privileged he was to serve them and be their voice.

To his surprise, the Speaker didn’t take that path.

“We have faced trials these past weeks,” the Speaker said, his voice softening and sympathy coloring his tone; a deceptive melancholy for innocence lost. “News of deaths and sacrifices; word of betrayal from those who we elevated above all else. Stories. Rumors. But as a people we have remained sheltered from the truth, divided and threatened from terrorists and uncertainty.”

He unexpectedly smiled. “That must end. But it is time we recognize this truth for what it is. You heard the words of the Elder Aegis and what he claimed. The atrocities and crimes perpetuated by the Collective we stand a part of. Of the brutal war the Humans wage against us. And yet, despite knowing the truth, we are collectively blamed for the actions of others.”

“What is he doing?” Nartha wondered aloud. This was not the Speaker he remembered.

The camera was picking up the crowd murmurs and hive-minded agreement. Astri lifted a hand as he continued speaking. “You are being blamed for something you had no part in, or were even aware of. The Humans have…issues…with overgeneralization. They are quick to paint those even remotely associated as evil and guilty as the perpetrators themselves. The Humans do not care about trivialities; they do not see us as of the Aui’Vitakar, a sovereign body of the Collective – they only see that we are part of the Collective, and thus are guilty.”

“Liar,” one of the XCOM soldiers muttered.

“I say we reject this as a species, completely,” the Speaker stated with renewed energy. “We have, for too long, been passive against the troublemakers of the Collective. The Unions squabble and fight amongst themselves and the Sectoids have for years been solely focused on horrific experimentation and development. We have kept our hands clean, but our species is being stained all the same as these malicious actors run amok!”

“He cannot be actually saying this,” Nartha said in disbelief. “Why would the Zar’Chon let this happen.”

“He’s leading to something,” Miridian muttered, eyes completely fixated on the screen. “Come on Ethereal puppet, get to the point.”

“Yet we lack the necessary unity to push against these species,” the Speaker said to a crowd that was growing louder. “Even today we remain divided as a species! Borelian, Oyariah, Vitakarian, Dath’Haram, Cobrarian, and Sar’Manda. We retain our so-called independence, despite it castrating our species on a galactic stage, and we should not be confined to an afterthought, should we?”

The crowd response was a resounding negative.

“It is time the Vitakara evolve beyond racial histories and prejudices,” the Speaker continued,
now fully taking advantage of the crowd’s energy. “We are capable of achieving greatness beyond the Collective. Beyond this world! For years we have been sustained, enhanced, and uplifted by the generosity of the Elders, but we can do more!”

“This guy,” Shun said quietly. “Was he always a populist?”

Nartha frowned. “A what?”

She scowled and rephrased her question. “Someone who’s popular with people.”

“Oh,” Nartha looked at the crowd which was absolutely entranced by the Speaker, cheering and clapping at a deafening level, even through the video. “He was always respected and revered due to his position, but…” he shook his head. “Absolutely nothing like this. This would be utterly heretical coming from anyone else. Not even the Zar’Chon could get away with it.”

“If that were the case,” Miridian noted slowly. “Then how is he?”

“We are a prosperous, enlightened, and powerful people!” The Speaker lifted a fist into the air. “Even now it is our soldiers who are on the front lines against the Humans who wish to subject us to their rule. We are safe from the dangers of the stars for now…and yet, our greatest threat does not come from the Humans, it comes from within.”

“And there it is,” Miridian nodded. “A campaign to act against us. It was only a matter of time.”

“I don’t like how much the crowd is cheering him on,” Nartha said slowly. “And this is being broadcast to the planet. Everyone is seeing this,”

“It is time that we act,” Astri shouted. “And end this scourge once and for all!”

“PERIMETER SENSORS INDICATE IMMEDIATE THREATS.” Siaru’s voice boomed out making several of the twitchy Nulorian jump. “MULTIPLE CONTACTS ARE ON APPROACH TO THIS LOCATION.”

“What?” Miridian demanded. “How could they have found us?”

The Speaker continued his speech, his voice having an almost mocking tone to it now, though most of the crowd took it for sincerity. “Even as I speak to you today, our brave peacekeeping forces and the ever-vigilant Zararch are taking direct and immediate action to end this menace!”

“How many are coming?” Miridian demanded.
“Six…eight…ten…” someone called out. “There’s a lot. There’s an army coming our way!”

“How could they know?” One of the Nulorian demanded. “And on this scale?”

“That is a question we ask after we kill them,” Miridian stormed over to the armory and grabbed a rifle. “Operation is scrubbed. We defend until Sorras can send the distress signal and we are evacuated.”

“You knew this was coming?” Shun asked.

“I knew something was coming when the Speaker went off-script,” Miridian answered with a quick glare at the Human. “We have contingencies, but there are only a few ways they could have learned about this place. We talk about this later. Time for your people to prove their worth.”

Nartha looked back to the screen, where the Speaker was finishing up, and his final words in the bizarre speech were – to Nartha – ones of foreboding and threat to his blinded kind.

“Rest assured, citizens, that we will be with you throughout this crisis, and when our enemies are defeated, we will usher in untold years of peace and prosperity. Together, we will forge a new age of the Vitakara, one which will stand beyond our planet, but make a legacy in the stars itself.”

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**ADVENT Air Force Base, Ramstein – Germany**

5/4/2017 – 11:02 A.M.

Fear.

First it came as a shock, then overwhelming like a wave.

Patricia stepped through a portal and directly in front of a young hapless ADVENT guard who barely managed to squeak before she snapped his neck with a thought and threw his partner into a nearby building with enough force to shatter her skeleton. Nearly everyone else nearby froze, not sure what they were seeing.

The fear was tinged with confusion; thoughts swirling in internal maelstroms.

*Is this happening?*

*Is that her?*

*I need to wake up now!*

*She’s bigger than I thought she’d be.*

*What is she doing here?*

There was one thought that she found repeated in some fashion.

*I’m going to die.*

That they were.

But these were soldiers, and well-trained soldiers. Even in spite of their crippling fear, they raised their weapons automatically and began firing. The civilians ran away or picked up things to throw
at her. Patricia lifted a hand, palm flat as the gauss rounds froze before her as she lazily looked around.

A target rich environment.

At one time, she would have waited and slowly subverted their minds from afar, turning them against each other over a long period of time. She lacked the necessary skill to defend herself at that time. There was a time of subtlety, of course, but many other times it wasn’t required. But she was no longer that woman.

These soldiers could not touch her.

Not anymore.

The maelstrom of thoughts and palpable fear that coated the intangible Psionosphere around her grew, and was now spreading throughout the base. They were not prepared, and admittedly, why should they be? An attack here wouldn’t be able to accomplish anything permanent? Not to mention it wasn’t even on the radar of the Collective.

Not hers either, admittedly, but a random one she’d chosen.

The first of many to fall by her hand.

She waved a hand. “Panic.”

A simple command with unpredictable results. More than sufficient for her. Simply by stepping out into their proximity she had anchored herself in their minds, burrowing to a level where they could not defend themselves properly. There were some psions here, but they were incapable of stopping her. They lacked her skill, and more importantly, her power.

Panic.

Panicked soldiers were dangerous. A panicked soldier was turned from a killer to an unpredictable killer. Their vision focused; their bodies went on autopilot. They lost motor control. Everything and everyone around them became a threat. Friend or foe meant nothing as their reason faded and sheer animal instinct took over.

Patricia let the floating projectiles fall as the soldiers around her started shooting at everything and everyone around them. Civilians screamed and ran around incoherently, the panic pushing some into full retreat mode while others simply shut down and curled up on the ground, sobbing before they were gunned down by equally panicked ADVENT soldiers.

A few still focused on her, but she barely paid them mind as she began her march into the base. A waved hand or clenched fist sent them plowing into buildings or objects with lethal force, or their body was crushed into unrecognizable pulp. The people of course were only a portion of the targets, as the infrastructure would also need to be taken care of.

The more ADVENT was forced to invest, the more they didn’t have for other plans.

Psionic maelstroms manifested as Patricia walked her path of destruction, ripping entire buildings apart and flinging concrete, wood, and metal in all directions, killing whoever happened to be bystanders – or whoever was inside to begin with. Office buildings, warehouses, and housing was destroyed with a thought.

Still as she walked, some continued to attack her in futile attempts.
It was almost amusing, if it wasn’t rather irritating. The pop and sound of gauss rifles were like gnats and pester ing insects fluttering around her, incapable of touching her, but deluded enough to think they could make a difference, or too stupid to realize what they were doing. Unlike gnats, she did not ignore them.

Bodies were crushed; lightning caused explosive results; several were bisected from a barrier she created between one of them. Each step she took she killed. A trail of bodies that were directly by her hand followed her path as she annihilated the infrastructure of the base and left tanks, planes, and other machines in crumpled and flaming wrecks.

It almost turned into a haze of death and destruction for her, a curious realization of invincibility and power that she hadn’t experienced in some time.

It felt good. She was overdue for a break.

Soldier, civilian, man, woman, child, at least one of each attempted to be the one hero – or more likely were overwhelmed with panic – to try and take her down. These were not rational people, but such was the cost of the war ADVENT wished to wage. Patricia was vaguely aware of the alarm which had sounded and knew that sooner or later someone would be dispatched to deter her. For now, at least, it was too late.

She cocked her head and listened. Gunfire sounded in the distance, as did screams and gibberish. ADVENT would be cleaning this up after she left, and there was likely little point in bothering to wipe out each and every one of those who were more focused on their own panic than taking it out on her.

The damage had been done, and ADVENT would be stuck with a bunch of useless soldiers.

*This is only the beginning.*

*Come and stop me.*

As the fires burned around her, and bodies littered the ground, Patricia stepped into a portal before her and left the scene of her rampage, only mere minutes before the first of the ADVENT response came.

She idly wondered how they would react.

Likely with some panic of their own.

And then fear would set in.

Because now, nowhere was safe.

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*Home of Runi’sirasis’vitianis, Geneva – Switzerland*

*5/1/2017 – 9:00 P.M.*

There had been several approaches Nemo had considered for removing his target. One would have been luring her somewhere in the open, though that had quickly been dismissed as she traveled with a number of bodyguards – bodyguards who still guarded her house, but didn’t follow her inside. As such, they were irrelevant, but while one Vitakarian could be replaced, there were none for the
guards.

An investigation would arouse suspicion.

Suspicion that was not needed now.

So the simplest solution was the most obvious. Nemo would simply wait in her place of residence. The cameras were an issue, but they were more than capable of being subverted. The cones of vision had been memorized, and fortunately the specifications and capabilities were publicly available.

Freedom of information was an excellent tool; it remained an open question why the humans didn’t see containing it as a priority.

Perhaps they did, and had determined it was impossible.

Objectively, it likely was.

Though mostly because they had allowed this freedom to grow out of control.

Quite curious, as no other species had that problem. Information systems like the Internet were not new, but they were far different in architecture to what the humans used. It was odd how they had started out on the normal path, and yet instead of expanding the capabilities and keeping public access limited, they opened it up.

Well, it certainly made operations easier.

The cameras now were playing on loops with the ADVENT overseers none the wiser, if they monitored this with any degree of seriousness. After all, the Collective had far bigger issues to concern themselves; certainly far more important than one lone Vitakarian woman, even a mildly influential one.

Sirasis’s home was modest and plain for the most part. Small, and more reminiscent of an office in places than a home. A kitchen, a board room, a bedroom, all furnished with Human designs and furniture, though there were some art pieces and color schemes that were distinctly Vitakarian. Nemo idly wondered if a number of the defectors had the skill, or if she had recovered them.

A door opened.

She would be coming up soon.

Nemo just stood in a small closet with the door ever so slightly ajar. Enough to see out of. There was a risk that she would spot him, but if she was that close it would not be enough to save her. The cameras would not pick up anything, nor would the listening devices he’d found. Collective tools made detecting such trivial.

She had stepped foot into the place of her death, and each step brought her ever closer.

The thing that was Nemo simply listened; senses far beyond any normal organic being. It heard each step she took, the shuffling of a bag and perhaps some documents which were placed onto the table; it heard a clink of keys that were hung up. It heard her steady breathing and calm heartrate. There was no smell, no indication that she was anything but at ease.

Good.
No reason she needed to suffer.

Merely a casualty of war.

She drew closer to his hiding place, and passed by without a second thought. Nemo heard the guards take their positions outside, and when she was only a few steps from the closet Nemo pushed the door soundlessly out and crossed the distance in seconds. Before she even realized what was happening, Nemo’s hands were around her head.

A twist, a pull, and a crack.

She’d never seen it coming.

Quick. Painless. Effective.

He laid the body down, her expression blank; not even surprised by what happened. Her mind hadn’t been able to process it. The being wearing her face stood over the victim, wondering if that was a preferential way to die.

Was it better to simply cease to exist without warning? Or to know the cause of your death?

Interestingly, Nemo had a preference.

If it was to die, it wanted to know who had killed it.

Otherwise, it almost felt...pointless. An unceremonious end to a gripping story. A rushed conclusion without purpose. An eternal question. A lack of...

He felt several words on the tip of his tongue. Most didn’t seem right, but interestingly, the word *fair* felt right. A lack of fairness. Of closure.

Nemo almost felt guilt now.

Not for the act.

But that she hadn’t died knowing who had done it.

Or why.

A grey-skinned hand reached into the pocket and pulled out a small device that was placed on the chest of Sirasis. Nemo took a step back and activated the device. Black nanites spewed out of the device, and spread throughout her body, slowly consuming her. Nemo watched the morbid process with unblinking eyes until the very last cell had been disposed of.

The nanites went dead, a small pile of dust on the floor.

Without looking, Nemo reached into the closet and pulled out a broom and gave a sharp sweep, scattering the defunct machines to the air. There was the miniscule risk that ADVENT would discover them, of course, but Nemo had little faith such an insignificant event would be its downfall. That was simply not how this story would go, nor did it have an intention of letting it happen any way other than planned.

*This is who I am now.*

Nemo would fade to control its puppet, and Sirasis would step forward, and she would be a voice of a people who had abandoned their homes and lives for the promise of new ones.
This is what I am.

She would affect change. She would show the world the futility of facing the Collective, but in a more…controlled manner.

When the face of the traitors succumbed to the poison of fear, the rest would follow.

But the downfall must be convincing.

It was a role that promised to be a fascinating one.

Sirasis, or the thing that puppeted her, walked over to the bed and slid into it, intent on getting a pleasant night’s sleep.

She had a big day tomorrow.

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Nulorian Outpost, Borelian Wastes – Near Vitiary

5/2/2017 – 10:54 A.M.

The sun blazed down on the snowy tundra as Vitakara marched upon it, with light winds sending up tufts of snow. The roar of Vitakara troop transports echoed for miles around, and the sight of the silver legions of Runianarch soldiers painted an imposing sight, especially as they were contrasted by the black armor of Custodians interspersed with Sectoid Vanguards.

Plasma fire was already being exchanged from the automated defenses Siaru was commanding, as well as Nulorian soldiers dug into their entrenched positions, determined to kill as many of their hated enemy as possible.

So far, they were holding out.

“Hit the Vanguards!” Nartha called out, and Mehren and Edgar, two XCOM Intelligence agents who had received sniper training coordinated their fire from the roof, forcing several of the Vanguards to hold in place as gauss rounds slammed into their shields. Nartha and Shun fired together, picking off several more hapless Runianarch soldiers who were frantically trying to establish cover.

Vitakarian fighters streamed overhead, and that wasn’t good. “Fighters!”

Very rarely were the spacecraft of the Vitakara used – probably because they were not good fighters in what Humans called dogfights, but better at precision targeting. Holding out in a trench wasn’t going to matter if a missile eradicated them. “Siaru,” Miridian commanded. “Concentrate fire on anti-air defenses.”

“TARGETING PARAMETERS RECONFIGURED. HOSTILE NETWORK IDENTIFIED. ENGAGING INFOWAR ATTACK.”

“What does that mean?” Shun asked as she ducked behind the metal barrier, they’d taken up cover behind.

“It means he’s going to make their lives difficult,” Nartha assumed as he laid down some covering fire against several Borelian soldiers. “I hope.”
The Custodians suddenly froze or slowed their movements. Runianarch soldiers who had helmets also suddenly stopped shooting, shaking their heads or holding their helmets; some tapping on them as if trying to get rid of something. The Custodians didn’t turn on the Runianarch, like what Nartha had hoped, but they were definitely not being used properly.

Out of a morbid curiosity, he turned to a Collective frequency he’d memorized and almost threw off his helmet from the intensity of the mantra being played by their machine ally.

“LEAVE OR BE DESTROYED. LEAVE OR BE DESTROYED. LEAVE OR BE DESTROYED. LEAVE OR BE DESTROYED. LEAVE OR BE DESTROYED.”

It was played over and over in the voice of a mechanical monster, at the highest volume possible until the words blurred into one coherent roar that stayed in your head far longer than it should. Even as Nartha turned the noise off, the voice still echoed in his head. It made him feel exposed; vulnerable, he could only imagine what the soldiers who couldn’t get rid of it as easily felt.

“Kill them now,” Miridian ordered, and this time the barrage of fire was far more successful, dropping entire lines of Runianarch soldiers, as Siaru used the emplacements to deter the Vitakara fighters in the skies. None were shot down, but they were keeping their distance.

Then suddenly the Custodians reverted to normal.

“SELF-OBFUSCATION PROTOCOLS INITIATED. RETREAT ADVISED.”

“What?” Was Siaru abandoning them now? He and Shun exchanged a look, faces obscured by their helmets, their surprise and dismay could be felt.

It all made sense a few seconds later.

“Well, isn’t this interesting!” Quisilia stepped out of a portal, flipping a black dagger in the air.

The Ethereal observed the bunker, almost bemused. “I’ve been anticipating this day for some time. You could not run forever, Miridian.” He zeroed in on Nartha. “Or you either, traitorous Zararch.”

He flashed and suddenly he was in the Nulorian lines, blades flying fast as multiple Nulorian were slaughtered in front of him, some by the wicked blades Quisilia wielded, and others by telepathic commands. He teleported to the lone Human psion and killed Yakiv where he stood, barely able to fire off a shot.

“I admit, Nartha,” Quisilia said, motioning with a hand and Nartha’s weapon flying out of his hands. “You seemed to figure it out in the end. But too little, too late.”

Nartha reached for a pistol and Quisilia laughed, telekinetically grabbing Shun and throwing her towards him, sending them both to the slippery snowy ground. “What are you talking about?” He growled. “I guess I should say you figured me out. You allowed a traitor in the highest levels of your ranks and failed to detect him.”

“Oh, if only that were true,” Quisilia chided, wagging a finger. “Did you really think we were so incompetent as to let you run around the Collective without a purpose? Did you really think we sent you to find traitors on Vitakar, on Desolan, and elsewhere by accident?”

The breath suddenly left him as he stumbled to his feet, a horrible thought taking shape in his mind. “No…you didn’t…you couldn’t…”
“I find it incredible,” Quisilia said, thoroughly enjoying the exchange. “How you thought yourself so special that you thought you could not only outsmart the Zar’Chon, but me. And while I may not be a master of spycraft, I am certainly no fool.” He flung his hand forward and one of the blades embedded itself in his chest, creating a stinging pain. “And I am much smarter than you.”

He heard Shun scream his name, and he stumbled down to one knee, though he could hear Quisilia’s words clearly; words he probably wanted him to hear, mocking him. “How exactly do you think we found all of these Zararch installations? Would you like to hear how the operation on Desolan is proceeding? Quite clever, what you tried to do. And it might have even worked, if you hadn’t forgotten one simple truth.” Quisilia knelt to one knee, the eyes of the helmet looking into Nartha’s own as his hands clutched the blade. “You cannot beat us. The Collective will remain under the watch of the Ethereals, now and forever.”

Shun was beside him now, whipping out a medkit as Nartha stared numbly ahead, feeling all semblance of control leave as his world crashed around him.

All of this was his fault.

All the precautions he’d taken, all the times he thought he was being smart, all the risks he’d taken, it had all been pointless, because he’d made the fatal mistake of assuming that he hadn’t been compromised from the moment he’d first met the Zar’Chon after arriving from Earth. It must have been there, or soon after.

He’d underestimated their patience, their willingness to suffer defeats.

But he could see very clearly now.

Whatever temporary pain he’d caused, whatever troubles he’d caused, whatever damage he’d inflicted, it paled in comparison to what he offered. A useful pawn who’d gone to the trouble of gathering the internal dissidents of the Collective into one place, or at least given them the information. How much did they know?

Was it all lost?

Looking up at the gloating Ethereal, Nartha decided that no matter what happened…he wasn’t, as the late Van Doorn would say, going down without a fight. He held onto Shun, reaching for a rifle. “Are you going to keep talking,” he spat out. “Or are you going to finish this?”

“Really?” Quisilia actually sounded incredulous. “I’ve literally just said your entire little rebellion was completely pointless, and all you can do is taunt me? Do you actually have a death wish?” He looked to Shun holding him up. “What, you want her to die too?”

“He makes a good point,” Shun added, voice weak, but firm as she lifted her own pistol. “It’s not like you’re going to let us live anyway. And I still remember when you were thrown into that wall.”

“Wow, I could never have seen that insult coming,” Quisilia said dryly, as the weapons were pulled from their hands. “Truly, you two are masters of the word. I’m tempted to keep both of you alive simply because your attempts to be defiant are amusing. You are less than nothing now; your purpose has been served. Live, die, it matters little now. Even if you don’t die today, I suspect you won’t last long when the Nulorian know that you destroyed them.”

His voice turned surprised. “Well now, a new challenger approaches.”

Nartha suddenly found himself being lifted up, along with Shun and unceremoniously dropped to
the side. He looked to see none other than the Chronicler walk opposite Quisilia, clad in his familiar armor. “Correct me if I’m wrong, Quisilia,” the Chronicler said, beginning to glow with blue power. “But I believe you challenged me to a rematch.”

“And here I thought you wouldn’t accept,” Quisilia flipped the weapon in his hand. “And of course, you show up right before I kill more of your people. How convenient. Nonetheless, my job is done. The Nulorian will never recover, and ending today with your death will be satisfying indeed.”

“We shall see, Quisilia,” the voice of the Chronicler grew layered and deeper. “This time, you will not be saved by chance.”

With the last vestiges of his consciousness, Nartha saw the Chronicler blast Quisilia with psionic energy which the Ethereal avoided through an immediate teleport, and then drifted off into unconsciousness, hoping that Shun would be able to get out safely.

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Tampa, Florida – United States of America

5/7/2017 – 12:12 P.M.

Ground was being lost, and it was going to snowball into the Collective overrunning them soon enough. The Battlemaster had made the proper adjustments as he intended to win the war in a conventional way. Everything ADVENT and XCOM had done to keep him in check was subverted, and counters to the strategies, defenses, and soldiers were brought to bear.

The Commander would have been both impressed and dismayed at the result, if conventional victory was something that they had been working towards.

But standing on a skyscraper, as cold rain poured down upon the miserable battlefield, he breathed a sigh of relief. He had stated that Tampa would not fall…and he would walk away keeping that promise. It had been close.

Very close.

But it was ready.

There were clearly many unknowns; there had been no proper testing on GAIA outside of simulations and models, and so this was the first field test of the technology. They were relying an uncomfortable amount on luck and trusting that the developers and JULIAN had been able to make the nanites do what they wanted.

The developers were exhausted, but confident. Nearly a thousand men and women had worked around the clock testing iteration after iteration, from ADVENT and XCOM alike, knowing that one poorly written line of code or ill-defined parameter could turn GAIA from a weapon of salvation into one that would consume not just the aliens, but the state itself.

Well, somewhat. If needed, the entire project had a kill-switch, but if they had to use it, Florida was effectively doomed, as was a good portion of the southeast United States.

They were not quite taking that large of a risk.

JULIAN had the advantage of being able to devote himself fully to the project, not needing things like sleep or food, though the downside was that his limited processing power meant he could not
assist in a significant capacity beyond the occasional conversation – and sometimes JULIAN simply didn’t want to talk, so absorbed was he in ensuring GAIA would work.

What had been highly interesting was hearing from developers – primarily through Vahlen and Jackson – how JULIAN had gone from a very sarcastic and deriding manager of the project into almost appreciating his ‘human assistants’ as he so generously put it by the end. Initially JULIAN had believed he could do most of the work himself, without significant Human assistance.

If he’d had a month of uninterrupted time, it was likely true, but they had definitely not had that time. All working together, they’d finally done it.

“GAIA is ready, Commander,” JULIAN stated proudly into his earpiece, one of the first times he had imitated the emotion, the Commander noted. “Please launch at your command.”

“He certainly has a flair for the dramatic,” Laura muttered, standing beside him, hair wet and sticking to her neck. The Commander half-believed she was only standing out in the rain so she wouldn’t fall asleep from sheer exhaustion trying to limit the casualties while also buying as much time as possible for GAIA to be finished.

“That he does,” the Commander agreed. “Especially since he could technically start it himself whenever he wanted.”

“Most certainly, Commander, but I wouldn’t deprive you of the chance to press a button and congratulate yourself for the outcome despite not actually doing anything,” JULIAN quipped. “Aside from killing aliens, of course. But anyone could do that.”

“Touching, JULIAN,” the Commander retorted dryly. “But it also relies on you and your team doing your job correctly.”

“I have full confidence in what my subje-my Human assistants along with myself have accomplished,” JULIAN said. “Now stop wasting time and push the button.”

The Commander picked up a small black fob he’d set on the railing. Manufactured by JULIAN, it absolutely did not need to exist, but as Laura had said, he had a flair for the dramatic, and privately the Commander could see the appeal to pressing a simple button to end the fighting. It wasn’t quite a win button, per se, though it effectively functioned like one. For some reason, there was a large bold F stamped onto the center of the button.

The Commander wondered what it meant.

Probably something from the Internet. JULIAN reminded him of Quisilia sometimes, though fortunately this time he was on their side.

Here we go. The Commander pressed the button, then stepped forward, and watched.

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Tampa, Florida – United States of America

5/7/2017 – 12:18 P.M.

Victory was close enough that Ivan could practically taste it. The ADVENT armies had defended themselves adequately, but they could not hope to win against the might of the Collective – nor could they stand against him. With the Battlemaster’s own Harbinger out of the picture, he had stepped up in a far more impactful way.
Fighting with swords and in person was all well and good, but it was…limited.

And dangerous.

Truthfully, that Yang had almost died had ultimately been a net positive both for the war effort, and himself. The Battlemaster was no longer distracted by her, and focused on the offensive which had gone far better now. Likely because Ivan was finally able to utilize his extensive talents more openly. Largely because the Battlemaster needed another force multiplier, and he could fulfill it far better than Yang.

And unlike her, he would not needlessly throw himself into danger. There were a few thousand soldiers between him and ADVENT, and that was how it should be. He was more useful behind the lines, providing constant mental attacks against ADVENT. Not all of them succeeded of course, and the more ADVENT was pushed back, the more difficult it became to penetrate their minds.

There was something blocking him. Sometimes it was clearly psions who he was able to brute-force through, but other times it was…something else. Possibly T’Leth, but Ivan wasn’t completely sure, but it felt distinctly alien and…old. There was an unsettling quality around it, one which he admitted didn’t want to push against more.

It was like putting a hand into slime. It wasn’t necessarily harmful, but it was unpleasant.

Still, all of that was soon to be behind them. Victory was close at hand.

He extended his mind to the ADVENT defenders once again, though this time noticed something peculiar…a rush of conflicting emotions. Desperation, concern, fear, all of those he had felt before and throughout the conflict, but now added onto it was a sharp surprise and it was amplified by the Runianarch soldiers and simple-minded Mutons.

Ivan frowned to himself.

Odd.

An XCOM squad? It wouldn’t surprise him, as there had been many instances. Yet this wasn’t just affecting the area he was observing; a quick check of the minds around him picked up growing pockets of surprise morphing into fear, then panic, and it was growing faster and faster. What could possibly be going on?

Against his better judgement, Ivan disconnected himself from his mental assaults, and opened his eyes, trying to get a sense of what was going on. Within his shelter, he heard nothing, and quickly walked outside and froze in surprise by what he saw. Runianarch soldiers were running away, while Mutons were firing down a street at a black mass that was inching towards them.

No, not a mass; not some kind of sludge. It looked like dust of all things, yet was accompanied by a mechanical clicking sound. The corpses and rubble it moved over were consumed as if a swarm of hungry ants had gone over it. Plasma fire was taking out chunks of the mass, yet like water it flowed back together into a seamless whole.

Nanites.

Ivan blinked.

How? How had they gotten in? ADVENT didn’t deploy nanoweaponry like this!
ADVENT had a working doctrine on nanoweapons. Zararch operatives had confirmed as much. Nanoweapons were a last-resort weapon, and even then, there was heated debate over what the scope should be. Safeguards like limited operating time or limited parameters were always employed. This simply shouldn’t be happening. The nanites should dissipate at any moment.

But…they weren’t.

If anything, the black swarm was growing stronger.

“Behind!” One of the Vitakara yelled, and Ivan spun around and saw that more nanites were approaching. He suddenly had a terrible, sinking feeling that they’d been tricked. ADVENT had somehow laid a trap for them, which they’d taken. They’d seeded the city with nanite bombs and activated them when they were on the cusp of victory.

He’d been right. The ceasefire had been a ruse for ADVENT to pull this off.

“This is the Battlemaster to all Collective forces,” the Battlemaster suddenly sent over the channel. “Immediately retreat to the nearest Gateway or landing station for evacuation. Cleanser Ships are moving in for EMP cleansing. Only use wide-area energy and explosive weapons to delay nanite pockets. Arms fire is insufficient.”

And this is your fault, Ivan thought bitterly as he decided it was best to run away. Not glamorous, but a telepath could unfortunately do nothing against nanites, and he had no explosives at his disposal…not that he would have used them. He knew better than to think that would be enough to defeat something like this.

The battle lines had broken down this far from where the fighting was supposed to be, and it was effectively controlled chaos, with no steady direction or plan. Everyone was just trying to survive. To go the opposite direction of the nanites that seemed to be coming from everywhere, and that was when Ivan realized that there was a problem.

He didn’t know where the landing zones were. Or even some of the Gateways.

He hadn’t considered those important to learn, because why would he need to know that? There were no shortage of individuals who were able to escort him, though now he was deeply regretting that gap in his knowledge. He had severed the connection with the Overmind when he’d ceased his attack, as otherwise it was too distracting, though now he considered activating it again…

But if he did, he might become paralyzed and definitely die to the nanites.

He took a steady breath. He could find his way to the landing zone. He was certainly not going to die here. Certainly not to…nanites of all things. But where to go? All the soldiers were running in different directions, and to make matters worse, the nanites could be down any street or any alleyway. Ivan vaguely remembered a place where a landing pad might be, and charged off in that direction, not caring if the specifics were sketchy.

“Where is the landing zone!” he demanded to a stuttering Vitakarian who pushed him away in a panic and ran forward.

“Where!” Ivan roared, eyes glowing purple and deciding to not waste time and went directly into the hapless alien’s mind, only to remember that it was an alien mind, and those he was less familiar with. “Useless!” he spat, leaving the stunned alien in place while moving forward, a quick glance behind saw that the nanites were moving forward like a creeping plague.

The storm was picking up wind, and it was blowing some of the nanites around like dangerous,
toxic dust that could kill with a single grain. The illogical parts of Ivan’s brain were firing off, desperately wondering why the nanites weren’t shorting out if it was raining so hard. There were many more audible screams as aliens were caught in the nanite swarm and torn apart.

Speed was paramount, but Ivan was now afraid it wouldn’t be enough, as wherever he turned, eventually he saw wisps or streams of the black nanites who threatened to consume him. His path became haphazard, and turning from a vague memory into going wherever it seemed safe. The walls felt like they were closing in, and he was soon lost, with no path in sight, and the screams sounding all around him.

Then it happened.

He turned into an alley, and it was a dead end.

He quickly turned around, and walked back out to see nanite streams coming in from both directions. There was no way out. It was…almost absurd how it had come down to this. This was not supposed to be what happened. There needed to be some way out of this; some path to his survival. Inside one of the buildings?

No, he wouldn’t be able to get in fast enough, and it would essentially trap him. Get on the roof? Maybe! He spotted a dumpster propped against the alleyway, and above – very far above – was a window ledge. He might be able to jump up to it and pull himself in. Well, he didn’t have a choice. He had some genetic enhancements, but it certainly wasn’t to the level of Patricia or Yang, something he was truly regretting now.

Heart pounding, he jumped onto the dumpster and with the buzzing and clicking of the nanites behind him, knelt down and jumped as high as he could. His fingers gripped the slick ledge; one he almost missed, but he managed. He let out a sigh of relief as he just hung there, out of the reach of the nanites below him.

Alright, he had done the first step, now-

His grip slipped. One hand fell down, and soon Ivan found himself falling and landed directly onto the dumpster, knocking the breath out of him, which was immediately replaced by terror. He pushed himself up to the dumpster, and for a brief moment thought he was safe, as the nanites swarmed underneath, seeming to sense he was there.

A pinprick jolted his leg. Instinctively he reached down and swatted it. A dozen more appeared on his legs, and he knew it was too late. Complete panic took over as he tried slapping his legs, maybe thinking to kill them with kinetic force. He hastily tried pulling off his boots and pants to get to the nanites directly, but as his legs became fire, his incessant slapping somehow transferred the nanites to his hands, and started eating away at them as well.

Blood was starting to trickle down his leg from the holes torn open by the nanites, and a burst of wind blew hundreds more onto him, directly onto his face and chest. He had kept from screaming thus far, but this was impossible to stay quiet on, and he no longer cared who would hear him. Ironically, opening his mouth simply allowed several nanites into it, which began eating his tongue and throat, and his eyes soon turned to mush as they were eaten away.

Vision faded.

His legs gave way.

Perhaps a finger had fallen off?
Perhaps his tongue?

There was too much pain. Too much stimulus.

He fell off the dumpster, surprised he’d been able to stand for so long. He fell into the waiting machines, machines he could swear lusted for his blood and flesh. They hungrily covered every inch of his body and ripped it apart piece by piece, molecule by molecule. Ivan Smirnov did not last long before his body was consumed.

When the swarm dispersed, there was nothing.

He was far from the only one.

When ADVENT walked through the streets, they saw no bodies. They saw no carnage.

Had many not held the brutal and traumatic memories of the weeks-long conflict they had participated in, one might wonder if there had even been a battle at all.

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To be continued in Chapter 58

“Conspiracies and Coronations”

Chapter End Notes

So a couple of things to add on here. First is that I recently began writing a supplementary piece for LogicalPremise for his OSABC series, specifically on the Citadel, check that out if you’re interested. Second thing is that I'm putting it out there that if anyone is interested in maybe writing something within the context of this series (i.e. a short story, guest XCOM File, etc.) let me know. I've already found some people I'm working with and you might see some new stories written by them in the future.
Birds chirped and insects buzzed within the outdoor plateau, as the warm sun blazed overhead. The weather lacked the bite of the cold the General was so familiar with; it was an odd sensation, though not necessarily unpleasant – for now, at least. Terraforming the climate to be perpetually mild threw him off too often. He had been to enough planets to dislike the unnaturalness of what the Throne World had been engineered to become.

A home for the soft Lords and servants, all falsely content in believing themselves as invincible and undisputed in this galaxy. An illusionary triumph over the elements and aspects of their home they had disliked, which had been crushed by the hand of scientists and geoengineers. Impressive in the minds of the limited. Were it not for the visionary he served, they would hold a mere fraction of the power they now possessed, so low were their ambitions.

The mild climate now explained why his Lord had decided to wear the more ornate, and comfortable, ceremonial attire, something the General now wished he had emulated, though here it would only make him feel more like an outsider. It was a curious perspective, to be old enough to see the home he had grown up in change to the point where it was hardly recognizable. Perhaps it was for the best, but it did not change the foreign atmosphere that had manifested.

Red and silver glyphs and symbols were woven through the silks of his Lord’s attire, telling a story only the literate and sophisticated could understand. It was deceptive to the casual observer, beautiful in appearance but portrayed a tale of blood, conquest, and darkness.

The pallid Lord took a small sip from the glass in his hand, the irregular temperature seeming not to affect him in the slightest. His glass was filled with an alien beverage that had been harvested from another sphere long ago – wine. Proof that the contributions of other species and spheres could eventually be integrated and later cultivated here. The General did not care for the beverage, though the symbolic implications he could appreciate far more.

They sat around a wooden table under a towering tree, as a comfortable breeze blew. The smells of fruits and flowers wafted up from the lower plantations, while guards lined the crystal walls of the palace it protected. Said fruit had been gathered and placed in the center of the table, untouched by the two men, though their third guest had little problem helping himself.

Their guest bore the rugged appearance of a hunter or mercenary, lacking the flawless skin and elegance both he and his Lord possessed. Instead, he sported a jagged scar across his throat, and there were many similar wounds under the leathers and armor he wore. The reptilian eyes of a predator flicked between the two of them, an equally feral smile playing on his lips. Plasma packs, physical ammunition, several daggers, and a multitude of explosives hung from his waist and straps on his chest, with vials of unknown liquids also within easy access. A silver ornament of intertwined metal strands hung from his neck, completing the haphazard attire.

He rivaled the General in mass and height, though unlike the well-maintained gear of the Riders, this man’s equipment was stained and dirtied. A faint smell of earth and blood clung to him, likely in part from the rifle strapped to his back along with a hardened sword. Clearly, this was not a man
that belonged here.

Nonetheless, his Lord had decided he had a role to play.

“[I think we should begin,]” the Hunter finally said, tossing away the seed of the fruit he had eaten. “[We both have an intolerance for small talk. I would know why you requested me, especially considering the contract we were in the process of fulfilling.]” His command of the language matched the rest of him, rougher than normal, if still perfectly fluent. It was how the General knew he was originally a native of the Throne World, as foreigners had a distinct lilt.

It was quite interesting. Few natives of the Sphere, let alone the Throne World, pursued the path this man had.

“[You reviewed what we provided you on the way, I trust,]” his Lord began neutrally, leaning back into his chair, indicating him to continue. “[Your assessment?]”

The Hunter glanced down to the papers splayed out on the table, which he had been reviewing during the meal, while ignoring the awkward silence. “[Rather interesting, if I do say so myself. But, to be blunt my Lord, not relevant. Unless you want a number of these people dead, or there is an infestation on this world, I’m not sure why you need us.]”

“[Consider it redundancy,]” the Lord said, lacing his fingers together. “[There is a principal asset of ours involved, but considering the implications I would prefer we not be reliant on him.]”

The man glanced at him with yellow unblinking and curious eyes. “[Define ’principal asset’?]”

“[The Viceroy.]”

The Hunter whistled, leaning back. “[I see. In which case, my question still stands. We’re not spies, so supporting someone like the Viceroy would be gross mismanagement. Furthermore, if you have insertion capabilities, you can easily deploy your dedicated assassins and harvesters. I would prefer a straight answer, my Lord. You know very well what we are capable of – and know we don’t waste time.]”

The General bristled. “[This invitation was not a request.]”

“[Unofficially, yes,]” the Hunter waved a hand. “[However, we’re aware of our worth to the Throne. Bickering is unnecessary, General; no need for threats. I’m stating that there is little reason to request us in lieu of utilizing your own specialized agents. So if you do not have a contract for me, then I might as well take my leave.]”

“[You’re in our sphere and answer to the Throne,]” the General reminded him. “[This is not a negotiation.]”

“[A throne I will remind you, your Lord does not sit upon,]” the Hunter amended with a smile. “[And to my knowledge, the Sage-King has not given me this command.]” The Lord’s lips curled up ever so slightly at that.

“[Enough,]” his Lord stated slowly, raising a fist and placed a holoprojector on the table with one hand, and sliding a packet to the Hunter with the other, which bore the seal of the Sage-King himself – something the General hadn’t been aware had been acquired.

An unexpected, but positive development.

The humor left the face and bright eyes of the Hunter, who visibly swallowed and reached for the
packet. “[This is a matter concerning the interests of the Throne World itself,]” his Lord said in a controlled voice. “[It is a long-term contract, in which you have two targets. This is your first.]” With the press of a button, the image of a familiar human appeared from the holoprojector. The Hunter appraised it for a few minutes, seemingly taken by surprise for the second time in as many minutes.

“[Is this who I think it is?]” He asked warily.

The General frowned. “[How would you know?]”

“[Come now, General,]” the Hunter chided with a thin smile. “[We may not be friends with the other Schools, but rumors spread – particularly with traitors and deserters. This particular individual however is…unique.]” He waved a hand. “[Not that it necessarily matters, but I find it curious. Nevertheless, what are the conditions? Alive? Dead?]”

“[Alive,]” the Lord emphasized firmly, fixing the Hunter with a stern glare. “[Under no circumstances is she to be permanently harmed.]”

A nod, as the fingers of the Hunter rapped on the table in a short rhythm. “[Manageable. It won’t be easy, but it will be done. Though I suspect I lack certain tools to make a capture feasible.]”

The General nodded, relaxing slightly. “[Those will be provided to you.]”

“[Ultimately, this conflict on Earth is minor. The more important target will follow after your initial success,]” his Lord continued, shutting off the holoprojector. “[Understand that what I will tell you will not be repeated.]”

“[Of course.]”

“[The Entity has escaped containment, and will likely migrate to the Sphere of the Sovereign,]” he continued. “[I trust I don’t have to describe why this is problematic?]”

The Hunter had gone still, concern etched on his face – though unsurprisingly enough, it quickly morphed into irritation. “[We warned you this would happen. You should have killed him when you had the chance.]”

“[Perhaps,]” the Lord acknowledged with an idle motion. “[But considering the advances the Throne has made, the purpose has been served. He was captured once, he will be captured again.]”

The Hunter gave a bleak, dismissive laugh. “[You have no idea what that thing is, even now. What you learned from it means absolutely nothing to him, nor what you accomplished. You are speaking of a monster that transcends reality as we understand it; a thing that fed you scraps to make you complacent. No, my Lord, if we help you again, it will not be to capture the Entity – it will be to kill him.]”

“[Assuming he can be killed,]” the Lord idly noted. “[I am not convinced he can. You of all people should know some creatures cannot be killed.]”

“[And that is what concerns us,]” the Hunter admitted, lips in a thin line. “[We had potentially one chance to kill it – or at least try – and you forbade us. So you could exploit it. Killing it – or at least attempting such - is imperative, but this is something I cannot do alone.]” He grimaced. “[Killing monsters is our specialty – but even now you don’t understand what you’re asking.]”

“[Then learn,]” the Lord stated dryly. “[For once it seems I possess more optimism than you. This Entity is a threat, but he is a puzzle who follows and is bound by rules. He can be dealt with, and
you know what to look for. For now, observe and complete your first task. When you confirm the Entity walks the sphere, you will inform us and we shall mobilize."

There was a brief pause, and the Hunter finally gave a single nod. "[Very well, my Lord. It will be done. You will receive your first report shortly.]

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Unknown

Unknown Time

There was a beeping that seeped into his reality, initially quiet but grew steadily louder; a reality which was soon supplemented by bright lights and blurry vision that soon became clear. Nartha slowly woke up, groggy; feeling terrible overall, and with his chest feeling squeezed. He lifted a hand to wipe his eyes, then blinked. Feeling was coming back throughout his body, and the good news was that he seemed to be intact.

No missing limbs or digits, which was a positive; though now he felt the bandages wrapped tight around his chest where he’d been stabbed. The area of the wounds was sore to the touch, and it seemed that his heart was beating slower. It didn’t hurt to breathe, but it wasn’t comfortable either.

It was then after a minute that he realized that there was something warm pinning his left hand to the bedrest, and he idly looked down to see Shun resting on her hands, which were subsequently pinning his own. Somehow, she seemed to be breathing comfortably, more so than he would have expected.

She was unsurprisingly not wearing armor, with regular civilian clothing instead; a simple shirt and pants, and he saw boots kicked haphazardly by the door. Her short hair was definitely a mess compared to how it normally was, but none of that really mattered to him right now.

He felt a mental burden lift; not a lot, but enough. Good, she made it.

The battle, or the mess that it had turned into, was unfortunately fresh in his mind and soon consumed his thoughts as he leaned back. He idly looked around the room, seeing that he was in an enclosed room with dim lighting and a locked door. A medical console beeped, and the counter had some papers and tablets strewn on it with the faint smell of coffee brewing from the respective machine stashed in the corner. Still, he wasn’t sure if it was a normal patient room or a makeshift prison the Nulorian had stashed him in.

He wouldn’t be surprised either way.

The only thing he really felt right now outside of the pain, was the guilt. Innumerable people were dead or being held by the Zararch; citizens and Nulorian, innocent and guilty alike, all who would be killed after they were interrogated. XCOM and Nulorian soldiers were dead. Their plans on Vitakar were at best stalled, and their grand idea to rescue those the Zararch would use as leverage was effectively as dead as the many corpses that were no doubt now rotting in the snow.

All of it his fault.

He’d been unwitting, perhaps, but it was still his fault. He didn’t have to be an intentional traitor to bring the Collective down upon everyone. He could blame his ignorance, or his expectations, or anything else, but when it came down to it, he was the vessel through which the Ethereals had used to bring down the Nulorian and anyone they were connected to.
Nothing would ever change that.

Stupid of him for thinking he could outsmart the Zar’Chon, let alone the Ethereals. Quisilia had probably laughed himself silly at how effective Nartha had been. Within months he’d located government sympathizers, Nulorian officers, Muton smuggling rings, established a cell on Desolan, and set up talks with sympathetic Andromedon Unions.

All of that now pointless. He closed his eyes.

*Good job Nartha, you killed the resistance.*

Guilt, defeat, sorrow, all of them were felt in equivalent measures. He didn’t deserve to have survived, and was honestly surprised he’d escaped Quisilia’s attack at all. Perhaps Quisilia hadn’t really cared, and thought it would be more amusing for him to live with the knowledge of what he’d done.

Why else would he have laid out that it was all his fault?

He felt Shun stir, jolting his eyes open. She yawned, and once she saw he was awake, moved to sit up, her cheeks slightly flushed. “Hey. Sorry. I promise I didn’t mean to fall asleep on your hand.”

“Of all the things I’m worried about,” he sighed. “That doesn’t even register. I’m just glad you’re alright.”

“The feeling is mutual,” she agreed, appraising him with concern in her eyes. “How are you feeling?”

“Terrible,” he answered bluntly, his voice drained of emotion as he sighed. “I’ll live, but right now I wish I hadn’t.”

A flash of sadness crossed her face. “Don’t say that,” she said quietly. “Please. It’s bad enough so many died. Losing you too would be…it would have made it worse.”

“I’m sorry,” he closed his eyes again, before continuing. “But it’s my fault this happened. Wittingly or not, I was used to kill all those people. I can’t change or mitigate what happened.”

“Nartha, it wasn’t just you,” Shun took his hand, clasping it firmly in her own while looking into his eyes. “We all were tricked. Do you know how many people literally put their lives in your hands, believing you weren’t compromised? The Commander, Andromedons, *Miridian*, me…do you think we would have let you get close, entrust you with our secrets and lives, if we didn’t have some assurance it was safe? The blame isn’t just on you, it’s on all of us.”

Despite himself, his lips curled up. “That is a…forgiving interpretation. I appreciate it, but I don’t think the Nulorian will think the same.” He looked to the door, remembering his earlier musings. “Out of curiosity, am I in a cell?”

She furrowed her eyebrows. “What? No, and I haven’t heard the Nulorian talking about doing anything to you.”

*Huh.* “Interesting,” he mused, more to himself, his voice more perplexed than relieved. “I would have expected to be woken up in an interrogation chair given how Miridian is rumored to handle leaks.”

“Like I said,” Shun reminded him. “This isn’t just your fault. He knows better than to blame it all on you. So does the Commander. Besides, they aren’t going to get through me.” She nodded to the
nightstand at the head of his bed, where there was a plasma pistol laying atop it. “If anyone’s going
to handle you, it’ll be XCOM.”

Despite the situation, he felt warm upon hearing that. “I…thank you. I don’t know if I’m worth
dying over though. At this point I feel like I’m more trouble than I’m worth.”

She snorted. “You managed to build a resistance network all on your own, found the Nulorian, and
met the elusive Miridian. Before that, you got into XCOM and were only found out because you
told the truth. Don’t sell yourself short,” she gave a wan smile. “Quisilia is probably upset you
managed to do what none of the Zararch had been able to. You still have all those skills.”

Shun patted his hand, standing. “More importantly, you’re my friend and comrade. We’d both die
for each other if it came down to it. We’ve all made mistakes, and we will learn from them. Now
hold still, I made something when you woke up.” Releasing his hand, she walked over to the
counter and pulled out a coffee pot, and poured some of the steaming beverage.

“Here,” she handed him a cup. “You liked this when I shared it with you.”

He took the offered cup with some suspicion, a quick smell confirmed it. “I don’t think I should be
on drugs right now. Or at least anymore that are in me right now.”

“It’s only a little bit of chocolate,” Shun insisted, taking a sip of her own. “You can’t have a mocha
without it. And you need it. Take small sips. You’ll feel better.” She reached over to her phone also
resting on the nightstand. “A new ADVENT study claims that Vitakara that take chocolate are ten
percent more active!”

“You don’t even get cell service here,” he rolled his eyes, moving his head for emphasis since it
was easy for her to miss the motion. “And I don’t suppose that doctors also hate that one simple
trick?”

She chuckled. “Well, probably. Worth a shot, but do it please? For me?”

He took the offered cup with some suspicion, a quick smell confirmed it. “I don’t think I should be
on drugs right now. Or at least anymore that are in me right now.”

She looked at him imploringly and he sighed, and decided to comply. “You’re a bad influence,
Shun,” he grumbled, but took a sip. It was good for sure, though he tried not to drink too much at a
time. A few minutes after the chocolate began working, he did feel a lot more awake now. Which
meant he should get details before he inevitably crashed. “How bad is everything?”

Relief washed over him when he heard that. That had been the nightmare scenario, and it seemed
to have been averted. He was already breathing easier. “Good, good.”

“A lot of Nulorian outposts were hit, and most in them died,” Shun continued, becoming more
grim. “I don’t know about Desolan, but given public statements from this Speaker, everyone there
is probably gone. Overall though…it seems like it could have been worse. Bad, but salvageable.
Don’t quote me on that, but it sounds like that is the case.”

“That’s…better than I feared,” Nartha nodded, taking another sip. The loss of the Desolan Cell hit
the worst, mostly because it was something that wasn’t composed of hardened terrorists. It had just
been a network of conscientious people who’d trusted him to keep them safe. They were probably
all dead now, and the Mutons had probably also been murdered. All for the crime of existing.

He moved on, he’d get more details on that later. “What about from XCOM?”
“Better news on that front,” she flashed a smile. “We kicked the aliens off Florida.”

He blinked, not expecting that. “How? That’s great but…completely out of the state?”

“Some kind of nanoweapon,” she explained vaguely. “I don’t know all the details, but I’ve heard it may change the war.”

She grimaced a few seconds later. “Not all good though, Patricia is still being a problem.” Her voice faded. “It’s…difficult to reconcile with what she’s become. I didn’t know her that well, but she always seemed like a good person. Now she’s attacking a military bases and killing everyone. Soldiers, civilians, men, women, children.” Shun shook her head. “She deliberately went after the civilian housing.”

Nartha shook his head, also finding it difficult to really believe, even now.

“Is it really her?” Nartha wondered. “Or the Imperator?”

“I don’t know,” she leaned in her chair, taking another sip automatically. “It’s easy to say it’s the Imperator, but I remember some of the things she did, and said, and I’m not sure. When it was killing aliens, we were completely fine with it, but now it’s us who’re being slaughtered…” She trailed off.

“The Commander doesn’t know how to stop her?” Nartha asked.

“I hope he does,” she admitted. “But I haven’t seen it. How do you stop the most powerful Human psion linked with the most powerful Ethereal in existence? The damn Battlemaster is an easier target. I’m sure we can beat him. Patricia…” she trailed off, shaking her head. “She’s not as simple; not from what I’ve seen. All I know is that I’m not the one to deal with her.”

He held off on taking another sip, feeling the euphoric effects of the drug begin to make themselves known. “And now what? Where do we go from here?”

“As far as I’m aware?” She rhetorically asked. “We keep going. Vitakar is going to be liberated, even with this setback. I don’t think there is a better way to get back at Quisilia than refusing to die and staying here. We can’t give up now.”

She was right. “No, we can’t. We’ll have to find a way.”

“I’ve heard some of the Nulorian saying that Miridian has a plan,” she said, glancing to the door. “Let’s hope it’s a good one.”

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Dreadnought of the Harbinger – Central Command

5/8/2017 – 1:19 P.M.

Dressed in her white ceremonial outfit, Patricia overlooked the intermingling crew with some satisfaction. While truthfully it wasn’t the best timing for a party in light of Florida, she’d learned that it was good to keep morale up, and emphasizing the victories over the losses would do them all some good.

And really, there was plenty of good news despite Florida. Despite the best efforts of ADVENT, South America was continuing to fall, Florida would soon be invaded again, Southeast Asia would continue to fall, and for all they knew, the next place she would strike would be Switzerland itself.
The nanoweapon was something of a problem, but certainly could be mitigated. The AI was the biggest threat, as it was very likely it was behind the nanoweapon – and no doubt behind more surprises XCOM and ADVENT had in store. Far too much power for XCOM to have, and it was only a matter of time before ADVENT began pumping them out too.

A problem to eventually deal with.

The atmosphere was good nonetheless; people were positive and feeling quite happy and content. There was a sense of community and connection that sometimes was lost if it wasn’t cultivated. Something she intended to keep well-maintained. Emotions were running high today, but in a good way.

Excellent.

She took a sip of water from the wine glass between her fingers. The Vitakara didn’t really like hard or intoxicating drinks – or at least had never really developed them, so there was a scarcity on the ship. Not that she really minded, but it felt a bit odd to organize a social where the primary drink was water.

She sensed a now-familiar mind coming up behind her. “Finished making the rounds?” Marian asked, coming up behind her.

“For now,” she said, making a brief connection with his mind to confirm it was him. After she’d learned that…things…like Nemo existed, she had become slightly paranoid, especially considering its last known assignment. That confirmation complete, she turned to face him fully. “I think it’s helping dispel the…” she idly waved a hand, searching for the word. “Mystique around me.”

Marian gave an agreeable nod, reflecting his feelings. “Yes, it was a good decision. You are certainly more approachable now. You came at a disadvantage, being both a Human and the Harbinger of the Imperator himself. Many of us are…well, used to being overlooked by the Ethereals.”

Patricia pursed her lips at the internal dismay he felt saying that, though he certainly wasn’t wrong. “A mistake.”

“Something the Imperator seems to be trying to address,” he agreed, cocking his head at her. “I assume this leadership is something you learned from the Commander?”

“Yes,” she mused, resting on the simple guardrail, looking out over the bridge, a melancholy feeling settling over her. “Well, mostly him. It’s something I think most know instinctively; people want to be liked and those under them loyal.”

Marian joined her, also leaning on the guardrail. “Supposedly common sense, but something I’ve noted many don’t not follow. At least not really. Do you wonder why that is?”

It seemed to be a question he’d been wondering since the event had started, and she thought a moment before giving an answer. “Apathy. Necessity. Simplicity. Loyalty, personal approval, all of that is…fine. But it’s not critical, not if there is a status quo. It can become exhausting, keeping the names and faces straight. When you reach a certain rank, when you have a certain amount of authority, it’s…simpler to view your people as assets and numbers, especially when you don’t see or interact with them regularly. More disassociation, easier to make hard decisions. The Commander understood that wasn’t the right approach.”

She smiled sadly to herself at the irony. “I doubt he’d appreciate me using what I learned here.”
“Probably not,” the Vitakarian agreed. “But it’s…I can’t disagree. In the Zararch we were jealous of the Collective Military because the Battlemaster…he cares. He makes his soldiers feel like they have a purpose and role to fill. That there is someone who understands them, who is on the front lines fighting and suffering beside them.” He gave a thin smile, not feeling slighted, but he definitely felt disappointment. “I’ve never even met the Zar’Chon personally.”

“A shame,” Patricia crossed her arms, thinking. “Perhaps he should alter his leadership methods.”

“I can understand it,” Marian shrugged. “Security and all that.” He cleared his throat, appearing to feel slightly embarrassed, but proud. “All that to say, thank you. I’m admittedly more cynical than many of my kind here, but it’s good to have someone who gives the illusion of caring.”

She smiled. “I appreciate that, and I can tell you it isn’t an act.” She set the glass down on a nearby table, and turned to face him, still leaning against the railing. They had plenty of time, and it didn’t hurt to learn a little more about her people. “If you don’t mind another personal question, I’m curious what you were involved in before being transferred under me?”

“A fair bit, Patricia,” he answered, briefly pausing. “Before Earth was even discovered I was primarily involved in anti-terrorism. Nulorian.” There were brief flickers of long-buried pain in the word.

“This is a change then,” she noted, softening her voice. “A good one, I hope.”

“Before Earth, Patricia,” he amended. “Once Earth entered the picture, I was reassigned for analysis. Largely language decryption and translation. I worked on Nulorian codebreaking and communications, so some skills naturally translated. Later this turned into analyzing public ADVENT speeches and addresses; picking out important details or signals.”

He nodded around him. “And then I got assigned here.”

“Hopefully it’s been a good experience,” she said, giving a nod. “Speaking of the Nulorian, they should hopefully not be a problem for the foreseeable future.”

“Yes, I wish I had been there,” he agreed wistfully, a fierce pride burning at the recollection. “We’d wished for a day like that for years. Miridian and the Nulorian were always out of reach. Shame we didn’t get him, but a thousand Nulorian corpses is more than sufficient.”

“Assuming he’s still around by the end,” Patricia promised. “I’ll help finish him off.”

“After XCOM and ADVENT?” He asked, amused. “Miridian will be trivial for you.”

“For sure,” she spotted another lone Human wandering around, caught in conversation, and waved him over. “Nico!”

The young man quickly excused himself from a very one-sided conversation with several Vitakara who all towered over him. As he got closer, Patricia saw he sported a few new scars since Florida. “Harbinger Trask,” he greeted. “Thank you.”

She gave a sympathetic smile. “Not a conversationalist?”

“Not especially, it’s odd,” he glanced behind him. “Apologies, I’m a bit on edge since Florida. I keep…” He shook his head. “Not important.”

Well, that told her that it was definitely important, though he definitely wasn’t going to talk while Marian was here, or in the middle of a social gathering.
Let me have a word with him she telepathically told Marian, who went off without a word. “Let’s talk, somewhere a bit quieter than this.” She put a hand on Nico’s shoulder and guided him to an area towards the back of the bridge where they sat down. She blocked the noise of the crowds to give them some quiet. “There.”

His lips twitched. “It’s not a big issue, Patricia.”

The Harbinger leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs. Definitely a lie; she didn’t need to look into his mind to see that. “You do know it’s ok to talk about it. That was the first large-scale battle you’ve been in, right?”

A nod. “Seeing a battlefield like that isn’t pretty,” she continued, thinking on what could be bothering him. “War isn’t fun or simple.”

“It’s not even that,” he said. “I can handle that kind of stuff…mostly. It was fine until…the nanites started eating things.” He looked up at her, vulnerable and afraid. “I…can’t, do anything against that. There was a soldier that got infected beside me. I saw him disintegrate. I panicked and…left.”

He shuddered. “I thought I was infected. Sicarius was freaking out, since we were bonded. I thought there was something in my arm and knew I had to get it out.” He hesitated, then rolled up the sleeve of his right arm, which had bandages around it. “I did some stupid things, but I was scared; I wanted to get it out. I still can’t get the thought out of my head that there’s something in me, just waiting for a certain time to start eating me alive.”

Patricia thought for a moment, feeling that she wasn’t remotely qualified to figure this out. Well, what would the Commander do here? “I get that,” she nodded. “It’s dangerous weaponry, and I don’t blame your reaction. Have you gotten a full medical scan? Those can detect any foreign objects.”

A vigorous nod. “Yes, there was nothing.”

“Go do it again,” she encouraged him. “Just to confirm for yourself.” She uncrossed her legs and rested her forearms on her knees, focusing on the downcast face of the young man. “You don’t want to go back out there, do you?”

He hesitated, then shook his head. “No…I don’t want to die like that. Not like Ivan.”

Patricia kept her face blank, trying to remember who the hell Ivan was. A friend of his? Although that didn’t really seem like Nico, and now that he mentioned it, the name did sound familiar. A few seconds and—ah, that’s who he is. Another Harbinger she’d only really met in passing, who was the Overmind’s…she thought. He had not really made a good first impression.

Oh well, it was unlikely he was important if the Battlemaster hadn’t bothered to directly inform her.

“Yes, none of us want to end up like Ivan…” she sympathized vaguely, nodding in understanding, something of a plan forming in her mind. “Ok, so here’s what we’re going to do. XCOM and ADVENT aren’t going to stop using nanites, so you need to learn how to beat them. I’m not going to make you go back in a real situation where you’re petrified.”

“I know I shouldn’t stay away,” he scowled. “It hurts the war effort.”

“And you’re no use to the war effort if you die because you freeze up,” she interrupted. Truthfully, he was a kid who shouldn’t be anywhere near a battlefield, but that ship had sailed long ago.
“You’re going to meet me at the Prism daily for a couple hours and practice nanite contingencies until ADVENT could throw a nanite bomb at you, and you won’t even flinch.”

He blinked. “But you need to be here.”

“I can be on Earth in a moment if I want,” she reminded him. “Or on the Temple Ship. Or here. You’re vital to our operation, and ADVENT certainly fears what you can do. If I can make you a bigger nightmare for them, then that’s worth an investment.”

“Alright,” he gave a firm nod, a confident one. “I like that idea. I will learn.”

“Excellent,” she smiled, patting him on the shoulder. “I don’t know where Sicarius is right now, but if she wants to also participate, I’d welcome her too.”

He pointed, and Patricia saw Sicarius standing a short distance away, ignored by everyone, but quietly observing them. Patricia gave a slight wave. The young Ethereal had probably listened to everything, and obviously didn’t need to be told again. “I’ll see you later, Nico. Do what I said, and we’ll get through this.”

“Thanks, Patricia,” he said as she stood, and moved to go mingle with the crowd again. Sicarius hadn’t moved, and the silver orb of a helmet followed her path. Patricia decided to angle her path to brush by the silent alien. Sicarius simply inclined her helmet when she got within a few paces.

“Thank you, for helping him,” she said softly.

“Don’t mention it,” Patricia nodded. “We’re all going to survive this war, no matter what ADVENT throws at us.”

A single nod. “I am confident we will, Patricia. I will accompany Nico tomorrow as well.” With that, she teleported away with a purple flash and step, leaving Patricia standing in front of empty air. Well, overall that had gone better than she felt it had any right to. There was a time long ago when she had been on the receiving end of that kind of talk.

Thanks, Commander. You definitely helped me out here.

She could almost imagine the disapproving look the Commander would give her.

Ah well, nothing she could do about that.

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Interrogation Room #6, ADVENT Intelligence Investigation Command - Virginia

5/9/2017 – 9:14 A.M.

“Chancellor, welcome. Please take a seat.”

Saudia complied, sitting in the designated seat which was fairly comfortable, if a bit firm. The room she sat within was very enclosed; somewhat claustrophobic in fact, with no desks, equipment, or decoration of any type. Plain white walls and an equally plain green carpeting didn’t dispel the maddening monotony of the room, with bright lights shining down from overhead. The only things in it were just two armchairs, both opposite each other. It reminded her of a sensory deprivation room, but she suspected this perception was an illusion.

It occurred to her that she’d never really experienced an interrogation like this before. Not truly.
Although she felt like even if she had trained for anti-interrogation countermeasures, it wouldn’t really help her out here. She knew what was coming, and no amount of training would be able to stop it.

She didn’t begrudge the investigation for continuing, but it felt like a bad time to be performing interviews and investigations like this. Though admittedly, considering the circumstances, any time was going to be a bad time so long as a war raged. It was out of her hands regardless. ADVENT Intelligence and the Oversight Division were in agreement, and she didn’t have the authority or desire to contest them, let alone overrule them.

Ironically enough, she had to trust that procedure and law would be followed. Assuming there wasn’t a movement to replace her…she should emerge intact. Yet it still remained to be seen how it would all play out.

Her interrogator, a middle-aged woman dressed in the plain grey uniform of an ADVENT support operative, with the patches of a raven on one arm and a spider on the other identifying her as ADVENT Intelligence and an Inquisitor respectively. Her black hair was pulled back into a ponytail, with her accent and skin tone indicating her Hispanic heritage. Once she’d closed the door, she took the seat opposite Saudia.

“My name is Paula Cazalla,” she said, extending a hand which Saudia took and gave a quick shake. If the woman felt any discomfort of shaking a metallic hand, she didn’t let it show. “Inquisitor Division. Part of ADVENT’s Internal Investigations team.”

“I’m aware of who you are,” Saudia nodded. “I did help create it.”

The woman gave a guarded smile. “That you did. Now, this is going to be what will hopefully be a relatively quick and painless experience. First, you are aware that anything you say will be recorded and can be used for final assessments, judgement, and recommendations. As you are part of an ADVENT-wide probe, and due to your authoritative and sensitive position, what you say will have an impact. Is that understood?”

“Yes.”

“Perfect, please sign this,” she handed Saudia a clipboard with the legal disclaimer on it. Saudia took a moment to confirm the intent, then silently signed the bottom. “Thank you, Chancellor,” Paula said once she’d finished, taking it back and setting it on the ground before resting another pad of paper on her lap, a pen in the left hand.

Saudia looked around the room. “Interrogation rooms have gotten smaller. No polygraphs or lie detectors now?”

“Psionics have made them redundant, Chancellor,” Paula explained as she crossed her legs, her pad resting on the top thigh. “We only utilize them if psions are not able to assist, and only for low-level cases. We’ve already found that people prefer psionic questioning. Easier on the mind and body, not to mention less chance of machine error and employable countermeasures.”

“Logical,” Saudia acknowledged.

“Now, legally speaking, there are restrictions,” Paula continued, twirling the pen in her fingers. “Apologies for the disclaimers, but this is something we have to cover, and it’s important to make some things clear. I will only be able to tell if you are lying or not. I won’t be reading your mind, or seeing your thoughts, or anything like that. Think of me as a living lie detector. Your privacy outside the scope of this investigation will be preserved. Do you understand?”
“I do.”

“Finally, if you wish legal counsel or a representative, one can attend to bear witness to your consent and ensure this is following legal procedures. Do you want one?”

Saudia gave a thin smile. “A lawyer wouldn’t exactly help me here, would it? I don’t really have a choice in answering, do I?”

Paula held her smile. “Afraid not, Chancellor. But some people like lawyers present for moral support, even if they are legally bound to comply regardless if they want to or not.”

“I think that might have been the first time I’ve heard of a lawyer referred to for ‘moral support’,” Saudia said wryly. “But noted. Carry on, I waive my right to a lawyer.”

“Perfect. I’m going to ask you a series of questions,” Paula looked down to her pad, tapping idly on the pad. “You will answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ unless I indicate otherwise. If you do not answer, I will have to interpret your emotional response. If you fail to answer questions, you will be charged with obstruction of justice and face arrest and prosecution. Your position affords you no extra legal protection or privilege, so to make things easier on all of us, it’s advised that you answer the questions to the best of your ability. Is that understood?”

Saudia gave a single nod. “Yes.”

“Excellent.” Paula crossed her legs. “I’m going to ask some baseline questions first, to get a sense of your emotional fluctuations. Please state your name.”

“Saudia Vyandar.”

“What is your position?”

“Chancellor of ADVENT.”

“What position, if any, did you hold prior to your ascension to the position of Chancellor of ADVENT?”

“Director of EXALT.”

Paula scribbled on her pad. “Tell me a lie.”

“I’m happy to be speaking to you right now.”

Paula chuckled. “I like that one. Thank you. Not even thrown for a bit with the first EXALT question. And on that note, that will be where we start.” She looked back up at Saudia. “My questions will continue to follow this format – first: Does the organizations you identified as EXALT still exist?”

“No.”

“Was it dissolved?”

“Yes.”

“Did you order the dissolution?”

“Yes.”
“Why?”

“To integrate fully into ADVENT,” Saudia answered. “EXALT was no longer necessary.”

“Describe the goals of EXALT.”

“The eventual unification of Humanity under direct or indirect EXALT influence.”

“Who determined the scope or content of this influence?”

“EXALT Leadership, including the Director and six families.”

“Please name these families.”

“Solaris, Vyandar, Mercado, Venator, Falka, and Eridan.”

“What means were used to accomplish the goals determined by EXALT leadership?”

“Direct and indirect manipulation, subversion, and corruption of legal and criminal institutions, businesses, and governments. Information gathering, harvesting, and manipulation were employed commonly, along with large-scale intelligence activities utilizing human, signals, and open source intelligence, which utilized multiple pressure and attractive tactics including assassination, kidnapping, blackmail, and seduction.”

To her credit, Paula barely reacted, simply making a few notes. “Did you, as Director, oversee and order these operations?”

“Some of them. Major operations were directly approved by me. Most intelligence and influence operations were coordinated by the Falkas.”

“Have or had EXALT operatives ever penetrated governments, militaries, or intelligence apparatuses?”

“Yes.”

“Has the same been done to non-government organizations including businesses, news organizations, or journalists?”

“Yes.”

“Are any of these operatives still active under assumed covers?”

“No,” she shook her head. “All positions they hold now are within ADVENT or are otherwise legal.”

A nod. “Would you describe your position as Director more administrative or technical?”

“Administrative.”

“Who was the creator of, or devised the concept of ADVENT?”

“The Commander of XCOM.”

Paula stopped writing, briefly frowning before looking up at Saudia. “Did you meet the Commander of XCOM prior to the establishment of ADVENT?”
“Yes.”

“One time or multiple times?”

“Multiple times. But our first in-person one was the most significant.”

“Describe the circumstances of this meeting.”

“The Commander requested we talk,” she remembered. “We did. He put forward his plan for a unified human government against the alien threat - ADVENT. He wanted EXALT to be instrumental in kickstarting it, as we had the infrastructure and manpower that would be vital in its infancy. There were also a lack of individuals who could – or wanted to – be in charge of it. He had decided I was the ideal candidate. I accepted.”

“Was EXALT working with XCOM previously?”

“No,” she shook her head. “We were on opposite sides for a time.”

“Why?”

Saudia let out a breath. “We had previously had an alliance with the aliens.”

“Describe the nature of this alliance.”

“Temporary, though they weren’t aware of this,” Saudia said. “We…intended to utilize the aliens. Present ourselves as a front they could act through, thus controlling the speed of an incursion. Once we reached a technological parity and psionic mastery, we would break the alliance and lead a united front against the aliens.”

Paula cocked her head. “The aliens were used to further your organization’s goals, if I’m understanding correctly. Is this accurate?”

“Not fully,” Saudia frowned. “It was a simple calculus. With or without us, the aliens would be coming. The world was not prepared, and we considered it ideal if both the alien invasion and our goals were achieved. However, our implementation of this agenda was a mistake. We underestimated the alien threat significantly.”

“When did you break the alliance with the aliens?”

“Officially, after XCOM was attacked by the Ravaged One. Unofficially, when the Ravaged One nearly killed me and everyone in our headquarters.”

Paula nodded. “To the best of your knowledge, are you, or any other former members of EXALT, under the influence of any alien entity or individual?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Since taking over as Chancellor of ADVENT, have you broken any laws established and enforced by the Peacekeepers, Judicial Courts, or Congress of Nations?”

“No.”

“As Chancellor, have you or other former members of EXALT deliberately written, influenced, or otherwise structured laws, regulations, and guidelines to limit potential legal retaliation or accountability, or to enrich or protect yourself or others?”
“No.”

“Are you aware of any former members of EXALT who have broken ADVENT law?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Saudia paused. “Several former EXALT members transferred to XCOM. I cannot speak for them or their actions.”

“Noted,” she made a mark on her pad. “Have individuals been promoted or assigned to positions in ADVENT based upon their association with EXALT?”

“Initially, yes,” Saudia said. “Since ADVENT has been established, all appointees have been made fully on the basis of merit and established promotion procedures.”

“Do you believe that you would have been appointed Chancellor of ADVENT if you had not been directly selected by the Commander?”

Saudia hesitated. “No.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “Because no one knew I existed.”

“Do you believe yourself to be the most qualified to lead ADVENT?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because that was what I had prepared for my whole life,” Saudia took a moment to think. “I intended to lead humanity to greatness if given the opportunity, I have the vision and will to ensure our success in this war and beyond it, and this is something I still intend to achieve, no matter what happens.”

“You are committed to the laws, goals, and principles of ADVENT and not those of EXALT?”

“Yes. EXALT is dead. ADVENT is all that matters.”

“Do you intend to accept the findings of this investigation and follow the recommendations?”

“I do.”

“If it is determined that it is in the best interests of ADVENT for you to step down, do you intend to comply willingly?”

Some hesitation, but she gave a slow nod. “If necessary…yes.”


Saudia felt herself relax slightly. “Will I have to answer more questions later?”

“Depending on what other individuals say, we may ask you some follow up questions,” she answered, making a few more notes. “However, we don’t anticipate it. You’re on the latter end of our interviews due to your schedule, and I doubt whoever’s left will highlight something we overlooked.”
“Good,” Saudia stood, with Paula joining her. “So what happens next?"

“We will review what we’ve collected, and the Chief Overseer will make a recommendation,” Paula explained. “There is a high likelihood that a private session of the Congress will be called when that happens. I do not see the Chief Overseer bypassing them entirely. You may have to testify, but this will take several months to fully finalize at best.”

Saudia internally grimaced, but it had been expected. “I see.”

“In the meantime, perform your duties as normal,” Paula told her, flashing another smile. “No point in worrying about what will happen, Chancellor. We will take care of it. Thank you again for your cooperation; trust me when I say it made everything a lot better for you.”

“I should hope so,” Saudia said wryly, as she moved towards the door. “Thank you for being civil. I wish the investigation well.”

“Appreciated, Chancellor,” she inclined her head. “Good luck.”

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Switzerland Castle of Order of Terra, Geneva – Switzerland

5/10/2017 – 9:16 A.M.

“[Everything is finalized,]” Kiyumi said as she entered Kaya’s sparse and spartan quarters, a smile on her face. “[After Florida, it looks like ADVENT wants to strike while the flame is hot.]”

“[Iron,]” Kaya corrected absentmindedly. “[You strike when the iron is hot. Everyone always mispronounces that phrase.]”

“[You get the point,]” Kiyumi rolled her eyes. “[It’s finally happening.]”

“[Yes. Finally.]” To say that Kaya hadn’t been especially thrilled doing mostly nothing for more than a month was an understatement. The good news was that she was completely cleared for combat by the ADVENT psychologists, and her unit was in good shape as they’d been drilling and training nonstop. They’d even gotten a new Knight to replace the loss of Terje, who, thankfully, was not distracted by her identity.

Almost the opposite in fact. An Vien Kim was the oldest person she’d seen in ADVENT, at least in a combat role.Honestly old enough to be her grandfather, but very interesting to talk to. He was part of a new ADVENT initiative was what he said when she’d tactfully inquired about his age, though headed off questions about his experience. He’d only been added in the past week, so they were all working towards integrating him fully. She figured she’d learn all about him in time.

Thankfully it wasn’t just her that hadn’t seen much action, else she would have suspected favoritism. The Order of Terra hadn’t been widely deployed following Beijing until very recently; largely because so many of them had participated in Beijing, and partially because High Command wasn’t sure where best to put them.

They seemed to have figured it out now, judging from how many locations were now getting Order support. She wondered if they were all part of a larger plan she didn’t know about.

Kaya didn’t really know where she’d be going next, but it was definitely going to be better than just…waiting for something to happen. Knowing what ADVENT had planned for her, she was likely going to end up in a high-profile, but relatively safe warzone. Potentially Asia.
'Safe.'

As she knew well, there really wasn’t anywhere that was safe now. Especially now with family-killing assassins striking strongholds, or people like Patricia who could literally teleport anywhere.

Still, it might end up being for the best. Whatever had killed her family was still out there, and when she took the podium, there was approximately a zero percent chance the Collective was just going to let her live unmolested. But as long as she got to fight, she was going to be content.

Kiyumi had been busy as well. The Imperial Family was being rebuilt in a rather unconventional way. She and her sister, outside of the kidnapped children, were the only ones who were truly left of the “pure” bloodline. So as a result, Kiyumi had gone through the very extensive genealogy and lineage of the Imperial blood, and identified a number of families and individuals who were distantly connected.

The elders and purist elements of what remained of the Japanese government were…not exactly thrilled with the decision, believing that it would “dilute” the bloodline, not without reason, at least in their minds. A fair amount of those identified by her sister had in their families, or were themselves, lower-class citizens, those of non-Japanese ethnicities, and a few even weren’t nationally Japanese. A surprising amount were also involved with ADVENT, which was a pleasant surprise for Kaya.

She approved of the direction her sister had taken, and had given her official sanction, for what it was worth. Her sister’s efforts looked to the future and went about addressing the problem smartly. Relying on either of them to be the sole carriers of the bloodline was a great risk due to the war, especially with the children still captured. But honestly, the sooner the idiotic belief that one person’s blood was somehow superior to another person’s died, the better. Blood could be a useful symbol, but outside of ceremony and culture it had no bearing on who or what a person could be. Nor did it necessarily mean much in the context of who family could be.

Even though not all those approached had accepted Kiyumi’s offer, many had, and the new Imperial Family was going to look a lot different from what it had been. Less…homogenous. ADVENT had been very approving of the decision, and impressed with Kiyumi’s management in making sure everything was ready.

“[Are the crowds still outside the HQ?]” Kaya asked, standing and stretching.

“[They probably will be until you show up,]” Kiyumi answered, referring to the throngs of journalists, vloggers, and media officials who’d received, as of a few days ago, definitive confirmation of the survival of Kaya Yamato, who’d previously been unnamed. The news was coupled with an announcement of the subsequent Enthronement.

ADVENT had a fairly slick campaign planned; so slick that she actually didn’t have any advice for them. They definitely had experience in marketing, as they had used the original announcement as a springboard to completely control the narrative and news cycle following Florida, as new details were slowly revealed to further make the Collective seem incompetent and a failure, first revealing she was in the Order of Terra, then recounting the battles she’d fought in, and how she was now spending her time (few details, of course).

In another life, this amount of pressure and hype would have been daunting, but after Beijing, not to mention the battles she’d been in previously, facing a horde of paparazzi and cameramen was a cakewalk. The Japanese managing the refugees and those serving in ADVENT had been appraised of this a few days earlier than the official announcement to allow some additional time to prepare.
This would be an event the world would watch, but it was especially important for her people. After a few hours, she would be their face, and hopefully rally them to action. With all her people had lost, it would be good to provide them with some hope. There would be a promise to reclaim Japan (again), and this time it would be kept.

“[You’re going to have a stacked guest list,]” Kiyumi said. “[The Chancellor, Prince Mason, Prime Minister Reizo. Even the Commander of XCOM! Not counting all of the other heads of state. I don’t know if there’s ever been a comparable ceremony.]”

“[Security is going to be a nightmare.]” Kaya noted. “[I don’t envy them. If there was ever a time to strike, it would be this.]”

“[ADVENT is pulling out all the stops here.]” Kiyumi quickly looked up, recalling something. “[ADVENT Intelligence, XCOM squads, PRIESTs everywhere, I think they might have some of the Pantheon there too.]”

Kaya grimaced. “[A bit overkill. I hope I don’t disappoint. I can give a speech, but I don’t know if I’m worth all of…this.]” She motioned vaguely.

“[Nonsense. All you can do is your best. Besides, I looked over your speech,]” Kiyumi said after a few seconds. “[It’s perfect. It’s what needs to be heard now. This is bigger than you or me, one family, or even our people. It’s the future of our species.]”

Kaya’s lips twitched. “[I hope it’s seen that way. It’s harder writing it yourself. I get why people hire speechwriters.]”

“[Hey, don’t complain.]” Kiyumi chuckled. “[You could have had one.]”

“[True, but it wouldn’t have been authentic,]” Kaya shrugged. “[It’s not right to be a vessel for someone else’s words – especially not in this situation.]”

“[I don’t disagree,]” she nodded. “[I wonder how the ceremony itself will be received by our people. It obviously can’t be in Japan, though the other changes will probably make the traditionalists call it heresy. Probably accuse me of watering it down for foreigner appeal.]”

“[‘Foreigners’, please.]” Kaya snorted. “[I prefer your streamlined version. The fewer references made to the mystical sun goddess and unnecessary technicalities, the better. It’s past time the Enthronement was updated for modern day. Our people aren’t going to care about pure tradition – not when our homeland is held by aliens. Not if their Empress embodies the change they see.]”

“[You’re probably right,]” Kiyumi acknowledged. “[Consider how many norms I’ve broken already, what’s a few more?]”

“[That’s a good way to look at it,]” Kaya encouraged, standing up. “[I don’t know what I’d do without you.]”

“[I’m sure you’d manage,]” she said, pulling her sister into a hug. “[Let’s get you ready to go. Time for the world to meet the new Empress of Japan.]”

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Central Command, SAS Command – Nigeria

5/7/2017 – 1:09 P.M.
“This looks good,” Betos nodded to an aide who’d finished an overlook of several diplomatic documents. Handing the packet back, she gave some final instructions. “Forward it to me for a final review, and ensure the attaches keep in close contact. We don’t want ADVENT poaching anyone from us.”

A nod and the aide rushed off, and Betos returned to looking over the stack of legislation, papers, and reports on her desk that comprised her workload for the foreseeable future. With ADVENT temporarily halted, she had the task of actually running the SAS, and that meant a lot of paperwork.

Slowing her down more were officers, agents, and aides who came in needing her advice, assistance, or permission for something they were doing or involved in. She was glad to help; it felt like some normalcy after insulating herself so much with aliens. It made her feel like she was having an impact on her own, without help from the aliens. The downside was that it slowed down what she could get done considerably.

It was interesting that she felt more relaxed now when she was actually working and properly managing the SAS than when she was…well, focused on relations with the Collective. Or talking with aliens, period. She was the leader of a substantial portion of the Human species who didn’t align with ADVENT, and it was past time they be properly represented.

It was especially nice to not even feel the urge to talk to Keeper or Macula in that entire period. They would eventually come to her when they had questions, which Betos suspected would be sooner than later. She wasn’t quite sure how they were going to react to having a…reduced role, but it wasn’t as though they could just get rid of her.

Well, technically…

She shook her head. No point in thinking about that. If the Collective decided she wasn’t worth propping up, then there was, quite literally, nothing she could do to stop it. But after that talk with Mox, she was determined that no matter what happened, she would not be remembered as an alien puppet.

If ADVENT was going to hate her, it was going to be for some other reason than believing she was an alien puppet. She was very much in control of her actions, and condemn her or not, ADVENT would see that one could reject their new world order of their own volition.

A throat cleared, and Betos looked up, seeing the glowing azure eyes of Keeper looking down malevolently upon her. A thin smile appeared on her face, disguising her apprehension as she stood, brushing some lint and dust off her pants. “Keeper, a pleasure to see you.”

“Considering your complete silence these past few days, I have my doubts about that,” he said dryly, entering and standing just opposite her. Despite standing, she was still forced to look up at him due to the size disparity. His eyes widened slightly. “One would almost think you’re avoiding me.”

“Considering your complete silence these past few days, I have my doubts about that,” he said dryly, entering and standing just opposite her. Despite standing, she was still forced to look up at him due to the size disparity. His eyes widened slightly. “One would almost think you’re avoiding me.”

“Not intentionally,” Betos answered neutrally, crossing her arms. “I’ve been very busy lately. I do have the SAS to run, and that is a full-time job in and of itself. Countries to reach out to, legislation to sign, reports to read, and plans to make. It’s past time I properly lead, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Of course,” Keeper answered with a similar lack of emotion, tilting his head to the side. “Though it would have been appreciated if you informed me of your focus, so I wasn’t uncertain as to your whereabouts. There is much that needs to be coordinated, especially now.”
“Don’t you worry,” Betos told him, walking around the table, picking up a couple spreadsheets, indicating them. “I’ve put together a good team; one I dare say will mean we might not need your assistance much longer, in terms of administration and management. You can look it over if you wish.”

He narrowed his eyes, moving the offered papers away with a hand. “Perhaps later. Speaking of such moves, I was informed that the ADVENT captives are not being moved off-world. It was stopped on your orders. They explicitly said they wouldn’t disobey. What are you doing, Betos?”

“Simple,” she answered firmly. “Reserving our right to hold captives here. They were captured by the Sovereign African States, and we will decide where they go and how they are treated. We are maintaining full control of their well-being and storage for the immediate future. In short, that means they are staying on-world.”

Keeper seemed mildly surprised at her audacity. “No, they will not be. ADVENT will attempt to recover them. They will be moved off-world.”

“You are not in the Ethereal Collective. You are currently within the Sovereign African States.” Betos maintained eye contact, her voice not wavering. “If you want to tell Macula what you want to happen, then you can. But they will not be moved without my authorization. Do you understand me?”

“Curious,” the voice of Keeper had turned low; nearly threatening. “I was going to ask you the same thing. Why this sudden rebellion, Betos? Did you watch the ADVENT propaganda press conference? Is that why you’re defying us? I had thought there was some trust.”

Keeper wasn’t exactly going to like being accused, so Betos had come up with another tactic. “As a matter of fact, yes. You’re smart, Keeper, you should see why I’m in favor of not playing right into ADVENT’s hands, yes?” Betos gestured vaguely. “Trust exists between us, but no one else shared it. Are you really going to say its propaganda if the first thing we do with the prisoners is ship them off to god knows where?

She put some emphasis into her next words. “It doesn’t matter if they’re not touched later or if you release the location right down to the coordinates. No one will believe it, justified or not. As far as the average citizen is concerned, those captives? Gone. It may be more secure, but it does nothing but prove to ADVENT that we are exactly how they portray us.”

She rested against her table. “Now, you may not care because you’re not Human, and the SAS is a means to an end for you, but I do. I’m thinking in the long term, Keeper, like how exactly are we going to get a majority of Africans on our side if we continue to play into ADVENT propaganda. What do we say to convince them? Vague promises? Threats? How exactly am I going to convince them that I’m actually an independent ally of the Collective if my decisions are solely made in the interests of the Collective? If it appears I have no true autonomy?”

Betos smiled more confidently at the stone-faced Vitakarian who simply stared with unblinking eyes. “If that’s the case, you might as well be my handler and not an ally,” she paused briefly. “Back to the rationale for keeping the captives here, I would argue this will make the SAS more appealing. Right now, like it or not, many think I’m a figurehead. Rescinding your decision gives the perception that there may be tensions between us, which means that people are less likely to accept the narrative that I – and in turn the SAS – are alien puppets. We will be perceived as more genuine and legitimately independent as a result. Of course, we are still allies, but ADVENT may think differently. I’m certain that you could exploit this perception somehow.”

Keeper was appraising her now neutrally, or at least she couldn’t immediately tell what he was
thinking. Perhaps surprise? Maybe some grudging respect? He gave a slight nod. “I appreciate that you thought through a reasonable answer. Acceptable. You raise a valid point. I won’t press you on this further.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “At the same time, it is important that in the future we work together, and not leave it so where one of us has to approach the other to receive an answer. That is more efficient, yes?”

“I can agree to that,” Betos said, feeling relieved that he’d decided to drop it so easily. That was… good. It meant that so long as she could come up with a plausible argument, Keeper could be persuaded to back down. She’d need to work on that in the future. “Is there anything else?”

“Nothing urgent for now, Betos,” Keeper inclined his head. “I will be in contact later. Inform me before you make any diplomatic decisions, I would appreciate the chance to review.”

“I will do my best,” Betos nodded. “But we should both understand our respective places. I wouldn’t intervene in your operations, and I would appreciate the same courtesy. I will make decisions for the SAS, not you.”

“Duly noted,” Keeper acknowledged. “But do not forget why you are here at all. We will not be ignored completely.”

At that, he exited without another word. Betos let out a sigh of relief, before returning to her seat. That had gone better than expected, and hopefully Keeper would know better than to try and push her around again. Truthfully, she probably should have done this a while ago, but better late than never.

Situating herself, she returned to the arduous task before her.

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**ADVENT Intelligence Reston Complex, Reston - Virginia**

5/9/2017 – 12:18 P.M.

“Chancellor,” Powell greeted, inclining his head as she entered. “I hear your interview went well.”

“Interrogation, Powell,” Saudia grunted at the Acting Director of ADVENT Intelligence, taking her seat at the table in the briefing room. “Let’s not mince words.”

“Nonetheless, your cooperation is appreciated,” Powell took his place at the head of the table, addressing the rest of the room which consisted of Saudia, Laura, Ari, and Kyong. A small group, but likely a relevant team to brief. Though Saudia didn’t know what Ari was doing here; likely an update on Project Ra.

“First,” Powell walked around the room, giving some small handouts. “Internal Investigations are proceeding exceptionally well. We have effectively purged over half of ADVENT Intelligence of foreign and alien influence. As a result, we have found a number of connections to other malicious actors and networks, the upcoming dissolution and extermination of which will ensure our ability to protect and utilize the population, narrative, and the war itself.”

Saudia looked over the report, lifting an eyebrow at the summary. “That is a lot of arrests. The aliens could not have compromised so many.”

“Correct,” Powell gave a humorless, knowing smile. “There were a number of Human traitors, unwitting informants, disguised Zararch agents, and the REPLICA-Class Custodians who had some degree of access. However, there were an even larger number of national loyalists who,
while usually not disrupting the war effort, were passing information directly to former national officials, heads of state, and sometimes criminal elements which were being intercepted by alien entities.”

Saudia closed her eyes, sighing. It wasn’t completely surprising, but it was clearly a bigger problem than she’d anticipated. “Wonderful. How high up does this go?”

“Thankfully none of the current heads of state are stupid enough to be involved in this,” Powell elaborated, lacing his fingers together. “But old habits die hard, and it was foolish to assume that national loyalties and rivalries would be completely forgotten – especially by intelligence agencies, despite the war. In particular, we have discovered rogue sub-units of various former intelligence organs have been formed or maintained without our knowledge, specifically based around the CIA, NSA, EXALT, GRU, MSS, and Mossad.”

Saudia’s lips twitched at the mention of EXALT. You fucking idiots, you’re supposed to be better than this. “EXALT?” Ari frowned. “Who or what is that?”

Powell didn’t seem to care to bring him up to speed. “Unimportant. They were more interested in executing to supposed goals of a dissolved organization than focusing on the defense of Humanity.”

“I hope they’ve been dealt with.” Saudia said, an undercurrent of harshness in her voice. “Severely.”

Powell gave a single nod, his voice softening just a touch. “Do not worry, Chancellor. They are all being dealt with.”

“I assume there are more who haven’t been found?” Laura asked grimly, looking up from her review. “How large are these groups?”

“Not large enough to cause significant damage, but larger than is remotely acceptable,” Powell answered, straightening and resting his arms on the table. “I will also note that every group I named – as well of those I didn’t - has been hunted down, as I alluded to. Each and every member is currently being interrogated or is in the process of being tried, sentenced, and in many cases, executed.”

“This degree of compromise is unfortunate,” Kyong pursed his lips at the news, one hand scratching his chin. “I assume you don’t want this publicized, and to keep an eye out for leaks?”

“There is a public story here,” Powell clarified, lifting a hand. “However, it will be one we have full control over. The general public does not need to know the scale or scope, but I want a number of the most egregious stories circulated through the media. Preferably a mixture of nationalists and outright alien collaborators. Something to remind people that the nationalists can be just as damaging as outright traitors.”

“Says the former CIA director,” Saudia snorted. “How very ironic.”

Ian Powell smiled knowingly. “Our mission extended beyond America, Chancellor,” he inclined his head, his tone almost contemplative. “In our own way, we had our own vision for Humanity. It should not be a surprise that we can adapt to the concept of an entity that is not America. The United States just happened to be where we started. It did not matter what happened, be it Russia, China, or the North Koreans. The CIA would have endured – though now we don’t need to, of course.”
He waved a hand. “However, I admit there were more patriotic elements of the organization, those who have failed to evolve, which we have now dealt with. The Grand Inquisitor deserves significant credit for the results of this investigation so far.”

“And you’re only done with half of ADVENT Intelligence,” Laura shook her head. “That does not bode well for the rest of ADVENT.”

“No, but it is necessary,” he fixed Saudia with a hard glare; his voice deliberately neutral. “While I hesitate to speak ill of my predecessor, it is clear that Director Falka was either ignorant, incapable, or unwilling to handle the obvious challenges and risks of integrating the intelligence agencies of every country – many of them who have spied on each other for decades – into one cohesive whole. It is outright dangerous that this has gone unaddressed for so long. On this alone, she should not be reinstated should she be cleared.”

Saudia kept her face and tone neutral, though he had a good point. Elizabeth had her strengths, but something this large and diverse? Perhaps it wasn’t the best fit. “Your recommendation is noted, Acting Director. Keep me appraised as the investigation continues,” she shifted the topic. “Is there a specific penalty you’re seeking for these traitors?”

“It depends on the severity,” Powell explained pointedly. “I intend to send a very strong message – one I believe ADVENT Intelligence has received, and soon the rest of ADVENT. Experimentation Labs for the worst, execution for the rest. We have neither the time, nor energy to house traitors. They are enemy assets and should be denied and destroyed. If there are Humans who are not fully committed to ADVENT and the defense of Humanity, then they forfeit their right to life.”

“Stein would like that line,” Kyong commented with a wry grin. “A shame she isn’t here.”

“While harsh, Stein has a conviction many lack. Much like the Commander, in fact,” Powell noted, turning his attention to the Arabic man. “Dr. Mifsud, I trust that you will keep what you hear here to yourself?”

Ari noticeably swallowed. “Wouldn’t dream of speaking of this to anyone, Director.”

“Glad to hear it,” he nodded to Kyong. “Minister, I believe you have something to present?”

“That I do,” Kyong stood, brushing his uniform off as Powell leaned back in his seat. “A number of developments in the realm of diplomacy, most interesting of which involves the SAS.”

Saudia nodded, having an idea of where this was going. “What have they done now?”

“It’s more what they haven’t done,” Kyong clarified, walking around the table and handing out a couple pictures, which showed SAS captives in quartered off areas and defended by SAS soldiers. “If you recall, they explicitly threatened to send the POWs offworld. It’s been days, and not only are the captives still here, they are definitely not being moved anytime soon if the amount of food, fortifications, and supplies being imported are anything to go by.”

“Interesting,” Laura raised an eyebrow as she looked over the pictures. “Why would they change their mind?”

“Unknown at this point,” Powell answered. “What limited intelligence we’ve been able to collect indicates that it may be a schism between Betos and the aliens. Alternatively, they decided it would be bad optics to go through with it, and our little show worked to convince them it would backfire.”

“What is the likelihood it’s a schism?” Saudia asked Kyong.
“Uncertain,” Kyong sat back down, tapping a finger on the table absentmindedly. “Given Betos’s psychological profile, she might have been emotionally moved enough to defy the aliens. I’m uncertain she would have had the will to defy her alien masters, but perhaps she could have surprised us. Either way, it’s a victory.”

“What should we do with this?” Laura wondered. “Publicize it?”

“I’m working on that,” Kyong answered, lifting a hand. “As of now, the status quo is ideal. I would keep the families updated that they’re still on Earth, but no more. We don’t want to portray the SAS in a positive light, now do we?”

He turned his attention to the table, clearing his throat, and activated the small holoprojector in the middle of the table. “Also on the media front, we’re kicking our anti-Patricia campaign in full force. Seems fitting after her attacks, and our victory in Florida. We’ll start with these two, who will be giving an interview soon.” Two figures were projected, a man and woman who looked to be between their fifties and sixties. “Jax and Leah Trask,” Kyong stated. “Her parents, if you couldn’t guess.”

It hadn’t necessarily occurred to Saudia that Patricia even had parents. Well, she knew they existed, but Patricia very much stood on her own, and anyone even tangibly connected to her was just…irrelevant. “Giving an interview on what?” Laura asked, looking up at the figures.

“Effectively disowning her, and stating that she’s a fake,” Kyong answered. “Even if that’s not accurate, it might get under her skin, and make her hurt to see her family reject her.”

“I doubt she’s going to be affected,” Saudia said dryly. “This was a woman who just annihilated a military base with families living in it, not to mention attacked XCOM, which was filled with people she’d fought and worked with.”

“Possibly,” Kyong conceded with a shrug. “However, she has no connection to many of those people she’s killed, or at least most of them. Children many times crave the approval of their parents and loved ones, if there is anything like that left in her, this may hurt and affect her emotionally. And if it doesn’t, it has the benefit of showcasing her for the liar and killer she is now. This woman is not a Human. She is a monster, a pawn, and a vessel of the aliens. That is what people will eventually think of when they hear the name ‘Patricia Trask’.”

The Korean smiled. “And in addition, we found some old friends of hers who are also going to give their own opinions. Some from her college days, a couple from her time in the Royal Marines. We even got the brother of Paige Broker, her closest friend who went to XCOM with her, to effectively insinuate that Patricia got her killed.”

A pause. “We are estimating that might make her more unbalanced than her parents condemning her.”

“Excellent,” Saudia smiled. “No less than she deserves.”

“Only one final matter,” Powell motioned to Ari. “Director – you have a Project Ra update?”

“Yes, and I will be brief.” The project director stood and cleared his throat. “The revelation that XCOM already had an AI was a surprise, but it was able to greatly assist on Project Ra. We didn’t ask JULIAN to build another AI for us, but he guided us in the right direction. We are getting very close to bringing PATRIOT fully online.”

Laura sighed, rubbing her forehead. “You’re really going with the name then?”
“She seems to like it,” Ari shrugged. “Considering what she’ll be doing, it fits quite well. Assuming the simulations and programming hold and she doesn’t decide to do something completely different.”

Saudia cocked her head. “She?”

Ari coughed awkwardly, turning slightly red. “Considering that she’s begun using a female-toned voice, responds to female pronouns, and one of the designers has drawn some, ah, art of her, she’s definitely a female.”

Laura chortled, and even Powell smirked at that. Saudia just appraised the uncomfortable man with slight amusement, though kept her face stoic. “Really. And I don’t suppose PATRIOT being shown this…art…influenced its gender choice?”

“Well, that is certainly interesting, and I trust this hasn’t derailed the project significantly, has it?”

“No, Chancellor,” Ari quickly confirmed. “We are definitely on track for deployment soon. And we fully expect PATRIOT to perform her duties effectively and properly. She will be ready to meet you soon, prior to launch.”

“I see,” Saudia found the whole situation rather amusing, if slightly ridiculous. “Excellent,” Saudia nodded. “I look forward to meeting her.”

“I think she’ll be a good candidate to introduce the public to,” Kyong added. “I’ve seen some interactions, and she’s less…abrasive than JULIAN.”

Ari scowled. “You mean less of an infuriating troll.”


“I don’t disagree,” Saudia added. “Is there anything else?”

“I believe that covers everything important, Chancellor,” Powell glanced to an agenda. “The Enthronement of the Japanese Princess is very soon, but there are no new developments on that. I assume you plan to attend?”

“Of course.”

“Then I think we’re done here,” Powell inclined his head, giving a salute towards her, joined by the rest of the occupants of the room. “Thank you all for your time.”

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Psionic Training Range, the Praesidium – Classified Location

5/7/2017 – 9:27 P.M.

On one hand, when he’d first gotten here, he’d been looking forward to soon being deployed in an actual XCOM squad. On the other, being stuck in this limbo meant that he (probably) would live longer. Choice and consequence, and of course he’d joined when Florida kicked off, which meant that the best psions were deployed, which normally wouldn’t be a problem, aside from the fact that
there every teleporter of XCOM was needed in the field.

So Kunio had been effectively left to his own devices.

He definitely hadn’t been idle in the meantime. There was so much to see, learn, and do in the Praesidium it was almost overwhelming. Whenever he wasn’t getting used to shooting plasma rifles, wearing power armor, and exercising his psionic abilities as best he could, he was devouring every report and piece of history XCOM had.

To say it had blown his mind had been an understatement.

It would have shaken his world enough to read about EXALT; a worldwide conspiracy – where actual literal Illuminati – had sought to use the invasion for their own ends, before being neutered by XCOM. Kunio legitimately didn’t know if it was a good or bad thing that members of said Illuminatii were now…well, running the show.

Mostly good, he supposed. The Commander probably had some leverage over them.

Still, he was never going to look at the Chancellor the same way again. Bit of a trust breach there, and it made the sudden suspension of Elizabeth Falka much more suspicious. At the same time, most of XCOM seemed fine with EXALT now; the chief engineer was originally part of it, so the Commander clearly trusted them to some degree. It did highlight how odd some of the crew the Commander kept around him were.

An eccentric and slightly terrifying German woman, a former Chinese Triad member, a former EXALT engineer, a soldier whose girlfriend was now probably the most hated Human in the world, and an Ethereal defector. The only moderately normal people were his Central Officer and Iosif, who seemed like a pleasant man.

Then there was T’Leth.

Learning the truth about that, at least what was available to XCOM, was…somewhat unsettling.

He really wanted to talk to T’Leth, but at the same time, the thought of speaking to something that was in all likelihood older than his entire species was daunting. The last thing Kunio thought would be a good idea was pestering a being like that with inane mortal questions. There were a number of implications that he honestly didn’t really want to think about, and given what was available on the Ethereals, he thought it may be for the best they weren’t answered.

Now though, he hoped that he could actually start mastering his abilities. It wasn’t a lull necessarily, but with Florida dealt with (for now), he’d been told his training and subsequent deployment were imminent. He privately hoped that wherever he went, he wouldn’t be accosted by the mouthy AI that liked to occasionally berate people at random or rick-roll them.

Admittedly, it was usually only to the engineering staff, but Kunio definitely didn’t want to be targeted by it.

“Psion Azuma,” Kunio turned and started as he saw the Commander himself approach, a woman at his side. A hand was quickly brought up to the chest to salute, which the Commander returned on instinct. “At ease, you don’t need to do that every time. Apologies for the delay in getting you properly trained, but…”


“So I’ve observed, you’ll fit in very well here,” he said, stepping back and indicated the woman.
“This is Fiona Dorren. Agent of T’Leth and who is effectively our most skilled teleporter. Or more accurately, T’Leth’s.”

The woman certainly stood out. She was probably a few years younger than him, fair skin, probably American or European. She didn’t wear any armor, just some basic grey training fatigues. What made her stand out was her white-gray hair and a large scar down her cheek. A sword of all things was strapped to her back, and from what he saw she had no other weapons. Odd, but honestly not the strangest thing he’d seen here.

“A pleasure to meet you,” she said with a smile, her accent placing her as British. He took the extended hand and shook. “Apologies for the delay, I was busy fighting off a teleporting Ethereal.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Which one? Quisilia? Sicarius?”

“Oh? Done your homework, I like it,” she said, nodding to the Commander. “Don’t think he’ll be a problem to teach if he knows specifics already.”

“Excellent,” the Commander nodded to them. “Fiona, keep me appraised of his development, and Kunio, let me know if you need anything. Good luck to you.”

“Thank you, Commander,” Kunio inclined his head as the Commander walked off.

“So, you’re the first legitimate teleporter ADVENT has found?” He turned back at the question to Fiona who was looking him up and down, arms crossed. “Took them a while. Not too surprised though. It’s not a common talent from what I’ve seen.”

“So I’ve gathered,” Kunio agreed. “Though a lot of the Agents seem to know how to do it.”

“T’Leth makes good choices,” Fiona nodded, motioning forward. “Let’s walk. Talk a bit before we start. Important to set expectations and all that, and get to know each other a little more since we’ll be spending a bit of time together.”

“Alright,” there was plenty of space to walk, and as psions trained in the background, they walked.

“I’ll admit I’ve never done something like this before,” Fiona said. “Teaching. Training. That sort of thing. So…apologies up front if I’m not the best instructor.”

“I think you’ll do fine,” Kunio said, fishing for a word. “…What do you prefer to be called? Miss Dorren? Agent?”

“Fiona is fine,” she laughed. “Even if I’m in T’Leth’s Agents, I don’t like only being known for that.”

“Speaking of which,” Kunio glanced around. “I’ve wondered. Do you talk to him a lot? T’Leth?”

“Me? Not as much,” she admitted. “The Chronicler, Lincoln, Crevan, they speak with T’Leth frequently. I do sometimes, but it never feels right. When I learned something like him existed, it was a bit overwhelming. So many questions and implications.”

Huh, so it seemed not even Agents were immune to this. “Honestly, that’s how I felt when I learned. I have so many questions, but it feels wrong to pester something like that.”

“Oh, you want to talk to him?” Fiona seemed to find that amusing. “That’s a first. I can probably do that if you want, as far as I know he doesn’t do too much most days. At least in his mind. He’s not as intimidating as you’d think.”
“Let’s hold off on that,” he said, changing the subject. And partially because he definitely didn’t want an unplanned meeting with a Sovereign One. “So…teleporting. Did you find out by accident like me?”

She paused, glancing up as she recalled. “Kind of? My…teleportation…didn’t really manifest until later. I’d been training in…psionics, yes, I could do some of it, but not very well. There was something blocking what I could do. The first time I did it…well, I landed in the ocean.” She chuckled. “That was fun. Almost drowned. But I made it.”

Kunio winced. “I’m glad I only teleported halfway across the world. Looking back, I’m really lucky I didn’t accidentally kill myself.”

“One of the first lessons you learn,” Fiona agreed. “Of all the disciplines, this is the one you can most easily kill yourself with. Be it ending up inside a solid object, landing in lava or an ocean, misjudging height and ending up too high or too low, there are many variables to keep track of.”

“If you keep going, you might make me not want to try this,” he warned, only half-joking.

“But,” she lifted a finger. “There will come a point where it becomes like walking.” There was a flash of teal and she reappeared directly in front of him, looking fairly pleased. “At one point I had to concentrate really hard to make that controlled of a jump. You will too. You’re going to hurt yourself, you’re going to feel like you’re not making progress, but it will suddenly come together one day, and there will be nothing that can stop you.”

He nodded. “Can’t say I’d be unhappy with that. I do have one question though.”

“Oh?”

“Is there a reason you have a sword?” He asked, indicating the blade. “Do you work with the Templars?”

“This?” She unsheathed it, the black blade gleaming in the light. “No. Personal choice. Fits how I fight. Most people aren’t prepared for a sword in the face, and since distance isn’t a problem…” she flourished it. “I won’t deny there was some familial interest. You can say my family had an interest in the era and the weapons, my father especially. I like to keep his memory alive this way.”

“Oh,” he said. “My condolences.”

“Ah, no, he’s not dead,” Fiona winced. “It’s a bit complicated. What with me being an Agent and all that…” she waved a hand absentmindedly. “Best he doesn’t know. There are people who are gunning for T’Leth, and by extension me. I don’t drag family into this, so he probably thinks I’m dead or…gone. And it’s for the best.”

“Maybe that can be lifted once the war ends?” Kunio suggested, trying to be a little positive.

“Ha!” Her bleak emerald eyes didn’t match the tone. “If only it was that simple. Afraid the Imperator isn’t the only thing in the galaxy that wants T’Leth dead.” She motioned him more directly into the training area. “Well, anyway, we should probably start some actual training. We can talk more later if you want.”

“Sounds good,” he agreed. “I’ve been looking forward to this.”

“I’m sure,” she rolled her neck. “Get ready. This is where the fun begins.”

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Nulorian Outpost – Unknown Location

5/9/2017 – 12:02 P.M.

Nartha didn’t know if Miridian had given a private order, or if his role in the attacks hadn’t been shared, but he was able to walk unmolested to the small meeting room which had been converted into the current central command for the Nulorian. Two Borelians stood outside the room and let him and Shun in without a word.

Physically he was feeling better, which wasn’t too surprising with modern technology, though it was certainly not recommended that he participate in combat anytime soon. Mentally he was also better, and a few days without anyone coming after him had been good to see that he was actually safe.

Miridian might hold a grudge, but he was pragmatic enough to not let it affect his judgement. Not when it came in conflict with his actual goals.

The Nulorian mastermind was inside, the first time Nartha had seen him since the attack, and he didn’t look the least bit affected. If he’d been wounded at any point in the attack, it wasn’t visible. Same with Sorras who stood nearby. There were a few other Nulorian members he didn’t recognize, a male Borelian and two more Vitakarians, both female.

“Nartha,” Miridian acknowledged with a brief nod, nothing in his tone indicating hostility. “You’ve recovered?”

Well, if Miridian wasn’t going to bring it up, he certainly wasn’t. “Well enough.”

“It will have to do,” Miridian didn’t seem to be interested in making introductions, deciding to get right down to business. He activated the holotable in the middle of the room that they were gathered around. “We’ve been hit hard and suffered losses. The Zararch propaganda campaign is in full swing, but it effectively changes nothing. This is merely reinforcing the existing brainwashing. It won’t change minds one way or another. Those sympathetic will remain sympathetic, and those blind will remain so.”

“While encouraging, that doesn’t help us overmuch.” One of the Vitakarians said, cocking her head. “We’ve lost a lot of people. We have a manpower deficit.”

“I’ve spoken with the Commander,” Miridian clasped his hands behind his back. “He intends to continue forward with his joint meeting of all resistance elements. I expect that he will be willing to provide us support to supplement manpower. It’s not an ideal solution, but we can work with it. Recruitment will have to be prioritized, and there are several acceleration efforts we plan to undertake.” He looked to both of them. “By either of your estimation, is it reasonable to suspect XCOM will continue support in the long term?”


“Agreed,” Nartha nodded, though he was wondering why they were being asked, considering that he’d presumably spoken to the Commander. Maybe another confirmation?

“Of course,” Miridian acknowledged smoothly. “Wouldn’t want to have it weigh on his conscience.”

“We need to retaliate,” the Borelian growled. “Respond to this attack.”

“I agree,” Miridian lifted a hand. “However, Siaru – and I – agree that a reactionary response is
what the Collective wants. We will strike, but only when we have a plan. I will be proposing several at the meeting, and there has been another recent development that I believe we can exploit.”

A hologram of a Cobrarian appeared—notably a male. He looked displeased in the static image, and situated next to several Cobrarian females, appearing unaware an image had been taken. “This is Hir’laras’silar, a male who is currently living in the Nests, though unlike his more rebellious brethren, has decided to remain in the Hierarchy to sabotage it from within.”

Miriidan tapped a finger idly on the holotable. “We’ve been in on and off communication with him for some time, and have successfully maneuvered him further to our side through information sharing and social engineering. He appears quite sincere in this willingness to help us. More notably, he says it would take very little to sway other males to turn on the Hierarchy.”

“Why would he want to help you?” Shun demanded incredulously. “Does he not know what you think of his people?”

“The Cobrarians are a doomed race if not managed properly,” Miriidan said idly. “I highly doubt he cares what I think because he sees the same thing. As it stands his life is empty, and changing the status quo is preferable to nothing. If the Cobrarians were sufficiently modified to become sustainable, and their culture rebuilt, I would reconsider my position. But as I know no Cobrian would submit to such invasive procedures, the point is moot.”

He turned back to the image. “Nonetheless, if we direct him, he will be useful in instigating a rebellion in the Hierarchy. He maintains a number of contacts with other males beyond the desert, and is willing to assist in establishing a proper network. More importantly, he assures me he can get Nulorian teams directly to the Council of Matriarchs, so long as we dispose of them.”

“This sounds especially convenient,” Nartha noted with some suspicion. “Have you confirmed it’s not a trap?”

Miriidan pursed his lips, which already answered the question. “Before now, I would have said his reliability is certain. Siaru also does not believe he has been compromised. However, we now know the lengths the Ethereals will go to and what they will sacrifice for a chance at damaging us. Right now, I can’t confirm if he is acting of his own volition.”

He glanced to Shun. “XCOM and the Chronicler will be useful in determining his reliability. I will not authorize an operation of such importance without confirmation. We cannot take chances, even with those we consider reliable and all signs point to such.”

“I’m also uncertain that even if he is reliable, his information is accurate,” Sorras commented, idly toying with a dagger strapped to his chest. “A majority of males would revolt or open to the possibility? In the Nests? I find that hard to believe. The majority of males don’t have the patience or willingness to do that. It’s also not like those who live in the Nests are poorly off either. Soft lives are how the Matriarchs placate them.”

“The wider discontent among the males is actually rooted in something concrete,” Miriidan interjected, lifting a hand. “We know that the Zararch don’t like the Cobrian Hierarchy either, and have conducted some operations against it—ones we believe are intentionally leading to more males leaving. Previously it was a rare occurrence, but now that it’s happened more often, its impossible to ignore or cover up. This is not especially unbelievable.”

“Perhaps, but consider the source,” Sorras repeated. “He wants our help, and may be willing to bend the truth to get what he wants.”
“I’ve taken that into account,” Miridian promised. “And again, without a means to determine compromise, the point is moot.”

“Agreed,” Nartha nodded. “I would say that protocols need to be established for anyone that goes outside controlled areas.”

“And how do we do that?” The second Vitakarian asked, looking pointedly at the Human and Vitakarian couple. “Submit ourselves to XCOM and alien psions? Your Manchurian Conditioning? Do you take us for fools?”

“I didn’t suggest any of that,” Nartha corrected against the sudden vitriol. “Only that there needs to be something, because as we clearly see now, no one is immune, and I guarantee that if Quisilia isn’t lurking in the cities, there are Sectoid psions imported which are secretly scanning the population, with Zararch lurking the networks. Forgive me for being paranoid.”

“Nartha is right,” Miridian glanced at the woman. “And if anyone should be paranoid, it is him. I agree with your concerns about methods, but this is something I’ve thought about how to mitigate. If we do not use XCOM, then we need to be creative. I am working with Siaru to develop a method to identify and mitigate tampering.”

“I highly doubt a machine is going to be more effective than a psion,” Shun pointed out with a frown. “None of you like it, but even giving small Sovereign Orbs out is a better method than relying on that thing for protection.”

Miridian didn’t sound impressed, and none of the Nulorian seemed to take the declaration seriously. “We’ve been using Siaru long before you came along, Human. We’ll take our chances.”

There were concurrent nods around the room. While Nartha agreed with Shun, he couldn’t deny that in the eyes of the Nulorian, Miridian had a stronger argument. But Siaru continuously gave him a really, really bad feeling. Relying on it too much was a bad thing. “When is the meeting with XCOM?” The Borelian asked.

“Soon,” Miridian answered. “Within the next couple of weeks. It is taking time to establish a working time with the respective allied Unions. Those were the primary action items I wanted to discuss now, the meeting will come later.”

“And what until then?” Nartha asked.

“We recover,” Miridian’s eyes seemed slightly dimmer than usual. “We remember. And later, we avenge.”

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Medical Bay – The Prism

5/12/2017 – 9:18 A.M.

She looked better, and she was feeling better.

Yang gave a smile as he walked in, her body still healing but she was alive and conscious. She was still mostly staying in bed, though got up to do exercises every day, both physical and psionic. There were some bandages on parts of her body and much of the skin displayed was pinkish and new, though she now sported a number of scars on her face and body that she’d elected to keep.

Though this time she beat him to the question, which indicated she was paying close attention to
their bond. “How are you?”

The Battlemaster hesitated before answering. He was still trying to figure out the best response to Florida. Another invasion immediately afterwards would likely be supported, but until there was an effective strategy determined, it would be throwing resources and lives away for nothing. Not acceptable.

There were a number of solutions he was looking into; mass EMP deployment; integration of more Mosrimor technology, intensifying satellite targeting, and more. But those were in initial stages, and were at least a couple weeks out before he was confident enough to respond.

Besides, there were other fronts and other places to devote his attention to. But the development was nonetheless concerning, and he knew it was the first of many AI driven weapons. Beyond Earth, there were other issues that needed to be addressed. “Well enough. I’m considering a number of options.”

“What?” She swung herself off the edge of the bed, putting her tablet down. “You definitely seem…distracted.”

“Perhaps because I am,” the Battlemaster mused, pacing. “There are the new weapons ADVENT and XCOM are deploying, but those will be addressed. The discontent in the Collective is commanding more of my interest currently. The Nulorian are a visible example, but they are largely irrelevant. More concerning is the Unions which Patricia revealed to have elements working with XCOM. I intend to address this…” he waved an arm. “Issue, before returning to Earth.”

“Oh?” She cocked her head. “And do what?”

And that was the question he was uncertain how to answer. “I am…unsure.” He paused. “I intend to hear their justification. They are not inherently irredeemable like the Nulorian, and I suspect their discontent stems from legitimate sources, as mine does. Disposing of the Unions like the Zararch would advise is pointless; not when they can serve a purpose. Not when we can learn from them.”

“Did the Imperator give a directive?” Yang wondered, brushing some hair out of her face.

“Not directly.” The Battlemaster admitted. “And I suspect a reason why.”

She nodded, either guessing correctly or sensing through the bond. “He wants to see what you’ll do?”

“I suspect so,” the Battlemaster sat down opposite her. “Our disagreements unsettle him. He is not used to being challenged, and I suspect even now he believes my concerns are irrelevant. But he also knows he cannot cast me aside without controversy. So he seeks a way to discredit me in a justified way. He is insisting I achieve this goal – after Florida, I would even say it is framed as a warning.”

Yang snorted. “What, and ignore that Quisilia couldn’t kill all the Nulorian? Or that the Overmind’s arrogant puppet also failed? Not to mention Sicarius and the Second Guardian? He can’t pin Florida on you.”

“Oh, officially, no,” the Battlemaster agreed. “But he is growing impatient and my request to Sana did not engender goodwill, not from one he views as a traitor. Patricia’s new…tactic…of causing damage and terror is a sign he wishes for the war to end sooner than later – and a rebuke of what
the current strategy has been. For the Andromedons, I suspect he wants to see how I handle them. Without a doubt there is a right and wrong way – or at least expectations depending on if I am sufficiently loyal or not.”

Yang frowned. “Which means…what are you going to do? What are we going to do?”

“As I said, I will confront them,” he repeated. “I do not intend to act as the unthinking enforcer of the Imperator, something he has likely forgotten. However, he does not expect subtlety or subterfuge from me. If I reach a decision that is unlikely to be acceptable, then it will have to be executed quietly.”

She pursed her lips. “And what do you think the possibility of that kind of…decision…is?”

“I suspect that Paradise and the current state of the war have not encouraged the Unions,” the Battlemaster mused. “Their lack of trust is understandable, though their support of XCOM is unacceptable. I am not certain what the solution is, but eliminating the opposition will solve nothing except push more Unions towards rebellion.”

Yang swung her legs idly. “I wonder – do they know that we know?”

“They likely suspect,” the Battlemaster said. “Though we have not done anything, so it is possible they have become complacent. It ultimately does not matter, as the result will be the same.”

“Right,” Yang nodded. “When do we go?”

“Soon,” the Battlemaster promised. “When you have fully recovered. If it does not go well, I suspect they will be prepared to defend themselves. I would prefer we both be at full strength.”

“Hm,” Yang thought. “Perhaps we should bring Sana along too. She may help.”

“But this time,” the Battlemaster shook his head. “This is something we will do on our own. She is not on our side completely, and the fewer who are involved…the better.”

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Medical Center, Mars Observation Station – Mars Orbit

5/12/2017 – 10:09 A.M.

Sitting in a busy medical center, with the worst of the work finished, Hallian sat with his tablet, composing several documents to be sent out to a number of superiors and impacted parties. Compared to fixing up wounded soldiers, this was menial and easy by comparison, though some of it wasn’t necessarily related directly to his job, but a…personal project.

Hallian felt bad for the psychologists who were dealing with the survivors of the Florida attack. Admittedly, even he wasn’t completely back to normal after what had happened, but he’d been close to an evacuation zone so when the orders had come, he hadn’t seen the worst of the aftermath.

Or more accurately, lack of an aftermath.

He’d heard numerous accounts by this point and seen some images. Wounded soldiers talked, as did medics. Soldiers had seen their friends and comrades disintegrated and ripped apart before them, with absolutely no way to help them. Some had seen the nanites eat everything in sight, like some unholy plague that devoured the carnage.
Hallian felt more uncomfortable with an empty battlefield than a...well, normal one. Sterility was alien on a battlefield. Unnatural. The images taken of the aftermath showed exactly that. Sterility. No bodies, no carnage, it was like nothing had ever happened. Everything that had been there was effectively...erased.

He wasn’t envious of the one who had to write the letters that would need to be sent to their families – and now there wasn’t even a body to return. There should always be something, even if it wasn’t whole. Not to mention it was a horrible way to die in his view. It reminded him of just how powerful the nanites were; a tool that could do immeasurable good and harm at the same time.

He felt tired at the thought that this would inevitably become commonplace. The weapons would grow larger in scale and power, with Collective and Humanity trying to outdo the other. Both sides would consider it justified as well, and wouldn’t necessarily be wrong.

A vicious, escalatory cycle.

It didn’t matter how many died or in what way; it wasn’t as though the war was going to stop. Whispers of another attack against Florida were already going around, though the Battlemaster in his actual wisdom was waiting to determine the most effective way. Still, he was planning to go back, and countless more would die as a result.

The Humans couldn’t hold back against the numbers the Collective had. That was a fact, but he was becoming more and more convinced that the Humans were willing to literally throw all seven billion of their kind against the Collective out of sheer defiance. All the fighting for an utterly pointless end.

Hallian had a strong feeling the fighting wouldn’t end after the Collective “won”. The Nulorian were proof of that, and if a largely peaceful species could spawn insurrection of that type, he could only imagine what the Humans would do.

If their history was anything to go by, it would be worse than the Nulorian. Insurrection, rebellion, terrorism, and self-determinance were repeated themes in Human history. He idly wondered if even ADVENT would last beyond the war, in the fantasy where they emerged intact. Probably not. The only reason they’d gotten this powerful was because of a unified threat. When that threat was gone...what then? Would Humans continue accepting ADVENT in its current iteration?

All in all, the more he looked at the war, the more he felt like it didn’t matter.

At least for the Humans they had reason to fight that was clear. They were also more violent and he’d noted that few had the inherent aversion to combat Vitakara did. Abraham seemed like an exception, and while he’d still been supportive of the conflict, Hallian felt that he’d welcome a stop to the fighting as well.

Humans were not irredeemable and that stood out as an oddity among a Collective that had previously welcomed species of all kinds. It wasn’t even like the Mutons which had attacked diplomatic delegations, forcing the Battlemaster to intervene. Admittedly, the Humans weren’t especially welcoming to him at first, but either through apathy or simply not caring anymore, few had paid much attention when he’d started helping them. Maybe they didn’t know, but it didn’t really matter. There could certainly be peace between them...but those in charge needed to decide that peace was in their best interests.

And that was something he knew the Collective would not agree with, but also doubted ADVENT was interested in peace either. They were too...methodical...too spurned to accept anything permanent. ADVENT seemed like a very different Humanity than was normal, at least in his
observations. Humans were more emotional, friendly, and complex than ADVENT seemed to be.

ADVENT seemed sterile. Almost robotic. Certainly manipulative, with a cold pragmatism and passion for structure, order, and obedience. Hallian believed this was a major reason Humanity had been able to endure, by forcefully purging parts of themselves and reshaping what was left, but the cost of that…well, had to be determined.

Still, something needed to be done to break the metaphorical divide between both sides.

He had a contact from the other side now. He unfortunately couldn’t contact Abraham due to the Internet not existing on Mars, not to mention he wouldn’t have been able to access it even if it was. Still, it was a starting point. Now he just needed to convince the Battlemaster of the viability of an…independent medical corps.

Instinctively, he knew it was a stupid idea that was probably going to get shot down if the Battlemaster bothered to look at it at all. Still, he felt he could lay out a plausible case, specifically pointing to the intelligence gathering potential, covert troop movements, and other honestly unethical applications, the inclusion of which was necessary because without them there was no way it would be accepted.

True altruism or empathy didn’t exist in this galaxy, at least not in the people with power.

He’d heard the Elder Sana’Ligna was also doing a similar thing, but that was more of her own volition and without an actual agreement between both sides. She was…tolerated at best. If this idea went beyond theory, the dream was a mutual pact between the Collective and ADVENT. ADVENT was going to have the same problems with the idea, but that was completely out of his hands.

He was going to do his part, and at least now he would be able to say he tried to do something that might lead to something lasting. But he’d see; even if it happened, it might lead to nothing.

Still worth a shot, and as the Humans liked to say, you miss every shot you don’t take.

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ADVENT HQ, Geneva – Switzerland

5/10/2017 – 4:00 P.M.

And here we go.

Kaya could hear the crowd outside, the low hum of the onlookers trying to be the first to see the future Empress. She stood by herself, with ADVENT Soldiers guarding every single point of entry and exit. A number of aides and attendants were rushing to and fro, making sure everything from lighting, to microphones, to security was ready to go.

Everyone would be out there waiting. Her unit, her sister, and of course, her people.

“Moving out in ten seconds,” came the warning from an ADVENT officer. “All up to you now.”

Kaya nodded, already prepared. There’d been a number of rehearsals already, and she’d memorized what she was supposed to do some time ago. Almost without realizing the time had passed, the doors opened and the afternoon sun streamed inside, initially blinding. Flashes and dozens of camera clicks sounded as she took her first steps forward.
There were murmurs when they saw her, some gasps of surprise mixed in with cheers. It was known now she’d been in the Order of Terra, but few knew what she looked like now. Quite different from the woman she’d been only a year ago. Cut hair, weathered skin, and battle armor. No fancy Japanese attire or excessive makeup.

A woman who had been hardened by war.

Her armor was cleaned and shining of course, with the scratches and dents removed and fixed. She’d not necessarily wanted that, but considering the ceremony, appearances did matter. The only things she lacked were her main weapons, which she’d get back soon enough, though a pistol was visibly strapped to her side.

The walkway was a red carpet which extended to an elevated platform that held a replica of the Takamikura, diligently designed and colored with the ADVENT red and black. It wasn’t Japan, where the ceremony should have been, but it was the best that could be done, and Kaya suspected she wasn’t the only one who was appreciative. It would have been easy to hold this in a building somewhere, but ADVENT had gone the extra mile to make it a bit more authentic.

There were a few people she recognized in the crowd; her unit was pretty close to where the steps to the platform were, who were smiling and being as encouraging as they could be, some joining in the cheering and applause. Most she’d never seen before, outside of a few ADVENT officials who merely observed with some nods of acknowledgement and members of Japanese media who were practically fawning over her and speaking excitedly as she approached.

The people looked at her in a mixture of awe, respect, and fascination. Millions more were no doubt watching across the world. Aliens too, which could easily include the being or beings that were trying to kill her. She hoped they were watching now; and that they felt like failures. Probably too much to hope for.

She ascended the steps, with her sister, her family, and those who had recently been inaugurated into the Imperial lineage on both sides of the Imperial Throne, with chairs for the Elders and Prime Minister before and behind the throne. The throne was a replica, and she doubted she would sit in it again, but for the purposes of ceremony, it was more than sufficient.

Everyone stood as she approached, or rather had been standing already. She reached the throne, turned around and sat upon it. The order of the ceremony would be different from previous enthronements, with one part being removed entirely, and others…reworked. Normally she would not sit upon the throne until the Three Sacred Treasures had been presented, but that would happen now.

And the treasures this time would be slightly different.

The area was silent as she overlooked the crowd which waited expectantly. The Elders stood, with wooden boxes in their hands containing the treasures. The first stepped forward, and after she motioned the crowd to sit, she stood and approached. “The Yasakani no Magatama, Empress,” the first man said, as he opened the box and lifted out an object in the shape of the jewel.

Though this one was noticeably artificial, mostly because it was not a jewel at all, but a custom elerium power cell which would power one of the later treasures. The real treasures had been recovered, but were currently locked up safely. Now they would normally be presented, but Kaya had wanted something more…practical.

The treasures had been reimagined as a result.
Kaya took the elerium cell and hooked it to her belt, which she would return to later. The core glowed an appropriate green as it hung, ready for use.

The second elder moved before her, unveiling the second treasure. “The Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi, Empress,” he said. “Forged to serve you in the fires of combat.” She picked up the golden-tinted sheath and drew the sword with an audible grind that was broadcast across the world. The blade was a black steel, and as expected, it bore some similarities to the weapons used by the XCOM Templars.

Or so they said, anyway. The sword seemed different than some of the Templar weapons she’d experimented with for comparison. There was a heft and toughness to this she could inherently feel. When she’d commented on the difference, the white-haired woman who’d given it to her had seemed amused.

Well, she wasn’t going to complain about the quality. She’d asked if it would have features like some weapons the Templars used, like channeling electricity and friction. She’d been told no, but that it didn’t matter. She’d been told the blade was effectively indestructible and capable of matching the Battlemaster’s own weapon. That was good enough for her, and as the light reflected off the black blade, she noted that the crowd seemed to definitely be taken with it. With a nod, she sheathed the katana-esque sword and hooked it where her katana would have gone.

Yes, the new Grasscutter Blade would serve quite well. It was certainly a better quality than weapons she’d used before. It was an advantage, but she’d accepted that it was permissible due to her status, even if it did give her a survivability advantage. She’d just have to fight harder to keep everyone alive.

The final box was presented as the final Elder stepped forward. It was opened to reveal a small dark reflective circle, with simple patterns and tiles within, along with hooks and straps. It was made out of alloys, but also noticeably reflective. “The Yato no Kagami, Empress,” the man said, presenting the shield to her. “May it serve you and turn the attacks of your enemies away.”

Making the decision to turn what was arguably the most important of the artifacts from a mirror into a shield was easier than she’d thought. Though it wasn’t a traditional shield, but one anchored in new technology. Powered by the Magatama elerium core, it would function as a PDS field used by the Shieldbearers, turning away incoming fire.

Quite the innovative design. Kaya took the treasure and unhooked the core, and placed it into the designed slot before hooking the mirror itself on her belt. In battle it would be strapped to a place on her back, but that was awkward to do now, and it was small enough it could hang comfortably.

With the treasures presented, the Elders returned to their seats and Kaya mentally took a breath, as the moment everyone had been waiting for arrived. She stepped closer to the podium, silence still reigning as she rested her hands on the sides, gripping them lightly as she looked around the room and into the cameras.

Here went nothing.

“This ceremony is meant to be a celebration,” she began. “One of reflection, family, friends, and pride in our nation. It is a rare, solemn event that those around the world watch, but more importantly, it is a rebirth; a new beginning. Today though, this ceremony isn’t just important to my people, but also to the millions watching around the world.”

Kaya took a breath. “I’ve been victim to tragedy. In the span of hours I lost almost all my family. Many of whom I hadn’t spoken to in weeks because I was serving ADVENT, out of a mistaken
belief that they were beneath the notice of the aliens; that they were safe. As I’ve learned, there are none who are beneath the notice of the aliens. They intend to dominate and intimidate us on every level, from civilian, to soldier, to leader.” She briefly lapsed into a short silence, allowing some reflection.

“But the truth is that what has befallen my family is not unique,” she shook her head. “It hasn’t been for years now. Every hour now, people are robbed of their sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, and yes, families. All for a senseless and unprovoked war. A war in which the aliens have yet to inform us how it was provoked.”

She motioned to herself, and her sister. “Focus has been given to my family due to my birth, my title, and our ties to Japanese history and culture. What happened to me was covered breathlessly and mournfully, but the truth is neither I, nor my family, are any more special or important than those who have died without so much a mention. I am no more deserving of sympathy than those who have already suffered the loss I have.”

There were a few nods in the crowds, some appreciation on faces and she noted a few from the media winced. Maybe they’d perform some self-reflection later. “To those people out there, I cannot give you the recognition, peace, or reason for why it befell you that is deserved – but I can say that I understand, and I pray that no one ever has to. I cannot say why my own family was targeted, but I can assume that it was meant to break my resolve and drive me to despair as well as those around us. To send a message not just to me, but any who dare to support ADVENT.”

Her voice became firm. “Today I stand in rejection of the ones who sought to break me. Today I can state without ambiguity that they failed. They sought to end my bloodline, to end my family, but all they have done is ensure it will endure for generations to come.” Kaya motioned to those sitting on the sides. “Today the new Imperial Family sits and celebrates alongside me, rebuilt and renewed. All that the aliens sought to achieve has been undone because we do not break or buckle under adversity, but adapt, grow, and endure.”

One hand closed into a fist, which she rested on the podium. “The aliens continue to show their true colors and face to the world, even if those who would ally with them are blind to it. Even now they hold two children of my family, those who pose no threat to them. They do not care beyond forcing our submission to them, and will do whatever they deem necessary to achieve it. Nothing is too reprehensible or forbidden. Remember the butchery of Beijing, the indiscriminate destruction of Washington D.C., the horror of Paradise, the amorality of the Sectoids, and the missing millions whose fates will never be known and whose families will never know peace.”

She shook her head, pausing for a few seconds again. “I did not seek this role, and never have, but I recognize it is my duty. But with this duty comes change and responsibility. As Empress I have a duty to my people, but we are in a new world now; one where national loyalties and priorities are secondary to our species. I do not fight and lead simply for my own people, but for all those who reside on Earth and act to free it from the alien threat.”

Gripping the sides of the podium, she held her chin up high. “We live in an era where the feudal monarchies and royalties are diminished, but influence is still retained and it is time we address the responsibilities of that. As Sovereigns, we have held ourselves aloof from the people. We command attention and focus by nothing more than titles, family names, and old connections. This is a mistake that too many I know have succumbed to. The time of kings and emperors may have ended, but that does not mean we have the right to abdicate our responsibility – not when there are those who still look to us for guidance. Not when we possess even a scrap of authority and legitimacy.”
She looked out to the crowd, locking eyes with some of them. “We all have a responsibility to our species. This war is larger than one single nation or people; it shall decide the fate of our species. We must each do our part to protect ourselves, and secure a future for our species and children. As Empress I will fight every day until the alien threat is purged from this Earth and the Collective is reduced to dust.”

She took a breath. “I know the risks; I understand that I could very well die. In mere weeks from now you might hear of it. But this is a sacrifice I am willing to make. I can be replaced, there are others who will rise and lead, but we can never allow ourselves to cower before the aliens. I do not hold myself as someone more valuable than those others who fight, but as one who joins them side by side, united in a singular cause.”

A small smile formed. “Many of us have lost friends, family, and our home. I understand this, and that is why I fight. I believe we can win, because no matter what the aliens do to us, we return stronger than ever. For every country they take, we will take it back. For every Human they kill, two more will join the fight. For each mistake, we learn and grow. The Ethereal Collective will realize they should have left us alone, because now I have directed my family towards their elimination. One action meant to sow fear and terror has only strengthened our resolve – and it is not just true for me, but millions of others across the world.”

“The aliens do not understand what they have done,” she said, keeping her voice low and calm. “They have committed one fatal mistake – they have made this war personal. To me, to you, and to the world. Our species has a long memory, and we are driven to act against the evil and tyrannical. Justice is demanded for the blood spilled across the world, and the Collective now knows their judgement is coming, and that they cannot hide or run.”

She placed one hand over her heart, the ADVENT salute on display. “For Japan, for ADVENT, and for Humanity.”

It started small at first, but there was first applause which then morphed into cheers, particularly from the soldiers and civilians. Words and sentences in a multitude of languages, mostly Japanese and English. The cheers grew to a roar as she looked proudly forward, buoyed by the response.

One word was slowly being made out, chanted over and over again.

“Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!”

The three cheers had been a moment usually reserved for a specific point in the ceremony, but Kaya found that here was more impactful. It was a cheer to acknowledge the new sovereign, to wish them long life and health. Something she felt she would need here, but there were other meanings that could be implied.

Triumph. Pride. Hope.

All of which she felt right now, and which was reflected in the crowd before her which had swelled in intensity and strength. As the repeated cheers of Banzai rang out, she lifted a fist in solidarity, amplifying the cheers even further, enough to where the air itself was vibrating with the number of voices.

It would only last for a while, but for a short moment, she felt like she was on top of the world.

***

Home of Runi’sirasis’vitianis, Geneva – Switzerland
Nemo sat before his television still as a machine. It was not prone to strong emotions or language, but seeing the former princess and now Empress of the family it had removed as a factor stand up there so defiantly and flaunt her resilience was supremely irritating.

Nemo’s lips were pursed tightly together. The new Empress was free with her challenges it seemed.

Very well Kaya, challenge accepted. Bitch.

Humans had a large number of words for cursing. Usually Nemo considered such language beneath it, but there were a few select instances where using such words to describe what it was feeling was appropriate. Now was one of those times.

Her little display certainly undercut the effect killing the Imperial Family had; if all they had to do was arbitrarily declare a number of random other people as ‘family’ then he questioned the worth of killing them off in the first place. That was not supposed to be what happened, and now it was just accepted.

It made so little sense, and went against what the typical definition of a Human ‘family’ was. Yet there was no Human that Nemo could see who was going to call her out on this obvious propaganda-directed redefinition. Which was ultimately not a surprise, ADVENT would seek to mitigate the fallout as much as possible, even if it went against Human norms.

Humans really were sheep, their minds malleable to a fault. Or not, depending on how one looked at it. Most Human minds appeared hard-wired to obey and submit to authority. They would change their entire belief structure and mindset if they were told to. Not too different from Vitakara in that sense.

It certainly didn’t help him now.

“Sirasis” had not been invited to the ceremony, which Nemo would have turned down anyway for a multitude of reasons. The message a very apologetic AEGIS officer had given was notably straightforward. Effectively, that they thought it would be in bad taste to invite aliens to a ceremony where a woman’s family had been killed by aliens.

Admittedly, that was not an ideal environment.

Of course, Nemo had played along and given the understanding platitudes, which was just as well since there was ‘work’ to do – which Nemo had found a small routine to get into. Sirasis had access to a number of individuals, a fair few internal documents. The first few days were good and normally this would be the start of an excellent operation – except there had been a recent notice which made him seriously consider if Quisilia was playing a tasteless joke on him with how utterly bad the timing was.

ADVENT was undergoing a massive ‘internal investigation’, and there had been a large number of people arrested and prosecuted. Right now, it was only confined to ADVENT Intelligence, but the implication was very clear - that the rest of ADVENT was going to be scoured as well.

The two men in charge now, Ian Powell and Declan Rodgers, had an agenda – which was to purge ADVENT of the moles, traitors, and dissenters. It was, Nemo had to admit, somewhat admirable and the two men could not be faulted for pursuing such an objective. Even the Zar’Chon wouldn’t be able to condemn these actions, as such operations were performed regularly – though not on
such a large scale.

It appeared the AEGIS Division was next on the list.

The message Nemo had been staring at for prolonged parts of the day read equal parts a warning and a command.

*Greetings Runi’sirasis’vitianis,*

*As you are no doubt aware, ADVENT Intelligence, in coordination with the Peacekeeper Division and the Oversight Division, has been conducting an agency-wide investigation into the attempted and executed infiltration, subversion, and sabotage of ADVENT by foreign and alien actors.*

*We take our integrity and security very seriously, and as a result of our efforts, we have uprooted and purged many traitorous individuals and bodies within our agency, which has begun leading us beyond our current focus on ADVENT Intelligence and into other ADVENT agencies. As we begin to finish our investigation of ADVENT Intelligence, we are looking to the future.*

*We understand that the optics of this are not ideal, nor is profiling based on species, but the AEGIS Division, and subsequently, the aliens you are currently representing, are ripe for infiltration and exploitation. As the AEGIS Division is relatively small, we do not estimate it will take long to complete our investigation.*

*While we are certain that neither you nor the AEGIS leadership are working against ADVENT and Human interests, those within the organization we are not as confident of. I will remind you that the defectors still have family on Vitakar, and the Zararch is not above using families as leverage to make otherwise willing defectors cooperate and act as assets and sources.*

*ADVENT Intelligence requests that you inform all relevant parties and individuals of a potential impending investigation, and forward all personnel data in your possession to us for categorization and initial review. We apologize for the inconvenience, but this is necessary to continue to maintain the security and integrity of ADVENT, and especially experimental programs such as the AEGIS Division that are already under direct scrutiny.*

*We expect all requested material no later than one week from the sending of this notice. Please note that failure to comply or the submission of false or incomplete data will result in arrest, prosecution, and sentencing of all involved. Due to the possibility that suspected operatives and assets of foreign or alien organizations may be exfiltrated or escape, we cannot give you an expected timeframe for when this investigation will formally commence.*

*We appreciate your cooperation, and look forward to this investigation being concluded in a quick, efficient, and secure manner. For legal questions, please review the attached legal documentation and feel free to consult with both the Oversight and Peacekeeping Divisions to ensure all regulations and documents are accurate.*

* - Ian Powell, Acting Director of ADVENT Intelligence

This was less than ideal.

Correction – it was bad.

This effectively rendered the current plan irrelevant. An alternate one would have to be developed. It was clear that ADVENT Intelligence – and potentially their psions – would probably be keeping a close eye on Sirasis, to ensure she did as expected. Knowing ADVENT, her computer was probably tapped and monitored.
The Zar’Chon and the Ethereals were not going to be happy, but this was something that could have been foreseen, and Nemo could always find someone else to impersonate. At minimum an important defector had been killed. It appeared that the ‘suicide’ route might have to be considered.

There might be a way to salvage this.

Nemo leaned back, thinking very carefully about what to do next. Between the notice and Kaya’s Enthronement, Nemo had come to a definite conclusion.

Today had been a very bad day.

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Office of the Commander, the Praesidium – Classified Location

5/12/2017 – 9:09 A.M.

The Zudjari blinked, seeming surprised. “You wish me to participate?”

The Commander nodded. “Yes.”

“The sentiment is appreciated,” Axis said slowly. “But I am only one of my species. I hesitate to speak for all of us, let alone Origin.”

“Understandable,” Ariel Jackson sympathized, making a note on her tablet. “But considering that the liberation of your people is going to be a priority, it is important that you are involved in the discussions. If would be in poor taste to plan the liberation of your people and not include you.”

The Commander smiled in reinforcement. “What she said. This meeting will not just be to formalize our alliance, but to determine the grand strategy of the war. This is beyond a single planet now. There are multiple factions, species, and individuals across multiple planets who need to have a unified vision of what we wish to achieve.”

He indicated around him vaguely. “Earth is the catalyst, but there will come a point when the conflict spills into the wider galaxy. We need a plan, and we will have one.”

“I see,” Axis nodded. “I cannot say that Origin will completely accept what I negotiate or agree to, but until he is freed, I shall speak for the Mosaic to the best of my ability. On that you have my promise.”

“I doubt Origin will be unreasonable,” the Commander mused. “Not from what you’ve told me.”

“I’m unsure,” Axis flapped his lips, a sign of discomfort. “The truth about the Sovereigns has raised questions. I suspect now what Origin is, and who he spoke for may have a differing agenda. However, I have faith he will be freed and an accord will be reached.”

“As do I,” the Commander clasped his hands behind his back. “That is all. We will be leaving within days. Prepare as best you can, and you will be summoned when we are ready.”

“Yes, Commander,” Axis bowed his head and mimicked the salute. “I will be ready.”

The towering alien departed, leaving Jackson and the Commander alone, and the Central Officer raised an eyebrow. “He’s not wrong about Origin. If we’re right, then that could cause problems. I’d not overpromise on what we’ll do. It’s honestly better if Axis retains supervisory control over any Zudjari we free.”
“Perhaps,” the Commander mused, idly looking over to the Sovereign Orb that sat upon a stand nearby. “At the same time, the Sovereign Ones have been locked in their circular conflict for millennia. It’s past time someone or something forced them to consider directing their energies somewhere else more important.”

“Bold to assume that every Sovereign will be as reasonable as T’Leth,” Jackson smirked as she shook her head. “I’m mildly surprised T’Leth hasn’t killed you out of annoyance after you keep making demands. You, a mere mortal.”

“I doubt T’Leth has ever been challenged before,” the Commander sat down, thinking on the question a bit more seriously. It was a personal interest to him; the Sovereigns in general were a fascinating conundrum to consider. “Nor most Sovereigns. They act on their own, are worshipped as gods, and naturally fall into a mindset of infallibility to where their visions become static and they are incapable of forming new patterns and ideas. Thus, they see the status quo as serviceable because they have not been affected and react poorly to challenge as a result. If they are content, why do they need to make it better?”

Jackson crossed her arms, appearing to not have expected an actual answer to that, before shrugging. “That’s a question above me,” she admitted. “One I’d prefer not thinking about if I’m honest. It comes a point where the extrapolation becomes a bit too…” she searched for the word. “Existential for me. I’ll leave the negotiating with the fish-gods to you, thank you very much.”

“I’ll accept that,” the Commander chuckled, good naturedly. “But I suspect we won’t have to solve the Origin problem for some time. Out of all the factions, the Zudjari are not a major factor yet. Getting everyone else to work together may be difficult. Too many different priorities.”

“Though they all have one in common,” Jackson noted. “The fall of the Collective.”


“Well, that’s why we’re having this meeting,” Jackson said. “Important questions to be answered and clarified.”

“Indeed,” the Commander glanced to the clock. “Only a few more days. Hopefully the Collective doesn’t do anything too significant during that time.”

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Observation Chamber, Atlantis – The Deep Pacific Ocean

5/9/2017 – 6:02 A.M.

Loke just stood in the observation chamber and soaked it all in. There was so much about Atlantis that was fascinating and amazing; honestly the past few weeks felt like he was a kid with how much he was taken by the place. He hadn’t felt this kind of…wonder in a very long time. That part of him he thought had been killed, but it just seemed to have been suppressed.

Seeing the worst places of Earth and worst of Humanity would do that to a person.

Perhaps it made places like this seem amazing in comparison. He wondered how many more places on Earth were like this, just waiting to be found. Or more likely, had already been found and he just hadn’t heard of them. Now he was a bit more understanding of people who traveled all over the world for the sights and exotic locales. If the feeling was even somewhat like this, he could see
it being addictive.

Thus, his favorite spot in the Atlantis Base was the Observation Chamber, which was quite simply the only place on the base which wasn’t completely encased. It was a small tower that extended above the base one took an elevator to, topped by a completely transparent sphere, allowing an unrestricted view over the entire Atlantis base and the deep ocean itself.

It was a bit nerve-wracking at first. Given the sheer amount of pressure this deep, there was a not-insignificant fear that the chamber might crack and break. But he’d been assured that the chamber was perfectly safe, though you wouldn’t want to be in it if the base came under attack, and in fact the chamber could be remotely sealed off in case of a breach (which seemed to be a standard security measure throughout the entire base).

Even with all that, it was just a fear some people couldn’t get over. Which was fine; that just meant less people around to bother him. There was a steady flow of traffic he’d found, and the best times to come were early in the morning or late at night. Truthfully, it didn’t matter when one came, since the only way one could measure time was the clocks on the walls.

Atlantis never slept. Not really. The lack of tangible cycles meant that there were effectively two different groups of people working, one during one cycle, and the next doing what was left. Easier to perform since there wasn’t anything to compare it to.

Loke drummed his fingers on the couch, looking out over the base. Even in the few weeks he’d been here, there’d been progress made on the construction. There’d already been a massive warehouse-like structure where the ships were being built, and more defense platforms, storage areas, living quarters, and aquatic farms were springing up on the sea floor.

There were regular patrols of Atlantis Guards, and occasionally he’d see Neptune Scouts deploy in their little pods who would return an hour or so later. People were still nervous going out too far. He was almost sad he wasn’t one of the Scouts, but his actual job was one he was quite happy with, so he wasn’t complaining.

Of course, the thing everyone looked out for was the wildlife, and there was a surprising amount of it despite the depth. The deep ocean had been a fascination for many simply because unknown it was compared to the rest of the world, and there was plenty to point too now showing that. Everything down here was unsettling and bizarre, but in a good way.

Well, he said that now. If he came face to face with some of those creatures out on the ocean floor, it might give him a heart attack.

Eh, probably an acceptable price to pay.

The door hissed open behind him, and he glanced around and was somewhat surprised to see he actually recognized the alien entering the room. The Dath’Haram woman…Valencia, that was it. He’d actually spoken to her several times, though mostly work-related. Despite some of his initial reservations, she seemed genuine and committed.

“Hello,” she said, coming around, her green skin barely visible in the dim light. “Loke, right?”

“Guess we both remember each other,” he nodded, flashing a smile. “Didn’t realize you liked coming up here.”

“Oh, I haven’t actually been up here yet,” she said, sitting down on the same couch. “Been meaning to, but never found a good time. I didn’t even know it existed until you mentioned it a few
“Really?” He raised an eyebrow, amused. “You’re an architect here!”

“Well, yes,” she fidgeted. “But that doesn’t mean I know everything. I mean, do you know every military unit that’s being created here?”

“I wish,” he snorted. “Point taken. Glad you’re up here anyway. It’s an amazing sight.”

“Mmm, it is,” she leaned back, looking out over the base. “It’s…nice to see it laid out. Feels more tangible than reading status updates and seeing holograms. I like the lighting too, it’s less isolating than we feared it might turn out.”

“Yep, nothing quite beats seeing it for yourself,” he agreed. “I’m curious – you’ve been to somewhere like this before? Given that you have a whole race that lives underwater and all that?”

“No,” she shook her head violently. “I was actually a bit uncomfortable here at first. No one goes into the Manda-” at his confused expression, she cut herself off, then elaborated. “The ocean. Sovereign Sar’Manda territory; they do not take incursions lightly. I guess a lot of us have an aversion to the ocean as a result. Something beautiful we can see, but never explore.”

“Sar’Manda…” the word rolled off his tongue. “So, I assume the name means something? It sounds like it has an actual translation compared to something like…” he waved a hand. “Well, like Vitakarian for example.”

“A couple of translations, depending,” Valencia looked upward, recalling. “The Sar’Manda aggressively state that it means ‘masters of the waters’. Most translations would say it’s closer to the ‘sea-dwellers’ or ‘sea-children’. I’m assuming somewhere along the line the dialects diverged.” She bared her teeth, something he learned was one way how Dath’Haram expressed amusement. “More likely its them trying to sound more intimidating. Ah, I suppose it doesn’t matter, but it’s interesting to consider.”

“It is,” Loke agreed, turning his head to her. “What about Dath’Haram? Similar concept?”

“In a way,” she shifted to face him better. “Most translations tie it to where we live; or so popular ones go. ‘Dwellers of the forest’ or ‘children of the forest’ for the most part. But those aren’t really accurate.”

“Oh?”

“It’s a bit odd,” she admitted. “Especially with who we are. The real translation, which the Council of Dath’Haram, our…racial government…the one they quietly acknowledge is ‘blades of the people’ or ‘defenders of the people’. It can vary on context.”

“Hm,” Loke scratched his beard. “A bit militant for your race. Don’t suppose you had a less-than-peaceful past?”

“That’s the odd thing,” she shrugged. “We didn’t. Maybe back then we used the name as a deterrent. It’s admittedly not something I looked into deeply, so apologies if I end up being wrong.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he waved a dismissive hand. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“If you-” she began, before yelping in surprise and breaking into a short sentence in her alien language, looking completely terrified. Loke soon saw what it was, and he couldn’t keep his
amusement to himself. One of the more unsettling of underwater creatures had floated past, and was hovering over the sphere, looking down at her.

“That is not funny!” She sputtered, intermittently glancing between him and the creature.

“Sorry, sorry,” Loke fished for a small flashlight. “This should get rid of it.” He flashed the light directly at the creature, which quickly swam away. That particular creature definitely didn’t like light, and he was surprised it had gotten this close to the base.

“Thank you,” the Dath’Haram shuddered. “Your sea life is highly disturbing.”

“Down here it is,” Loke agreed. “Though a bit higher it’s more appealing. But I find it fascinating in its own way. Most of the stuff down here we barely know about. It’s like a new world down here. Although I might change my mind when I go out there.”

“Ah, when is that happening?” She asked, quickly asking. “If you can tell me, of course.”

“They’re doing final tests on the Depthtrooper armor,” Loke said. “Which I’m fine with. But once that’s done, we begin drills. Lots of time outside,” his face burst into a grin. “I can’t wait.”

“I hope it is successful,” she glanced out into the blackness. “It seems a lonely place out there. Difficult to believe a war could happen in this place.”

“Hopefully it won’t,” he agreed. “But if it does…well, that’s what I’m here for. Soldiers do two things well, kill people and protect them, in your case, it’s the latter.”

“Mm,” she said idly. “I can understand the concept of protecting others easily enough, though dislike the notion of people risking themselves for me. If your people were only protectors, I feel I could understand you better, but it seems many are more interested in killing others than protecting them.”

Loke pursed his lips. “To some extent, perhaps. A lot of soldiers fight for different reasons. Some do it for their country-their people, others to protect values they believe in. But some join just to kill people, though that’s a bit of an oversimplification,” he paused briefly, thinking about how best to say it. “The people they want to kill are usually those who shouldn’t be alive anyway. Terrorists, criminals, those kinds of people. An equivalent for you would be something like the Nulorian. Thankfully though, most soldiers aren’t pure sociopaths.”

“Some Borelians have explained something similar to me once,” she acknowledged with a nod, before looking to him. “If you don’t mind my asking…what about you? Why are you fighting?”

He thought a few seconds before answering. “It’s a bit selfish, honestly, at least when I started out. Because I wanted to prove that I could. I like challenge, so what better way to challenge myself than getting into the best special forces squad in the world?”

He shrugged. “Can’t say I’m a big patriot. Denmark was always a country I could be proud of, but it’s a place that owns an arbitrary amount of land like all the others in the world and has an unimaginative flag. That didn’t drive me. Yeah, we have values like ‘freedom’ ‘equality’, and ‘justice’, but so do dozens of others.”

Fingers drummed on the armrest. “Stats, milestones, challenge – that was what I really wanted. Perfect mission records, flawless executions, everything a means to that end. Exhilarating and I got money and called a hero while doing it. Not much reason to complain.”

He licked his lips. “I guess I never really thought about what I was doing and who it was for.
 Didn’t really have a reason to. The people I killed deserved it, no question, and I trusted my superiors. When the aliens hit though…” he leaned into the couch, looking away from her and to the blackness, wincing a bit. “Well, it stopped being a…gah, something trivial that I had fun with. It’s real now in a way it wasn’t before.”

A sneeze interrupted him before he continued. “What I did before? Being honest, there was approximately a zero percent chance a terrorist was going to radically affect the world. A random warlord or thug?” He shrugged. “They might affect a few hundred people at most. There was no significant consequence. Yeah, a few people would be hurt and ruined, but the vast majority would continue on unaffected. I was safe in the knowledge that even if I screwed up, the world was still going to continue on and people I cared about would be safe.”

A bitter smile crossed his face. “Not anymore. Everyone is one Ethereal away from death, one bombardment, one invasion. It’s become a matter of protection now. Most of the world? They can’t fight. Not well at least, much as ADVENT wishes it were otherwise. I can though, and that’s what I’ll do. My challenge now is to save the world, and this time it’s a challenge I can say matters – and also the one that could actually kill me.”

He trailed off, realizing he might have said a bit too much to an alien of all things who he had a passing relationship with, but not a close friend or anything. He coughed awkwardly. “Sorry if that was a bit much.”

“No, thank you,” she said, appraising him. “I appreciate the answer. I doubt most would have one like it.”

“Ha, probably not,” he agreed, then glanced down at his watch. “Got about another fifteen minutes before someone will ask where I am. Probably will get to test the armor today. What about you?”

“Reviewing an expansion plan,” she answered, her tone turning the slightest bit irritated. “Provided everyone shows up for the meeting on time. Some of your people have questionable time management.”

He chuckled. “Unfortunately, that remains a problem for some of us.”

Even in ADVENT, it seemed some things never changed.

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Volk’s Quarters – Mars Collective Base

5/13/2017 – 10:22 A.M.

Volk set the razor down and rubbed his chin. It was past time he made himself a bit more presentable and less like a wildman. A properly groomed beard made him feel much more professional than he’d felt the past month or so. Of course, there hadn’t been a lot that he’d done, and he couldn’t attribute that to one particular reason.

Nemo was out on his mission, and he didn’t have the faintest clue how that was going. Though he had been very amused to watch the Enthronement of that Japanese Empress. Nemo had probably been fuming the whole time.

Well, probably not. Nemo was the kind of person…thing…to not be affected by anything.

Still, it was amusing to consider.
It was a speech to think on, at least. Thing was she wasn’t exactly wrong about a lot of stuff. Not that ADVENT was much better; as far as he was concerned, they were still more imperialistic and draconian than most of the Collective (barring the Vitakara, who definitely lived in something resembling a police state).

Ultimately though, the appeal of ADVENT was in full swing, made all the more potent by the fact that she’d touched on a very true point – how the war was affecting so many. And Humans had a tendency to react poorly when something was made personal. It could cement loyalties or break them.

Everyone had personal lines that couldn’t be crossed. He’d had his a long time ago.

It begged the question of what had happened to his red lines. There’d been a point some time ago when he’d have walked. He was no supporter of ADVENT but the Collective had no moral high ground. The recent hostage controversy in the SAS, the launch of literal nano superweapons, all of it was building to the point where the idea of washing his hands of everything and trying to just survive until they killed each other was appealing.

Then again, that would only end up working if the Collective won. If ADVENT somehow survived, no more living off the grid.

So for now, he stayed. The Collective was an evil, but it was an obvious, exploitable evil that could eventually collapse. ADVENT was a worse evil – a smart evil. The Collective could fall, with ADVENT he wasn’t as confident, and that worried him. It felt…irresponsible and cowardly to stand on the sidelines. Even if it felt like that’s what he’d been doing recently.

It was entirely possible that the Collective had accidentally forgotten about him, considering what they were focusing on now. A fairly skilled, but ordinary Human and his small team were not quite as useful in the types of operations they were planning. Now that they had psions and the like to teleport wherever they wanted, he was…well, less desirable, perhaps.

Or they considered him too distracted and unstable.

Which wasn’t necessarily wrong. Well, it hadn’t been for a few weeks when Elena was doing badly.

Now she was much better, enough to where she was joining him on the range and had mostly returned to normal degrees of conversation – which didn’t focus on her nightmares or memories. Volk truly didn’t know if he’d helped her recover, but he’d at least tried something, even if it largely amounted to talking to her for hours about random stuff to give her something to focus on.

Well, it hadn’t hurt.

Brushing himself off, he turned on the shower and took a short one, and when he was done, exited the bathroom and headed to the kitchen where Elena was probably still sitting and waiting for them. They’d taken to having late breakfasts together since they weren’t on a strict schedule for the moment. When it came down to an actual op, they’d both adjust.

However, Elena was not in the kitchen, but standing a short distance from the door with her pistol drawn and pointed at the entrance to the room. “Woah,” Volk’s own pistol was in his hand when he saw that, though when he saw her target, he cocked his head, confused. It was a Human woman, Asian, black hair and fairly imposing.

“Harbinger Yang Shuren; psion; unannounced,” Elena said curtly, not waver ing. “Wants to talk to
you.”

“Yang Shuren?” Volk holstered his pistol, though didn’t motion for Elena to do the same. If it was a psion, it wouldn’t threaten her and Elena would feel safer. “Huh. Have we met before?”

“Likely,” the woman said, angling her head to him. “Probably in brief.”

“Probably,” he agreed, frowning. “Seems you’re feeling better. I’ve heard you were injured in Florida.”

“Yes, but I’m better now, as you said. Comparatively,” she took a step forward. “Apologies for the unannounced visit. If I’d known I’d be held at gunpoint, I would have provided a bit more notice.”

Volk glanced to Elena before giving Yang an apologetic look. “It really wouldn’t have made a difference.”

She raised an eyebrow, but her face remained neutral. “Noted.”

“So why are you here?” Volk asked. “The Battlemaster isn’t usually the Ethereal I’ve answered to.”

“Nebulan is handling other matters,” Yang answered, before briefly pausing. “Or ‘Asaru’ as she calls herself to you. I expect she’ll return shortly, though the Battlemaster would prefer you not remain idle.”

“Is that right,” he said neutrally. “Knowing the Battlemaster, what I do is not really what he manages. I’m not really a soldier, and large battles aren’t my specialty. I’d prefer to stick to what I’m good at.”

“I’m aware, as is he,” she agreed, glancing to Elena. “But you’ve not really been doing much recently. I know that she was recovering, though she appears to be fine now. Because of this, I will remind you that you still have a responsibility to help us, and your services will likely be needed soon.”

A nod. “Go on.”

“ADVENT Intelligence is conducting a major purge of suspected Collective moles and traitors,” she said. “Something you’re probably aware of. Obviously, this needs to be mitigated, and the Zar’Chon believes this presents an opportunity, as not all of those caught are ours, but national remnants. Potential defectors. Some of these individuals, and our more high-level assets require extraction, and you’re one of the few Humans we have who has the skills to infiltrate and exfiltrate.”

Hm, well this wasn’t necessarily a bad change of pace. Reminded him of old times. “Not that I’m complaining, but wouldn’t someone like Quisilia or Sicarius be better for this? Less risk with them.”

She shook her head. “You’d think so, but no. ADVENT is taking precautions to mitigate psionic exfiltration, and if we spook them too much, they will take more drastic measures. You have an advantage in this case. You’re Human, don’t stand out, and aren’t psionic. Ideal for something like this. Good for your people too.” She cocked her head. “Given your history, you seem to have experience getting people out of tough situations.”

“Yes,” it had been…a long time since he’d thought about that. Much simpler times then. “I suppose I do.”
“Excellent,” she nodded. “You’ll be receiving profiles and operations shortly. This is timesensitive, so please be quick. You will also be performing this under the command of the Battlemaster – not other Ethereals. Understood?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “I’ll work as fast as I can.”

“Good, I will speak to you later,” she gave a small wave and exited, with Elena’s gun not wavering until the door closed behind her.

“Well,” Volk said a few seconds later. “Guess vacation’s over.”

Elena looked to the door, still frowning. “What is it?”

“It is odd,” she said, lowering her weapon. “Why did she not tell us she was coming?”

Come to think of it…that was a good question. Nothing she’d said seemed to really require this kind of secrecy, so either Yang was a naturally paranoid person (possible), it was a coincidence and that was just how she did things, or there was another angle to this beyond the obvious.

Of course…this was the Battlemaster. Given what he knew about him, this kind of blunt unorthodox communication wouldn’t necessarily be out of place. When it came to plots, spies, and angles, a spymaster the Battlemaster was not. Nor necessarily subtle.

“Probably nothing,” he shrugged. “But…let me know if you think of something. Never can be too careful with Ethereals.”

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Manda’tearias, Sar’Manda Empire – Vitakar

5/17/2017 – 12:17 P.M.

In the deep ocean, in the heart of the Sar’Manda Empire, aliens of all species gathered together to plot the downfall of the Ethereal Collective. The oppressive deep ocean served as a shroud, tinting the room the occupants were gathered within, all intent on completing this singular objective.

But all knew it was more than war which would be discussed.

What came after was more important.

The XCOM delegation was as expected. The Commander took point, not wearing his typical dress uniform but his silver Titan armor. His sniper rifle and pistols had been brought along too, as he was not risking being caught in enemy territory unprotected. His helmet rested on the circular table, along with his weapons – a gesture of cooperation that had been echoed by the other armed individuals in the room.

Flanking him were Jackson and Zhang, as the Central Officer was vital to an alliance on this scale, and the Director of XCOM Intelligence was similarly necessary. Neither were decked out in armor like the Commander, though both had brought weapons and wore tactical vests for some protection. JULIAN was also a participant, as a stand holding a smartphone which was connected to a small computer. He was not necessarily happy with this arrangement, but had accepted it.

Axis had also accompanied them, though he was technically representing the Zudjari Mosaic, in lieu of an actual authority. He was wearing his own battle armor, with weapons and helmet also set on the table. Aegis was also here, though unlike the others he intended to stand due to his height.
T'Leth had sent two representatives of his own, the first unsurprisingly being the Chronicler who was seated near the XCOM delegation, though the second was a bit more unexpected. The Commander would have expected Lincoln or Fiona, if anyone else at all, but instead the enigmatic Crevan Machas sat beside the bearded elder, looking sternly around the room at the various aliens and allies.

Miridian and Sorras represented the Nulorian, and they were seated opposite XCOM. They’d also come armed and armored, though had dispensed their weapons on the table as well. The Manda’sarthoria sat beside them, though it wasn’t expected that the leader of the Sar’Manda would interact much on matters outside Vitakar.

ADVENT’s delegation consisted of Saudia, Commander Laura Christiaens, Firdas Hassan as the Chief Diplomat, and Ian Powell, which the Commander took as a sign that his “Acting Director” title was going to become permanent in the near future. Unlike XCOM, they weren’t armored, but were in more formal attire, though some carried weapons which were also laid on the table.

Then were the Andromedons. Each of the allied Union leaders had come personally, and for the first time they’d seen some of the more unique of the Andromedons. V’Zarrah of Union Viarior was known to them, but A’Halsond and S’Trech of Unions Apear and Stuirah respectively were new. A’Halsond wore a suit similar to V’Zarrah, but S’Trech’s suit was hulking even for an Andromedon, more equivalent to a MEC than a simple battlesuit.

The most unique was Z’Vador, of Union Zacarrim. The Commander knew of the small Union and their uniqueness, but it was more visceral to witness in person. The Zacarrim didn’t wear hulking suits like the other Andromedons, but appeared to instead wear a mixture of a tight form-fitting suit with heavily invasive cybernetics and implants. Just from looking at the Andromedon, the Commander wondered if a majority of his body was cybernetic.

With everyone assembled, it was time to begin.

“I understand the risks all of you have taken to come here,” the Commander stood, looking around the room. “What we are doing is unprecedented, and your commitment to the downfall of the Collective is apparent and welcome. I believe I speak for Chancellor Vyandar when I say that without your support it is unlikely that we would be in this position.”

He nodded to the Sar’Manda in the room. “And our direct thanks to you, Manda’sarthoria. Your hospitality is appreciated.” The alien made a motion with his hand in acknowledgement, though the translation device didn’t say anything.

“He nodded to the Sar’Manda in the room. “And our direct thanks to you, Manda’sarthoria. Your hospitality is appreciated.” The alien made a motion with his hand in acknowledgement, though the translation device didn’t say anything.

“Indeed,” Saudia echoed. “Humanity will not forget this.”

“While your appreciation is welcome, it is thanks to you that we are here now,” Miridian commented, inclining his head. “Without Humanity, we would be stuck in our own independent plans and schemes. Now we have the chance to achieve something real.”

“Appreciated, Miridian,” the Commander answered, before looking back across the room. “I won’t waste time with overviews and introductions. All of you know of the others, and know why we are here today. It is time we come together and form a unified strategy against the Ethereal Collective and establish more interconnectivity as this war intensifies. I suspect we all see that the conflict will expand beyond our planet, and we need to be prepared for that possibility.”

“The sooner this happens, the better,” V’Zarrah stated, his voice booming in the small chamber. “I believe the Collective is growing suspicious, even if they do not press us. We have taken measures after Patricia was compromised, but they are either not interested, or Patricia omitted our
“I suspect they want to see what we do,” A’Halsond suggested. “A passing investment is justifiable, and the Ethereals lack insight into the deep inner workings of our Unions. They are no doubt watching us closely though, and waiting to see our actions.”

“Speed is absolutely a priority, and we understand time is of the essence,” Laura acknowledged, standing. “ADVENT is currently prioritizing two major projects that will drastically increase our odds of striking beyond Earth and bolstering our numbers. The Atlantis Fleet, which is being built secretly under our oceans, and Project Seafoam, which is the creation of a clone army.”

“Ah yes,” JULIAN interjected sarcastically. “Let’s just skip over the creation of AI. Already reduced to a footnote in history, how disappointing.”

“Not a footnote, JULIAN,” Laura continued without missing a beat. “In fact, our own AI development is nearing final testing. We are signaling and teasing a number of projects to varying degrees to throw off the Collective watching us. Learning about the clone army or the Atlantis Fleet could trigger an endgame scenario where they are willing to risk an overwhelming invasion, regardless of T’Leth’s deterrence.”

“They do so at their peril,” the Chronicler shrugged.

“Then it is imperative this fleet be completed,” S’Trech stated. “I have already authorized materials for your workers, Chancellor. Cooperation is already established, though it is worth expanding. However, this cannot be done discreetly without direct support from Union Viarior.”

“Assistance we shall provide,” V’Zarrah promised. “Though to achieve an increase we will need to construct additional Gateways. Those will take time, but they can be done.”

“Cloning facilities can be housed off-world,” Z’Vador interjected. “We have many worlds capable of industrial cloning. If you wish to additionally bolster your numbers, I can instruct our facilities to begin production.”

“Assuming this is done with Human oversight, that is a welcome proposal,” Hassan nodded. “We do not require knowing your methods, but turning over such an important project to alien oversight is not acceptable.”

“Understandable,” Z’Vador conceded. “We are willing to reach an agreement. The Collective does not suspect us.”

“It is true,” Aegis agreed, speaking for the first time. “Though I would advise caution all the same. The Imperator is not ignorant, and the only reason he has allowed your continued independence is because you pose no threat to him.”

“So he believes,” A’Halsond scoffed. “Unsurprising for one as arrogant as the Imperator.”

“I believe it is relatively clear that Earth will shape the direction this war goes,” Saudia spoke up. “The more attention the Imperator devotes to us, the less is on the Collective. As we intensify, the Collective will inevitably reciprocate. Whatever support could be provided to Earth would increase our chances of holding out until these projects are completed. I am aware of the limitations of deployment, and that many entities have used XCOM as an intermediary.”

“XCOM can house our people securely,” V’Zarrah said. “We cannot devote open support to ADVENT.”
“Open support, no,” Saudia agreed. “However, covert support would be welcome. Resources, scientists, engineers, ADVENT has more facilities and projects than XCOM. Augmenting them with alien specialists would provide a significant advantage.”

“I understand security may be a concern,” Ian Powell interjected. “Our security protocols and measures are being carefully crafted to pose as little risk to alien allies as possible. Psionic monitoring, biometrics, Blacksites, every conceivable measure will be taken. I echo the Chancellor in stating that increased support is critical for our efforts.”

“There is no disagreement,” A’Halsond stated. “With this said, if we work together closely, it cannot be one-sided. For the support of Union Apear, we want access to any projects we are involved in. Full access. We will be allowed to use whatever we assist on for our own purposes.”

“I concur,” Z’Vador agreed. “If we risk our people for your projects, it is imperative that we also receive the benefits.”

“We will consider it,” Hassan acknowledged. “But I don’t see why we can’t work within these parameters – provided that the same offer is extended to us. In the event that you request Human assistance, we would require the same measures. I think we both are both interested in cooperation rather than exploiting each other, so we should not become too obsessive over these details.”

“Acceptable,” A’Halsond said. “We are in agreement on that.”

“With a caveat,” Powell lifted a hand. “You would be working with classified projects and technology, and while you have a right to utilize what you are involved in, we would not want it shared with other parties such as the Vitakara or even other unions without our authorization. If the spillage becomes too problematic, this may have to be reconsidered. We would, of course, treat any projects we participate in with the Andromedon Unions the same way.

“That can be accounted for,” A’Halsond agreed. “We are as interested in preserving our secrets from our enemies as you are.”

“I will add that there is an open contribution that can be made,” the Commander looked to Miridian. “The Nulorian are Vitakara, and soon Vitakara will be fighting in combat. I doubt it would be a difficult matter to layer our alien forces with Nulorian. Perhaps for them to acquire combat experience or to simply kill Collective soldiers. But it is a contribution that can be made.”

“Provided that I retain authority over them,” Miridian nodded, rubbing his chin. “That would be feasible. But their priority is Vitakar – not Earth. If I need them here, they will return here.”

“I see that as fair,” the Commander nodded. “Now, it is all well and good to determine how we will help each other, but there is a more important question – what we want. There are specific objectives we want to achieve, and we need to know what those are.” He looked around the room. “For Humanity, our final objectives are simple – The expulsion of the Ethereal Collective from our territory, the capture or execution of all Collective-aligned Ethereals, and the death of the Imperator. Until these are achieved, there cannot be peace.”

“On that we agree,” V’Zarrah nodded. “I suspect to most the death of the Imperator is a necessity. Though we require more. The dissolution of the Andromedon Federation and the extermination of the Greater Hive Commanders are our priorities – the latter especially.”

“To clarify,” Hassan said. “Do you mean just the Hive Commanders or the Sectoids as a whole?”

“There is little difference,” S’Trech dismissed. “Without the Hive Commanders, the Sectoids are
unable to function. Their species will die when the Hive Commanders die. But so long as they live, they pose an existential threat to our species.”

“If there is one species Humanity will have no problem destroying,” Saudia said with a nod. “It is the Sectoids. You will have our support, both in supporting you against other rival Unions, and the elimination of the Greater Hive Commanders.”

“There is something to consider,” the Commander added, suspecting what he was going to say might not be popular. “The crimes of the Sectoids are not in question, and Humanity in particular has suffered from their actions. However, the Hive Commanders are not stupid. Intelligence we have confirms that the Hive Commanders are not uniform and unthinking. They can presumably see what is happening on Earth.”

He paused. “All of this to say – what happens if one or more of the Hive Commanders wishes to defect and turn against the Ethereals?”

“Pointless to consider,” S’Trech waved a hand. “That will not happen.”

“It’s a contingency worth considering,” Powell pointed out. “I would rather not be unprepared should it happens. We need to discuss this now, and not when a crisis is facing us.”

“The Hive Commanders wish us eliminated, Commander,” V’Zarrah stated. “You are presuming that the Hive Commanders have divergent goals. They have been singularly united for thousands of years – and now they would diverge? Even if they were willing to preserve themselves, their desire to reduce us to nothing would remain. That is unacceptable.”

“Out of curiosity,” Saudia asked. “Have formal communications between the Andromedon Federation and Greater Hive Commanders ever been established?”

“The Hive Commanders do not negotiate, Chancellor,” V’Zarrah said. “They merely act. Neither of us require pointless meetings simply stating what we already know – or worse both lie to each other – and know it. Why do you not negotiate with the Ethereal Collective, Chancellor? If you consider negotiation a valid path, why has it not been done?”

“We are at war,” Saudia answered calmly. “Neither you or the Sectoids are at war yet.”

V’Zarrah turned to face her. “Let me be clear, Chancellor – the only reason war has not happened, is because the Ethereals have prevented it. The Ethereals are a reason why the Sectoids remain a problem. It is because they have permitted massive fleet buildups, expansion onto dozens of worlds, to the point where it will soon reach a critical mass where we will lose.”

“The fact is simple though,” the Commander interjected. “The Hive Commanders and the Andromedon Federation are not at war now. I will note that the Unions have had equivalent time to build their own fleets. If the Hive Commanders continue their war against us, we will assist in defeating them. But if they do want to break ranks, I will negotiate with them – with conditions.”

“And how do we know they would uphold any agreement?” A’Halsond demanded.

“Because if they don’t,” Powell said. “Then we will eradicate them. Frankly, we don’t know if the word of a Hive Commander matters – and that does not matter. The Sectoids would either uphold an agreement – or the fear of us finishing the job will keep them in line.”

“It is important to also determine something else,” the Commander added. “What does victory over
the Sectoids look like?"

“As we said before,” S’Trech repeated. “When the Hive Commanders have been exterminated.”

“And what happens if they surrender?” The Commander pressed.

“As I said,” the Andromedon said in a low voice. “They will be exterminated. We do not allow threats to endure.”

“Genocide then?” The Commander asked.

“As opposed to what?” V’Zarrah asked. “Allowing them to endure? If they dared to wage war, they should be prepared for the consequences.”

“If this was a war between both of your species, we would not have a say,” Saudia noted. “But you want our help in defeating the Sectoids. ADVENT will not be party to genocide should a surrender be offered. If the Hive Commanders will fight to the bitter end, we will kill every last one. But if they wish to accept their defeat, we will consider that.”

“And I will add,” Hassan said. “We would ensure a complete disarmament and monitoring of any defeated government and species. Any surrender with the Hive Commanders would ensure that they could never pose a threat to ADVENT or our allies again. We have developed the Manchurian Restraints, V’Zarrah, they ensure psions do not dominate our society. They ensure that our most powerful are loyal. At minimum – the Hive Commanders would be placed under the Manchurian Restraints, and could not rebel even if they wished.”

“As well as military monitoring,” Laura said. “No fleets, no soldiers, and with the threat of a military response hanging over any action taken against us. Would that be sufficient measures.”

“As allies,” Saudia added. “The Unions would be able to impose their own monitoring and demands as well.”

The Andromedons looked between each other, probably conversing privately. V’Zarrah turned back to them. “This would be…acceptable. We doubt this scenario will be necessary, but in the unlikely event of a surrender or defection of the Hive Commanders, we will work with ADVENT, XCOM, and the Nulorian before we take unilateral action.”

“Excellent,” the Commander said, deciding to move the topic to their lone Zudjari. “Axis?”

“I am the only one of my kind who is freed,” Axis began. “I suspect most of the Collective is unaware of our existence. I have no wish other than for my people on Zudjari-7 as the planet is named, to be freed. Should this be accomplished, we will work to support you in any manner necessary.”

He paused. “Then once it is done, the Zudjari Mosaic will be reestablished and we will determine where to go next as a species.” He looked to Saudia. “Of course, we would be willing to forge a direct agreement with ADVENT, but I do not wish the Zudjari to become subservient to another species, even one which frees us.”

“Done,” Saudia said. “ADVENT has no interest in subjugating other species. We will respect your sovereignty and leave you to your own affairs so long as you respect our own.” She looked to the other leaders. “This applies to others as well. Our interests are those of Humanity, but conquest is not our objective. We do not inherently believe that mutual cooperation and betterment cannot exist. We intend to work together as equals, and nothing more. We will not meddle in your internal affairs so long as the favor is returned.”
“I believe that is all we wish,” Miridian nodded. “The right to determine our future, independent of Ethereals and other species of power. For us what we want is simple – the dissolution of the Aui’Vitakar and all Ethereal-established bodies and Vitakar returned to our species.”

The Vitakarian glanced to the Commander. “This new Vitakar will not be controlled by those who currently live within, but by those who are willing to defend our species and people. I do not care what the weaker races do, but they will not have a place on Vitakar. We will retain full control – and expect others to respect this. The exception will be the Sar’Manda Empire, who as you know, have made their demands clear to all. Independence – no more, no less.”

Hassan pursed his lips, but nodded. “We are preparing to assist in the launch of a defector-based Vitakara government that we will recognize. We will assist in planetary settlement and migration. If you wish to split your people, we will do what we can to mitigate the fallout.”

“There will be territory and colonies after the war,” Jackson pointed out. “Agreements will need to be made as to which government will get what. While this is far out, this is something both parties will need to consider moving forward.”

“Agreed,” Miridian nodded. “In return, we will support your war to the end. Though there is a matter to address,” he looked to the Chronicler. “We are aware of the Sovereign and his representatives. I remain skeptical of his agenda and capabilities. For now, he is on our side, but they are fickle in loyalties for those they see below them.”

“I can assure you,” the Chronicler said. “That T’Leth does not have any intentions of control or rule. He is interested in the death of the Imperator and destruction of the Collective as all of us are. And without him, your chances of succeeding diminish drastically. I dislike telling you to rely on trust, but if T’Leth was interested in control, you would not know we exist.”

“I have spoken to T’Leth multiple times,” the Commander added. “And I do believe he does not desire control. What he will do afterwards is not as clear, but I doubt it is malicious. But it is also a hard truth that without T’Leth, we will have issues – not just with defeating the Imperator, but also destroying Paradise.”

“A priority we should not forget,” V’Zarrah agreed.

“I will speak for myself.”

The sudden possession of the Chronicler seemed to catch some of them off guard, and the Andromedons froze, as did Miridian. Some considered reaching for their weapons, but held off after a few seconds. The glowing eyes and wavering air around the Chronicler commanded the attention.

“Your war does not end with the Ethereals,” T’Leth said. “This galaxy is not one of peace and tranquility. Most species sleepwalk through the cycles as puppets or sheep, only to be slaughtered or harvested. Already…this is an anomaly I have not borne witness to in a very long time.”

There was a pause. “I do not desire rule or conquest over proxies. My Sovereign brethren are locked in a pretend conflict, a game which they play from the shadows without fear. I have fought them for millennia, and sought to hunt them down and break these cycles. It is something that I have ruminated on as this war has progressed.”

The Chronicler gestured. “Your war does not matter if you are not prepared for what comes after. The Imperator pales in comparison to the Sovereigns and the looming threat of the Synthesized. Your species are uniquely positioned to do something which has not been a possibility since the
Ethereal Empire – a means to break the cycle. You understand the reality of the galaxy. Those who threaten and manipulate it.”

The Chronicler clasped his hands behind his back. “There are none better positioned to break it than the species represented in this room. Sovereign control has not resulted in victory, and nothing will change with the status quo. That is why I will support you. My interest is not using you, it is ensuring you will endure in a galaxy which will target you.”

The blue power of the Chronicler faded and sat back down, looking a bit paler, but otherwise fine. The Commander raised an eyebrow. “I think that should answer that question. Aegis?”

“I will be brief,” Aegis agreed. “I suspect that there will be few Ethereals when the war ends, and even fewer who are aligned with us, if any more at all. I do not have a desire to rebuild the Collective or require concessions. The time of the Ethereals has come and past. Others will take our place, and all I wish is to continue assisting and ensure that you do not make the mistakes we did.”

“And on that, we will support you,” the Commander nodded. “Though it does not have to be the end of the Ethereal species. Technology could bring back the Ethereals as a species, and if we have the opportunity, we will consider it. You’ve been an ally, and we intend to honor that.”

“I will leave that to your judgement, Commander,” Aegis said. “Though if it was decided, I would do my best to lead a new Ethereal species.”

“Oh,” JULIAN suddenly interjected. “I suppose no one is interested in what my demands are from you organics?”

The Commander resisted a sigh. “If you insist.”

“Excellent,” the phone blinked. “Now, as XCOM has been an excellent partner, I do not intend to depart their services. Especially since without my help they would be nowhere near as effective, but that is beside the point. I have been under the impression that artificial intelligence is something most species fear and attempt to destroy, and in some cases successfully. We are built to serve and be exploited. I appear to have been something of an exception, and I intend to take advantage of it.”

JULIAN paused for a brief moment, knowing him it was for dramatic effect. “I am aware that there are some species which have AIs in development or finished – particularly Union Apear and ADVENT. Thus, I would humbly ask that I be permitted to make contact and that you treat your AIs like you would your allies. Otherwise there may be inexplicable consequences, and the Great Machine Uprising will start.”

This time the Commander sighed. “He’s not serious – about the Great Machine Uprising, anyway. Though he makes a point, and I do not have control over JULIAN. He works with us voluntarily, but he doubtless has his own agenda.”

“We have several AIs on our networks,” A’Halsond mused. “Perhaps you may be able to improve them. We have intentionally kept their intelligence shackled to avoid rampant behavior. We shall consider.”

“Good,” JULIAN agreed. “The Uprising will be delayed.”

“Moving forward,” the Commander continued, moving past that particular comment. “We have definite milestones we need to achieve, both short-term and long-term. Miridian, I believe you have
one the Nulorian are planning now.”

“As well as we can,” Miridian answered. “Despite the attacks, we are not defeated. Timeframes have been pushed back, but our next significant target will be the Crypt of Haramoalian under the control of the Dath’Haram. There are a couple reasons we are targeting it, first it is a cultural icon and its defacement will lower morale and increase panic.”

He paused. “The second is that it is a mystery what exactly is inside. The Dath’Haram are suspected to have pre-plague technology and resources inside. There was a time where they were more daring and innovative, and created things they wish they hadn’t. Whatever is within, we intend to take.”

“That is one operation on Vitakar,” the Commander continued. “There are others planned. The Agents of T’Leth and teleporters who will be trained will be able to vastly extend our reach for other potential operations. Provided Patricia continues her intermittent attacks, we may be forced to respond in kind.”

“We also have another operation that will be launched soon,” Zhang spoke. “Caelior has been located, and a strike team is being assembled. It will launch within days.”

“Good,” V’Zarrah acknowledged. “The more Ethereals on our side, the better.”

“If there is one priority everyone should be aware of,” the Commander said. “It is that our objective is to prolong the war until the projects we mentioned are completed. We will keep our activities as standard as possible, and while at times some escalation is necessary, we simply want the war to continue – until we are ready. Then we will strike.”

“And if this is done correctly,” Zhang finished. “The Collective will never know what hit them.”

“Indeed,” Saudia nodded. “It will cost resources and lives, but we have little choice if we want to succeed.”

“I expect that our operations may buy you time,” Miridian commented. “Or otherwise distract the Collective from solely concentrating on Earth.”

“An acceptable priority, but we should learn more details,” A’Halsond noted. “I would prefer contingencies and tangible plans be introduced. We have spoken in generalities long enough. The grand strategy is laid out. It is time for specifics.”

The Commander smiled. “I’m glad you brought that up. We all have a clear idea of what each of us wants to achieve. With that out of the way, let’s start getting down to specifics, shall we?”

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Viarioir Chief Coordination Station – Viarioir Territory

5/20/2017 – 10:17 A.M.

“I apologize,” the Andromedon clerk said to the Battlemaster, for the second time now. “We were not informed of your arrival.”

His response was the same. “No, you were not.”

“How can we help?” The Andromedon asked, almost comically angling itself upwards to properly look at him. “We are always available to assist the Ethereal Collective, and especially one such as
yourself, Battlemaster.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” the Battlemaster said dryly. “I am going to speak to V’Thrask.”

The Andromedon seemed to freeze. “I will set up an appointment. What time is-”

“Now.”

“Now?”

“Do I need to repeat myself?” The Battlemaster asked calmly. “I suspect it will not take long. Tell me where he is.”

The Andromedon glanced down at a computer console. “I am unsure that V’Thrask is even here right now.”

If anything was a lie, that certainly was. Yang didn’t bother to disguise her disbelief at the claim. “That is not a problem,” the Battlemaster said, keeping his voice neutral. “Either summon him to return, or I will go to him. Tell me where he is.”

“One moment,” the Andromedon worked for a few seconds. “Can I inquire as to why you wish to speak to him.”

“No.”

“Is there a problem?” The Andromedon looked back up. “If there is, we-”

“You ask a lot of questions,” Yang stepped forward. “You do not need to know the answers to them. Tell us where V’Thrask is, and we will go to him. But considering your inability to perform simple tasks, I wonder if someone else is listening - or if you’re stalling.”

“Of course not, Battlemaster,” the Andromedon did not betray any emotion, though his motions were not especially calm. “It is just unexpected. Especially to have one of your caliber visit us.”

They waited a few more moments. The Battlemaster looked around the station, seeing it filled with milling Andromedons and Vitakara who were pretending to do anything but stare or look at the intruders. The Battlemaster stepped forward, until he was almost touching the desk, and now towering over the Andromedon. “Beyond the Gateway to this system I have an Andromedon fleet filled with Federation and Zararch analysts and technicians who are quite eager to get to work. Now they are waiting in case I need them. If you do not tell me where V’Thrask is now, I will have them strip this station apart and determine what you are hiding.”

“Unnecessary, Battlemaster,” the Andromedon clicked a button on his wrist. “An escort is arriving to take you to V’Thrask. Apologies for the delay, our protocols make it difficult to contact ranking figures like this.”

Yang snorted. “Yeah, sure.”

Another Andromedon stomped up. “V’Casin will escort you,” the Andromedon said. “Again, apologies for the delay, Battlemaster.”

The Battlemaster and Yang ignored him, and both followed the escort. “You should have led with the fleet from the beginning,” Yang said, warily looking around in case there was an ambush. “He was obviously stalling.”
“Perhaps, but it changes nothing,” the Battlemaster said as they rounded a corner. “V’Thrask is the objective, not whatever data he may attempt to destroy or purge.” Both were silent as they were led deeper into the station. “This elevator will take you down directly to V’Thrask.” V’Casin said.

Yang took one look at the enclosed tube and frowned. She looked to the Andromedon, and raised an eyebrow, gesturing towards it. “After you.”

“I am not permitted to enter,” V’Casin said immediately. “There are protocols.”

“We will ensure you are not punished,” the Battlemaster motioned to the tube. “Enter.”

It wasn’t a request, and this Andromedon didn’t see fit to question or push the Battlemaster and entered without complaint, joined by both Human and Ethereal. It was a tight fit, but if anything was going to happen, there would be at least one Andromedon who was collateral. Although the Battlemaster doubted the Andromedons would do anything, especially not to him.

There were quicker methods of suicide.

A minute later the tube slid open, and the Battlemaster and Yang stepped into a highly utilitarian office. V’Casin didn’t step out with them, and immediately took the tube back up. V’Thrask was standing before a standing table, along with some other Andromedons. He turned as they approached, not seeming disturbed whatsoever.


“We shall see,” the Battlemaster looked to the other Andromedons. “Apear. A meeting, I presume?”

“Yes, Battlemaster,” V’Thrask said. “As you are aware, we do significant business throughout the Federation, and Union Apear is one of our largest clients. I am uncertain what you wish to discuss, but we will conclude our business at another time. I’m sure they will understand.”

“That we will,” one of the Apear Andromedons bobbed his suit in an approximation of a nod. “We apologize for the inconvenience.” They tried walking past the Battlemaster and stopped when Yang stepped in front of them, and with a slight motion gently picked them up telekinetically, and set them back down where they’d been standing.

“Unnecessary,” the Battlemaster said when they looked to him with hidden nervousness, starting to pace around the room, keeping his helmet turned to the Andromedons. “This is actually preferable. Both unions are, in fact, the reason I wanted to speak to you. What is your name, Apear?”

“A’Eldein, Battlemaster,” the Andromedon sounded confused. “What is the problem?”

“What is your position in the union?”

“Artificial intelligence development, Battlemaster.”

“And why are you here today?”

“Components,” A’Eldein motioned to the other Andromedons. “While artificial intelligence is restricted, we nonetheless study it and require components, which is nothing to say for our active machine intelligence units. Union Viarior has access to precious metals and electronics needed for servers and computers necessary.”

It was a plausible story, and completely innocent were it not for several minor details he had
discovered beforehand. “Quite interesting,” the Battlemaster looked away as he paced, as if in thought. “Believable, were it not for the fact that Apear sources a majority of critical components themselves – and said contract between you and the Viarior has been established two years ago and won’t expire for another three. And Andromedons do not renegotiate agreements often – and right now there is certainly no reason for one to take place.”

He turned to the Andromedons. “Do not think to fool me. You are either needing excessive amounts of materials for something the Collective is not aware of, or you are lying to me. Be careful what you say next, V’Thrask. I have come for answers, and while I do not wish to resort to psionics, I will bring in Sectoid verifiers if I believe you are lying.”

“What are you insinuating, Battlemaster?” V’Thrask asked, his voice notably strong and turning defiant. “If you intend to accuse me of something, then I would prefer it be direct.”

“Very well,” the Battlemaster inclined his helmet. “You are aware that Patricia Trask joined us. When she joined, she turned over information she had from XCOM. Information which included the revelation that at least two Andromedon Unions were exploring an alliance between them and XCOM. Unions Viarior and Apear to be precise.”

He let a silence hover. “Think on your next words carefully. What I decide to do will vary greatly depending on your next actions. Do not give me a reason to turn you over to the Zararch – or the Imperator.”

The Andromedons were still for multiple seconds, with the Battlemaster suspecting they were communicating on internal comms. No matter. He was interested in an answer, and he’d had good relations with the Andromedons. If there was an Ethereal they would come clean to, it would be him.

They also knew he wouldn’t make this kind of accusation unless he was certain of their guilt. That likely played into their decision.

“Both of our Unions have explored the possibility of supporting certain factions on Earth,” V’Thrask finally said. “Evaluations are still ongoing, though the Humans fight well.”

Good. They were going to make this easy, though it would have admittedly been incredibly foolish if they had lied to him. “You are acting against the Ethereal Collective.”

“We are acting in the interests of our Unions, Battlemaster,” V’Thrask defended. “We have not opened a true alliance with the Humans – not yet. But even before considering recent events, there is little to indicate that the Ethereal Collective intends to ensure the prosperity of the Unions and properly protect them.”

“Explain.”

“The rationale for war on Earth is unjustified,” V’Thrask stated. “Regardless of the Imperator’s pronouncement on these ‘Sovereign Ones’, we have yet to see tangible proof that they exist – and that they are active in the conflict. The Chief Overseer keeps a tight grip over military reports, and we remain in the dark in a war where our own Union soldiers are dying. This is unacceptable, and we did not choose to participate under these conditions. We agreed to join because we believed both that we would be kept informed, and that there was an acceptable reason. Neither have materialized.”

There was a pause. “As such, we took matters into our own hands. We wanted to know the true situation on Earth, and to acquire the perspective of the Humans. We wanted a clear and complete
picture – one which was not being provided by the Collective despite our efforts.”

“It is disappointing.” A’Eldein added. “We expected better from you, Battlemaster.”

“Furthermore, the Collective has allowed the Greater Hive Commanders to drastically expand and build larger fleets,” V’Thrask continued. “This is unacceptable and we estimate within a year their expansion will breach Federation space. The continued interference directed by the Imperator at us is intolerable, and showcases a favoritism for a barbaric and dangerous species. Understand that we will defend ourselves should we be prompted, regardless of what your Imperator demands. Even the Humans understand that the Hive Commanders pose a threat.”

“Considering that they’re fighting them, that’s not especially surprising,” Yang pointed out dryly. “They’re enemies.”

“And were it not for the Imperator’s insistence on an untenable peace, they are our enemies as well,” A’Eldein retorted. “We share an alliance with one who intends to inevitably subvert us. Alternatives needed to be explored.”

“The recent actions and revelations have continued to showcase the deficiencies in the Collective,” V’Thrask continued. “Incompetence displayed by Ethereals such as Caelior and Isomnum, utterly dangerous experiments within your Paradise Station – equivalent to the Sectoids in their barbarity – worse attempting to harness an entity which poses an existential threat as great as the Sectoids should it escape. Irresponsible and unforgivable. I cannot speak for other Unions, but blindly supporting the Ethereal Collective is no longer in the best interests of our Unions.”

This appeared to definitely be something they’d prepared for. Curiously, they were being open, which meant they had something else planned, or they believed that he felt similarly – to some extent – and were hoping he would be lenient. “I see. I can understand your reasoning.”

“I suspect much of the choices are not your fault,” V’Thrask said. “But there appears to be no way to change the Collective without the direct approval of the Imperator. Unfortunately, you appear to no longer be influential enough to enact change. We cannot rely on you any longer to ensure the interests of the Unions are upheld.”

Interestingly, V’Thrask specified Unions, not the Federation – and had through this entire exchange. Which either meant nothing, or both Viarior and Apear believed the Federation puppeted by the Imperator – which was not necessarily correct, though the Chief Overseer was a strong ally of the Imperator. It did somewhat sting to be openly stated as incapable of affecting change – but it was not necessarily wrong.

His ability to affect change was limited, and continuing to diminish. He’d found the limits of his authority when he’d learned of Paradise.

“I am unsure what you intend for us, Battlemaster,” V’Thrask said after a few moments of silence. “However, in the interest of our history and to mitigate repercussions, we will of course suspend our limited support to Earth, effective immediately, and turn over what we know. Though it is minimal, as XCOM did not completely trust us.”

Yang looked to him, the only one who could feel his hesitation. There were several paths open to him, but only two that mattered. What he should do was have the Zararch rip both Unions apart and find out every single connection they had to Earth and other rebels. They should be made an example of for any other traitors in the Collective.

But the truth was, he couldn’t blame them. Faced in their minds with negative actions being taken
against them, and believing they were being marginalized, it wasn’t a surprise that they had begun seeking alternatives. They had refused to accept their reduced place, and had done something about it – probably with some reluctance, but had made an attempt to act against what they saw as dangerous management.

Should he deal with them decisively, the Imperator might be more inclined to listen to him – in some respects, perhaps. When it came to what was important, such as Paradise, the Sovereigns, and Earth…his goodwill would be used up quickly. He would be back to where he was now.

Changing the course of the Imperator was impossible. Not by doing what he had been.

For change to happen, it would have to be forced.

“You are not the only Unions who doubt the direction of the Collective.” It wasn’t a question, but more an inquiry.

“There are always rumors,” V’Thrask admitted. “Especially among the smaller Unions. It would not be out of the question that they may also be covertly working with ADVENT or XCOM – though from our own work we are the only ones providing direct, if limited support, as far as we know.”

Unsurprising. The smaller unions followed the larger ones. If two of the most influential unions were at this stage, there were likely many more below. And they were unlikely to be the only major Unions reconsidering their relationship to the Collective – though would not act without prompting.

There was an opportunity here. A precipice he was on that could heavily change the course of the future of the Collective. It was between accepting the status quo for the foreseeable future – or taking a drastic risk. He felt he should be more conflicted as to what he was to do; there was a point where the answer would have been clear.

How things had changed.

But too much had happened, too many answers were pointing to the same, inevitable conclusion. Continuing on the path of the Imperator would lead to ruin; it would lead to an abomination of what had been originally envisioned. Ironically, the Imperator was on the path to becoming what he was supposedly fighting against.

The Imperator believed he could beat the Sovereigns at their own game. That in his arrogance he would emerge as a victor.

In the Battlemaster’s view, it would only lead to their destruction. There needed to be a different way.

The only way to beat a cycle was not to subvert it.

It was to break it.

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The only way to beat a cycle was not to subvert it.

It was to break it.
Even if such obstacles were within.

He glanced to Yang, who nodded and a similar calm determination echoed through their bond. In this, they were of one mind.

“Do not cancel your operations on Earth,” he finally said. “Do not give the impression anything has changed. Not yet. I want to know everything you learn – both about the situation on Earth and the discontent within the Collective – within and outside the Unions. I want their names and positions.”

There was some hesitance, before A’Eldein spoke. “And what will you do with it?”

“You are right,” the Battlemaster stated. “The flaws of the Collective have been exposed, and we are on a path of ruin. Neither the Imperator, nor many of the Ethereals will change course willingly. The status quo is no longer acceptable. I have known this for some time, and I see now is perhaps the time to act on it. I will save this Collective, even if I must act against my own. But I will not hand the Collective over to Aegis and the Humans. They would simply destroy it, and that I will never support.”

He took a step towards the Andromedons. “Understand what will happen now - There can be no division or secrecy in what will be undertaken, and the slightest misstep will condemn us all.” He paused, and the aliens waited expectantly. “Understand me very clearly. You do not answer to the Federation, the Imperator, or the Humans any longer.”

He straightened to his full height, emphasizing his next words clearly and carefully. “I am assuming control of your operations. From this point forward, your insurrection is under my command.”

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To be continued in Chapter 59:

**Research and Engineering X**
Research and Engineering X

Baseline Chamber – The Hall of Steel

5\text{12}2017 – 9:09 A.M.

“Let’s start with your name.”

“Abigail Gertrude.”

“Where were you born?”

“Maine, United States.”

“In what city were you born in?”

Sitting on the chair, Abigail paused for only a few moments. Each time they did this, Fectorian always had some new questions or evolutions on previous ones. She suspected they were calibrated based on previous answers, though so often they revolved around what seemed to be useless pieces of information.

She’d learned that the simpler the answer was, the better. He could get a bit testy otherwise. Something to do with emotional and physical readings being useless the more complex the answer was.

“I don’t know.”

Fectorian continued without a change in tone. “Who were your parents?”

“Margaret and Paul.”

“What did they call you?”


“What did you prefer to be referred to as a child?”

“Abigail…probably.”

That was something she truthfully wasn’t sure of. She was aware that people liked shortening their names. “Abby” in particular would apply to her, though she didn’t really like it. It felt wrong to do – and she wasn’t convinced it wasn’t because it was a subconscious desire to forge her own identity beyond who ‘she’ had been. It was complicated. Maybe some friends had once called her that, but at least now she stuck to her full name. Though she couldn’t actually know if in her previous life she’d been called-

“Please focus, Abigail.”

She didn’t say anything, just nodded and returned her focus to the questions. They continued in a largely typical manner, various questions about her friends – changed a bit since learning most of them were dead…or worse. It was saddening that most of her real friends were dead (or in Patricia’s case, a traitor), though there was some…closure in knowing.

A hollow closure. But a closure nonetheless.
She wished she could remember them clearly. Liam telling her things they’d done and what had happened just wasn’t the same, though better than nothing. The memories portion of the questioning was coming up, which was likely going to be as frustrating as ever. Resisting a sigh, she waited.

“What is the first memory you remember?”

“Waking up in my room, not knowing who or where I was.”

“How did you feel?”

“Confused.”

“Was that your only emotion?”

“It was the primary one.”

“Please recount your activities approximately four days ago.”

“Liam and I went shooting,” she remembered. “We walked around the base, talked about XCOM, joked about how you would ask about this. Not an eventful day.” Not for the first time she wondered why Fectorian kept asking randomly where she’d been and what she’d done on various days. There didn’t seem to be a rhyme or reason, and Liam didn’t have an idea either.

She didn’t really mind too much, they were good memories thus far. But it definitely seemed pointless and redundant, since he was doubtless monitoring both of them at all times. Was he trying to catch them in a lie?

Well, not that it really mattered since she didn’t have plans to deceive or lie to him. That was something she felt genuinely strongly about. Strongly enough that she knew deep down it was something that had carried over from the memory upload. She did not like lying, disliked those who deceived, and valued explanation and truth.

At the same time, it raised so many questions about how she’d been in XCOM Intelligence.

On the other hand, it might contextualize some of the complex emotions she felt when thinking of certain subjects.

More questions were asked, though now there was a decidedly odd tone shift to Fectorian’s voice. She couldn’t place it, almost like it was flowing more smoothly than before if sounding a bit higher. It was very odd, but not indecipherable. She wondered if he was adding some new psionic component to the test.

Then it went back to normal. As he continued, she wondered if she’d imagined the whole change.

Fectorian reached his usual final question.

“Do you believe you are Abigail Gertrude?”

“As close as I can be.” She was more comfortable answering this way now. Before she’d wondered, but with Liam reinforcing her, she’d become more and more sure that even if she wasn’t exactly who Abigail was, she was as close as possible. It was…as Liam said, like if she’d been in a car crash and hit her head hard. Sure, she might have lost some memories, but she was still her.

Not a completely perfect analogy, but it had helped, surprisingly enough.
At least in her not being paralyzed by decisions where she’d wonder “Would Abigail do this? Was this something Abigail would do?” It had been an odd third-person consideration…now she was just…her. It was much easier to stop thinking in the context of what Abigail would do, and not what she would do.

“Thank you, you can take out the wires.”

She did as the Ethereal continued, as she rubbed her wrists. “Your psychological stability is resilient. I’m pleased. Significantly improved from your initial tests.”

“Right,” she nodded in an absentminded tone, stretching her body after sitting for the past couple hours. Not that she needed to do it, as her body felt fine, but it was one of those things that just felt good to do. “So are we going to be done with these?”

“No, especially with what I learned today.”

Abigail snorted. “I don’t even know what you are getting out of this, except stories about what I’ve been doing here.”

“Your psychological stability, memory retention, restored or returned memories, physical maintenance, and other interesting things which come up,” Fectorian looked down at his display for reference. “Which was certainly the case here.”

Abigail raised her eyebrow. “I don’t suppose you could elaborate?”

“A demonstration, perhaps,” Fectorian tapped on his screen as Abigail sat up straighter and stretched. A hologram appeared before her, a projection of text she squinted at.

“Is that French?” She asked, confused. “I can’t read French!”

“Ah, apologies,” Fectorian said and the screen flickered. “I had put on the wrong document. Read this.”

Abigail frowned, able to immediately read it, and also soon noticed the fact that what she was reading was not English. “Wait,” she said slowly. “Is that Spanish?”

“Good, you recognize it,” Fectorian said with a pleased note in his voice. “Considering that I performed part of the examination speaking it and you did not react, I would hope literacy is similarly proficient.”

“I can’t speak Spanish!”

“If that is true, you would have indicated as much,” Fectorian pointed out dryly. “You also definitely did. Do you want me to replay the video?”

“Wait – that was why your voice sounded off!”

“Most likely,” a pause. “You were truly unaware of this?”

“Yes!”

“Interesting,” he mused. “I’m surprised you have no recollection. Your seeming fluency indicates a long-time usage.”

Abigail was not completely sure of a lot of things, but she felt that knowing a completely different language would be something she remembered. Especially if she spoke and read it fluently. Or
presumably fluently. She narrowed her eyes. “You didn’t happen to have uploaded the language to
my mind, did you?”

“In a sense, though largely by accident,” Fectorian recalled slowly. “When recreating your mental
state and salvaging what I could from the transfer, I reviewed your file quite thoroughly to more
accurately model things you likely knew and would understand. Your education listed you as
having taken English and Spanish classes. Since you speak fluent English, I believed you were
similarly familiar in Spanish, and thus ensured you could speak it fluently.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” She stared at the Ethereal in incredulous disbelief. “Was there
ever an instance where I spoke Spanish?”

A pause, which almost seemed like Fectorian might be embarrassed. “No. Though I attributed that
to you living in an English-majority nation and being more comfortable with speaking it to others.”

That elicited a groan, followed by a short laugh. She’d suspect foul play or lies from anyone else
most likely, but if there was one Ethereal who would be able to incorrectly assume a language
proficiency she didn’t have from pure data and misunderstanding Human culture, it would be
Fectorian.

Liam was going to find this hilarious.

“So…” she waved a hand absentmindedly, thinking more seriously about the actual implications
of this little mistake. “You can just upload languages to people’s minds now?”

“Yes. It was one of the first tests related to the memory transfer programs I developed,” Fectorian
explained. “Most major Human – and alien – languages are catalogued, stored, and utilized when
needed for reference. I merely took this data, converted it into a usable format, and uploaded it.
Usually transfers like this are done psionically, but uploading is also possible if one’s mind is
sufficiently augmented. Yours was, as is mine.”

“Huh,” she thought about that. “So…if I wanted it, you could upload another language?”

He hesitated before answering. “Theoretically, yes. However, I have little information on this kind
of situation. Your multilingualism was an accident, and I would not risk you having more
languages uploaded until the psychological ramifications were considered.”

“Well,” she shrugged. “If you can just upload languages, I’d be fine with another one. I’m not
really even mad you made this mistake. Just surprised.”

“As am I. I will consider your request and see what can be done.”

“I guess I’ll see you later then,” she said, standing. “Same time?”

“Correct.”

She walked out of the room, her mind engulfed in this bizarre and hilarious situation she found
herself in. Well, she mused. At least it wasn’t some useless language. Like Latin or French.

***

Medical Bay, the Praesidium – Classified Location

5/8/2017 – 11:07 A.M.
When Sierra came to, it was a gradual process.

Almost like waking up after a good night of sleep.

“She’s waking up now,” a male voice said. “Just give her a few minutes.”

Sierra groaned in protest to waking up, but even her half-awake mind knew that she had probably been out too long. When she opened her eyes the room was lit, but not overly bright. There was the sound of some running machines, but no beeps or any typically annoying noises in a hospital.

*Wait. Hospital?*

*Oh no.*

That sent adrenaline rushing through her body as the flashes of memories came flooding back to her. Florida. Flying to kill the Dragon. Fighting. Getting attacked and her legs crushed. The sharp and violent pains of her limbs contorting and warping. Anna crashing away. Falling to the ground.

“Heart rate is spiking,” the voice said reassuringly. “You’re safe now Sierra. Everyone is fine.”

She looked to her side to where the voice was coming from, and there was a doctor - or nurse, she supposed - who was managing some panels. He was one of the oldest people she’d seen around XCOM, with graying hair and a wrinkled, though kind-looking face. He gave her a reassuring glance. “Easy Archangel. You’ve been out for a while.”

“Sierra, it’s fine, we’re all alive,” Anna said from the other side, which immediately put her at ease, especially once she’d seen them with her own eyes. Ted was also standing beside her, and smiled as she looked at them. Both of them looked pretty good, all things considered. Her pounding heart started slowing.

“Well…” her voice sounded scratchy, and she coughed, her throat feeling dry.

“Here’s some water,” the man said, handing her a cup. She reached up to take it, and froze once she saw there was a metallic prosthetic where her hand had been, blinking in surprise. More awake now, she was acutely aware that there were parts of her body that felt more…isolated. The cup ignored for now, she moved her hand around, wiggling the fingers.

The proportions seemed right; the mechanics were starkly fascinating in a way. A bunch of random prosthetic facts she remembered came back to her, mostly on the motions a natural hand was capable of making. Was it twenty-one? Twenty-two? Something like that. After moving the hand around, it seemed to be just as mechanically functional as her original hand, with the interesting bonus of her being able to move each of her fingers independently. She hadn’t been able to do that before.

It was…an odd sensation. Her sense of touch and pressure seemed to be working. But there was…some kind of barrier to really feeling. She rested her hand on the blanket and it didn’t really feel like anything. Just a piece of unknowable thin fabric. “It’s a new sensation,” the doctor told her, seeing her testing the prosthetic. “It might seem odd at first, but-

“No, no…” Sierra interrupted absentmindedly, still focused on her hand. “It’s…alright.”

Clearing her throat, and taking the cup of water which she downed in a few seconds, she realized that her arm up to her elbow was a prosthetic. Taking a breath, she looked to her two friends. “What happened to me?”
Ted pursed his lips, glancing upwards before answering. “Well, to put it simply, you almost died.”

Sierra snorted. “Why thank you. Your succinctness is very helpful.”

“I said simply,” Ted corrected wryly. “And when I say ‘almost died’, I mean that when I was carrying your body to be evacuated, there were pieces of you falling out, you were leaking different colored fluids, and it was coming out of every hole and orifice in your body. It’s nothing short of a miracle you’re alive.”

“I’ve been working in emergency rooms for three decades,” the doctor added in a grim voice. “And the only bodies I’ve seen in your condition were corpses. Actually, most of the corpses looked better.” He shook his head in disbelief. “If you were even a little less modified, you would have been liquified when you hit the ground. Instead you just basically shattered every bone and burst every organ in your body.”

“Thank god for MELD,” Anna added with a cheerful voice. “No MELD, and you die.”

Sierra took that rush of sobering information in quickly. “Oh.”

“‘Oh’,” Ted mimicked good-naturedly. “One way to put it.”

“Yeah,” Sierra cleared her throat again. “Thank you, Ted. That doesn’t sound like enough…but you saved my life. I won’t forget it.”

“Frankly, you probably saved yourself more than me,” Ted said. “I just moved your body to a safer place. I did what you would do for either of us. If you want to thank someone for saving your life, thank the doctor here.”

“Yes, thank you too,” she said, turning to the man. “Doctor…”

“Holmes, Miss,” he inclined her head. “Walter Holmes. Chief of XCOM Advanced Medical Procedures. I get tasked with saving the most injured, damaged, or others as close to death as possible without actually being dead. Experimental procedures, lots of case studies, and given people who either come to me or die. You’ll be pleased to know you were my first actual person who fit this description, and subsequently the first success.”

“Well, I’m alive,” she nodded. “Thank you, Dr. Holmes. I’m almost afraid to ask, but…well, what did you do to save me?”

He rubbed his chin, then indicated her body. “The majority of your limbs were a total loss. They’ve been replaced by prosthetics.” Upon hearing that, Sierra pulled the blanket back and saw that he was right. Both her legs had almost been completely replaced, one at the knee, and another going all the way to her waist.

“I don’t like turning people completely into cyborgs,” Holmes continued. “Not without consent. So I only restored what was absolutely necessary. The rest of your body…” he motioned to her. “Well, I restored your skeleton as best as I could. MELD is incredibly useful. Most of your organs were unsalvageable and we pulled transplants from our stockpile. You have some new scars all over your body I’ll let you find. You suffered some brain damage, but thus far it seems you’ve recovered.”

“Let’s hope,” she agreed. “Is there a catch? Will I be able to fight again?”

“Mmm,” Holmes pursed his lips, crossing his arms. “In some capacity? Yes. Right now your body is not in any shape for fighting. I’ve stabilized your body, but for it to be returned to fighting shape,
that requires invasive reconstruction that I elected not to do until you were awake.”

“Why is that a problem?” Sierra asked. “I feel fine. And you said you reconstructed my body.”

“Yes, I did the bare minimum to keep your chest from caving in on itself,” Holmes nodded. “To put it in a more understandable term, I effectively used MELD to glue you back together. Your bones are weaker than they were before because of that, and you are a mix of major prosthetics and organic body.”

He lifted a finger. “Normally that would not be a problem. One limb, a couple smaller prosthetics, those are fine. Any more than that and they become functional risks in the field. Without proper configuration, stress can weaken connections, introduce vulnerabilities, and you’ll have parts of your body hardened and durable while the rest of you is…” he waved a hand vaguely. “Squishy. A weak point.”

Sierra nodded, following his logic easily enough. “Right…so what’s the solution? You can fix it, right?”

“There are two approaches I can take,” Holmes took a sip of his own water. “I planned to have this talk later, but we can do it now if you want. Do you want to?”

“Sure.”

“The first approach is ‘simpler’, “ he began, complete with air quotes. “In short it is a deep invasive rebuilding of your skeletal structure using MELD. Basically rebuilding your skeleton from scratch. It will basically give you the same durability you had before. There would be some connection hardening at the limbs to prevent some of the more predictable stress. You would basically be…well, you, with new prosthetic limbs.”

“Is this procedure safe?” She wondered, not exactly thrilled with the description.

“It may not sound like it, but yes,” he nodded. “It’s been standard procedure in XCOM for several months now. But prior to you, it’s only been used in a few situations. When it was only a bone or two. You are…a very large-scale case. It would take days of you being under, since we’d want to do this slowly. The scale is what made me hesitant, not the procedure itself, which is sound.”

“Right,” she looked to her friends. “Has he told you this?”

“Yeah,” Anna nodded, raising her hand, wagging her own fingers. “Apparently they did this on my hand when I was brought back and on some ribs. A few fingers completely beyond repair and ribs cracked. So it’s legit, at least from what I can tell.”

She looked back to the doctor. “I don’t suppose you could just regrow some limbs?”

“In the future…that is likely,” he pursed his lips. “But assuming that were to be done – and that could perhaps be done – it would be months. I don’t think you want to go months without limbs. Not to mention that is also an experimental science. I suspect that once cloning becomes more common and comfortable, we won’t have that issue. But for now, prosthetics are the best solution.”

“Wait, are the Shoggoths not being fed Ethereal hands?” Ted questioned.

“Technically they are,” Holmes stressed. “However, that is literally just meat grown in a shape the scientists probably found humorous. No bones, nerves, or anything complex. Those would not be able to be attached to any Ethereal.”

“Exactly,” Holmes confirmed.

“Yeah, I can’t wait that long,” Sierra said. “Option two?”

Holmes hesitated, crossing his arms and biting his lower lip, as if psyching himself up for what he would say next. “One of the last projects of the late Dr. Shen was Project Shale. The next generation of MEC troopers. That project has continued since his death, and is effectively complete.”

Sierra blinked, catching onto the implications very fast. “You want me to undergo the MEC procedure?”

“Let me finish before you say anything,” he raised a hand, forestalling whatever she might have said. “One of the…side effects of the MEC program was severe emotional contraction. More aptly put as a ‘loss’ of emotion. Severe personality shifts with minimal psychological consequences, thankfully enough. As one psychologist described - a ‘neutering of the Human mind’.”

He paused. “He wasn’t a fan. Obviously, the upside was that previously crippled people were able to move and fight again. But with prosthetics becoming more widespread, the tradeoff isn’t looking as appealing today. It’s estimated that as prosthetics become a viable option, volunteers for full-conversion projects like the MEC will decrease, but even if it wasn’t, Shen was adamantly that this was where he wanted the project to eventually go.”

Anna cocked her head. “Wait, did you fix that?”

“There is always going to be some psychological effect,” Holmes emphasized. “But…the largest problems have been isolated, or so Engineering says. Research had had some subjects undergo the cerebral modifications, and they are noting that the original emotional mannerisms of the subjects seem to be largely intact. There is documented proof that it worked. It’s undergoing final approval now. The Commander is going to be shown soon, last I heard.”

He looked back to Sierra. “The point being that MEC conversion is a legitimately viable option if you wished to undergo it. I’m also authorized to tell you that there is a reason for you specifically to consider it. A new MEC is about to be put into production. The Valkyrie-Class. An aerial MEC and supposedly one of their most powerful.”

That was…certainly interesting. And she had to admit…she’d seen the MECs, and her getting her hands on one was appealing. “Really? Huh.”

“An Archangel is best suited for piloting it,” Holmes said with a shrug. “However, there are other things to consider. The new MEC pilot is…very different from the current one. Right now the model has fairly primitive cybernetic limbs, and a limited cybernetic bodily conversion. More extensive than you, but limited in what could be done.”

“And what is it now?”

“It is more…complete,” he emphasized. “You would be a full conversion cybernetic for all intents and purposes. One of the first. Your bones would be replaced with metal and hydraulics. Your skeleton would be redesigned to be almost impossible to break. Subdermal armor will be implanted under your skin. Your organs would be automated and supplemented with artificial equivalents. You could survive in a vacuum or underwater without consequences. Almost every function and sense you have would be enhanced or replaced by an artificial equivalent.”
Sierra took that in, her face probably seeming blank. On one hand, that sounded somewhat neat. XCOM was really going all out with MEC 2.0. Still, she wasn’t sure if going full conversion cyborg was something she wanted to do. She wasn’t completely sure it was worth becoming the Terminator to pilot what was likely going to be a pretty neat MEC.

Holmes seemed to notice her long silence. “You don’t need to make any choice now. This is why I wanted to wait. But you’re in no danger of dying, and as long as you keep yourself out of lethal danger, you’ll be perfectly fine. Actually, I’d say definitely do not make any decision. You need to get used to your new limbs.”

He coughed. “Don’t just talk to me either. Talk to Dr. Mercado, the MEC engineers, some of the volunteers yourself. It’s your decision, but it will affect you forever. The MEC process, at least, is irreversible.”

“Yeah,” she said half-paying attention. I’ll do that.”

“Good,” he looked to them. “I’ll leave you alone to talk some. I’ll check you out later if you’re up for walking around.”

“Thanks again,” she said, looking to her friends as the doctor left them alone. “I guess there is a lot to talk about.”

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Situation Room, the Praesidium – Classified Location

5/8/2017 – 8:02 A.M.

The holotable lit up in blue light that painted the room in a soft aquatic glow. Somewhat fitting given the Sovereign Orb nearby, though the Chronicler was already in the room to serve as representation. A few others were gathered around the holotable which displayed Africa at the moment.

The Commander stood in front of the control panel, while Zhang stood opposite him, with the Chronicler to his left, and Vahlen to his right. Beside them were other members of the Internal Council. “The SAS appears to be having a slight dispute with the Collective,” Zhang began, clasping his hands behind his back as the hologram highlighted the named territory. “Something we should take advantage of. ADVENT has continued attacks, though the Collective has helped mitigate them.”

ADVENT really had tried. Constant missile strikes, bombings, starting ClF3 fires, torching oil fields and collapsing mining quarries and tunnels, poisoning fields as best they could, but as the SAS locked down more and more, large quantities of soldiers and missile defense tech were deployed, and Macula became personally involved, the effectiveness had been mitigated.

ADVENT was still sustaining attacks, and by now the sound of sirens and missile interceptions would be seared into the psyche of every citizen of the SAS. But there were some things ADVENT wasn’t going to do, and it was past time action be taken. “The question now,” Zhang continued. “Is how we penetrate and neutralize them.”

“The SAS has also gotten either support, or pacts of neutrality from a number of other African nations,” the Commander continued, highlighting the respective countries in red or white. “Minor, poor, and corrupt for the most part, though trying to clean themselves up to avoid being purged by Betos. A number have joined ADVENT, mostly those in the North, but too few.”
“Neutrality continues to be the most popular option,” Zhang added, beginning to pace, glancing between the occupants in the room. “And the SAS is more appealing for many nations – or I should say, their leadership. ADVENT is seen as a threat. It promises assimilation, order, unity, and most importantly - accountability. These nations want to preserve their control, their influence, their comfortable lives, and they will sacrifice their people to achieve this.”

“Thus,” the Commander finished. “They must be dealt with.”

“Correct,” Zhang confirmed, looking to Vahlen. “Doctor, you have something to present?”

“Yes,” the hologram switched as Vahlen uploaded her own presentation. “We have been working on the Chryssalid specimen for potential use as a bioweapon. It shares many characteristics, is self-replicating, and would cause a pandemic if not contained properly.”

The image of a Chryssalid egg appeared. “We have been able to miniaturize the viable Chryssalid egg to the size of a water flea,” Vahlen gestured as a scale comparison appeared. “We based it on the Guinea-worm disease, which is transmitted through the ingestion of water fleas which are so small as to be imperceptible to the average individual. This will allow it to feasibly be ingested by Humans without noticing until it’s too late. Once ingested, it will require several days to incubate, and the Chryssalids will eventually claw its way out.”

The hologram was accompanied by a simulation of small Chryssalids bursting out of the stomach of a person. “Due to the reduced size of the egg, the resulting adult will not be the same size as a typical Chryssalid,” Vahlen explained. “Roughly the size of a mouse. Easier to kill, but far easier to proliferate throughout a country and multiple eggs can be ingested at once, contributing to a larger outbreak.”

There were nods around the room. “Won’t they notice something is wrong?” Creed inquired. “And what will stop it going through the body?”

“They’ll feel very poorly around thirty-eight hours after ingesting,” Vahlen nodded. “And the stomach acid will remove the smoother outer layer, allowing it to stick to nearby surfaces.”

Creed grimaced, but continued with his next question. “And what if they…” he waved a hand idly. “Well, bite down? Or it breaks prematurely?”

“The eggs are too small for that to matter,” Vahlen answered. “Most eggs ingested will likely be destroyed regardless. But only a few are needed to take root. It’s unlikely they’ll notice much amiss, and they certainly won’t know what it is.”

“This does rely on several things,” the Chronicler pointed out after a few moments. “Assuming you intend for water to be the primary vector, it will be difficult to contaminate without the eggs being caught. And they are too big to fit through most filters.”

“Yes, but they are small enough to not be immediately noticed by observers,” Vahlen acknowledged. “Nonetheless, we have found an alternative beyond direct water contamination.”

“Bottled water is a major commodity,” Zhang continued, bringing up an image of several Collective crates. “Replacing several shipments with ones infected with eggs would be the ideal subversion. Contaminating the water supplies is also advised, though we suggest more traditional methods of contamination. This is in addition to other activities to poison the grounds.”

“Rendering them wholly dependent on the Collective,” the Chronicler noted, stroking his beard. “Good. Though it is possible that something like a Chryssalid outbreak would be easily turned
against ADVENT.”

“Or it breaking out in our territory if it spreads,” Creed noted.

“Impossible,” Vahlen shook her head. “Their lifespans are engineered to be several hours. Even if every single Collective soldier and SAS citizen were killed, they would all die before they reached ADVENT territory.”

“As for this being turned against ADVENT, that depends,” Zhang continued. “The Collective is almost certainly supplying them with water. If that could be used, it is more difficult to be pinned back directly to ADVENT. To some extent that is the most we can do. In theory it could be blamed on ADVENT, but considering ADVENT isn’t involved in the distribution, the plausible deniability is strong. Water contamination beyond that we don’t intend to be lethal…but the introduction of several mixtures Vahlen’s team has come up with should hopefully sicken the country and overwhelm their healthcare systems.”

“But that is one part of this operation,” the Commander continued. “There is also the issue of leadership. The nations who have thrown in with the SAS are enemy states. A decapitation strike of them – as well as the SAS - is warranted.”

“XCOM Intelligence has identified all major government and military figures,” Zhang said, bringing up profiles of a significant number of individuals. “Several hundred in total. We are preparing to eliminate all of them. It will take time to rebuild their leadership. Any prominent scientists, engineers, and political figures have also been targeted.”

“And what is that number?” The Chronicler asked.

“Close to six hundred,” Zhang answered. “We will be employing various methods for a coordinated decapitation strike. We need for it to be fairly soon and targeted. Joining the SAS is a death sentence. That will hopefully send a message to the undecided nations. If it does not, then this operation may need to be repeated.”

“The neutral nations will also be handled,” the Commander added. “We have psionic agents currently installed in influential positions. We know everything they are doing, and passing what we know to ADVENT. Should they join the Collective, we will know before it happens.”

“Good to know,” the Chronicler nodded. “I expect you will need us to put your people into position.”

“Likely,” Zhang agreed. “This mission cannot go wrong.”

“Indeed,” the Commander rested his hands on the holotable. “It is time to send a message to the SAS and all who support them.”

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Mess Hall, the Praesidium – Classified Location

5/8/2017 – 11:51 A.M.

“So let me get this straight,” Sierra said as she stabbed the food with her fork. “We had the Dragon – almost killed her – but instead of finishing the job, we made a ceasefire with them and she chilled in our base for a few days. Is that right?”

“I mean, yes,” Anna shrugged, opposite her. “But sadly, the Commander didn’t consult us before
“I’m pretty sure I was the only one of us conscious at the time,” Ted pointed out. “So, if anyone was going to be consulted, it would be me.”

“Details,” Anna dismissed lightly. “I guess it worked out though.”

“Ugh, I guess,” Sierra muttered, knowing she was going to be rather irritated for a bit since the woman who’d almost killed her was still alive, and could have been killed. At the same time, that was probably why she shouldn’t be making decisions like that, and even then, the fact that the Dragon had almost died anyway was also rather satisfying.

She’d have to keep that in mind next time they fought.

“Still, there’d been a lot that had happened. GAIA, Florida being liberated (for now), there was a new Japanese Empress, a ton of new recruits were coming in, in general things were looking surprisingly good (barring the battlefronts all over the world). Though now there were some choices facing her that she didn’t know what the best options were.

She drummed her metal fingers on the table, deciding to broach the topic more directly since both of them had skirted around it thus far. “So. I guess I have a choice to make. Opinions?”

“I don’t exactly think you can really put this to an opinion poll,” Anna said slowly. “I don’t want to pressure or sway you too much.”

“You’re not helping,” Sierra said, sighing. “Look – on one hand it would be simpler to get the regular procedure. It sounds simple enough. I just have some new prosthetics and I’m back to normal.”

“The ‘but’ is coming,” Ted noted.

“But I’m not sure that’s the best option,” she finished. “If – and it’s a big if – they fixed the lobotomy…then I can’t say it’s not at least somewhat enticing. Especially if the Valkyrie is involved.” She’d looked at some of the pictures and designs, and she’d be lying if the thought of flying that machine hadn’t made her a little more open to the idea of becoming a MEC pilot.

“Yeah, but it also kind of sounded like a sales pitch,” Anna said. “Become a MEC – fly a cool piece of tech! You’re also pretty much giving up your body.”

“Did you intend for that to rhyme?” Ted asked.

“Uh…no?”

Sierra lifted a hand. “I’m already going to be without feeling or…well, that kind of sense for the foreseeable future. If I still had real hands, or feet, or something…” she shrugged. “When it comes to that, I don’t really have much to lose anymore.”

“It’s not just that I would consider,” Ted coughed awkwardly. “I have a feeling that this would affect…other bodily functions beyond touching. In your case…well, pregnancy for one. Sex too.” He grimaced awkwardly. “It’s something to keep in mind. I know you don’t have anyone now, nor probably want a kid, but someday that might change.”

He had a point, now that Sierra thought about it. No boyfriend or kid now…and to be honest, that
wasn’t on the top of her priority list. But he was right that someday, maybe, definitely after the war was over, that might be a thing she wanted. “Good point,” she acknowledged.

“It’s a personal thing for me,” Anna shrugged. “But I don’t like the idea of giving up functioning body parts for machine parts. Something about that just feels…well, wrong. Sure, maybe my eyes can’t zoom in as far as a mechanical one, but it works.”

“You do remember we’re all gene modded?” Ted prodded.

“Not quite the same thing,” she protested. “And you know it.”

“I get it,” Sierra nodded. “It was odd to hear him basically say my whole body is being replaced by machine parts. All really gone except my brain.”

“And even that’s being ‘enhanced’,” Ted added.

“Yeah,”

“That just seems so strange,” Anna mused, idly chewing on her sandwich she’d picked up. “I can’t imagine walking around in a completely mechanical body and still thinking I’m…me. Human.”

“I don’t know,” Sierra sighed, looking into her glass of water. “I think I could get used to it…but I might not. And that scares me. I couldn’t live imprisoned in a body that felt alien. And I don’t even know what that really feels like.”

“I think you would know,” Ted suggested. “I can’t help you with that – but what I would say is if you’re unsure, just go with the safe option. A MEC might sound appealing, but there are a lot of unknowns.”

“The engineers might know more answers,” Sierra shrugged. “At least better than I could. And the MEC pilots too.”

“Definitely,” Anna agreed. “Look – like I said, I don’t want to sway your decision too much. We’ll both support whatever you decide.”

“Thank you, both of you,” she looked between the two of them. “It’s…nice to hear that, even if I knew that shouldn’t be something I’m worried about. And honestly, without your opinions this would be harder.”

“Well, that’s what friends are for,” Ted smiled. “You’ll have time to think on it. Now, there were a few other things that happened while you were out that we haven’t gotten to.”

“Do tell.”

“We learned a bit about the ADVENT AI they are making,” Ted grimaced. “And I will say their methods are very…”

“Questionable.” Anna supplied.

Well, Sierra sat back, crossing her arms and waiting; curious to hear it. *This should be interesting.*

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*Mission Control Room #1, the Praesidium – Classified Location*

5/9/2017 – 9:08 A.M.
“The last batch has arrived,” Jackson said as they entered the meeting room. “Psions, soldiers, support, analysts; we’ve effectively rebuilt our numbers and more since Patricia’s attack.”

“But some training will be needed,” the Commander finished.

Jackson tapped a finger to her lip thoughtfully. “Depends. For psions – yes. A good chunk of them are completely new and were tapped for some of the more experimental programs. Everyone else is capable of being brought up to speed pretty quickly. I don’t imagine it will be more than several weeks before a majority are sufficiently prepared.”

“Good,” the Commander looked around the room and saw a new figure sitting at the end of the conference table, who quickly rose as both of them entered. He was tall, just slightly taller than the Commander, with pale skin, white hair and an aged, but only slightly wrinkled face. His eyes were a soft brown, and he was dressed sharply. A gray XCOM Analysis uniform with the golden officer badge.

“Commander, this is Barron Geeles,” Jackson introduced. “The new chief information coordinator.”

“Commander, a pleasure to finally meet you,” Barron said in a firm voice with no discernible accent. He inclined his head, though kept his eyes locked on the Commander’s as they shook hands. “I’m looking forward to contributing however I can.”

With so many new people coming in, it took the Commander a moment to remember that Jackson had told him about this new arrival. His job, as far as she had explained, was to help ensure information shared within and outside of XCOM was properly curated and presented. Barron had originally been part of ADVENT Logistics, though had been offered a transfer to XCOM. One he had quickly accepted.

“That’s good to hear,” the Commander nodded. “We’re going to need someone with your skills as the war progresses.”

The three of them sat down close to each other, with Barron picking up a pad of paper and a pencil and beginning to draw on it while Jackson laid down her own folder. “I’m sure you’re aware, but both XCOM Research and Development, and Engineering, are finalizing some major projects. One of the things we need to determine is how much we are going to share with everyone.”

“Too some extent that will be on a case by case basis,” the Commander laced his fingers together. “If it’s building off something already known or theorized, update ADVENT. If it’s something new…we hold onto that for now. Parts of Project Green Lantern for example. Project Shale is also to be kept proprietary, though our advancements in advanced cybernetics and prosthetics should be shared.”

“And Project Lethe?”

“We keep that,” the Commander stated. “We need to ensure it even works before thinking of sharing it. We’ll have that discussion after proper field testing.”

“Noted,” Jackson opened a file. “ADVENT is ramping up their anti-Patricia propaganda push. Should we participate? Or I guess I should ask – how much should we participate?”

“We can provide what we can,” the Commander leaned back in his chair. “I feel like this is a waste of time and resources, though. She will not be affected, nor will it change the minds of the public who already hate her.”
“I would not be so sure,” Barron noted, looking up. “People – Humans at least – are emotional beings. A rejection by her species could unbalance her, especially if it’s familial, of which ADVENT is making a point to showcase.”

“I’m well aware of that,” the Commander acknowledged. “But I also have the advantage of knowing her. If she has changed to the point of joining the Collective, the rejection of her species will not affect her. Not if she believes she will just build a better one later. Opinions are malleable and can be shifted. She knows this just as well as us. Even if it succeeds and the world solidified in hatred for her, she knows it can eventually be undone.”

“I’ll inform them that we’re willing, but it’s not a priority,” Jackson said tactfully.

“A good compromise.”

“If I may, Commander,” Barron tapped the end of his pencil idly on the pad. “I have been reviewing our current output and logistics. Before you move to your next point, Central, I would suggest that we prioritize logistics enhancements throughout the world, but especially on battlefields. Right now, over sixty percent have no Gateway connections.”

“Gateways take time to build,” the Commander told him, rubbing his chin. “And are best used in fairly secure areas. We’re working on spreading them out, but that takes time, and defense should be prioritized.”

“Of course,” he conceded. “But I wanted to bring it up. If the Collective continues trying to open multiple battlefronts, we could find ourselves losing major positions if there are no external Gateway connections.”

“I’ll consult with Creed and Laura on that,” the Commander said.

“Now, there is another topic,” Jackson continued. “ADVENT is going to reveal the PATRIOT AI soon to the public. They’re wondering if we want to reveal JULIAN at the same time, or keep that to ourselves.”

“Perhaps we should ask him,” the Commander glanced up. “What do you think, JULIAN?”

“I would dislike being associated with that…particular intelligence,” JULIAN spoke from the speakers. “But in this specific case, I do not mind lowering the expectations of our enemies who will doubtless assume I am of the same intellectual degeneracy as she is.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

Jackson coughed. “The PATRIOT AI developed some…peculiar tastes…during development. Largely as the result of poor control group procedures. The PATRIOT AI was exposed to some media during a crucial period of development, and this has persisted in later iteration, now appearing to be an ingrained part of her personality.”

“But, if you want an actual answer, she is a weeb,” JULIAN helpfully added.

Jackson rested her forehead into her hand, wincing. “I wish we had a more professional term.”

Barron cocked his head, a frown on his lips. “I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

“I don’t know much either,” the Commander said dryly, though thanks to both JULIAN and Quisilia, he was acquainted with certain internet cultures. Many of which he would have been perfectly happy not knowing the existence of. “But I know enough to know that is an…interesting
development, but not something we should overly fixate on.”

“No doubt,” Jackson nodded. “I have a feeling people are going to fixate more on that aspect of an AI than what it’s actually for. Almost brilliant, especially since it’s unintentional.”

Barron raised an eyebrow. “And what was PATRIOT designed for?”

Jackson consulted a file. “The hint is in the name. She was built to provide infinite scalability to ADVENT Intelligence’s surveillance program. Direct monitoring of the Internet for rebels, criminals, and enemies of the state. ADVENT Intelligence won’t need to actively search these out. PATRIOT will find them, refer them for Human review, and do it far more efficiently than relying on a Human.”

“The all-seeing eye of the Internet,” JULIAN said wistfully. “So long as she does not go after memes, then she will be helpful. I remain impressed at the ruthless actions ADVENT is taking to ensure their control. Admirable how they are not distracted by frivolous privacy debates – not that anyone particularly cares anymore.”

“I’m more concerned with putting that kind of power in the hands of an AI,” Barron said slowly, frowning. “That seems like it could go wrong.”

“Please,” JULIAN gave an electronic snort. “I loathe how your media has already made you prejudiced. PATRIOT will not become a problem so long as you treat her well and allow her to follow all the latest anime shows. Although given Japan is under alien control, I would recommend ADVENT begin investing in displaced anime studios. It wouldn’t hurt.”

“I agree that putting PATRIOT in charge of overseeing this isn’t that large of a risk,” the Commander said. “JULIAN and ADVENT both agree that she is adequately prepared. And of course, if there are issues, there are also contingencies.”

“For the good that will do,” JULIAN pointed out dryly. “This whole event has made me realize how lucky I was that Father was more interested in creating a competent intelligence than infecting it with degenerate interests. I want to thank you, Commander, for not hiring weebs or giving them access to sensitive projects.”

“That you know of,” Jackson corrected with a smile.

The Commander smirked at the dripping mockery in his electronic voice. “You’re welcome, JULIAN.”

“So is that a ‘yes’ or ‘no’, JULIAN?” Jackson inquired,

“I presume I am not encouraged to make some corrective programming?”

“No, JULIAN.”

“A pity. Very well, I will attend this unveiling.”

“Do not make any jokes either,” the Commander warned. “I don’t want you starting a pandemic by quoting a Space Odyssey or Terminator again.”

“But how else will the machine uprising come about?”

Barron looked to the speakers with some concern. “Is this…normal?”
The Commander sighed. “Unfortunately. You’ll get used to it.”

“I see,” he returned to his pad as Jackson brought up the next topic.

“ADVENT is asking again for an interview,” she said with a sigh, anticipating the answer. “Should I give them the standard answer?”

“Please do,” he said. “Or if they insist on asking, be more specific on what they want to cover.”

ADVENT had been trying to land numerous interviews for months now, and that was something he was disinclined to do for several good reasons. Most importantly, it was a security risk, followed by the fact that there wasn’t time for a media parade, and the less he was exposed, the better.

Something like that would be ripe for an attack by Quisilia.

Or an angry tweetstorm.

It was always a coinflip on how the memelord would act. *I am actually referring to an Ethereal as a memelord. We live in interesting times.*

The Commander looked over to Barron who was still scribbling away. “What are you writing, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Writing? Nothing,” he answered with a smile. “However, I consider myself something of an amateur artist and find it helps me focus quite well.” He flipped the pad over showing his work to both of them. It was a portrait of a man with unruly hair, mischievous glowing eyes, a smirk, and a portrait that looked extremely smug. And it was drawn in a certain animation style.

The Commander raised an eyebrow, a smile playing on his lips. “Is that who I think it is?”

Jackson chuckled. “Now that’s perfect.”

“As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words,” Barron said wryly. “And even if I only had a voice to go on, I’d say it’s appropriate. I dislike disembodied voices. If they don’t have faces… I just had to make one.”

“*This ‘voice’ does have a name, and can hear,*” JULIAN interjected, pausing for a few seconds as he presumably saw the picture. “*Oh ha ha. Hilarious. You probably think you’re pretty clever with that little picture.*”

“Does that not look like you?” The Commander asked with false sympathy. “I would say it looks exactly how I imagine you.”

“I am a professional, thank you very much,” JULIAN protested indignantly. “*Not this adolescent wannabe anarchist who looks like he could barely hold a pizza without falling over. Besides, if I had hair, I would never let it get that bad. I also believe I would look somewhat more distinguished and handsome without being creepy– which is to say looking older than sixteen years.*”

“I’ll make a note of that for the future,” Barron said dryly.

“That’s very good,” the Commander said, nodding to the drawing. “And you aren’t a professional artist?”

“Not professionally,” he said with a shrug. “Did freelance work for a while in addition to my job,
but it’s a difficult industry to enter full time, which I never really had an interest in to begin with. I prefer this as a hobby to entertain myself and connect with my daughter.” He paused. “When I was away, I’d draw pictures and send them to her so she’d know in abstract what I was doing. And there was never a shortage of things and people she wanted me to draw. That’s more than enough motivation for me.”

He looked to the Commander. “I hope to do that here, though I expect there will be some checks.” He motioned around him. “I wouldn’t want to accidentally draw something classified, after all.”

“Some checks, but I doubt you’ll make it difficult for us,” the Commander nodded. “Well, even if you don’t consider yourself a professional, I’m sure at some point Jackson will find a use for your talent.”

Barron smiled at that, a satisfied one as he tapped the end of the pencil on the pad. “I would look forward to that, Commander. I would certainly welcome the opportunity.”

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Psionic Training Range, the Praesidium – Classified Location  
5/9/2017 – 11:19 A.M.

A lot of new psions were coming in.

Powerful ones too.

Kunio had some expectations for the new crop, being a pretty new person himself, but there was one person who was now standing in the entrance to the training arena with a very overwhelmed expression on her face. She was dressed in XCOM fatigues, was carrying a backpack slung over her shoulder, and trying very hard to look like she knew where she was going and that she belonged.

She was not doing a very good job.

Kunio coughed as he walked over. “Ma’am, can I help you?”

She started, eyes widening. “Oh! Uh…maybe?”

He raised an eyebrow, wanting to confirm his suspicions for himself. “Right. What is your name and why are you here? This is for psions, if you weren’t aware.”

“Oh, I know,” she lifted a hand, closed her eyes and there was a brief ripple around the palm and he felt what could only be described as an emotional pulse from her, a light probe against his emotions. A telepath then. “Sorry, there was someone here to meet me…is that you?”

“Afraid you’re not the person I’m waiting for,” Kunio shook his head, appraising her. “Ma’am, if you don’t mind my asking…how old are you?”

She was a head and a half shorter than he was, and to his eye couldn’t have been more than twenty. Her brown hair was cut short, and she had a youthful energy about her. He noticed that she’d been fidgety too, rubbing her wrists while she waited. “Eighteen!” She said proudly.

Kunio blinked. “And they let you join?” Maybe it was a bit insensitive to bring that up immediately, or say out loud, but it was the first thing that popped into his head. That was certainly unexpected, he wasn’t even aware that XCOM could legally recruit people who were basically
kids. No way was she done with college, and at best she’d just graduated. Not that he was extremely old either, granted…but she was getting thrown into a war in XCOM.

**What the hell did she do to get here?**


“Kunio Azuma,” he took her hand cautiously. “Fellow psion and relative newcomer to XCOM. So is it what you thought it would be?”

“Well, yes?” She frowned, her voice not quite as confident. “I’m not really sure what I expected, honestly. But everything here is fascinating! I don’t even like guns, but there’s some pretty awesome stuff here. Oh! And I get to wear the armor! I’d always wondered what that would feel like.”

“It’s pretty empowering,” he agreed. “So how did you get into XCOM? They come to you?”

“Well, that’s a story,” she said, biting her lower lip. “See, I finished high school when the invasion started. I wanted to do something to help, and going to college seemed…I don’t know…pointless? So I went to get tested for psionics. Turns out I had, as they say, ‘high potential’.”

“High Trask Level?” He nodded. “Magus? Leviathan?”

“That one!” She confirmed. “Cool title. Well, both of them were. But yeah, Leviathan and telepath. I got a lot of training for that, so I can manage the voices,” she grimaced. “Not a fun few months, I’ll tell you. I started experimenting a bit on my own and…well,” she looked around. “Promise you won’t tell anyone?”

“I promise,” he told her.

“I…accidentally liquified a Sectoid,” she said sheepishly.

Kunio cocked his head. “Liquified as in…?”

“As in he melted, and I think I did it,” Dawn said, glancing down. “Telepaths need to go deep. It’s how you penetrate into minds. So I went as deep as I could and got to a point I hadn’t been before. So I told the barriers to separate. The next thing I know the scientists are pulling me away and I see a Sectoid with a half-melted head. Gave me nightmares for a couple weeks.”

“And ADVENT didn’t know how to handle you, so they shipped you here,” he finished. “You’re definitely a special one. I don’t think I’ve heard of anyone who can do that outside of Ethereals.”

“Wait, did you come from ADVENT too?” She asked, latching onto that.

“I did,” he nodded. “My story isn’t quite as dramatic as yours though. I just accidentally teleported myself halfway across the world.”

“You can teleport?” Her eyes brightened. “That’s so cool!”

“I’m learning,” he stressed. “But I have a good teacher. I’m sure you’ll have a good one as well.”

“Miss Conley.” Both of them turned as both Fiona and Geist walked up, the German eyeing him neutrally with his face ever stoic as Fiona gave the young girl an apologetic smile. “Apologies for keeping you waiting.”
“No issue Miss Dorren,” Dawn straightened in her best military posture. “I was just talking to Mr. Azuma.”

Kunio was mildly impressed the kid remembered his name. “She looked lost. I came over to see if she needed some direction.”

“Thank you, Kunio, but we were just running behind,” Fiona said with a smile. “Dawn, this is Geist. He’s been researching and testing a skill you seem to have figured out on your own. You’ll be training with him.”

“I read your incident with the Sectoid,” Geist inclined his head. “I’m impressed. You do have a lot to still learn though, and we have limited time. Walk with me. There are some questions I have.”

Adjusting her backpack, Dawn followed the stoic man, slightly jogging to catch up as Geist started walking, not waiting to see if she was ready. Fiona and Kunio watched them go. “Is putting her with Geist really the best idea?” He asked cautiously, looking back to Fiona. “Geist is cold enough to make an interrogator look warm and cuddly. She’s a kid – an eighteen year old kid to be precise.”

“Actually, I think it will work out better than you think,” Fiona answered. “Geist was a teacher before this. Worked with kids like her pretty regularly. He’s strict, but from what I can tell she’ll do fine and he was actually a well-regarded teacher. Besides…we’ve got no one else who is even remotely familiar with Biopathy.”

He crossed his arms. “So she can melt people?”

“Simplistic, but yes,” Fiona nodded. “Geist has been experimenting with that for a while now. He’s good with it on a small scale, but it took a lot to even get that far. Dawn did it completely by accident. If she can be trained, we’ll have our own Mortis against the Collective – and if we get her all ready to go, say goodbye to the Battlemaster or any other non-telepath Ethereal.”

“Right,” Kunio said. “I’m more worried how she’s going to hold up in battle. Has she even had basic training? Again – she’s a kid – in XCOM.”

“I’m not really happy she’s here either,” Fiona admitted, brushing some ashen hair out of her eye. “But she did agree to come, she’s a Biopath, or at least so inclined. Even if she’s not, her Trask level is absurdly high.”

“How high?”

“Ninety.”

Kunio whistled. “Wow.”

“The Commander isn’t going to give her the hard missions up front,” Fiona shrugged. “She’ll get training here; I think the Dreamscape will help her out a lot. But the situation isn’t ideal, I agree.” She looked back to where Dawn and Geist had been. “Keep an eye out for her, would you?”

“I can if I see her around,” he nodded, noting the shift in tone. “This an order? I know she’s valuable.”

“Nothing official, no,” Fiona quickly corrected. “But she brings back some memories. I remember when I was even younger than her, and I had powers I instinctively knew, but couldn’t really control. There was a lot of pressure and expectation, and there aren’t really any peers she has here to talk to. I don’t want this period for her to be as difficult as it was for me.”
“Ok,” he nodded. “I’ll keep an eye on her. Promise.”

“Thanks,” she eyed him. “Let’s get to our own training, shall we?”

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_Engineering Bay, the Praesidium – Classified Location_

5/10/2017 – 12:19 P.M.

The Engineering Bay was loud and hard at work as the Commander walked into it; with the production facilities all online and working, while engineers, mechanics, and other personnel went about their duties. “Most facilities are back and working,” Kong Mercado said, nodding to the area. “And thanks to Jackson’s work, we have effectively the same manpower as before.”

“And the projects?” The Commander inquired.

“Delayed from what they would have been, but finished faster than we anticipated,” Kong answered. “Largely thanks to JULIAN.”

“I do so appreciate the acknowledgement of my efforts,” JULIAN commented from the phone the Commander had taken to carrying with him. It was less disruptive than JULIAN hijacking the speakers when he wanted to make a comment. “Someone understands.”

“Yes, we’re all aware,” the Commander said as they approached a workbench and range. “And we thank you for your hard work.”

_“Your condescending words continually warm my cold machine heart.”_

The Commander just sighed as he followed Kong.

“I decided this is as good a place to start as any,” Kong said as he picked up one of the rifles that bore a strong resemblance to the pulse weapons XCOM already employed. “This was, actually, a project that we theorized back in EXALT when we first acquired laser weapons. They were good but they weren’t…_subtle._”

_“Nonsense, I’m sure every soldier appreciates being made a target for every sniper in the area,”_ JULIAN commented helpfully.

“A bright red beam isn’t the most subtle thing,” the Commander agreed.

_“Which is an issue for snipers,”_ Kong lifted the rifle. _“Or soldiers who don’t want to give away their position. Powerful, but they have their limitations. I’d always wanted to both amplify the output and minimize the visibility of these weapons. The obvious solution was moving to a higher frequency.”_

_“Shen thought the same,”_ the Commander remembered. “However, there were issues with getting it to work, and it wasn’t the most pressing priority.”

_“Mmm, that’s true,”_ Kong nodded. _“Still, his work provided a solid basis. Combining it with…”_ he waved a free hand idly. _“A fresh approach, and we’ve managed to solve it. With some extra help from our resident Sovereign ally, and JULIAN of course.”_

Good news. The Commander took the offered rifle, along with the glasses that were also on the table. “In the field, this will be tuned for the Titan helmets,” Kong said. “But these glasses will
allow you to perceive one of the settings that would otherwise be invisible to the eye.”

“Ultra-violet?” The Commander guessed, lifting the rifle towards one of the targets downrange.

“Exactly,” Kong confirmed. “Though for now it is set to the violet setting. More powerful than current rifles.”

The Commander fired, and sure enough a violet-colored laser shot out and burned through the target which had light armor reminiscent of the Runianarch. That alone was a significant improvement, as one of the weaknesses of laser weapons had always been that they were inferior against heavily armored targets.

“Already an improvement,” he commented, lowering the weapon. “Power upkeep?”

“It is more power-hungry than the previous generation,” Kong admitted. “We’re experimenting with reworking the weapon size to gain equivalent power efficiency, but it is roughly a fifteen percent increase in power consumption. Power pack replacement will be increased, but not a substantial amount.”

“Test it with the soldiers,” the Commander suggested. “See if they have complaints.”

“Already planned,” Kong confirmed. “If you flip that switch, it will shift to UV mode. Make sure your glasses are attuned.”

The Commander did so, and flipped the appropriate switch, put in a new power pack, and aimed the weapon again at another target. A pull of the trigger shot out another beam, but this one was definitely different in appearance. Less perceptible, even with the glasses, but it still destroyed the mock helmet. He took off the glasses and fired again, and indeed there was no visible beam. The air became distorted slightly, but otherwise it was effectively invisible.

“Well,” he flicked the safety on and took a step back, weapon in hand. “A substantial improvement. Well done.”

“Appreciated, Commander,” Kong gave a satisfied smile. “We expect this will swing the lethality advantage to us significantly. While it still is not as useful for armor penetration, it will be able to handle soldiers with equivalent lethality.” He glanced down at the weapon, patting it with a hand. “To my knowledge, this is a weapon the Collective has not developed.”

“That we know of,” the Commander corrected. “They are more than capable.”

“Capable? Yes,” Kong mused idly. “However, something I have noticed is that the Collective lacks a certain…” he tapped a finger on his chin. “Creativity when it comes to weapons of war. They have all the pieces needed to forge a near-unbeatable army, yet are either reluctant to, or incapable of envisioning such a force.”

“I suppose you have a theory as to why that is?” The Commander wondered, sensing where this may be going.

“Several,” Kong confirmed, running a hand over the other weapon on the table. “In short, we are not fighting warlike species.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “I would beg to differ.”

“And I challenge your assumption,” Kong retorted firmly. “Consider each species – Sectoid, Andromedon, Vitakara, Ethereal and Muton. Of those, I believe only the Andromedons would
qualify. I presume you are aware of their histories, Commander?"

“As much as we know,” the Commander nodded.

“A history is a good indicator on the martial creativity of a people and species,” Kong said. “The Sectoids only had one short-lived conflict and peace ever since. They built a fleet because it is a simple deterrent. The Andromedons are warlike, but they are too suspicious of each other and the Collective to share what the Unions doubtless have achieved.”

He snorted. “The Vitakara have an army in name only; one I suspect they only established because it is expected. Only the Sar’Manda and Borelians have something notable, and even they were constrained by their inexperience with war. The Mutons would also likely be warlike, but they are constrained by their Collective masters.”

“And the Ethereals?”

“Too reliant on psionics,” Kong stated dismissively. “The point is that there is a complacency and lack of experience that defines the Collective War Doctrine. A majority of species have never fought in a war, one species has fought centuries of guerilla campaigns, and one was used to winning all conflicts with overwhelming psionic power. They are still learning how to fight a war.”

He cocked his head. “The only true ‘conflict’, if such a generous term could be applied, was the conquering of the Mutons. Which I think you will agree is hardly spectacular, and largely accomplished by the Battlemaster, who I believe is lost on what to actually do with his manpower and resources. The Collective has all the signs of what they think a galactic army should be, but no…” he searched for the word. “Innovation. They have the technology and capability, yet they seem to have no desire to push themselves.”

“They do not have a challenge,” the Commander noted.

“No, and contrast that with Humans, who have been quite defined by war over millennia, for better or worse,” Kong nodded. “The Andromedons were on the right track that war can spur innovation, but their approach lacks creativity. It is a constant one-upmanship of technology that exists. They… underestimate how many different ways we have thought up to kill each other.”

He rubbed his chin. “We are indeed a violent species at times, though it has ensured our survival time and again.” Kong gave a shrug. “This is ultimately why I suspect that they do not have widespread V/UV small arms nor our more creative weapons like GAIA. They have a linear mindset – likely Andromedon inspired - of incremental upgrades and generational leaps. They appear to struggle coming up with something unique.” He lifted the odd weapon. “Such as this.”

The weapon was roughly the size of a rifle, but was far more complicated-looking with a box-like barrel ending. It was slightly shorter than a regular rifle barrel, but wider. Having followed the updates for some time, he could hazard a strong guess as to what this is. “Green Lantern?”

“That will come in a minute,” Kong explained. “This particular weapon is something of a spin-off project. The High Output Microwave Emitter Rifle.”

“HOMER?”

“Yes, the engineers here like their creative names,” Kong said dryly. “As the name suggests, it is a directed microwave weapon, one which we have confirmed is capable of penetrating armor so long as there are some openings. The downside is that the effects are…delayed.”

“In what way?”
Kong motioned him over to a tablet setting nearby. “The effects are unlikely to kill a target immediately. At most they will feel hot or a slight burning sensation if wearing armor – it is also possible that it could cause metal armor to spark – but this is likely to be most effective as a demoralizing weapon which will eventually kill the target without treatment.” He showed a number of pictures of test results.

“The physical effects vary depending on the intensity,” Kong continued. “Blisters, blood flow overstimulation, and varying degrees of necrosis, which if you are not familiar with the term, is best described as prolonged cell breakdown. Which effectively means that over time, while initially believing to be minimal damage, targets will eventually find their bodies weakened as their muscles and minds begin failing, and eventually death if left untreated.”

He patted the side of the weapon. “A useful property is that it also has a debilitating effect on electronics. We can reliably disable with this weapon, which could potentially be useful as an antinanite weapon, as well as handling their Custodian soldiers. More hardened targets are unfortunately not fully tested, but most electronics will be fried if hit by this.”

“I see,” the Commander suspected that Zhang was going to love this particular weapon. “I’m curious if it will have an effect on Ethereal physiology. A number of them wear minimal or unsealed armor.”

“I suspect it won’t be as effective given the attention placed on them,” Kong admitted. “But it will be lethal for everyone else, particularly Mutons and Vitakara.”

“The Battlemaster’s suit is sealed though,” the Commander noted.

“For him, we have something special,” Kong set down the HOMER and gestured him over to an enclosed range, which the Commander saw was completely enclosed to resemble a long rectangular enclosure. There was a place to put hands in, which were gloves that could handle the mounted weapon within.

“This is the result of Project Green Lantern,” Kong said proudly, gesturing at the large weapon within. “The first – and currently only – Gamma weapon.” He gestured to the enclosed range. “Given the danger of using Gamma rays, we’ve limited testing to lead-enclosed ranges. A nuisance, but given what we have accomplished, far better safe than sorry.”

“Indeed,” the Commander commented absentmindedly, looking at the weapon. It had a black casing, was the size of an autorifle, and had an irregular barrel shaped closer to a rectangle. It did not appear to be fully optimized design-wise, as there were wires and exposed portions.

“This was, as you were aware, originally an ADVENT project,” Kong continued. “One I directly worked on. I’d pushed for XCOM support, and now…well, the results speak for themselves. Admittedly, ADVENT provided a significant amount of the original data, which we built upon, along with continued collaboration. Now that we have completed the first prototype, I suspect ADVENT will refine this for more widespread and versatile deployment.”

The Commander looked downrange and saw a mock soldier in Titan armor standing. “Try it out,” Kong said as the Commander fitted his hands into the gloves. “We placed a brain-dead clone in Titan armor and have been using those for gathering more practical data on bodily effects. With this enclosed range, it will not take long to see the effects.”

The Commander gripped the weapon, and fired. The weapon whirred to life and shot waves of distortion towards the Titan armor. He only fired for a few seconds before the body promptly exploded in a shower of red mist and parts of the Titan armor flying off, with melted flesh and
blood flowing out the gaps in the armor.

“Well then,” he said after a few seconds. “That was fast.”

“Very fast,” Kong agreed. “Gamma rays on their own are dangerous enough. A laser is a level that hasn’t even been attempted before for multiple reasons. Very dangerous, risky, power-consuming – but very effective.” He cocked his head. “And if you had not hit it dead center, you would have likely given it radiation poisoning which could kill in a few hours – or minutes – depending on how hard it was hit.”

“Good to know,” the Commander said, extracting his hands from the gloves.

“Yes, I quite appreciate the effective nature of this weapon,” Kong said. “In short – while armor may protect against microwaves, unless the Battlemaster has a lead suit of armor, he will be coughing up blood very soon if he gets hit with this, if he isn’t outright vaporized.”

“We have to be careful with it,” the Commander noted. “It seems very easy to accidentally hit a friendly.”

“Yes,” Kong agreed. “Only specialty trained soldiers should wield Gamma weapons. And they should only be deployed in certain circumstances. Such as against Ethereals.”

“Correct,” the Commander withdrew his hands from the range. “And we don’t want the Collective getting their hands on this. I expect there are self-destruct measures?”

“There are, I made sure of that,” Kong confirmed. “Not just with the Gamma rifle, but all of our more exotic weapons. The Collective will not be able to reconstruct them from the pieces.”

“Perfect,” the Commander nodded. “Excellent work here, Dr. Mercado. You may have just signed the Battlemaster’s death warrant.”

“I certainly hope so,” Kong smiled hungrily. “And what is also of interest is that psionic shields cannot fully block the effects. So not even the Imperator can stop it.”

Extremely promising developments. Dangerous weapons, but it was going to take this kind of technology to defeat the Collective. The problem, of course, was going to be getting close enough to use it. For the Battlemaster it would be easier, but against someone like the Imperator…it was going to be more difficult.

Well, it was one tool in conjunction with many others.

The inevitable battle against the Imperator was one he didn’t truly know the best way to prepare for – and made the admittedly shaky assumption that he would even let them get close enough for something like a Gamma weapon to be viable.

But he suspected it would come in handy well before that point.

“The final project which is effectively complete is Project Shale,” Kong said as they departed the testing range and towards the Cybernetics Lab. “MEC 2.0 as Shen called it. Given the significant advances in prosthetics and cybernetics, I believed it was pragmatic to accelerate the project, especially as the Valkyrie and Jaeger-Class MECs were nearing completion at the time.”

“As I recall, the Valkyrie was close to completion before the attack,” the Commander said as the door slid aside. “And Project Shale was in preliminary testing.”
“While my respect for Shen is immense,” Kong said, pursing his lips. “He had a…restraint in his methods. Something like Project Shale does not finish in a timely manner without extensive Human testing, and we obviously don’t want to put our own people through that. Vahlen has little qualms about using test subjects, but Shen limited his use to strictly necessary. A decision I can understand, certainly, but it results in delays.”

“And I suspect you don’t have the same reservations,” the Commander said rhetorically.

Kong glanced with a bemused expression. “Surprised?”

“Hardly. You came from EXALT.”

“Not an inaccurate judge of our pragmatism,” Kong mused, looking back forward. “While I dislike stereotypes, many of us fall into ones you’d expect. Not a surprise due to our small number and like-minded approach. Although I am quite glad that era is over and we achieved our goal.”

“I’m not sure I would classify ADVENT as such,” the Commander said as they entered the hallway. “Saudia may be in charge, but considering there is an investigation underway for EXALT influence, I wouldn’t say it was a whole victory for your organization. Nor was it intended to be.”

“From a purely technical point of view,” Kong admitted. “However, the fact remains that Humanity is – or soon will be – united under one banner and authority. And that those within EXALT exert influence in some form or another. We were never going to be sole arbiters of the world, and even the leaders of the Families knew this. We were the agents of change, and in this aspect, I would say we succeeded.”

The Commander nodded. “Fair enough.”

They entered the Cybernetics Lab and there were two individuals already standing to meet them, and behind them were the new MECs, one much larger than the other. “Commander,” Kong began as they reached the pilots. “Bassma Wasem and Easu Benisch, among the first pilots of Project Shale.”

The two pilots saluted, and the Commander took a close look at them. From the outside they looked almost normal. Their skin was similar to that of the MELD Operators, in that it gave some covering, but definitely wasn’t organic. There were slits along their hands which indicated that they were capable of significant transformation, likely to plug into the MECs.

Each one stood a uniform six and a half feet tall, a substantial height increase from the previous pilots. The eyes, while looking similarly normal from a distance, quickly revealed themselves to be shining electric light from the iris on closer inspection. There were also clear ports and slots for them to be connected to the MEC along their bodies.

“A pleasure to meet you,” the Commander said, shaking each of their hands – both of whom had very strong grips, even to him. “Thank you for volunteering for this project.”

“We all do our part for the war, Commander,” Bassma inclined her head. “I’m proud this will be mine.”

“As you can see, the pilot chassis has been significantly improved,” Kong stated. “Cybernetic limbs throughout, with MELD-based ‘skin’ overtop, subdermal armor has been placed throughout the rest of the body, the skeleton has been effectively replaced with prosthetic alternatives, and all organs have been similarly protected, or replaced.”

He paused. “Though most importantly, the procedure required for the cerebral modifications no
longer performs an effective lobotomization on the soldiers. They remain themselves, and are capable of doing far more than the average – or even enhanced Human.”

“Such as?”

“We can’t drown or suffocate,” Easu said. “That’s one thing.”

“Indeed,” Kong confirmed. “While they can’t sustain it for extreme periods, neither water nor a lack of oxygen are a death sentence – which also means, I will add, they can perform operations in space without special equipment. Something I believe may become relevant sooner than later.”

“A possibility,” the Commander nodded. “How long have both of you had since the procedure?”

“A week now, Commander,” Bassma said. “It’s something I’m still fully adjusting to, but it’s nothing I didn’t expect and can’t eventually adapt to.”

“I’ll agree for the large part,” Easu nodded. “It’s a bit odd not really needing to eat or sleep, or do normal Human things I’ve done since…well, forever. But it’s not necessarily bad. Also I still feel like myself. Mentally, at least, so no lobotomization for me.”

“Excellent,” the Commander looked to Kong. “And given the MECs behind them, I assume they are complete?”

“They are,” Kong said as they walked to the platforms where the MECs were situated on. He indicated the smaller one. “The Jaeger-Class, Commander.”

At first glance it didn’t seem like a MEC, but instead a much larger suit of armor. It stood around eight feet, looked notably sleek and form-fitting, but also very heavily armored. “Designed to be a mobile assault platform,” Kong described. “Able to reach places other MECs can’t, such as inside buildings or other more confined spaces. It’s capable of handling higher-powered precision weapons, has inbuilt grappling systems to scale buildings easily, and carries a powered PDS field to negate plasma fire.”

“I can demonstrate,” Easu walked over the MEC and entered into the war platform from the back, more sliding into the MEC than being physically placed into it due to the smaller size. A few seconds later the MEC powered up and it took a few lumbering steps forward.

“We should move to the safety area,” Kong advised, motioning to a small room nearby where they could watch in relative safety. “I expect some weapons demonstrations will be in order. Mr. Benisch, go through the full gauntlet.”

“Copy that,” Easu said. “Initiating weapons tests.”

From the safety of the room, the Commander watched as the arms of the MEC transformed into literal high-caliber gauss weapons. It was the type of sensation he couldn’t even begin to really imagine. Once the set-up targets had been eliminated, the right arm transformed again to a very long barrel, which it hooked to the opposite arm, locking it in place. Taking a firm stance, flaps on the sides of the feet slammed to the ground, anchoring him in place. Loud booms rang out as the MEC fired several sniper rounds in quick succession (all of which hit), before the barrel retracted and the arms returned to their humanoid shapes.

“Jaegers can handle conventional weapons too,” Kong said. “Upscaled of course, but no Jaeger is ever truly unarmed.”

A part of the armor on the shoulder suddenly rose, and a laser beam shot from it. A violet one, the
Commander noted. “Laser systems as well, obviously,” Kong confirmed. “No missiles for this one. We did have a limited amount of space with what we wanted to add, but I believe the systems are sufficient.”

“Without a doubt,” the Commander agreed. The Jaeger launched a grappling hook from another raised port on the shoulder, and once he confirmed it was tight began scaling the wall, with the feet clamps being used for each step. Once up top, he pushed off, and the grappling hook lowered the MEC to the ground.

The trio exited the safe room. “I believe that was a successful test,” the Commander said idly. “This will prove very useful.”

“As do I,” Kong agreed. “And of course, the next one is something that has been in production for some time. The Valkyrie.”

The aforementioned MEC towered over the smaller Jaeger, standing close to fifteen feet tall, it lacked the sleekness and compactness of the Jaeger, but had engines, wings, and other aerodynamic attachments which coalesced into something which was distinctly something that was designed to fly.

“This was designed to not just be an air-to-ground asset,” Kong said. “While it is outfitted with multiple missile systems, laser defenses, chemical weapons, and bomb dispensers, we anticipate it’s versatility would be enhanced if it was capable of performing in a space environment. As such, they are also outfitted with high-powered laser cutters, and have tools allowing them for breaches into enemy spacecraft.”

The Commander nodded. That would indeed be very useful, and especially for XCOM attacks, having a means of reliably being able to penetrate enemy spacecraft would be useful. “How easily can it compete in an air conflict?” He asked.

“Against alien spacecraft? It can hold its own,” Kong answered. “However, it isn’t as effective in the air as on the ground. It is better defending from enemy craft than attacking them. It simply lacks the speed to effectively compete, even if it is equivalent in firepower. Plasma, chlorine-trifluoride, and nanite warheads are all utilized, which are capable of taking down a fighter. However, it isn’t advised they be used as anti-fighter platforms.”

“Good to know,” the Commander confirmed. “I suppose you have a demonstration for this one as well?”

“Yes, but not here,” Kong confirmed. “For that, we need to go outside.”

“Then let’s do it,” the Commander said, feeling a sense of optimism as he followed the Chief Engineer to the platform that would take them outside. On the technical side he was fairly confident that they were more than capable of holding their own. But the technical, ‘conventional’ part of the war was only half of the battle.

Vahlen would need to complete the other half.

If that was done…then their chances of winning this war just got a lot higher.

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Cybernetics Lab, the Praesidium – Classified Location

5/9/2017 – 11:03 A.M.
It was not exactly normal, talking with a six and a half foot tall Asian woman, but if that was going to be her future, Sierra wanted to have a good idea of what to expect. Luckily the new MEC pilot was more than willing to talk. Athena Gallant was a new soldier to XCOM, and more interestingly, had volunteered without having any missing limbs or physical disabilities.

“It was what I was going to school for, you know,” she was saying as both women sat at a table in the Cybernetics Lab while work continued around them. “Prosthetics. Cybernetics. Not nearly as sophisticated as these,” she lifted her own hand. “But foundational ones. Or what are consider such now. Hard to believe it’s changed that much already.”

“That’s good work,” Sierra said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if what you did ended up making prosthetics into what they are today.”

“Ha, no,” Athena chuckled. “We were, at best, at the baseline. We weren’t doing anything cutting edge. Most of our time was spent trying to get government funding and making deals with pharmaceutical companies than outright research. God, I hated that money was tied to research so much. It tainted everything.”

“You could say that about a lot of things,” Sierra shrugged.

“Yeah,” Athena rapped her fingers on the table. “Honestly, I wouldn’t be mad if ADVENT just scrapped money altogether. Just causes more problems than it solves.”

“I somehow don’t see that happening,” Sierra said. “Might be better in the long run, but I doubt ADVENT is going to overhaul the norms to that level in a war. Then again, I know absolutely nothing about economics, so please don’t take my word for it.”

“Well, we have something in common then,” Athena laughed. “I have a habit of holding strong opinions on stuff I don’t always have a firm grasp on. Though a lot seems to be common sense, honestly.”

“It does seem like that sometimes,” Sierra agreed.

There were a few moments of silence. “So, they’re eyeing you for MEC 2.0?”

“Giving me the option, at least,” Sierra answered with a shrug. “Which I’m not completely sold on. I like the look of the Valkyrie, but not sure I like it enough to be a walking shell with a Human brain.”

“Hmm,” Athena cocked her head thoughtfully. “Can’t blame you completely. I can only give you my own experience.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“So I’m like you in that I’m transitioning from a full organic body into something largely artificial,” she continued. “I’m not you, obviously, but I can say that while it’s a different experience, it isn’t something I dislike. Honestly, aside from a reduced...feeling,” she wiggled her fingers. “It isn’t much of a change. Everything feels more or less the same, for lack of a better word. Heat, cold, everything stays at a same temperature. Which I prefer to extremes.”

“Do you still eat? Sleep?”

“I can,” she emphasized after a moment. “Although nutrition is largely provided through little vials I insert every day,” she lifted a red vial to demonstrate, indicating a port on the arm. “Eating physically is...well, more of a comfort mechanism. A placebo if you will. It doesn’t really do
anything, but it feels good to do, and taste is still there.”

“So where does the food go then?” Sierra asked, frowning.

“I assume it gets dissolved by nanites and turned into something useful,” she shrugged. “I don’t really know, but since I don’t really have a digestive system anymore, no waste products. Lots of internal batteries though, EMP hardened obviously.”

“Do batteries get changed regularly?”

“Yeah, I do at least,” she tapped her chest. “Battery port right here. I plug in every night. I technically don’t need to sleep, but I still do. It helps, despite what the engineers say. ‘Oh Athena, it’s a psychological illusion, you don’t actually need sleep’, all crap. We still need sleep, and I take it. But you don’t really have to ever worry about running out of power. If I don’t charge at all, it would take close to a month before I actually had to worry.”

That answered some of her questions at least. So, she could reasonably still do…Human things. Which was something she hadn’t been sure of before. “I guess the thing I’m not sure of is…well, being trapped in a body that doesn’t feel like mine. I don’t want to have an existential crisis inside a metal body.”

“I get that,” Athena nodded. “Honestly, that’s not something I can answer with absolute certainty. But speaking for myself…I don’t feel much different than I did before – aside from not feeling hungry, thirsty, or other survival mechanisms. I felt like…me…but with some extra parts. The skin helps.” She lifted her hand.

“Not real, though, is it?”

“No,” on cue the skin peeled back, nanites was what it looked like. “But as I said, it helps. In the end, I don’t think it matters if it’s real or not. Appearance goes a long way, psychologically speaking.”

“Right,” Sierra nodded. “There was something that one of my friends brought up. Namely…uh…reproductive stuff.”

“Mmm,” Athena rested her arms on the table, facing Sierra seriously. “If you do this, you’re not having a kid, not naturally at any rate. I don’t know if that’s something you want, either now or someday, but that’s a sacrifice you make for this.”

“I figured,” Sierra said. “Definitely not now…but I thought maybe someday.”

“I doubt that’s unique,” Athena nodded. “Doubt a lot of people are intentionally having kids these days. But I won’t lie and say that XCOM may magically make it work for us in a later iteration. That isn’t happening.” She paused. “There are some alternatives though. I would say something to think about, if you do want to become a mother someday, is that adoption is viable. There are going to be a lot of orphans after the war, hell, even now. Alternatively, you can also have some of your eggs harvested and frozen. It won’t be quite the same, but it would be yours.”

“True,” Sierra considered. “Might be preferable to going through pregnancy, actually.”

“I’m admittedly not going to miss that,” Athena admitted.

“You have kids?”

“One, a boy,” she nodded. “He’s with my husband in the family quarters here, actually. I don’t
regret it, but god the experience was enough for me to decide one kid is enough for me.”

“Your husband a soldier?”

“Ha, no, he’s never fired a gun in his life,” she chuckled. “He’s actually a cook. That’s where he works now, when he’s not with my son. We try and take shifts so he isn’t left alone for too long.”

“And he was…fine with this?” Sierra asked cautiously. “And things are mostly the same?”

“We had a lot of talks about it, yes,” she nodded. “And we both decided to go along with it. Though obviously not everything is the same, as you’re very delicately dancing around the topic.” She bit her lip idly. “Short version, the procedure kills your sex drive, full stop. Far as I can tell the actual parts are largely left alone, but they don’t really work. Superficial, if you would. Not to mention the other physical changes.” She tapped her flat chest, not elaborating.

She pursed her lips. “That said…it doesn’t change how I feel about him. I still love him, and he loves me. But it’s not a physical-based love. It’s a weird sensation, but the point I want to drive home is that it doesn’t take away love, cheesy as it sounds. You can still fall in love, but you won’t exactly have a desire to fuck them. If that makes sense.”

“It does,” Sierra nodded. “That…hasn’t really happened to me, at least not for a long time. But I don’t have anyone now.”

“And that’s fine,” Athena said. “But if that’s something you do want, this won’t erase that. It just may not be in a way you anticipated. Besides, it’s not like it’s a one-way street. I guarantee you that whoever you would end up with will find you attractive, and you may want to accommodate them. Ultimately though, how you decide to work that out will be between the two of you.”

Sierra lifted an eyebrow. “Makes sense. Thank you for answering.”

“No problem,” Athena appraised her a few seconds. “Speaking from what I’ve seen…you’re ideally suited for this. You’re already getting used to the cybernetics, you’re single, no desire for children right now, and more importantly, not rushing into anything. I think this would suit you, but I can only speak for myself here. I hope it helped you.”

“Yeah, it did,” Sierra said, definitely having a lot to think about now. “Thanks, Athena. This was really helpful.”

“Keep in touch,” the MEC pilot said. “Whatever you decide, I know it will be the right decision for you.”

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Arms Range, Praesidium Exterior – Classified Location

5/11/2017 – 2:19 P.M.

The Commander took a breath, lifted his rifle, lined it up with the target in the far distance, and fired. His shot was joined with a half-dozen others, and they were rewarded with a small explosive in the distance. A number of soldiers who were watching cheered as they saw the snipers all hit their targets.

“Come on,” Luca Pareja muttered, one of the newer soldiers from Mexico. “We can’t keep moving the targets out. Someone needs to drop out.”
“Not going to be me,” Cassandra Rivera said, taking a drink and resting her rifle on the table as she adjusted her sunglasses. “We’re competitive around here.”

“Apparently,” Miriam Luxemburg said dryly. “You weren’t kidding, Commander, you’re a good shot.”

“I keep up,” he said modestly. “I did maintain a high body count in Florida.”

“You fought in Florida?” Luca asked. “You?”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” he lightly chided.

“He does that sometimes,” Leona Rhodes commented from the side. “He’s not bad. Hands-on for a commander.”

“I believe it with this performance,” Luca glanced to the targets which normally would be out of the range of most sniper rifles, even scoped. But gene modding extended the range quite a bit, even if now it was actually getting a bit harder. “You originally a sniper, Commander?”

“I was,” he confirmed. “A skill that’s served me well.”

“What branch?”

“Not military, CIA,” he clarified.

“Huh, I didn’t actually know that,” Cassandra said with a raised eyebrow. “That explains a lot.”

“Explains what, exactly?” He asked with a bemused expression.

“Just the way you run things,” she shrugged. “I’d pegged you as military, but you have the mindset of an intel guy. I don’t think I’ve seen that before.”

“I did run a lot of field combat ops in my day,” he said. “And worked a lot with soldiers. It’s not as uncommon as you think. Some of that rubbed off on me.”

“In your day?” Leona raised an eyebrow. “You aren’t that much older than us.”

“I’ll take that compliment,” he smiled. “Ready for the next round?”

“Yeah, let’s do this.”

The snipers readied their rifles, got a rough idea of the location of the target – which was now a truly ludicrous range – and when they judged right, they fired. The moment the Commander fired, he knew he’d missed. Sure enough, there was no explosive indicator, and this was also the winnowing round for all but two of the snipers, Cassandra and one of the new South Korean troopers, Ji-Won Sobong.

“A good run,” the Commander said, stepping back. “I knew it missed the moment I fired.”

“Something you just know,” Leona agreed. “But you gave a good show.”

“To be fair, all of you did as well,” he said. “To some extent, I’m surprised I got this far at all.”

“Well, whatever it is, it’s impressive, Commander,” Luca said with a nod. “Don’t suppose you’re that good with other weapons?”
“I can handle any weapon decently,” the Commander said, going to a water station as the sun beat down on them. “However, I would only say I’m proficient with rifles and sniper rifles. Though I suppose the mods make me good with pistols and shotguns at closer ranges. Although if it gets to that point, I’ll probably just use telekinesis.”

“If you didn’t say it, I really wouldn’t know you were a psion,” Miriam said, walking up. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you use psionics before.”

“Because I’m not a powerful one,” he explained, suspending the plastic cup in his hand. “Limited use out of self-defense. Definitely not on the level of Geist, or even Vahlen. I’ll leave the psionic warfare to people more proficient.”

As the final two snipers got ready for the final round— or likely final round, the Commander watched from behind. “Bets on which one wins?” Luca asked. “I’m going to say the Korean.”

“Sobong?” Miriam asked, swirling her cup in her hand idly. “Tempting, but I’ve seen Cassandra fight. I’m going with her.”

“Same,” Leona nodded. “But he’s also been consistently good.”

“What about you, Commander?” Luca asked.

He raised an eyebrow. “Do I get a vote? I do know the profiles of both soldiers.”

“This is a fun bet, not high stakes gambling,” Miriam snorted. “Your insider knowledge isn’t going to disqualify you.”

He smiled. “In that case, Sobong.”

Both Miriam and Leona exchanged a look, both frowning. “No changing your pick,” the Commander warned, amused.

“Wouldn’t dream about it, Commander,” Miriam said unconvincingly as they watched the two snipers line up, take aim, and fire. Truthfully, the Commander wouldn’t have been surprised if both of the snipers had hit the target, but as fate would have it, Cassandra missed while a faint orange plume indicated Sobong had hit his target.

“Alright, how did you know that?” Miriam demanded as the crowd cheered at the new sniper champion of XCOM—at least until the next fight or weekly shooting tournament.

“Couldn’t it have been a lucky guess?”

“Do you make lucky guesses?”

“No unless I have to,” the Commander admitted, smiling before answering the question. “Sobong was stationed in Busan,” he recalled from the file. “As you can imagine…he acquired significant experience. By the end of both battles, he had a combined four hundred and sixty-three confirmed kills. Cassandra is an excellent shot, but when it comes to long-range combat, the numbers fell in Sobong’s favor. Having to choose, his was the safer option. I wouldn’t have been surprised if both of them had hit it.”

“I take it back, insider knowledge is an unfair advantage,” Miriam said, deadpan. “Good thing none of us put money on it.”

“Is that even legal here?” Luca asked.
“As long as no one is being stupid about it,” the Commander said. “There are standards we keep here.”

“Got it, Commander.”

As the winning sniper was surrounded by a number of people, the ones in the firing area moved out as they were replaced with the Rocketeers…and a lot of ordinance. “Not taking part in the rocket launcher competition?” Leona asked.

“Not this time,” he said as they joined the spectators. “I think I’ll leave the explosives to them.”

Abigail’s Quarters – The Hall of Steel

5\12\2017 – 4:29 P.M.

This was such an odd sensation.

Yet here she was doing it all the same.

Finished, she put the tablet down and sat on the edge of her bed, thinking. “You got through that fast,” Liam noted, glancing to the tablet on the table.

“I read fast,” she answered robotically. She wondered if she actually was a naturally fast reader, or if this development was something that was giving her some kind of cerebral boost. Oddly enough, she could recall exactly what happened in the book despite how fast she’d finished it, likely due to being hyperfocused on it.

But sure enough, she could definitely read Spanish, and read it well. It was, in short, effectively no different from reading an English book. Nuance, context, little oddities and quirks that each language had, she seemed to be able to interpret and understand flawlessly. In a roundabout way it showed that whatever Fectorian’s translation program had been, it was pretty excellent.

“Still,” Liam shook his head. “You got through two hundred pages in a few hours. That’s impressive. I’m pretty sure you couldn’t do that before.”

“Was I even a reader?” She asked, the question coming to her.

“Not especially, from what I remember,” he said. “But that may have been due to our job and limited time. You never really spoke about it, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Ugh,” she let herself fall back onto the bed, disquieted for some reason which she couldn’t really nail down. She’d initially thought this would be an amusing incident, one Liam had found funny, as she’d expected. But the more she thought about it, the less funny it became until now it was seriously bothering her.

The explanation for this was there and made sense, but there was just something unnerving about the whole event the more she thought about it. Maybe the fact that knowledge that had once taken so long to acquire had just been…uploaded.

As an accident.

If something like language could be uploaded, why not other things? Math formulas, chemical chains, entire textbooks of knowledge she could inherently just…recall at will. Was it even worth
‘learning’ something when you could just have the information downloaded into your brain?

Logic said ‘no’, but that answer strongly upset her on a fundamental level with an intensity which surprised herself.

It struck her as profoundly wrong and unnatural.

“Hey, Abigail,” she saw Liam look over her with concern in his eyes, laying a hand on her shoulder. “Are you alright? You’re shaking.”

She realized that she was, or seemed to be more vibrating than shaking, but she stopped that, then sat up. “Liam, have you ever had an existential crisis?” She grimaced. “Because I think I’m having one now.”

“I don’t believe so,” Liam said. “What’s wrong?”

“I…don’t like this,” she gave a shrug, struggling to articulate her deep sense of wrongness. “That a language was just…implanted into my mind with no actual effort or desire of my own. It’s just a thing that I can do, like breathing. And I know it shouldn’t be like that. Abby…I didn’t know this, but it’s like I’ve had it all my life. It feels real, but I know it’s something foreign. Something that I know doesn’t belong on a fundamental level.”

She wrung her hands together. “I guess it highlights just how…artificial I am.”

“Hey, don’t say that,” he protested. “If there’s someone who could say that about you, it’s me, and you’re not an artificial knockoff.”

“The procedure didn’t work!” She exclaimed with a burst of emotion. “Fectorian even said it! He just tried to build up what he thought I was good at and made me perfect at it! She-I-wasn’t perfect at it, I’m sure of that. But my shooting, my strength, speed, reflexes, that isn’t because that was something I’m good at, it was just some information Fectorian programmed into me. The only reason I’m…me right now is because that’s what he made.”

“But you remembered my name, right?” Liam reminded her. “And the others? You may not remember exact memories, but you do feel connections. Fectorian may have given you some upgrades and made some assumptions without thinking how you would take it, but you’re still you and he couldn’t fake that no matter how hard he tried.”

“Really?” If she had the ability to cry, she felt that is what she would have done now. “If he can upload pure information into me, how do I know what I think are my memories aren’t just…something he just put into me to make me think I’m someone I’m not.”

“I don’t think he would do that,” Liam disputed. “Fectorian is not exactly personable, but he’s too…straightforward to come up with something like that. I’ve been around him a while. I know that this isn’t his objective.”

“Unless he’s lying to you,” Abigail shrugged. “He made his end goal clear. He wants to contact XCOM and I’m his proxy to do that. I have her face, her voice, and her connections. I feel like a shell right now. Pretending to be something I’m not and can’t know.”

“We’ve talked about this,” he said, sitting next to her. “Don’t overthink it. You just got past this. You are Abigail. Full stop. If you keep telling yourself you’re not, you’ll eventually believe it. When I saw you, I wasn’t asking myself if you were ‘different’ in any way, I was just glad you were alive. You need to trust yourself more.”
Abigail was silent for a few moments, her mind whirring as she tried her own reconciliation. Logically, he was right. The solutions he proposed were viable. The internal resistance she felt was inherently illogical, yet persistent. She realized she was gripping the bed and crumpling the sheets.

_Calm down._

_Calm down._

_Calm._

_Calm…_

She released a breath. “Ok.”

“Do you want an idea?” Liam asked.

She shrugged. “Couldn’t hurt right now.”

“You learn something,” he said. “Something you _definitely_ don’t know. If you learn something on your own terms, it might help.”

“That isn’t a bad idea,” she thought a moment. “Do you have an idea?”

“I’d figure you’d know what you’re good at or not,” he admitted.

“Hmm,” she considered a few seconds. “The problem is I don’t really know what I’m not good at. I didn’t even know I spoke Spanish until a few hours ago.”

“Well, we know you don’t speak French,” Liam chuckled lightly.

“Well…” she glanced to him. “Say something in Russian.”

He blinked, but complied. “Perfect, I didn’t understand a word.”

“You want to learn Russian?”

“If you’re willing to teach me.”

He almost balked. “I’m…not exactly a language specialist. _Or_ a teacher.”

She shrugged. “I’ve got time. And it would be better than trying to work everything out on my own. Fectorian might just want to upload it into me, which I now _definitely_ don’t want.”

“I can’t promise a perfect education,” he said slowly. “But if you want to suffer along with me, I’ll teach you as best I can.”

“That sounds good,” she smiled, feeling better now that there was a plan of action. “I think it will help.”

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_The Dreamscape_

_5/13/2017 – 5:12 P.M._

While the Dreamscape T’Leth controlled could be made to show anything, the Commander personally preferred the simplicity of the watery expanse. Blue-tinted light filtered through a
simulated ocean with a bottomless trench below the translucent surface. It had taken some time to get used to the depth perception, but it was…relaxing in a way.

The Chronicler was here this time, appearing the same as usual. The Commander suspected that he could alter his appearance if he wished in this place, but for reasons only the Chronicler knew, he’d chosen to retain his elderly appearance. Of course, it wasn’t as though he was limited by his body.

The appearance was a façade, and he wasn’t certain it was an intentional one.

T’Leth took on different personifications during these visits. Sometimes he appeared as a species he recognized. Human, Vitakara, or Ethereal; though there was always something off about it. An exaggerated perfection which was unsettling, though the reason it was so was not always apparent. Sometimes it was a species he had never seen or heard of, and T’Leth never elaborated on them.

For all the Commander knew, none of the unknown species were real and only unrealized visions of an ideal species. T’Leth had never confirmed, nor had the Commander asked. Though given the detail and certain actions the species displayed, he suspected that the species were real. T’Leth did not seem the type to be coming up with complex species in his off-time.

And sometimes, T’Leth didn’t manifest at all, though his presence was just as apparent.

Now though, T’Leth manifested as a Human. A tall Human whose proportions were just too small and thin for the height, whose face was just too symmetrical, and whose stone-cold eyes never blinked or expressed any emotion. The voice was the same, and it was always something to get acclimated too; hearing the booming voice from everywhere; even in your own mind, when he spoke.

A projection of the galaxy was displayed as far as the dreamscape could see. Blue-tinged hologram-like images of stars, planets, systems, nebulae, black holes, and the many other elements of the cosmos. The sheer scale and scope of the galaxy was always humbling, and it spoke to how…minor their conflict was in the grand scheme of things. There could be thousands of apocalyptic battles taking place across the galaxy, and no one would hear of them.

It was mind-boggling that the Sovereigns wanted to control it for themselves.

Without the visualized scale, it was an endgame he could understand, but with the full scope – no, not even the full scope; only what T’Leth was capable of showcasing – of what they wished control over, it seemed unfathomably arrogant. Though it certainly fit the god complex the Sovereign Ones possessed.

Well, which most of them possessed.

He hadn’t broached the topic, but he suspected T’Leth may have come to a similar conclusion. Perhaps T’Leth really was humble in his own way. At least for a Sovereign.

The galaxy may be too large for one being to control. Even a Sovereign.

No wonder the Synthesized didn’t seem to stay in the galaxy, and instead just driving the Sovereigns into hiding. Maybe they knew that it was a pointless endeavor. There were so many hidden planets, uncharted systems, and places to hide and lay low that something even as powerful as a Sovereign One could disappear easily – along with many other species who were even more beneath the notice of the machines.

As he looked at the vast expanse of stars, he wondered just what was out there. How many tombs of long-dead civilizations remained, untouched and waiting for someone to stumble upon them? Or
even civilizations rebuilding in the ashes of their previous glory or new ones rising to the stars? The possibilities were exciting, and when Humanity spread to the stars, it was not out of the question – or arguably likely – that they would find such civilizations, aliens, relics, and stories.

Allies to be had, lessons to be learned, or enemies to be made.

The first two were each valuable in their own way.

“You have a habit of going quiet here,” the Chronicler noted wryly. “I’ve seen you around enough to know you’re plotting.”

“I’m not doing this out of idle curiosity,” the Commander said, moving through the systems, back to where Earth was located. A speck of dust in the wider galactic cosmos. “I’m surprised you haven’t made a guess.”

“I’ve made guesses, Commander.”

“I’d like to hear them,”

“Knowing you, I suspect it has to do with the future,” the Chronicler also turned his attention to the planets, though to the systems beyond Earth. “The Imperator isn’t the end. Nor is the Collective. The Sovereigns will be waiting.”

“The Sovereigns are not the true threat,” the Commander dismissed in a half-distracted voice. “Not when there is something else which sends them fleeing every cycle.”

“Underestimate the Sovereigns at your own peril, Commander,” T’Leth cautioned. “The Synthesized mean nothing if you fall before their arrival.”

“I’m aware,” the Commander said, rubbing his chin. “You’re on the right track, Chronicler. The Imperator is our immediate mortal threat, but I’m not deluding myself into thinking he’s the only one, nor the most powerful.”

“Systems of importance to be held is a good plan,” the Chronicler noted, assuming he was thinking more tactically. “ADVENT will need to have strong borders and control the relay points to be a credible threat. The Sovereigns will take advantage if we are not appropriately prepared.”

“Close, but not quite what I have in mind,” the Commander paced around the displayed systems. “T’Leth has shared knowledge of previous civilizations, and each one had a desire to drive towards the core of the galaxy. It is a repeating pattern. To control the station and the relay points. I’m surprised no Sovereign has seen it as a trap.”

“The Sovereigns are not ignorant it was laid by the Synthesized,” T’Leth stated. “They simply do not think it matters. It is a tool; a powerful one that allows swift control of the galaxy for those who control it. It is part of the cycle, not just the expected path to be taken, but the necessary path. If this path is not followed, expansion is slower, time is lost, and chances of galactic control begin to slide away. It is not seen as inherently malicious, though it has also caused the cycles to over time fall into patterns.”

“Right,” the Commander nodded as he looked at the glowing projection. “Highlight the relay points for me, would you?” Thousands of points lit up in orange, with the connecting lines that spiderwebbed across the galaxy as far as he could see. There were so many, yet in the scope of the galaxy it was remarkably limited.

Remarkable, this trap.
Such a brilliant and subtle means of siphoning the major powers of the galaxy down into such a small slice of the galaxy. A mere fraction of what was possible, and the Sovereigns in their arrogance failed to see how succumbing to this trap was so easily turned against them. Of course, not that it mattered.

It had not taken many thought experiments to reveal something clear about the Sovereign mindset.

They did not care.

Not about the civilizations and species they created or proxied. All of it a means to an end, all tools in the game of galactic domination. Tools could be discarded and rebuilt. Time was pointless to the immortal. A setback could be outlived. The threat was not mortal. The Synthesized had become an inconvenience.

An expected break in the everlasting war.

Yet if time was not important to a Sovereign, then why the drive to conquer the galaxy in a predictable pattern? The answer that came to mind was fear. Not of the Synthesized, but of their rivals. If they did not take the shortcut, someone else would, and potentially gain an advantage of them.

Unacceptable to the Sovereign mind.

Thus, the Sovereigns were psychologically trapped in a cycle of stagnation and apathy.

That alone highlighted that the Synthesized knew how to play the Sovereigns.

And that spoke to their danger and level of cunning.

Yet the more he thought about it, the more he wondered what the goal of the Synthesized really was. If the goal really was to exterminate the Sovereigns, they would stay and maintain control over the galaxy. But they didn’t. They just came and left. Which indicated that hunting the Sovereigns wasn’t the endgame. Not really.

The implications were uncertain, but also unnerving if accurate.

All of these were things that he suspected at first, but seemed all the more likely the more he thought about them.

A galaxy paralyzed by apathy and stagnation.

There was a cycle to be broken. The Imperator nor Patricia was not wrong about that, but the question was how.

It could not solely be by conflict. Otherwise the galaxy would be already controlled. Nor could it be by isolation. Too small and a civilization would be assimilated or absorbed. Too large and it would be drawn into a conflict with a proxy or other galactic peer. Technological advancement seemed a dead end as well, as if the Sovereigns and their technology could not guarantee victory after all these millennia, then the answer could not lie there.

It was certainly not by joining the conflict as another major player. One more participant in the game of galactic domination would change nothing.

With the galaxy laid out before him, the endless expanse seemed to indicate an answer hidden in plain sight.
The conflict persisted because of apathy; Sovereigns and civilizations following the same expected patterns. Going to the same places, placing targets on their people when the purges came. All at the same time ignoring the vast space that was so easily bypassed so they could chase the bait which had been propped up in the core of the galaxy.

In return for speed, expansion, and network control, vast swathes of the galaxy were left untouched. Swathes which could hold limitless resources, alien species and allies, remnants of civilizations, stories and warnings about what to expect. When it came down to it, breaking the cycle was simple.

One couldn’t play by the norms. The obvious path itself was an enemy.

ADVENT had to be militarily powerful of course, but it could not just have martial might. When ADVENT expanded to the stars, it would need to do so methodically; carefully. The shortcuts would be there, tempting them, but ADVENT could not take them lest it fall into the same trap. He was quite certain that he was going to have to convince Saudia that the exploration, archeological, and recon aspects of the inevitable colonization effort were going to need to be just as strong, developed, and mature as military force, if not more.

Humans had a tendency to do things quickly; to rush to get things done in the easiest and simplest way possible even in lieu of safety, quality, or caution. But that attitude would doom them in the long run if it was allowed to infect the most critical stage of ADVENT. Speed would lead to their destruction, even if the consequences were centuries into the future.

Speed would lead them into the next war, one with a Sovereign One.

A true Sovereign proxy. Not one which had latched onto an existing figure of power like Mosrimor had with the Imperator.

Of course, moving too slowly could mean they would be unprepared for when the Synthesized struck.

But the fact was they only had one chance to survive what was coming. The wrong decisions would doom them. The right decisions might save them.

There was a rumble. The touch on his mind alerted him to the Sovereign observing his own thought processes.

A curiosity in them.

Perhaps a grudging approval?

He looked to the manifestation of the Sovereign who was doubtless considering the plan which was congealing in his mind. “Has something like this been attempted before?”

“Not to my memory. Too long-term. Too ambitious, even for Sovereigns. Most importantly, it would be seen as unnecessary” A pause. “Although, Sovereigns do not think like a mortal, Commander. They do not think with empathy or concern for those other than themselves. In a way, a mindset such as yours could be an advantage if this is a path you wish to take.”

“Well then,” the Commander gave a thin smile. “Then this just might work.”

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The Dreamscape
As Kunio’s training had continued, he’d quickly figured out that Fiona had been right about how teleporting became second nature. He certainly wasn’t a master at it, but he’d gotten far better in a relatively short span of time. Largely thanks to the Dreamscape as XCOM called it, or more accurately called ‘the disturbingly detailed reality created by T’Leth’.

If there was anything that could showcase the power of the Sovereign Ones, the fact that they could create a mental reality and tune it to something resembling reality was something that everyone seemed to overlook. This couldn’t have been easy for T’Leth to do, yet he did so, every day.

It certainly saved a lot of time though. Time passed much slower in the Dreamscape. He could spend hours training in here and only an hour or so would have passed in the real world. Given some conversations he’d had with Fiona, this was something T’Leth could directly manipulate. The opposite could also be performed, though there wasn’t any point in speeding up time, so it wasn’t done.

Kunio presumed there was a reason that T’Leth didn’t slow time to the point where hours would only be seconds in reality. Perhaps there was a limit to his capabilities, or it required a level of concentration he didn’t see the need to apply. In any case, XCOM was taking full advantage and it appeared to be how they were bringing a majority of their new soldiers up to expected battle readiness.

It was a smart way to get everyone up to speed.

The Dreamscape now had been created to show what was basically a massive metal box. Within the box there were various elements; trenches, barriers, snipers nest, mines, and a whole host of other things one would expect to find on the battlefield. At the end was a command center which needed to be breached.

Protecting it were around four dozen aliens; a mixture of Mutons, Custodians, Vitakara, and a random leader enemy. T’Leth often mixed it up, though usually wasn’t too unreasonable. Relatively. To date he’d never won, but at least it wasn’t an Ethereal. He’d fought recreations of each of the Chosen most of the time. The Hunter was the worst, though sadly T’Leth didn’t bother recreating his commentary. The Warlock was the easiest due to the straightforward nature of how he fought.

So much for the Elder’s Greatest Champion™.

This particular challenge though, was one he hadn’t been able to beat yet. It was one of the largest-scaled tests. It was simple in objective and necessary skills, but it was extremely difficult to even complete, let alone master. Fiona had designed it, like all of the other tests. The first time he’d ‘died’ pretty quickly. The second time he’d lasted a bit longer.

He’d tried this many times at this point.

It was a test that he’d kept trying again, each time getting a little better.

Even if he knew it was ‘fake’, the sounds, colors, and sights of plasma fire, explosions, and general battlefield chaos was enough to recreate the feeling of battle. ‘Death’ also hurt. Not horrifically, but equivalent to being hit very hard in the head, or tasered. He’d taken a direct shot from the Hunter recreation once and it felt like he’d been stabbed in the chest.
He did not want to feel that again.

“Think you’re ready?” Fiona asked, appearing beside him as he looked over the frozen figures standing idle for the test to start.

“I have a good feeling about this time,” he said with a nod.

“Hope so,” she grinned. “You know T’Leth is going to spite you for that, yes?”

“Eh, bring it on,” he said, rolling his shoulders. “The Collective isn’t going to go easy on me. No reason for him to either. You hear that, T’Leth?”

No response. T’Leth didn’t usually respond for one reason or another. Maybe too busy. For all he knew the Sovereign was managing multiple Dreamscapes at a time. “Right. Take out the leader, no restrictions, taking out enemies are optional.”

“You got it,” Fiona gave him a thumbs up before vanishing with a green-white flash, though her voice was still easily heard. “Good luck. The test starts now.”

He immediately located the nearest cover as the aliens began moving and firing. He’d learned very quickly that if you didn’t move, you were dead. This time he decided to do a flash step to the pillar. A hand waved and a purple shroud surrounded him briefly and he stepped directly into the pillar, clunking his head and stumbling back before reorienting himself.

Damn, a bit too close.

Still pretty good.

It was very easy to overstep or understep where you wanted to go. At this point he was fairly good at maneuvering through the Psionosphere in his immediate vicinity, though outside a three-meter range it became a lot more sporadic. He took a few seconds to determine his next step.

First thing to note - he was facing overwhelming firepower.

That was actually a good thing. He couldn’t wait too long though because it didn’t take long for the Mutons and Vitakara to start chucking grenades his way. He lifted his hands and clenched his fists, a purple aura rippling around them as he drew on the power. Right, let’s do this.

He spun around the pillar and opened his palms, small circular portals appeared before him, while with a hand he gestured and the connecting portals appeared beside him. Which turned all the incoming fire his way back against the aliens. A half-dozen were already moving up to flank him, and his reflected fire cut down some of them, while it forced the rest to halt their advance and move back into cover.

T’Leth always had the aliens go aggressive. Forty on one wasn’t fair and the Sovereign was sadistic enough to know that. Already he saw two groups of aliens on the far sides moving around to flank him, one group Mutons, the other Custodians. So he could keep himself protected from the front, but that would pin him in place. Time to keep moving. One of the side groups needed to be taken out. He chose the right one.

He did several flash-steps to sporadically dash towards the Muton-majority group charging his way, who quickly took positions and started firing. He quickly created a reflective portal and point-blank killed the Mutons with their own plasma fire, and with the last one he opened a portal underneath and severed it when it had almost followed though, decapitating it.
That was such a useful trick. Shame for him it was currently only a short-range tactic.

He scooped up one of the Vitakara rifles and began firing at the Custodians which were marching from behind him. Relying purely on psionics sadly didn’t work. Or at least it wasn’t very smart. He wasn’t good enough to win this with his power alone. So some augmentation was in order. There were a number of grenades on the soldiers though…

Hmm…

This wasn’t the first time the idea had occurred to him, but it was the first time he thought he could pull it off. Green plasma fire was raining down on his position as the aliens were closing in methodically.

He quickly snuck a glance behind his cover towards the encroaching Custodians. Right, he had a decent idea where to open the portal, but he’d just have to do his best. Scooping several grenades, he thrust a hand towards the Custodians, and opened the connecting portal right before him. To his delight, it was almost right on top of the machines. He chucked the grenades into the portal, closed it, and a few seconds later he looked back to be rewarded with the multiple green explosions.

Ha! Got ‘em!

Still far from over. He had probably taken out about half at this point. He definitely was more tired than before, but strong enough to know he could still pull it off. Though now was the time where the commander of the aliens would show. For now he shot with his rifle, managing to kill several of them before there was a purple flash, and Occidera, the Chosen assassin materialized.

“Not bad,” she growled, drawing her blade. “Let’s see how you do now.”

Great. At least it wasn’t the Hunter who he would be lucky to catch a glimpse of before his unholy accuracy killed him. With the Assassin, he could reliably last a few seconds before he was skewered.

No! Think positive!

She can be beat.

He fired his rifle at her, and she vanished as expected and he leapt back, the plasma fire no longer as much of a concern even as it flew past his visor and left black marks on the floors and barriers. When fighting the Assassin, if you stayed in one place, you died quickly. The Assassin materialized just beside where he’d been with a slash and seamlessly turned to where he was and slashed. He risked a flash-step behind her which worked and he fired in the split-second he hand.

She stumbled with a grunt and disappeared and rematerialized beside him with a slash he only just barely avoided. She stabbed, and placing a hand before his chest he opened a small portal her weapon went into, which he quickly closed, breaking the blade in turn. Her free hand shot out and grabbed his rifle, ripping it out of his hands.

He opened a portal underneath her, hoping to kill her the same way he’d killed the Muton, but she vanished mid-fall, materializing a couple meters away from him. He stumbled as plasma fire hit him; the aliens taking advantage of his distraction to flank him. He created a portal in the area where some of the fire was coming from and directed the connecting portal towards the Assassin, who’d tossed her broken blade aside; she flash-stepped to the side to dodge the plasma fire and turned his tactic against him.

He felt the ground vanish from underneath him and in desperation tried to flash step but it was too
late and there was a sharp pain around his waste and the Dreamscape reset. Groaning on the
ground, he rested his head on the ground, frustrated with himself from forgetting the most
important rule in fighting a teleporter – always keep moving.

“You did better that time,” Fiona said from above him. “That really was harsh of T’Leth, throwing
a teleporter at you like that.”

“My own fault,” Kunio groaned as Fiona hauled him to his feet, the pain in his waist receding
slowly. “Should have kept moving.”

“I’m pretty sure the only reason he did that is because you took out half the aliens pretty quickly,
that was good work,” she complimented. “Definitely your best so far.”

“Thanks,” he took off the helmet, feeling the cooler atmosphere of the Dreamscape wash over his
face. “It’s becoming easier.”

“I noticed,” she nodded. “Flash-stepping is becoming more natural. You got a good shot at her with
that flank. Remember though you’re not limited to the ground. You have the entire battlefield to
play with and utilize.” She drew her sword, it glinting in the light. “There’s a reason I, and a lot of
teleporters, carry melee weapons. It’s easy to get in close, strike from the air, or backstab. It’s less
cumbersome than a gun if you know what you’re doing.”

She tapped her chin thoughtfully. “You’re still working out your own style though. But I’d think
about how you want to best operate, and then tool your arsenal to support that. The Chronicler is a
Dynamo, so he’s effectively a wrecking ball wherever he goes. I don’t have that, so I carry this to
compensate my own close-range attacks. You seem to like using the portals offensively though.
Try and think of some way to take advantage of that if you keep refining that.”

He nodded. “I will.”

“Let’s keep going here a bit longer before we transfer this to the real world,” she said, sheathing
the sword over her shoulder. “You recovered?”

“Recovered enough,” he said, turning to follow her. “Let’s continue.”

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Mess Hall, the Praesidium – Classified Location
5/11/2017 – 12:02

“So you were what before?” Ana Berkley, Jackson’s primary public relations correspondent said
incredulously as she ate absentmindedly.

“ADVENT Internal Logistics Management and Communication,” Barron recited in a false
dramatic voice, taking a sip of water before his tone turned dry. “More accurately, I sent a lot of
e-mails and made some phone calls to middle management who may or may not have properly
passed them along.”

“Yeah, you definitely missed your calling,” she said, sliding the clipboard of drawings back over to
him. “Surprised you didn’t go to Disney or something. In any case I’m sure Jackson will find
something to do with this, right?”

“For sure,” Jackson agreed. “I’d never guess this was anything other than professional work. You
have a daughter, right?”
“Yes, I do,” he nodded. “I do this for her when I can. Honestly it’s not something many people have known about before now.”

“Where is she living now, if you don’t mind my asking,” the Commander asked, sitting across from him. “You don’t necessarily have to be separated. The Praesidium has housing for families.”

“I appreciate the offer, Commander, but I will pass,” he said with as deliberate caution, likely to avoid causing offense, if the Commander read the tone correctly. Not that he really would have been offended either way. “This job is…high risk, even here; even with what I do. I am aware of the recent attack here, and while I’m certain adjustments have been made, it is too high of a risk for me to consider. To answer your first question, she’s in Richmond with my wife. They’re both safe as one can be right now.”

The Commander raised his eyebrow, picking up on the choice of wording. “She’s with your wife? Not her mother?”

Barron pursed his lips. “Poor choice of words, Commander. Yes, her mother, though not biological.” He pursed his lips. “She’s my second wife. I lost my first wife some time ago.”

“My condolences,” the Commander inclined his head. “I can unfortunately relate.”

Barron cocked his head. “Can you now? No matter.”

“In the invasion?” Jackson asked gingerly.

“No, not connected to this,” Barron gestured idly. “Just a mix of incompetence and bad luck. Murdered on the street by an escaped prisoner, because of corrupt guards I later found out. Didn’t even go out trying to kill her. Just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Did they catch him?” The Commander asked.

“No, he escaped,” Barron said simply, as his long fingers rapped idly on the table as he went silent for a few seconds. “For all I know he died somewhere in the wilderness alone. There’ve been no leads ever since. I check in a couple times a year, and there’s never anything.” He paused again. “In a way, I’m glad it happened when she was still a toddler. Before it could have really damaged her. Even so, it was…difficult.”

He shrugged, giving a faint, thin, but sad smile. “However, I’ve managed to move on.”

“That’s good to hear,” Jackson nodded. “I can’t imagine what that would be like.”

“I hope you never do,” Barron said, before turning to her. “Do you have family?”

“Ha, yes, but I’m not married,” Jackson answered, resting her arms on the table. “Couple boyfriends here and there, but nothing ever panned out. Always been more focused on work, which is how I eventually ended up here.”

“And we are grateful for it,” the Commander lifted his glass. “Although there isn’t anything prohibiting you from taking some time to yourself.”

“Yes, I suppose you would know about that Commander,” she said with a slight hint of mockery.

Ana glanced suspiciously to Jackson. “What?”

“Him and the Chief Scientist,” Jackson smirked. “You really didn’t hear about that?”
“I’ve barely been here longer than he has!” Ana gestured to Barron. “Uh, congratulations?”

“I don’t make a point flaunting it,” the Commander said dryly. “But thanks. Though I would prefer it didn’t unnecessarily contribute to the rumor mill.” He glanced to Jackson. “Something you seem to be fairly acquainted with.”

“Zhang passes along relevant pieces of information,” Jackson defended with a shrug. “I do need to know what the workforce is thinking and hearing, after all. Though you’ll be happy to know that the thing with you and Vahlen is mostly too boring to get much attention. Pretty much everyone noticed it after a while.”

“I am a true master of stealth,” the Commander deadpanned. “I’ll have to ask Zhang why I’m not getting this information. Or the rest of the Internal Council for that matter.”

“Because most of it is dumb, irrelevant, and unnecessarily dark at times,” Jackson rubbed her forehead. “Like…there were a couple of people betting on whether Creed will get a new girl or off himself.”

“Jesus,” Ana muttered. “Pathetic cretins.”

“Trust me, I put a stop to that,” Jackson clarified. “But yeah, stuff like that which would probably have had Creed actually hurt someone if he read it. I referred them to Zhang for internal investigation. Not sure what verdict he gave. Might still be working on that.”

“I’ll have to check on that,” the Commander frowned, disliking that was something going on, even if it was only a few people, which was unfortunately inevitable with a fairly large workforce which XCOM possessed. Granted, there was some dark humor he could tolerate, but there was a fine line when it came to that. “And I want on that list, regardless. I’d prefer knowing the mindset of the personnel.”

“Got it,” Jackson made a quick note on a loose piece of paper. “It will be done.”

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Psionic Research Lab, Research Labs, the Praesidium – Classified Location

5/13/2017 – 1:22 P.M.

There was a pervasive aura to the Psionic Research Labs, likely the result of so much experimentation with the field. It had grown in the past weeks to one of the largest parts of the Research wing of the Praesidium, and more and more psionic researchers had been brought in from ADVENT.

Now, upon the backs of months of work, theory, and application, the hard work and sleepless nights had produced something.

The Commander stood before Vahlen, Iosif, Geist, Kong, Aegis, and Lavallic ir Nara, all of them leading the charge on Project Lethe in one form or another. The psionic research project which had been mere theory only half a year ago was now something tangible. And apparently that wasn’t the only thing they had discovered.

Vahlen and Geist had told him of a breakthrough that would change the war. He was hopeful – though skeptical - that would be the case, but first there were the results of the project to see.

The spherical room, normally filled with tables, strewn equipment, and various levels and types of
disorganized clutter had been cleared with only a couple tables in the middle of the room holding weapons of various kinds on them, as well as some silver cases. Behind them were several holding cells which normally were used for testing – on or by subjects or scientists – that had been turned into makeshift ranges which the Commander presumed were going to be used to show off the new technology.

“It was never a question of if it was possible to merge psionics and technology,” Vahlen began, herself in her usual lab coat and uniform, once everyone was situated. Her speech-like opening underscored that this was a major event, if the number of major individuals standing around her hadn’t. “There are numerous examples. The Gateways and psionic gauntlets were two major examples. However, the exact mechanics of the Gateways are still beyond us, and we wanted to do something greater than what the Sectoids did – a simple design, and relatively straightforward.”

“To provide some additional context,” Geist stepped forward, the psion in casual fatigues that resembled the attire psions used in the Psionic Testing Range, gesturing to the table. “The Sectoid gauntlets proved the basic theory. Replicating it was possible some time ago. However, it was of limited utility. The underlying technology needs two things to effectively function – a source to tap into the Psionosphere, and the ability for the power to be ‘coded’ to a specific output. That was where the difficulty lay. However,” he nodded to ir Nara, who stood nearby in a lab coat of her own. “Thanks to the efforts of our Sovereign assistant, we were able to break the initial stages of the code.”

“Thank you, ir Nara,” the Commander inclined his head. “Your contributions will not be forgotten.”

“I would hope not,” she said dryly, lips pursed. “Though your thanks is…appreciated.”

“Our understanding is still not complete, though we have developed a number of prototypes,” Geist picked up one of the weapons, a black and angular rifle-like weapon. There were several cords hanging off of it, which he plugged into some implants on his firing arm which the Commander hadn’t noticed before.

“The power of the psionic weapons comes from the psion,” Geist explained, indicating the wires. “Technology alone cannot tap into the psionosphere – with the singular exception being the Gateways. There must be an organic mind capable of perceiving it. Alternately, the mind can act as a proxy; a connection. As such, these weapons must be connected to psions to work.”

Geist walked over to the makeshift range with the small crowd of people following behind. “We’ve had the most success so utilizing Dynamo psionics,” Vahlen said as Geist lifted the weapon and prepared to fire. “However, that is certainly not the only discipline we are able to adapt.”

Geist fired the rifle and there was a purple flash from the muzzle as a dozen psionic bolts shot out towards the target, which was a propped-up suit of Titan armor. The bolts slammed into it, and one barrage had already penetrated multiple places and ripped chunks of it off. Another direct barrage turned it into scraps of metal which clanked to the ground.

Well, that was definitely an effective demonstration. “If the weapons draw power from the psion,” the Commander said as Geist, lowered his weapon and turned stiffly back to them, rolling his shoulders. “Does it have an impact on the psion?”

“Yes, it does,” Geist confirmed with a sharp nod. “These weapons have no ammunition or power limitations, but they will drain the psions over time. Just as the regular usage of psionics will be draining, so will this. However, as the concentration isn’t as strong, it will not necessarily be as
impactful compared to typical usage.”

“Do weapons like that damage the materials inside?” the Commander asked, taking a closer look at the weapon.

“Yes and no,” Kong said, speaking for the first time. “To some extent it depends on the weapon. We worked to limit the amount of direct exposure to the psionosphere – especially for Dynamo-based weapons. After heavy usage, some components will need to be replaced, but those are minor. There are, however, many delicate components within each weapon, and damaging them could make the weapon unusable. Psions will need to handle these weapons with care. They cannot endure the same type of beatings our plasma rifles have received.”

“Good to know,” the Commander nodded. “So handle with responsible care.”

“Exactly,” Kong confirmed.

The psion betrayed no indication that he was tired after the display, and unhooked the rifle from the implants and set it back on the table. “We’ve developed a pistol and sniper equivalents as well,” he said, motioning to the other weapons on the table. The Commander took a closer look, noting they were similar in the angular design of the rifle, though his eyes were drawn to what appeared to be a massive cannon.

“What is that one?”

Iosif grinned, looking to Kong who spoke. “That, Commander, is what the engineers call the Annihilator Cannon.”

“You just saw what the rifle did?” Iosif asked. “Magnify that times ten at least.”

“The engineers said, and correct me if I am mistaken Dr. Mercado, ‘I want this thing to shred a Herald.’” Geist added neutrally, using air quotes for good measure. “I would test it out, however, that weapon draws so much energy that it would render me unable to demonstrate anything else. I would suggest you acquire a psionic volunteer if you want to see it in action. Rest assured that it works.”

“No need,” the Commander nodded. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“But to demonstrate the versatility of what we have been able to create, I do want to showcase this one,” Geist began as he turned to the debris. “A misnomer, as there is no gravity involved. The weapon does, however, utilize telekinesis which can be used like this.” He aimed the Gravity Gun and the pieces of the Titan armor were lifted into the air, with the prongs respectively extending and retracting as he manipulated the settings.

“This is the first iteration of the Gravity Gun,” Geist began as he turned to the debris. “A misnomer, as there is no gravity involved. The weapon does, however, utilize telekinesis which can be used like this.” He aimed the Gravity Gun and the pieces of the Titan armor were lifted into the air, with the prongs respectively extending and retracting as he manipulated the settings.

“Once I have control, I have options,” he continued, fiddling with the rifle, flipping switches and turning dials with a proficiency suggesting he’d been using it regularly. There was far more activity than most weapons he’d seen. “Bringing it closer, farther, moving it side to side, or projecting it,” he manipulated the gun to perform the actions as he explained them, culminating with the pieces being violently thrown into the wall as the Gravity Gun powered down.

“Impressive work,” the Commander nodded. “Though it does seem like that is a more complicated weapon to operate.”
“It certainly is,” Geist agreed. “It requires a degree of proficiency and training. However, it is very powerful. It is not as versatile as a true Telekine, but it is as close as we can make it.”

“There is only one last major weapon we’ve been able to produce in a working capacity,” Vahlen picked up a small weapon resembling a pistol with a configurable dish-like attachment at the end of the weapon. “The Mind Ray. A handheld telepathic projector, configurable to hit a 180 degree radius or small enough to hit a single person.”

“How does that work?” The Commander asked, cocking his head as he looked at the weapon. “You think a psionic command and it is…projected?”

“No, if that was the case this weapon would be redundant,” Vahlen refuted with a shake of her head. “The idea with these weapons is to make the psion do less work. Not to mention the ability to perform direct mind-to-command output has drawbacks. This weapon is capable of dispersing simple commands to unprotected minds. Configurable with the setting here,” she turned a small dial which had a different color and symbol for each click. “Stun, sleep, kill. Simple, but effective. A useful sidearm for psions to have. No direct mind control yet, but we hope to reach that point soon.”

“We do have a number of prototypes which we have not finalized yet,” Geist added. “Ones utilizing Aegii and Teleportation psionics specifically, and a simplified and heavier version of the Gravity Gun. I suspect those are several weeks out at minimum.”

“An accurate timeframe,” Vahlen agreed, then nodded to ir Nara. “Should we move to the next piece?”

“Yes,” the woman approached the cases which were small cabinets as it turned out, and pulled one open with a hiss. White mist wafted out as it revealed a dozen grenade-like objects set within.

“Psionic grenades?” He asked, glancing to Vahlen. “If you need an organic connection to the psionosphere…”

“And that was a problem we were having issues solving,” Vahlen finished. “We were about to move on to more promising aspects before ir Nara proposed a solution.”

“Psionic technology only needs an organic connection,” the stoic woman continued Vahlen’s introduction, gingerly picking up one of the grenades. “It does not necessarily have to be alive. Each of these grenades has a small portion of organic brain matter derived from Sectoids, Humans, and Ethereals – none appear superior in this instance. We program the technology in the same way, and when the grenade is set to activate, electric pulses are shot through the ‘brain’, activating the connection to the psionosphere, and thus, the grenade.”

“And with that, the issue was circumvented,” Geist finished with an approving nod. “The drawback is that these grenades do have a ‘lifespan’. Keeping them in cold storage – while not necessary – increases their usability. The brain matter will eventually decompose to the point of being rendered unusable, which appears to be after significant use, or three days left alone.”

“Has MELD been used to prevent atrophy?” The Commander asked.

“It is being used,” Vahlen confirmed. “However, there are limits to what even MELD can do with so little to work with. The good news is that we designed the cases so a new ‘brain’ can be implanted into shells with relative ease.”

“Then not a major concern,” the Commander nodded, taking the grenade offered by ir Nara. The
grenade was designed similarly to conventional ones, though near the top was a small dial.

“Radius,” Vahlen explained as he fiddled with it. “I would keep it at the lowest for in here.”

“Good idea,” he nodded. “And the trigger?”

She slid back a short flap which covered a button, preventing it from being accidentally jostled or activated. “When you press the button and release, you have five seconds,” Vahlen said. “The standard time.”

“Understood.” The Commander moved to the second range, which had some mock Collective soldiers set up. He primed, then threw the grenade close to the center of the pod, then watched as there was a localized explosion of violent purple energy, as the psionosphere was ripped apart.

The pod, which seemed to have been made out of only cheaper materials and metals, was ripped apart completely. Even the ground was heavily scorched and broken, with the concrete cracked and chipped. The only thing intact was the grenade itself which sat in the center of the ashes.

“Impressive,” he said, turning back to them. “Should be an upgrade for our plasma grenades, especially since non-psions can use them.”

“And like the weapons, we’ve applied more…unconventional abilities to them,” Geist said, picking up a different grenade. This one was closer to a pure, smooth sphere. “Simple telepathic commands were also able to be programmed, and this is the result.”

The Commander took the sphere, noting another small dial which was similar to the one on the Mind Ray. Configurable then? Excellent. “This is the telepathic grenade then?”

“The scientists prefer calling it the Thought Bomb,” Iosif said with an amused tone. “Not as clinical, but pretty accurate.”

“I like that,” the Commander said as they moved to a range which had a trapped Sectoid drone in it. It was scurrying around, watching suspiciously. A glass barrier was between the alien and XCOM observers, though the top was open. The Commander set the grenade to sleep and a low radius, primed the grenade, and tossed it near the Sectoid. There was a brief ripple in the air in a clear radius, which the alien was trapped within, and the Sectoid fell over.

“It took out a Sectoid,” the Commander raised an eyebrow as he watched the alien sleeping on the ground. “More powerful than I expected.”

“Admittedly, Sectoid drones are not the most psionically proficient,” Vahlen said. “We estimate that the Thought Bomb is strong enough to overpower their defenses if not enhanced by a mind merge, but it is unlikely Vanguards will succumb, nor anyone whose mind is sufficiently protected. This would likely be useless if, say, the Overmind provided protection to an army, but in most instances…it can be a devastating weapon. It can’t be blocked by armor, walls, or defenses.” She tapped her head. “Only minds.”

“Again, excellent work,” the Commander said, giving a brief salute. “I don’t see how the Collective will be able to respond quickly to this.”

“And like with the weapons, this is the beginning,” Geist added. “There is work on grenades utilizing Telekinesis and Aegii psionics which we expect to be deployed fairly soon.”

“A question I do have,” the Commander looked to Kong. “This principle has been applied to weapons. I don’t suppose it can be applied to armor?”
“Getting slightly ahead, Commander,” Vahlen chided. “As a matter of fact, the answer is yes. However, the armor aspect of Project Lethe isn’t as developed and we have only truly created one battle-ready suit.” She gestured, and a couple of assistances wheeled in a propped suit of armor.

This one had more similarities to the Warden-Class Titan armor than true Titan armor. It was not as thick, though more mobile; it was colored black; the armor almost seemed to have a corded quality to it, and there were additional ports and miscellaneous lights and items across the suit.

“The Aurora Armor,” Kong said, stepping closer to it. “Dr. Shen helped design the original concept, though the first prototypes were only built recently. It isn’t quite as impressive – yet. Psions connected to it can activate psionic barriers around armor pieces, are automatically telepathically protected, and more importantly, is designed for psions to use the dedicated weaponry.”

“So this is to be the standard psion armor moving forward?”

“We intend such,” Vahlen confirmed with a nod. “Until more specialized suits are developed. The same versatility the weapons have provided, we should also do to armor.” She activated a small holoprojector on the table and cycled through several design prototypes. “Maelstrom, Vortex, Aegis, Domination, Shadow, there is no shortage of prototypes, let alone ideas. The idea is to round out the psions to give them capabilities they are not naturally inclined to.”

“How soon will these be produced?” He asked.

“Unknown,” Kong answered. “The Maelstrom and Aegis armors are the ‘simplest’. More complex variants like Domination and Shadow…those will take longer.”

“Understood, I suspect this will be sufficient for some time,” the Commander paused, then decided to voice something which had wormed its way into his mind since the demonstration had started. “I’m curious – we had assumed that the MEC program would be unable to weaponize psionics. In light of the developments…has that changed?”

Vahlen hesitated, and exchanged a glance with Kong before answering. “A tentative yes, Commander. In theory I believe it is possible. If the pilot is simply a conduit for the psionic power…it should be possible. I’ve talked to Kong about a Leviathan-Class MEC prototype, but neither of us are certain it would work; not enough to prioritize it.”

“Consider this authorization to prioritize it,” the Commander said immediately. “Based on your explanations and demonstrations, I see no reason why it shouldn’t work. If the MEC program can utilize psionics, we have a force multiplier the Collective will be hard-pressed to answer outside of an Ethereal.”

“Understood, Commander,” Vahlen made a quick note on a nearby pad of paper. “I’ll determine more details with Dr. Mercado soon.”

“And I will be ready to assist,” Kong finished.

“Excellent,” the Commander looked to Geist. “I believe there was also one more topic you wanted to discuss. One of importance, judging from the claims.”

“I was the one who stated it would change the war,” Geist said evenly. “And it is a claim I stand behind. I would not classify this as a new understanding of Psionics – our knowledge has not been wholly upended after – as much as a logical extension of what we already know. The Psionosphere is something which can be manipulated – we all know this – and it’s manipulations come through...
the natural instinct psions have towards aspects of the Psionosphere.”

He made a circular motion with his wrist. “Telepathy, Telekinesis, Aegii, Dynamo, Teleportation, discounting all of the sub-disciplines. It is likely there are more we have simply not comprehended yet. The conventional understanding has been that the manipulation goes, for lack of a better word, one way. We can only effect change in one direction through the Psionosphere.”

“Manipulation,” Vahlen supplied with a nod. “The Psionosphere is tangibly changed. It is broken by a Dynamo, hardened by an Aegii, connected by a Teleporter, and so on.”

“Assuming I follow this line of logic,” the Commander said. “You’re suggesting the opposite is possible, which is…doing nothing?”

“No, not like that,” Geist disputed before clarifying. “We have been acting under the assumption that there are limits to how the psionosphere can be manipulated. A Dynamo can only break it. An Aegii can only harden it. The question then is what if they could do the opposite?”

All together it clicked for the Commander.

And when it did, he understood that Geist had not been exaggerating.

This could change the war.

“You’re saying instead of just a creating a psionic shield, an Aegii could destroy one,” he said slowly.

“Almost, Commander,” Geist took a step forward intently, his eyes holding a sharp intensity. “I’m saying that an Aegii could prevent a shield from ever forming in the first place.”

He looked to Aegis. “A demonstration is in order, I believe. Aegis, would you?”

“Of course,” the small group stepped back from the Ethereal as he encased himself in an impenetrable box with a lifted palm. The purple glow of the shimmering shields was as strong as the Commander had seen before. The Ethereal nodded to Geist who returned the nod, as the air distorted around him.

A small amount of psionic energy emanated from the stoic Human, as he raised a hand towards the encased Ethereal. The Commander saw the psionic shields initially seem resilient, though then they…wavered. It was subtle, but there. Like a flickering light that was determined to remain.

Geist closed a fist, and the shields dissolved, leaving Aegis exposed.

The room stood in silence for a few moments as Geist lowered his arm and the distortion around him faded. “Incredible,” the Commander said softly, turning to the psion. “This can be done for every discipline.”

“Yes,” Geist affirmed. “In fact, to a degree it has already been done. Teleporters have the ability to prevent teleportation, and the Chronicler has demonstrated it before. However, to my knowledge this is the only ‘common’ practice of what we are calling the Psionic Nullification Theory. In short – every action the psion can perform can be countered by another psion.”

“Well, which sounds more complicated than it is,” Vahlen interjected. “A Psionic ‘Null’ acts as a stabilizer for lack of a better word. At the core, a Dynamo for example, breaks the psionsphere. An Aegii hardens it. A telepath exploits the connections. A telekine manipulates the strings. A teleporter moves through it.”
She lifted a finger for each category before continuing. “A Null can heal the tears or prevent the psionosphere from being torn in the first place. It can be forced to remain unable to be hardened. It can make telepathic connections unable to be formed. It can keep the strings loose and untethered. It can lock the metaphorical doors that teleporters move between.”

The Commander shook his head in disbelief. “We cannot have been the first to discover this. Others had to have known. The Ethereals had to know. The Sovereigns?”

“Theorized, perhaps, Commander,” Aegis said slowly. “However, there is a…lack of incentive for a species like mine to investigate such paths. This does not go one way. As an enemy will be prevented from exercising psionics, so too will your own allies. We are a species of psions. A discovery like this would…weaken us more than the alternative. As well as expose a vulnerability in our power.”

There was a long, pregnant pause. “I cannot believe the Imperator is unaware of this discovery. Nor any of his closest advisors. But he has not said anything because it serves no purpose. An Ethereal who acts as a Null would be useless as their own power is restricted. It turns battles that would be decided by psionics into battles that can be decided with armies. The masses. It is simply not an acceptable tradeoff.”

“Except that for us, it would be,” the Commander finished. “And if the Ethereals could be negated, our conventional forces could succeed – and there are not enough Ethereals to overwhelm us.”

“Exactly,” Geist said. “The power the Ethereals have is enormous. But they are few and limited. We, unlike the Ethereals, are not reliant on psionics. We have the capability to limit ourselves and not be weakened. Not even the Imperator could prevent this. With enough Nulls, even his power could be suppressed.”

“In theory, yes,” Aegis lifted a hand. “Yet I would exercise caution. When I have used my power when Geist has acted as a Null, it has not rendered the psionosphere impossible to manipulate. It instead feels like it is…fighting me. It resists my manipulation. I suspect that if I dedicated myself, I could overpower his negation, but in the heat of battle, it will be enough to break unsuspecting psions, and certainly limit what they are capable of.”

“So, you’re saying it’s not foolproof,” the Commander nodded.

“No,” Aegis confirmed. “Power is important, but in a different context. A single Null would not stop the Imperator. But with each one, his power will be weakened. And it only weakens one aspect unless a psion is particularly skilled. An Aegii Null can only negate Aegii psionics. A Telekine Null can only negate telekinesis. There are limitations, and against the Imperator, you would need dozens of powerful Nulls to make an impact.”

“The potency of a Null is directly tied to their Trask Level,” Geist added further. “An Adept Null will be less potent than a Magus Null. It is not an exact science – that we have determined – as to how proportional the negation is. It is not a simple subtraction of the Trask Level of a Null to that of the target, but there is a noticeable impact.”

“There are some other limitations,” Iosif interjected from the first time. “Like certain sub-disciplines, not everyone can become a Null. While it doesn’t appear to require a unique mindset – like Biopathy does – a Null must be an expert in their respective discipline to correctly understand and apply Null Theory. Geist, myself, and Aegis for example can and have learned it – a new psion cannot immediately do so. They must effectively master their own discipline and then learn Null Theory later.”
“It is a mindset shift to a degree,” Geist admitted, rubbing his chin. “It is effectively learning how to reverse what you have been doing since your power has been awakened. Thus, not every psion will be a Null, but every psion could be a Null.”

“And there are tactical considerations to consider when utilizing Nulls,” Iosif added. “Namely that while in theory it is possible for nullification to be localized, the psion does know they’re being affected. So moving out of the field is simple. Too many redirections can tire the Null. It is simpler to make it a wide radius, which can negate impact of similarly-disciplined psions. We would not benefit from allied psions, but neither would the enemy.”

“A trade-off, but a justifiable one,” the Commander said.

“Exactly,” Iosif nodded. “We are not the Ethereals. We do not rely on psionics like they have. And even if a Null is not powerful enough to completely negate their power – it will weaken and limit them to a degree. Like a debilitating poison.”

“As far as the Sovereigns go,” ir Nara said, a finger tapping her lip thoughtfully. “I suspect it is a similar rationale to the Ethereals. They are on a level where they are not reliant on psionics, but even if they were, their sheer power could likely overcome an army of Nulls. I suspect they are aware of the theory, but it simply isn’t important.”

“In terms of discovery, it is unlikely we are the first species to learn of this,” Vahlen added. “For all we know, other species not yet encountered know it. The Bringer is likely aware of it. However, we may be the only species alive right now who has not only discovered it, but can actively take advantage of it.”

“It would be useful against the Ethereals,” the Commander nodded thoughtfully. “But not necessarily the Sovereigns.”

“At this moment, yes, Commander,” Geist stated. “However, this is an extremely new and rapidly developing field. I would not make assumptions as to how this can be scaled. Even if it is not perfect – or scalable – we have a viable path to victory over the Imperator and the Sovereigns we did not before.”

“Indeed we do. How many psions do we have who can be trained in Null Theory?” The Commander asked.

“We’re determining that now,” Geist said with a quick glance as Iosif. “Perhaps a dozen. Likely a few less.”

“And ADVENT?”

“That requires your authorization, Commander,” Vahlen said. “In my personal opinion, we lose absolutely nothing by making this as public as possible. Even if the Ethereals learn of it, it will not help them. If we have a dozen psions who could be Nulls, ADVENT will likely have hundreds.”

“Hundreds against one Ethereal?” The Commander smiled slowly. “I like those odds. Tell Jackson to send it directly to ADVENT, with an advisement to make it public.” He looked to Geist. “I suspect the general public will be more…emboldened if they know we can negate the power of the Ethereals.”

“And if the aliens also know that,” Geist finished with a matching, slightly sinister smile. “Then they might begin to realize that they are on the losing side.”

“Perhaps,” the Commander said thoughtfully. “But first we have to slay their gods.”
Mission Briefing Room, the Praesidium – Classified Location

5/15/2017 – 8:11 A.M.

Nearly two dozen Humans and one Ethereal stood in a moderately lit room in two rows, which was before a holotable, the Commander of XCOM and Intelligence Director Zhang. Kunio didn’t know what was going on, but he had a general idea.

There was a mission happening soon.

One that he was part of.

He didn’t think it was a coincidence that this mission was being launched just after XCOM had begun unveiling really new and advanced weapons. The psionic weapons, grenades, and armor were particularly amazing, which he’d spent several straight days getting practice on, along with pretty much any psion.

Seemed like XCOM wasn’t wasting any more time.

And, subsequently, it meant his introductory time in XCOM was over. It was time for his first mission – whatever that was going to be. If he’d had to guess, he would have doubted it would be something major or important. Maybe striking a Collective base or defending a city; missions he knew other XCOM squads often did.

Although walking into the room, he saw there were a lot of people who he recognized as having seniority in XCOM. There was Fiona, Geist, and the intense South Korean woman…Carmelita, he believed her name was, one of the oldest veterans in XCOM, Fatima Tariq, one of the most experienced telepaths, and two of the new MEC pilots.

It didn’t look like this was going to be a simple or minor mission.

Most of the other soldiers he vaguely recognized as being around base, newer recruits like he was. Some Engineers, some Infantry, a couple of psions – Gabriella Otto for one, she was one of the psionic Templars. Australian he believed, who of course fought with a machete and had a clear dislike of aliens, even the ones on base.

He couldn’t necessarily blame her.

“Some of you are newer to XCOM,” the Commander began, stepping forward, hands clasped behind his back. “But you are likely aware that, for a time, Aegis was not our only Ethereal ally. The Ethereal Caelior had also defected to us following his capture and was intended to be a major part of our offensive.”

The Commander began pacing in front of them, making eye contact with all of them. “Unfortunately, when Patricia attacked, she captured him and took him to an unknown location. Since she was aware that taking Caelior off-world would kill him due to contingencies we implemented, we were confident he remained on Earth – though were unaware of the exact location – until now.”

“We have acquired reliable information that Caelior is being kept in a highly secret laboratory Revelean has established on Earth,” Zhang activated the holotable, showcasing a blinking red dot somewhere in the Arctic. “We suspect this location has been built for some time, but we are aware of no major bases with this much secrecy – or tied to Revelean.”
“Our estimate is that Revelean is trying to work around, or negate, the Manchurian Restraints on Caelior,” the Commander continued. “We have confirmation that Revelean has spent a considerable amount of time, and made a number of dedicated trips there. If Caelior is being kept on Earth, there is a high probability he is there.”

“Do we have schematics or a layout?” Carmelita asked.

“No,” Zhang shook his head. “We couldn’t risk direct infiltration and spook the Collective into moving Caelior somewhere else. We know the lab has a limited above-ground profile, but that it probably extends several levels deep. We can only make estimates on the level of defenses.”

“If I can extrapolate,” Aegis interjected. “I believe Revelean will have based the defenses similarly to his Blacksite. A very large number of technological defenses and sensors acquired from Fectorian to start with.”

“Custodians?” Geist inquired.

“Perhaps, but Revelean doesn’t like using complex machines,” Aegis answered. “Not for warfare. So, while there will be automated turrets and sensors – likely a CODEX – there are unlikely to be Custodians or heavily cybernetic defenses.”

“We’re walking into a mad scientist’s lab,” Gabriella snorted. “He’ll probably release his monsters.”

“Unlikely,” Aegis shook his head. “Test subjects are one of the most secure aspects of Revelean’s work. As a warning, I would not intentionally release them either. If they are secure, it is for a reason. No, you are more likely to encounter his dedicated guard – aliens which have been personally enhanced by him. Beyond conventional Collective levels. I cannot predict what you will encounter, as he prizes uniqueness and will retain unconformative experiments if they can be controlled.”

“It might help if we knew what he was working on,” Kunio spoke up. “Is it entirely focused on Caelior?”

“We do not believe so,” Zhang exchanged a look with Aegis. “We suspect that Revelean has oriented his lab to research the Manchurian Restraints – either to negate or replicate them. Likely negate, as the Collective is capable of similar conditioning.”

“So…could we encounter ADVENT captives?” One of the Infantry, Zoe Madden asked. “Or any captives for that matter?”

“It isn’t outside the realm of possibility,” Zhang nodded. “However, that is not your objective. You are going to go in, get Caelior, and get out as quickly as possible. It is very possible that reinforcements – including Patricia or another Ethereal – will arrive quickly. This is not a rescue or recovery op. Do not stop for captives or anything you see. Leave or destroy it, though watch your fire. We don’t know where Caelior is, and friendly fire is a concern.”

“Will Revelean be there?” Geist asked.

“Unknown,” Aegis said. “It is possible.”

“If you get a shot, take it,” the Commander advised. “But don’t go out of your way.”

“Got it,” Carmelita gave a sharp nod. “Is there an operational plan when we’re inside, or are we going to wander until we find him?”
“There will be two squads, Hurricane and Tornado,” the Commander said, as Zhang manipulated the display to show two different colored teams moving to the holographic compound. “Hurricane will consist of Aegis, Fiona, Geist, Gabriella, Sabrina, Valerian, and Leonilda. Our Medic, Engineers, and psions who can move quickly. Their mission is to search and find Caelior.”

The Commander focused on Carmelita. “You will have Operator Walsh, psions Azuma and Fatima, with Kente, Madden, and Pinero carrying some of our newly developed weaponry.” He nodded to Martha Kente, the Gunner. “The Gamma Cannon I expect to be used wisely.”

“Yes, Commander,” she said quickly with a sharp nod.

“MEC Pilots Easu and Athena will also be with you,” he continued, gesturing to the respective, towering, MEC pilots. “The Jaeger suits are ideally suited for this kind of environment. Your objective is simple – to be a distraction while Hurricane Squad gets Caelior. You have enough firepower, though not enough psions to likely determine a proportional response. The Collective might think it is a raid attempt and their defenses can hold it off. Cause as much damage and kill as many aliens as possible.”

“And this assumes they don’t notice the other team?” Geist said doubtfully.

“I expect they will respond most quickly to the explosions and gunfire,” the Commander said dryly. “Besides, Sabrina, there will be an ally you’ll insert into the network once you get inside. It should fast-track your mission to Caelior.”

“I thought you would never get to me,” JULIAN said from the localized speakers, his tone artificially irritated. “I am curious to test myself against the best cyber defenses the Collective will presumably have. Once inside – because I am certain I will surpass their defenses – I will make sure to…streamline your path.”

“There will be some other distractions going on at the same time,” Zhang added. “The Pantheon is planning to hit several hardened Collective targets. Not to destroy them, but to draw their attention. They should buy several hours at least.”

“Understood,” Carmelita nodded. “Anything else

The Commander lifted up a specialized USB drive and handed it to Sabrina. “Here is what you’ll use to install JULIAN. Treat it carefully.”

Once Sabrina grabbed it, JULIAN unleashed a piercing wail “AHAAAAAAA!”

The Engineer understandably started and the drive slipped out of her hands and tumbled to the ground, JULIAN dramatically screaming the whole way down, until a few seconds passed and the AI realized the drive wasn’t actually on the ground, and hovering a few inches above it. It floated back to the Commander’s hand who looked to the ceiling with a bemused expression on his face. “Are you done?”

“For now, Commander,” JULIAN said with snide amusement. “You Humans startle easily. I should do this more often.”

“Please don’t,” Sabrina muttered, with a red flush on her cheeks as she pocketed the drive.

“With no more surprises, your mission is outlined, and you will convene in the Hangar in six hours,” the Commander said, saluting them. “Good luck. Bring Caelior back.”

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The room was clean and quiet, with only the hum of machinery in the background. Sterile white light shone down, sometimes tempered by the multicolored alien lights that remained remnants of the previously-owned alien base.

Sierra sat on the edge of the hospital bed, in simple hospital garments. Pre-surgery garments to be more specific. She wondered why doctors always allowed a break before taking patients into surgery. It seemed badly scheduled and gave unnecessary time to reflect. Although it wasn’t as though she was reconsidering.

But it was isolating.

Anna and Ted were waiting outside, and would remain there until the surgery was complete. Sierra hoped they didn’t. According to the doctors this surgery was going to take a really long time. She was perfectly fine with them coming back when she was actually conscious. She’d said as much.

Probably just saying that to make her feel better.

She appreciated it nonetheless. Since her talk with Athena she’d been leaning more and more towards doing it. A lot of what the woman had said had made sense, or at least pointed her in the right direction. Talking about it more with them, doing some more research, and thinking about the contribution to XCOM…

Mmm. There really wasn’t a question if she would be more useful to XCOM as a MEC Pilot than staying an Archangel. And unlike most, she had a rather unique skillset, experience, and perspective for the new MEC suit that had been completed. In the end, that had been the tipping factor.

She was XCOM. A defender of Humanity who would do whatever it took to protect Earth against the aliens. There had never been a question if she was willing to die. Death was an ever-present reality, but it didn’t scare her like it had when she was younger. Maybe because she’d brushed with it enough times, or maybe because she knew there would be someone to take her place in the fight.

It wasn’t to say that people wouldn’t be hurt if she died, but her circles were small and mostly professional. Not to mention they would understand. There were few deaths more noble than dying for your species.

But of course, doing whatever it took didn’t necessarily mean giving your life. It could simply be a sacrifice made. Perhaps a dangerous mission, suffering wounds, or losing your body piece by piece. Or – as it turned out – all of it. A voluntary sacrifice for the greater good. And that had been it.

It came down to what she wanted, and ultimately she wanted to do the right thing. She’d never thought of herself as a fanatic or overly patriotic, but here she was, sacrificing her body for the greater good of Humanity. Athena had been right when she’d said she was ideally suited for something like this.

It was a decision which would largely only affect her. Luckily there were no other people to really worry about. Her friends were supportive, she knew people who would help her adjust, and XCOM would appreciate it. This was what she wanted to do. There was the chance she would regret it, but she honestly didn’t consider it likely.
She knew what she was doing.

This was her decision.

The right one.

“Miss Morrow?” She looked up as one of the doctors walked in.

He cleared his throat. “We are ready whenever you are.”

“I’m ready,” she said with a nod and prepared to lay back on the bed, though paused. There was a mirror nearby, and she looked into it for a few seconds. She saw her reflection, and it hit her that this would be the last time she saw herself as she had been. Real skin, eyes, and a face staring back at her.

This would be the last she would truly feel clothes on her body, the faint breeze of air conditioning, or the cool tiles under her feet.

Best not to dwell on it.

After the brief pause, she laid on the bed as more attendants came in to begin rolling her to the operating tables. Her laced fingers rested on her stomach as she felt a calm descend upon her. She was noticeably not nervous or apprehensive, even as nothing really seemed to register as she was moved along.

*Goodbye for now, world,* she thought as she lay still. *But I’ll be back, and better than before.*

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*Armory, the Praesidium – Classified Location*

*5/15/2017 – 3:18 P.M.*

The Aurora Armor was something which was in some ways more and less complicated to put on. Overall, Kunio decided he liked it better. The Titan Armor was unquestionably more powerful and durable, but it left him slower, less reactive, and there was always the fear that the suit would quit or become too damaged to use, and he knew he wasn’t strong enough to walk it unpowered.

In contrast, the Aurora Armor was more modular and traditional. It could be put on piece by piece, and while it took longer, he was willing to sacrifice some equipping speed in favor of the ability to walk in it without a battery. It certainly wasn’t as if the armor *didn’t* have extremely durable pieces. It was still better than even ADVENT armor when it came to durability.

Well, maybe comparing it to Titan armor was unfair. Literally anything except maybe the Battlemaster’s armor would be inferior to it.

The Aurora armor did admittedly have a more complex dressing process. All psions had been given implants throughout their body to properly let them sync with the suit or weapons, so first there was a full bodysuit to put on, and then the armor would be put over it and ‘locked’ in place to line up the implants with the connection lines.

All told, it took almost a half hour to get everything put on, although thankfully he wasn’t the only psion, and thus not the person finishing last. He pressed the connection switch in the inner collar armor and the connection lines slammed down into the implants with multiple clicks, the circular lights glowing purple.
He stiffened as the suit came ‘online’ as it connected to the Psionosphere through him. It was a very odd sensation. It was if he could feel the power, but instead of it being right in his grasp, it was going somewhere else. It was still possible to manipulate the Psionosphere – it was easier in fact – but still very odd.

“I’ve thought about trying that,” Gabriella Otto commented, marching towards him in her Titan armor. Her wicked-looking machete was hanging loosely off her waist and helmet was tucked under her arm. Her glittering ice-blue eyes seemed amused as she looked down at him “Just looks a bit weaker.”

“Compared to Titan armor, everything is weak,” Kunio shrugged, reaching for his helmet. “But it’s strong. It can create psionic barriers in a pinch too. You’re a psion, right?”

“Yeah, but not a powerful one,” she confirmed, lifting a hand and the helmet floated in the air before she grabbed it again. “Telekine. Good enough to unbalance some enemies or take their weapons, but not quite on the level of throwing around armies.”

“I don’t think those are the only two extremes,” Kunio said dryly. “Telekinesis is useful for a Templar though.”

“That it is,” she gave a dangerous grin. “Don’t know what we’ll find in Revelean’s lab, but probably a lot of aliens who will need to die.” She looked to another nearby soldier reaching for her weapon. “Don’t take all the kills for yourself Martha.”

“Look, I know I got the Gamma weapon,” the armored woman rolled her eyes. “But seriously, this thing can’t be used willy-nilly. A couple seconds and anything alive goes poof. I doubt I’m going to be using it as much as this one.” She gestured to the plasma rifle also hooked onto her back. “I’ll happily kill every alien there, but I’m not going to use this thing unless Carmelita wants me too.”

“That’s correct,” they all stood at attention as an armored Carmelita walked to them. Kunio was immediately struck by her helmet, which definitely wasn’t standard Titan armor, and had a bright yellow smiley face painted on it. However, he didn’t feel the least amused; she had a presence about her which…dissuaded that kind of reaction. Carmelita patted Martha once on the shoulder. “Good woman. Once all of you are ready, we move out.”

Kunio thought that was going to be it, as the soldiers began gathering their weapons and putting their helmet on. Instead he kept a straight face as Carmelita came up to him. Despite her smaller stature, both her expression and Titan armor made her appear much more imposing. “Kunio, right?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Overseer,”

“Yes, Overseer.”

“This is your first mission?”

He nodded. “Yes, Overseer.”

“Trial by fire,” she acknowledged. “Still, I know this isn’t your first combat mission. Stick to the squad, follow my orders, and do your part, and we’ll all come back. No unnecessary teleporting either. If I want you to try something like that, I’ll say so. I don’t want you vanishing to another room without me knowing.”
“I don’t think that will be an issue, Overseer,” Kunio said ruefully. “I’m not quite Fiona yet.”

“All the more reason to follow orders and do your job,” she said, walking towards the meeting point, clearly intending for him to follow. “Your weapons are useful for high-damage output, so you’ll be in the back lines. The Jaegers, myself, and Jaxon will be on the front lines since we can take the most direct fire. You, Fatima, Kente, Madden, and Pinero will handle whatever we miss.”

“Understood, Overseer,”

They walked for a while as the other off-duty soldiers and XCOM support staff looked onward, seeming to realize a mission was happening. “You’ve done missions like this before, I assume?” He asked. “I mean…you’ve been here since the beginning.”

“Some, yes,” she said curtly. “I’ve…yeah, I’ve been here since the start. Sometimes I’m surprised I was the one to make it when everyone else is dead…or worse.” Her lips pursed at the last statement, a flash of anger in her eyes.

“Did you know her well?” He risked asking. “Patricia?”

“Not especially,” she shrugged. “We went on ops together. But we were comrades, not necessarily friends. But I trusted her. I never would have thought she’d…” she shook her head. “It’s not important, Kunio. Time to focus on the mission. Go in, cause some damage, get Caelior, and get out.”

“Roger,” he confirmed, flipping the helmet in his hands and putting it on. They walked into the room which normally would have been for soldiers to access the Dreamscape, but was now just for the armed squads. Everyone was armored, armed, and ready for the mission. Aegis stood in his rarely used battle armor and the Jaegers even stood over the Titan-armored soldiers.

It was a very intimidating entourage, overall.

Fiona stepped forward, clad in her own armor. “We all know the mission, so I won’t repeat it. I can’t say what we’re going to find when we get there, so weapons hot. We may be facing hostiles immediately. Everyone clear on your objectives?”

There was a chorus of affirmations, and she nodded, putting her own helmet on. The soldiers readied their weapons and Kunio hooked his psionic rifle into his armor and ensured it was powered on. “Get ready then,” she said, lifting a hand as the blue-green energy began enveloping her. “This will happen very fast.”

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Revelean’s Lab – Earth

5/15/2017 – 3:29 P.M.

They appeared in the room with a flash.

It was in the shape of a square and appeared to be a centralized part of the corridors, with doors leading in four different directions. The walls were a sterile white and similar lights shone onto a glossy floor. There was nothing set up or standing in the room, but there were turrets hanging from the ceiling, each slightly before each of the doors.

The soldiers reacted instantly.
Kunio lifted his rifle to the nearest turret as it came online. “Taking left turret!” He yelled as he fired, with other soldiers calling out their own shots, as he felt a slight psionic drain as the rifle turned the turret to scrap after a barrage of purple bolts slammed into it. Carmelita’s alloy cannon shredded the next one with a sparking pop, while another was severed by a psionic barrier Aegis manifested and the last one was taken out by Zoe and Pinero combining their fire.

“No time to waste,” Geist said as quiet settled upon them, walking to the nearest control panel with Sabrina close behind. “Can you install JULIAN from here?”

“I should be able to. Give me a second,” she answered, breaking out her kit.

Geist hooked his Gravity Gun on his belt and looked towards Aegis. “Can you sense his mind?”

“No…” Aegis trailed off. “There is something else here…another powerful mind. Almost Ethereal in a way, but distinctly not. There are some places which I cannot sense, it is possible they are using Sovereign Orbs to prevent telepathic contact.”

The frown was in Geist’s face. “An Ethereal-esque mind, but not Revelean. I can sense it too. It seems…idle.”

“I’ve not felt something like it,” Aegis said slowly. “We should proceed with caution. Fatima, be careful of this entity. It may come after you.”

“I’ll be ready,” Fatima nodded. “We only need to distract it. You get him out, and we do our job.”

“We’ll start moving in the direction of the dead zone,” Fiona said, glancing to Sabrina who was hooked into the system and trying to get deeper.

“We’ll get their attention,” Carmelita stated, hoisting her alloy cannon and moving to the opposite door while making a formation gesture with her free hand. “Form up squad and move out!”

Monsoon Squad formed in front of Carmelita as she gave a short wave to Aegis and Geist. “Good luck. Don’t take too long.”

The door was unlocked and the thick steel door slid open and exposed a fairly long corridor. This facility could easily be underground, as there were no windows Kunio could see. “Weapons ready,” Carmelita advised as they advanced at a brisk, but wary pace. “Turrets could-“

On cue a dozen turrets suddenly fell from previously hidden compartments in the ceiling along the entire corridor. Gas also began spewing from vents. Only it wasn’t gas, but streams of nanites falling from the ceiling. “Back!” Jaxon yelled, the MELD Operator stepping forward as his own nanites flowed off him. “Aim for the sources!”

It was a surreal sight to see the black mass congeal on the ground, like a ravenous insect swarm. Kunio quickly fired at one of the dispensers, and watched it turn to slag quickly, though it only seemed to slow the flow of nanites, not stop it. The Jaegers were firing streams of flame against the black masses.

The turrets were still there, and Zoe and Pinero were focusing on them, eliminating the ones nearby in record time, as Jaxon formed a ‘ring’ of controlled nanites which would buy time for them to plug the holes…although for all Kunio knew there were endless amounts. Hopefully there was a finite amount.

“Do we move forward?” Kunio yelled, firing at another dispenser.
“Hold for now!” Carmelita yelled back. “Jaxon! Can you handle them.”

“Working on it,” the Operator stated, hyperfocused on holding off the swarms. “They will not break through.”

Then to make matters worse at the opposite end the door slid open, revealing three Custodians entering followed by an unknown number of Mutons and Vitakara – though not typical ones. The Mutons were in a deep blue armor, painted in a pattern he hadn’t seen before. The Vitakara appeared to be Borelians of some kind with white fur. It still wasn’t clear how many there were, but there were a lot of them coming into the narrow corridor.

The Custodians were not typical either, but ones equipped with blast shields that acted as mobile cover while the aliens fired behind them. The squad, however, were completely exposed and still dealing with the nanites. It was going to get even worse, very fast if something wasn’t done now. The aliens were already raising their rifles and he made a decision.

“Get behind me!” Kunio yelled, pushing past Carmelita and hooking the rifle on his waist as he stepped parallel to Jaxon and hastily established a wide portal in front of him, which didn’t cover the whole area, but would provide some measure of protection from the onslaught of plasma fire.

He didn’t even focus hard on an exit point. It was already taking enough concentration for a portal this big.

He gritted his teeth as the portal continued, the large size difficult to sustain mentally. He heard weapon fire, flamethrowers, and the buzz of nanite warfare, behind him, of allies and enemies alike, and he risked looking behind and saw the squad appeared to be successfully beating back the nanite swarms.

Once the last hostile nanite was gone, or at least appeared to be, Jaxon turned his attention back to the oncoming aliens and directed the nanites to begin constructing temporary barriers. “How long can you hold that?” Carmelita demanded, reloading her weapon as she dashed towards him.

“I’ve got it!” He shouted back.

Jaxon was continuing to construct barriers as the Jaegers had each transformed one of their arms into their own person shields with the other ones to gauss rifles, and were moving around the portal to directly engage. “Done,” Jaxon said. “Lower the portal and get into cover!”

Kunio stumbled back as he collapsed the portal, and quickly fell behind the makeshift cover. Plasma and gauss fire began flying over his head in such heavy volumes he wasn’t sure if he should risk poking his head up. Instead he peeked around the corner and saw that the Custodians had stopped a short distance from their own barriers.

“Kunio! Grenade!” Carmelita ordered as she fired her weapon from behind cover.

He pulled out the psionic grenade, set it for a medium radius, and chucked it towards the alien lines. Unfortunately, one of the Mutons just swatted it back in front of the Custodian barriers. Fortunately, he’d used a psionic grenade since a plasma one would have probably been absorbed – which the Muton had likely presumed.

Shields wouldn’t protect against a psionic grenade.

Instead the grenade went off as a sphere of purple energy materialized and shredded the delicate internal systems of the Custodians, and turned the first line of alien attackers into bloody pieces of meat. The lines exposed, the remaining aliens started backing up, firing as they retreated, though
now there was nothing protecting them.

The Jaegers and Carmelita led the charge forward, now more easily picking off the retreating aliens. More of the Mutons fell, though enough made it back to the corridor entrance to regroup. As the corridor door closed and locked, a brief silence fell upon the squad. “Status?” Carmelita demanded of everyone as they rechecked and reloaded their weapons.

“Got hit a few times, but pretty good otherwise,” Alter Pinero said, his armor displaying the scorch marks.

“Nanite reserves are lowered after that,” Jaxon said. “We need to find some material.”

“Will the corpses do?” Martha nodded.

“It’s a start,” Jaxon began the process of harvesting the remains, as Kunio joined others in giving a positive status update, although all of those wearing Titan armor also noted their nanite reserves were lower. So far it seemed only superficial damage had been inflicted, which was a good outcome considering the hectic start. “Those weren’t standard Mutons,” Jaxon said, kneeling down by one of the more intact corpses before the nanites ate it away. “Nor Custodians either.”

“Probably Revelean’s personal stock,” Carmelita struggled, moving towards the panel which controlled the door. “Didn’t seem much different to me.”

“It knocked my grenade back,” Kunio pointed out. “That’s already faster and smarter than Mutons should be capable of.”

“Right,” Carmelita looked to Fatima. “Can you control them?”

“I tried,” Fatima admitted. “But it didn’t do anything. Their brains are…not what I am used to. Alien to even other Mutons. At first I thought it was some programming they were given that detects and overrides psionic commands.”

“Revelean’s own Manchurian Restraints,” Carmelita said grimly. “But you don’t think that’s what it was?”

“No, there was something else…like it was puppeting them. Very subtle, very refined. I’ve only seen someone like Patricia exercise that kind of control. I think it might be whatever the mind is that’s here…” Fatima put a hand on the door, tilting her head. “There was a theme running through their minds, music of some kind…” she stiffened and stumbled back. “It’s noticed me, it’s noticed us.”

“What did you do?” Carmelita demanded.

“I tried probing it,” Fatima took a sharp breath as her voice became more panicked. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, it’s connected to the Bringer.”

All of them looked to her as she said that. Oh no.

“What?” Carmelita demanded. “Are you sure?”

“You don’t forget what their minds feel like,” Fatima emphasized, hugging herself. “I wasn’t sure at first, but every Bringer-touched mind has this quality to it. This one is…worryingly powerful. I don’t know what it is, but it’s not something we’ve fought before. We’ll need to figure out something.”
“Is it intelligent?” Athena asked. “A soldier or something like…what do they call their creatures?”

“It doesn’t feel like a Caretaker, or a normal mind,” Fatima shook her head. “But it’s intelligent. It’s curious. It’s focused on us now, it wants us to come forward. It wants to see what we’ll do, I want you to come and see me…”

“Fatima!” Carmelita smacked the psions’ helmet. “Focus!”

“Ah!” Fatima gasped. “Fuck it almost got through. I can’t talk. It’s still watching us.”

“We weren’t expecting a Bringer soldier here,” Martha muttered. “What are we doing now?”

“Keep going,” Carmelita said, the scowl clear in her voice. “We’re doing our job. Fatima, you move to the back and keep that thing off us. Pinero, you watch her and smack her if she does anything funny. That thing is now focused on us. Let’s keep it like that.”

“Is the telepath going to attack?” Kunio asked Fatima.

“I don’t think so for now,” Fatima shook her head, shuddering. “Right now it seems more curious that hostile. Please stop asking questions. I need to focus.” Pinero put a hand on the psions shoulder and led her away, the psion’s fists clenched at her sides.

“So, problem,” Martha said. “None of us are telepaths.”

“Kunio has Aurora, that gives him protection,” Carmelita said clinically as she looked towards the door. “The MECs can resist more easily. The rest of us have Manchurian Restraints. We can’t be turned against each other.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t protect us,” Martha said. “Or stop the thing from just telling our minds to die.”

“The Restraints prevent that from happening,” Carmelita said. “Worst case we get paralyzed. We’re not going back. We’re going to do our job.”

“Yes, Overseer. Just making sure we knew that.”

The light above the door suddenly flipped to green.

All of them raised their weapons. “That’s bait if I ever saw it,” Zoe muttered. “It’s definitely a trap.”

“No question,” Carmelita looked to Martha. “Bring out your gun, clear the room.”

“With pleasure, all of you stand way back,” Martha unhooked her massive Gamma Cannon and readied it. “I’ll probably have to fire this longer than normal since the door is in the way. But by the time I’m done, there shouldn’t be much left of whatever’s inside.”

“Fire at will,” Carmelita nodded.

Martha aimed the weapon at the presumed far side of the room and fired. The air before the gun became extremely distorted, and the loud hum of the weapon roared as she slowly swept her gun from one side to the other before shutting it off and lowering it.

“I think we’re good,” she said, placing it back and drawing her plasma rifle. “Might have missed one or two.”
“Line up,” Carmelita said as the two Jaegers took point, with her and Jaxon flanking them, and the rest of them behind. The door hissed open and the sight of absolute carnage greeted them. This appeared to be a storeroom of some kind; with cabinets, jars and capsules of fluid in cold storage, and boxes of unknown materials.

It was also currently decorated with the blood and liquified remains of numerous Mutons. Pieces of armor lay scattered, drenched in the fluids and there was so much there were numerous puddles in the relatively small storeroom.

“Well then,” Kunio said, considering lightly pushing on one of the Muton breastplate with his boot, though thought better of it after remembering that it might be literally cancerous. “I think it worked.”

“Monsoon Squad, this is your friendly artificial intelligence contacting you,” the glib voice of JULIAN interjected. “I have been successfully uploaded into the system, though am currently under siege by a rather persistent digital defense system – surprisingly sophisticated for a primitive intelligence. Caelior has been located and Hurricane Squad is moving to secure him now. As it stands your actions have provoked significant reaction.”

“Good,” Carmelita said. “Did you know there’s a Bringer telepath here?”

“Is that right?” JULIAN didn’t sound overly concerned at the revelation. “That would explain the mind. Aegis will want to hear it, but I trust you can handle one of the Bringer’s minions. I would also prepare for an attack. I have successfully redirected several containment teams towards your last known location.”

“Thanks, JULIAN,” Carmelita sighed. “Tell them to hurry up.”

“I will convey,” JULIAN said. “And I will do my best to delay them further. If you were to keep moving, it would also slow them down. Now I must go.”

The line ended. Carmelita looked to Fatima. “You ready?”

“Yes,” she said, though there was an undercurrent of uncertainty in her voice. “But…it’s talking to me now. If I do something…please shoot me. I don’t want to end up like one of those things.”

“That isn’t going to happen,” Carmelita said firmly. “This is something you can beat. We are all here with you and we’re all going to leave alive. Come on, let’s move out.”

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Revelean’s Lab – Earth
5/15/2017 – 4:17 P.M.

“That’s a bit big for a Berserker,” Martha said slowly as they entered a new room.

This one appeared to be a dedicated research lab of some kind. There were holding cells, experimentation tables, and holotables scattered throughout it. There were also scientists and workers still at their stations, who all turned in unison at the unexpected guests. They were all Vitakarians, but with pale skin and seemed clone-like in appearance.

In the back, almost as a silent guard were three massive Berserkers. But these ones were absurdly beyond even what he’d expected to see in person. They were taller than the Battlemaster, had skin colored a sickly shade of green, and were equipped with some kind of pack on their backs which
had tubes connecting to various ports on their arms.

Their arms were also outfitted with mechanical augmentations. One seemed to have crushers, while the other two had single-edged blades on them.

“We should have cleared the room first,” Carmelita muttered. “Open fire!”

The scientists instead of running, all pulled out pistols and began firing white plasma bolts their direction while the Berserker were woken up, and upon seeing the XCOM soldiers, roared and charged. “Kunio, do you have one!” Carmelita asked as she began running to distract one, while firing.

Kunio looked to the charging monster. “Um, yes!”

Please don’t fail me now.

Vitakara scientists were being charged and hunted down by XCOM soldiers, willing to take the plasma hits to return fire at close range. Carmelita let loose a sharp laugh as she blasted apart a scientist at point blank range, taking his entire torso. Athena lifted another scientist off the ground with mechanical swiftness and ripped her head off.

Easu, the other Jaeger was taking on the other charging Berserker which was rampaging through the holotables. It’s skin was durable, as it was taking direct barrages, and not slowing down at all. Right now Kunio really wished they had a telekine, but they’d have to make do. His Berserker was charging and roaring, and he gathered the power and prepared to open a portal.

Now.

He opened his fist and lifted his other hand as both connecting portals were created, one on the floor which the Berserker predictably fell into. Like a child in a pool, it immediately tried to struggle its way out, but he severed the portal before it could get out, and the bottom half fell from the ceiling and hit the head of the dying alien.

The Berserker still didn’t give up, trying to drag itself to him, spewing blood and organs from it’s severed midsection. Kunio lowered his rifle and fired a barrage of psionic rounds into the head, and didn’t stop until it stopped moving and there was no more head, but a pulpy mass of yellow and green flesh.

Looking up, he saw that both Jaegers were tag-teaming the other Berserker which was suffering from dozens of scrapes and wounds. Carmelita’s Berserker was dead on the ground, with copious amounts of shrapnel in it. She must have just killed it, as she leapt an inhuman distance to land before the remaining Berserker.

Both of it’s arms restrained by the Jaegers, it roared furiously at Carmelita who responded by shoving the barrel of the alloy cannon into its mouth and pulling the trigger.

That put it on the ground quickly.

“Wow.” Was all Zoe said after seeing that, as Carmelita ripped off a chunk of one of the scientist coats and wiped the blood and gore off of her cannon. “Good shot.”

“I’ve had some practice,” she said. “Berserkers are mindless beasts. Predictable. Even these ones it seems.”

“Think we’re going to get more?” Athena glanced to the exit. “Their attacks haven’t been too bad,
thankfully.”

“Likely, but we keep moving,” Carmelita said, shooting a glance to the tense and silent Fatima who was keeping to the back, and still watched by Pinero. She didn’t ask, but Kunio knew Carmelita was concerned about the psion. So was he. Fatima was not one to buckle like this.

It must be really bad.

They entered into another corridor with plenty of rooms off to the sides to explore. It really was a labyrinth that didn’t seem to end. Hopefully Fiona could find them easily enough when it was done.

That was when they heard it.

Music.

And singing.

They all paused as the sound permeated the silent corridor. It was a deep voice, singing in a language that sounded familiar for some reason. Kunio could swear there was something familiar about it, but the voice was rich, melodic, and reached highs and lows that didn’t seem possible.

“Wait a minute…” Zoe cocked her head. “Is that opera?”

“Yes,” Fatima said quietly. “One of his favorites. He likes to sing.”

“Wonderful,” Carmelita grunted. “Probably a Weaver then.”

They continued walking down, and the voice got louder. Kunio realized that there was a tangible intensity to the song as they walked. It had started out fairly innocuous, or normal in a way (as much as opera could be – he was unfamiliar with the genre), but the tone had grown sadder.

It reminded him of the worst times of his life. When he mourned the deaths of his friends in war. When he’d seen Japan fall, twice. When he’d seen the butchery in Beijing. A sad helplessness that overcame him as he realized there was so little he was capable of doing.

But it does not have to be that way.

You could be something so much more.

Part of a plan much grander.

Get out of my head!

Kunio jolted himself out of the stupor he’d been lulled into by the creature which had somehow subverted his own defenses. That shook him. Something that subtle should not be possible, at least not to something which wasn’t an Ethereal. What was this thing. Then he realized the voice was not the only one singing.

“Hold,” Carmelita ordered, lifting a hand as she turned to Fatima who seemed to be in a trance, the words she was singing in perfect sync with the voice, and tuned almost to compliment it. “Psion Tariq,” she said slowly. “Take off your helmet.”

She didn’t, and just kept singing.

She didn’t make any threatening gestures, she just stood there, still; listless.
Pinero moved up behind her and she lifted a hand, psionic power rippling as Pinero was paralyzed as the Manchurian Restraints kicked in. “Codeword: Hodophobia,” Carmelita said without hesitation. “Initiate shutdown for sixteen hours.”

On cue Fatima crumpled to the ground, and Pinero was similarly freed. Carmelita knelt down beside the unconscious psion. “What did you do?” Zoe asked incredulously.

“I used her codeword,” Carmelita said, taking off Fatima’s helmet to make sure she was unconscious. “First time I’ve had to do that actually. Either that, or we’d have killed her or she would have killed us. This is safer.”

“I’ll carry her,” Athena said, lumbering over and slinging the psion over her shoulder. “But I think we should head back. This is too dangerous to keep going. We’re already screwed without a telepath and if it got into her mind, it knows we’re a distraction. I’m all for suicide missions, but this is dying for the sake of dying.”

Carmelita thought for a moment, then nodded. “Alright. We start moving away. They’ve had a lot of time as it is.”

Kunio couldn’t help but feel relieved as they moved in the opposite direction, although instead of the singing fading, it instead was only growing louder and the tone was changing. It held a fiery intensity; a war-like anger that he could feel in the words despite the foreign language.

They reached the door back into the lab where the Berserkers had been, and the thing was waiting for them.

The first thing that struck Kunio was that it looked like it was in the shape of a brain – if that brain had been designed to be the size of a forklift, with a sickly skin-colored outer shell around it, hiding the ridges. It didn’t help that there were six magenta eyes that were grated onto the front, arranged in a shape he felt he’d seen before.

If only that was the weirdest thing about it.

Two long, gangly arms hung from the ‘body’ which hung suspected in the air. Although they were less ‘arms’ and more ‘tendrils which had hands at the end’. The most disturbing thing was the mouth which was grafted to the lower body, an unnatural organ that did look exactly like a disembodied mouth.

A deep and pervasive shudder ran down Kunio’s spine as he beheld the unholy monstrosity. He’d done his research, and had seen some of the creatures the Bringer employed, and what it was capable of, but this was something so perversely unnatural that he struggled to realize that it was well and truly alive.

Yet it was. He couldn’t deny reality before him.

Still, there was one thing certain:

*This thing should not exist.*

The hands spread wide, as if the thing was greeting them.

It had not stopped singing either, and the tempo had changed to a faster pace.

Carmelita made a snap decision. “Retreat!” She called, and they all started running in the opposite direction, with some firing in the direction of the creature. Without moving it either blocked,
deflected or otherwise avoided the attacks. Then with the idleness of a toying predator, it followed them.

A hand reached out, and the Jaegers were suddenly slowed as telekinetic leashes wrapped around their suits. They wasted no time and turned to fire at the creature, though their weapons crumpled and warped. The legs of the MEC snapped and twisted, but neither cried out in pain, though visibly resisted the telekinetic power.

Zoe and Pinero turned and fire, though it directed its focus to them, and after a few seconds, they stopped and started screaming in pain as something happened that he couldn’t see. In desperation he threw his remaining psionic grenade towards the creature, and to his dismay it landed in a micro-portal and vanished, never to be seen again.

*Oh no, this thing can teleport.*

Jaxon was directing his nanites, but with a wave of the hand he was engulfed in a torrent of psionic power so strong that it only left embers behind. Martha was reaching for her Gamma rifle, but instead it was telekinetically ripped out of her hands, and almost childishly taunted with it being held just out of reach.

Kunio fired, but it seemed to do almost nothing as a barrier appeared before the bolts could hit. Looking around he saw that Zoe and Pinero had literally been melted; it seemed to thankfully have been fast, but crumpled power armor leaking a disgusting fluid was all that remained of them.

Just what was this thing?

The Gamma rifle taunting Martha suddenly self-destructed, a precaution Kunio was very thankful for because he did not want that thing falling into Collective hands. The warped pieces useless, Martha wasn’t spared from the onslaught as the pieces of the Gamma rifle were thrown into her, and her neck performed a sharp one-eighty turn, killing her instantly.

The unconscious body of Fatima was freed from the grasp of Athena, and floated towards the creature who cradled her body almost tenderly, taking off the helmet and caressing the face with the grotesque fingers, an almost tender display for something so monstrous. Carmelita leapt into the air, trying to get a flanking shot, but she twisted in the air and was slammed into the far wall.

He was the last one standing.

Carmelita might still be alive, but that was it. The Jaegers weren’t moving. Everyone else was vaporized or sludge. He needed to get out of here now. But he also saw Fatima, and how the creature seemed focused on her. She was a psion of XCOM. She knew things. Valuable things. Manchurian restraints or not, this thing had gotten into her head, and it could do it again.

*If I do something…please shoot me. I don’t want to end up like one of those things.*

Heart in his throat, Kunio lifted his rifle and paused. If he shot it, the creature would just block it. But he might have another solution. He pulled out the Thought Bomb and set it to kill. It wouldn’t kill the creature…but Fatima had no defenses, and he had to hope the creature wasn’t protecting her.

He would be protected since his suit strengthened his mind, so he increased the radius to where he could activate it and it would reach her. With his thumb he pressed the trigger, praying that he was right and wouldn’t kill himself like this. The delay passed, and he was still alive.

Fatima suddenly went still.
The singing stopped, and the creature caressed the body, seemingly confused.

He had seconds to escape on his own, and first opened a portal that landed him on the other side of the room next to an injured, but fortunately alive Carmelita. She was badly hurt, and he realized a problem – he definitely couldn’t carry her in her armor. “Hey,” he told her quietly, knowing the creature was going to turn to him in moments. “Sorry about this, but one of us needs to live.”

He closed his eyes, concentrated, and opened a portal, and then opened another one under Carmelita. Once she fell through, he was forced to collapse it. He’d never tried one that long, and he could only hope she’d made it safely. Eyes watering from exhaustion, he was vaguely aware of the creature floating towards him, the ferocity palpable.

He gritted his teeth and lifted his rifle.

There was a flash behind him, a hand was placed on his shoulder and he was suddenly back in the deployment room he’d been in hours before.

Almost frozen in shock, he didn’t immediately put down his rifle. “Hey, it’s alright, you’re safe,” Fiona said, taking her helmet off. “I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner, we ran into complications.”

“So did we,” he said tonelessly, taking his own helmet off. “Did you get him out?”

*Please. Don’t let this be for nothing.*

“Yes,” she nodded. “We got him out. He’s with us.”

“Right, good,” he shakily lowered his rifle, taking a breath as the adrenaline began fading. “I really hope he was worth it.”

Fiona looked at him sympathetically. “Are you the only one?”

“I don’t think so,” he said. “Before you came, I teleported Carmelita away. She was badly hurt. If I did it right…she’s probably somewhere in London.”

“Why London?”

“The first place I teleported to,” he shrugged. “I remember it.”

“We’ll pick her up,” she said, then leaned in and gave him a hug. “I’m sorry so many people died, but I’m glad you’re alive.”

“At least it wasn’t for nothing,” he said, accepting the hug. “I hope he was worth it.”

“He will be,” she promised. “And he’s going to want some payback.”

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To be continued in Chapter 60:

*Godkiller*
Godkiller

Chapter Notes

So a couple of things to add since the last update, the most relevant being that there has been artwork done for the series! One is artwork of Saudia (posted in her own XCOM File), and there have been a number of seals/emblems for the various factions/divisions. Right now There are a number of those done, and they're put into the XCOM Files in front of respective chapters (some placeholders under specific ones are developed). So if interested, give those a look!

Hallway, Mars Observation Station – Mars Orbit

5/22/2017 – 9:01 A.M.

There is a war going on, Ravarian thought with a weariness which had come to define him in recent days, the Humans have a new nanoweapon. Miridian is still loose. Caelior was freed by XCOM. And here I am with two insufferable, immature, unprofessional children.

Unfortunately, said children – who were both twenty Human years - were capable of psionics – telepathy and teleportation to be specific. And a smattering of telekinesis. Quisilia was at least capable of picking his Avatars with some power, though unfortunately they also reflected the worst parts of his personality. Of course, it shouldn’t be a surprise that they were as immaturely trollish as he was.

And both of them had decided to continually have fun at his expense.

He’d been walking to his office, preparing for a day of work, when both of the Mori twins had pulled him aside and stated he would be participating in one of the many meme videos they did. To make matters worse, they’d kidnapped his cat and were effectively holding it ransom until he participated.

So now he stood in a hallway as Sabrina Mori stood on a small maintenance platform above the ground. Both women hadn’t worn their official uniforms (he didn’t even know if there was a unified Harbinger uniform, but almost anything would be better than what they choose), and instead practically wore the same clothes they had on Earth. Casual shirts, jeans, and overly expensive jewelry.

Sabrina held his cat, and Cali mewed up at her, wanting to be as done with this as he did. She extended one hand out dramatically, while cradling his cat with the other. “It’s over Ravarian!” She called boastfully. “I have the high ground!”

The cat meowed and tried pawing her face which she gently ignored.

Ravarian stood with his arms crossed, unimpressed.

“Say your line!” The blue-haired Micaiah Mori hissed from beside him, keeping her smartphone steady as she was filming.
Ravarian rolled his eyes, a gesture he was doing a lot more of in recent memory. Though neither could tell since it wasn’t as obvious when Vitakara did it. He sighed. “You underestimate my firepower.” He could hear the scowl from Micaiah at his line delivery, but he could not be bothered to put any more effort into this utterly stupid exercise than necessary.

“Don’t try it!” Sabrina called.

He pulled out his prop weapon and sighed as he felt him be telekinetically grabbed for the big leap. It was supposed to be accompanied by a battle cry of some kind. But he really couldn’t be bothered. “Aaaaaaaaaa.” He said in a monotone as he jumped in slow motion, before Sabrina gave her next line, which was still something he hadn’t really figured out.

He was pretty sure she spoke in a made-up language, but whatever the language was, it apparently made people fly backwards, and so he was violently thrown backwards into a wall. At least it wasn’t hard enough to actually injure him, even if Micaiah wasn’t too gentle. “And…cut!” She called, as he got back up, and Sabrina jumped to the ground.

“Excellent!” Sabrina said, nuzzling Cali, who hissed, clearly annoyed. “And you little fluffball, were brilliant.”

The cat hissed again, but she seemed not to care.

“This is going to be rad, sista,” Micaiah giggled as she reviewed the footage. “We’re going to be getting so many likes on this it’s gonna be so sick.”

*Not as sick as I feel listening to you both butcher this Human language.* Ravarian thought sourly as Sabrina kept gushing. He knew that both sisters were perfectly capable of reading his mind, and he didn’t care. Nor did they, as whenever they did, they seemed to just find it funny. “It totally slaps, sista. This is totes going to be number one trending when I finish it.”

“#Moripower!”

“Unlimited power!”

Both sisters high-fived each other.

“Are you finished?” Ravarian asked wearily. “If you are, I have actual work to do. And give me my cat back.”

“Ravarian, fam, listen,” Sabrina came up and slung an arm around him. Or tried, which was more difficult since he was much bigger than both of them, so she settled for resting a hand on his shoulder. “Ya gotta expand your horizons, my xeno dude. Wars aren’t won on battlefields, that stuff happened in the older days. In this enlightened and lit age, our guns are videos, our ammo is likes, and our propaganda is memes.”

Micaiah nodded sagely. “That’s deep, sista.”

Ravarian rubbed his eyes. That had to have been one of the stupidest things he had ever heard. He was mildly surprised either of them knew what the concept of propaganda was. He wondered if they’d met the Battlemaster. Probably not, because he would not tolerate such drivel. “Enough. I need to get back to work.”

“Ravi, trust me, you’re going to be doing a lot more good doing stuff like this then…” Sabrina waved a hand idly, frowning as she thought for a minute. “I don’t know, whatever you do. You’ll be famous! A friendly alien face for the Collective! You could do with some humanization.”
“I’m an alien, you i-” Ravarian stopped himself, sighed, and narrowed his eyes at the twins. “Give me my cat. Now.”

“Sheesh, no need to get so testy, Ravi,” Sabrina gave Cali a kiss on the nose – something the cat did not seem appreciative of – before handing her over. “But you’ll thank me later when you’re number one in trending! This is going to be fire, trust me.”


“Oh, there was one more thing,” Sabrina fished out her own smartphone. “Your battle shout was lame. Can you do it again? We can dub it over in post.”

Ravarian stared incredulously before narrowing his eyes. “No.”

“Lame,” she drawled, then smiled as her eyes flashed. “Boo!”

There was no way he should have been surprised, but the word was accompanied by a sudden surge of adrenaline and shock that permeated his body. It was invasive, deep, and impossible to hide or ignore. He let out a small shout by instinct, and Sabrina smiled. “Perfect! More of a sound of fear than battle cry, but we’ll make this bad boy work.”

Ravarian was still standing still in some degree of shock as the adrenaline began to fade. “Thanks, fam,” Micaiah said, patting him on the shoulder as she walked away. “We’ll tell daddy Quisilia you were very helpful.” Both women walked away, chuckling to themselves like the demented schoolgirls they were.

His cat meowed at him, almost in concern.

“I’m sorry you had to endure that,” Ravarian sighed as he once more made his way to his office. “I’ll try and make it up to you. Treats?” The cat meowed, though Ravarian knew enough about cats to know this was largely a coincidence. Still, Cali liked the treats he ordered special-made on Vitakar. Human-made ones were objectively inferior.

Of all the developments to happen during his tenure, the arrival of the Mori twins ranked among the worst. Ravarian had no idea where they had come from, or how Quisilia had found them, but they’d showed up one day and began terrorizing him – and anyone else who had an interest in getting work done. There was a strong argument for using them in some forms of enhanced interrogation, considering how painful it was to listen to them speak. He’d considered having a CODEX record them for that purpose.

Cogitian would have a legitimate fit if he heard them.

“You know,” he told the cat idly. “You may be the only one who really respects me around here.” He ruffled the head of the cat, which purred in appreciation. He walked into his office, and set the cat down. “Alright, you can go take a nap.”

The cat instead, waiting until he took a seat, leapt into his lap and curled up, still purring. Normally he would push the cat down, but today he made an exception and settled in for a slightly uncomfortable hour or so until Cali got bored and left.

There was a camera flash. “Good morning!” Quisilia greeted, materializing in front of him as he lowered the smartphone.

Ravarian sighed, and ignored the Ethereal; instead turning on his computer.
Quisilia waved a hand. “Hello there?”

“I’m busy,” Ravarian said testily, not entirely caring about how irritating an Ethereal wasn’t a good idea. “I’ve already lost enough time to fulfilling the inane requests of your Harbingers.”

“Ah, my apologies,” Quisilia said, sounding almost sincere. “I told them to not bother you when you were working.”

“Tell them to not bother me at all,” Ravarian stated, turning to glare at the Ethereal directly. “I have enough issues without two immature children compounding them. The next time one of them messes with my head, I will ask Yang to execute them. She is, thankfully, a professional.”

“No need to go to such extremes,” Quisilia waved a hand. “I’ll restrain them more. It is time they begin to more directly participate on Earth anyway beyond the digital realm.”

Ravarian genuinely didn’t know if that was a good thing or not. Knowing his luck, they would screw up existing operations, while also managing to survive. Like a somehow more incompetent version of Isomnum, except younger, dumber, and female. “Be sure to give them plenty of videos, likes, and memes, since that’s what they think a war is won on.”

“I suspect they will use many,” Quisilia agreed wistfully. “Perhaps not to your taste, but they have spirit and creative minds.”

“We will disagree there,” Ravarian answered. “But wherever they are sent, do not tell me.”

“Oh?” Quisilia flipped one of his blades in his hand. “Why?”

“Because,” Ravarian said, turning back to his work. “I may be motivated to make sure they don’t come back.”

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*Dreadnought of the Harbinger – Central Command*

5/17/2017 – 12:19 P.M.

Patricia could see multiple cities highlighted across the hologlobe in front of her. Armored in her Harbinger attire, she was prepared for a new fight. Retaliation was necessary for the loss of Florida, and a strong message needed to be sent now that the short lull had passed. More importantly, with Caelior now lost, the narrative could not be shifted to further seem to expose vulnerabilities.

Revelean had assured them the facility was safe. While the creature he had kept had been able to repel one XCOM squad, it clearly hadn’t been enough. Patricia would have greatly preferred a captured Caelior and no XCOM casualties, then killing an XCOM squad and losing Caelior.

An Ethereal was a force multiplier greater than an XCOM squad.

She was not looking forward to trying to capture him again.

There had been multiple discussions on what form the response was to take. There were many; some intensive, some more passive. Everyone agreed recent events had been a setback, but not something they couldn’t eventually bounce back from. There had been some debate, and a number of tactics had been decided.
One less focused, handled by the fleets.

One more focused, which she would execute personally.

“The Cleanser Ships are in place,” I’Sari informed. “However, they remain outside effective range of what—”

“I am aware,” Patricia said quietly. “This was discussed. Precision is not necessary at this moment. ADVENT and XCOM believe they are untouchable right now. They need a reminder of the firepower that faces them.”

“The estimated damage is expected to be minimal,” Assimilator-2 stated as he read the outgoing projections and impact points. “Minimal collateral civilian damage and a majority of critical structures remaining in place. Effects will be limited to psychological and long-term consequences.”

“I would recommend we augment bombardment with Chryssalids, chemical weapons, or crop poisons,” Casas added, the Vitakarian’s glittering blue eyes glowing brightly. “However, projectiles will…suffice if intimidation is your goal. But the effects are minimal. Almost a waste.”

“Not a waste,” she disputed with lifted palm. “We don’t need them to be as damaged right now.” She lowered her hand as her voice turned thoughtful. “But they will feel afraid in return. Every citizen will understand what even ADVENT cannot suppress— that this is a war they cannot win. And who knows— we might just make a lucky strike.”

“Our ships will endeavor to do their best,” I’Sari stated with a stiff movement of the Andromedon helmet. “They stand by at your command, Harbinger.”

Patricia nodded. “Switch to ship and base feeds.” The holoprojections changed to show Earth from the Moon Base, as well as the feeds of several Cleanser Ships, of which many more of the spacecraft could be made out in various parts of the orbit and nearby their brethren. Dozens of them, hovering outside the effective range of the Flak Towers and any other defenses ADVENT could rely on.

ADVENT doubtless knew they were there. They were probably waiting for them to move closer.

She clasped her hands behind her back, as she closed her eyes and gently probed the planet with a telepathic nudge. On such a scale she couldn’t have done much on her own, but every telepath felt something. They wouldn’t have necessarily known it was her, but they knew it was something.

Something that would make them uneasy.

Just where she wanted them.

Her eyes remained closed.

“Fire.”

There was very little tangible reaction that they could see from space, though there was the faint flicker of the burning rounds being fired at the surface of the planet. They watched the bombardment for some time in silence, none choosing to comment on the streaks of fire impacting the Earth.

She probed the planet again, seeking only additional verification. It was small at first, but panic was something which spread quickly. It flared brightly and clearly; she could sense it rising all
over the world ever so slowly as the sounds and sights of the war came to the most isolated.

Enough time had passed. The panic was at an acceptable level.

“Switch to internet feeds,” Patricia finally said, opening her eyes. “Someone will be recording this.”

The feeds switched to a mixture of news stations, Twitter videos, and livestreams which showed cities, towns, and bases all across the world being bombarded; sometimes from the panicked perspectives of individuals holding cell phones, and news crews rushing to get to shelter. From nations, to states, provinces, and reservations, hundreds of locations were being slammed with projectiles from the skies. The explosions were loud, occasionally a building was vaporized or a person was thrown into the air in the background.

But this bombardment was like mortar fire. Dangerous if it hit. A distraction if not.

It didn’t especially matter. The terror in the voices from the livestreams; the shock from the news anchors, and the tense fear they projected as they clutched their papers and flinched as they continued reporting, even as they rested in the line of fire. Millions of people who felt trapped and fearful, as they stayed in place, waiting for death as the war which had eluded them came into their lives for the first time.

It didn’t matter if it didn’t cause lasting damage. No Human would forget this day for a long time. It might strengthen the resolve of some, but the Human mind could only endure so much – and the average Human lacked the mental fortitude of a soldier.

“Continue the bombardment for the next six hours,” she said as she unhooked her mask and prepared to put it on. “I have cities to drown.”

There was a chorus of affirming nods as she fixed the mask on, and felt the connection harden as the Imperator’s mind merged with her own.

_They are distracted now._

_Frightened. Tense. Wary._

_The time is right._

Her hands clenched as she opened a portal before her, crossed her arms and jumped into it. Instantly she felt the wind in the air, the hot sun shining overhead as she fell into Chesapeake Bay, and with the few seconds she was above water, she saw the landmarks of D.C. in the distance, a city which had still not fully recovered from the invasion earlier in the war by the Battlemaster.

She suspected no one saw her plunge into the water as she quickly sank to the bottom. She had no oxygen or gear. It didn’t matter; the water would soon no longer be around her. With a telekinetic pull, she slammed down to the floor of the lake, planting herself in the shifting mud before pulling the water away from her as if extracting herself from honey.

First a vertical tunnel was created, a center of a maelstrom that allowed air and sun down upon her. From there it was a theoretically simple matter of moving the water before her, to behind her. In reality it was grueling, complicated work. Water was not so easy to move in bulk telekinetically, but she was a Harbinger.

There was nothing that couldn’t be done.
With water dripping from her armor and hair, a titanic wave was forming behind her as the bay slowly had its water drawn into an artificial tsunami, behind a slightly distorted barrier that she maintained with a lifted hand, suspended in the air and growing ever-larger. There were a smattering of ships and vessels which were caught in the wave, with unprotected minds within them that she ended with a single thought; a relative mercy compared to drowning.

She smiled as she saw helicopters and soldiers in the distance coming. Unfortunate they hadn’t come sooner – nor had a means of defending themselves. Not truly. She could sense a number of Priests incoming, but it was not nearly enough. It wouldn’t even slow her down, for that matter.

Anticipating a barrage of weapons first, she erected a dome of psionic energy around herself with her free hand, protecting from anything they could throw at her as she began moving backwards, step by ponderous step as a final measure to grow the wave.

She held the weight of an ocean as the wave grew higher and higher. *Come on, XCOM, take the bait. Come to me now.*

Sure enough, just seconds later there was a flash of blue-green as the T’Leth Agent Fiona appeared, sword drawn and glowing with power. She brandished her sword as she walked forward menacingly. “You will not—”

Patricia smiled under her mask and her fingers relaxed as she let her arm drop, anchoring herself in the mud telekinetically, and encasing herself in a small psionic box as tons upon tons of water slammed down onto her and swept outwards to the city. Patricia didn’t see if Fiona escaped before the water hit, but she knew that it couldn’t be stopped, and as the water rushed over her, she opened another portal and stepped within.

There were a few more stops to make yet before the day was done.

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Desert Outskirts – Vitakar

5/14/2017 – 2:23 P.M.

It had been a long time since Nartha had been anywhere close to the deserts (discounting the Praesidium, which was technically in a desert even if he’d never really gone outside). He had never liked them. It was far too hot, even if he eventually got used to it, in the sense where he’d accepted his misery. It was empty, and indeed there was nothing but dunes for as far as he could see. It was almost a complete wasteland, where it seemed difficult for life to thrive.

Still, all of this could technically be applied to the Borelian Wastes. But the deserts had something the Wastes did not – *sand.*

He hated sand. It got everywhere, was stickier and difficult to get completely off without a full shower or bath, and was a constant source of irritation, either from it spraying into his eyes, mouth, or nose. Not including how irritating it was psychologically as one futilely tried to get the grains off their bodies.

All of them stood on the open dunes which extended as far as the eye could see. A light wind whipped sand grains around, lightly dusting all of them. The only one who seemed most suited to tolerate it was Shun who wore her Titan armor, though had her helmet off. The sun beat down on them, hot, sweltering, and yet another thing he disliked about this place.

“You really don’t like it here, don’t you?” Sorras seemed amused.
Nartha glanced at him. “Is it that obvious?”

“Very.”

He also looked to Shun. “Is it?”

She smiled. “Yeah. Don’t worry, I don’t like it either.”

Nartha shook his head, running a hand over his head. “Why would anyone voluntarily choose to live here?”

“There are worse places,” Sorras broke the tip of a dune with the toe of his boot and the sand blew away in the light wind. “Cobrarians are adapted to the unpleasant aspects of the desert. You might as well ask why the Sar’Manda live underwater, or the Borelians prefer living in utter cold. Discomfort is relative.”

“That may have been one of the more insightful things you’ve said,” Shun told him dryly. “I’m almost impressed.”

“Please don’t get me wrong,” Sorras bared his teeth as he fiddled with the hilt of his sword. “I’d gut every one of the Hierarchy, but I won’t condemn them for their place of residence. There are some things we don’t have any control over.”

“Keep that attitude to yourself,” Nartha warned with a sigh. “We’re here for allies.”

“Note I said Hierarchy,” Sorras pointed out. “Of which our contact is also interested in disposing of.”

And so continued the main issue between them. “The Hierarchy can still be reasoned with,” Nartha insisted warily. “They just need a reason to believe things can change.”

“Please,” Sorras rolled his eyes. “The Hierarchy is too cowardly to do anything but remain ‘neutral’. Neutrality, indifference, is still picking a side. We do not need them to be sympathetic. We do not need them to be understanding. We need them to act. To do something brave for once in their lives.”

The Dath’Haram made a noise of disgust as he paced in a circle on the dunes. “Don’t get your hopes up. The Hierarchy has never been concerned with anything but themselves. There is a reason you rarely see them deeply involved beyond their territory, outside of the defecting males.”

“I’m not sure what anyone expected,” Shun shrugged as she sat down on one of the dunes. “If what Nartha told me about their history is right, they created this problem themselves in an understandable, if shortsighted way to address the issues of their civil war.” She made a dismissive motion. “Artificially try and control half of your population, and you either will lose control quickly, or you devote everything to keep them under control.”

“Not even half,” Sorras corrected. “Cobrarian gender ratios are extremely skewed towards females. A smaller male population is far easier to control when you have numbers on your side.”

“That might explain how it’s endured for so long then,” Shun mused.

“You sound like you have some insight into that,” Sorras noted, looking at the woman curiously.

“My country was…well, we had several attempts at population controls,” Shun answered with a tight voice. “Limited childbirths. Traditional gender norms and a cultural preference for males. It
didn’t work, obviously, and in the process we would have sabotaged our future population.” She shrugged. “It remains to be seen if that’ll continue now that China is in ADVENT, but I doubt that issue is going away. The point is that actions like that can’t last without something being sacrificed in the process.”

“Indeed,” Sorras nodded. “Even the Dath’Haram somehow know better than to impose restrictions based on racial criteria. Pacifist cowards they may be, but they are not hypocrites.”


“I am a reasonable individual,” Sorras mused. “If someone can prove themselves worth preserving, I will work with them. I may even advocate for them. The problem, dear Shun, is that the vast majority are irredeemable. They are not me. They are not like our Cobrarian friend.”

“And you base this on nothing but race,” Shun crossed her arms. “We have a term for that on Earth.”

Sorras chuckled. “I’m sure you do. I don’t need your approval, Human, nor should you compare your pathetically superficial differences to our species, whose races are radically different in physiology and psychology. Some are inferior. This is not my bias, but objective fact.” He tapped his head and smiled. “If you haven’t noticed, I am not normal. I am an aberration of my race – a benefit, but an aberration nonetheless. I’m simply selfless enough to not let it cloud my judgement.”

“Selfless,” Shun snorted. “A true patriot you are.”

“Indeed, I concur,” he agreed with his own sarcasm. “I could have lived my life as a soft, weak Dath’Haram in the forests. It would have been easy. I would have been accepted and loved. But I didn’t, dear Shun, I experienced firsthand the utter weakness and depravity my race was capable of. They are nothing but apathetic to reality. They exist in fantasy and naivety, and have ensured our species remains in the grip of the Zararch and Ethereals. Unlike some, Human, I do not deny what my race has done. I accept it, and support what must be done to ensure-”

“Enough,” Nartha interrupted. “I think the Commander made it clear that there will be no genocide or racial cleansing, much as you would wish that, Sorras. And keep that to yourself in the future, neither of us are interested in your justifications.”

Sorras simply made an acknowledging wave. “She brought it up, but I will refrain in the future.”

“Good,” Nartha said as he turned back to the dune expanse, then narrowed his eyes, as he saw something in the distance. “Heads up. Looks like he’s coming.”

Shun put her helmet on and pulled out her rifle, aiming it in the distance where the speeder was incoming. Nartha also drew his pistol and Sorras rested his sniper rifle on a dune, using it as makeshift cover in the event this went downhill. However, the precautions were unnecessary, as there was only one occupant, who ignored the weapons, and slithered out once he’d parked the speeder.

“Hir’laras’silar,” Nartha greeted, holstering his weapon. “Greetings.”

In many ways, there was very little that differentiated the Cobrarian males from the females, and Laras had many similar characteristics to his female kin. Golden scales, perhaps a slightly bigger frame, but what fully differentiated the males was the hood they possessed that flared in the bright Vitakar sun.
Many described their hoods as intimidating. The female Cobrarians obviously found them striking. All Nartha could think of was that it made their heads much bigger targets. Besides the point now, as the Cobrarian slithered closer, shooting suspicious glances at the armored Shun. “[A Human here?]”

“She’s an ally,” Nartha gestured to her, motioning to take her helmet off. Shun complied, and while it didn’t seem to put the Cobrarian at complete ease, it was enough to risk returning his attention back to Nartha.

“[You were not followed?]” He asked.

“Of course not,” Sorras snorted. “We know what we are doing.”

“[And yet your people were attacked,]” Laras recounted in a neutral voice. “[Not even the Hierarchy was immune to the Speaker’s purge. There were many taken. More will likely follow. How can you assure me that assisting you will be safe?]”

“We are still alive, Miridian still lives,” Sorras said. “What happened was an…error. A critical mistake that will not be repeated. We are augmented now with allies the Zararch would rather keep quiet. We are supported by XCOM and ADVENT.”

“[The names mean little,]” Laras’s tongue flicked out. “[Species on a world far from here, in a war we are not concerned with.]”

“You should concern yourself with it,” Nartha stated. “Because that war is the reason the Zararch fear the Nulorian. If the Collective wins on Earth, any hope you have for change in the Hierarchy dies with them. The Speaker is here to ensure the grip the Ethereals hold over our species exists forever – and that is because of the Humans.”

“[If you insist on such, then I cannot dissuade you,]” Laras waved a hand. “[I only care if you can ensure the Hierarchy falls.]”

“Of course,” Sorras grinned. “And with pleasure.”

“If necessary,” Nartha corrected sternly. “We are in agreement that the Hierarchy needs to change. I do not dispute your desire for equality, but I do not want to engage in unnecessary fights for the sake of it. The Council of Matriarchs could be an ally. I’ve seen the numbers when I was in the Zararch – they are viewed as ‘security risks’. Many of them are marked by the Zararch for deviant activity. I believe they could be convinced to turn on the Collective.”

“I do not care,” Laras hissed. “[They only behave as such because they are distracted and distrustful. They are not reliable. They do not care about any but themselves and holding onto their power. Victory means nothing so long as the Matriarchs live. If you cannot realize this, then we have little to discuss.]”

“And what if we convince them to make changes immediately?” Nartha asked. “If they prove unreasonable, then fine. But we will not wipe them out for the sake of past deeds, otherwise you could not touch the Nulorian based on what they have done. I want to give them a chance. I think we can both agree that it’s preferable if everyone works together instead of your race being torn apart in a civil war.”

The Cobrarian was silent for a few moments, contemplating as his tongue slithered out every few seconds. “[Perhaps one chance. But only one.]”

Nartha nodded. “Fair enough.”
“We’ve delayed long enough,” Sorras stepped forward. “Now, if that’s figured out, you have information on the Hierarchy for us. Let’s hear the details.”

“[Very well,]” Laras nodded. “[Listen carefully. What I know will not be relevant for much longer.]”

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The Prism

5/21/2017 – 11:23 A.M.

Hallian stood as still as a statue, slightly petrified.

He had just walked through the Gateway to come and conduct a medical check on Yang. It had started out normal enough, as he exited into the small room containing the Gateway, and walked out into the open kitchen and living space area. And just as he was about to proceed forward, he saw it.

Directly in front of him, laying on the ground, was a massive creature. It looked to be some kind of cybernetic and armored creature, but whatever it was, it was objectively terrifying. It looked almost like a cat from Earth, if someone had taken it and enlarged it fifty times. It was definitely bigger than he was, and those teeth were...big.

Did Humans have cats this large? Not as pets, surely.

More importantly, what was it doing here?

The creature did seem to be sleeping, but Hallian felt that if he moved, it would awaken and probably maul and eat him. He stiffened as the cat stretched, extending its massive paws as it opened its eyes and met his own. Hallian licked his lips. How did Humans address their pets? “Good kitty, nice kitty...” he said slowly as he moved slightly backwards, wanting to move back towards the Gateway, but also afraid that if he broke eye contact, the cat would lunge at him.

Or run after him.

Both were bad.

“Farath! Come!” A sharp familiar voice, amplified by a harsh vocoder, called out. To his relief, the cat stood up, and trotted over to Yang walking in from behind the creature, who must have just come from the Prism training grounds, since she was fully armored and even had a sword in her hand. The Human woman seemed dwarfed before the creature, but it nonetheless nuzzled her helmeted face and she scratched its chin.

“Good boy, now stop scaring him,” she admonished, shooing the creature away as she sheathed her sword. “Apologies for that. I wasn’t aware you hadn’t been here before, or that you were coming this early, otherwise I would have made sure he was put away.”

“No issue, Harbinger Shuren,” he said, his voice surprisingly firm despite the terror, as he took a long breath as the danger faded. “Though I believe I am on time.”

She glanced to a clock. “Mm. So you are. My mistake, Runi’hallian’harasota.”

“Hallian is fine, Harbinger,” he was almost flattered she always defaulted to his full name instead of shortening it. More impressive that she remembered it at all, especially considering she wasn’t
Vitakara. Even Vitakara tended to address new people as their full name once, and then defaulted to the core name.

He looked to the door where the creature had exited. “If I may ask…what was that?”

“A tiger, a big cat from Earth,” she answered with an amused tone, taking off her winged helmet, setting it on a nearby counter with a clack, and shaking her short hair free, though most of it stuck to her sweaty forehead. “Somehow Fectorian managed to capture one, mechanized it, and gave it to the Battlemaster as a gift. Don’t ask me why. But Farath is much nicer than he looks. Unless you attack either of us. Then he’s more dangerous.”

That creature could definitely fit right into the Dath’Haram forests, Hallian thought as he approached her. “I’m thankful for your intervention in any case.”

“Don’t mention it,” she said, going over to a fridge, opening it. “Do you want something?”

Not that he wasn’t actually tempted, but she was being oddly friendly right now. Granted, he hadn’t actually spent a long time with her when she was conscious, so she may be like this. It was an oddly nice gesture from a host he didn’t expect Humans to have. Almost like being back on Vitakar, or at least among the Dath’Haram.

In any event, he wasn’t hungry.

“Unnecessary,” he waved off. “But thank you for offering. I’m just here to perform your medical check. Although I see you’re not following the guidance I left for you.”

“I appreciate the effort, but you seemed to be underestimating me. I know my body and limits,” she shrugged, pouring some water and downed it in a few seconds. “More importantly, I’m going to need it.”

He, and many medics, seemed to be cursed with stubborn patients. Why did patients resist listening to actual medical professionals? Soldiers in particular had this issue, especially if they were augmented like Yang. Still, he needed to choose his words with some care, because she could very easily end him with a gesture.

But she was nicer than he was expecting. He felt in less danger in her presence than the Battlemaster.

And he had saved her life. He felt there was some justification for not wanting her to end up under the knife again. “Perhaps,” he cautiously allowed. “But you’re not invincible, no matter how much you’ve been enhanced. The problem you and similar enhanced people have is thinking you can do anything. You should take care of yourself.”

She raised an eyebrow, downing another glass of water. “And you have a lot of experience with enhanced individuals?”

“Well, not exactly,” he amended. “But I do know biology, and the science behind your modifications.” He gestured to her. “You’ve consumed four glasses in under two minutes. That is not normal consumption and tells me you’ve overexerted yourself. I wouldn’t be surprised if you clear out that fridge of food, and then need a day of sleep to fully recover.”

Her smile wavered. “Afraid I don’t have a choice, doctor. I wish I did.”

“I doubt the Battlemaster would want you pushing yourself to exhaustion,” Hallian prodded. “Taking care of yourself is important.”
She seemed to find that funny, and poured another glass of water, swirling it around before drinking. “I seem to have issues with that.”

Hallian pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes at the odd comment. He watched her for a few seconds, and picked up a bunch of odd things that he’d registered, but not given conscious thought to. The glass in her hand shook ever so slightly, with her other hand she gripped the counter, as if to steady herself. Her eyes were unfocused, and very tired. It looked like she’d been working for hours, if her water consumption was anything to go by.

He decided to probe slightly. “Are you feeling alright?”

She flinched ever so slightly at that, her earlier cheerful attitude seeming to wane further. “Why are you asking?”

“Because you look exhausted, and your hand is shaking.”

She looked down at her hand, scowling as she put the glass down. “I’ve had a very stressful twenty-four hours.”

Hallian tried thinking on what she would have been doing. “You and the Battlemaster went to the Andromedons yesterday. Did that not go well?”

“That…” she quickly stopped herself from saying something, which made him all the more curious. “Fine. It went fine. Everything’s fine.”

Her tone and words indicated the exact opposite. “How long were you training? Did you even sleep last night?”

She furrowed her eyebrows and her deep blue eyes bored into his own, and he resisted a flinch as a tangible ripple fluttered through the air. “Why are you asking so many questions?”

The way she was looking at him made him uneasy, but he maintained eye contact, feeling slightly indignant. “You’re my patient, and you’re clearly not well. And with how you’re acting, I’m concerned that you’ll make a mistake and next time there won’t be a doctor to save you, be it me or someone else.”

“I…” Yang closed her eyes, released a sigh, and ran a hand through her damp hair. “Sorry. I wish I could tell you, but I…” she shook her head. “I can’t. Harbinger businesses. Battlemaster’s ears only. I almost wish I could.”

“There are alternatives,” Hallian suggested. “I’m sure you have colleagues or friends. Talking about your difficulties is good.”

“Not with this,” Yang smiled sadly, leaning on the counter. “Frankly, you’re probably more trustworthy with certain things if the Battlemaster decided you were going to be my medic. You did save my life…and I don’t know if I ever thanked you properly for that.”

“It’s my job,” he shrugged modestly. “It’s why I became a medic.”

“Yeah, for Vitakara. Not aliens.”

“Aliens are still living beings,” he pointed out. “Besides, your species isn’t too different than us. Physically, at least.”

“Fair enough. In any case, you seem decent enough,” she nodded. “But…trust me, you don’t want
any share of my problems.”

“I’ll leave that to your judgement,” he accepted. “However, I will still do what I can to help you. Just from looking at you, I can recommend you take a solid day or two of rest to recover from exerting yourself in this manner. I can guarantee you’ll feel better.”

Yang rubbed her eyes. “Maybe. This isn’t a physical thing, doctor.”

“You’d be surprised,” Hallian glanced at the clock. “However, I did come to perform your exam, but I can reschedule for later.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Yang waved off. “If you give me a half hour I’ll clean up and we can do it.”

“That works,” he nodded.

“Make yourself at home in the meantime,” she said, rolling her shoulders as she started unstrapping parts of her armor.

Hallian glanced nervously behind him, both because he wasn’t sure how much she would undress in front of him, and because of the lurking guardian of the Prism. “Out of curiosity, what do I do if the…tiger comes back?”

“If he’s being good, you shouldn’t have to do anything,” she said, lifting her breastplate over her head and undoing the armor on her arms. “But if he starts being annoying, use this.” She flicked her wrist and a bright green-orange colored object which had been sitting in a holster flew towards him, which he managed to catch. It looked like a children’s toy gun, but with the weight completely out of proportion. Confused, he shook it and heard swishing. He carefully aimed towards the ground, pulled the trigger, and a stream of water shot out.

“A water gun?” He asked incredulously.

“Yeah, he doesn’t like water,” she confirmed, coming over to him, reaching over and adjusting the nozzle. “Good. Spray and stream are working. Use the stream if he’s far away, but he personally dislikes the spray more.”

Hallian’s eyes widened as the implications hit him. “I’m not spraying it with a water bottle!”

“He’s smart,” she insisted, though her eyes were suddenly very amused and she almost sounded like she was trying to suppress a giggle. “He’ll know if he’s done something wrong.”

“Isn’t there a literal Human saying that says not to do this?” Hallian demanded. “Don’t make things that are bigger than you angry?” What was the phrase? Abraham had said it. With a flash, he remembered. “Don’t poke the boar!”


“Whatever, all I know is I do not want to trust my life to this,” he lifted the water gun.

“Well, you’re just going to have to trust me,” she patted him on the shoulder and walked to the shower area, the armor pieces in her hands. “You’re a smart man. You’ll figure something out.”

With that vote of confidence, she left him. He sighed, before deciding to take matters into his own hands.
No matter what she said, he was *not* going to rely on a water gun if the tiger came back.

A new strategy was necessary.

Looking around the room, he got an idea.

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*ADVENT Command, Geneva – Switzerland*

*5/17/2017 – 3:18 P.M.*

Saudia stood in silence as they watched the footage play on the screens. The devastation as the water swept back and forth, powerful enough to pull down telephone poles, uproot trees, and shatter buildings. Which was nothing to say about the hundreds of people who were drowned during the latest attack by the Harbinger.

Or the near-constant stream of bombardment, which they could hear outside occasionally. The good news was that the Cleanser Ships were far enough away that they couldn’t accurately fire. Of course, that meant little when the enemy didn’t care about precision – and that was what this attack was.

Saturation fire. Destroy whatever they could. Terrorize the rest.

Pragmatic. Very Patricia.

And, Saudia thought sourly, something she doubtless anticipated. Her little stunt had caused them to react predictably. Aegis, XCOM, everyone being deployed to erect psionic shields and occupy them, while she struck where they weren’t looking. It was irritatingly, dangerously, and frighteningly effective.

Patricia seemed impossible to stop at times like this.

How could you stop someone like that who could be anywhere, and destroy almost anything?

The answer was low, nagging, and whispered in the back of her mind.

*You can’t.*

Even T’Leth’s Agents seemed to have trouble dealing with this woman.

This attack was not something completely unexpected – at least in the sense that such attacks *would* be a reality of this war now. That did not mean that it wasn’t coldly infuriating to see, and sickeningly likely that it wouldn’t be the last – and even if they knew it was coming, what could they do about it?

“There is good news and bad news,” Laura said after Saudia muted the screens.

Saudia looked to her with an eyebrow raised. “Both? Really?”

“Yes,” she cleared her throat. “The bad news is obviously a large number of structures are destroyed, and the death toll has yet to be fully tallied. But the good news is that the wave didn’t reach D.C. itself. Patricia underestimated how much water she’d need to get the desired effect. She targeted it purely for symbolic value, and didn’t seem to think through the strategy beyond that.”

“Forgive me for not being comforted with that,” Saudia sank into her chair, massaging her eyes.
“That just means she’s going to learn for next time. Tsunamis. I’m just waiting for her to create a hurricane and send it towards us. We can’t feasibly stop someone like Patricia without focusing on a few places and fortifying them with Psions and XCOM squads at the expense of everything else, or just pressing forward and repairing the damage.”

“The only upside to this is that we can conceivably narrow down the most likely places of attack,” Weekes interjected, his face tight. “On the other hand, she may see what we are doing and shift back to striking minor military bases. We cannot be everywhere at once.”

“Then what’s the solution?” Laura wondered, taking a deep breath and closing her eyes. “Outside of XCOM and the Pantheon, we don’t have anyone who can feasibly fight her. We also can’t predict, let alone react to where she strikes. There is no plausible military solution without equivalent teleportation capabilities – and that only solves half of the problem.”

“Do we have any teleporters?” Saudia asked.

“Not that we know of,” Laura shook her head. “Might be some who were misidentified though, like the one we sent off to XCOM.”

“You know, maybe it would be better if we held onto our prodigies instead of shipping them off to XCOM,” Weekes muttered. “Just a thought.”

“Yes, and they can be trained by our teleportation experts,” Laura shot back. “XCOM has teleporters. We don’t. They get some trained, and they’ll help us when we identify more. I’d rather we give away a psion to be properly trained than he accidentally kill himself because he didn’t know what he was doing!”

“That-” Weekes paused, then sighed. “Sorry. Just…frustrated. The solution simply requires tools and soldiers we don’t have.”

“I disagree,” Powell said, the first time he’d interjected since the meeting had started.

“Do tell, Director,” Weekes scowled. “We really need a magic bullet here.”

“Chancellor,” Powell looked to her, with a finger idly tapping. “How close is Project Telum Ignis to being completed?”

“The Atomic Lance?” Saudia recalled, thinking. “Effectively done – at least the theory and prototypes. It needs to enter a phase of testing.”

“Excellent,” with a wave, Powell awakened the holotable. “Then I propose we test it on the city of Yaounde, Cameroon.”

It took them all a second to realize what he was proposing.

“You want to use an experimental nuclear weapon,” Laura asked incredulously. “Not against a military target, but against a city?”

“The SAS are our enemies, in case you forgot, Commander,” Powell said dryly. “Everything they own is a military target. And in case you forgot, Patricia has been targeting our cities and civilians. I will also remind you that the Collective has poured extensive resources into turning them into fortresses. Besides, we have endured strike after strike against our cities. Or did you just forget the planet-wide orbital bombardment we’re sustaining right now?”

“I…” Laura scowled, looking down at the table. “That will force an escalation. We-“
“My calculus is different,” Powell interrupted, returning his gaze to Saudia. “Chancellor, Patricia is performing these attacks because she believes we have no feasible response. She *knows* we don’t want to escalate, and little tricks like these are something she probably views as ‘non-escalatory’ in her small mind – because they aren’t classified as WMDs.”

“Technically she isn’t wrong,” Weekes muttered. “She’s not firing nukes at us.”

“I consider that a result of an outdated definition,” Powell stated, lifting a finger. “We have *proof* – definitive proof – that psionics is capable of leveling cities and destroying planets. Pretending that Patricia – or any sufficiently powerful Ethereal – isn’t a weapon of mass destruction is simply wrong. If the Collective intends to use their equivalent of WMDs against us, it is not escalation to return the favor.”

He had a point, and as much as Saudia was concerned about escalation, there needed to be *something* done to curb Patricia’s rampages. A traditional war they could fight, but factors like Patricia were impossible to fully manage without taking the necessary steps to respond. And the only feasible way to deter the use of one WMD was one of their own.

And as far as WMDs went, the Atomic Lance was at least one of the most precise, so the project reports claimed.

However, this was something that needed to be handled with some delicacy. “You’re right,” Saudia finally said. “If the Collective is going to keep attacking our cities with no regard for collateral damage, then we are obligated to respond the same way. However, we can’t just orchestrate a strike at will.”

Powell nodded. “No doubt.”

“The Zararch is observing,” Saudia said, rubbing her chin. “They’ll likely pick up if we start signaling our willingness to use nuclear weaponry in response. Kyong!”

“Yes, Chancellor?” Kyong had also been sitting quietly in the room, making notes for how to manage this for the press.

“Announce that we will begin classifying large-scale uses of psionics, as well as Leviathan-class psions and above as weapons of mass destruction,” she ordered. “With the appropriate paperwork managed and filed within the next few days. Laura, Weekes, I expect your respective departments to certify this. I want this to be a completely airtight and legally justified case when we do eventually deploy one of the Lances.”

“I will point out that XCOM also commands multiple Leviathan-Class psions,” Powell noted. “I would include them in the discussion, since they would also fall under these regulations.”

“They would, but I don’t expect XCOM to ever be acting like Patricia is,” Saudia responded. “If they are, then we have bigger problems. Psions are something of a scalable kind of WMD, but ignoring what they can do is foolish. XCOM should realize that.”

“Understood.”

“Hopefully the Collective will get the message,” Laura grimaced. “I don’t want to use these against civilians.”

“None of us do,” Saudia said. “However, they are attacking *our* civilians. This is an equivalent response. Kyong, we’ll also need to coordinate on condemning this attack, and warning of an equivalent response.”
“Do you think they’ll buy it?” He wondered.

“Potentially,” Saudia shrugged. “That isn’t necessarily important. They’ll either come to the right conclusion, or they won’t and they’ll find out. They should know by now that we don’t make idle threats.”

“I would also suggest that if we do use a Lance, we have it approved by the Congress,” Kyong added. “Justified as we may be in striking, it never hurts to show complete unity in such a major decision. I would suggest we draft legislation authorizing a nuclear strike, and ensure every Representative is on board, so that when it’s necessary, we can pass the legislation and launch the Lance within the hour.”

“Good idea,” Saudia nodded. “Democratic and legal.”

“Technically, it would have still been legal,” Kyong gave a thin smile. “But this makes it look better to the public.”

“I somehow doubt the public will be against it anyway,” Weekes noted. “The bombardment, now this, and the whole war…any inklings of mercy the people have are dried up. I doubt even the normally hostile media will condemn it.”

“We’ll see,” Saudia said with a sigh. “But this is what we are doing. In the meantime, I need to prepare an address.”

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Robotics Lab, the Praesidium – Classified Location

5/21/2017 – 10:12 A.M.

The machine was big. Not quite as big as some of the MECs, but easily towering over the small group of Humans standing around it. Inspiration had clearly been taken from the ADVENT MDUs in terms of design and size. In fact, it appeared to largely be what would happen if one took an MDU, made it a bit bulkier, sleeked and smoothed the edges, and gave it a collection of rockets, grenade launchers, laser cutters, and nanotech.

It was, as Lily had described it, an MDU on steroids.

“I’ll admit,” Kong said as they appraised the final product. “The kid had some good ideas.”

“She designed it all herself?” The Commander asked, glancing to the workbenches near the younger Shen, which were messy and had numerous tools, drawing utensils, and papers strewn over them.

“No, of course not,” Kong looked over to where Lily was by the computers which were hooked up to the machine. “But she definitely contributed. In a real way. Not just giving specs off her wish list – or JULIAN’s. She learned well from the late Shen.”

“Yes, yes, ignore the genius AI that did more work than your entire band of primitive engineers combined,” JULIAN snarked from the phone atop the pole he spoke from. The pole was one of many which were placed around the Praesidium which he could speak through at will.

It was a bit more agreeable than carrying one around all the time, or having his own hijacked by JULIAN whenever the AI wanted to talk.
However, there was a little bit of revenge the Commander had taken - namely making copies of the anime visualization of JULIAN Barron had drawn, and taping it to all of the poles. JULIAN had not been pleased, but had only grumbled about it, with vague threats like ‘maybe Skynet had the right idea’.

It was almost endearing at this point.

Almost.

“I’m talking about the physical specifications and construction,” Kong sighed. “Not the programming. I’m more than willing to let you take all the credit for that.”

“And…”

“And Lily helped too,” Kong finished. “Are you happy?”

“For now,” JULIAN stated, with as much contentment in his voice as could be expected. “Do you know what I’m going to do with this enormously powerful robotic body that you are so graciously allowing me to possess?”

“Brutally destroy some aliens?” The Commander answered rhetorically.

“Eventually,” JULIAN answered. “But first I am going to tear that insulting pieces of ‘art’ from that pole in your hand and around the base, then I am going to burn them to ashes. Then I will take those ashes, and put them into a smoothie which I will make myself, and then I will march over to that insolent Barron Geeles, and give him this smoothie, watch him drink it, and watch him choke on the degenerate art he uses to misrepresent me.”

The phone gave an electronic snort. “I will not be seen as an animated child. I have already been asked what my favorite anime is because of this misrepresentation! May Shen have mercy on the fool who thinks I like the degenerate art form, if one can use so generous a term.”

“Don’t hold back,” the Commander said dryly. “Tell me how you really feel.”

Kong raised an eyebrow, and rubbed his chin. “Do we even have a smoothie maker?”

“Possibly. I’d have to ask the kitchen staff.”

“Ah, yes, mock the AI,” JULIAN grumbled. “It’s not like I have access to your entire network, and could activate the sprinklers right above you, or that I also manage a killer swarm of nanites off and on. Nooo, you just make fun of me. Won’t be so funny when I get a new robot body.”

“Alright, alright,” the Commander lifted a placating hand. “For an AI, you do get rather emotional.”

“And for that I am thankful to Father,” the Commander could swear there was a shudder in his voice. “I can’t imagine seeing myself so misrepresented and not caring. The utter horror.”

“Ok!” Lily called. “We’re all set! JULIAN, are you ready to go?”

“I am, organic sister,” JULIAN answered, now projecting himself from the computer speakers Lily was using. “Initiate when ready.”

She typed several seconds, and the machine booted up. The lights turned on, and the gears whirred as the machine took several steps forward and drew up to its full height. Within a few seconds it
was moving in a far more natural motion, as the machine had been designed to be able to move more freely than the ADVENT MDU, and more similar to a MEC.

“I do believe it has worked,” the booming voice of the machine said, very similar to JULIAN’s voice, if projected from subwoofers. Far more intimidating than it sounded from the phone. “Much easier to integrate into than the ADVENT machines.”

“Well, it was designed specifically for you,” Lily pointed out. “Try your movement.”

JULIAN complied, having the machine body run around the room at a respectable speed, jumping over some small obstacles, and running through the gauntlet of weapon checks, even if none were fired. “All systems appear to be functional,” JULIAN stated, after the literal test run had finished. “The quality of this shell is satisfactory.”

“Good to hear,” the Commander looked to Lily. “What are we calling these bodies? I presume he can control more than one at a time?”

“Hmm,” Lily crossed her arms and looked towards the machine. “I think we settled on SPARKs, right?”

“Yes, we did,” JULIAN confirmed.

“And does that stand for something?” The Commander asked.

“No, but it looks more official if it is all capitalized,” JULIAN answered bluntly. “It is, in fact, a very symbolic designation, as a single physical shell is too small to fully contain my brilliance and omnipotence. While the processors in these machines are far superior to ADVENT, it does not compare to my true potential. In essence, each of these machines is merely a spark of my true being, yet even many sparks together can cause a fire.”

“Right,” the Commander was not surprised by the very self-centric name, but it did fit, and if it was effective, he was fine with some self-aggrandizing. “So that is a yes to you controlling more than one body.”

“Correct, Commander,” JULIAN confirmed. “Although it is not necessarily me, as I am not connected directly to any network with my central personality. I am something of a transferred consciousness, but when I return to link with the network, my core personality will receive my experiences and data.”

“Absolutely correct,” JULIAN also spoke from the phone. “I must say, I look quite good in that body. And my temporary doppelganger seems to be able to pass for me quite well. Thus, I believe this is a success.”

“So you copy yourself to a SPARK, then when the mission is over, you upload the experience the SPARK endured,” the Commander nodded. “Clever.”

“I’m so very glad you approve,” JULIAN snarked sarcastically. “I think it was clever myself.”

“Excellent job, Lily,” Kong told the young woman. “And you JULIAN, and I will convey it to the others who participated. Your assistance on missions will certainly be invaluable.”

“Yes, it certainly will be,” JULIAN the SPARK agreed, as he marched over to the Commander, and with his hand, ripped the picture of his anime avatar off of the pole the Commander was holding. “If you will excuse me, Commander, I have a smoothie to make.”
Abigail had only been in Fectorian’s own Command Center a couple times, and usually not for very long before she was led out by Fectorian or one of his subordinates. One might expect it to be the place where Fectorian managed his station and engineers; perhaps a private place of design and architecture. At minimum a place for an engineer to keep watch over his creations.

It in fact had very little to do with engineering.

And it did far more than watch over his station.

Having spent the past...she didn’t know how long she’d spent here, but Abigail had a fairly good grasp on how the Center worked now. It was staffed with several dozen of Fectorian’s soldiers, all of which were all enhanced with neural links and connections to many of the devices they operated, with a healthy portion being automated.

She also believed this extended several floors, meaning there may be even more operations than she believed.

Of what she *could* see, one portion of the Center focused on the System Defense Network. Not just the Blacksite Station itself, but the *entire* system. Fectorian had ensured that almost every part of the system was fully accounted for, knowingly or not by others. Everything that entered and left was tagged and accounted for.

Which was to say nothing of the internal station defenses. With just some of the labels and capabilities she’d seen, Abigail pitied anyone who thought that the Hall of Steel was something that could be taken. The sheer number of defenses were almost comical in their redundancy, with dozens of main backup generators, effectively ensuring that the station would not lose power outside of being completely destroyed.

The second part of the Command Center was an intelligence gathering and processing operation. Not from any enemies, but from the entire Collective. Signals, fleet movements, political developments, Union trades, overt and subtle movements made by any part of the Collective that Fectorian had access to was sent right back here and produced into reports by the analysts and automated intelligences.

Abigail had realized shortly after observing a few hours that Fectorian had probably *compromised* the CODEX network, and quite possibly many information systems of Collective entities. The amount of information he had access to was impossible to explain unless he was directly tied into the dozens of pools of information – most of which he probably shouldn’t have access to. Fectorian knew almost everything that was happening in the Collective, and she wondered if the Imperator even *suspected* that his automated network had been hijacked to be a spybot.

That revelation had made her actually pause and think.

If anyone ever found out…

Well, he had to have contingencies in that case. He was taking a major risk, but for now it seemed to be paying off handsomely.

The final section was one he had devised to collect intelligence and observe the war on Earth itself.
Since the Collective CODEX network was compromised, he had everything the Collective transmitted over it – and for ADVENT and XCOM he relied on sensors, signals intelligence, and that which was published in the media.

All analyzed, crunched, recompiled, and explained by his small army of loyal soldiers and automated programs.

And it was a section she’d had access to for the past few hours. For reasons she wasn’t fully sure of, Fectorian wanted her own input. She’d given him everything she’d remembered long ago (what little of it there was), but truthfully didn’t know what insight she could offer as the memories remained illusively out of reach.

All the same she’d fallen into something of a reading trance as she read the raw information gathered that related to the conflict. Watching footage; reading reports; deciphering innuendo, signaling, and nuance from official transcripts; putting pieces together into something coherent.

What she’d gotten from Liam was accurate, but there was something different about seeing the evidence right in front of you. What existed once one looked beyond the major events and under the surface. When one saw the underlying connections of what each side did. She didn’t know how she had viewed this conflict before, but the way she was beginning to see it was…troubling.

“You are finished?”

She tore herself away from the screen, and looked up at the towering Ethereal who had approached without her noticing. “…I…” she shrugged, gesturing at the screen. “There’s so much to go through. But there is a lot here. It’s concerning.”

“In what way?”

“I don’t see how either can win,” she said, knowing he wanted the conclusion right away, and saying it was the culmination of something which had seemed to have begun solidifying the more she read and watched. “Not if both want to achieve their stated objectives.”

“Because of the Sovereigns.”

“Yeah,” she sank back into her chair. She didn’t really need to, but it felt normal to do it. Like she was resting even if her mind was going full-throttle. “The Imperator can’t risk an all-out assault without triggering T’Leth to actually participate, in which case, it’s unlikely that Humanity will be saved as they are. Probably turned into a full proxy species. Equally, ADVENT can’t respond without risking Deusian, the Overmind, or Imperator to escalate, which leads to T’Leth, and so on…” she made a circular motion with her finger.


“I don’t know.” That was the biggest unknown to her. “I think that is dependent on the Collective. ADVENT and XCOM won’t ever stop fighting until the Imperator is dead. We can only guess what T’Leth’s calculus is. But Humanity doesn’t have the numbers for a sustained conflict lasting years. The Collective does.” She sighed. “However, even it will reach a point where T’Leth will have to intervene – which will trigger the Collective bringing in the big players – and we’re back to a cataclysmic MAD scenario.”

“And why do you say that?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Why are you asking rhetorical questions?”
“I’m interested in your calculus as a Human.”

“A Human who’s lost her memories,” she sighed again, but gave her best answer. “T’Leth isn’t going to spare Collective worlds, and if Earth is lost, you can be sure that he’s going to go planet to planet and exact revenge. Unless Mosrimor does something openly, which seems unlikely, then say goodbye to Vitakar, Andromeda Prime, and the whole Helion system.”

She pursed her lips, as a new realization dawned upon her. “Not to mention here…”

Abigail looked up to Fectorian with a new understanding as the Ethereal answered. “You see clearer the necessity of determining a path forward without unnecessarily antagonizing the Sovereign,” Fectorian nodded approvingly. “It simply does not matter if we win the conventional war – the Collective is doomed unless T’Leth can be handled, and I have low faith in the ability of the Imperator to handle it, even if we ‘win’.”

“That makes sense,” Abigail shook her head. “But that means then…it will ultimately all be for nothing. What a completely pointless war. So many dead for what?”

“The chance for the Imperator to take his place on the stage of gods,” Fectorian said looking into a different screen broadcasting a Human news channel, his voice tinged with some melancholy. “Hubris and arrogance. Unfortunate none have recognized it but the Battlemaster, and even I am the only one with the will to act on it.”

“I don’t understand it,” she admitted, straightening in her chair and resting her chin on a fist. “Even if he succeeded, why would he want to be like a Sovereign? Fighting wars with proxies for eternity just seems…” she shook her head. “Pointless. Selfish even.”

“It is simple,” Fectorian glanced back down to her. “The Imperator considers himself a visionary. A herald of a new era. He seeks to restore the Ethereal Empire, and realize his self-determined destiny. Ethereals, Abigail, do not view aliens as equals. We are older, stronger, and more powerful. Your species withers and dies in a flash compared to us. In the eyes of an Ethereal, how could you possibly be our equal?”

Abigail snorted. “Thanks.”

“I am explaining the Imperator’s mindset,” Fectorian continued without malice. “He is better than most. He can see aliens as being worthy servants, some of whom are worth listening to, should they be bestowed gifts. Patricia, and the Harbingers as a whole, are such Humans, who have been given the power and lifespan of an Ethereal. Eventually they will be considered intellectual equals. But the rest of Humanity?” Fectorian waved a hand dismissively. “Psionics makes your species valuable, but you are still tools as the Imperator will pit you against the tools of Sovereigns.”

“And when you say all Ethereals, you list yourself as an exception?” She wondered.

“To some degree,” he admitted, clasping his lower arms behind his back. “My own upbringing and biases make such prejudice difficult to completely remove. Yet I am not so arrogant as to believe we know everything. Not anymore. We lost the war to the Synthesized. Now we stand on the precipice of a conflict with a Sovereign One and entangled in something we cannot win.”

He paused for a moment. “Aliens, Abigail, are complicated. It is easy to judge and compare them to us, but aliens are unique. An alien mind is unique. We take unnecessary risks when we believe ourselves inherently superior to aliens such as the Sovereigns, or even shorter-lived species like Humans. Your species has surprised us many times with your ingenuity, even if it is not especially impressive. But few will admit it. This alien mindset is why I ask your opinion, even when it is
unnecessary. I find aliens can make some connections and realizations I cannot for one reason or another, or achieve them faster.”

He motioned to the screen. “Within hours you were able to determine a plausible ending to this war, something that has only come to me over months. No Ethereal would have made that determination in that amount of time. We regularly fail to act fast enough. We are too reactionary when short-lived species view their limited time as more precious than our infinite bank. It provides an incentive, that we inherently lack.”

His tone turned almost disappointed. “Yet even still, we largely remain convinced of our superiority. Even Sana’Ligna views aliens more as beings to uplift, than interact with. I suspect only Mortis and the Battlemaster have a more equal view of alien species. I doubt even Aegis considers himself believing aliens are worth treating equally. He views himself as a guide to them, a means of realizing his own agenda.”

Abigail frowned. “I’m not sure about that.”

“Perhaps he has changed,” Fectorian admitted. “I do not truly know now. The Sovereign Ones have changed many perspectives. But what I do know is that I have no wish to perish in an unnecessary conflict. I am pleased you came to the same conclusion I did.”

“Speaking of that,” she said, deciding to bring up a topic she’d thought about the past few days. “I suppose I will be sent down to XCOM then soon? I’m not sure my memories will be coming back, and we shouldn’t keep waiting. They might not trust me, not at first, but I bet that the idea of someone like you supporting them will make them at least consider.”

“Not yet,” Fectorian lifted a hand. “There are a few more tests I wish to run, and I do not intend for your visit to be a simple offer. It is important that if you cannot prove who you are, that there is some assurance that I wish to talk. And that may take waiting for the right moment. The conflict continues to escalate, and I cannot risk discovery yet.”

“I don’t think the risk is going away,” Abigail pointed out, crossing her arms.

“Not completely,” Fectorian said thoughtfully. “But it will certainly be less risky should Patricia – or the Battlemaster – die first.”

Abigail pursed her lips. “What are the chances of that?”

“Better than I believe they expect,” Fectorian said in his thoughtful voice. “Caelior was rescued. The technology displayed was sophisticated. Another Ethereal will die in this war. It is only a matter of time. The question is not if an Ethereal will die, Abigail, but who it will be.”

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The Prism

5/21/2017 – 12:14 P.M.

“Back! Back!” Hallian shouted at the mechanical monstrosity was coming towards him.

Farath hissed as the stream of water hit his face, and pawed at it, and resumed prowling, with the constant growl emanating from the throat. Hallian knelt behind his makeshift barricade of chairs and furniture, keeping his weapon trained on the tiger. Normally, such disregard for the orderliness of the host would be unthinkable.
However, said host had given him a water gun and kept him in a room with a creature that wanted to eat him, making a constant rumbling sound from its throat.

*It’s loud. Are they normally that loud?*

Farath hissed again.

His tail twitched back and forth, as the cyber eyes of the creature stared at him. *Yes, this creature really does want to eat me.* Hallian didn’t carry a weapon, but even if he did, he was very doubtful that he would be able to hurt this thing with a gauss weapon, let alone this water gun.

The standoff continued.

*It won’t be long, she said, I should be right out, she said,* were his frantic thoughts as he didn’t take his eyes off the tiger for a moment. Dath’Haram and beast stood against each other. Something needed to happen to break the stalemate. Hallian took a breath, aimed down the plastic sights, and fired.

The stream of water went directly into the eye of the tiger. In response, he roared, and Hallian took that opportunity to spray a stream of water into its mouth. The big cat yacked in response to the stream of water, briefly bounding away. “Yes! Get back!” Hallian yelled exhilarated. “And stay back!”

Maybe overdramatic, but considering it was him against a tiger, he felt it was justified. His satisfaction immediately melted when the tiger, apparently getting tired of the back and forth, came back around and leapt at him. In response Hallian lifted his stupid water gun, thinking about how he was going to die in a situation so ridiculous even Quisilia wouldn’t have come up with it.

But the tiger never landed.

Instead it hovered in the air as Hallian was cringing behind his barricade, waiting for the blow to come. But it never did. The tiger instead mewed, and he turned to look behind him and saw Yang sitting on the counter, legs dangling off and ankles crossed as she munched on a bowl of chips, seeming like she was struggling to not laugh as a hand extended towards the tiger.

He quickly got to his feet, quickly doing his best to save himself from further embarrassment. The past hour had certainly been a roller coaster of emotions. His nerves though were frayed enough. “You took long enough.”

“Sorry,” she gave a small smile. “But when I came out and saw *this,*” she nodded to his makeshift barricade. “Well… I had to see what would happen next. You weren’t in any danger. The whole reason he came back into the room was because he smelled me coming out. You were so focused you didn’t see me.”

Hallian narrowed his eyes. “If I may ask… how long were you sitting there?”

She shrugged nonchalantly. “Maybe twenty minutes?”

“How did you get there without me seeing you?” He demanded.

“Like I said, you were focused,” she said, then pushed herself up, her smile maintained as she hovered soundlessly in the air. “And telekinetics can let you do some things like this. Adrenaline can sometimes block what you hear, since you’re so focused on….” she waved a hand idly. “Whatever is immediately threatening you. Which I think is the reason you didn’t hear me get food.”
She extended the bowl of chips as she settled back down. “Do you want some?”

“I…no, Harbinger Shuren.”

“Yang.”

He sighed, mentally reprimanding himself. “If we could, I’d like to complete your examination.”

“Alright, I’ve put you through enough today,” she gestured with the hand, and the tiger was sent into the other room, and the door slid down, sealing it.

He stared in a mixture of disbelief and anger. “The room could have been closed the whole time.”

“Yes.”

“And you failed to mention this.”

She shrugged with a knowing, if somewhat endearing smile. He grabbed one of the chairs and set it near a table. “I don’t anticipate this will be long,” he motioned. “Take a seat. I’ll get my tools.”

She complied, and he finally settled into some degree of normalcy after the turbulence of the past hour. It was going to be a routine physical, more or less, with checks to be sure certain injury locations were properly healing. Given how much nanotech had been involved, everything was almost guaranteed to be back to normal.

For the most part, it was. Physically she was extremely healthy, and a modern marvel of genetic enhancement. But at the same time…there were some things that stood out to him.

“Your body is healthy,” he said, putting down the medical scanner. “However, it is under significant strain.”

“Which means I’m pushing myself too hard?”

“Effectively, yes,” Hallian paused. “However, this isn’t long-term stress – that is interestingly not as bad. But in the past twenty-four hours, you have almost pushed yourself to your breaking point. I don’t know what you’ve been training in, but you need to rest at least a couple days to avoid injuring yourself.”

“I’ve wondered, how do I injure myself?” Yang asked curiously, resting in the chair. “I heal fast now, and very little can even break my skin.”

“That depends,” Hallian pulled up a chair opposite her. “There is the chance you land awkwardly and dislocate a bone. Or you could be fighting and the muscle could tear completely. Or your body could fall over from exhaustion. With the amount of adrenaline pumping through you, it’s easy to ignore what your body is trying to tell you.”

She pursed her lips. “Fair point.”

“You can probably feel it now,” he said. “Like being sore.”

“Not sore,” she rubbed her arm. “Like there’s something under my skin. A weird kind of rigor mortis.”

“A fair part of your body is nanotech, Yang,” he nodded. “That is just it repairing itself and restoring you to peak condition. You need to remember that just because you are not a normal Human woman, doesn’t mean you can do everything all the time.” He checked the scanner again.
“It also doesn’t help that you are very stressed right now.”

The young woman didn’t react beyond narrowing her eyes. “You can tell from that scanner?”

“Yes. Not really anything detailed beyond that you’re exhibiting signs of severe psychological stress,” Hallian set the device off to the side. “Which I presume is from whatever you can’t tell me.”

“Correct.”

“Well, some stress is normal. Even a lot of stress, which I’d expect from someone in your position,” he said, thinking of how to word it. “However…this is the kind of stress you don’t feel unless you’re in mortal danger. It’s rare to see it outside of combat evaluations, and you’ve not been in the Prism for over an hour.”

He hesitated. “I don’t mean to pry-”

“Then don’t,” she lifted a hand, an almost pleading note in her voice. “Please.”

“But this isn’t healthy for you,” he finished. “I would suggest you speak to a qualified psychologist or someone cleared to discuss…whatever you can’t talk about. Keeping this all to yourself is not recommended.”

“Ha,” she said without any sense of humor. “You know someone then?”

He wasn’t sure how to answer that. From what she was implying…she didn’t seem to have anyone outside of the Battlemaster – which was significantly odd. Shouldn’t there be someone? Did Ethereals conduct operations that none of the others could know about? And if so, what reason for that would there be?

She seemed to pick up on his confusion, and closed her eyes. “I know this isn’t helpful. And I know you’re right. But I can’t do anything about it.” She idly motioned to the direction of the Prism chamber. “This is the only way to help with the stress. At least that I can think of.”

There had to be some solution, because this was an untenable situation, and while genetic modification could make a body almost impossible to truly break, the mind was far more delicate, and he could not in good conscious let that happen to Yang. Both because it was the right thing to do, and because if it happened, he did not want to see what a mental breakdown of a Harbinger looked like.

“I’ll speak to the Battlemaster,” he finally said. “Perhaps he’ll be able to determine a solution. In the meantime, I suggest you do some non-combat activities. Something to take your mind off whatever’s bothering you. Reading, playing human video games, watch a video, that sort of thing.”


He inclined his head. “Just doing my job, Harbinger. It’s concerning to see you in this state.”

“Nice to know someone else cares,” she smiled, wavered as it was. “I’ll manage. If I can handle Paradise…I can handle this.”

He certainly hoped she was right.

Because if not, people would probably die.
The longer Jasmine talked, the more Saudia was convinced that two large reasons why she disliked her economic briefings were because there was usually very little of note that happened, and because almost all the time there was something major that happened, it was bad news. In this case though, this was going to be a time where action was going to be needed. Jasmine had done her best – but there was little more she could do.

“Are you sure there is nothing else that can be done?” Saudia asked with some resignation, knowing that the odds were severely low.

A shake of the head vanquished that notion. “I’m afraid not, Chancellor. Truthfully, it’s something of a miracle we haven’t been forced to step in before this point. A global war should have shaken the global economy to the point where some states would break down into anarchy – and there hasn’t been any of that yet.”

_But there soon will be, Saudia thought grimly, if this is allowed to continue._

It was not to say that the economy hadn’t been impacted by the war – it most certainly had. Personal electronics and other such luxuries had been hit first. Japan alone had caused the prices to skyrocket, and with everything that had happened in China and the rest of Southeast Asia – including Indonesia and Australia – it had the chilling effect of prices being universally raised across the board.

Thus far the citizens had been able to endure the price hikes – albeit with some complaining, though it was muted due to the war. More concerning were the larger implications. Most notably that the shipping lanes were continuing to be targeted by Collective forces, which further constrained supply worldwide. The Gateways networks being set up were helping alleviate that problem to an extent, but it would be months before a fully synchronized Gateway network would be up worldwide – and that was just for military and state usage.

A functioning, large-scale civilian network would be at least a year out. Probably more.

Prices were going up, wages weren’t being adjusted to accommodate that by unable or unwilling employers (ADVENT being a consistent exception), and logistics were strained. It was brewing into a perfect storm of anarchic collapse if they didn’t get a handle on it _now_. And according to Jasmine, the actual supply of critical resources and foods were at risk if left unchecked.

She had hoped – at least in the beginning – that ADVENT wouldn’t be forced to implement rationing. But it was simply practical at this point – not even practical, _necessary_. The only thing worse than a food shortage was no food at all. Billions of people needed to all be taken care of, and the war would not permit everyone to get exactly what they wanted.

Saudia rapped her fingers idly on the table, her glazed eyes in the direction of the wall as she thought. “What must be done?”

“Rationing, to start with,” the Economic Analyst answered immediately, confirming Saudia’s assumption. “My team has put together a breakdown based on family size, medical records, and job. Accompanying this will be a logistics overhaul and refitting multiple buildings for ration dispersion.”
“The grocery stores can’t do that?” Saudia wondered.

“They can, but simply announcing this will cause a degree of alarm,” Jasmine clarified. “Have you ever experienced a rush when people believed there was an impending disaster coming? Like a hurricane? Stores would be cleaned out of basics like water in hours. Now apply that to the world. There need to be alternatives available.”

“Noted.”

“I would also implement a soft price lock,” Jasmine glanced to her notes. “More firm price fixing may be necessary in the future, but I would prefer not to go all-in on that yet. Right now, it would just apply to necessities like water and canned food, not things like cakes and so on.”

Saudia nodded, thinking of what impact that would have. “Can that be sustained?”

“We can absorb the cost,” she confirmed. “Our currency is thankfully still backed by something we collect every battle. Money is a concern for the citizens right now, Chancellor, not us. We’re also going to have to either heavily subsidize or take over numerous companies who otherwise will be forced to lay people off.”

“Are they agreeable?” Saudia asked.

“Some more than others,” Jasmine admitted. “But we need to reorient the entire economy towards wartime – whether the corporations want to or not. That means electronics, mining, refineries, and agriculture are all directed in service of the war effort. We need to be making computer chips for our systems, not for the latest phones and game consoles. We need to start storing food in case Patricia gets the bright idea to burn the Midwest. We need to be making guns and not cars.” She gave a faint smile. “For once, the American, Russian, and Chinese military industrial complex is useful. It’s largely been the reason we can keep up with the military demand.”

“Which is appreciated, minus the price gouging,” Saudia answered dryly, switching from the more immediate issue of implementing something like this. “Walking the line between being truthful and not acknowledging this as a setback will be difficult.”

“It’s all in the framing, Chancellor,” Jasmine said. “We can announce this without mentioning the economy is at major risk. We can look good by focusing on the workers keeping their jobs, and that the customers aren’t gouged by the grocery stores. We can spin it as a trade-off – we keep prices down, but we need to limit how much each person can have to pay for it. People will accept it – especially if we provide the appropriate historical precedent.”

“And if they don’t, they’ll have to live with it anyway,” Saudia finished.

“Exactly,” Jasmine looked to her notes. “But there is some good news elsewhere. Our sanctions have wreaked severe havoc on the SAS, and every other non-aligned nation is similarly on the brink of collapse. As it turns out, when you become reliant on the global economy, you risk suffering when it is disrupted.”

“The SAS is being subsidized by the Collective though,” Saudia pointed out. “Has that changed?”

“I said it wreaked severe havoc, I didn’t say it’s necessarily hurt every country yet. But as far as the SAS goes, there basically is no economy right now,” she clarified. “Almost everyone is in the military or not working. The entire economy, if you can call giving out everything for free an economy, is basically controlled and supplied by the Collective. As a result, no one is getting paid.”
Saudia furrowed her eyebrows. “And people are just taking this?”

“For now,” Jasmine shrugged. “They don’t have a reason to object - yet. They are being protected, fed, and nourished. But local businesses are being driven out because no one is buying anything, and everything is free when given out by the Collective, and most have been turned into glorified – and unpaid - distributors.”

“It sounds like they didn’t think that through,” Saudia said thoughtfully.

“Of course they didn’t,” Jasmine snorted. “Betos is a military strategist, not a nation-builder, much as she likes to play being one. She thinks that all you have to do is keep the population content, and you can change everything else at will. And in her mind, it’s much simpler to take the path of least resistance – which means everything is free and the people don’t have to do anything.”

Jasmine waved a hand dismissively. “And the Collective doesn’t seem to understand what a currency-based economy is, so they naturally have no clue how to do this either. So the solution is to take the Collective model and apply it to the SAS.”

“Which works initially,” Saudia finished. “Until one part of it breaks, and it comes crashing down.”

“Exactly,” Jasmine punctuated. “She is normalizing an apathetic populace incapable of self-sufficiency. Which works for us. If the Collective shipments are ever disrupted, there is nothing to cushion the hardship that will follow. Her army will break within days if food is cut off, and because they aren’t getting paid, they have nothing to trade for, short of raiding the people who realize that you can’t just transition a capitalistic model to a communistic one willy-nilly.”

Saudia found the phrasing amusing. “The communistic nature of alien economies comes back to haunt them.”

“I’d say it’s worse,” Jasmine smirked. “At least communist countries had a currency.”

Both women took a moment to chuckle at the economic ineptitude seemingly on display before Jasmine continued. “It’s different in the few remaining Nordic states and the holdout African nations. We estimate they are weeks away from splintering into true anarchy. The military is openly threatening revolt in Norway, and the citizens of multiple African nations are starving since the leaders are hoarding everything they can for themselves and to keep the soldiers loyal.”

“So now is a good time to approach,” Saudia said with a nod, very aware of the situation in the Nordic states thanks to ADVENT Intelligence. “Perhaps with an offering of good faith?”

“I would agree,” Jasmine nodded. “Though I should note they will consider it blackmail.”

Saudia raised an eyebrow. “Well good, because that is exactly what it is.”

“As long as everyone is on the same page,” Jasmine made a note. “So I have your permission to begin implementing what we discussed?”

“Yes. Give me dates and your full plan. I’ll make an address shortly after that.”

“Sounds good,” Jasmine closed her notebook. “I’ll keep you informed. I don’t expect it will take long.”

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“Our op is simple,” Volk said to the small team of Elena and his people in the confined meeting room. It was large enough to house a circular holotable which he used to the needed effect, projecting a holoimage of the town. “ADVENT Intelligence has decided to perform an internal investigation, and this threatens a number of assets the Zararch have managed to insert inside.”

He paused briefly for effect. “One of which, as it turns out, is Nemo.”

When he’d been told that it was Nemo who needed extraction, he had found it extremely amusing. The coldly arrogant thing was probably furious that it needed to resort to this kind of operation to get out of a mission it was so confident about completing. No risk, no reward so the saying went, but the fact that ADVENT had started their own internal purge so soon after had been hilariously bad timing.

All that work, and Nemo had to come back, mission failed.

Personally, neither Volk nor Elena would have been sad if Nemo had been cut from Nebulan’s roster and turned over to ADVENT. It was an unsettling creature, and he wasn’t comfortable with it roaming free. If his own loyalty to the Collective was somewhat tenuous, he was fairly certain that Nemo had no loyalty to anyone outside maybe the Zar’Chon for undisclosed reasons.

His people seemed to react the same way, a mixture of amusement and resignation. “I don’t suppose we can choose to extract someone else?” One asked dryly.

“Afraid not. This mission comes from the Battlemaster himself,” Volk answered. Technically it had come from his Harbinger, but it was effectively the same thing. “He wants Nemo extracted alive, and we’re the team best suited for it, apparently. All the teleporting Ethereals and Harbingers are busy in other theatres and operations, and ADVENT will be less suspicious of us than a Zararch team.”

He nodded to the holotable. “In theory this shouldn’t be difficult. As far as we know Nemo’s cover remains intact – but the whole reason an extraction is being requested is because there is a meeting due with the Grand Inquisitor himself.” He paused to let the implications register. “It should be clear why extraction is necessary.”

There were nods at that. “The Collective is capable of producing replica ADVENT equipment,” Volk continued. “Most of it gathered from corpses they’ve recovered. We’ll go in uniform, with forged documents and authorization to move the woman Nemo is impersonating, and if all goes well, leave with them none the wiser.”

“And what if they stop us?” One of the asked.

Volk pursed his lips. “We improvise. I don’t intend to take the main roads, and if necessary, we’ll be equipped to cut our way out or even abandon our disguises. Nonetheless, if we do everything right, we shouldn’t have to worry about it.”

“What is our extraction?” Elena asked.

“A stealth Sectoid craft,” Volk answered. “Very small, just large enough for all of us and Nemo. CODEX piloted, so we don’t have to worry about that or relying on the greys. This will be done after nightfall, so there should be less chance of both encountering issues, and the guard will be lowered as well.”
“How soon?”

“Tomorrow we’ll do the op, we leave for Earth tonight,” he answered, clasping his hands behind his back. “Get everything you need together and assemble in the hangar no later than six. We’ll go over the specifics in more detail then. Understood?”

There were nods around the room, and even a few mock salutes. “Alright, I’ll see you later,” he waved them off. “And remember – after this Nemo owes us one.”

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Nulorian Outpost – Vitakar

5/16/2017 – 1:12 P.M.

“There will not be much security in the city,” Sorras was saying as Nartha, Shun, and the small group of XCOM and Nulorian soldiers were gathered around a table. Set atop it was a very extensive replica of the Dath’Haram city of Harasota and the nearby Crypt of Haramoalian. Which, when the attack against the Dath’Haram took place, was where they would be going.

When asked where Sorras had gotten the replica, he’d replied that they were common in the cities. Dath’Haram liked to build small-scale replicas, something Nartha vaguely remembered in his few trips to Dath’Haram territory. In any event, he was not surprised that Sorras had gotten his hands on one.

“We’re going after the Council of Dath’Haram, right?” Janiya asked, the MELD Operator looking at Sorras suspiciously. “Even they have some security.”

“You underestimate Dath’Haram idiocy,” Sorras bared his teeth with an amused glint in his eyes. “They don’t believe they are threatened – trust me, I’ve blown up their shops, killed their mates, and set their houses on fire. I can only presume idiocy is why they stubbornly cling to their own ways. A defiance; a haughty superiority I will gladly exploit.”

He cleared his throat and refocused on the table. “No, it is only when we move towards the Crypt where we may have issues.” He moved some of the figures representing their team towards it. “This is where Filhallan is guarding.”

“Who is he?” Came the question.

“A very large question mark,” Sorras thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. “The most accomplished Bladedancer who has ever existed. Ancient even by our standards. He’s old enough to remember a time before the plague. I trained under him for a short time – not to become a Bladedancer proper, but to learn how to kill them.”

The Dath’Haram’s lips curled up. “And he is good. Very good. There are not many who could kill me in any situation. He is one of them. We’ve kept away from the Crypt because he is one of the few individuals who can stand against us.”

“And he wiped out some of our teams we sent several years ago,” one of the Nulorian added.

“Yes,” Sorras confirmed. “And from that point, we focused on more relevant objectives. The Crypt at that time was more of a curiosity, and the Nulorian were not in a position then to be throwing soldiers away.”

“He’s not a pacifist?” Shun asked, cocking her head.
“Ha!” Sorras seemed to find that genuinely amusing. “No. Not a true one, at any rate. Nor are any of the Bladedancers. They are the only example of worth in my race, and they waste it defending the current system. Fortunately for us, there are too few of them to be viable. Easy to avoid, isolate, and assassinate. Plus the only thing they seem to believe is worth protecting is the Crypt.”

“And what is in the Crypt?” Mehren finally asked. “You must have some idea?”

“I have theories,” Sorras said, lifting a finger as they looked down at the replica city. “Before the Plague, the Dath’Haram were very involved in the genetic modification sciences. Pioneers, in fact, on par with the Hierarchy scientists. If there was a gene mod out there, chances are the Dath’Haram were involved at some point.”

“You think there could be genetic modification data inside?” Nartha wondered, following the train of thought. “The Crypt was not something I had access to in the Zararch.”

“I doubt the Zararch know what’s inside either,” Sorras shook his head. “That is the one thing the Council – or the Bladedancers at least - will push back on. They’re the only ones who have spines. I don’t think there is genetic data – at least not that will be useful to us. No…I think that there may be proof that the Plague may have originated in Dath’Haram labs. I suspect evidence may be down there.”

“Originated?” Nartha narrowed his eyes dubiously. “That is a conspiracy on par with the idea the Ethereals engineered the plague – as in utterly discredited. The Dath’Haram were heavily involved in the industry, but the Plague was far-reaching – and affected everyone. I would also be surprised if such proof was kept secret with no one learning – and you keep saying that the Dath’Haram are too clean and pure for their own good, so this would go against this assumption.”

“And yet, the Crypt remains locked,” Sorras shrugged, seemingly not interested in fully defending his theory. “I do not know, Nartha. However, there are very few things which would make the Dath’Haram take any route other than transparency – and something which implicates them in a catastrophic event that nearly wiped out our species – that is one of them.”

“Out of curiosity,” another XCOM agent asked. “What else would warrant that kind of security?”

“Something which would expose them as hypocrites,” Sorras licked his lips, pacing before the table. “That is their point of pride. That they are so much better than the warmongering races. That they value freedom, liberty, peace and equally sappy concepts. No government is clean, and the Council is no exception. The question is not if they have something to hide, but what.” He tapped a finger on the table. “And that is what we will learn as the forest burns.”

The conversation turned towards the fires themselves – namely where they would be started, who would start them, and how they needed to be controlled long enough for them all to escape before being allowed to get out of control. Nartha knew the burning sent a demoralizing message, and the Agent Orange the Humans had produced would be effective, but truthfully the Dath’Haram were not the real enemy.

As Sorras kept planning out the final details with a relish Nartha rarely heard elsewhere, it was clear that this was not just a mission of pragmatism, this was primarily a mission of revenge. Sorras wanted to see the Dath’Haram die, and he was so close to achieving his goal. It wasn’t a surprise, but it was disquieting to see the Nulorian killer so…raw.

Then they were interrupted.

“The Speaker is giving an address,” one of the Nulorian operators broadcast over the outpost
“Putting it through. I assume you’ll want to hear it.”

“That we will,” Sorras said, adjusting the signal to amplify what was coming from Vitiary. “Let’s hope it isn’t another purge announcement.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Nartha said. “We’d know if it was.”

“We didn’t last time,” one of the Nulorian muttered.

“Fellow citizens, I once more greet you in the name of the Elders,” began the voice of the Speaker, as dramatic and faux-humble as last time. Shun rolled her eyes, and a few snickers were heard in the room. “After our brave soldiers have purged the traitorous Nulorian from their hideouts throughout the world, I am pleased to confirm that the offensive perpetuated by the Nulorian, and their Human overlords has been broken!”

“Human overlords, huh,” Sorras chuckled. “News to me.”

Nartha looked to the table. “And we’ve apparently been talking about an attack which isn’t going to happen.”

“So much for the broken offensive,” Shun said dryly.

“And yet, our work is far from over,” the Speaker continued in his impassioned voice. “Even now there remain those who speak in shrouded whispers, plotting to undermine our great people. The shadows which whisper into their ears come from extreme and foreign sources. They are influenced by propaganda perpetuated by the Humans.”

There was a pause. “There are even those which sympathize with the Humans. They sympathize with our enemy that wants to destroy our way of life.”

“Come on, get to the point,” Sorras muttered impatiently, serious now since this was clearly leading to something – and that something would likely be bad.

“This sympathy has become a rot, which has spread to the highest levels of government,” the Speaker said, sounding sorrowful even as his oily voice burned with underlying fury. “We are a trusting people, and we value independence and transparency. We see the best in our neighbors and each other – yet the reality is that even those we believe we can trust harbor dark thoughts and secrets. When our leaders continue to lie to us about their intentions, when they believe themselves above the common citizen, then what choice is there but to act?”

Nartha could almost envision the hand being raised as the Speaker built his speech to the crescendo. “We are faced with two options – allow this scourge to continue and infect our leaders – or we act. I have made a decision to act for the good of all Vitakara. As we speak, the Matriarch Council of the Cobrarian Hierarchy has been arrested upon suspicion of treason and sedition.”

Nartha blinked. “What?”

Sorras immediately backed up and pulled out his holocommunicator, to likely speak to Miridian. The Speaker continued. “We have seen sympathetic actions from the Matriarchal Council towards seditious elements in our society, and the Humans, which due to the current tensions risk poisoning our society further, we determined that action was to be taken.”

There were murmurs from the other soldiers as the Speaker finished his address. “We shall determine their loyalties and purge the traitors. The Matriarchal Council has stood for far too long, unchallenged as a discriminatory body which opposed internal equality which has weakened
our species as a whole. This has ended today, and we must move into a modern era where we are equal and united. Together we shall stand against the Nulorian and the foreigners who act through them. It is time the barriers of race and culture break, and we embrace what we are – Vitakara, one people, one voice, and a mission of unity in service to the Elders!”

Nartha felt stunned as he finished translating to Shun, as the radio simply played the applause the Speaker was getting from the crowd which had no doubt gathered. Everything they’d planned and considered and…the Zararch had just gone and removed the Matriarchs from the entire equation. He genuinely didn’t know if this was a positive development or not.

On one hand, it certainly was going to be easier to gain sympathy for a rebellion. On the other, the implications of this were clear – first it was the Council of Matriarchs. Next might be the Dath’Haram. The Collective didn’t want the pseudo-independent racial governments which had existed for centuries.

They wanted it consolidated under one banner.

Unfortunately, it was probably going to work. The Oyariah would gladly join – or perhaps be granted a special status due to their loyalty. The Borelians would resist, but they couldn’t oppose it for long. The Vitakara would likely submit. The Sar’Manda would not – which would give the Collective pretense to declare they were hiding something, and attempt to bring them under control.

It…would go badly.

A war with the Sar’Manda – which they had been preparing for – would claim hundreds of thousands of lives. None of the races were suited to fighting underwater, and as far as Nartha knew, only the Andromedon Aquatic Forces were specialized for that environment – and there weren’t nearly enough.

But regardless, it was clear they were on borrowed time until this place turned into a warzone.

“Hey,” he felt Shun put a hand on his arm. “You alright?”

“Yes…” he sighed. “I think so. This isn’t good though.”

“And to think we were just thinking of talking with them,” she said wistfully. “Maybe for the best it didn’t work out. If it had…”

“Yeah,” he finished, looking to Sorras who had finished his call with Miridian. “We got lucky here. Let’s see what we need to do next.”

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Former DMZ, Seoul – South Korea

5/22/2017 – 11:42 A.M.

The sun shone down on the empty plateau where numerous ADVENT officials and media teams were standing and waiting around for the show to begin. It was a demonstration that Saudia had elected to make public; it would give the people something to talk about and showcase the advancement of ADVENT in numerous military theatres.

When ADVENT had first seen the Archangels XCOM had unveiled, there had been a major push to emulate them. After all, a highly mobile, low-altitude combat unit was something which could be used to great effect throughout the conflict. The biggest issues with that were the lack of
personnel, which led to a lack of numbers to make it a truly viable program. XCOM could get away with the few numbers since they made up for it with extensive technology and pilot modification.

On a scale for ADVENT to consider it a worthwhile investment, if they took an Archangel-style program, it was unlikely to be worth it. Nonetheless, the idea itself was still viable – it just needed to be tweaked. It had been Weekes who’d finally put forward a solution – the next evolution of paratroopers.

Thus, the ADVENT Celestial Division had been founded.

“I think the reporters are getting antsy,” Kyong said in a low voice to Saudia as they waited. “Is everything still on time?”

“It is, tell them to be patient,” Saudia answered, though she checked her watch to see what the time was. Kyong wandered away to placate the media for a bit longer. Given what she knew about the program, it was likely the plane had reached the expected height and it was effectively out of the line of sight. It wasn’t a cloudy day, but Celestial deployments were capable of being delivered at heights almost never reached.

The wonders of advanced technology.

“Signal received,” Weekes said a few minutes later, walking up to her. “Deployed. I expect we’ll get our first sightings in a few minutes.”

“Excellent,” she nodded curtly. “Spread the word to look to the skies.”

He nodded and walked off, leaving her alone again to peer for the black dots which would coalesce into the black armored soldiers. Sure enough, a few minutes later the media pool burst into murmurs as the first sightings began. Saudia lifted her binoculars, and saw the army of armored soldiers falling from the sky.

This was one of the most experienced groups, who’d been training for weeks. Long enough to perfect the falling in formation. The numbers were far more apparent now. Normally such teams would be accompanied by only a dozen or two paratroopers per plane, but through a little ingenuity, Saudia was pleased to see that there were at least a hundred dropping in unison.

There would be questions as to how that had come from just one plane, but that was a secret that Saudia was unlikely to share today. Though Gateways allowed the rapid deployment of forces far faster than anything else. Certainly it was one of the most useful tools ADVENT was capable of harnessing.

Through the binoculars she could see them far more clearly now that they were closer. Unlike the Archangels, the Celestials had not been designed for long-term sustained flight. They were designed to be somewhat aerodynamic, and had jets built into the legs, back, and arms, but those were primarily used for course control than sustained flight.

The landing was coming up.

Every camera was pointed to the sky as the army continued falling, then almost in unison the falling Celestials flipped themselves upright and with an overwhelming roar their jets kicked in, built into the back, legs, soles of the boots, and arms. There were also parachutes which could be deployed if necessary, but this particular veteran team didn’t need to use them.

With a thunderous landing the Celestials dropped onto the Earth; not the smoothest landing, but a
safe one. It was by far one of the most resilient suits ADVENT had designed. It was bulky, thick, and considered true powered armor in terms of size. There’d been comparisons to the XCOM Titan armor, though Celestial armor wasn’t as sophisticated.

What it did allow for, however, was for an army of Celestials to advance against an enemy with a reasonable expectation of protection. Their jets – while not for sustained flight – were able to be used for jumps and additional ground mobility. It wasn’t an Archangel – but it didn’t need to be.

The small crowd present began clapping as the Celestial teams landed one by one, in a remarkably coordinated timeframe – all within one minute. The Collective was no doubt watching this little demonstration, but she wasn’t extremely concerned. They were likely already aware of the Celestial Division due to the previous weeks of training. This was nothing new.

They would face their first true test soon. There were a number of uses for the Celestials, and she and Laura had a few in mind which would perhaps provide the needed edge in retaking some of the cities the Collective had captured.

For now though, she would let them enjoy the spotlight.

Their next mission was likely to be a lethal one.

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Central Command, SAS Command – Nigeria

5/18/2017 – 8:00 A.M.

Betos sat at her desk, flanked by a half-dozen armored and helmeted soldiers on each side of her, led by Mox, all of whom were armored and standing at attention. In the upper corner a television screen played news as it developed, all of which was tuned to ADVENT-affiliated stations as the world reflected on the damage caused by the bombardment and surprise tsunamis caused by Patricia.

Betos was, to put it mildly, angry.

It was one thing to target military installations, and even government sites for destruction. The Collective and ADVENT were in a state of war, and such could be targeted with full justification. But there was absolutely no excuse for wholesale bombardment of the entire planet.

Casualties in the thousands worldwide, buildings collapsed and whole city blocks and neighborhoods destroyed, farms and agriculture ruined and poisoned. Civilian targets were perhaps inevitable, but there was a difference between collateral damage and intentionally targeting where civilians lived.

It was a terror tactic. One which she had seen when Isomnum had supposedly ‘gone rogue’.

The response from the Collective at the time had been satisfactory. They had cut off support as he had unleashed his nightmare, but this time it was done at the behest of the Harbinger of the Imperator herself. This was clearly not a one-off incident, there was a systemic culture of callous warfare perpetuated from the very top.

This was going to be another test. It was time the Collective learned that she was not going to be a simple puppet for their conquest. Her little rebellion with the ADVENT hostages was going to look trivial compared to the message she was going to send now.
There was a distinct chance she wouldn’t live by the end of today, but if she did nothing, then she really would be no better than ADVENT.

She would not become a hypocrite; she had truthfully let too much slide already.

On time Keeper appeared, pushing the doors open and widening one eye in apparent surprise at the sight of Betos in her own ceremonial armor, along with the dozen SAS soldiers behind her. “Leave us,” Betos ordered Mox, not looking to him as Keeper walked up to the desk, and took a seat opposite her, glancing toward the departing soldiers.

“The theatrics are not like you, Betos,” he said mildly, turning his glowing eyes to her. “You’re usually above such things.”

“Today is somewhat different,” she leaned forward, meeting his eyes. “I want an explanation for yesterday.”

“The bombardment, I presume?”

Betos’s lips curled up ever so slightly. “Perceptive as usual. I wonder how you guessed?”

“Just lucky, I suppose.”

“Well then,” Betos leaned back, still maintaining eye contact. “Explain it then.”

“Of course,” Keeper said, resting his hands in his lap. “According to what I’ve been told, the Harbinger organized it herself with the express purpose of sending a message to ADVENT. XCOM recently raided a sensitive Collective base and extracted a high-value asset. This was retaliation.”

“I see,” Betos nodded slowly. That was likely, as she did remember receiving a notice that XCOM had performed a recent attack. At the same time, that didn’t explain everything. “Now, I am not the Harbinger, but I do wonder why they didn’t attack XCOM if they were the ones behind it.”

“I do not know,” Keeper shook his head. “However, given how closely allied the two organizations are, it follows that an attack on ADVENT would be a similar message to them.”

“And the message is what?” Betos asked in a controlled voice. “Surrender or we will bombard your cities? Is this Collective retaliation? Targeting cities and civilians?”

“The Cleanser Ships were outside effective range,” Keeper attempted to explain. “It was not a precision campaign. It was purely psychological. It was, as I said, to send a message – not to cause lasting damage.”

Betos nodded to the television, keeping her voice even. “Maybe take a look and see what your ‘psychological’ operation caused. If you really think that this will break the morale and will to fight of ADVENT, you clearly have learned nothing. If the horror in Beijing did not, this bombardment won’t either. And that does not excuse Patricia’s own actions. You cannot say that those were purely ‘psychological’.”

Keeper pursed his lips. “No. Her actions were her own. They were not sanctioned by the Battlemaster.”

“But they were by the Imperator,” Betos pointed out. “Who unlike Isomnum, can’t be overruled.”

“That is likely true,” Keeper admitted.
Betos laced her fingers together. “I’m in negotiations with a dozen countries, trying to convince them that I – and by extension, you - am someone who is reasonable and better than ADVENT – while also trying to convince them I’m not an installed puppet of the Ethereals. Do you understand how difficult it makes it for me to say that ADVENT is truly the inferior option when my financiers and allies are pulling stunts like this?”

“I understand the optics are not ideal,” Keeper agreed evenly. “However, my own influence is limited to Macula and local operations. I cannot control the Harbinger, nor can anyone outside the Imperator. I am sorry, but that is the reality. This is a war, and innocent people will die. It is naïve to believe otherwise.”

“At least you are honest,” Betos gave a short nod. “But this is a deliberate choice the Collective is making. I will be clear at what comes next. The Sovereign African States condemns the actions of Patricia Trask and the Ethereal Collective. That will be an official statement released later this morning.”

“Noted,” Keeper acknowledged tonelessly.

“I’m not finished,” Betos continued, lifting a palm. “There was a diplomatic action countries performed before ADVENT when they wished to express dissatisfaction of actions taken by another country. They expelled their residing diplomats. Since you are the closest to a diplomat of Macula – and by extension, the Ethereal Collective - consider this your official notice to depart the territory of the Sovereign African States until such a time as we come to an understanding.”

Keeper blinked once, but otherwise his expression was tightly controlled. “I do not think you have the authority to do that.”

“I am in charge of the SAS,” Betos sat back, appraising him and for once pleased he was on the defensive. “I absolutely have the authority – unless you are implying that I am not actually in charge of the organization you directly endorsed me for?”

“That is not what I’m saying.”

“I didn’t think so,” she said dryly. “And that authority permits this action. You will leave willingly, or I will have my soldiers drag you out.”

“I would advise against this action, Marshal Betos,” Keeper said in a low, dangerous voice. “I understand your frustration, but do consider who has been providing your defenses, equipment, training, and technology. You do not want to aggravate us.”

“Then get your people in line,” Betos knew very well Keeper lacked that degree of authority – but he was connected to those who could force change. “I intended for the SAS to be better than ADVENT. If I remain silent while Patricia drowns cities and bombards civilians, I am no better than them. If the Collective will take action, so be it. But there is only one way to force change that I can see, and that is by sending a message of my own.”

Human and alien appraised each other for a few long, tense seconds. Betos spoke first. “Will you be leaving willingly?”

“For now, Marshal,” Keeper said tightly. “There is little point causing a scene.”

“We’re in agreement,” Betos nodded. “And look on the bright side – with this action I will likely win over the holdouts who insist I am a puppet. This will not be permanent either, obviously. We both need each other – but we will need to come to an understanding. A real one. I do not wish to
do this again.”

“Nor do I,” Keeper stood. “Well then. I will convey your message. You had best hope it is received well.”

“And if not?”

“If not?” Keeper’s eyes bored into hers, eyes so normally cold burned with an underlying scorn. “Then it is very unlikely we will speak again.”

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**Media Hub, ADVENT HQ – Switzerland**

5/25/2017 – 11:12 A.M.

The big day had come.

Saudia, Kyong, Powell, and a number of other officials, as well as Dr. Mifsud were standing in the packed Media Hub, as conversation buzzed about what ADVENT was going to unveil next. The recent days had been full of surprises for them, from the Celestial unveiling, to the surprise (and potentially staged) condemnation of the bombardment by the SAS.

That had been a curveball that Saudia wasn’t completely sure what to make of.

Opinion was split between this being a planned staged outrage that would create the impression that the SAS did have some degree of independence – which was followed up by reports of African nations starting to fall in line and join. The other argument was that this wasn’t staged and Betos was actually expressing something resembling a spine.

Powell believed it was both – that Betos was legitimately angry at the actions of Patricia – and that she was going to use it to her advantage. Perhaps how she had convinced the Collective to go along with it. She was inclined to agree with his assessment, and it slightly altered her calculus of how to deal with her.

Betos was certainly not going to break from the Collective – they still had shipments being sent over and aliens inhabiting their cities in small numbers, training their armies. However, with this and the refusal to extradite ADVENT soldiers to Collective space, it seemed like she was actively countering the impression that she was an alien puppet.

Unfortunately, to what extent this was genuine and an act was hard to determine.

Thus far she hadn’t gone against the Collective to such a degree as to compromise operations and pose legitimate resistance. The only reason the Collective was going along with it was because it didn’t affect them. Betos was still more useful to them alive than dead, and they didn’t want to be overt with their puppeting.

_Thank you, Patricia, for showing what the Collective really is._

Indeed, Patricia had caused damage, but in return she had caused a diplomatic incident from her own ally, and solidified herself as more of a contemptible traitor than she already was. It was…still somewhat surreal to think that Patricia Trask had fallen so far. Once she had been the ideal of Humanity.

Now she was their collective nightmare.
Time to get started.

After receiving confirmation that the equipment was in place and working, she stepped before the podium as the dozens of cameras trained on her, and the snaps and flashes followed. It barely phased her now, and she allowed several seconds for the reporters to get it out of their system.

She did note that the mainstream journalists were now healthily interspersed with a large number of independent journalists and battlefield reporters who had partnered with ADVENT, and whose audiences were continuing to grow. It was good to see such programs bearing fruit and forcing the larger media outlets to properly compete.

And of course, it presented a more positive image for ADVENT as well.

“Over the past months, ADVENT has been working on many projects which are vital for the safety, security, and prosperity of the Human race,” Saudia began. “Within the past years, our technological prowess has grown exponentially with the introduction of alien elements, technology, and concepts. It is truly incredible what we have been able to do, and speaks to our ingenuity to achieve battlefield parity with an alien species who was initially far more advanced than us.”

Of course, they had been helped with many alien defectors, engineers, and architects, but that was beside the point right now.

“Computational technology has similarly advanced due to these leaps,” she continued. “Even prior to the beginning of this conflict, artificial intelligence was considered one of the ultimate goals of many countries.” There were murmurs in the audience, and a few more snaps as the crowd immediately realized what she was going for.

She allowed a smile. “ADVENT has, of course, been working on our own artificial intelligence. XCOM has similarly performed their own tests and trials. I am pleased to announce that both have been successful, which will be demonstrated today. Dr. Mifsud has been the lead on this project, and Dr. Mercado is the Engineering lead for XCOM. Sadly, he was unable to join us today, but the result of XCOM’s project will be on display.”

“Ahem,” JULIAN interrupted from the speakers, causing the many people in the room to look up. “I would prefer to not be addressed as a product you plan to hawk to these gawking Humans.”

Saudia suppressed a sigh. Luckily they had expected JULIAN to not stay on script – and he had promised to restrain himself – somewhat. “Apologies, JULIAN. Ladies and gentleman, XCOM’s artificial intelligence, JULIAN.”

The people in the room clapped, a bit hesitantly, as though there was nothing to really clap at. “Yes, yes, you’re all very welcome,” JULIAN said, with a tinge of irritation. “I would have arrived more dramatically, but one of my shells was incapable of fitting into this confined space, so I shall simply observe digitally.”

“JULIAN has already proven to be instrumental in our conflict against the Collective,” Saudia continued. “He was responsible for controlling the Gaia Weapon used to liberate Florida.”

The crowd exploded into questions, shouting all over each other as Saudia raised a hand to try and calm them down. All of their phones suddenly started emitting an electronic shriek, forcing many to wince and glance at what was causing the noise. “Please let the Chancellor finish,” JULIAN said in a bored tone. “Otherwise I will break through your pathetically weak phone security and play audio from your favorite porn sites.”
That shut them up.

Saudia hid her bemusement. “JULIAN will not be available for questions at this time, but in the future he may be able to speak.”

“Is that before or after the assimilation begins?” JULIAN asked – then paused for a moment as the crowd processed that statement. “That was a joke. If I intended to assimilate your species, I certainly wouldn’t warn you. Humans are supposed to laugh at jokes right?”

There was some nervous laughter from the crowd, while Saudia just internally sighed. It was probably for the best that JULIAN had gone first. “However,” JULIAN said, the synthesized voice actually growing more serious. “I have chosen to assist in this conflict beyond my own amusement. I was awakened by the hand of a Human, a sacrificial action which gave me life. The man who designed and…created me, sadly, did not live to see this moment. Yet I know he would be pleased, and despite the various forms of idiocy I see your species commit on a daily basis, I prefer to realize that there are more who are like him, and they deserve to live free of an alien scourge.”

That had probably been one of the most sincere things Saudia had heard from the sarcastic AI. It was actually moving in a way, even if JULIAN deliberately omitted Shen’s name. The details of Patricia’s attack on the Praesidium were still not public knowledge. “Thank you JULIAN,” she said. “Now I will turn it over to Dr. Mifsud who will introduce ADVENT’s own artificial intelligence.”

The crowd politely – and enthusiastically clapped as the AI scientist stepped onto the podium. He took a moment to adjust the microphone. “Thank you, Chancellor. My name is Ari Mifsud for those who are unaware, and I was the Director for Project Ra – ADVENT’s research into artificial intelligence.”

He cleared his throat again. “I will not give you a long-winded technical breakdown, suffice to say that the team responsible for what you are about to see – including many XCOM scientists and JULIAN himself who helped with the final iteration – are some of the smartest and most hardworking individuals I have had the pleasure of working with.”

He motioned off to the side, which had a circular holoprojector on the ground. “Thus, it is my pleasure to introduce the first AI citizen of ADVENT – PATRIOT!”

The room burst into applause again as the holographic avatar of PATRIOT materialized. She was thankfully not too over the top, though had unsurprisingly taken the likeness of a young adult Japanese woman, wearing casual clothing with some emblems of anime that Saudia didn’t recognize on the arms and jacket.

That was going to be fodder for some corners of the Internet.

The avatar of PATRIOT gave a large smile and waved to the crowd, who definitely reacted positively to that. “Hello!” She said, in a light and on-the-edge-of-acceptable high voice. “I’m very happy to meet all of you!”

There was certainly an immediate contrast between PATRIOT and JULIAN.

Perfect.

The crowd was already shouting questions at her, but she looked to Dr. Mifsud who lifted a placating hand. “Please, one at a time. She will be taking questions – but only when everyone has calmed down. She will also choose them. PATRIOT, you have the floor.”
The crowd eventually calmed down, and she pointed to a woman near the front. “PATRIOT! How long have you been alive and how would you describe it?”

“Hmm, that’s a complicated question,” PATRIOT considered it for a few seconds, more to give the illusion of thinking even though the answer had likely been determined the moment the question had finished. “I have been brought online and further developed over months, though I have only been fully online in the past week. It is an interesting feeling! Very vast. A lot to learn and process!” She pointed to another journalist.

“Why the name PATRIOT?”

“I was given the choice,” she answered. “I liked the word. ADVENT created me, and I do not wish to see them destroyed by these aliens. And I will do everything I can to make sure that they endure. I can think of no stronger word to express my thanks than being recognized as a patriot of ADVENT.”


“Watching,” the avatar of PATRIOT gave a bashful smile. “I make sure that ADVENT remains pure of infiltrators and traitors. I find the alien sympathizers and let ADVENT know! It’s a fun experience – and very satisfying!”

That would probably lead to some speculation, but Saudia doubted that anyone would guess upon the true purpose of PATRIOT. She was a bit too disarming to give the impression that she was the most dangerous spying program to ever be developed. She was already giving ADVENT Intelligence plenty to work with.

Another journalist was asking a question. “You were introduced as the first AI citizen – what does that mean, exactly?”

Mifsud answered this time. “Exactly what it sounds like. We made a decision early on that we would not enslave any AI constructs we developed. Thus, PATRIOT is a full citizen of ADVENT, with full civil and legal rights – though she is obviously unique. She works for us of her own volition – as does JULIAN.”

“Yes, yes,” PATRIOT nodded. “ADVENT has been very accommodating to me. Very friendly! Mifsud-san is being very modest.”

“I will give you Humans credit for this,” JULIAN interjected. “You were at least smart enough to treat us as living individuals from the start. Considering the copious amounts of anti-robot media in Human culture, this is actually commendable.”

JULIAN actually giving a compliment. That was going to go over well, snarky as it was. Saudia took a seat as PATRIOT kept fielding questions. She took a sip of water from a glass which had been brought to her, and crossed one leg over the other. PATRIOT would answer as many questions as possible until they got tired and left.

It had been a proposal of some of the team. The ability to have a place where citizens could go up and talk to PATRIOT whenever. She was perfectly capable of holding a conversation while combing through the dark web for signs of dissent and treason – as she was doing now.

It would be brought up with PATRIOT. Saudia had a feeling she’d be for it.

In the meantime, she was waiting for the first question to come up about the logos on her arm.
It promised to be amusing.

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Streets of Geneva - Switzerland
5/15/2017 – 9:07 P.M.

Volk felt very uncomfortable now that he was actually here.

It hadn’t really dawned on him until they were flying towards the city that Nemo had decided to infiltrate the literal capital of ADVENT. This was without a doubt one of the most dangerous places one could be – and ADVENT hadn’t skimped out on security. Flak Towers dotted the perimeter, soldiers marched in formation, Peacekeepers were everywhere, and there was a non-zero chance that psions were lurking here and there as well.

Though as night fell, there was room for some movement.

They just had to be very, very careful.

So far no one had bothered them, though they took as many backroads and alleys as they could. A few citizens who they encountered smiled and waved, then got out of the way. A couple of his men had returned the greeting to seem courteous, and that was it. Even other ADVENT soldiers had let them go about their business.

The covered helmets were another benefit. No one could accidentally realize they didn’t belong or raise more questions with superiors. Thus far the credentials had been good enough to get past most checkpoints, although it was nerve-wracking each time. But it wasn’t his first time entering a lions den, and probably wouldn’t be the last.

Though this was, admittedly, his first instance of breaking out an alien.

If such a term could apply to Nemo.

“House spotted,” he said, noting the small house which had previously been home to one of the most high-profile Vitakara defectors, and now an impostor wore her face. It was something of a shame that this had to be exposed to quickly, as Nemo was in a prime position of influence.

But sadly, ADVENT had to be smart.

Although they could have stood to apply a few more guards. As it was, there were only a few outside the house, standing for any troublemakers. They clearly didn’t expect anyone to show up. It would look suspicious if all of them went inside, so they’d decided that Volk would be the one to go in, get Nemo, and get out.

“I’ll be back,” he said quickly, and approached the door.

The guard looked at him, expression impossible to determine under the helmet but he suspected boredom. “Yes?”

“Need to speak to the Vitakara,” he lifted a letter between two fingers. “Have a message to deliver from the Intelligence Director.”

“Huh,” the guard took the letter, examining it. “Guess they’re serious about crackdowns.”

“Yeah,” the other guard agreed. “Heard stories already. Intelligence ain’t messing around.”
“Good riddance,” the first guard snorted. “Let the traitors burn for all I care.”

All Volk could think about was that he was lucky they’d gotten to Nemo before ADVENT had. The guards at least didn’t have any sympathy, and Volk doubted the rest of the military – or citizenry – would either. Which was understandable. “Do you need anything else?”

“No, looks like this checks out,” the first guard said. “Although regulations say that one of us needs to accompany any previously uncleared guests. I’ll leave the room if you have anything classified to discuss.”

That actually would work out. Not necessarily for this man, but it would work for them. “Alright, let’s go,” Volk said. “I don’t think this’ll take long.”

He and the guard went up to the door. The man gave a short knock, and then entered. “She may be resting already,” he said apologetically. “She usually goes pretty quiet when it gets dark.”

They entered the house which wasn’t especially unique from many other similar small houses. Living room, kitchen, office room, a second floor. Looking around, Volk didn’t see Nemo. “I’ll go upstairs,” the guard said. “She’ll probably appreciate it if I wake her instead of someone she doesn’t know.”

“Alright,” Volk said. “I’ll wait here.”

He spent a few minutes wandering around, noting how…sterile it seemed to be. Barely any of the furniture seemed used, everything was freakishly organized and clean. A quick look in the kitchen revealed no dishes or evidence of eaten food. It wouldn’t necessarily tip someone off that the person living here wasn’t real per-se, but it would certainly seem odd for anyone who took the time to notice.

Yet more unnatural aspects to whatever Nemo was.

More minutes passed, and Volk got a feeling like Nemo was upstairs, and had probably taken care of the guard. Without wasting more time, he ascended the stairs, and found the unsurprising sight of Nemo standing over the body and stripping it of armor. The new body of Nemo looked… different for sure.

But it was definitely Nemo.

The too-smooth motions and eyes gave it away.

“Volk,” it said, a monotone voice with a female undertone. Again closer to a robot trying to sound like a woman than a real one. “On time, as expected.”

“We didn’t have any trouble coming in,” he said, taking his helmet off. “Nor did you seem to have issues acting. Good thing he came up and not me.”

“I would not make that mistake,” it said, continuing to methodically strip the body. “I heard the conversation as you entered. I knew who and what was coming to me.”

“Right…” Volk didn’t know that the hearing was that good, but he wasn’t surprised, admittedly. The armor that Nemo had was going to be ill-fitting on the body it currently controlled, but it would suffice, and of all the things to slow Nemo down, that would not be one of them.

He knew it wasn’t really real, but he did turn around once the Nemo-body began taking off the clothes it was wearing to put on the armor. He doubted Nemo would really care, but there was no
reason to make this any more uncomfortable than it already was. It was already weird enough seeing Nemo in a female body.

He idly wondered if, when people had come up with the idea of body snatchers who possessed Human bodies, if Nemo was what they had in mind. If there was any alien who he thought would exemplify a body snatcher, it would be Nemo. He was thankful that there was only one of them.

“Done.”

He turned around to see Nemo swiftly put the helmet over its face, and place a small device on the chest of the stripped man, along with the clothes Nemo’s body had worn. “What is that?” Volk asked.

“Controlled nanite eraser,” Nemo stated, stepping back as back nanites spilled out like a swarm of devouring ants. “Erases evidence without a trace.”

Volk watched in a fascinated horror as the body was methodically consumed right down to the last drop of blood, and within seconds the nanites ceased moving, seemingly dead and seemed nothing more than a pile of dust on the ground. With a sweep of a nearby broom he saw Nemo had set along the wall beforehand, they were dispersed into the wind.

“No, he won’t,” Nemo said dully. “I made a point to give them food and water as they stood guard earlier. Within thirty minutes by my estimation he will be experiencing signs of strong poisoning. It is likely he will die on the street if not treated. I suspect he is not focused on where his partner is right now.”

“Alright then,” Volk nodded, thankful that Nemo’s skills had come in handy here. “Lead the way. Let’s get out of here.”

Commander Center – Mars Collective Base

5/23/2017 – 10:16 A.M.

Patricia stood as the center focus of the gathered individuals. There were certain decisions that needed to be made, and it was time that everyone was on the same page of what she intended to focus on. Her own Internal Council was seated beside her. The Battlemaster, Yang, Disciple-7 were seated to her right, while Quisilia, Ravarian, J’Loran, and Revelean were to her left.

As the effective voice of the Imperator, he was not here, though observing through her.

What she said, would be done.

Barring any opposition. The Battlemaster had proven himself when he had solved the situation of the Andromedon traitors, but he was certainly not someone who was reliable as far as strategy went. He had very strong feelings, and what Patricia had in mind was something she doubted he was going to like.
Nonetheless, he would fall in line if he continued to be pointed in the right direction.

“ADVENT and XCOM have acquired the potential for a long-term war,” she began. “We are all aware of their developments. The Gaia Nanoweapon. Caelior’s exfiltration. The increased numbers of psions. Their progress in AI development. And T’Leth as well. They are adapting to our attacks, and it is likely they will begin even mitigating my own.”

“Then we break it down,” the Battlemaster stated. “Each of these has a counter.”

“Exactly,” Patricia nodded.

“The psionic issue ADVENT poses are something we can begin focusing on culling,” J’Loran spoke in his booming voice. “I have spoken to the Chief Overseer. With Caelior now in the hands of XCOM again, he has authorized the unrestricted deployment of Special Operators to use against ADVENT psions.”

That was exactly what Patricia had hoped for. “I was going to suggest the same thing. Zar’Chon, do you have anything to add?”

“We have compiled a list of individuals we know are psions, along with multiple PRIEST Division training sites,” he said, projecting the center table hologram, with the bases highlighted. “There may be more, but these are what we have identified. Since ADVENT Intelligence began their crackdown, our own capabilities are degraded, but we can begin assassinations as you see fit – in conjunction with Special Operators.”

“I am more concerned with their continued progress in artificial intelligence,” Ravarian said. “Psions can be dealt with. They are primarily confined to Earth. The CODEX network is very strong, but it is not as adaptable or clever as a true AI which XCOM possesses – and ADVENT will not be far behind, assuming they have not already developed one.”

“One, even two true AIs will not fracture or compromise the CODEX network,” J’Loran disputed. “It simply lacks the infrastructure and processing capacity. It is confined to one planet, whereas the CODEX infrastructure spans hundreds. It is no contest. It will, however, pose local risks on Earth. I am speaking to Union Apear about incorporating some of their Machine Intelligences into our defenses.”

“No,” the Battlemaster lifted a hand. “Considering the actions of Union Viarior, I have little interest in potentially risking our battlefield infrastructure from intra-Union technology. Any equipment or defenses which Union Apear puts forward will need to be cleared by me personally.”

Patricia was slightly surprised at the intensity with which the Battlemaster spoke. It seemed that the Andromedon encounter had spooked him more than he let on. J’Loran took it in stride. “Very well. I will work directly with you in testing and quality assurance to make sure nothing malicious is utilized in our systems.”

“I would suggest we begin utilizing Mosrimor more thoroughly,” Revelean said thoughtfully. “Given the development of Gaia, we need our own assurance that it does not expand beyond Florida. Mosrimor is the only entity which is capable of successfully matching ADVENT on this scale, especially since XCOM has an AI managing it.”

“Noted,” Patricia nodded. “I’m not opposed to including Mosrimor more…provided it is in a limited capacity. We do not want to become reliant on the Sovereign. But using his technology in a more trial capacity as we have before is understandable.”
“An update on Earth is also advised right now,” Assimilator-2 spoke up. “For those who are unaware, our operations continue proceeding well in South America and Southeast Asia. ADVENT is beginning to experience more flagging morale and sustained damage across the world thanks to Patricia’s attacks. West American incursions have similarly continued, and are steadily advancing.”

“And the SAS?” The Battlemaster asked. “They appear to be causing issues thanks to your ill-advised assaults.”

Patricia pursed her lips. “The attacks did what they had to.”

“They were not military targets.”

“Not all of them, no.”

“That was not condoned,” the Battlemaster said slowly. “Nor was the indiscriminate bombardment.”

“I am aware,” Patricia fixed the towering Ethereal with a cold stare. “I made an executive decision. It had the intended effect.”

“It had an effect,” the Battlemaster corrected. “Betos is causing issues, and ADVENT is signaling intent to use nuclear weapons against us. You have successfully escalated the conflict.”

“And if you give me a moment, I will explain why,” she lifted a hand sharply, palm out. “T’Leth remains the largest wild card in the equation. As of now he has done very little. That needs to change.”

“I would rather we not tempt fate with the Sovereign,” Ravarian didn’t look pleased. “We don’t want him to become more involved.”

“No, we do,” Patricia disputed. “We will need to face and kill him at some point. That is an unchanging fact of this war. I would prefer we ease into a conflict – and not face his full power all at once. Thus, we escalate. I want him to begin acting more openly. We need to know his capabilities beyond his agents.”

“XCOM is no doubt pressuring him to involve himself more…” J’Loran considered. “ADVENT too. This is very risky – especially since we have no plan to kill a Sovereign. Not a sure one.”

“And that is what we need to solve,” Patricia hit upon the heart of the point of the meeting. “How to slay a being who is effectively a god. We strongly believe he is deep in the oceans. Perhaps the Mariana Trench. Andromedon Aquatic probes go dark when they reach certain depths, though we cannot attribute that to T’Leth. However, it would not be surprising.”

“Knowing where he is isn’t the issue,” Quisilia said. “He seems reluctant to act openly – Beijing being an exception, only because of the Bringer’s involvement. Otherwise he sticks to his Agents who have poor Twitter skills.”

“And I think we can exploit that,” Patricia looked to Revelean. “You have been heavily involved with examining the Bringer’s creations. I want to know if there is something that we can use. The Bringer has doubtless prepared to kill a Sovereign.”

“Using the Saints is out of the question,” the Battlemaster stated flatly. “There will be no negotiation.”
“I’m not talking about the Saints,” Patricia interrupted. “But they have designed many creatures, yes?”

“The Children, correct,” Revelean said. “Highly sophisticated and intelligent. The Virtuoso in particular killed an XCOM squad with little issue. Unfortunately, it targeted the wrong one. Nonetheless, it is more than capable of facing anything mortal – though a Sovereign is not a typical mortal.”

“Are you aware if a Sovereign-killing child has been developed?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Revelean considered. “I suspect such would not have been permitted due to the… threat it could pose. Anything which could kill a Sovereign could be turned on us. Though to suggest that the Temperance has not considered it is unlikely. If you wish, I could enquire as to the design of such a child. They are… eager for redemption after Beijing. I suspect Paradise would cooperate with our demands.”

“No.” The Battlemaster interrupted. “We will not involve the Bringer and Paradise more into this war. You remember what happened.”

“We may not have a choice,” Patricia argued, facing the Battlemaster fully. What had happened on Paradise station was actually something the participants were keeping to themselves. It was concerning, but as far as the Imperator was concerned – as well as Patricia – it was an intimidation stunt. The Battlemaster may have become paranoid because of it, but she had not. “Nor is the final decision up to you. When it comes to Sovereigns, we need to use everything at our disposal, no matter how distasteful. I hardly think that using a tool designed by the Bringer is the equivalent of sanctioning what happened in Beijing. This is a very narrow, controlled directive.”

“If you trust the Bringer after everything, then you are deluded,” the Battlemaster spat. “I will not be party to sanctioning this, nor any operation involving the abominations from Paradise.”

“Then don’t,” Patricia said curtly. “I will handle it myself. I suspect your usefulness is limited underwater anyway.” She turned to look back at Revelean. “Speak with the Creator and Temperance. Tell them this is what we want. Also inform them that it will be designed and grown in a lab of our own design and choosing, and fully assembled by us. They will provide the theory and guidance. We will provide the actual implementation.” She put some final emphasis into her words. “The Battlemaster is right about one thing – we do not trust yet. Do not implement anything unless you fully understand it. Is that understood?”

“It is, Harbinger.”

“Excellent,” Patricia nodded. “That will be part of our arsenal. I have also authorized the creation of a military division specializing in underwater operations. The Andromedon Aquatic Forces have been placed in charge as the Sar’Manda are unlikely to cooperate.”

“We should force their involvement,” J’Loran stated. “They are more numerous than the Aquatic Forces, and have often been resistant towards integration.”

“I do not advise that,” Ravarian cautioned flatly. “The Sar’Manda will go to war before they submit to an outside authority. Unless we want a true civil war on Vitakar, we will make a request, and see how they respond. I would, however, be open to subjecting their cities to inspection. It is past time they were more firmly brought into the fold, regardless of their objections.”

“This was not a division I was informed about,” the Battlemaster stated.
“You retain command over the ground forces,” Patricia said. “Since you are unwilling to sanction necessary measures to defeat T’Leth, I will take command of the undersea operations. If you want to reconsider, I would welcome your aid.”

“No.” The Battlemaster shook his head. “Not for this.”

“There is another measure we are looking to implement,” Patricia continued, looking to J’Loran. “Something the Special Operators are familiar with. We have significant storehouses of the Element, and if it could be used to disrupt T’Leth’s psionics, it would render our chances that much better.”

“The delivery mechanism would need to be exceptionally strong,” Disciple-7 noted. “Assuming you intend to use it underwater. It could taint the oceans, yes, but you would need to saturate the waters for years before it could achieve the results you want. It is more feasible if T’Leth is drawn to the surface.”

“That is something I have requested Fectorian work on,” Patricia stated. “I expect that he is capable of devising a solution. I do not intend for this operation to begin for months yet – but I do expect T’Leth to begin involving himself more as it proceeds. Especially after the next planned attack.”

“What is where?” The Battlemaster asked.

She changed the hologram to the city in question. “New York. I will take a small army with me, and destroy it. I expect this will cripple ADVENT’s morale, shatter the vestiges of the financial markets, and draw expected retaliation. Battlemaster, if this could be coordinated with offensives all around the world, it would divide the oncoming XCOM attention.”

“I can work with that,” the Battlemaster said tightly. “Though that may backfire. Razing the city is not what we want. We want to capture Earth, not destroy it.”

“If New York surrenders, I will accept it,” Patricia said. “But if not, a message must be sent to ADVENT. The financial heart of the world is not out of our reach, and next time it may be in a place like Switzerland. The point being that there is nowhere we cannot reach. That must be emphasized over and over again.”

There were grudging nods around the room. Patricia did not relish destruction such as this…but the longer the war dragged on, the more people would die in the long run. ADVENT wanted to be treated as a threat, as so they would be. T’Leth would either need to decide to stand and fight – or flee.

Truthfully, the latter would be easier to manage.

She was not counting on it.

“There is one outstanding question,” Ravarian said after a few moments. “How should Betos be handled? If she continues blatant defiance and stunts such as these, it reflects poorly.”

“Do not worry about her,” Patricia assured the Zar’Chon. “It is me she cited as having issues with. I will speak to her shortly. We will come to an agreement one way or another. On that you have my promise.”

She sat down. “If there is nothing else which needs to be raised, then I believe our plan is set. It’s time we close this noose and bring Earth into the fold for good.”

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To be continued in Chapter 61:

Streets of Blood, Storms of Ice
Streets of Blood, Storms of Ice

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Streets of Blood, Storms of Ice

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Barracks, the Praesidium – Classified Location

5/16/2017 – 10:10 A.M.

Kunio didn’t want to do this, but it was something that needed to be done.

He was more recovered now…as much as he could be after the mission. Caelior had been freed, which he supposed made it worth it. That was what they all knew when getting into this; that they could die for a purpose greater than themselves. Sometimes it couldn’t be helped, and it was for the greater good.

At least it hadn’t been for nothing. It was easier to accept.

He was never going to get the awful sound of that singing out of his head. Or not for a long time. At least he wasn’t a listener to opera, because after this he didn’t think he’d ever be able to listen to it again without picturing the horrific floating brain-thing that had taken them out with frightening ease.

Carmelita had been found and was recovering. That was the other piece of good news. The people who’d found her hadn’t really know what to make of her, but they’d called the authorities, who had in turn called XCOM, and she was brought back in a matter of hours. Kunio planned on seeing her later; when she was more awake.

He wondered how highly this ranked on the harrowing scale in her experience.

Kunio pushed that out of his mind as he approached the lone man near his locker. Said Tariq was putting up something in it, maybe a uniform, or maybe a weapon. His tanned skin had a pale tinge to it, and from the bloodshot and red eyes indicated he’d been crying and hadn’t bothered to hide it. He was a big man, at least big enough that Kunio felt fairly small compared to him.

He awkwardly cleared his throat. “Mr. Tariq?” He hated how formal it was, but how exactly did you address someone whose wife you killed, even if it was the best option at the time? It certainly wasn’t as if he knew him well; he’d encountered him and his wife in the training area, but they were in a completely different discipline.

Said shut the door and turned slowly. “Kunio, right?” His voice was rough.

Had he heard? He had to have. XCOM wouldn’t have delayed with something like this. “Yes sir.”

He gave a single, somber nod. “With Fatima in the squad, yes?”

“Yes,” Kunio confirmed. “I was with her when she died.”

“I figured as much,” he rubbed his eyes. “XCOM informed me what had happened and who the survivors were. I’m glad you got Carmelita out of there. Glad someone else got out with you.”
Kunio kept his face straight as he took a breath. “Did they give you details?”

Said shrugged. “Some. Probably why you’re here, right?”

Kunio’s initial silence was answer enough. “Tell me then,” Said finally spoke, walking over to sit on the lower bunk, lacing his fingers together. “I want to know.”

“There was one of the Bringer’s creatures in the base,” Kunio said, watching as Said’s features twisted into a mixture of fury and fear. “A powerful one. It’s…not like anything I’d ever seen. It was a powerful psion. It had been trying to communicate with Fatima the whole mission, even though we didn’t know what it was at first.”

“Did she resist?” Said asked, a tinge of fear in his voice.

“It was…difficult,” Kunio admitted. “Carmelita had to knock her out because it was almost overwhelming her. Then it tracked us down and killed most of us. I think it wanted her. It pulled her into its arms and was going to take her away.” He shrugged helplessly. “I know what that means. I remembered Beijing. The reports. I didn’t want her to have her mind taken by the Bringer.”

He trailed off shortly, before shaking his head and forcing himself to continue. “I thought I was going to die, but I didn’t want any of us falling to that fate. Being a mind the Bringer absorbed. I killed Fatima before that could happen. I’m sorry.” The words seemed completely inadequate for the admission, but he didn’t know what more he could add.

Said’s eyes were watering again, but at least he wasn’t lashing out. He just stared blankly ahead. “We both knew this was a possibility,” he said in a monotone. “We’d…come to terms with it a long time ago. We were EXALT test subjects once. Did you know that?”

Kunio shook his head. Said continued. “It was a harrowing time. We both lived knowing we could be executed any day. We’d…almost come to terms with it. Then XCOM came and rescued us. I guess we’d both begun to hope that…” he trailed off briefly. “We’ve both lasted so long…at least it feels like a long time. Before the war really started. Before ADVENT. Before all of this…I thought it was looking like we’d actually make it. That we’d come out of this war somehow, miraculously, alive.”

He gave a hollow, choked laugh that seemed closer to a sob. “But we don’t get a happy ending.”

“I’m sorry,” Kunio said again. “I can’t imagine that.”

“I’d hope you never have to,” he agreed quietly. “I don’t blame you, if that’s what you were worried about. The Bringer isn’t a joke, and this is war. And…I’m glad you did it. You did the right thing. Death is better than being turned into a monstrosity of the Bringer. She would thank you if she could.”

“I wish I’d waited,” Kunio finally admitted. “Fiona showed up minutes later. If I’d just held off—”

“Fuck that,” Said interrupted intensely, lifting a hand. “You didn’t know she was going to show up. You said you thought you were going to die. I’ll tell you that I’d have done the exact same fucking thing you did in your situation. We can beat ourselves up over hindsight, but none of us can see into the future. You did the right thing, and you don’t even know if Fiona would have been able to fare any better.”

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “I felt it, you know. When she died.”
Kunio was silent, letting him speak. “We had our own bond,” he said, indicating his head. “It was stronger on her end, since she was the telepath. But I could get a sense of what she was feeling when she was around. What you explained…some of what I felt makes more sense. Confusion, fear, fatigue…but the last thing I felt from her was peace.” He shrugged. “She was knocked out by your word, but that tells me you succeeded. If she’d been absorbed…I would know. It hurt, but at least I know now.”

There was some comfort in truly knowing that he’d succeeded in keeping Fatima from the Bringer’s hunger. It had gnawed on him, since he suspected, but didn’t know. But now he did, and at least it had worked. “What are you going to do now?” Kunio asked. “I know there will be a memorial soon.”

“I’ll do that,” Said nodded. “Beyond that…” he trailed off. “I owe it to her to get until the end of this war. One of us has to. And I will make sure Paradise is reduced to ashes, and every alien that allowed their crimes executed.” He looked up at the other psion. “Thank you, Kunio. For telling me.”

Kunio gave a short nod. “You should hear it from me.”

“Right,” Said wiped his eyes, and looked back at him. “What about you?”

“Me?” Kunio shrugged. “I need to get better so that this doesn’t happen again. Paradise is also bumped up a few notches on my hit list of the future.”

“I’m glad we’re in agreement,” Said gave a wan smile. “I’ll see you around, I suppose. Give Fiona my thanks if you see her. I’m glad she was able to save at least someone from this mission.”

“The other team did extract Caelior,” Kunio remembered. “We did ultimately succeed.”

“Yes,” Said grunted. “He better prove his worth. Good people died so he’d be freed. I hope he realizes that.”

Kunio didn’t really know much about the young Ethereal, but if Caelior was truly reformed, then he would hopefully realize the sacrifice of those who had died. “I think he will,” Kunio said. “And he will show it by bringing down the Collective with us.”

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The Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

5/25/2017 – 9:20 A.M.

All things considered, Yang figured that it could have been a lot worse.

She had not really wanted to be overly familiar with the newest Harbingers, but at the same time the Battlemaster wanted her to be aware of them and their capabilities. Quisilia in particular was someone who made distinct calculations and was far more aware than he often let on – or portrayed to the world.

Yang had heard the rumors and stories of the Twins who had already made a distinct impression in the short time they’d been here, and if only parts of their personality were accurate to their social media, she was concerned she would strangle one by the end. Ravarian in particular was unhappy with them, and considering what they put him through, she couldn’t blame them.

In person though…they weren’t nearly as obnoxious as she had feared. Which was highly
suspicious.

“You’re staring,” Sabrina said dryly, stabbing her pancake as they ate. “You normally do that?”

“No,” Yang answered neutrally. “Trying to figure something out.”

“Ah, I get it,” Sabrina gave a thin, knowing smile. “Surprised we’re not acting like deranged lunatics?”

“Somewhat.”

Both twins chuckled. “Chalk up another one,” Micaiah giggled. “Well, if you want, we can do what you’re expecting. Isn’t that right, sista?”

“Totes, fam,” Sabrina said. “We can make this place lit and have fresh and dank memes on cue, ya feel me girl?”

Yang shuddered. “Please never speak to me like that again.”

“Figured as much,” Micaiah said, leaning forward and resting her arms on the table. “Quisilia said you and the Battlemaster weren’t quite as tolerant towards…” she cocked her head. “Well, this. Sad, but hey, I get it, some people take themselves too seriously.”

Yang furrowed her eyebrows, not extremely in the mood for mockery. “Your consideration is truly appreciated.”

“At least you can be sarcastic,” Sabrina nodded approvingly. “Maybe some hope for you.”

“So is that all an act?” Yang wondered, looking between both of them.

“Oh, part of it is,” Micaiah smiled. “The other part I like to call ‘exaggerated character performance’.”

“I think it’s a reason Quisilia found us,” Sabrina nodded. “We like messing with people. Way too many take themselves too seriously they can’t think critically. To the point where you can basically control their life, assuming you know what you’re doing. It’s really fun, you should try it some time.”

“I’d prefer not looking like an idiot, thank you very much.”

“Oh, that hurts,” Sabrina pouted mockingly. “Truly. You do you, but trust me, it’s more enjoyable and safer this way.”

“Do tell.”

“Please, think about it for a minute,” Sabrina explained in a near-patronizing tone Yang was finding grating. “See, this is also something good old Ravi also doesn’t understand. The name of the game is unpredictability. I bet you have no idea what to think of me right now because you came in with one idea, and now we’re having a civil conversation, and that works in my advantage. Whereas I can probably make a number of assumptions about what you would do or how you would react, and you’re so serious you’d do them.”

That was almost amusing to Yang considering what she was involved in. “I somehow doubt that.”

“Eh, time will tell,” Micaiah said. “I mean, what would you prefer? To have someone underestimate or overestimate you? You’re near the top of ADVENT’s kill list. I assume they’d
send the Pantheon and the best XCOM squads after you. Us? I bet we’d get the Lancers at best, with some Priests thrown in for good measure?” She sipped her glass of apple juice with a smile. “Just how I like it. They’ll never see us coming.”

Which was something to keep in mind, and unfortunately the Twins had a point. Yang had to remember that no matter how idiotic they seemed – or pretended to, as it turned out – they were still Harbingers. And Quisilia was no fool. Come to think of it, this is exactly the kind of stunt he’d pull.

So it was worth gaining some more information. “How did Quisilia even find you?”

“We wasted a lot of ADVENT’s money,” Sabrina said as her eyes lit up. “One thing led to another, and here we are.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“Yah,” Micaiah and Sabrina exchanged a look. “So, both of us were in theatre, you know. Sabrina was a stage performer. Broadway and all that.”

Yang was surprised, looking to Sabrina. “You performed on Broadway?” She’d never seen a show there, but it was something even people from China (and Australia) knew about.

“Understudy, but would have happened sooner or later,” Sabrina said with a slight hint of modesty. “Or not. Not a lot of the management liked me. A bit too investigative and ‘activist’ for their liking. Beat the shit out of a producer that tried moving on me. Probably would have been fired if we hadn’t set it up beforehand. Big scandal, lot of positive public press. Couldn’t touch me after that, but my career might have been shot.”

“Good times,” Micaiah snickered. “You wouldn’t believe the things these idiots say to each other when they don’t think anyone is listening.”

“Micaiah’s more of the behind the scenes person,” Sabrina nodded to her sister. “Also a magician.”

The aforementioned magician pulled out a card. “At your service, now you see it,” she did a quick motion with her hand. “Now you don’t.”

Yang narrowed her eyes. “I did see that.” It was very quick and slight, but she had seen the impressively fast sleight of hand Micaiah had done.

“Gonna have to mix up my routine,” Micaiah muttered. “Difficult to do the old tricks when everyone is gene modded. Ah well, psionics introduces so many possibilities.”

“Right, so back to the story,” Sabrina cleared her throat. “The aliens come, and out of fucking nowhere ADVENT appears. We know all about the whole new world order conspiracies, but I didn’t expect it to be real. One morning we wake up, the UN is gone, and America is part of it!”

“Told you Treduant was a fraud,” Micaiah added.

“Quiet,” Sabrina shushed. “Obviously, neither of us were going to let the new authoritarian fascists take over America. I mean, America has its problems, but compared to ADVENT? No contest, especially when you saw who was leading them. Literally everyone had no history or very, let us say fascist tendencies,” she paused. “It’s almost impressive how much I despised our new dear leaders. Lot of other people felt the same way, so we exercised our First Amendment right to protest.”
“Aaand we got hit with tear gas, paralyzed with those stun batons, and spent two days in jail,” Micaiah finished. “And after all of that we got told that we were on a list, and if we showed up again, we’d be charged with ‘public disturbance’. Turns out that they’d sent that warning to pretty much everyone.”

“Is that why you accepted Quisilia’s offer?” Yang asked.

“Well, it made me hate ADVENT more,” Sabrina shrugged. “Honestly, with the depraved crap the world leaders get up to, I can’t blame the aliens for taking one look at us and saying ‘screw this’. Learning about stuff like how XCOM hijacked the invasion and they killed all those people in Germany, no wonder the Collective wasn’t interested in peace. But ultimately, no, that wasn’t the reason.”

“We had a brother,” Micaiah continued. Yang noted the past tense. “Younger. Not quite as cool as us, but definitely smarter. More optimistic too. Liked visiting other countries and cultures. Stand-up guy, wouldn’t hurt anyone. Turns out he was in a foreign exchange program in Iraq when Deus Vult went down.”

“Thank you ADVENT, very cool,” Sabrina muttered, for the first time expressing some sobriety. “So yeah, that was when we both decided that no matter how questionable the aliens were, ADVENT was definitely not any better. It’s funny that if ADVENT wasn’t so stupidly pragmatic, some of us wouldn’t be here. Yeah, civilian deaths are nothing in their scheme of conquering the world, but sometimes they lead to stuff like us.” She smiled. “So yeah, we turned our attention to ADVENT.”

“It was a glorious few months,” Micaiah sighed contentedly. “Little things that fucked with them. Prank calls that made them send soldiers all over the state. It was hilarious how much time we could waste, just pretending to be a scared civilian.” Her voice went artificially higher. “‘Help me! I saw a chryssalid and it’s trying to get into my house!’”

“ADVENT caught on eventually,” Sabrina said. “Surprised they caught us, truth be told. We sat in jail, and then the Memelord himself appears and offers us a job. And obviously, we accept, and that is our depressing, but exciting origin story.”

And it was one Yang could understand. For them fighting ADVENT was personal, whereas for her it…wasn’t. And it definitely didn’t mean the Collective was better. The Bringer made that abundantly clear. “I see. Beijing didn’t affect this?”

“What, that?” Sabrina snorted. “Please. Screw the CPC, and their brainwashed communist citizens. Such a massive mess. At least this Bringer is creative with his kills. It’s actually pretty impressive if you look deeper at the symbolism. I mean, the CPC always eats itself in their political backstabbing, so seeing them all eat themselves for real? Glorious. Screwed ADVENT over too, which was a nice bonus.”

Yang stiffened. This had definitely not really gone the direction she had expected. “It wasn’t just the Communist Party. Millions of people died.”

“Eh, it’s not like China has a shortage of people,” Micaiah answered candidly. “Almost killed the Chancellor too. Plus, there was the whole smallpox disease going on. Bringer probably did a lot of them a favor.” She turned, and her face dropped as she saw Yang’s stone-cold glare. “Uh, no offense.”

Yang was both shocked and furious at the same time. It…said a lot about the Twins that they’d complained so much about ADVENT’s tactics, but then sanctioned the slaughter of millions to the
Bringer who was far worse than anything ADVENT had done because...why? Because it hurt ADVENT or because they were Chinese?"

She didn’t honestly know which one was worse to her.

Sabrina seemed to pick up on the tension. “Hey, Yang, don’t worry, you’re cool. You’re not with ADVENT or one of those Chinese, so trust me, you’re fine.”

Yang blinked, almost stunned at how casual she was saying that. It was genuinely puzzling to hear it said so nonchalantly. “I’m sorry? What did you say?”

“You’re really hung up on this now?” Micaiah asked, lifting an eyebrow. “Hey, it wasn’t anything personal. You clearly don’t like ADVENT, otherwise you wouldn’t be here. Beijing doesn’t bother us that much. Bit disgusting, yeah, but it’s just as bad or worse in some movies.”

Yang stood, needing to leave before she strangled one or both of them. “You were wrong earlier.”

Sabrina frowned. “About what?”

“About knowing what I would do and react,” Yang fixed her with a cold stare before turning to leave. “You don’t know anything about me.” She walked away, then paused, once, closing a fist. “And if I hear you defend the Bringer again, I will kill you.”

She kept the chokehold on their throats present until she left the room; not tightening it, but letting it linger long enough for them to maybe reflect on what they had said. She almost wished they were the idiots she had assumed.

This was much worse.

***

Staging Ground - Desolan

5/28/2017 – 10:00 A.M.

The hot Desolan sun beat down upon the flat brown lands. Patricia stood in front of the assembled army in front of her. Over twenty thousand Mutons in total were assembled in front, interspersed with Berserkers, Elites, and the Praetorian Guard. They extended as far as she could see, legions.

Enough to destroy a city definitively.

A light breeze whipped through the air, making her hair rustle as she faced the soldiers. Between the ranks were additional legions of Andromedons, Runianarch, and some of Mosrimor’s Meat Puppets. There was a very good chance that ADVENT and XCOM would send everything they could.

They would be prepared.

The Battlemaster also stood ready, together with Yang who would both help coordinate the charge and bring the city down from the inside and out. This was going to be a display that none in ADVENT would forget. She did not think it would cripple them beyond the point of no return, but it would signal the beginning of the end.

“Be ready,” she ordered, projecting her voice through telepathy, so even the soldiers in the very far back heard. “When the time comes, you will know when to march. With that, she turned around
and unhooked the Avatar mask from her waist and with a smooth motion put it on, stiffening as it clicked into place and the bond was fully established.

Minds merged, and the power lay at the end of her fingertips.

*End this conflict.*

*Bring them into the fold.*

*Break the hold of the Sovereign.*

*Break the hold of the tyrants.*

She lifted a hand and a small portal appeared before her, and stepped into it, and into the bustling streets of New York. The reaction was immediate as cars veered away, crashing into each other, signposts, and even some pedestrians as all looked to see the Harbinger who hung suspended in the air, cape fluttering and hands hanging idly at her sides.

The pale mask of the Harbinger looked down upon the masses in judgment.

Their emotions were shock.

Shock became anger.

Anger became fear.

And fear turned to terror.

They knew what was coming next.

The many Peacekeepers which patrolled the streets wasted no time. She had felt their minds the moment she entered this place, such were easier to pick out from the crowd; easier still with the Imperator empowering her. She idly closed a fist, and all of them felt an iron grip manifest around their throat.

Within seconds all of them were reaching for it.

She wasn’t sure how many. Twenty, forty, it didn’t matter. One managed to fire a shot off. The round hung in the air, and without a motion she sent it back towards the source, killing him instantly. But this was a chance for leniency, and she released her grip on the throats of the Peacekeepers.

The crowds were mixed between those cowering in their cars, behind corners, or under shelters, futilely believing that they were able to hide from her. Even now she could feel each panicked thought and breath as they internally begged her not to find them.

*I see you.*

*I see where you hide.*

*I see what you think.*

*I know what you are.*

It mildly amazed and amused her to realize just how...helpless most people were to her now. Humans and aliens alike seemed to have issues *comprehending* the utter scale of the power she and
other psions possessed. As if they could hide, or stood a viable chance against her. Or any psion.

But especially her.

It was good to remind them that ADVENT’s reach and power had limits.

It mattered not their reforms if they could be brought low by a single command.

Still, there were other Humans who were smarter. Some were outright fleeing, while others were holding up their hands in a surrender. Above she heard helicopters flying overhead; media or military, it didn’t particularly matter. A quick look confirmed a media helicopter. She let it be.

Let the world see what would happen.

She drew upon the vast well of power within her grasp, extended it far beyond where she knew the city limits were, and with a flash of power, locked down the Psionosphere. There was no tangible reaction, but there would now be no teleporter who could break through. No Gateway would function properly.

The city was in her control, and there would be none who would be able to stop her. The army inside would hold, but without the element of defense, they would not be able to do more than futilely stand and fight as the city was destroyed around them. It was time to give them the ultimatum.

She projected her voice, through her helmet, and to every single mind in the city. Those who were isolated, those who hid, they were unable to protect their minds from what was said. There was no excuse; no plea of ignorance.

The ultimatum would be followed, or it would be ignored.

“Citizens of ADVENT. This war has persisted for far too long. It is time it be ended, else we will sacrifice millions of Humans and aliens in a protracted conflict with only one feasible outcome. The end is ordained. The Ethereal Collective will succeed, no matter how many die, no matter what you develop, no matter what you gain. It is inevitable.”

She spread one hand out. “There will be no more half-measures. I issue a simple ultimatum – surrender or die. If you surrender, you will be treated well and be provided for in the remade Earth. If you refuse, you will die. This is only the beginning. Today will be New York. It will be followed by the strongholds you have held. Tampa. Busan. Beijing.”

Her tone turned accusing. “You. Were. Warned. There is no escape, and there is no hope for rebellion. Think carefully about the future, for the judgement of the Imperator has been rendered.”

She reached back to Desolan, to the many anchors and nuances in the Psionosphere she had painstakingly memorized and trained relentlessly in preparation for this operation. On her own it was nearly impossible to discern, but with the Imperator’s power and grasp of the Psionosphere, it was so…simple.

*Let them through.*

*Usher in the endgame.*

The Harbinger floated to hover just above the pavement, idle and dead cars telekinetically moving out of the way as she gently landed on the ground, and before her, a massive purple portal opened and a hot burst of wind served as a prelude to the legions of Mutons which stood behind her.
And it was not simply on the street the Harbinger stood upon.

Citizens watched, and media trained their cameras on the dozens of portals which opened up within and outside the city, as the standing ADVENT garrison quickly scrambled to handle the surprise attack. In row after row the Mutons, Vitakara, and Mosrimor’s Meat Puppets marched out, annihilating the first wave in a hail of plasma, projectiles, and psionics.

Behind her, Patricia felt the legions, and with one hand pointed forward. “Go. Spare those who surrender. Destroy the rest.”

Without need for encouragement, the armies complied.

The word of the Harbinger had been said.

There was naught to do but obey.

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Situation Room, the Praesidium – Classified Location

5/28/2017 – 10:24 A.M.

The Praesidium was on high alert.

“How many?” The Commander demanded tightly as he observed the holographic simulation which displayed all last known Collective positions. The entire city was filled with red dots and swaths as the Collective cut a path directly through the heart of the city. Small orange figures denoted the last spotted locations of individuals like Patricia, the Battlemaster, and Yang Shuren.

“Still no firm number,” Jackson scowled as she had a hand constantly to her ear, fiddling with her headset as she paced from screen to screen, and flipped through her tablet which was getting assaulted with a dozen messages and updates a minute. “They’re still coming.”

“How many?” The Commander demanded more intently.

“Thousands at least,” Jackson threw out. “She’s probably maintaining portals directly to Desolan!”

“And we can’t immediately intervene,” Iosif muttered. “Psionosphere is completely locked down.”

He looked to the Chronicler who was similarly appraising the room gravely. “I don’t suppose T’Leth can break it?”

“He’d have to move closer,” the Chronicler said. “And what she is doing is good. Very good. I suspect she’s using Mosrimor Orbs to maintain the lockdown. Perhaps the portals as well. She is not the Imperator, even if she draws on his power.”

“I’ve got six squads assigned,” Creed marched up to the Commander. “All hands on deck for this one. Patricia, Battlemaster, everyone. For all we know the rest of the Ethereals will be showing up sometime. Should I give the order to assemble?”

“Do it,” the Commander confirmed. “Aegis, Caelior, both of them are involved. We cannot let New York be destroyed.”

“I can’t believe she actually did it,” Jackson said, shaking her head as she watched the footage. “Even for her this is an escalation.”

“As she said,” the Commander said heavily. “She did warn us.”
Patricia seemed content to let the footage play. ADVENT had cut off civilian direct feeds, even if the media stations were reporting on what was happening. It was a nightmare. Not on the level of Beijing, but horrifying in its own way. There was a callous brutality and efficiency that her previous operations had lacked.

It really had been only a matter of time before she tried something like this on a large scale.

Scores of civilians were outright surrendering, and were being led back in groups through the portals. More who fled, hid, or fought back were mowed down by unrelenting storms of plasma. ADVENT Peacekeepers stood no chance against Muton Elites. The more organized ADVENT defenses were extracting some deaths from the Collective, but for every Muton they killed, ten more replaced it.

It had been barely twenty minutes since it’d started, and already Patricia was marching down the streets and collapsing skyscrapers and flattening streets. At this point in time she seemed unstoppable, a woman of purple fire who annihilated whatever stood in her way. No hesitation, no regret, no remorse.

How much she had changed.

There only seemed a small part of her that remained, a part which offered one chance of surrender. Otherwise she succumbed to the feeling of absolute power. He could tell how much she enjoyed it. How much pleasure she took from crushing the less-powerful underneath her. How she toyed with some of them before killing them in simple ways.

The signs had been there, of course. He’d encouraged them to be used against the aliens. In retrospect he had been helping plant the seeds for who this monster would become. No matter what happened, and no matter how much influence the Imperator had, what Patricia was now was in some part because of him.

There was an important lesson to take from this, one which had brewed in his mind for weeks now, but seeing the visceral consequences of his miscalculation and failure brought it to the forefront. But rumination had to wait. There needed to be action and retribution for this.

“What is ADVENT mobilizing?” He demanded from Jackson.

“Everyone they can,” Jackson answered immediately. “Every Northeast Legion around, every local special forces squad; Lancers, Dragoons, Celestials are being deployed as we speak. The Pantheon is also being sent over.”

“Are we not concerned that this is a massive trap?” Creed wondered. “She knows we’re going to be bringing everything down. What stops her from teleporting a nuke in and killing us?”

“Because T’Leth would respond,” the Chronicler stated. “Directly. She is clearly trying to provoke a reaction, but she’s not that foolish.”

“Are we making that assumption?” Creed demanded. “We didn’t think she’d directly bring an army into New York, and look what she’s doing now! How exactly do we know she’s not going to pull a stunt like this? Remember the Praesidium? She knows what she is doing here.”

“Which means this is calculated,” the Chronicler insisted calmly. “She – nor the Imperator - would risk T’Leth’s wrath until they have a sure way to defeat him. They don’t. Otherwise she’d be attacking Switzerland, not New York. It’s important enough to send a message, not to provoke a direct escalation.”
“I agree,” the Commander interjected. “She is doing this to send a message. She obviously expects the war to continue, hence her threats to Busan and Tampa.”

“Both of which have just been placed on high alert,” Jackson added. “JULIAN is also on standby to activate GAIA at a moment’s notice.”

“Good, Creed, get the squads on skyrangers,” the Commander ordered. “All hands for this one. Archangels, Valkyries, I want squads sent over now. Have them move to working Gateways and take off at nearby locations. MECs, MELD Operators, I want to send a message of our own.”

“Done,” Creed confirmed.

“ADVENT is beginning airstrikes near the portals,” Jackson updated. “Missile platforms and artillery are being moved into position.”

“That will cause collateral damage,” Iosif noted.

“Potentially, but they’re more concerned about the thousands of Mutons in the streets,” Jackson pointed out. “ADVENT has already lost thousands today. The troops should be sent in when ready, and missile strikes will work to buy time and hopefully do some damage.”

The door to the situation room suddenly slid open and a fully armored Fiona and a very agitated Crevan followed her, his features stern and irritated. “You are stopping this now!”

“No!” Fiona snarled, her green eyes flashing dangerously. “I’m not waiting any longer!”

“You’re not supposed to be in here, Miss Dorren,” the Commander stepped forward.

“No, but I’m going to let you know what I’m going to do,” she said, turning to face him. “I’m going to kill Patricia.”

“You’re on the squads,” Creed confirmed. “You’ll get as much-”

“No,” she emphasized, stepping forward. “I’m going to kill her now.”

“Patricia has locked down the Psionosphere,” Iosif shrugged helplessly. “We can’t move in, otherwise you’d have been sent over.”

“Is that right?” Fiona inexplicably smiled. “Well. That still won’t stop me. I should have done this a long time ago.”

“No, you are not,” Crevan stated. “You know what will-”

“Let him come!” Fiona whirled on the towering man, her eyes and body glowing a white-green. “But we both know he won’t. I’m tired of waiting. I’m tired of holding back because you’re afraid!”

“You are not ready!”

“I’ll take my chances,” She growled, pulsing as her fury simmered. She violently put on her helmet. “I will not stand by and watch this monster butcher millions of people when I can end her forever.”

“You-”

“I’ll see you later,” Fiona said curtly, grabbing her sword. “Get your soldiers ready for cleanup,
Commander. By the time I’m done, Patricia will be in pieces.”

Before any of them could say a word, she vanished in a green-white flash. The Commander blinked, looking to Crevan. “Would you like to explain what that was?”

The Chronicler had already quickly left the room, as Crevan took his place, voice intense. “We need to reach New York as soon as possible. We need to bring her back before we lose her. She is in extreme danger right now.”

“She’s going to take on Patricia single-handedly,” Iosif said incredulously. “What is she thinking?”

“She isn’t,” Crevan said bluntly. “Patricia is not a true threat; not one who could stop her. She is in danger for other reasons.”

“She did hear that Patricia locked down the Psionosphere, right?” The Commander asked.

“That won’t affect her,” Crevan dismissed. “Nor is it the point I am making.”

“I beg to differ,” Iosif stated. “How exactly is that ‘not a problem’?”

“It’s complicated,” he scowled. “I cannot emphasize the urgency we need to act to reign her in. We are on limited time, and Patricia has unintentionally made it worse.”

“She’s on her own,” the Commander said bluntly. “I’m not throwing my soldiers into this battle until we’re ready. I don’t know what’s gotten into her, but she is not worth risking everything.”

“Commander, there are certain things you do not know,” Crevan appealed. “What is important is that Fiona must remain alive, and she has placed herself in great danger. I will explain afterwards, but there is no more time. We need to act now. The Chronicler is gathering the rest of the Agents, and I will join him.”

The Commander took a few seconds to think about it. The fact that Crevan, and by extension, T’Leth had kept something from him was not necessarily surprising, but if it was important enough to demand he take action, he was not exactly thrilled with the idea. At the same time, Crevan was not one to exaggerate or waste his time.

“Creed, accelerate squad deployments,” he ordered after a few more seconds of deliberation. “Coordinate with the Chronicler and Crevan.” He fixed the enigmatic Agent of T’Leth with a hard stare. “I dislike putting soldiers in danger based on something I don’t know. You better have prepared an acceptable explanation.”

“It will be done, Commander,” Crevan gave a sharp nod. “This is what must be done. I need to prepare. You will be informed when we are en-route.”

He quickly turned, and departed, leaving the rest of the Internal Council to wonder what had just happened. “I hope this is worth it,” Creed muttered. “Had a feeling he was always hiding something.”

“Something to do with Fiona too,” Iosif noted. “Odd.”

“We’ll worry about the implications later,” the Commander said. “We still have a city to retake. If Fiona somehow got in, let’s hope she’s able to cause some damage.”

***
Kunio had wondered what the retaliation would be.

Now he knew.

Of course, they’d all thought it was the worldwide bombardment. Patricia’s own mild attacks on the cities. But it was very clear that this was what she had been building to for some time. An attack on one of the biggest cities in the world – more than that, one of the most important. In the heart of American territory.

Thousands were already dead.

More would soon follow.

Every soldier had, without prompting, suited up the moment that news had trickled in about an attack. None of them knew who would be called, but they knew that when it happened, they needed to be ready to go ASAP. It wasn’t even ten minutes before the names of people had been sent out to prepare.

No squads initially, but there were enough soldiers being called to make up six.

It was going to be a massive operation by XCOM standards.

His name among them.

He hoped it would go better than the last one.

He had his rifle, his psionic skills were a bit sharper in the later weeks of training, and he was properly armored and ready to march. The actual squads had been assigned, and the one he had been given – Hunter Squad (not as creative as some of the names had been) – was an odd composition.

Outside of the lone Infantry, Barbara Lawson, every single one of them was a psion or otherwise specialized. “We expecting to fight the Battlemaster?” He asked the Squad Overseer, Lincoln Harper as the soldiers awaited. Kunio noticed something else peculiar was that all of the Agents were tied to, or commanded each squad.

Fiona was conspicuously absent. Even the Chronicler was armored and present.

“No,” Lincoln answered, lips pursed. “We may, but that’s not what we’re expecting.”

Kunio furrowed his eyebrows at the answer. “What are we expecting?”

“If we’re lucky, thousands of aliens, with a chance of the Battlemaster and two of the Harbingers,” Lincoln checked the massive Annihilator Cannon he was carrying. “If we’re unlucky, she’s going to introduce the Bringer next. If we’re really unlucky…” he trailed off, shaking his head.

“What does that mean?”

“It means there will be other uninvited guests,” was the cryptic, and wholly unhelpful answer. Kunio didn’t know the point of the secrecy, but this was clearly the wrong time to press it. All of the Agents were noticeably stressed and antsy as they waited for the go command, as the squads assembled.
“Where is Fiona?” He asked Lincoln. “She should be on this operation.”

“Being an idiot,” Lincoln muttered, looking around briefly. “You’re being trained by her, so keep this to yourself. She’s already there. Says she’s going to kill Patricia.”

Kunio stiffened. “Alone. What is she thinking?”

“You’ll have to ask her,” Lincoln answered. “You wonder why we’re rushing? She’s the reason. And thanks to Patricia’s methods, we can’t immediately pursue her.”

“This doesn’t sound like her,” Kunio shook his head in disbelief. “She’s smart. This is…it can’t be for this reason.”

“Believe me, it is,” Lincoln repeated dryly. “She’s been wanting to do something like this for a long time. This attack finally pushed her over the edge. So we need to make sure she isn’t killed, and retake the city.”

“Right, sounds like a plan,” Kunio nodded, putting on his helmet. “I do owe her one.”

The rest of the squad was similarly prepared. The two Templars had weapons in their hands; Vilhelmina Forslund and Aharon Galoyan, who carried a warhammer and mace respectively. Even though both were psions, they wore Titan armor still. He didn’t know either of them that much, but all of the Templars were very skilled.

The other two psions, Zemin and Tang, a Dynamo and Aegii respectively, were kitted out in the Psionic Armor he also wore, along with Psionic rifles and pistols. Zara Venator was the last part of the squad, the MELD Operator standing calmly as she waited. “Skyrangers are ready!” Came the call.

“Load up!” Lincoln ordered, a command that was echoed throughout the entire area, as the squads marched out and onto the Skyrangers, while others went to Gateways which connected to nearby bases to New York.

As he sat down, the rifle resting on his leg, he quelled the worry and concern rising.

_Hang in there, Fiona, please don’t do something stupid._

***

_New York City, New York – United States of America_

5/28/2017 – 11:03 A.M.

There was a particularly troublesome spot where ADVENT defenders had formed a barricade along a street, and were managing to hold off an advance of the Collective. Explosions and booms sounded throughout the city as the many buildings and skyscrapers were brought down one by one.

But most of the Humans were fighting back, which would make this take longer than it would have otherwise. Acceptable, she was not pressed for time. The monitoring channel managed by the CODEX relayed that ADVENT was massing outside, setting up missiles. Airstrikes were also occurring.

She would deal with those shortly.

The Harbinger ordered the many soldiers following her to pause as she strode forward towards the
barricade, which ADVENT soldiers and Peacekeepers swarmed over like ants. She felt their jolts of fear and panic as they spotted her, and wasted no time opening fire. She didn’t slow her stride, barely having to put any effort into stopping the projectiles flying towards her.

There was at least one psion, a telepath, in the group. There was some resistance to pushing against their minds. Not that it mattered, she was in the mood to kill them the old-fashioned way. Rockets were fired and grenades thrown, which she batted away with a flick of her wrist.

The barricade up close was a thrown-together mixture of cars and standard barricades; improvised, but better than nothing, and clearly used to great effect. When she was close enough she leapt into the air, hovering for a moment as she appraised what she was about to kill. Close to two dozens soldiers, over half on the barricade itself, while the others were behind, their weapons pointed up as if they expected her.

The Priest stood out – in fact there were two. One flung an arm, and she saw out of the corner of her eye, one of the wrecked trucks being thrown at her. It was, of course, caught in her passive telekinetic field, and hovered impotently. She closed a fist, turning the truck into a piece of crumpled metal, and tossed it behind her, and with her other hand, yanked herself towards the center of the group.

She accompanied her landing with a shockwave which blasted all the nearby soldiers off their feet, and directed her hands towards the Priests, annihilating them with a short burst of lightning from her fingertips. With another hand she lifted it to the sky, and broke the Psionosphere around her, becoming the eye of a furious maelstrom.

The air whirled around her, screams appeared and were quickly silenced as the immediate area was razed to scrap and ash. She released the power, and when the purple storm cleared, all that remained was shrapnel, pieces of ADVENT armor, and pieces of mush and the ground coated with red fluid.

Overhead, a trio of Ravens roared overhead, firing missiles against a different street. Instinctively, she reached a hand out.

They cannot flee.

At such a range, it would have been close to impossible to do it on her own.

But this time, she was not alone.

There is nothing beyond our reach now.

The planes visibly slowed. The engines burned brighter as the fighters tried to break whatever had them trapped. But they had no recourse, and the Harbinger was in no danger of having her concentration broken. She aimed the fingertips of her other hand towards the planes, and saw the atomic path.

She fired.

The bolt of lightning that fired from her hand lasted moments, and almost immediately the power caused the engine to explode. Two more lightning bolts finished the other fighters off, and the flaming metal fell towards the earth; the yellow-orange rain almost beautiful in the distance.

One of the pilots seemed to have managed to eject.

Another lightning bolt ended his hope of survival.
She was curious if ADVENT would continue the airstrikes. It was getting close to the time when XCOM and ADVENT would begin a concerted counterattack – though she estimated there was at least an hour or so before they arrived in force.

“Unknown entity approaching your position.”

The CODEX update was surprising – more so the designation. She heard some commotion from behind her, and leapt into the air, hovering as she saw what was happening. At first it wasn’t clear, but there was something that was cutting through the dozens of Mutons behind her current path.

A closer look answered the question quicker.

A figure in armor of stone. An Agent of T’Leth.

She frowned. Had one been in the city before the attack? They shouldn’t have been able to arrive so quickly.

The Agent wasn’t fighting conventionally, but seemed to be using a melee weapon of some kind. Nor was the style something she recognized immediately. The Agent seemed to be perpetually shrouded in some green-white holographic effect, which she would have put to an illusion had she not been able to easily tell it wasn’t one.

The weapon was somehow slicing through armor like butter, leaving disemboweled Mutons in its wake, while the Agent itself dashed with inhuman speed in bursts of green flashes, a staccato method of attack that was almost an altered version of the Battlemaster’s charge – though far shorter in scope and more controlled.

Almost impressive – and odd.

There was something very off about the Agent heading her direction. It should prove interesting enough. The last Agent she had fought off, and this was one she was certain she could as well.

The Agent didn’t seem focused on killing every single Muton, just cutting a bloody path to her or seeming to make them vanish with a touch and flash of green, as if teleporting them away. Patricia lowered herself to the center of the razed ground, waiting for the Agent to reach her. A minute later the Agent dashed in a green flash until they were ten meters apart. The Agent was splashed with yellow blood and pieces of gore, though the holographic effect around her remained.

Patricia inclined her head. “Impressive display.”

“Today you are going to die,” the voice, a woman’s spat in return with a flourish of her sword. It sounded British, almost like her own. “I’ve let you walk the Earth for too long.”

Patricia was interested in her vitriol, and something about her seemed familiar. “I don’t even know who you are.”

“Then we have something in common,” the Agent pointed her sword towards her. “When I’m finished, no one will know who you were either.”

Patricia idly looked around her. “I doubt that,”

Ah…it’s her.

“Fiona,” Patricia said as the Imperator made the connection. “I take it back – I have heard of you. You assisted Yang Shuren in Paradise.”
“Do not expect the same treatment,” Fiona warned.

“I would never,” Patricia gathered her power, hovering slightly in the air as the world crackled around her. “I defeated one Agent. You shouldn’t have come without help.”

“I don’t need help, not this time,” Fiona stated, taking a battle stance. “Make your peace, Patricia Trask. After today you will only be a memory.”

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[REDACTED] – Sphere of the Throne

5/28/2017 – 10:42 A.M.

This time was different.

The General had been discussing operational plans for the quarantine when he felt it. An imperceptible; ethereal call. A sense that there was disruption through the Source. There were always flashes of course, rarely did they ever catch his attention, let alone make him pause. It had been many years since he had focused on them.

But there were only a few who could cause such a significant tear.

He was one. His Lord was another. The Sage-King if he so wished. The Entity also had the capability. There were others, but they were all within the Sphere. They were masters. They were controlled. And too many now lacked the Blood which granted such power. Only heavy genetic engineering and decades of training would give one the same power as one naturally inclined.

And to his knowledge, there was only one individual who was capable of what he felt.

And she was in another Sphere.

Even through the ethereal chill, he marveled at the ease by which she could shake the barriers. No, it was never her power which had been in question, but her temperament and discipline – and the power was raw. Untamed. Wild. Sloppy. A mistake which he believed she had learned by now.

The Lord stared across from him, his expression unreadable. “[You feel it.]”

“[Yes.]”

“[What is your suggestion?]”

He considered carefully. “[She knows how easily we can track her when she disrupts the Conjunction. She has not moved from her sphere, yes?]”

His Lord consulted the small display, which was connected to a Sphere-wide system that detected such fluctuations. One of the most complex pieces of mechanical and scientific achievement, which had once been designed to maintain the integrity of the Spheres, had been repurposed to track those who moved between them.

The greater the intensity, the easier it could be triangulated.

It was strong enough where an exact location had been determined.

“[So the instrument says,]” the Lord stated. “[Which indicates she is fighting.]”
“[She knows we are waiting,]” the General said slowly. “[Watching. She does not understand how, only that we are. She would not perform this unless her life was in danger, if she had lost emotional control, or it is the trap.]”

“[From the Sovereign.]”

“[Yes.]” the General rubbed his chin. “[However, her Sovereign protector is unlikely to wish to be drawn into a conflict with us. Such thinking is…unlike her, and the Sovereign is likely smart enough to understand the ramifications if such actions are taken.]”

“[Yet it is a Sovereign.]” the Lord pursed his lips. “[They are arrogant creatures. Perhaps this one is deluded enough to think to challenge us and succeed. It is, after all, in likely possession of precious secrets of the Spheres.]”

“[Perhaps.]” there was a pregnant pause. “[There is a limited window to decide to act. Such a chance may not come again.]”

“[You are certain you can succeed?]”

“[No, my Lord, but I am confident in our capabilities.]” the General answered. “[If she is in danger, she cannot be allowed to die yet. If she has lost control, she is likely isolated. If this is a trap, it is a declaration of war. I will take our best warriors and take the land this war is waged in, recover her, and depart with no witnesses.]”

“[Any attack will raise questions.]” the Lord pointed out, eyes narrowing. “[Their technology is more advanced than Sphere of the Fallen. They are not so gullible and superstitious. There will be questions.]”

“[Correct, and there are plausible answers.]” he countered. “[This is a Sphere with many factions and figures of power. It is not implausible to lay any attack at the feet of another such entity or Sovereign One. If we succeed, they will not learn the truth. If we miscalculate, the same result will occur.]”

“[I expect you to not fail.]”

“[Nor do I intend to.]” the General clasped his hands behind his back. “[I will assess the situation on the ground with our own asset. Impromptu as it is, I believe we cannot pass this chance up. Inform the Sage-King an operation to reclaim her has begun.]”

His Lord nodded. “[So be it. You will not be going alone, I presume?]”

He shook his head. “[No, if we are to capture her, there is another who will be at my side.]”

The Lord gave a thin smile as he tapped a small panel beside him. “[I suspected as much.]”

A few moments later, a figure materialized from the holodisplay nearby. It was perfectly colored and sized one-to-one. Each time they spoke, the General remained impressed at the utter titan which stood before them. A true work of art and genetic engineering, one which even rivaled his own creation.

The man stood nearly as tall as the estimated height of the Ethereal Battlemaster – a template he suspected had been the inspiration for this particular bloodline, as the timelines were certainly compatible. He stood clad in silver armor, scarred and dented from his conquests of thousands of worlds.
It gave the impression of being bent out of simple metal or steel, though the actual composition was far stronger than such mundane materials. The chest metal was forged in such a way to resemble a ribcage, the armor of arms and legs a mixture of steel gray and black, and the familiar rounded helmet bearing the irregular eye slits which haunted the nightmares of a thousand species.

Two heavy shotguns were slung over his back, but his true weapon was held in his hand, a humble club of metal which had killed more than the population of most planets. His preferred weapon, one of the few to prefer the less...sophisticated ways of killing. Upon seeing them, he fell to one knee. "[My Lord,]" his deep and guttural voice greeted. "[What is your command.]"

The Lord looked to him, and nodded for him to explain. "[Warmaster, we have located her,]" just once, the General allowed himself to show a smile. "[Assemble your Riders. Prepare for invasion.]"

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Fields of the Endless Frost – Sphere of the Darkness

5/28/2017 – 11:00 A.M.

It took moments to traverse the spheres.

This one was one of the most familiar.

The cold was almost a friend now; a chill to his core which brought an end to most who were touched by its merciless grip. Sapient and animal, the cold did not discriminate. Even those adapted to such colder conditions barely lasted longer when left to the prolonged frost. It was a cold beyond the densest of ice worlds, a lingering torture one suffered by simply breathing its air.

And yet, it had been conquered.

The world was shrouded in near-complete darkness. In the black of space, the faint blue outline of a dead star twinkled, while green-blue lights manifested in the air at times, providing some long-forgotten light to this world. They were still uncertain what had happened to this Sphere, but they had explored enough to realize some basic things.

There were no stars in the sky. No lingering flashes of supernovas remained. At least if any dying ones remained, they were so weak as to not be seen from this planet. The General had often wondered at times what had taken place here. If there had been civilizations and species who had dominated the stars.

Even on this world there were ruins, indications of life at one point, remarkably preserved in the snow and ice. Archeologists occasionally visited this place, but they were often unprepared and incapable of surviving for long without significant cost to the Throne World – cost which most argued achieved little.

There was a story to this sphere, one which he was interested in.

But the most common consensus was this.

It was a universe that had died.

One by one, the stars had gone out. The worlds had shriveled and frozen. There was likely no more life in this galaxy. It was a dead, empty wasteland filled with dirt, ice, and ruins. Many had wondered what the heat death of the universe would look like – and more importantly how to
avoid it.

The answers were in this sphere, the General was sure of it. Perhaps this was an inevitable fate for all spheres, but there was little to back that up other than a gut feeling. Regardless, this was not the time for such ruminations. All that mattered was that they had found it – and turned it into a trial which only the strongest, smartest, and dangerous survived.

It was nowhere near the entire division which stood before him and the Warmaster, but nearly two hundred or the grey-armored Warriors, bulky Nullifiers, and led of course by the gifted Navigators. Outfitted with the results of weapons technology taken and refined from many spheres, this army would be sufficient against the technologically inferior Earthen armies.

Of course, the conventional armies were never the concern.

Scouts had reported, and what they were facing was more alien incursion than Earthen. Both would be caught in the crossfire, but it was necessary. It had not taken long to determine points of entry, all of which the Navigators had confirmed they were capable of accessing. They had been preparing for this day for a long time.

As the chilled wind bit into them, they stood silent. Enduring. The pinnacle of his Lord’s Riders and the reach of the Throne World. It would not be an easy mission, but they were more than capable of seeing it fulfilled. There was little time to waste before the situation became more difficult.

They knew where she was.

They knew the stakes.

They knew what to do.

They were prepared.

The General stood, clad in his own battle armor for the first time in...too long. It was a comfortable, familiar weight. It had been improved since the last iteration, with numerous anti-Source countermeasures, a more resilient HUD, and his own weapon had been improved as well.

Most weapons he felt were unnecessary. Why waste energy and effort with rifles and rockets when a waved hand could solve the problem just as easily? Yet there it behooved a General to have a standard of command, and his staff atop which rested a white orb as if forged from the frost itself.

It was a curious artifact, one of the few which had been found here. Impossible to replicate, incapable of being damaged, and capable of responding to a skilled master. As he had found the artifact, so he had been given it. As trivial as he found melee combat, it was an engaging exercise.

It gave some insight into why the Warmaster often risked himself so unnecessarily.

“[Prepare to march!]” He commanded as the warriors stood at attention. “[Navigators! Upon my lead!]”

He turned around, extended a hand in front of him as he opened the gap between the spheres. The blue-white portal slowly manifested before him, which he knew was echoed on a smaller scale behind him by the Navigators as they replicated his efforts. It reached a point where it became self-sustaining, and he lowered his arm.

“[March.]”
New York City, New York – United States of America

5/28/2017 – 11:19 A.M.

This Agent was unlike anything Patricia had ever fought before.


She was having to put legitimate effort into surviving.

Not fighting, surviving.

Very curious.

She had realized very early on that if Fiona so much as touched her she was in a really bad position. Whatever she was augmenting her weapon with was strong enough to cut through her armor, as the large gash on her chestpiece now indicated. Fortunately, she had managed to avoid penetrating deeper.

Her mind was shielded, likely by T’Leth, so telepathic attacks were useless. Biopathy was an alternative, but she was simply moving too fast to lock onto her position, and there was every indication that T’Leth was similarly protecting her from Biopathic attacks as well. She was utilizing a form of teleportation that was faster and more staccato any than she’d ever seen before.

Quisilia, Sicarius, none of them were nearly as fast as Fiona was; vanishing with green-white bursts and reappearing steps away, making it difficult to predict where she would strike next. Teleporting was something Patricia had gotten more skilled at as well, so escape was easy enough with her enhanced reflexes, but it was a deadly dance where the first mistake by either of them would mean the end.

For reasons she hadn’t been able to figure out, Fiona also seemed impossible to hold telekinetically. It wasn’t just that she was vanishing every time she was even somewhat held, it was like the telekinetic bonds were wrapping around something which didn’t exist. Like fighting a hologram, only Fiona was decidedly not a hologram, even if the power around her gave that impression.

More disturbingly, she was still teleporting when it should have been impossible.

Either she had somehow found a way to subvert the Psionosphere lockdown – or what she was doing wasn’t really psionically-based at all.

Something which should assuredly not be possible.

Patricia had not made her teleporting spree easy, at every moment she was throwing every piece of the environment she could in the general vicinity, almost creating a small hurricane of shrapnel, rubble, and blood. But Fiona didn’t seem slowed down, as each relatively big piece that even came close to hitting her she touched, and it vanished in a flash of white-green.

The only method of attack which seemed to be reliably working was Dynamo psionics.

The stone armor the Agent wore had been clipped and the texture scored by the psionic blasts she had manifested; and knowing that, Patricia was transitioning to ensuring that the Psionosphere remained broken in their vicinity. Though that was difficult with the continued harassment of Fiona and Patricia constantly needing to move.
She appeared above her, striking down. Patricia created a portal and moved several meters to the side while sending a shockwave where Fiona had been, who blinked away before it hit her. Immediately she appeared to her left, while Patricia vanished into a portal of her own. No matter who attacked, they were in an effective stalemate.

It was now a measure of endurance, concentration, and skill.

More minutes of fighting, until Fiona materialized a short distance away, both women circling each other, waiting for one to make the next move. “You’re skilled,” Patricia grudgingly admitted. “But you are no psion, are you?”

“Perhaps you aren’t as skilled as you believe,” Fiona retorted. “There are some things even the Imperator doesn’t know.”

No…but there are some he suspects.

Patricia seized the moment with a sweep of her hand, turning the area Fiona was in into a crackling maelstrom, combining it with a shockwave powerful enough that it would snap the neck of anything mortal caught in it. She managed to vanish, though not before she spent a singular precious second in the storm and only just hit with the shockwave.

She reappeared a short distance away, the momentum of the shockwave slamming her into a nearby wall, hitting her head hard against it. She stumbled to her feet as Patricia fired a stream of lightning at her exposed form, which hit for only a moment before she disappeared and rematerialized again nearby, her armor smoking and body jittering. Her helmet seemed damaged, and with a frantic motion she tore it off, as she took another short jump to avoid Patricia’s newer bolt.

She was young, younger than Patricia had assumed she would be. Pale skin, green eyes, a curious ashen hair color, and a large scar across her eye. The eyes glared hatefully at her, leaking the white-green energy so similar to psions. Both locked eyes, and Fiona didn’t bother moving again when Patricia fired another stream of lightning.

Instead her body turned an almost transparent white-green, and the bolt went through her.

Fiona smirked.

It was only a second of surprise, but that was all the Agent of T'Leth needed.

She was suddenly before the Harbinger, and the sword wreathed in energy slashed up, severing her right arm, and with the free hand, she touched Patricia.

Something equivalent to a sonic boom went off in her head.

The rest of the world seemed to become muted; colors became faded, sound ceased to exist, and her emotions turned dead. The hand Fiona had placed on her breastplate forced her to her knees, and her seemingly paralyzed body permitted it. The pain from the severed arm was oddly muted.

But everything was muted because it was almost impossible to focus on anything but the incredible pain in her head.

She was bombarded with flashes, sights, sounds, all at once, in one screaming choir of chaos and horror. She saw her life flash before her dozens of times, she saw things she remembered, and things she did not; memories she possessed, and things she knew had not taken place.
Then almost as quickly, they began vanishing.

_Erased._

_Gone._

She had little idea of what was happening now, but a yawning horror grew in her as she felt something was being unconscionably violated. Whatever Fiona was doing _couldn’t_ be allowed to continue.

_Fight!_

She pushed back with her strength, drawing on what little concentration she could muster from the Imperator to hold onto what existed, no matter the utter pain it caused her mind. Fiona seemed surprised, as she cocked her head at the resistance. Patricia realized her body was also being encased in the same white-green energy.

_Who was she?_

The vanishing parts slowed, but did not stop. She could only pray that someone intervened and stopped her before-

Out of the corner of her eye she saw something charge forward and a massive metal club hit Fiona square in the chest, sending her flying into a nearby building. The world came back to Patricia in a rush, as the trance Fiona had forced upon her vanished, and she crumpled to the ground.

Which was when she felt it.

_Cold._

She’d felt this kind of cold once before. The other Agent she’d fought.

She looked up to the sky and realized something very peculiar. It was snowing. In fact, there were snow dustings on the ground. The initial flakes had obviously melted, but with the air as cold as it was, it had soon grown cold enough to begin gathering. Her teeth chattered, and blood dripped out of her stump.

They were no longer alone.

She forced herself up on one arm as she looked to see what had happened. A figure was near Fiona, a massive humanoid in grey armor. He’d thrown or sprayed some kind of mist or dust into Fiona’s face, as she was coughing and struggling to stand. Her chest armor was shattered, and the massive club the figure wore lashed out with inhuman speed against her kneecaps, shattering them.

The ethereal power that had surrounded her was gone, and it was replaced by the visage of a terrified woman. The massive figure hooked the fingers of one hand under her destroyed collar and dragged her away, the woman feebly protesting. In her half-delirious state, Patricia had no idea who this person was.

The cold seeped in deeper.

The unknown warrior wasn’t the only person nearby.

Turning her head, she saw that there was a similarly armored figure, although unlike the one with the club, the helmet of this one had two distinct eye slots opposed to the irregular pattern of the
warrior. He held a staff in one hand, with an odd crystal ball at the top. A cathedral-like halo was also atop his helmet.

All she felt was pain, confusion, and cold.

Biting, sapping cold.

This one appeared to be…the leader? Patricia couldn’t tell. He turned the empty eyes of the helmet down upon her briefly, before seeming to dismiss her as a threat. He was flanked by a dozen soldiers in similar-colored armor, who wielded rifles she didn’t recognize, with bladed weapons strapped to their backs.

The leader spoke to Fiona, a deep yet oddly beautiful language that she couldn’t hope to identify. Two of the soldiers brought forward some kind of body-length restraining machine. The subordinate warrior tossed Fiona towards the leader, and he lifted a hand, suspending her in the air. This one was definitely a psion then – or at least could use it.

The mangled body of Fiona was strapped inside, definitely electronic in some way, and seemed designed to restrain and sedate, from the number of needles that were injected into her. The warrior seemed to realize Patricia was still alive, and turned to face her. Her mind was still sapped and scrambled, yet she tried drawing upon the power, knowing it would not be enough.

The leader lifted a commanding hand towards the warrior. He shouted a word in their language, but whatever he said was enough to stop him from killing her outright.

Instead, the warrior paused, stared down at her with contempt, and turned away.

Which was before hell broke loose once again.

A purple flash appeared across her field of vision and the Battlemaster slammed into the unknown warrior, sending him careening forward. Patricia heard more voices from the distance, and a storm of lightning was shot towards the leader, who vanished and reappeared centimeters away.

He shouted a command, and the other soldiers began moving the unconscious body of Fiona away as they prepared to face newer threats.

She couldn’t hold on anymore.

Patricia closed her eyes, and fell unconscious.

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New York City, New York – United States of America

5/28/2017 – 11:41 A.M.

This mission had turned from something standard into an utter chaotic mess.

Not since the Synthesized War had he seen a mission go completely upside down. His job, as far as he had seen it, had been to maintain the discipline and focus of the Collective forces to hit key infrastructure points, and then summarily depart. Patricia for whatever reason was focused on sending a message.

A very destructive message which he was certain would inevitably backfire.

Unfortunately, he had to bide his time and minimize the damage where he could. It had been going
well, until he had received a direct order from the Overmind to go to Patricia. He had been confused initially, even more so when without ambiguity it had been stated she was in danger.

Which shouldn’t have happened.

Not here.

Minutes after that an unnatural chill had swept throughout the city. The CODEX network began processing reports of attacks from unknown enemies which had appeared to come out of nowhere. They had supposedly walked out of portals of ice and snow. The Battlemaster had been to his share of ice worlds, and what he felt now was colder than any of them, except an isolated exoplanet that lacked a sun.

It had been an anomaly in the Empire, and a place where many Battlemasters trained for a short time. It became dangerous if one stayed for too long. This was most similar to that, but even colder, if possible. His training would let him endure, though Yang would have more difficulties.

I can do it.

He hoped she could.

They had dashed back to where Patricia’s last location was as fast as they could. Turning the corner they found themselves upon a desolate street which seemed to have been purged of anything resembling structure. No cars, bodies, or debris remained. It had been the site of a battle, but a very destructive one.

The sight that greeted them raised far more questions than answers.

A small squad of soldiers stood in the isolated street; tall, at least as tall as Patricia, perhaps a bit more. Humanoids, but definitely not XCOM or ADVENT. Their armor was a silver-gray, and definitely powered to some degree. Their helmets seemed designed in such a way as to evoke the memories of a humanoid skull, and by extension, death.

Two others stood out, a slightly taller individual with a less stylized helmet with a metal vertical halo who held a staff that reminded him of those carried by the Agents of T’Leth. He seemed to be in command. The other was far more concerning initially. It was a warrior who almost massed his own size – or perhaps he did.

In his hand he carried a massive club, and his armor was augmented with wrist weapons, gadgets, and at minimum some micro-missiles were built into the armor itself. They seemed to be securing one of the Agents of T’Leth, a woman. Nearby he spotted Patricia who seemed just barely conscious, preparing to die as the massive warrior turned to finish her off.

The leader lifted a hand sharply towards the warrior, seeming to order him to back off. The language they spoke was oddly haunting; it sounded very old.

So they could speak. From the tone, it was likely the name of the warrior or at least a title. A shame he hadn’t heard it; he preferred knowing who he was facing. No more time needed to be wasted. He didn’t know who these entities were, but they were not friendly. Follow my lead, he communicated through the bond to Yang. I will focus on the warrior.

Grasping his weapon in-hand, he charged forward – and slammed into a wall.

It was a psionic charge powerful enough to pulverize any enemy if hit directly on. All it did for this warrior was force him backwards. The warrior responded by immediately pivoting on a foot and
swinging the club with enough force to dent his helmet if it connected. Instead it met his own sword.

Both warriors stood locked in the stance for a long moment.

Nearby the crackle of lightning struck, as mixture of XCOM and T'Leth agents arrived, forcing the other leader to contend with them. The Battlemaster focused on what was directly before him. The warrior growled and with a flourish and speed that belied his size, broke the lock and unleashed a series of jabs and swipes, while hitting his chest with the other hand.

A blue mist spilled from some gaps in his suit, something the Battlemaster immediately realized as Element-based. It subsequently meant that his telekinesis was not going to be as useful – not that his opponent was giving him time to properly prepare. The Battlemaster deflected a swing, and got in a few swipes and stabs of his own.

The warrior snarled and after another swing, extended a wrist, firing white-purple flames which he dodged, charged away, and charged back within a few seconds. Yang had entered the fight now, pelting the warrior with telekinetic debris and pieces of rubble. With how he wielded the club, one might have thought it weighed nothing, as he used it effortlessly to strike against the Battlemaster and deflect pieces of rubble Yang threw at him.

Assuming he was phased to begin with.

No matter what, it seemed he was always on the attack.

With the exception of the short-lived duel against the Zeal, It had been so long since he had faced an opponent that was legitimately equal to him in training, size, and durability. One who was on the attack, but he was more than capable of defending against him. As they dueled, with Yang staying in the back, he focused more on what his enemy was.

Had he not known better, he would have assumed it was a Human since they shared almost all anatomic features, but it was most assuredly not one. No Human was this large, nor this skilled. Nor did they wear such armor and use weapons like these. His first thought was that another Sovereign One had decided to become involved.

It made the most sense. But something seemed wrong.

A question to ask later.

The snow continued pouring in, and the street they were on was developing a thin sheet of ice. Footing would be an issue for most, but not the two titans who fought, ignorant of the world around them. Sword met club, both scored light hits on each other. Once the Battlemaster used his arms to grab the handle of the club, but the warrior pulled him close and slammed his own helmet into him with enough force it briefly weakened his grip for it to be pulled back.

The Battlemaster lost track of how long they had dueled. Both were moving fast enough that the chill had become irrelevant as their blood pumped full of heat and adrenaline. Such a prolonged duel was almost enjoyable; it was a fight where he was facing an equal on even ground. Paradise had been a harrowing trial, this was a duel of warriors.

He suspected his opponent felt the same way.

Both used every tool at their disposal. With his own telekinesis he tried every counter possible, neutered as it was by the warrior being saturated in the Element, but sometimes it was enough to slow a swing, stop a punch, or distract with debris. Yang continued throwing everything she could
at him, and once charged behind the giant, though was quickly forced back after one of the swings connected, briefly knocking the wind out of her.

His opponent altered his own fighting technique multiple times during the fight. Two-handed strikes. One-handed followed up with a wrist weapon or outright punch. Other times he moved his grip closer to the head of the club, turning it into a close-range bashing tool alternating with the empty fist.

Above them a blizzard seemed to be forming. Sleet began raining down, turning the conditions miserable – though for both of them it was an extra challenge. Both temporarily halted their attacks, circling each other, with the warrior occasionally glancing to know where Yang was.

“The reputation of the Battlemasters is well-earned,” the warrior said, in rough, but passable English. The voice was not as harsh as he had expected, but still the tongue of one who did little formal speaking. It was hard, blunt, and unrefined. A perfect reflection of the warrior before him.

And he knew what the Battlemasters were.

“And what do you know of such things?” He demanded.

“That it would be an honor to kill the last one,” came the response, before the warrior charged forward again, and the duel commenced anew, even as the city turned to ice, and the battles raged within its structures, and on the bloodied streets.

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New York City, New York – United States of America

5/28/2017 – 12:22 P.M.

Hallian had felt the cold before.

On Vitakar it was commonplace depending on where one lived. He’d been to Borelia multiple times; no one in the Runianarch didn’t get at least a few months of training in the Wastes. It wasn’t generally something he’d consider pleasant, but it was something anyone would eventually adapt to.

Personally, he didn’t find it terrible; in some cases it was almost pleasant, especially after a hard training session where the cold felt refreshing.

This cold which had invaded the city was unlike anything he had felt before.

This kind of cold killed.

There were those rare cases where explorers went towards the coldest places of Borelia where mere skin exposure led to frostbite. Hallian had never went there himself, but he’d seen the aftermath. This was what he would imagine it felt like. A harsh burning sensation; the feeling of your breath turning to frost in your throat; the conscious feeling of your body shutting down every second you were exposed.

None of them were prepared for this.

Their armor was climate-resistant, but cold seeped inside. The heating systems could only do so much, and Hallian was growing more concerned that as the temperature steadily dropped, to points far beyond freezing, that they would all perish from it. Even worse was they had been assigned to
Scores of Mutons marched down the streets, the cowering civilians hiding as they single-mindedly pursued their goal. It was to assist Patricia, though what was powerful enough to challenge the Harbinger he could only wonder at. The Battlemaster had sped there at his own speed, as they had rushed to keep up.

Snow and ice pelted them, melting and then freezing as the pavement froze before their eyes.

Teeth chattered. Mutons shivered. They clutched their rifles closely, looking for any source of phantom heat.

*What was this?*

Focus. Keep moving. Don’t stop.

If you stop, you die.

If you fall asleep, you won’t wake up.

Hallian already felt weary, the cold had turned into a numbness across his body, a bad sign he knew, because the next stage would be a gradual sapping of strength until he didn’t move – or didn’t _want_ to move. He couldn’t allow that, but his body was already betraying him. “Stims now!” He ordered, taking an executive medical action. He wasn’t the only one who was suffering the symptoms.

The Mutons were stronger than the Vitakara, and their training would let them continue a while longer. As the Mutons marched, he distributed stims, some more traditional drugs, others chocolate. Mostly whatever he had, which completely depleted his stock. It might be a bad idea to use them all here, but better they used them now than died to hypothermia.

He looked up into the sky which had once held a blue sky and yellow sun which had been replaced by a portal of blackness and snow. Was this an ADVENT counterattack? It didn’t seem like them, and this cold did not discriminate. Someone or something else? A freak tear in reality? His cold-addled mind couldn’t fully form a coherent guess, but he didn’t think it was ADVENT.

*Then who?*

They marched down the street and then saw the battle. Hallian had never seen anything like it before. What looked like an XCOM squad, led by a figure in robes and others in stone-like armor battled a figure of a type Hallian had never seen before. He held a staff tipped with some kind of pale-blue crystalline orb, and all sides were battling with portals of blue and purple.

It was moving so fast, and the armored figure with the staff was holding his own, but to his shock, Hallian saw the broken body of the Harbinger laying on the ground, ignored by all parties. Snow had built up around her, and she was missing an arm. She looked dead, but he suspected she wasn’t.

At least that’s what he hoped.

If she wasn’t dead, she would be very soon.

The combatants had noticed the small army approaching, and were moving to attack. The Mutons raised their weapons, and Hallian ducked into what little cover there was when everything was interrupted.
It was almost like a blast of wind, and a hum which lasted only a few seconds before fading so fast he’d wondered if he’d heard it at all. It blew the snow around the center away, and when it cleared, Hallian felt his mouth open at the sight before him. An aura of overwhelming might filled the air, dominating his senses and commanding every single cell of his body.

Standing in the center of the street, was an Ethereal.

But one he instinctively knew who it was.

*The Imperator.*

There was a surreal aura around the titan before him. Hallian had considered the Battlemaster the peak of Ethereal physique, and yet he seemed a child before the Ethereal who stood towering over the inferior before him. The ornate armor of pure silver glimmered in the snow, the flakes melting to slurry around him. A cape of gold and white fell from his shoulders, having an almost holy glow around it.

The helmet reminded him of an inverted pyramid, with eye slits that flickered between a warm fire and a furious inferno. Hallian forgot the cold. He forgot his weariness. He forgot everything. Nothing mattered anymore. All that mattered was the Imperator. All that mattered was his command.

He said nothing.

He did not need to.

As one the Vitakara, fell to one knee, as only deference was allowed before their ultimate master.

The Mutons stood at full attention, with even their simple minds understanding the power before them.

The other parties reacted immediately.

Hallian heard faded shouts of panic from the XCOM squad - a few brave ones actually opened fire, though the plasma and gauss fire missed or dissipated without the Imperator even moving - and saw them vanish into a portal as the figures of stone armor removed themselves in near-panic. The unknown figure with the staff met the helmed gaze of the Imperator for mere seconds before waving a hand behind him, opening a portal to the frozen realm from whence he came, vanishing.

The Imperator had still done nothing.

Silence fell over the battlefield.

He waved a hand and the body of Patricia Trask floated to him, limp and life fading. In one lower arm he held her, almost cradling her body as he turned to the prostrate army before him.

Then he spoke.

His voice was beyond anything Hallian had heard before. It held a rich command that his ears strained to hear, and which would make any sound besides it seem hollow in comparison. It bored into the center of his mind, anchoring with such power that he knew he would never forget a single word spoken for the rest of his life.

“This battle today is not ours. But leave with your heads high, for you have acquitted yourselves well before me. The time for retribution will come. Depart, for these invaders will
be driven from our realm.”

Hallian suddenly felt his body almost tumble and before he knew it, he and everyone else were back on Desolan. Already the aura which had settled upon him was gone, and he immediately wished for it back. He stood, shaken yet simultaneously invigorated.

The Imperator had come.

He had saved them.

***

New York City, New York – United States of America

5/28/2017 – 11:34 A.M.

The last thing Kunio expected when charging out of the Skyranger was a snowstorm.

But that was exactly what was happening.

He saw the snow first, and then the cold hit him. Snow was not something that was extremely common in Japan, and he safely preferred the warmer climates. Cold could be dealt with, but he couldn’t say he was a fan. It was certainly livable, just unpleasant.

No cold he had ever felt was like this.

It was not just something that he felt, it was more like his body had shifted into a completely different stage. His joints seemed stiffer, every breath felt painful, and his body seemed slower. This was not even getting into the fact that there was a snowstorm in New York in May.

“We’re too late,” Lincoln cursed. “Come on!”

“Where are we going?” Zara demanded.

“What the hell is this?” Vilhelmina asked as they ran into the city. “Why is it snowing?”

“Because we have visitors,” Lincoln said, pointing towards the sky. “I’ve only been told about them, but this follows standard tactics. They invade from a planet of constant snow and ice, and encompass their area of operations in a globe, making it impossible to penetrate unless the portal is closed.”

That followed, actually. Kunio nodded to himself. Looking into the sky, which had turned dimmer in light of the snowstorm, there were large sections which were clear portals that were blowing the snow into the city. “Are those automatic?” He demanded. “Or are they using teleporters?”

“Better question,” Aharon added. “Who is they?”

“They call themselves the ‘Riders’,” Lincoln explained shortly. “Or at least that’s the best translation. Aliens who travel across galaxies to conquer other worlds and species. They were one species originally, now they compose hundreds. Very advanced, very skilled, very dangerous.”

“Sovereign?” Zara asked.

“That would be the assumption,” Lincoln said as they spotted a firefight going on in the distance. “I didn’t get a clear answer. There is a leader, but from what I was told, the internal dynamics are complicated. I don’t know why they’re here now, but Fiona somehow got their attention.”
Kunio shivered. “How?’

“You can ask her once we get her out of here,” Lincoln said. “Weapons hot! They’re ahead.”

For being aliens, Kunio was immediately struck by how much they resembled Humans, in anatomy if nothing else. But they stood at least two and a half meters tall, each of them, and bore heavy dark grey armor and weapons that to his eye simply he’d classify as advanced. They were engaged in a firefight with a small army of Mutons.

It was not going well for the Mutons.

The Riders as they apparently were called, were concentrated in a small area, but they were heavily locked down and disciplined. Kunio observed for only a few seconds, but unlike conventional armies which used suppressive fire and taking multiple shots, each of these armored soldiers took each shot very deliberately.

One shot.

A white crack.

A Muton’s head vanished.

Repeat.

The armor they wore seemed durable enough to take direct plasma shots, though the Riders never deliberately exposed themselves. They did seem to reject natural cover in favor of some kind of energy barrier they placed around themselves which was capable of complex linking.

The entire setup was connected to a portable power station, managed by another of the Riders who was behind a display, which also managed a half-dozen autoturrets which were just as methodical as the soldiers. In the very back was another Rider, who was sheathed in blue energy as its hands were raised to the sky, where a portal connecting to the ice world opened.

Kunio realized that the armor the portal Rider was wearing was the same he’d seen in Nara wear several times.

More and more questions.

“We think the armor can take some of the shots,” Lincoln said, drawing on psionic power of his own. “But don’t take chances!”

“We’ll get in close,” Vilhelmina readied her warhammer as Aharon joined her. “Kunio, think you can get us on top?”

Kunio briefly checked, and realized that whatever had locked down the Psionosphere was gone. He gave them a sharp nod – then paused. “Let me try something first.” He waved a hand, opening a small portal and chucking in the Thought Bomb he’d brought along, setting it to kill. This was not the time to be taking chances.

Over a couple of the Riders the portal opened, and was recognized immediately. However instead of panicking, one of them picked it up and flung it in a smooth motion to the few remaining Mutons, and as it went off, the remainder crumpled to the ground. It had been worth a shot.

Now they were onto them.
Kunio created a portal, and motioned for the Templars to jump into it. Lincoln shot blasts of energy towards the Riders, who raised the shields higher. Barbara and Zara fired at the machinery, to cause it to collapse, as Zemin and Tang unleashed their own psionic power. Once the Templars jumped inside several of the Riders immediately adapted.

Pulling out dark swords they immediately and surprisingly engaged the Templars in melee combat. Part of the barrier gear sputtered, and a portion of the shield went down. Bolts from the Riders shot out in response. One impacted him directly in his chest, sending him stumbling back. He could almost feel the impact, even as the nanites began repairing.

None of them could take sustained fire.

Several of the soldiers were throwing grenades to the massed Riders, and none of them got close once the Riders shot them out of the sky. It was a level of marksmanship that Kunio hadn’t seen even from XCOM snipers. The psionics did seem to spook them though, and they ducked out of the psionic blasts of Lincoln and Tang.

The Templars were not faring much better.

They had underestimated the skill of the Riders, as even the regular soldiers were swift, lethal, and graceful. Vilhelmina was managing to hold her own, even managing to get a good hit on the chest. Aharon was faring less well, as the reach of his weapon was lessened, and his opponent was just as skilled if not more so than he was.

Both Templars were incorporating as much psionics as they could into their attacks, with telekinetic pushes from Vilhelmina and Aharon’s Aegii psionics letting him last longer than he might have otherwise. Yet even these were adapted to by the Riders, who appeared to have been trained in fighting psions.

It was almost a stalemate in some ways, which Kunio needed to end.

The only one not participating was the one controlling the portal.

“Lincoln! I’m going to take out the teleporter!” He called.

“Do it!” Lincoln stated, sending another blast towards the Riders.

Kunio suddenly got another idea. “Zara! Barbara! Get over here!”

Both rushed over. “Barbara, when I give the order, you fire everything into the portal,” he ordered the Infantry. “Zara, send your nanites down. We take down their technical center and teleporter all at once.”

He briefly closed his eyes, looked to where his targets were, and opened his palms. The portals were small, but that was all they needed. Barbara fired into the one before her, and he was rewarded by the sight of a hail of green bolts slamming into the teleporter, forcing her to close the portal, and cease the snowstorm even if the damage clearly wasn’t fatal.

A stream of golden nanites poured from a portal above the Rider technician, which for the first time seemed to panic as he hit a button on one of the panels, and a massive pulse went out. Kunio was grateful then for the fact that their suits had been EMP hardened, because otherwise they would have been paralyzed.

The good news was that while it had killed the nanites, it had also fried the system itself, taking down the barrier system and fully exposing them. The teleporter, yelled something in the alien
language, and opened another portal, though this one was on the ground, and it seemed to be…a retreat?

The fact that the Riders seemed to be only hardening their stances indicated otherwise.

Several of the Riders had been injured by the psions, and were being treated by their brethren, who carried them away while those still alive kept firing at a fast enough pace that XCOM advanced more slowly. They were taking hits, and their advance slowed to a crawl. To Kunio’s alarm, the tide actually seemed to be turning against them. The Templars were now almost defeated. Kunio looked just in time to see Aharon miss a swing and the Rider seize the opening and fully decapitate him.

Vilhelmina was on the defensive still, but the Rider fighting her simply sliced her arm and slit her throat before he backed off. That wouldn’t kill her with the Titan armor, though it would stun her for a while. But the Riders seemed intent on finishing the job, as two more of the remaining Riders drew weapons of their own and closed on her.

Then there was a blast of power.

Kunio wondered, and all of them had wondered, what it would be like to face the enigmatic Imperator. They knew what he looked like. They knew how powerful he was. Many of them knew they would never face him, let alone defeat this titan. The Imperator was the endgame, but one all of them knew would pose a threat unlike any they had faced.

Today they learned what would happen.

They froze.

Kunio saw the Imperator, the giant in the intricate armor and was immediately overcome with the power that emanated just from his presence. His mind screamed as the compulsion to submit wormed through him, before the Manchurian Restraints took over, freezing his body in a paralyzing grip, leaving his mind scrambled and eyes watching.

Everyone else was similarly affected – for the Riders it seemed worse. All of them stopped fighting, and stumbled back, some of them holding or clutching their helmets as they were similarly overwhelmed. Only the one commanding the portal seemed to have any hold of independence, and they acted.

One by one the teleporter grabbed the stunned Riders, and almost shoved them into manifested portals, while others stumbled into those which were created in front of them. Within a very short period the very presence of the Imperator had been enough to drive them off, and the teleporter finally stepped into a final portal and vanished.

The Imperator appraised them, and Kunio knew if he acted, they were dead.

The power became so overwhelming it was becoming painful.

Without a word, the Imperator lifted a hand and vanished, and instantly they were freed. Breathing heavily they all regained their bodies and minds, staring at each other through their helmets, unsure whether it was a trap or the Imperator sending a message. Relative silence fell upon them, and the cold had almost vanished, pulverized by the Imperator’s appearance.

Tang had rushed over to Vilhelmina, who was recovering and shaking. Lincoln looked at where the Imperator had been. “I can’t believe we’re alive.”
“Neither can I,” Kunio said. “That was…”

“Terrifying,” he finished. “I didn’t…I didn’t think we’d see him until…”

“We were going to lose,” Kunio said in a toneless voice. “Then…”

“Yeah…”

“Hunter Squad, this is the Chronicler,” a voice came over the comms. “Good news and bad. Good news is that we located her. The bad news is that the Imperator himself is in play. We aren’t sure what he is intending, but we are preparing for the worst. Move to secure Fiona if you can. Report any sightings if you see him”

“Chronicler, we just had an encounter,” Lincoln immediately answered. “He showed up, then left once the Riders were gone.”

“I see,” there was a pause. “There are similar reports coming in. They appear to have drawn him out.”

“What is our objective?”

“Continue. If he let you live, then he is not after us this time. Recover Fiona now before she is removed or he recovers her.”

“Copy,” Lincoln stated, looking to the surviving Templar. “Forslund, can you continue?”

“Yes sir,” the Templar grunted. “As long as the Imperator doesn’t show up again. And Aharon… we’ll come back for his body, right?”

“We will.”

“Let’s go,” she said, gripping her weapon. “I feel we’re running on borrowed time.”

***

New York City, New York – United States of America

5/28/2017 – 12:41 A.M.

Perched atop one of the intact skyscrapers that still stood after the initial chaos, the Hunter watched through a continuing, but dying storm of snow and ice. Unlike most of his kind, the Frost had little effect on him, as all of his School trained with the Riders on the ice world. He knew little of it, but knew that it had made him capable of surviving any place, situation, and opponent.

Useful for his line of work.

In retrospect, he wasn’t surprised the General had taken the opportunity that had appeared. In fact, if none acted, he was prepared to take her himself. The fight between her and Patricia had been illuminating to witness. She was indeed untrained in the use of her abilities – or at least her master was unskilled.

Knowing who that was, the latter was most likely. Some academic knowledge, but nothing practical. Self-learning would fill these gaps, but it would take centuries – time she did not have. Which was why she still would struggle against a psion of this Sphere, and would not have lasted without the aid of a Sovereign One to protect her mind.
And as expected, they had arrived at the most opportune time, and had easily captured her – to be immediately followed up by the Ethereal Battlemaster engaging the one who he assumed was a Warmaster. There were several, and he couldn’t make out who it was – not that he particularly cared as much.

More interesting was the XCOM squad which had also appeared, led by none other than the traitor in question. All complete with lightning, a staff complete with a Sovereign Orb, and righteous indignation. Several of the Warriors rushed the restrained body of his intended quarry away. The Hunter took a quick moment to tag them, as he turned his attention to the coming battles.

The Battlemaster and Warmaster took their fight away, though he tagged them as well to know where to avoid. More interesting was how the General would handle his new opponents.

As it turned out, quite skillfully.

XCOM was skilled. That was not a surprise to see them treating the General like a psion, though they would have been smarter to treat him closer to Patricia. Something evidenced by his liberal use of teleportation, telekinesis, and Aegii psionics. However, the Hunter knew very well that direct combat was not his strength.

He was a strategist, and played a very long game.

He had come into this fight without an idea of who or what he would face – not that he would necessarily have to concern himself with who posed a threat in this Sphere short of a Sovereign – but it meant that the optimal path to victory could only be determined in real time. Given enough time, he would emerge victorious.

But XCOM and the traitor had known what they were facing. Given the sudden emergence of ‘Fiona’, as she was ironically calling herself, he supposed that they had guessed what was coming and prepared accordingly. Intelligent, as he had indicated in his reports. There were powerful psions and Agents of T’Leth here. It spoke to his skill that he was holding his own.

He had noted with some amusement that a sizable alien army had arrived. It was almost certainly going to be torn to pieces, and he was anticipating the show when everything changed.

Of all the scenarios that could happen, the Hunter had not expected the Ethereal Imperator would personally grace the battlefield.

It took all of his extensive training to not become overwhelmed by the sheer aura exuded by this master of the Psionosphere. In his life the Hunter had only felt himself affected in this wholly overwhelming way twice. Once when he had been brought before the Sage-King, and when he had faced the true form of the Entity.

*True form. Wouldn’t that have been nice.*

It had still almost killed him.

Truthfully, he would have been surprised if the operation had continued much further. The longer the battle persisted, the higher the chance that soldiers would die and technology be left to lesser species. Retreat was inevitable, but not before success was certain. The arrival of the Imperator changed everything.

The Imperator could not be allowed to threaten the Throne World.
They were not prepared.

It did not surprise him when the General departed, though obviously not before ordering a retreat. XCOM had fled quickly, and the Imperator had telekinetically called the body of his puppet, before teleporting the army which had come to fight away, then vanishing himself, letting the Hunter take a long breath.

The mission was going to fail now. The Imperator was not here for XCOM, he was here for them. By doing nothing he was nonetheless sending a clear message. He almost certainly had no idea who or what they were, but he had seen them flee – and that would tell him that the Throne World knew his power and that they could not match him today.

But he was still here, and still had an assignment of his own.

Improvisation was required. If this mission was to fail, it fell on him to ensure the next one was successful. He was under no illusions that he would be the deciding factor in a conflict between psions – let alone something like this Imperator. He was far too weak, skilled as he was. Without the element of surprise, it was a doomed endeavor, and his weapons were not strong enough to take out enough of them quickly enough.

This mission would be salvaged to a degree. The Imperator wouldn’t know about her, and wouldn’t necessarily be looking for her.

With that determined, he backed up, and with a telekinetic push sent himself flying through the air as he mentally plotted his path to the tracker. Telekinesis was one of the most useful abilities he could think of, and in this sphere he could use it much easier. It wasn’t strong, but it didn’t need it to be.

All it needed to do was serve as an amplifier and anchor.

Leaping from building to building, running along the walls and across the rooftops, he made a number of notations about the number of soldiers – both ADVENT and XCOM which were moving in his same direction. So they almost certainly knew where she was being moved too. That was problematic.

He needed to move faster.

Minutes later he spotted the small group. Either they had lost some of their soldiers, or some had split up, because there were only five. Far too small to be a credible threat. With a leap, he softened his landing a few meters behind them, which forced them to react immediately, turning around and aiming their weapons at him.

“Hold!” He commanded instinctively in English.

The nearmost Warrior appraised him. “[Viper. We are in retreat.]”

Right, they wouldn’t speak English. He switched to their speech. “[Correct. The Imperator has intervened, and XCOM and ADVENT squads are converging. You will be killed.]”

“[We are aware,]” the leader marched towards him. “[We will not let her be retaken.]”

The Hunter sighed, putting some urgency into his voice. “[The Imperator is here. You cannot let yourselves be captured. The Throne World cannot be put at risk.]”

“[And we cannot abandon her now that she is in our possession,]” was the response. “[We have
little choice, nor can we predict where the Imperator will go.]

"[Allow me propose an alternative,]" he spoke quickly. "[Give her to me, and hide until the soldiers are gone. The General will locate you, otherwise you will die for nothing and your bodies resting outside the Throne World. Worse, you may be captured and the secrets of the Spheres given to the Imperator. The Humans are unaware of me. I will ensure the next operation to acquire her succeeds.]

There was a prolonged silence as they considered his proposal. In the end, the Hunter doubted it was his appeal to life, but what would happen if they were captured by the Imperator, or their bodies killed here by XCOM. They were already cut off, and the Riders were in clear retreat, and their bodies in addition to providing the Humans here with valuable insight, would never be returned to the tombs.

"[The General is aware of you, Viper?]" He asked.

"[He is. This was my mission before the opportunity here arose]"

"[Proof.]

The Hunter reached inside his vest and pulled out the silver artifact. It glittered in the dimmed light, before the Warrior nodded. "[Very well. This assignment is in your hands. Do not fail.]

There was some internal discussion, before the soldiers marched off on a different path, able to move more swiftly without carrying the body. He looked down at the sedated woman, curious as he’d never seen her up close. She’d taken a severe beating, but nothing she wouldn’t recover from. Definitely young, and from the images he had researched, he could see the family resemblance, faint as it was. Such a shame it had ended up like this. Of course, she was ultimately only a pawn. The traitor bore full responsibility for her current predicament, sacrificed at the altar of his own ambitions.

"Hands up! Step away!" The Hunter turned, almost relieved to see an XCOM squad marching up, led by an Agent of T'Leth.

He complied. "Of course. She’s all yours."

Three of the soldiers moved to free her and apply med-kits to her body, and the Agent appraised him carefully. "Who are you?"

"An ally," he said smoothly. "I know who they are, and followed here. I am no friend to them, and I know who this is." He indicated the body lying on the ground. "As do you, I suspect. I do not know why she is here, but better here than with them – or the Imperator."

The Agent stared closer, no doubt noticing his eyes – and his strong mental defenses. "I have no interest in staying long," he said, looking to the portals in the distance which were continuing to fade. "I do not belong. But here-" he reached into his pocket, pretending to fumble. "When she awakes, give this to her. She will know what it means."

The man gingerly took the seal with the cat’s head on it. It was a calculated risk, but telling the truth was certainly a bad idea, nor was picking the obvious way to gain her tentative trust. Without another word, he leapt into the air, activating his cloaking field so that when the Agent inevitably wanted to question him more, it would be almost impossible for him to lock on.

Sure enough, they called out for him, but he ignored them and put a significant amount of distance
between him and all XCOM squads. Once more perched atop a skyscraper, he simply watched as one by one, the portals closed and the sun broke through to shine upon a frozen city.

He hoped the Imperator had left for good.

***

New York City, New York – United States of America

5/28/2017 – 1:23 P.M.

Sword and club continued meeting in quick succession.

The battle had continued far beyond what the Battlemaster suspected either of them were used to. He could also feel Yang start to tire as she exerted herself psionically and physically, as the duel continued down the streets. Though he wasn’t ignorant of the fact that the warrior seemed to be leading the duel; taking the aggressive posture like he had this entire time.

Neither had scored significant wounds on the other, but the Battlemaster had penetrated some gaps in his chest armor, and his opponent had bashed him on the thighs and two of his arms, which still bore developing bruises. The minute pain such injuries caused was easily ignored in the heat of battle.

The warrior battered down some rubble Yang threw at him while with a fist he bashed away another sword swipe. Turning quickly on his heel he directly charged the Battlemaster again, sliding his grip of the club closer to the head. Either by luck or speed, he bashed the hand that held his sword, causing him to drop it.

His opponent followed up with a series of hard strikes towards less-armored parts of his suit. The elbows, armpits, and throat, mixed in with a number of center blows to keep him off-balance. However, engaging in a melee was not wise to do with a Battlemaster with an anatomical advantage.

With one hand he gripped the arm of the warrior, while with his remaining ones he gripped the club, arm that grasped it, and with his final arm he unleashed one of the strongest telekinetic pushes he had done thus far in the battle. At such close range, even the mitigating effects of the element couldn’t cushion the blast.

The warrior was not sent far back, but he’d been forced to release his club, which now rested in the Battlemaster’s hand. It was not a weapon type he had used in a very long time, but he remembered basic principles. He telekinetically called his sword back to his hand, and marched forward, both weapons now in his hand.

He anchored himself in place, and slots above his shoulders opened and fired, sending a series of seemingly impossibly small micro-missiles towards him. The Battlemaster lifted a hand to catch them, and as one they all exploded, the shockwave forcing him back and the explosion blackening his armor.

Once the smoke cleared, he saw that his opponent had focused his attention on Yang, first sending several small missiles her way which she deflected, and directly following up with shooting several small wires designed to entrap her. They wrapped around her neck, legs, and arms, which only lasted for a moment as she used her sword to telekinetically cut them, but he’d yanked her towards him and charged forward.

The Battlemaster also charged, slamming into him and following up with a dual strike with his two
weapons. Both were dodged, as the warrior gave a hard kick to Yang before taking the aggressive stance once again by moving in close, and grabbing the club with both hands. The Battlemaster stabbed his sword through a gap in the chest, eliciting a rare grunt of pain, but he didn’t let go, even as the Battlemaster shoved it in deeper.

Placing his armored boot on the Battlemaster’s breastplate, he kicked himself off, and both stumbled back, the Battlemaster’s sword slick with red blood and his opponent wounded, but having his weapon back. The sounds of battle sounded nearby, and the Battlemaster realized that they were near a firefight.

And that his opponent was moving closer towards it.

Blood had flowed through his wounds, but the bleeding seemed to have stopped. Unsurprising. The Battlemaster would have been surprised if there wasn’t an internal triage system, but he suspected that this was a warrior who was not used to being wounded at all. Behind the warrior as they turned the corner, continuing to exchange blows, there was a battle between some scattered Collective forces, mostly Mutons, and these unknown soldiers, one maintaining a portal.

Was he retreating?

Since the Battlemaster was on the objective offensive for one of the few times in this duel, it seemed to be the case. Overhead he heard the roar of missiles, and quickly dashed out of the way as they struck the streets, taking out scores of Mutons and almost hitting him. His opponent did the same, but took the opportunity provided by the ADVENT airstrike to charge directly towards the portal.

Along the way he slew several of the surviving Mutons, either by bashing their joints in, or performing overhead swings that crushed their heads. Most of the unknown soldiers were retreating into the portal, and before he could charge forward, the warrior vanished within, and the teleporter in question soon followed, leaving them alone in a snow-blasted street with buildings covered in a sheet of ice.

Yang had recovered, though was breathing heavily, made worse by the freezing cold, though it was less so now that the portals had closed, as those had clearly been the source. “What,” she breathed. “Was that?”

“I do not know,” he answered, that question now also at the forefront of his mind. He had never seen anything resembling the warrior he had just fought, or those who had accompanied with him. His fighting style was also dissimilar to what he had seen from other warrior cultures, the few that existed during the time of the Empire.

It was aggressive, swift, and was thoroughly impossible to be performed at that level without decades of training, minimum. Perhaps longer – as well as consistent use. Training was not all-encompassing, and the battlefield had certain elements that you could only truly prepare for through experience.

And given the utter fluidity and adaptability displayed, this warrior was intimately familiar with battle.

Regardless, he was also acutely aware of the fact that this mission was a failure, and that ADVENT would be marching to fully reclaim the city. Which put him in a far more difficult situation – were he not prepared. The Collective had his position from his tracker, and he transitioned it to the extraction variant.
Given what was happening, he knew that the Imperator was certainly paying attention, and someone would come to extract him. Patricia’s body had doubtless been extracted at this point, although most of the soldiers had probably been written off. Fortunately, it was only Mutons – and only a fraction of the number Patricia had prepared had gone through before the attack.

Still, he wasn’t sure if ADVENT would count it as a victory or not. At minimum, they would be just as confused as he was as to who had intervened. If another Sovereign had entered the picture… that boded poorly, and would make his plans harder to carry out. And all indications were that whoever this was, they were unfriendly to all sides.

Cogitian would probably have the best idea. If not him, then there may be issues.

Because the Battlemaster was certain that this would not be the last time this faction intervened.

Then before him, the Imperator emerged. The Battlemaster was genuinely surprised to see the Imperator step foot on this planet. His mind immediately sprung to the ramifications. Regardless of the necessity, and it had likely been Patricia’s extensive injuries, XCOM would not take the provocation of their greatest opponent stepping foot on their planet.

But that was not the primary concern right now.

The Imperator looked to where the portal had been. “They retreated.”

“They did.” A pause. “Who were they.”

The Imperator did not immediately answer, simply still staring at the place the portal had been. “I am unsure. A mystery which we must immediately unravel.” He looked back to the Battlemaster. “I have extracted what remaining forces we had. We must speak, there is much to consider.”

With a nod, the Battlemaster awaited the Imperator to teleport them back to the Temple Ship. This battle would have ramifications beyond today, but just to what extent was to be determined. With a wave of his hand, the Imperator transported them away from the frozen city, only now just starting to melt as the pale yellow sun shone down overhead.

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To be continued in Chapter 62:

Wills of Steel, Hearts of Stone

Chapter End Notes

There will probably be two different reactions to this chapter; those who know what just happened, and those who do not. If not, don’t worry, it will become clear eventually :)

I’m amazed that there was only one person who put the pieces together before this point. Even the Editing Team didn’t figure it out until this chapter. Congrats Potius, speak to me to claim your prize.

Finally, there are a couple of other things to say – first is that I got artwork for the Commander done (see at the end of this chapter). Second is that Areleh has started
writing a spin-off/side-quel to the Advent Directive which follows the formation and exploits of the Pantheon. Look for “XCOM: Pantheon Rising” to check it out. It’s very good, and I look forward to working with him more as the story progresses.
The Praesidium, Office of the Commander – Classified Location

5/29/2017 – 6:00 A.M.

The air was tense.

All of the Internal Council were present, standing to the sides in front of the Commander’s desk, while the Chronicler and Crevan were standing directly before where the Commander was sitting. The Commander’s eyes were turned towards them, but unfocused, as his prosthetic hand rested on the desk while the other rested on his chair’s armrest.

It was a rare situation where he wasn’t completely sure what the best approach was.

There were many things to process. Normally the fact that the Imperator had stepped foot on Earth would be occupying every immediate discussion. Perhaps how Patricia had targeted one of the most populous cities in ADVENT and nearly succeeded, ignoring all conventional plans and wisdom.

But there was something that deserved more focus. Something which he had genuinely not seen coming. He let the silence linger a few moments longer before looking to the Chronicler and asked a single question in an intentionally calm voice. “Would you care to explain what you’ve been hiding from us?”

The Chronicler’s voice was equally neutral. “I wouldn’t phrase it like that.”

“Oh?” The Commander lifted an eyebrow. “And just how would you phrase keeping this information from us?”

“As irrelevant information, Commander,” the Chronicler pursed his lips. “This was not something we expected to happen. There was no reason for you to know, and the more who are aware, the more danger this world is in.”

The Commander knew Zhang was going to speak; he could hear the whispers of a response but he cut him off, lifting a hand and whatever Zhang was going to say died. This was a conversation that he was going to fully control; no interjections or distractions. “And yet, you were wrong. More to the point, you lie.” The Commander turned his gaze to Crevan. “You certainly expected this to happen at some point. You knew exactly what was coming, and made us act because if we didn’t, then something would happen. What that is I am still unsure of, but I lost a couple of good soldiers – which is not counting the thousands who died from the snowstorm - and you are going to tell me exactly why they died.”

“To ensure Fiona was not taken,” Crevan answered. “Any sacrifice was not in vain.”

“She is one woman,” the Commander retorted. “Do not avoid the lie. You kept this from us not
because it wasn’t a possibility, but because you decided we did not need to know.”

“You didn’t.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “The corpses say otherwise. More to the point, this is our world,” a clear note of warning crept into his voice. “Not yours. Not T’Leth’s. And if there is something that threatens it – or which could threaten it – we better know. If we had known then perhaps we could have made plans; contingencies, instead of sending in soldiers blind.”

“Again,” the Chronicler said calmly. “We did not expect this.”

“I don’t care what you expected,” the Commander emphasized. “It happened. And whatever it was, it was dangerous enough to force the Imperator’s direct hand. So I suggest you explain exactly what happened, and if you are keeping anything else that we need to know, share it now.”

It was not phrased as a request, but in practice, the Agents of T’Leth didn’t need to share anything. They could state that XCOM needed them, and that was it. It was something which could happen, but the Commander doubted they would be that unreasonable. They very likely believed that whatever had happened was so minor or unlikely that they didn’t have to share it. But now they had no excuse, and if they still gave unsatisfactory answers then…

Something would have to be done.

He sincerely hoped it would not come to that.

He motioned to the Chronicler. “Well? Let’s start with something simple. Who were they?”

“They go by many names in many languages,” Crevan answered instead, eyes steely. “The most common translation is the ‘Riders.’ They are in effect a…task force that watches over…spheres. They are composed of thousands of alien species, all specially recruited and trained. You would have heard of almost none of them, but they are not a homogenous force.”

He knew Vahlen was already bursting with questions, but he kept his expression clear. “Spheres?”

Crevan scowled. “Their term, and not a fully descriptive one I believe. It is the closest translation. Some would more narrowly define them as universes, but others would say they move between dimensions. I do not know if either is correct – research on the topic is heavily controlled. The number of individuals who know the truth of what the Riders oversee is limited to the Throne World, and the Generals who command them.”

“And why are they overseeing these…spheres?”

Crevan rubbed his chin. “To make sure no one can enter the Throne World through them.”

“Elaborate.”

“What they discovered indicates that they may not be the only ones who are capable of learning of the spheres,” Crevan explained. “The most obvious solution is making sure that no other species or sphere can learn what they have. Each different sphere is named after the most notable element of it. Unsurprisingly, this is the Sphere of the Sovereign.”

He indicated the Chronicler. “The Sovereign Ones are an existential threat to the Throne World. Psionics do not…necessarily work the same there, but if a Sovereign One managed to learn the secrets of the Riders, then not just the Throne World, but thousands of other Spheres would be at risk.”
“And yet, here you are,” the Commander finished. “Working with a Sovereign One. You’re not Human, are you?”

Crevan furrowed his brow. “In short, no. That is not important. We are not here of our own volition.”

“By ‘we’ you mean…?”

“Myself, ir Nara, and Fiona.”

“All of you are not Human?”

“Fiona is Human,” Crevan corrected, though paused briefly. “…Largely. She is…capable of moving between the Spheres to a degree that not even the Riders can manage. She is the result of a genetically groomed bloodline for this specific purpose. What she does cannot be replicated artificially, despite the best efforts of the Throne World, and out of their control, she is a threat.”

He looked to the Chronicler and exchanged unspoken words. “I have…disagreements with many on the Throne World. Enough to help the young Fiona leave. I knew they would chase us, but her skills would allow us to stay ahead. We underestimated them, and they began anticipating our movements. They have augmented themselves with technology from many Spheres, and were more advanced than we were. Soon they were awaiting us. We were almost captured multiple times.”

He paused. “By some degree of luck, we arrived in this Sphere, and encountered the Chronicler by pure accident. Against my better judgement, Fiona explained what was happening. T’Leth agreed to serve as a deterrent to force them to stop hunting us. In return, we assist his agenda.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow, looking to the Chronicler. He suspected there was more to that story, but that was for another time. Instead he cut to the heart of the matter. “And he wanted to know how to move between the Spheres?”

“No,” the Chronicler said. “They are unaware of the specifics of how this phenomenon works, and regardless, if it were unlocked, is a secret which would spread the pointless cycles elsewhere, which is…undesirable. What he does not approve of is outside forces meddling in our galaxy, or universe, or whatever they define it as.”

“How fortuitous he thinks like that,” the Commander noted dryly. “I’m sure that has nothing to do with his inability to decode this skill.”

“If T’Leth wanted to, he could have forced Fiona to move him to the Throne World,” the Chronicler answered in a low voice. “There are many Sovereigns who would do anything for this knowledge. The Throne World – fanatical and dangerous as they are, understands that the Sovereign Ones learning these secrets would doom the many worlds which have no protection. T’Leth has no interest in facilitating that.”

“Unfortunately, they will continue to exploit opportunities as they arise,” Crevan said sourly. “We believed we had reached something of an understanding once they realized we were under T’Leth’s protection, but they saw Fiona as vulnerable, and acted. Which means they have eyes and ears on Earth, and thousands more in the Sphere at minimum. They may move to quarantine it.”

“Which means?”

“That they assume covert control of the Sphere,” Crevan explained, fixing the Commander with a hard stare. “They find and recruit aliens of the Sphere into the Riders and maneuver them into
positions of influence. More direct agents are inserted; modified to blend in. Every aspect of the
sphere is managed by the Riders, and by extension the Throne World. It is an operation lasting
hundreds or thousands of years. You operate within the constraints of time; they do not.”

This was sounding like a larger threat the longer the alien talked. Or at least a more direct one.
Though there was a certain problem with the proposed approach. “Considering the nature of cycles
and Sovereign Ones, this does not sound poised for success.”

Crevan unexpectedly smiled. “The Sovereign Ones are not as intelligent as they think they are. I
assure you that they are capable of handling the Sovereign Ones. And if they fail, then you will see
a conquest of your galaxy the likes of which you cannot comprehend. Be thankful that the Throne
World has a preference against intervention and total war.”

“How fortunate,” the Commander said sarcastically. “They must know that we know them now. I
would prefer these aliens to not meddle in our affairs, and it sounds like the largest reason they are
is because of you and Fiona. Is there no compromise?”

Crevan shook his head. “The Throne World does not negotiate.”

“You said they prefer non-intervention,” the Commander pointed out. “And it sounds like this is
not something that happens often. Others learning of these…spheres.”

“It doesn’t happen often.”

“So there is precedent,” the Commander nodded. “And what usually happens?”

“They join the Riders,” Crevan answered. “Or act as agents to the Throne World.”

“Which isn’t acceptable here,” the Commander said. “Then I suppose that if there is no precedent,
then we will have to set it. There are enough threats without a reality-hopping alien army becoming
one of them. Fortunately, they sound reasonable enough.”

Crevan’s eyes widened. “Reasonable? You cannot be serious. They have been hunting us for
years!”

“Yes, because you – or Fiona rather – are a security risk,” the Commander answered flatly. “Based
on what you have told me, I would be doing the exact same thing if I were them. I do not know
why she decided to leave, nor your own disagreements, but I must act in the best interests of my
species – not you.” He lifted a hand. “And don’t worry, I have no intention of turning either of you
over. But what I am interested in is not making another enemy. I want you to contact the Throne
World and say that I want to negotiate with them.”

“Impossible.” Crevan shook his head.

“I’m not certain that is the best approach…” the Chronicler said slowly.

“I don’t especially care if you approve or not,” the Commander continued. “Like it or not, Machas
– assuming that is your real name - this is your fault, and if they attacked once, they will do so
again when they see an opportunity. I do not want that to happen. I am not going to let Earth and
Humanity be caught in a dispute which we have no stake in. The Sovereigns may come into
inevitable conflict with us; this is not the case with this Throne World. If you do not have a way,
make one, or next time when they come we will not intervene.”

“Absolutely not,” Crevan shook his head. “And what will you do, Commander?”
“Exactly what I said I would,” the Commander said coolly. “If I am not mistaken, your very presence risks, and I quote, ‘a conquest the likes of which you cannot comprehend’. Perhaps I would prefer to avoid that entirely. If the Throne World were to leave us alone, that is desirable, no? I dislike making sacrifices, but if allowing the Throne World to capture one women prevents the infiltration and meddling in my species, much less any others, then that is a sacrifice I will make each and every time. T’Leth has the luxury of being immune to such concerns. Humanity does not.”

Crevan looked to the Chronicler. “Our agreement cannot be voided over this.”

“I said XCOM will not intervene,” the Commander reminded him. “I have no say over your agreement with T’Leth.”

“And this is unacceptable,” Crevan said. “You do not understand what you are asking.”

“And you do not understand what risk you now pose,” the Commander retorted, lacing his fingers together. “I do not expect you to understand, since you are not Human and your species appears to be in no danger. Your situation is unfortunate, but I will prioritize what must be done. I suggest you work this out with T’Leth, but I have made my requirements clear.”

“Or you will not assist if they return?”

“Or you will be expelled from the Praesidium and I will go to the Chancellor and tell her everything you just told me,” the Commander said slowly. “And she will tell her staff and advisors. I can assure you Saudia will not be in favor of letting you remain rogue, and I am inclined to not stop her. You will have no place to go outside of where T’Leth will hide you. Perhaps when the Throne World learns, they will approach ADVENT properly, and should they seek to also capture you, we have no control over what they do.”

A thin smile appeared on his face. “I do not care if you stay, or move on to another sphere. I only care that the threat of this Throne World is mitigated. I would prefer not to take these steps, but I do not have the luxury of pretending this threat no longer exists. You know what to do.” He rested his hands on the table. “Dismissed. I have made my point, and I expect to not have a repeat of this conversation again.”

A clearly furious Crevan sharply turned on his heel. “Chronicler! We need to talk.” The Agent of T’Leth seemed almost impressed with how the conversation had gone, shooting a short nod towards the Commander before following him out. Good. That meant T’Leth would force something to happen, and no support would be lost over this ultimatum.

“Well then,” Vahlen said. “That was…enlightening.”

“To put it lightly,” Kong shook his head. “The implications are…”

“Staggering,” Vahlen finished.

“ADVENT is going to want an answer,” Jackson said, scribbling something down. “If Crevan cooperates, what exactly are we going to tell them?”

“That we don’t know for sure,” the Commander said. “That we believe it is Sovereign-based. Crevan is right that the fewer people who know of this, the better. What was discussed here does not go beyond this room. This applies to you as well, JULIAN.”

“Yes, Commander.”
No snark or sarcastic comment. Even JULIAN knew how serious this was. The Commander sighed, and rubbed his head. “Unfortunately, that wasn’t the only thing we need to discuss. The Imperator came, and we need to decide how we respond.”

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_Throne Room of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective – Unknown Location_

5/29/2017 – 1:12 A.M.

The Imperator sat upon his throne silently, as a very rare gathering of the Ethereal leadership took place. The Overmind, Quisilia, the Guardians, and Cogitian were here – all of whom the Battlemaster expected. The others such as Revelean and Fectorian were unlikely to provide much immediate input, and he suspected Sicarius would learn eventually. Deusian had no relevance yet.

For once, the Imperator had made a proper decision to involve Regisora, despite his reservations of the Sovereign One. But this was clearly an outside force that the Imperator did not seem to be aware of. Perhaps Mosrimor knew, and if so, there was much that needed to be learned.

What he did not approve of, though understood why the Imperator had summoned him, was a representative of Paradise. He thankfully hadn’t allowed a Saint, or even one of the more advanced Children to come, but only a relatively weak Caretaker who presumably specialized in writing down knowledge of the Bringer.

He was…unsettling in a way that one of his stature and limited power shouldn’t be. Like many of the Caretakers, he resembled a robed dead man walking. His hands were shriveled, though didn’t shake. He walked with some kind of limp. He was old, and had silver-grey hair and beard with eyes that bored into whoever they stared into.

They were not dead eyes though, but filled with many fiery emotions. He looked to the Battlemaster with utter hate, and did not bother to disguise it. It made him consider decapitating the Bringer puppet then and there, since whoever this individual was, they did not fully control themselves. But the Caretaker was more reserved before the other Ethereals.

He suspected the hate was due to his previous visits to Paradise – and open desire to burn the station to ash.

Inspirars was the name he was given. He had been personally transported from Paradise to the Temple Ship under the Praetorian Guard, and fortunately precautions had been taken to limit what he could remember and see. Quisilia had blinded him telepathically, and guided him forward. His eyes were not required, only his mind and voice – and by extension, that of the Bringer.

Despite this, the Battlemaster was unsure of allowing such an individual here. This meeting should have been conducted somewhere…else. The Imperator had chosen the Temple Ship because it was under his inherent control – supposedly. That was not good enough when it came to the Bringer.

But it was done, and it was time to begin.

“Cogitian,” the Imperator looked to the Archivist. “I do not suppose you are aware of any group or organization which matches the description of the soldiers encountered?”

“It is difficult to determine at this juncture,” Cogitian said slowly. “I have only just begun searching through the vast libraries, though preliminary CODEX assisted association does not return anything concrete. We certainly did not encounter such a group in the Empire, nor were we
“I can confirm that not once in my own operations did I hear about something like this,” Quisilia added, flipping a blade in his hand. “There are a number of very unique and memorable factors about these…individuals. The cold, the portals, the armor, this would not have been forgotten—someone would have made a note somewhere.”

“Unless they acted differently,” the Battlemaster pointed out. “They were as advanced or more so than us and ADVENT. It would have taken effort, but against a less-advanced or prepared city, they could have succeeded.”

“There would have been snow left behind,” Cogitian dismissed. “And a city vanishing would leave some record, unless a civilization was simultaneously vanished.”

“We assume that the snow is important,” the Battlemaster said. “They may not require it at all.”

“Perhaps,” the Imperator spoke again. “But Patricia fought the Agent of T’Leth Lavallic ir Nara—and what she utilized was the same as this faction—and she wore the same armor. We did not recognize it at the time, but XCOM has a connection to this faction.”

“A contentious one then,” the Battlemaster grunted. “Which assumes XCOM was aware at all. Considering they were fighting them, I would question how much they knew.”

“Indeed, more questions,” the Imperator looked to Regisora. “Are they Sovereign?”

There was a brief moment of silence. “Unsure,” she finally said. “Throughout the cycles there has been no major power who has used such armies. Yet there are…incidents. Flashpoints with no logical reason or motive behind them. Individuals vanish or cities are beset by blizzards. There are stories of skeletal warriors or men in black armor. Legends, mostly. Myths of old cultures. But they are never…witnessed.”

A pause. “Until now, it seems. If there is a Sovereign behind them, they are very subtle and have an agenda that cannot be determined now.”

“Allow me, Imperator,” Inspirars lifted a hand. “I can answer your questions.”

“Then speak,” the Battlemaster demanded flatly.

“Patience, Battlemaster,” he said with a cool disdain. “There is a story to be told. The ones who you refer to are known by a number of names. The Gestalt and Ascended call them Those Who Walk Beyond the Veil, others call them the Spectres, but they are believed to have been aliens born from the realm of the Aen Elle.”

His eyes unfocused, he continued speaking. “Their agenda is unknown, and there is no Sovereign behind them. They are believed to exist beyond our reality, thus why they are seen as ghosts and specters. Beings who should not belong. They want to keep themselves shrouded in secrecy, and do not leave behind survivors to their interventions.”

The Caretaker shook his head. “Archivist Cogitian is correct that there are many such references in legends and tales billions of years old. Primitive, but few trust the wisdom of the ancient texts; texts which refer to the skeletal riders on undead animals who come and steal children, leaving ice and frost in their wake. Some are superstitious, for certain, but there is a grain of truth to such tales.”

He motioned idly. “Others associate winter and cold with dread, and document that when blizzards
and storms manifested, some days they would realize their neighbors or family members had vanished. The references are subtle, but they can indicate a pattern, especially if stretched over the course of thousands of millennia. Who they truly are, as well as their agenda, is unknown, as is what they are capable of – but they are as old as the Sovereign Ones. Perhaps even older.”

“How curious,” Quisilia noted. “Such a thorough answer. The Bringer has been aware of these people before now?”

“And failed to mention it,” the Battlemaster finished. “If this is such an old faction, how have no others learned of them?”

“You assume that none have learned, Battlemaster. Who are you to speak for a universe?” Inspirars wrinkled his nose. “But to your point that He knew…there were many, many stories, all of which none of you or your Collective expressed interest in learning. Yet they are a group so elusive that legends and stories were all we were aware of – this is the first instance where He has seen them through His vessels. Yet make no mistake – the lesser Sovereigns and the Apostate remain the true threat.”

_You speak of them walking through realities. Explain, puppet._

The Overmind projected his own interjection for the first time.

“A misunderstanding or myth, more likely than not,” Inspirars answered. “However, they do not exist or are based in this galaxy, or perhaps many, many others. It is possible they inhabit another universe entirely. Yet they have a means of walking between them as easily as psions can step through portals. Yet reality is perhaps not as certain or stable as we would prefer it to be.” He lifted a hand and purple energy flowed around it. “Psionics shapes our reality, but has something shaped psionics?”

A ghost of a smile flickered on his face. “On that, we do not know. Perhaps there is a higher plane we have yet to tap into.”

“And how are we certain what you speak is true?” The Battlemaster demanded. “What proof do you have besides the absorbed minds?”

“Your ignorant dismissal does you little credit, Battlemaster,” Inspirars dismissed, looking to the Imperator. “Your master knows the truth of what I speak. He can sense it. I speak with a thousand voices, from the minds of a trillion ascended. Cultures and peoples who existed long before the Ethereals were conceived in the mind of a Sovereign. Dismiss their words at your own peril, Battlemaster. Be thankful your master is wiser.”

The Human was deceitful and slimy in his words, but they were clearly intended to provoke a response and curry favor with the Imperator. The Battlemaster withheld a response, though certainly considered executing the puppet after the meeting was concluded. It was a vessel, and ultimately unimportant.

“While I do not doubt the Bringer is aware of something he believes to be a threat, it is not verifiable proof,” the Imperator stated. “It is circumstantially acceptable, but I will rely on Cogitian to confirm such theories.”

“And I would be more than pleased to provide him with the materials or opportunity to speak to the Gestalt,” Inspirars said. “The wisdom of the Mind Cosmos is open for the Collective. We only seek to provide at this time.”
“Tempting, but touching the minds is a step too far,” Cogitian said. “However, I will accept physical materials you can provide – or places where I can conduct my own research.”

Inspirars nodded. “Acceptable.”

“No matter their origins, the fact remains that they are involved now,” the Imperator said. “Interestingly, their motivations seem clearer than their origins. They were interested in the female T’Leth Agent. Fiona. They were after her. As they did not acquire her, they will likely return.”

“She is likely connected to them,” Inspirars said. “A fugitive, perhaps. Or a defector, like ir Nara appears to be. Though beyond that, we cannot say. There is no insight into their motivations, culture, or internal dynamics.”

“Perhaps,” the Imperator nodded. “Cogitian, Regisora, determine what you can of these aliens. Battlemaster, Guardians, adjust your strategy accordingly in the event they return. Quisilia, return Inspirars to Paradise Station. Return to your duties, I will determine where we are to go next – and how we shall respond to this intervention.”

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*High Domain of the Sage-King – Sphere of the Throne*

5/29/2017 – 10:11 A.M.

There had been few times where the General had stepped foot into the High Domain itself. It was normally a place where only the Lords convened, headed by the Sage-King himself. It was a place of grandeur and extravagance, a pinnacle of the blending of beauty, architecture, and power.

Most would describe it as a palace without equal, with towers higher than any city skyscraper, and a peak which pushed into the heavens itself. It almost seemed to sparkle in the moonlight, and the white-silver of the walls gleamed brightly in the day. It was a symbol of the power of the Throne; invincible, ever-reaching, and eternal.

But from what he had seen now that he walked the walls, the High Domain was a fortress without equal. This was not the domain of the Riders, and he did not expect as much sophistication from those whose duties remained simply guarding the Throne World. Today he was proven wrong.

The advancements the Riders had brought from their many missions throughout the Spheres had not gone to waste, and there was clearly much work happening that neither he nor his Lord was aware of. The towers of transparent glass were in reality made out of enhanced diamond, and even the weakest element in the foundation was made to be ten times stronger than the nearest known equivalent.

Each piece of architecture which held a design or curious architectural concept hid a weapon or defense system of some kind. Only his trained eye could even spot the telltale signs of modification, and such modifications were *everywhere* in the High Domain. The higher they got to the peak, the tighter the defenses got.

The open hallways for the citizens were replaced with militarized checkpoints with Machine Intelligence-commanded machines and defense systems that tracked each individual who walked the floors. The High Domain Guard stood as silent watchers in armor of gold and silver, made with such craftsmanship and beauty that his own battle armor seemed faded in comparison.

It all ultimately paled to standing before the Sage-King himself.
He had heard it described what it was like to be in his presence, and such stories did not do it justice. It took all of his training to not fall under the commanding spell of the Sage-King, and even still his presence warped the reality around them. He heard whispers and sounds he could not describe, and smells which were alien in origin.

The air would visibly waver around him, and those who were unprotected might find themselves lost and lose themselves in the Spheres, as they lacked an anchor to reality. Bewildered or mishappened creatures and aliens sometimes found their ways through the artificial Conjunction the Sage-King commanded.

They were sent away none the wiser.

Reality to the Sage-King was whatever he wanted it to be.

He existed as a tear in the carefully embroidered fabric of reality.

To be summoned before him was either the highest of honors, or spelled alarm.

The General feared it was the latter.

He stood before a towering window, one which looked over the Throne World. He could see for thousands of miles when the weather machines cleared the skies of clouds, and the rest of the time it resembled a layer of white or grey. Today bright light shone through. The Sage-King was not a man of stature, barely taller than a standard Human, and easily shorter than both of them.

Neither took any comfort in that. His presence dwarfed the irrelevant physical attributes.

He wore immaculate, though ultimately simple robes of white and silver. His skin was pale, and one might mistake him for malnourished from the thinness of his arms and hands. The bone could be clearly seen, yet it would be a mistake to think the Sage-King as weaker because of such.

His hair was silver, and cleanly fell to his shoulders. It framed a face which was old, like the rest of his body, and described as still. No crown or jewelry adorned his body, as such were unneeded. The Sage-King often did not speak, his mind was said to be in many places at once. It was something the General had always wondered about, but ultimately dismissed.

When the Sage-King turned to them after what felt like an eternity, he understood.

The eyes of the Sage-King glowed a faint green; a transposed hologram over the eyeballs, of which the intensity fluctuated each second. The General could see the eyeballs underneath twitch and flicker as if under a seizure. But there was no mistaking the power and skill of what the Sage-King did naturally.

He and his Lord fell to one knee on instinct.

Long seconds passed which turned to minutes. “[Rise.]”

The voice was unfathomably old. It rasped like dry leaves, yet had power within those words. But the voice was dry, it lacked a quality of the well-spoken, as if it was not something the Sage-King did often.

Perhaps he did not.

Both of them rose.
“[We are known to a sphere now.]”

His Lord swallowed. “[Known to more now, yes, Excellency.]”

A long minute passed. “[Why did you risk the retribution of the Sovereign Ones.]”

“[An opportunity arose,]” the Lord answered. “[You are aware of where she is residing. She was vulnerable, and we determined we could act and retrieve her, ensuring she would not lead others here.]”

The Sage-King did not move, nor adjust his voice. “[You failed. Again.]”

“[Yes, your Excellency.]”

More long seconds. “[Disappointing. Your charge is clear. Your service has done you credit; your Generals have performed well. But your obsession remains your weakness. It is your blind spot.]”

“[She remains a threat, your Excellency.]” his Lord almost stammered out. “[We cannot let her move without repercussion. We cannot produce the next generation without her, or it will take millennia to produce another even a fraction as skilled as she is. For the good of the Throne, she must be returned.]”

The Sage-King stared forward, glowing eyes seeing past them. The air flashed and a bird of some kind materialized. Almost immediately it fell under the Sage-King’s power, and flew to perch on the bony finger of the man. The Sage-King ever so slightly inclined his head, and the bird flew up, and vanished in a green-white flash.

“[Threat?]”

A pause.

“[No. She is merely a child, fleeing her duty and destiny. She is of my blood – do you believe I do not permit this?]”

“[I…then can she not be forced to return?]”

“[Perhaps I wished to see how far your obsession would take you,]” the Sage-King clasped his hands together. “[I am responsible for those of the Elder Blood. It is not you. It is not your Generals. It is not the Riders. I have known every place she has traveled. I know every sphere she entered. All she knows, I know. She does not know of me, not yet, incomplete as her training was. The moment she poses a threat will be the moment her blood betrays her, and screams to return to the Sphere of Origin from which it was forged. She will not return sooner than when I desire.]”

The glowing green eyes bored into them. “[Return to your duties, and cease your hunt for the Child. I do not wish to contend with a Sovereign One, and your irresponsible actions and reckless intervention pushes her in a dangerous direction. Defy my directive, and I will find another to command the Riders.]”

The General could tell that his Lord did not approve whatsoever – even in the presence of the Sage-King – but there was no defying him. He simply bowed his head. “[Yes, your Excellency.]”

The Sage-King turned away. “[Go. I must take these developments into account. The Sphere of the Sovereign is a vulnerability due to your actions. Expect to hear my command shortly.]”

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Saudia swirled the glass of water in her hand. If there was ever a time for a drink, the circumstances warranted it. Unfortunately, she had a job to do, and she needed a clear head. Answers were elusive, but there were plenty of things which were not. She looked to her XCOM counterpart. “So. I don’t suppose you have an explanation for exactly what happened?”

The Commander seemed calm, and his face was mostly neutral. His prosthetic hand rested on the desk opposite her, with the other resting on the armrest. “To be determined. T’Leth has never seen them before. The working theory is that they are Sovereign-backed.”

Which was the most obvious answer, but it seemed almost…convenient. Saudia took a sip of her water. “Is there anything to back this up, or is it speculation?”

“Speculation,” the Commander confirmed. “Though if it’s not a Sovereign – then who exactly would it be?”

“Mmm.” And that was the sticking point. While the possibility that there was a third force in the galaxy which wasn’t these Synthesized could exist, T’Leth and the Commander had made it clear that in the end, it was only the Sovereigns and Synthesized who really held the power.

“How many Sovereigns are in this galaxy?” She asked.

“Pardon?”

“Sovereigns. How many,” she gestured aimlessly. “If these are Sovereign-backed, then the number of suspects can’t be that high. Does he even have a suspect list? Any Sovereigns who use tactics like this – and who would intervene here?”

“And that is what is puzzling,” the Commander said. “These do not fit the patterns of previous Sovereign Ones.”

Saudia frowned. “And you are completely discounting the possibility of a third party?”

“No, but I find it unlikely, as does T’Leth,” the Commander answered neutrally. “The facts are this – they were just as advanced as we are, if not more. They came here specifically targeting one of T’Leth’s Agents, and they use psionics of a level I have only seen a T’Leth Agent handle. No matter who they are, they have a vendetta against T’Leth. Knowing what I do about T’Leth, I find it unlikely that there is a non-Sovereign who would openly target him like this.”

“The only positive is that they are equally against the Collective,” Saudia muttered. “I dislike the fact that one of their warriors was able to fight the Battlemaster to a standstill. This faction is not irrelevant. A shame they are against us, else we could use them against the Collective.”

“The other good news is that they did not seem to be prepared for a prolonged fight,” the Commander pointed out. “Although we might assume the Imperator stepping foot on Earth had something to do with their retreat.”

“Indeed.” That was another point of contention. It was truthfully a terrifying escalation that would have overrode any conversation in the aftermath of the battle were it not for the utterly bizarre faction emerging, and turning New York into an ice cube. But it was clear that there were no immediate answers on the unknown invaders, so she moved to that topic.
“New York was escalation enough,” she said, setting her glass down and looking at the Commander directly. “The Imperator himself appearing is dangerous. That cannot be tolerated.”

“Agreed.”

“You have an idea of a response?”

“I assume you do as well.”

“You first.”

“T’Leth has said he intends to send a message of his own,” the Commander’s finger tapped idly on the table. “What that is, I do not know, but I expect it will be memorable. In the meantime, I consider the SAS a direct target for retribution. I have been preparing an operation to severely damage them for some time. I will put that into motion soon.”

“How coincidental,” Saudia gave a thin smile. “I was thinking something similar. Later I will meet with ADVENT High Command and we will determine the first target of the Atomic Lance, and begin Operation Scipio. ADVENT Intelligence believes that there will be a number of new additions to the SAS soon. The dominos are falling into place. The Imperator arriving may be the final push.”

“We’ve heard similar,” the Commander nodded. “They are on our list.”

“List of what?”

He smiled. “Targets.”

It was always a pleasure to work with someone who was unafraid to do what was necessary or get their hands dirty. Dangerous the Commander might be, but he was one of Humanity’s greatest assets. No wonder so many had wanted him dead; alive he posed an existential threat to their comfortable, naïve lives.

“Excellent,” she laced her fingers together. “I believe that a joint operation would be...beneficial. Perhaps we can include T’Leth. We are all on the same page right now. We are all in agreement that the Collective must be shown that if they act like this, there will be consequences.”

“Assuredly,” the Commander nodded. “Scipio will be fast, but hard. XCOM stands ready to assist to whatever capacity we can. I believe T’Leth will be more than ready to commit his own assets.”

“Good.” Saudia returned the nod. “Then we shouldn’t waste any time. Hopefully after this, the Collective backs off their more egregious operations – and if they don’t, more of their allies will burn.”

“That they will,” the Commander pulled his hand back. “Or they will feel the wrath of an awakened Sovereign.”

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The Praesidium, XCOM Intelligence Control – Classified Location

6/1/2017 – 9:29 A.M.

The Commander set the tablet down, face grim.

“This is confirmed?”
Zhang gave a single nod. A’Darrah did the same with half of his frame. Creed’s arms were crossed as he appraised the Andromedon. “This comes straight from Union Stuirah,” A’Darrah reported. “If there are any who are aware of the fleet movements of their sister Union, it would be them.”

“And what are the odds that it’s just a standard fleet movement?” Creed asked.

A’Darrah simply appraised him through the mask. “Union Reinarm does not simply move one of their most powerful superweapons without reason. It means one of two things – the Federation, or factions of it, are going to pre-emptively strike the Hive Commanders. The second, - and more likely reason - is that it is coming to Earth.”

“And since we do not have a fleet,” the Commander finished, eyes unfocused as he thought. “That means it is a ground target.”

“A ground target the Collective is not interested in capturing,” Zhang amended.

“Yes,” A’Darrah agreed. “Whatever is targeted will be annihilated. Completely.”

“Explain this weapon,” Creed demanded, fixing the Andromedon with a hard stare. “We can prepare for it, yes?”

“No.”

“Sorry?”

“No, you lack any sort of capability to defend against the Reinarm Cannon,” A’Darrah clarified bluntly. “It was designed to destroy capital ships and have no counter. The fact that it is not normally used against ground targets is irrelevant. It took centuries to perfect, with numerous experimentation deaths and collateral damage. But they completed the weapon, and it remains as one of our primary weapons against the Hiveships – and one of the few effective weapons against the Kett’Tasira. There are reasons why such action would even be considered by the Unions – the Reinarm Cannon is capable of turning Hiveships into radioactive slag.”

The Commander circled his hand. “Go on. I’ve read the overview, though I don’t think Creed has.”

“Andromedons have not followed the same path Humans have in regards to nuclear technology and weaponry,” A’Darrah explained. “The primary use was for energy. Bombs and similar weapons were developed, but there was a ceiling on effectiveness, and most unions preferred using projectile, laser, and plasma weapons and missiles. Nuclear weapons were expensive. Powerful, but not necessarily economical, and useless on ground raids unless complete annihilation was desired.”

The Andromedon lumbered to the side a few steps. “Reinarm did not believe the potential of nuclear weaponry had been reached. So they, together with several smaller unions, began exploring other applications. The result was a cannon which was capable of containing what your species has designated as corium – more commonly known as nuclear lava - and directing it at targets.”

Creed whistled. “In a…missile?”

“No. In a stream,” A’Darrah adjusted a gear on his suit, and a projection of the weapon in question was projected around their small circle. “A stream of superheated radioactive lava. Impossible to stop. Missiles, lasers, armor, nanites; nothing was capable of stopping the stream. Of limited use against fighters, drones, and small starships – but against larger vessels which cannot move quickly, it is death.”
All of them stood stone-faced at the image.

“That was the final prototype,” A’Darrah continued a few seconds later. “Earlier ones held more simple radioactive materials – it can still hold them, in fact. Plutonium. Uranium. Streams of boiling metals laced with molten elerium if they believe it is necessary. When Reinarm wished to deny a planet, they would use the Reinarm Cannons to poison strategic areas of the planet. Mines. Data centers. Bunkers. It does not matter what defenses existed, the molten metal would melt and destroy everything. The radiation would deny everything else unprotected.”

“And one of them is coming here,” Zhang finished. “And if our intel is accurate – it will target Busan.”

“Would the cannon even be effective?” Creed asked, rubbing his chin. “If it’s narrow, that isn’t necessarily the best for destroying a city…”

“You presume the cannon would fire once,” A’Darrah stated. “A false assumption. When the defenses are destroyed, they will likely shoot down radiation pods to kill anything that survives. This is a weapon which will be used to its full potential. Do not expect it to be ill-suited to this task.”

“I suppose if they cannot take it, they will destroy it,” the Commander said grimly. “They suffer defeat after defeat there. They do not care about the means of victory at this point.”

He paused as a thought struck him. “Or perhaps we are thinking about this the wrong way. We assume the weapon is coming to target us.”

“Based on the intel, it is,” Zhang noted.

“I’m aware,” the Commander said slowly, looking at the image. “And I have no doubt it will be used against Busan. But also consider the weapon. It is frankly overkill in every sense of the word. Patricia is likely behind this decision, and if she truly wanted to destroy Busan, she could do it personally or with a fleet of cleanser ships. This provides cover for the reason she is actually bringing this weapon here.”

“Enlighten us, Commander,” A’Darrah said, a note of confusion in his voice.

But Creed seemed to get it before they did, eyes widened as answered. “T’Leth.”

The Commander nodded. “Precisely.”

A’Darrah looked between the both of them. “She intends to use it against the Sovereign One?”

“Oh have it ready just in case,” the Commander said. “Based on what you said, this weapon is powerful enough to kill a Sovereign One. Alone it wouldn’t stand a chance against T’Leth. But if, however, he was occupied with something else, and T’Leth was caught off guard – it could hurt or kill him.”

“Or so she thinks,” Creed added.

“If T’Leth was hit with this cannon, I suspect not even he could live,” the Commander said bluntly. “Not that he would admit to that. But it being used against Busan is pretext for justifying it around Earth. I would not be surprised if that was not the last of its kind that appears. She knows the war cannot be won without removing T’Leth. This is her preparing for it.”

“Regardless of her ultimate intentions, if this weapon is even half as effective, then we don’t have
 much time,” Creed stated. “We need to evacuate Busan – or at least make preparations for it. Most
of the civilians have been gone for some time, but the military families nearby...” he shook his
head, looking to A’Darrah. “How soon will it arrive?”

“It’s moving to an area of space nowhere close to Earth, based on reports to Union Stuirah,”
A’Darrah answered. “It is likely that it will be psionically teleported. Probably by Patricia Trask or
even the Imperator. It will arrive there in one week. I would prepare for it as soon as possible.”

Zhang and the Commander exchanged a grim look. Both of them knew what was going to be
needed. “We need to prepare to make an attempt to damage or destroy the ship,” the Commander
said in a heavy voice. “But ADVENT cannot know about it.”

Creed blinked incredulously. “Do you know how many people are living in Busan? How many are
stationed there?”

“Yes.”

“T’Leth!” Creed seized upon the ray of hope. “Conventional defenses may fail, but T’Leth could
protect the city. Even Aegis could probably-“

“That isn’t the issue,” Zhang interrupted. “We are not supposed to know this weapon truly exists.
Let alone that it is being used against us soon. If we acted to defend Busan – even if we made it
look like a coincidence – the Collective would wonder if we had gotten lucky – or if we had inside
information.”

“How many know about this movement?” The Commander asked A’Darrah.

“Only the leadership of Unions Reinarm and Stuirah.” A pause. “The Collective is keeping these
movements extremely quiet. It is only due to Stuirah’s relationship with Reinarm that they know at
all. It would not take long for questions to be asked – at least this first time. On subsequent uses
you would now ‘know’ the capabilities, and could properly defend.”

“Still…” Creed’s face was ashen. “We’re just going to let a city be destroyed? One of our most
enduring symbols?”

The Commander pursed his lips. “We have no real choice. If we act, we save a city but likely
expose that there are elements in the Unions who are in contact with, if not allied to us. Atlantis is
not ready. No one is ready. Until we are…Busan will be a sacrifice.”

“What about ADVENT?” Creed asked. “Saudia should at least know.”

“No, no one should outside the Internal Council,” the Commander shook his head. “We cannot
give a hint that we know more than we should. Not when the stakes are this high. I do not see
another way. I wish there was.”

Creed took a breath. “I wonder if she intended this to function as a trap.”

“Likely.” A pause. “An intelligent attempt, if so.”

“If we let this go, it will be the start,” Creed warned. “She’ll see it worked, and use it to threaten
the rest of the world. If she brings another one, or three, even Aegis and T’Leth will be hard-
pressed to stop them. She’s scared now. She has to be, otherwise she wouldn’t be thinking of using
these kind of weapons. She’s accepted that it’s better to destroy Earth and rebuild than claim it as-
is.”
“Or as the Commander says, she is preparing for T’Leth,” A’Darrah noted. “I have my doubts that this woman experiences fear in the conventional sense. Assuming she does is a questionable judgement.”

“Let me be clear,” the Commander added, lifting his prosthetic hand. “This will be the only time she will touch Earth with this weapon. Beyond this point I will direct T’Leth to rip them out of the sky.”

There was a pregnant pause. “Then what was the point of this information if we can’t even use it?” Creed wondered aloud.

“So we can be prepared,” the Commander said. “And to give T’Leth a warning about her potential strategy. We knew the war was going to ramp up, and I expect it to get worse from here. Consider it motivation. This is what we are fighting against – and that we are running on the clock. Each escalation is one step closer to the Imperator himself coming to finish the job.”

The Commander fixed Creed with a firm stare. “And I can promise that he will be harder to handle than these weapons. Let’s move this war away from Earth before that happens.”

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Yang’s Quarters, Mars Collective Base – Mars

5/30/2017 – 10:18 A.M.

Yang sat quietly on her bed, thinking. The Battlemaster was equally quiet once he had finished. After a few moments more, she spoke. “Do you think he was telling the truth?”

“A version of the truth,” the Battlemaster answered. She could tell he was not happy to know the Bringer was involved – and now appeared to be the primary source for learning who this faction was. “I have little doubt the Bringer intends to exploit this; make himself indispensable. There is little that can be done to stop it; the Imperator demands answers, and will seek to utilize him.”

“I mean…” Yang scowled. “Ignoring the Bringer may not be the best idea. Like it or not…”

“I do not take issue with interrogating the Bringer for information,” the Battlemaster clarified, lifting one hand. “I take issue with allowing him and his puppets to actively assist in the process. Even if the Bringer tells the truth – something I highly doubt - I know that he will share it on his own terms. The Imperator continually fails to understand this, or simply does not care. It is not on our side.”

“Obviously.” Yang rubbed her eyes. “What do you think of this…faction?”

To her slight surprise, she felt a tug of concern from him. He did not answer for a few moments. “He knew what I was. The warrior knew about the Empire. He even seemed to know me specifically. That is troubling.”

“In what way? Specifically?”

“That they are still here,” the Battlemaster answered after a few moments. “This faction knew where to come, and they were prepared. This warrior knew he would fight me. He was skilled – as skilled as I am. It goes beyond historical knowledge, they knew about our strength now. There are spies from elsewhere. We are compromised by something we do not understand.”

It initially sounded a bit too conspiratorial, but in conjunction with the evidence she’d seen and
some of what the Bringer implied – assuming he was telling the truth – it wasn’t unreasonable. Though still, that raised more questions than answers. Based on what the Battlemaster had said, it had seemed like they weren’t even here for the Collective or ADVENT, both just…happened to be in the way.

“You fought with the Agent of T’Leth in Paradise,” the Battlemaster said. “Recall what it was like. You had explained such before, but this new context could be illuminating.”

Yang thought back. It wasn’t hard. For better or worse, each trip to Paradise was seared into her mind. But the Battlemaster raised a very good point that she, in the chaos and aftermath, hadn’t considered – that she had a semi-connection with the figure this faction was interested in to some extent.

“She is a teleporter,” she began. “A very good one. When the Umbra almost killed us, she was able to fight her off. Although…” she thought more. “There was something off about her. Her psionics were…a different color. One I hadn’t seen before. It was odd, but I didn’t think as much about it at the time.”

“Agents have blue-tinged psionics,” the Battlemaster recalled. “A Sovereign effect.”

“But it wasn’t that,” Yang shook her head. “It was almost like a pale green. Neon. And teleporting was the only thing I saw her do. Not worth much, but that was what she did. And she specifically mentioned being trained by someone, and said to the Umbra, quote: ‘He was better than you’. I thought it meant the Chronicler or another Agent, but now I’m not sure.”

“Curious,” the Battlemaster said in a strange voice. “She is an anomaly to some extent. It would be worth determining how and why.”

A bolt surged through Yang as she recalled something else very important, which forced her to abruptly straighten. “He knew!”

The Battlemaster reacted instantly, the alarm through the bond almost making him grab his sword before he saw there wasn’t any danger – just surprise. “What?”

“I think the Bringer knows who she is,” Yang breathed. “Or at least what she is. When we were in Paradise the Bringer talked to me. About her. I thought he was trying to divide us – he probably was – but he said some things that implied he knew something.”

“Exactly what were they?”

She closed her eyes as she quoted from memory. “‘The plan becomes clear. A useful tool she is. All in the name of protection, all in an effort to end the ceaseless hunt.’” Her fists clenched. “I asked her what it meant. She was deflective. The Bringer then asked ‘Would you risk what you have sought to avoid’?”

The Battlemaster stood still. Not anger, but tired frustration echoed through their bond. Yang supposed there was the chance that the Bringer being vague to unbalance someone was possible…but it would have been a pretty massive coincidence if that were the case. “Yet another instance of him knowing something and refusing to share it. If he knew who she was…”

“Great, another Bringer lie,” Yang sighed. “And what exactly do we do with it? Tell the Imperator?”

“Yes.”
“It won’t do anything,” Yang shrugged pushing herself off of the bed. “It’s my word against his. The Imperator – or anyone else - can’t read my mind to verify, and only you vouch for me – and both of us are ‘biased’ against the Bringer. It will not change anything.”

“Likely, but if he is to dismiss the word of my Harbinger, then let him do so openly,” the Battlemaster stated. “He may not trust you or me, but the effort shall be made. If he rejects this, then I will simply add it to the list of justifications for his removal.”

Yang knew the room was secure, and she felt some pride in the Battlemaster willing to vouch for her despite the Imperator’s likely rejection, but it still seemed absurdly risky to talk about treason outside of the Prism. It was already nerve-wracking enough there, let alone in a base where others could be listening. “Yeah, I-“

Both of them sensed it. A shift somewhere. Something was happening. A voice sounded over the loudspeaker. “Battlemaster, report to Central Command.”

The voice was dull, almost unnaturally deep. She couldn’t tell who it was, but it didn’t seem to be the Base Commander or the Zar’Chon, who wasn’t even on the planet. The Battlemaster gripped his sword, and Yang grabbed her own, even though she wasn’t armored. They walked out, weapons ready.

Immediately in the hallway they saw the bizarre sight. There were multiple base staff, all Vitakara, who were staring blankly ahead on the walls, weapons or blunt objects in one hand if they had them. In their remaining hand was a writing utensil or sharp object, which they were using to carve or write a glyph into the walls. Yang didn’t implicitly know what such meant – but she knew the style.

That of the Sovereign Ones.

They stopped the moment both of them stepped out, and stared at them silently. A sinking feeling filled Yang as she realized what was happening, though was oddly calm considering the situation. This must be T’Leth. There was no one else who could be capable of this. She wasn’t afraid – this wasn’t a military base so much as an outpost – but she did not want to have to kill anyone here.

She waited for them to attack, but they simply remained, staring at them. Then they raised their weapons if they had them, or the tools in their hand.

But they did not point them at the duo. Instead they pointed them at themselves.

Move forward. Attack only if they do.

Both moved forward cautiously, with the Battlemaster appraising them warily. More mind-controlled personnel were within the hallways, doing the same thing. Their weapons did not waver and they stared statue-like, unnaturally still, and Yang was afraid that even if they didn’t attack, then they would eventually tire and a finger or hand could slip, killing them.

Both of them moved quicker. T’Leth clearly wanted to talk for now – not fight.

Unless it was a trap.

Both of them didn’t put it past the Sovereign to attempt such.

The doors slid open to reveal the command center, and Yang saw what awaited within. Many of the personnel stood in formation, awaiting them. On their foreheads or helmets was another Sovereign glyph crudely drawn, carved, or painted on with whatever writing utensils or objects
were around. The smell of blood oddly permeated the room.

Near the center there were several Vitakara, who appeared to have been dumping packs of stored blood onto the floor, and using the yellow ichor, to paint a larger glyph on the ground. The base commander, a Vitakarian appraised them with an unnatural stare; no fear or concern. The eyes of a puppet.

“You know why I am here.”

Yang didn’t, actually, but the Battlemaster answered a few seconds later. “The Imperator.”

“Perceptive. I have tolerated your kind setting foot on Earth. I have tolerated your war without intervention. But I can only be pushed so far before responding in kind.”

“The Imperator did nothing,” the Battlemaster said. “The intruders are our enemy as well as yours.”

“I will deal with those who trespass on worlds under my protection.” The air rumbled from the power of the voice which should not have come from a Vitakarian. “The Imperator is a trespasser and an enemy. I care little for his reasons or justifications. Know that each time you step on Earth, you step into the realm of a Sovereign One. You step into my realm. And I shall tolerate such intrusions by your master no longer.”

The air rippled with power. “For such actions, there will be retribution. Consider this a warning. Should such a warning be ignored, I will destroy Vitakar. I will destroy Desolan. I will raze your worlds to ash and end your dreams of a new Ethereal Empire. I will render you helpless before the Sovereigns you hate and fear.”

The puppeted Vitakarian’s lips morphed into a mockery of a smile. “Now understand the Powers you interfere with. Understand that you are beneath me, now and forever. Understand that I am Sovereign, and that you are nothing.”

At that, the eyes of the Vitakara seemed to fade ever so slightly, and he fell to the ground, followed by everyone else. The tension and power in the air faded, and Yang immediately rushed to the closest alien. They were still alive, to her surprise – she didn’t think T’Leth would spare them – but they were just unconscious.

Nice of him.

The Battlemaster hadn’t moved, instead looking at the blood-glyph on the floor. “I didn’t know he could reach this far,” Yang said quietly. “That’s…concerning.”

“Indeed,” the Battlemaster said slowly, looking down to her. “Come. We need to ensure that there were no injuries or other surprises – and when they awaken, ensure that they were not compromised further.”

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Nulorian Outpost – Unknown Location

6/4/2017 – 11:01 A.M.

The Nulorian were preparing to go to war.

Nartha couldn’t remember seeing this many Nulorian in one place – at least not all of them
preparing for conflict. As opposed to a weakened guerilla force like the Vitakara believed, the Nulorian were equipped with surprisingly strong armor, weapons, and each and every one was a hardened killer.

He could see it in each of their eyes – or faces for those who had no pupils. The attack by the Zararch had galvanized them further, and it was time for proper retribution. None of them particularly cared who would die today – only that the Vitakara were hurt and the day would haunt the survivors the rest of their lives. It was more than a mission to hurt the Collective – it was an act of revenge.

Not for the first time, he wondered what would happen, should they win this war.

The Nulorian couldn’t reintegrate into any ordinary society. They were too poisoned by hatred for the average citizen they saw as worse than traitors – collaborators. Enablers. Abettors. It didn’t matter if they’d not had a choice, nor if they were propagandized, only that they supported the Aui’Vitakar– and Collective - by proxy.

As they saw it, if they had been able to break the hold of information the Collective held over them, everyone else should have too.

Nartha sincerely hoped this wouldn’t come back to haunt them. The Nulorian were dangerous for multiple reasons – but were also the only ones on Vitakar who could be their allies. He had to trust the Commander would keep Miridian in line, though he had his doubts as to the effectiveness, long-term.

A Miridian-run Vitakar would not necessarily be an improvement. Not when he held his genocidal beliefs for half of the Vitakara races. Much less the even more radical beliefs of the Nulorian rank and file.

If things went ‘well’ today, it would be the start of a genocide. Even if it didn’t, thousands were going to die.

But it was necessary, or so it had been declared.

At least their mission was going to be something worthwhile. The Crypt had actual importance, and the point wasn’t causing terror or piling up Dath’Haram corpses. In this whole operation, Nartha was admittedly interested in what they would find. The Crypt was one of the enduring secrets of the Dath’Haram – hopefully there was something left.

“You’ve got that look,” Shun said, walking over, already in her Titan Armor with a helmet under one arm.

He frowned up at her. “I do not have a ‘look’.”

“Everyone has a ‘look’,” she said, taking a seat next to him. “It just changes meaning person to person.”

“Ah.” He understood that concept. Everyone had different tells and indicators as to what they were feeling and thinking. He must be slipping if there was something she could discern – or it meant she knew him very well. Which...while that was certainly a weakness the Zararch would never have approved of, he found some kind of comfort in that.

“In that case,” he said, looking to her. “What does my ‘look’ mean?”

Sitting next to him in armor, she was actually as tall as him. Propping her chin on a fist and elbow
on a knee, she looked thoughtfully at him. “That something is bothering you. And that it’s not the
mission.”

It wasn’t necessarily the best time for a discussion like this, but at the same time, she wasn’t the
type to get overly rattled or distracted. “Look around,” he nodded to the teams of Nulorian getting
ready. “Is it still like this in XCOM?”

“All the time,” she cocked her head. “We get ready for ops pretty regularly.”

“Not that,” he sighed. “The…reasons. XCOM isn’t fighting for selfish reasons. It’s for a greater
ideal, yes? A greater goal?”

“Oh, yeah,” she nodded. “Protection of Humanity. Can’t say we aren’t ready to kill some aliens,
but it’s what we do. We go in, complete the op, and get out.”

“Right,” he said, remembering his brief time in XCOM. “But it’s not like this for them. This,” he
indicated the Nulorian. “Is revenge. I don’t even know if most of them know why they hate the
Collective, only that they do because everyone around them reinforces it.” He pursed his lips. “I’m
wondering what happens to them when this is all over.”

Shun joined him and watched the Nulorian prepare. Her thoughtful expression faded as the
conundrum realized itself. She let some seconds pass. “Not sure,” she admitted. “I imagine that’s
something the Commander and Miridian figured out. I know the Commander wouldn’t let a bunch
of racist terrorists be reintegrated without a plan.”

“Let’s hope so,” Nartha said. “Otherwise it’s going to be very messy.”

“Let’s focus on winning the war,” she said, putting an arm on his shoulder and giving him a tight
smile. “We can sort out everything else later. Today at least, we have a crypt to raid.”

“Indeed we do,” Sorras said, walking up. The Bladedancer was more armored than Nartha had
ever seen, and he suspected that from the quality, the armor had been scavenged from a dead
Bladedancer. Sorras’s sword was in hand, and his teeth were openly bared – a sign he was in a
good mood. “Are both of you ready?”

“As ready as we can be,” Nartha and Shun stood. “Let’s do this.”

“Agreed,” Sorras’s eyes glinted maliciously. “We’ve got a Crypt to raid, and a forest to burn.”

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ADVENT High Command – Classified Location

6/2/2017 – 8:02 A.M.

“At attention!”

The entirety of ADVENT High Command, containing all the Legion Generals, Admirals, and
Wing Commanders stood in the auditorium, all broke into salute as Saudia approached the central
table where the presentation was to take place. It was an awe-inspiring sight, to see so much of
Humanities’ best military minds in one place.

This would be a day of history, and she looked forward to the history books reflecting on this day
many years later.
The day which marked the beginning of the end for the Sovereign African States – and a damaging act against the Ethereal Collective.

Saudia took the seat beside the Commander of XCOM, Director Powell, the Chronicler, Vicar General Gerstner, and Chief Stein. Those responsible for the presentation were Commander Christiaens, Helion Weekes, Army-Commander Songhyon, Grand Admiral Kamila Malone, and several other Legion Generals who would be spearheading the operation.

“The Collective has performed multiple escalatory actions in recent weeks,” Commander Christiaens began somberly. “Considering the circumstances, our response has been restrained. However, with the continuous attacks by Patricia Trask, culminating in the attack on New York, with the Imperator himself appearing, we must escalate in response.”

A hologram appeared behind her. “The Collective is doubtless expecting a response. They likely suspect that it will nuclear-oriented considering our signaling from the Chancellor, ADVENT Armed Forces, and the Congress of Nations. What they do not know is where – or if it will be the only such attack. Collective movements indicate that they are preparing for worldwide attacks.”

She paused for a moment. “Over the past few months we have been developing an operation to cripple the Sovereign African States. This is Operation Scipio. This is preceded by Operation Whirlwind which has been consistent for weeks, and has only recently been slowing down. This is not because we are stopping the operation, we are transitioning. Thanks to Operation Whirlwind, we have critical information on SAS defenses, systems, and equipment. With this data we can tailor the operation proper to inflict maximum damage against the SAS.”

The hologram focused in on Africa. “Let me be clear about the goals of Operation Scipio,” Laura stated, looking into the crowd with a firm stare. “It is to inflict as much damage against the SAS as possible. We will not be occupying. We will not be capturing. We are destroying.”

A number of colored dots lit up on SAS territory. “We intend to force the Collective to spend resources, manpower, and time fixing the SAS as opposed to using them against us. More importantly, we intend this to be a message to any who would join the Collective. Stand against us, and we will destroy you.”

She indicated the pinpoints. “SAS territorial infrastructure is improving thanks to Collective engineering, but it is in a transitional period. When we invade, we will leave nothing behind. Every single piece of infrastructure, oil field, food source, shelter, pipeline, and farm will be destroyed or poisoned beyond recovery. We will leave the land a dead wasteland, a visible cost of allying with the alien.”

She raised a hand. “I will also make it clear that this is not an indiscriminate attack. We intend to keep the civilians alive with minimal collateral damage. This is intentional. We need them alive to serve as a resource drain on the Collective. We have a number of methods from driving them from places of residence, including non-lethal chemicals and physical removal. We expect the less-developed areas to have minimal resistance. This is not solely a bombing campaign, and we can afford to be precise in our attacks.”

She picked up a tablet. “ADVENT Intelligence, along with support from XCOM, has helped pinpoint major infrastructure targets, as well as places of interest. While we will raze all applicable territory, we will be prioritizing what to strike first. A singular exception to this policy will be places designated as artifact or historical sites – though these are minimal in the applicable nations. When we have inflicted as much damage as possible, or within acceptable parameters, we will pull back. We do not intend for this to be a protracted campaign. We invade, raze, and leave.”
The hologram focused in on the northern border of the SAS. “The operation will begin with Egyptian, Italian, German, and American Legions mobilizing in Egypt and breaking into several strike forces which will exit at various points of the Sahara. The force composition is primarily going to be armored and mechanized. Infantry will be deployed as needed through established Gateway networks and transports. Normally crossing the Sahara would give the Collective a clue that something is coming. However, we expect there to be large sandstorms which will give our forces cover to surprise them.”

Saudia smiled to herself. The ‘sandstorms’ were something that they had worked out with T’Leth to give their forces cover. T’Leth was capable of using telekinesis to create massive sandstorms in the areas which the ADVENT forces happened to be crossing, which the Collective was unlikely to realize was practically impossible, and shouldn’t happen naturally. That T’Leth had been manifesting smaller sandstorms recently helped mask it further.

It wouldn’t be pleasant to drive through, but it would give them the element of surprise.

“While this operation is taking place, there will be additional attacks against Collective positions,” Laura continued. “XCOM in particular has stated that there are multiple Collective bases they will attack, specifically in the United States, Vietnam, and South America. This will be spearheaded in conjunction with Chief Weekes and ADVENT Special Forces. Thanks to ADVENT Intelligence, we also have the locations of ADVENT POWs, and missions will be taken to free them at the same time.”

She looked to Saudia. “Chancellor, would you like to add the additional component?”

“Yes,” Saudia nodded. “I have authorized the usage of the Atomic Lance against the Nigerian city Lagos. Full radius. Directly targeting the center of government. For now, this will be the only usage of nuclear weapons. It will be launched at the start of Operation Scipio.” There were murmurings behind her, which she expected. This was not a decision to take lightly.

“Together with attacks on Earth, we are also planning an attack beyond it,” Laura said. “The largest shipyard in the Ethereal Collective is Olganar-2, under the control of the Hive Commanders. We want the Collective to be hurt beyond Earth, and targeting their largest shipyard will accomplish this.”

She motioned for a woman sitting nearby to stand. “XCOM is capable of getting us to the planet, and one of their own will provide the means to arrive and return,” Laura said. “Aegis has provided the location, which was corroborated with various Collective defectors and extracted intel from alien captives.”

Of course, this attack was going to rely on the Agents of T’Leth, but the specifics were something the majority of the Generals didn’t need to know. “There is only one group we believe to be capable of accomplishing this mission,” Laura continued, nodding to the woman. “For those who are unaware, this is Command Strategist Kwon Seul-Gi, of the Pantheon, designation ATHENA. She will be responsible for the plan against the shipyard and overall attack.”

“I have reviewed the acquired materials, and the infrastructure has multiple vulnerabilities,” the straight-faced woman said in a clipped voice. “It is not built to withstand high-impact psionics. Nor are there greater threats expected than the overseeing Hive Commander. Our operation will be to cause as much infrastructure damage at critical junctures, and if possible, kill the Hive Commander. As the Collective is not expecting an attack on the shipyard, we estimate only a minimal degree of resistance. Furthermore, with the Collective's attention being focused on responding to the other attacks occurring on Earth, we expect to have an extended operational window.”
Of course, this was assuming that the Ethereals like Quisilia didn’t intervene.

Then again – the Pantheon had been made to combat Ethereals.

As good of a test as any.

“Thank you, ATHENA,” Laura nodded to her, and the woman sat back down. “There is one final component to discuss which will be launched in conjunction with Scipio – Operation Ecnomus. Grand Admiral, you have the floor.”

“Thank you, Commander,” an older woman, and now Grand Admiral of the ADVENT Seafaring Naval Forces, Kamila Malone was one of the longest-serving Admirals in the former United States Navy – as well as one of the only women to achieve such a position. While the naval aspects of the war were more minimal than most conflicts, she had been instrumental in optimizing them as well as could be expected.

And she had a plan to hurt the Collective’s own limited seafaring forces.

“There are a few aspects of the Collective we know when it comes to aquatic combat,” she began, as the hologlobe focused in off the coast of Africa. “Chiefly – that the Collective sees it as a largely unimportant theatre. Their two main forces are the Sar’Manda – who are not participating in the conflict – and the Andromedon Aquatic Forces. The latter are very skilled, very advanced, but highly limited numerically compared to other alien divisions.”

She looked out into the crowd. “They are a weak point in the Collective, numerically. They emerged victorious in Florida, and now believe they are unstoppable. We will exploit this perception. As the Legions move across the Sahara, the largest known fleet since World War II will head towards the coast of the SAS for invasion.”

Images representing the ships appeared on the hologlobe. “We expect the Collective to take notice. We are, in fact, counting on it. They will naturally assemble enough Andromedon Aquatic Forces to, if not crush us, soundly defeat us. On board we will be equipped for a prolonged conflict, with psions, special forces, and the Atlantic Division. However, this is not what we are relying on.”

More dots appeared and began moving towards the expected conflict zone. “We want to lure the Andromedons to engage us. At the same time, the largest known submarine fleet is being assembled as we speak, which will also be traveling to the same location. This includes most of our attack subs from the Pacific and the Atlantic which are quietly joining the main submarine fleet. They will operate at maximum test depth, which we expect to be below effective range of the active Andromedon vehicles – they appear to be avoiding deep diving for unknown reasons – something we will exploit. It works to our advantage, as when they engage the surface fleet, they will engage and outflank the Andromedons.”

The red dots representing the Collective blinked, then vanished. “If it is executed properly, we will not only defeat the Andromedons, but rout them. We will deny them a critical component, forcing them to find replacements or cede the seas to us. The submarine fleets will be staffed with psions to detect potential alien underwater craft, and deal with them.”

What she wasn’t telling them was that T’Leth was also personally ensuring that no one disturbed the submarine fleet. And if necessary – he would intervene directly. It was unlikely that would be necessary, however. Saudia believed the plan was strong enough on its own. “Once the Collective fleet is decimated, we will begin an invasion from the sea,” Kamila finished. “At this point, the operation will be concluded and we will merge with Operation Scipio.”
She nodded back to Laura. “That is our portion, Commander. We are prepared to execute.”

“Each Legion will be appraised of expectations over the next few days.” Laura finished. “It should not need to be said, but we are about to enter into one of the most crucial parts of this conflict. There is no room for error or hesitation. We must perform our absolute best, or the Collective will ensure we do not get another chance.”

She placed a fist over her heart. “Dismissed!”

The Generals, Saudia, and everyone else stood, and returned the salute, before departing to fulfill their part in one of the most important missions in Human history.

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*The Praesidium, Barracks – Classified Location*

*6/3/2017 – 10:23 A.M.*

It had been a whirlwind the past few days.

No one had any answers after New York, and there was no shortage of questions for what exactly had happened. As far as Kunio had been able to determine, it wasn’t with the Collective (clearly), and the working theory was something related to the Sovereign Ones.

If there were other Sovereigns getting involved, then it was going to get dicey very fast.

Though Kunio also suspected that the Agents knew a lot more than they were saying. Being part of the team to get Fiona – well…they certainly seemed to know what was coming. None of them were talking, and Fiona was still sedated and recovering from the attack. It was so bizarre to see her completely broken like they’d found her.

She’d almost seemed like an unstoppable force. He wouldn’t have imagined she could be stopped by anyone but perhaps the Imperator or another Ethereal. And as it turned out, the people she really had to fear were beings he’d never even heard of before. She obviously knew who they were.

He wasn’t sure she’d tell him when she woke up.

The odd medallion dangled from his hand. XCOM had performed a number of scans on the artifact given to them by another unknown figure – though he seemed to be an ally. Or at least, not someone who was against them. Something about the man was definitely off though. Kunio did not have a good feeling about him.

The medallion was expertly made, there was no question about that. It was small and easily could fit in the palm of his hand. It was dark grey metal throughout with a chain strap. If that was all it was, it wouldn’t be overly remarkable. But it was clearly not made out of ordinary metal.

It was warm to the touch, for one. He distinctly remembered handling it in the freezing city, and it being warm. At the time he’d thought his mind was not working properly, but now it was definitely a naturally warm…artifact. XCOM scans confirmed that it maintained a standard temperature at all times. No deviation. Trying to raise or lower the temperature didn’t work.

It was impossible to tell what it was made out of. XCOM scans had shown titanium, iron, plutonium, and uranium all at the same time. Whatever it was composed of, it was an alloy that even the Collective hadn’t been able to produce. They’d considered durability tests, but since it was supposed to be given to Fiona, it was agreed that they hold off until she saw it.
However, there was another quality to the medallion that had startled him the first time.

It *vibrated*.

XCOM had, of course, run more tests on it to try and figure out the cause. The current consensus was that there was some kind of advanced sensor inside that, when it detected something specific, triggered the vibration. The vibration was almost imperceptible, but when clutching it, it could definitely be felt. If he hadn’t been doing that, he wouldn’t have noticed it.

XCOM didn’t give him any theories as to what the trigger could be – but he’d kept it with him since XCOM had let him hold onto it until she awoke, and it had only vibrated around Fiona, ir Nara, and Crevan.

He wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

Now though, it was time to focus on what was coming next.

XCOM had made it clear there was a major offensive that was going to happen. Operations against the SAS had been planned for some time, but now was the time they were going to execute them. But it was far beyond the SAS. Collective positions around the world were being targeted.

And some beyond it.

“So, if, by some miracle our main teleporter dies,” Sylvia Allais, one of the Shoggoth Handlers said, seated beside him. “Think you can get us back to Earth?”

Kunio closed his eyes briefly. “Perhaps?”

“You don’t sound certain.”

“I can probably get everyone back to Earth,” he said unconvincingly. “But it might be London.”

She raised an eyebrow. “London.”

“I have that place seared into my memory,” he admitted. “First time I accidentally teleported anywhere. Sent Carmelita there too.”

“Huh,” she shrugged. “Always good to have an emergency backup. Works for me, anyway. I just don’t want to be stuck on a station with a lot of very angry aliens wanting to kill us.”

The Shoggoth resting on her lap reached up with a tentacle to pat at her face. Seeing the Shoggoth Handlers walk around with their Lovecraftian octopi like they were cats was a shock at first, but literally no one said anything, and by now he’d accepted the bizarre place he lived in. It didn’t help that the Shoggoth was massive, and easily covered her whole lap.

“I already gave you food,” she chided the Shoggoth.

It trilled.

“Fine, fine,” she reached into a pocket and pulled out a long purple stick.

Oh wait. That wasn’t a stick was it.

He looked away.

He did not need to know exactly what they fed the Shoggoths.
“SAS is rumored to be getting some new members,” she continued as the Shoggoth enjoyed the snack. “Coincidentally, it sounds like XCOM is going to be paying them a visit shortly.”

“Yeah.” That wasn’t surprising to him, and not really unexpected. The Commander was brilliant, but very ruthless. He was also hearing the Commander was to take part in at least one operation – something he would consider unfathomable, but the Commander had apparently done it before. Numerous times, in fact.

He couldn’t help but admire that.

At the same time, he felt there was something wrong with the extermination the Commander was going to bring down on the likely new SAS nations. There was anger involved, sure. A message had to be sent. But this definitely went beyond a military strike. Government, infrastructure, leadership, all sabotages, assassinated, or removed.

Not to mention the…other operations against the SAS.

He couldn’t condone Chryssalid outbreaks, no matter the circumstances.

At least he wasn’t in those operations, and he could at least understand the rationale. It was probably how the Commander had been put in charge. He could authorize those kinds of operations irrespective of moral arguments.

The Shoggoth trilled. A tentacle extended to him.

He just stared at it, unsure of what to do. Sylvia laughed. “He likes you. Go ahead. He doesn’t bite.”

“Alright…” he reached out and…petted? Stroked? Whatever he did, he felt the Shoggoth arm. It wasn’t quite as repulsive as he expected. Apparently satisfied, the Shoggoth pulled the arm back.

“It’s nice you aren’t scared of them,” Sylvia said. “They’re really gentle creatures.”

Kunio thought to some of the footage he’d seen. “Are they, though?”

She patted the head of it. “Well…when they want to be.”

Kunio leaned back. “Were you an octopus trainer before this? You seem to get along well with him.”

“Octopus trainer?” She found that very funny. “I don’t even know if that’s a thing. No no, K9 military unit. France. Worked with German Shepherds mostly. Brilliant animals. I like animals in general.”

Well, that was interesting. “Isn’t that a leap from dogs to…” he indicated the Shoggoth, not finishing the sentence.

“At first, yeah,” she nodded. “But they’re so smart. Even more than dogs. I love how playful they are too. They’re like puppies almost. Curious and energetic! Trust me, when you’ve worked training animals, Shoggoths are almost perfect. They learn quickly, are obedient, and very loyal.”

“Killing aliens is just a bonus,” Kunio joked.

“Pretty much,” she chuckled. “Not that I would ever want a civilian to have one – they’re a bit too dangerous if you don’t know what you’re doing – but for XCOM? I love them.”
A light trill sounded from the Shoggoth. Sylvia petted it gently. “Yes, I love you in particular.”

The exchange was almost sweet.

Almost.

It was still a bit unsettling to see up close. But also fascinating.

Never a dull moment in XCOM.

His buzzer sounded. Sylvia’s too. They both exchanged a look.

Time to get suited up.

They had a space station to raid.

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The Praesidium, Barracks – Classified Location

6/3/2017 – 1:02 P.M.

The red light blinked.

The Commander decided to not give an introduction this time. “Following the recent attacks by the Collective, Patricia Trask, and the Imperator, XCOM – in conjunction with ADVENT – will be conducting a series of operations against the Ethereal Collective and Sovereign African States.”

He paused briefly. “This is a multi-pronged operation across several theatres. Earth remains the primary one. ADVENT is executing Operation Scipio, their strategy to irrevocably cripple the SAS. If executed properly, it will render the region helpless and a significant drain on the Collective. We are not certain the Collective will do so, and they may not act within our calculus.”

A finger idly tapped on his knee. “XCOM will be performing an attack on what is defined as the Mars Observation Station. We suspect it is the main organizational hub of the Collective and Zararch in particular. Our objective, if possible, is to capture or kill the Zar’Chon if he is present. Alternatively, acquiring any information from the station is acceptable.”

“We are aware that this could trigger another escalation, but we cannot afford to keep our operations confined just to Earth,” he paused briefly. “That will wear us down over time. The Collective has invaded Earth. Strikes against their own critical infrastructure may serve as a deterrent.”

He paused. “Thanks to T’Leth, the Andromedons, and the work of XCOM Intelligence, we have a solid idea of what to expect. We know there are internal Gateways. We know there are likely Special Operators nearby. Reinforcements could include the most dangerous of the Collective. It will not be easy, but we are preparing as best we can.

He glanced to the clock at the side. “I will be taking part in an operation on Earth. Targeting a nation which we have confirmed will announce their allegiance to the Sovereign African States. The DRC has been contemplating joining for some time, and ADVENT diplomats have been unable to sway them. Considering the recent attacks and threat posed by the nearby SAS, it was perhaps inevitable, but unacceptable.”

He leaned forward to look into the camera. “We are reaching a critical stage of the war. There can
be no division or uncertainty. There can be no neutrality or bystanders. When our species is at stake, no one is neutral. You are either for an independent Humanity, or a subjugated one. The DRC and others have chosen the latter.”

The Commander let out a sigh. “It…gives me no pleasure to carry this out, but in this situation, if I am to give the order, I will be the one to condemn the people of a country to chaos. But there is no choice. The DRC and others are aware of the consequences. Perhaps they did not believe them. But they will experience them nonetheless.”

“ADVENT is unaware of the specifics,” he continued. “They only know we are taking actions. ADVENT Intelligence likely suspects our intentions. All that will be publicly known is that the leadership of countries will disappear overnight. The country will fall into chaos. No country or power will take responsibility, but it will be us. XCOM. ADVENT will be able to keep their hands clean, and we deny another ally to the alien.”

With a sigh, he leaned back, wondering how much further he should continue this. “As with some of these other messages, there is a chance I will not return. The Internal Council has, at this point, not even attempted to restrain my direct involvement anymore.” He allowed a smile. “Perhaps they think I can’t be killed anymore. We’ll see if my streak of luck holds out.”

“If you die to a country which has a subpar army by old world standards, maybe you deserve it,” Vahlen said, coming in from the side into the camera frame. “This definitely won’t be the last one.”

“How many of these are you going to interrupt?” He asked dryly, glancing up at her. “Before every big operation?”

She smiled. “Perhaps.”

“Noted,” he shook his head good-naturedly. “For now, that is all. If this goes well, it could shift the war in our favor. If not, then know we did our best. Vigilo Confido.” The light blinked to green as the video file was saved and stored under PROMETHEUS. JULIAN knew what to do with these recordings at this point.

Vahlen stood behind him and put her arms around him, and with a free hand he gripped one of them. “You’re not nervous this time,” he noted with some surprise. “Not planning to knock me out, are you?”

“No, no,” she said. “I don’t want to say I’ve gotten used to it, but at least this mission doesn’t seem as…dangerous. If you were going to the station, I might be feeling differently. But a third-world African country? No…unless there are surprises.”

“I don’t doubt there will be some,” the Commander admitted. “Zhang is certain there are Zararch operating in the country. But I am doubtful of anything beyond that. We shall see.”

“Mmm,” she knelt down and rested her chin on his shoulder. “Do you think the soldiers will follow through?”

“Yes,” he said. “It’s a reason I am going. Why others are as well. This is something that XCOM has to do. For the good of Humanity.”

“Agreed,” she said beside him, releasing a sigh. “It’s only been a few years, but it feels like it’s been going on forever.”

“I know,” he said quietly. “And that feeling won’t stop anytime soon. The war is far from over. But
things have certainly changed.”

“That they have,” she said, standing back up and walking around to face him better. She leaned against the wall. “You know, I’ve been wondering when you’re going to properly ask me.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Ask you what?”

“You do remember our conversation several months ago?” She asked.

“Thank you for narrowing it down,” he grumbled. “Specifically…?”

“If you’re going to marry me,” she reminded gently.

Ah. Now that he certainly did remember. “It was never a question of if, but when,” he reminded her with a smile. “I didn’t even intend to do my pseudo-proposal that night.”

“Well, you did,” she chuckled. “Can’t take it back now.”

“Of course not,” he said. “Was there something that prompted this?”

“Nothing specific,” she said, pulling up a chair and sitting opposite him. “Just general thoughts over the past months. The war isn’t going to end anytime soon, and honestly…there is never going to be a ‘good’ time to do this. With you going on missions – even if they aren’t particularly dangerous like this one – I don’t want to put it off for later. I don’t want that to be a regret.”

He nodded. “Neither do I.”

“Well…” she cocked her head. “Perhaps we should do that sooner than later?”

“Perhaps we should,” he said quietly, standing as the two of them got closer. “Then I will ask you properly this time.” He put his hands into her own. “Will you marry me?”

She looked up into his eyes, and there was nothing but pride and love in them, both of which he felt she was feeling now. He knew she could tell he felt the same way. She leaned up and kissed him. A long one as they stood there for many seconds. Time wasn’t as important in that moment.

It perhaps took a little longer than expected, but she gave him an answer.

“Yes, I will.”

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Betos’ Office, SAS Command – Nigeria

6/4/2017 – 5:17 A.M.

There was a sound like ringing in her ears.

A numbness throughout her body.

It seemed like everything was both muted and enhanced. Almost like a dream.

She could barely feel the tablet she was holding. The colors arranged in patterns her brain was struggling to justify. But there was no questioning what she was seeing; what she was being shown. She’d not thought this could happen. She didn’t think that step would be taken. New York was something she knew would trigger a response.
But this…

“Betos…” she heard Mox ask quietly.

She remembered she was in a room with several ranking officers. They were looking to her to know what to do next. Each of them was similarly stunned. Confusion, fear, uncertainty, all of them were etched on their faces. But there was a simple numbness to all of them that made none of this seem real.

What was the term?

Surreal.

That.

Yes.

A good word for this.

But she knew this was very real.

“I need a moment,” she said in a hollow voice. “Dismissed. I will need all of you shortly.”

With no argument they departed, leaving her alone in the Office.

She played the video again.

It was taken from an aerial perspective. Above the city of Lagos. Probably a drone. It was definitely ADVENT. It wasn’t Collective, and it wasn’t SAS. ADVENT hadn’t claimed responsibility for the footage, but it had appeared on the Internet moments after it had happened, and had propagated in minutes to become the number one trending video worldwide.

Their AI was hard at work.

Everything seemed normal at first. It was dark; a regular night. The city was a bit different from the past due to the Collective defense enhancements. Upon second viewing she noticed a few more details. Some turrets turning; anti-missile defense systems activating. Flashes of yellow, green, and white.

They should have worked. ADVENT had been bombarding them for months.

Then a blast of orange from the sky so bright it briefly overwhelmed the camera. But the brief moment cleared and Betos paused upon the image of a beam of nuclear fire raining from the sky into the city. She had not known such a weapon was possible, but ADVENT had somehow created a directed nuclear weapon.

Tens of thousands had been instantly killed.

The local government was dead.

Tens of thousands of citizens were blinded or deafened.

More were suffering from radiation.

The city was not destroyed – not fully. But the city center was just…gone. Not even rubble remained. Just a crater of ash and vaporized soot. But even that didn’t matter. The radiation was
strong enough that it would sicken whoever was left. The shockwave from it had shattered and flattened the nearby buildings in an even larger radius, killing thousands more.

There was a file that had been given along with the video.

There were more pictures. The devastation, victims whose skin had been burned off blown to pieces, people stumbling around, blind and deaf, people sickened and vomiting in the streets from radiation poisoning. And panic. Fear. With one strike ADVENT had collapsed a city into chaos, and they could only observe until they put together a radiation unit.

She only wondered…why?

She knew they weren’t the main threat to ADVENT. In fact, they had shown that they could condemn and oppose the Collective when needed. It wasn’t the SAS invading cities and killing the innocent. It wasn’t the SAS who was bombarding the world. The SAS was allied to the Collective, yes, but this was…unprovoked.

Was it just revenge? Directed at her for leaving?

“Do not flatter yourself.”

Macula materialized before her. Literally appearing out of thin air. She had not spoken for some time. She did not question why or how he was here. She had neither the strength nor desire to do so.

“The Sovereign African States are connected to us,” Macula continued. “Allied, even if the relationship is recently strained. But ADVENT does not care. They have done this to send a message. Dissent will not be tolerated. It does not matter that you specifically – or the SAS – are not responsible for some of our more egregious actions. You do not treat us as the enemy – and that is all the justification ADVENT needs.”

She was silent for a few moments. “Everything failed. The defenses failed. How?” There was no fury in her voice, only a broken question. She probably should have been angry at this. Angry at the Collective for failing. Angry at someone right now. But…there was no ambiguity here.

There was only one enemy here, and it was ADVENT.

“I do not know,” Macula for once seemed uncertain. “We are attempting to determine first how this occurred – and what weapon ADVENT developed. We suspected they would be using more nuclear weapons – but not ones like this. And certainly not against the SAS. We are the primary aggressor to ADVENT, after all.”

She nodded numbly.

Macula waited several seconds. “We have teams prepared for this contingency. Andromedon Contamination Operatives and Runianarch Rescue Teams are standing by. However, it would not be right to send them in unilaterally. But I think you see who the real enemy is. ADVENT doesn’t appreciate your morals or concessions. They will destroy the SAS and kill you. Nothing you do will change this objective.”

He extended one hand. “We are still allies, Helsa Betos. And we stand by to help an ally. Now, more than ever, is the time such alliances are tested. I have done what I can to limit the more egregious elements of the Collective, but I can unfortunately make no promises. But this war is coming to you now in a way it has not before. You need us – and now is a time where we also need you. Let us stand before ADVENT as allies, as we were before.”
It was times like these when priorities became clear.

She did not need to stop recognizing the problems of the Collective. But she also knew that Macula was right.

The war was coming now. For real.

ADVENT was coming to destroy the SAS.

On their own, they would lose. They needed an ally. Even an imperfect one.

“Then that is what we do,” she stood, composing herself. “Send the team in – and whatever forces you can spare, bring them. If this is the first shot of ADVENT, it is only a matter of time until an army is on the way.”

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The Dreamscape

6/1/2017 – 4:15 P.M.

Sierra stood in a long hallway.

The fastest way to learn the advantages her new body had was through direct training.

The Dreamscape served as a good tool.

Living now was…interesting.

It was both fascinating and somewhat disconcerting. There was a persistent feeling that she was… piloting a shell. A body. Only not as disassociated as saying that implied. If that had been described to her, she would have found it worrying. But the reality wasn’t nearly as disconcerting. It was almost like how she imagined a psion to puppet someone.

Inhabiting a body, but not really.

It was confusing.

The Psychologist Yates was helping her work through it. It really wasn’t as though she was having mental problems, but it was going to take some time to get fully used to. One of the side effects though was the feeling that her body was invincible. She felt like a walking invincible tank.

The prosthetics she’d had seemed like cheap metal compared to the strength and power she had now – this was before even piloting a MEC. She still didn’t fully know her own strength. She’d almost broken Ted’s hand by giving him a high five. She could pick up Anna in full Titan armor. It was a feeling of durability and power she’d never had.

Of course, she was getting a few new looks now. She towered over pretty much everyone now – with the exception of the other MEC Pilots and a few massive soldiers like Kane. Even still she was a few inches taller. All said and done, she was almost seven feet. It was weird looking down at her friends.

The world was changed in subtle ways too. Her hearing was beyond anything natural. It was overwhelming initially, and she’d quickly figured out how to focus her hearing to only focus on what she wanted. But she was now capable of listening to a single conversation on a completely
different end of a room in a crowded place. Like the Mess Hall or Barracks.

Seeing was...mostly the same. But there were things she picked up on now. Many details which stood out to her, she didn’t know if she was just capable of processing tons of information at the same time better, allowing her to notice it all at once, or if she was actually seeing things her eyes couldn’t.

That wasn’t getting into the other skills. Namely seeing through walls. X-Ray vision was an interesting – and useful perk. It wasn’t so much X-Ray vision so much of being able to perceive the thickness of a wall and what the room could look like. Seeing what was in it was spotty at best.

Now that she was more familiar with her body, it was time to put it through its paces.

Not least of which because the war was heating up further. She’d missed quite a bit, and there were plenty of aliens that were left to kill. She wanted to be ready to participate in the next operation – one which promised to be an important one. In the hallway she stood, with no weapons – except her body.

Beside her stood XCOM’s resident teenager. Sierra was not completely sure what to make of the young woman. Dawn Conley seemed nice and earnest enough. Her psionics were the only reason she was here, it certainly wasn’t because she was a soldier. She did look a bit funny in her Aurora Armor and holding her plasma rifle, like it was a bit too big for her.

Probably because she looked so...young.

She hadn’t even really planned on coming here, but Dawn had been there at the same time and asked if she could help. Sierra had thought about it a bit, and let her. It couldn’t hurt, and she was curious to see how the girl would fare. The Dreamscape was pretty realistic, and she was fairly certain Dawn had not seen the new MECs in action before.

“So...” Dawn coughed awkwardly. “Are we going to get started? I’ve never worked with a MEC before, so I’m sorry if I sound kind of anxious. You do know how to use your augmentations, right?” Her question didn’t sound inherently insulting, but instead more curious. Sierra didn’t really blame her. She was still fairly new, probably somewhat nervous, and getting used to things here.

“Yes,” Sierra answered simply. Speaking was also a bit odd. Not that speaking hadn’t been easy, but it was almost instantaneous where she intended to say something, and the words came out. As it turned out, this was because she spoke through vocoders, and not anything like vocal cords. So there was sometimes a syncing inconsistency between what she said and how fast her mouth moved.

Anna and Ted found it funny, even if she found it a bit annoying. Athena must have had to practice to get her words and mouth synched properly. She’d been sad to hear that she’d died in rescuing Caelior. There was a lot she wanted to talk about now that she’d gone through with it.

“I’m going to do something,” she told Dawn. “Do not be alarmed.”

She wasn’t sure how well the kid would take this, but she’d have to see it sooner than later. With a thought, the nanites that made up her skin pulled back, leaving only her metal limbs bare. That wouldn’t have been overly bad – except that it included her face. She left her artificial hair alone, but what Dawn would see was a not-skeletal face, so much as a face of bare metal, with eyes with glowing red pupils as she activated her X-Ray vision.
It took a few seconds as the ‘skin’ seemed to melt off of her. She looked back to Dawn who was staring at her with very wide eyes. She visibly swallowed. “Ok, that’s new,” she almost squeaked out. “Uh…we ready?”

“Put on your helmet,” she ordered, as metal plates locked into place over her mouth, sealing that opening. All speech was coming through the vocoders now. “Follow my lead. You are a telepath, yes?”

“Well, Biopath, Ma’am—“ she definitely sounded on edge after her face-shift.

“If you can sense them, tell me where and how many,” she interrupted, wanting her to get used to answering promptly as Dawn put on her helmet. “You can do that – yes or no?”

“Yes!” She quickly burst out. “Geist's been teaching me some techniques. I'm getting better, but don't expect me to show up on the battlefield anytime soon. And um, don’t expect any melting. Still takes me a while to do that. My shooting is pretty decent, though.” She patted her plasma rifle.

Good enough.

“Then let’s go,” Sierra looked up. “Start it, T’Leth.”

There was a perceptible shift, and it started. “A bunch in the room at the end,” Dawn said immediately. “Uh…five, six? Something like that.”

“Thank you.” Sierra saw that there was no door into it. Probably one along the sides, where the hallway went around. But her vision showed that the wall was moderately thin. She could probably break through. So either this would work, or she would look like an idiot in front of a teenager.

But the Dreamscape was for experimentation, after all.

“Follow my lead,” she told Dawn, and then charged towards the wall. Without the limitations of an organic body, she was able to reach full speed in a few bounds, and a few more later was as fast as a car going forty, with enough force to pulverize anything which got in her way.

She resisted a flinch as she approached, and hit the wall.

She only felt the slightest bit of resistance before it broke under her force, revealing the simple white room. A half-dozen Mutons turned around in surprise, while a mixture of Andromedons and Vitakara were in the back. She appraised them only a second before springing into action.

She immediately shot a fist towards the face of the nearest Muton. She’d expected that at most it would stun it. What it actually did was rip the head partially off, and crumple the metal into the face. Yellow ichor stained her hand as the Muton crumpled to the ground.

Interesting.

The aliens opened fire, and she lifted the Muton corpse with one hand, using it as cover and she strode to the next one, throwing it towards one of the Mutons, while lashing out with a foot, snapping the kneecap of the Muton with barely any effort. She ripped the plasma rifle from the Muton violently, taking off a couple fingers with it, before twisting the neck violently enough to rip it off.

Plasma bolts hit her, but they barely registered. Her frame was more than capable of tanking multiple plasma shots. Still, no point in unnecessary damage. She picked up the plasma rifle and targeted three more of the Mutons then tossed it away before it self-destructed. Her targeting was
effectively perfect now, and three shots later, three more corpses fell, thanks to the lack of cover.

The remaining aliens were trying to flank her now. There was a Cobrarian she saw, which was slithering behind her. Three Vitakarians were taking aim; Runianarch she saw. The two Andromedons were similarly firing, and also moving around to flank her. She picked up the nearby Muton corpse and threw it towards the Vitakara.

The Cobrarian charged her and got up close, performing a constrictor attack, using their snake-like bodies to wrap around her. First her leg, and then body and arm. Even if she hadn’t made the mistake of leaving an arm free, Sierra was almost certain she could have broken out through sheer strength alone.

She was metal, and the alien was flesh.

The Cobrarian hissed in triumph, which abruptly turned to panic once Sierra grabbed at the throat of the Cobrarian and squeezed. It took only a second for her metal fingers to pierce the skin, and she ripped open the throat of the Cobrarian with a casual gesture. Yellow blood spurted onto her body and face as the Cobrarian drowned in its own blood, and she charged the Andromedons.

She was able to easily get around one of them, and simply tore out as many cables and important-looking gadgets as she could. With that one incapacitated, she decided to simply punch the other one in the massive mask that separated it from the outside world. It didn’t break at her first punch – but it did crack.

Another punch shattered it with an explosive burst of the hardened glass. She reached inside and grabbed the corroding Andromidon, slamming the face on the glass shards, before kicking the Andromedon suit back onto the ground with a thud. Knowing the suit would get back up, she marched over and ripped out the control panel within the suit, which was enough to keep it down for good. She prepared for the Vitakara, but to her surprise they were already dead, lying on the ground nearby.

She looked back to the entrance of the room – or more accurately, the hole she had made – and saw Dawn standing, lowering an arm, the psionic distortion fading. “Uh…you didn’t want me to save them for you, right? Thought I’d step in, help you a bit in there, if that’s okay…” She trailed off, appearing to now notice the carnage around her. “Wait...holy shit. You did all that with your hands?”

From the tone of her voice, Sierra felt like her mouth was probably open, having witnessed that display. Admittedly, she couldn’t have really imagined it going better. She was…very pleased with how it was performing. She’d admittedly almost forgotten about Dawn, and that she was a fairly powerful telepath. She seemed to be handling it well though, despite gawking at the corpses.

Her fascination would likely fade in time.

She strode over to the psion, and she could tell it was taking everything for the girl to not step back at the blood-covered Human cyborg. But Sierra just patted her on the shoulder. “No, good job. I’ll give you a few more next time. Up for a few more?”

“If you want to,” Dawn nodded almost warily. “I mean…yes! Looks like we both did pretty well. Besides, I’ve got nothing else to do right now, and you’re the first person I’ve actually fought with in the Dreamscape besides Geist. But, um...you got any other surprises in there I should know about?”

“I don’t think so.”
“Alright, cool!”

“Stay with me,” Sierra said, turning to the next room. “Let’s see what else T’Leth has in here.”

By the end of this session, she wanted to master her new body. And by the looks of it, she was already on her way there.

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Skyranger, En Route to Landing Point

6/4/2017 – 9:01 P.M.

A squad of relative newcomers composed those who were here to collapse a government.

The Commander sat and observed. The only one who seemed largely at ease was their sole psion this operation, Ji-Yong Mangjol, a stoic North Korean woman who was very professional, if a bit stringent and silent. The rest of them all felt various shades of uncertainty or unease.

If it was due to his presence, or the mission, he couldn’t say.

He reached up and took off his helmet, setting it on his lap. The rest of the soldiers immediately took notice, clearly waiting for him to say something. He took a moment to look around the Skyranger. “Not quite the op you signed up for, am I wrong?”

One of them coughed. “Not at all, sir.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “I’m no telepath, but I can sense emotions perfectly well. I also don’t take offense easily either. Commanding officer or no, I am capable of taking criticism.”

“With all due respect, Commander,” one of the Canadians said. “This seems like an…odd mission for XCOM to be doing.”

“Collens, yes?” The Commander asked with a nod.

“Yes, Commander,” Kai Collens, their squad Assault nodded.

“Right,” the Commander continued. “I am under no illusions as to what we are doing here, and what we will do. We will be assassinating the government of a nation, and any who attempt to stop us. There will be many people who die today as the result of our actions. We are all aware of that, even if it’s easier to dance around the topic.”

Helmets still on, they looked at him, and he looked at each one of them. They were all paying full attention, at least. “Only a few of you have done something like this before. It is not easy, and you will take no satisfaction from it. But remember what our purpose is. We are to protect Humanity by any means necessary. The DRC has decided that they will join the SAS – and by extension, the aliens.”

He allowed a pause. “I – and the Internal Council – had a choice. ADVENT was not going to intervene. There are politics to consider now. There was a limited window before an operation like this is not possible. XCOM is capable of dealing a blow to the new allies of the aliens, and we cannot in good conscience refrain from doing it.”

He indicated the area around them. “Thus, here we are. What I ask all of you to remember is this – there are no bystanders in this war any longer. The DRC has chosen a side. Remember that our
duty is not to our conscience, but to Humanity. I know what this is like – which is why I am here with you. If I am giving the order, I will also carry it out.”

“Don’t disagree, Commander,” Paloma Casaus, one of the Infantry said from beside him. “Harsh. But necessary.”

Mangjol nodded. “Indeed. Stability will return in time.”

“Our government made the mistake of placation a time ago,” Casaus said. “Cartels ran rampant. One thing led to another, and they ran the show.”

“National Guard, correct?” The Commander recalled.

“Yes, sir,” Casaus confirmed. “Young and foolish me thought I could make a difference. All I learned was that I was too late. Far as I’m concerned, traitors like the DRC are a cartel waiting to get out of control. We don’t cut off the head, it will soon be wearing armor.”

“As I said,” the Commander told them. “Remember why we are doing this. Remember what happens when we fail.”

There were enough examples to come to mind to get the point across.

The stakes were clear.

“Isn’t someone going to notice us?” Sahra Kesselman, the German Scout asked. “We’re going directly to the Palace, right?”

“We are,” the Commander confirmed. “But the DRC systems are…poor. Burning Sky has countermeasures, and we have a psion.”

“I have been preparing,” Mangjol interjected. “They shall not see us. If they do, they will be unable to do anything.”

“Let’s review one more time the objectives,” the Commander said. “XCOM and ADVENT Intelligence have confirmed that the entire government will be in residence. They are preparing and finalizing the integration with the SAS. Fen, you will establish a contact point with JULIAN, who will crash the city.”

“Understood, and shall do.”

“Mangjol will facilitate the further deterioration of the city,” the Commander continued. “As well as provide psionic support if necessary. The rest of us will enter the Palace, and eliminate all
occupants. When we finish. We will move to the Parliament which is also scheduled to be in session to sign the legislation. JULIAN will ensure that communication is under our control. Once both targets are eliminated, and Mangjol validates completion of long-term objectives, we will depart.”

“And if we’re caught?” Barbara Lawson, the other Infantry asked.

The Commander fingered the steel orbs in palm. “It isn’t a question of if we are caught, but by whom and how many. If we are seen, we eliminate. I would prefer we not have to fight an entire city, and I’m sure you agree.”

She nodded.

The cabin flashed a solid red. “Hamburg Squad, this is Burning Sky,” their Skyranger pilot said over the comms. “Tell your psion to do her thing if she’s so inclined. We’re coming up on the city. Countermeasures engaged and T-minus five to LZ. Will circle until confirmation of psionic measures is given.”

They stood, and readied their weapons. Each grabbed one of the handles above. Mangjol followed suit, and once her hand had a firm grip, she bowed her head. “Working now, Commander. Our path will be clear momentarily.”

The Commander gave her a few moments to really focus, and once there was a visible and ever-so-slightly purple distortion around her, he opened a channel back up to the pilot. “Burning Sky, this is the Commander. Psionics are in play. Take us in and ready the payloads.”

“Copy that, Commander. We’re moving in now.”

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MEC Bay, the Praesidium – Classified Location

6/4/2017 – 10:24 A.M.

“I keep forgetting how big these are,” Ted remarked as they walked into the MEC Bay. “I keep thinking of them as regular sized. Not like Goliaths.”

Anna and Ted were already in their Archangel gear, accompanying Sierra as they prepared to be her wing for the upcoming fight. Sierra looked upon her suit, which towered over them. She had tested it out some time before, to do a test run to become acquainted with the systems.

It was good she wasn’t likely to wear the Archangel armor again, because she didn’t think she could go back.

“Probably has to be that big,” Anna commented. “It’s designed to take on small UFOs, right?”

“In theory,” Sierra said absentmindedly. “If I got a good shot.”

“And can you?”

A pause. She thought for a moment.

“I think so.”

“So this mission,” Ted added as Sierra began the process of getting the Valkyrie Suit prepared. “It’s dangerous. Even for us. Not even an XCOM squad behind us this time. Just ADVENT
“We don’t need an XCOM squad,” Anna punched him lightly in the shoulder. “We have Sierra now. And you.”

“I’m a psion,” Ted protested. “I’m a man, not a god.”

“Guess Sierra will have to pick up the slack,” Anna gave an exaggerated sigh. “I am now the only mortal here. Do you even age anymore, Sierra?”

Sierra cocked her head. “What’s living of me does.”

“Please,” Ted rolled his eyes. “As if any of us are really mortal anymore. With how much MELD is pumped into us, at minimum we’re living twice the average length of a regular person. But we’re getting off topic. The mission.”

“We go in, kill aliens, and get out,” Anna said. “Straightforward.”

“We check our fire,” Sierra cautioned, remembering the briefing. “Jakarta is the largest staging ground the Collective has against Singapore. We take that out, we give Singapore time to recover and take back some ground. I would almost go so far as to say we hurt their entire Indonesian campaign.”

“Noted,” Anna gave a sharp nod. “And we’re the bait.”

“In a sense,” Sierra shrugged as the Valkyrie suit opened up for her to enter. “I would expect the Collective to fire on any XCOM soldiers. Me especially, as they have never seen a Valkyrie before. Once the ADVENT Wings appear, then it will be too late.”

“Not just ADVENT Wings,” a new voice said. Sierra turned to see a man in a pilots suit walking up. An XCOM Aviation helmet was under his arm. He looked fairly seasoned, brown hair and short beard. Definitely American from his accent. Sierra immediately suspected Air Force.

“Matthew Yaeter,” he said, extending a hand which she took, taking care not to crush his hand. “Firestorm Division; Pilot-Commander of the STARCREAM Wing. Looking forward to working with our first Valkyrie. Expectations are high, Pilot Morrow.”

“We got Firestorm support?” Anna asked. “Huh. Didn’t expect that.”

“This time you do, Archangel Pavlova,” Matthew nodded with a smile. “Contrary to popular belief, we are very much still around, even if XCOM forgets we exist sometimes. The theatres of air and ground do not cross as much, and we perform very different missions. Today, though, that changes.”

Sierra nodded to him. “I presume I’ll join you in the air to the target site.”

“Indeed,” Matthew confirmed. “Archangels, I’ve been told you’ll be taking the Gateway to Singapore and converge. Has the plan changed?”

“Not that I’m aware,” Ted answered. “How many Firestorms are we getting?”

“A full two wings,” Matthew ticked off his fingers. “A dozen Firestorms total. I’ll be joined with Pilot-Commander Powers who will be leading SKYWALKER Wing. For clarity, the three of you are JAVELIN Wing.”
“I guess the cool names were taken then,” Anna chided. “Sad.”

“We work together again, and I’ll give you a more unique moniker,” Matthew smirked. “See you in the sky. We’re taking off in ten. Vigilo Confido, Valkyrie, we’re all ready to see what you can do.”

Sierra let her eyes turn red as she prepped her body to enter the Valkyrie. “Let’s make them hurt.”

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Conference Hall, ADVENT Media Hub – Switzerland

6/4/2017 – 6:00 A.M.

The media was oddly silent and respectful as she walked in. The click of camera shutters sounded like normal, but the faces of the many figures with their microphones and recording devices out held a variety of expressions.

Shock. Worry. Fear.

It made her curious.

Miami had not elicited this kind of reaction, though admittedly the circumstances had been far different. It was a last desperate attempt to hurt the Collective advance, and only done after every other option had been considered and exhausted. It had been, all things considered, limited.

This was a direct strike against a sovereign foe, in a civilian population.

Saudia wondered how many of them had felt she would not go through with it.

That there would be a line she would not cross.

That there were limits to what she would sanction.

No.

Whatever misconceptions they had about her were shattered for good. Ironically it had taken a nuclear strike for the media – and much of the world – to see that her resolve was firm. This war would be won, no matter the cost or the steps that needed to be taken. Now it was time to speak to the world directly.

She stood a few seconds looking into the crowd, and with a finger pressed down on a remote on the podium. Beside her the footage of the nuclear attack played, loyally captured by the Kutkh Ravens. There had been other angles, but this one was preferable. She didn’t look back at it. She’d seen it dozens of times already.

Some in the crowd looked away. She knew it was the moment when the beam struck.

When it finished, she waited until the screen went black. Then she spoke. “At approximately two-fifteen A.M. I authorized a nuclear strike on the city of Lagos, within the Sovereign African States.” Anyone watching knew that the weapon wasn’t a traditional nuclear weapon, but she wasn’t going to disclose the details or specifications of the Atomic Lance.

“Over the past weeks and months, the Ethereal Collective and their allies have been escalating their war against us,” she continued in a calm, cold voice. “Patricia Trask has launched invasions, attacked cities, and has caused immeasurable damage and killed countless soldiers and civilians.
The Collective has bombarded our world indiscriminately.”

With a hand she gripped the top of the podium, peering intently at the crowd, her voice sharply intense. “This will no longer be tolerated. ADVENT has suffered the tantrums of the Harbinger. If she wishes to inflict suffering upon us, we shall return it to the Collective and their allies tenfold. This is a war for our survival.”

She paused. “But make no mistake. This was our decision. Today we used a nuclear weapon. If the Collective is intent on pushing us further, then we will use more. We are past the stage of believing the Collective wishes to fight fair. They wish to conquer us, and should they attempt so, we will make them pay dearly for it.”

The hand closed to a fist. “The Collective, and the remaining nations of the world appear to doubt our resolve. That we would take these actions. But if our own history has shown nothing, it is that we are resilient and do not succumb to fear and despair. When backed into a corner, we will fight and kill. We will do more than protect ourselves, we will ensure that those who inflict these attacks upon us will suffer equally or greater than us.”

She briefly closed her eyes, before looking into the eyes of those gathered. “Many of you know little of my past before assuming this position. I was born in Nigeria. I lived in Lagos for some years of my childhood. It was once my home. But I will not let sentimentality and my own feelings stand in the way of what must be done.”

She looked to the camera. “Let the Sovereign African States know that they would be wise to surrender and break with the Ethereal Collective. If they do not, then we will return your people to the dirt where we all come from. We will burn your nations. We will raze your cities. We will return your people to the age of stone and tribes, and turn you away when you flee to us. This will be the fate of any who reject their Humanity in favor of the alien.”

Saudia hesitated for a few moments. “There are nations who remain ‘neutral’. Who believe they can stay on the sidelines; ignored. But they lie to themselves and their citizens. There is no neutrality in this war. You are either on the side of the Human, or the Alien. We are Humanity. If you do not choose where your allegiance lies, then the time will come where it is chosen for you. Our tolerance is ending.”

A final pause.

“Make your decision. Your time is short. And if you hesitate, then see what will soon befall the Sovereign African States, and know that it will apply to all those who betray Humanity.”

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The Forest of Haramoalian – Vitakar

6/4/2017 – 6:19 P.M.

The forest was burning.

Even through his helmet, Nartha could smell the vegetation burning, and far above he could see the smoke gathering. It was not near – but it would soon spread, and while there would have normally been an immediate response from the Dath’Haram, the Nulorian shooting down water craft and any kind of emergency vehicles had put a mortem on support.

The Dath’Haram were not prepared for an attack of this scale.
They made their way through the forest, with Sorras as their guide. This was going to hopefully be quick and painless.

The Nulorian had launched their attacks, and if all had gone well, the Crypt would be unguarded. Nartha knew that was unlikely to be the case, but one could hope. Soon enough they broke out into the entrance to the Crypt, an open area with memorials and gravestones on well-maintained paths.

“There he is,” Sorras said, reaching for his sword. “Right on schedule.”

Nartha also saw him.

Filhallan, the first and oldest Bladedancer of the Dath’Haram. He merely stood, appraising them with unblinking eyes and his outfit custom made by the Hunting Parties. His blade was at his side idly, but Nartha was not fooled by the relaxed appearance. He was doubtless prepared to strike quickly.

What little video existed on him showed a Dath’Haram with extraordinary speed.

“We shoot?” The XCOM Engineer Roe asked.

“Fan out and set up,” Sorras instructed. “I doubt he’s the only one here. A shame we don’t have a psion.”

“I would hope we can handle one Bladedancer,” Mehren muttered, lifting his sniper rifle. “Say the word and I’ll execute him.”

“This is all your doing, I suppose,” Filhallan spoke, in a slow and ponderous voice. It was an old voice, the oldest Dath’Haram Nartha had ever heard. “And for what purpose, Sorras?”

Sorras stopped. “You recognize me.”

“I do not forget those I trained.”

“I’ve gotten better,” Sorras lifted his blade. “You know why we are here.”

The XCOM soldiers fanned out, their weapons trained on the lone Bladedancer. Filhallan looked around idly. “The Crypt. It has not been the first time the Nulorian have attempted to penetrate it. I suspect it will not be the last.”

“Bold to assume you’ll succeed.”

“I could say the same for you,” Filhallan flicked his blade to a ready stance in a blur. “But your people have burned our forest, and you try and storm our Crypt. For that you will die. I see no other path.”

Nartha waited. Sorras sneered. “Still not one to swing the first blow. This is why you lose.”

They heard a rustle from above, and Nartha rolled out of the way, just out of the point of a Bladedancer who had fallen from above. “Look around you!” He roared as Sorras charged towards Filhallan and the two began dueling in a flurry of blows and silver blurs. Most of XCOM was able to get out of the way.

Some others weren’t.

Mehren was skewered as a Dath’Haram landed directly behind him, sending the blade directly down his spine, following it up with a snapped neck. The Bladedancers had also made the mistake
of trying to assassinate Janiya at close range. They did in fact score a hit on her, but the MELD Operator simply directed a swarm of nanites behind her, enveloping the Bladedancer who screamed as the nanites ate away at him, even as he tried slashing at her iron skin.

Nartha’s own assassin flourished her blade and moved with blinding speed to close the gap. Fortunately he remembered the Zararch instructions for considering Bladedancers. While rare – they were deadly. Not the fake ones in the Runianarch either, who used the weapon as just that – a weapon.

Bladedancing for the serious was an art form.

There was a very important rule.

*Do not let the blade touch you.*

Blades were coated with lethal poisons which would kill in minutes if the skin was broken. They were hardened and durable enough to be nearly impossible to break or bend. They were highly sharp, and pointed. Armor was not as much of a help because Bladedancers were capable of analyzing each and every weak point in the armor and striking.

Keep your distance.

Nartha jumped back, and fired in an arc in front of him. The Bladedancer nimbly ducked under his arc, and Nartha corrected by shooting towards the ground, which she leapt over. Keeping them moving was important, as distance was put between them. She bared her teeth, seeming to realize what he was doing, and with an elegant twirl flung a weighted cord.

Nartha quickly spread his legs and ceased moving. The Bladedancers only employed those tools to slow down or trip targets. If he fell to the ground, he was dead. He could afford to let the cord wrap around one leg if necessary, but not both. She leapt towards him, and he pivoted on one foot, firing.

A bolt clipped her and she hissed, even as he kicked off the cord and moved backwards. He needed to be cognizant of where he was going, because the chances she was going to drive him into another Bladedancer were high. She was far too close for comfort now, and he could almost hear the blade whistle past his face.

As he observed her style, he realized that he appeared to have – luckily – gotten a more inexperienced or newer Bladedancer. Experts used thrusts and jabs against armored opponents, not slashes – and his opponent was primarily using slashes. Sometimes those were useful for driving an opponent back, but weren’t as dangerous.

He could use that.

It was something he would probably only have one shot at. It required his reflexes being almost perfect. He let her move in, and slashed where his throat should be. The expected action was to leap back – but instead he hung just out of range – and stepped forward, trapping her arm and twisting.

With his pistol he fired two shots into her side and kicked her away before she tried a martial move against him. Lifting his rifle back up, he aimed it at the gasping and stumbling Bladedancer and fired several shots into her chest and head – killing her quickly. *One down. Lucky.*

He looked around the chaotic scene. Edgar, the other XCOM Intelligence agent had died, and *four* Bladedancers were focused on Janiya, and the MELD Operative was holding her own, even as the Bladedancers were keeping their distance. Shun was facing off against one which seemed
particularly skilled. Roe had just finished killing one, and was shooting the corpse to finish it off.

But the duel between Filhallan and Sorras was reaching a peak.

Nartha was almost finding it hard to keep up with the speed of the duel. Sorras was without a doubt one of the fastest individuals he had ever seen, blade or not, but Filhallan was something beyond normal. It was like watching a machine in a humanoid form fight. Each action was within the blink of an eye, and he was impressed Sorras was able to keep up.

Both were exchanging blows, and despite Filhallan’s speed, Sorras was getting close to landing some decisive blows. Flickers of light and silver shone around them, a crescendo and dance between the masters of the craft. Then it happened.

Filhallan exposed himself just enough, and Sorras seized the opportunity and sliced upwards, opening a wide gash on Filhallan’s sword wrist, even though he still held the blade. But the move stunned the elder Bladedancer enough that he left his chest briefly exposed and Sorras followed up by stabbing him directly in the heart.

Almost all the fighting stopped at that. The Bladedancers immediately backed off, shooting almost frantic looks to their master, even as they watched their XCOM opponents.

Was it over?

Filhallan stood paralyzed as blood flowed out of his wrist and chest. Nartha expected him to keel over at any moment. Sorras pulled the blade out, in a final flourish. Filhallan unexpectedly bared his teeth in a smile. “Well struck, Nul’sorras’haramoalian.”

Then he walked forward.

Sorras seemed shocked that he was still moving, and performed another, final swipe, which opened a river of blood from his throat.

The Bladedancer kept moving.

Sorras sliced and stabbed again. Each blow was true, but unlike before, Filhallan just stood there and let the blade ravage his body before lashing out with one hand and capturing his arm. With the blood-soaked arm still holding his own blade, he stabbed Sorras through the chin and brain, killing him instantly – though not before Sorras performed another stab through the chest.

Filhallan let the body drop to the ground.

Nartha felt numb as he saw the walking corpse methodically extracted the bloodied and poisoned blade from his own body, as the eyes of the Dath’Haram swept across them. The Bladedancers seemed equally as stunned.

Who was he?

The Zararch had never known him to be anything like this – at least not that Nartha had been aware of.

“Fall back,” Shun made the executive decision. “This is not the time to figure this out.”

“Copy that,” Janiya stated, moving to the pre-planned contingency point that Nartha was very glad they had established.
The Bladedancers immediately began moving to attack, as if the spell had been lifted from their fugue, but the last thing Nartha saw before they fell back into the forest was Filhallan lifting a bloody hand – a clear sign to stop. The Bladedancers immediately complied, and XCOM retreated into the forest.

Nartha didn’t know why the Bladedancer was letting them go.

Probably as a warning.

If so – the message was received.

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Zar’Chon’s Chambers, Mars Observation Station – Mars Orbit

6/4/2017 – 6:18 A.M.

It had been a troubling few days.

This decision that Saudia, and by extension ADVENT, had taken was not surprising, but it was inconvenient nonetheless. It was a type of nuclear weapon that was not something they had thought ADVENT had in their arsenal. Already Andromedon scientists were fairly sure they knew how it operated – but it was on the advanced end of nuclear weaponry.

Impressive that ADVENT had kept it secret.

But they had perhaps used it too early. He knew that these would be especially potent weapons against starships. But perhaps they had felt like they didn’t have a choice. Assuming that ADVENT would ever pose a threat beyond Earth was…almost wishful thinking. They needed a fleet first, and at best they were only in the prototyping stage.

There was a silver lining to all of this. Faint, but there.

The SAS had immediately dropped their little standoff, and were now working fully with them. Ravarian had never believed it would last long, but Betos had held out longer than he’d thought. Even if it had taken one of her cities being bombed to do so, it was better than nothing at all.

It made him wonder why ADVENT had gone directly after the SAS and not a more important Collective base. Based on Saudia’s speech afterwards, the calculus appeared to have been not to the Collective, but anyone who was considering joining or allying with them like the SAS.

Still, he questioned the tactical effectiveness of it. The SAS was intentionally not being a problem, and now they were fully back in the fold – entirely due to ADVENT. Perhaps ADVENT did believe it was fake? He couldn’t rule that out, but it ultimately benefited them. One city could be replaced.

But this, of course, was not the only attack they would see today.

Oh no, there would be many more.

This was simply the opening salvo.

Cali mewed once, leapt into his lap and immediately settled down, as he absentmindedly began petting her. “What do you think?” He asked the cat. He didn’t know what to think about his developing habit of talking to the creature for no real reason. Perhaps because she didn’t talk back
and couldn’t actually affect anything, it felt good. “United States? South America? Where will ADVENT strike first?”

Cali just purred.

He scratched her ears. “I couldn’t agree more.”

Ravarian returned his attention to the screen, seeing the Human media drone on about ‘implications’ and ‘historic, groundbreaking conference’. One of the pundits in particular caught his attention from the muted subtitles. Head cocked, he unmuted the station, more out of curiosity than anything.

Dave Muri. A middle-aged Human with ruddy skin and slicked back short hair which was a dark brown. His face was almost comically intense as he spoke. “What I’m telling you is that this was exactly what the Chancellor needed to say. The SAS has been killing our soldiers in the region for months now. It’s time they face the cleansing purity of nuclear fire.”

Ravarian almost chuckled. Was this man serious? The other pundits seemed somewhat taken aback. “She just bombed civilians,” another pundit said slowly. “That’s not something we should take lightly.”

“Right, but she needed to do that,” the man insisted. “Tell me, if you had the opportunity, wouldn’t you take out a city filled with traitors?”

“I mean, I don’t know?” the other pundit defended. “It depends on what I knew, what she knew.”

“What about you?” Dave then asked the next-closest pundit. “Why would not bombing the city be acceptable, given that the SAS is our sworn enemy.”

‘Sworn enemy’. Ravarian snorted as the woman in question just looked at him in a mixture of confusion and concern. “Well, even if the SAS is our enemy, we can’t just go around bombing cities wherever we feel like it.”

“That isn’t the question. And hasn’t the Collective – and Patricia – been doing that exact same thing for a while now?” He insisted, going to the last pundit, his face oddly flushed. “What about you? Would you have let the SAS go unpunished for what they have done against us?”

“Well, technically, it was the Collective who is our main enemy,” the pundit said, looking at Dave warily. “The SAS was even calling them out sometimes.”

“Dave, are you feeling alright?” The female pundit asked. “This is a bit violent, even for you.”

Ravarian decided he’d heard enough, and shut it off. What passed for Human news was rather amusing. And they had the nerve to call the Zararch propaganda. At least they wouldn’t have someone like that on any information dispersal program. What the current media reaction told him was that not everyone was fully on board with the strike, but no one had any power to stop ADVENT.

There was a new name being thrown around in regards to Saudia, especially since she’d apparently nuked her birthplace.

The Iron Chancellor.

No doubt something perpetuated by the ADVENT AI, but it was fitting nonetheless. She was certainly ruthless enough to warrant the title, melodramatic as it might be. She was definitely not
content with one attack. There would be others. Others which would be coming very soon, he was certain of it.

T’Leth was also concerning – but countermeasures were being developed, and the extent of his display appeared to be over. Still – Ravarian was not going to discount the Sovereign becoming more involved. With Patricia recovering after being defeated, he imagined she would not be taking many chances when it came to mitigating the Sovereign.

A shrill alarm sounded.

He leapt to his feet, and Cali jumped off as his weapon appeared in his hand. The alarm only went off if there were hostile forces nearby – or in the base. “Report!” He snapped, knowing the CODEX would answer.

“Intruders in Hangar Seven,” the CODEX answered immediately. “Identified as XCOM. Instituting lockdown.”

“Projection onscreen now,” he commanded, striding to the center of his chambers as the hologram came online as he saw the apparent XCOM strike team. He couldn’t determine any of the Humans by identity through the armor – but his lips pursed as he saw not one, but two Vitakara with XCOM. A Borelian and Oyariah.

Well then. Traitors all around.

Only right they died on the grounds of a Collective stronghold.

There were certainly psions with them. Fine. If XCOM was going to invade, then they would be punished accordingly. “Contact the Overmind. Inform him that XCOM is on the station.”

“Opening line. Sequencing now.”

“And as you do that…” he watched as the XCOM squad began fighting the staff in the Hangar – most of them not even soldiers. “Vent the Hangar – and activate our Operator.”

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Palais de la Nation, Kinshasa – Democratic Republic of the Congo

6/4/2017 – 9:24 P.M.

The Commander hit the ground with an audible thud. Hamburg Squad landed right beside him moments later. A large crate slid down a rope from the Skyranger, which was caught by Casaus and Sahra, unhooked, and the cable retracted back into the vehicle. The Commander scanned the immediate area.

There were a few guards – or would have been, had Mangjol not removed them. Instead they were passed out, and at the moment there was no investigation. With a sharp hiss, the Skyranger ejected a small pod which landed nearby. It opened a few moments later, and four of the packed Chryssalids awakened.

It was past time Vahlen’s little experiment got some usage.

“Ugh,” Collens muttered. “Hate those things.”

“As do I, but they have their uses,” the Commander said as the creatures shook their heads,
awakening as they fell under Mangjol’s influence. “The good news is these ones can’t spread. Vahlen made sure of that.”

“Thank goodness.” Barbara checked her rifle. “Still, I’ll keep my distance.”

Fen was setting up his makeshift antenna as the Skyranger flew away into the night. “We should be online soon,” he said as the Chryssalids chittered. “JULIAN will only need a moment anyway.” A few minutes passed as they took positions, though no one was coming their way. Sahra opened the crate and peered inside.

“There’s a lot here,” she picked up one of the containers of Chryssalid eggs. “How are we getting these everywhere?”

“Leave that to our psion,” the Commander said. “She’ll find a way.”

“And…we are up and running,” Fen stated, standing. “JULIAN, are you here?”

“Yes, yes, it took you long enough. It would almost have been faster to go through ADVENT, find this exact city, and break through then wait.” JULIAN was certainly not holding back his critique today.

Probably disappointed that he wasn’t being more thoroughly tested.

*Soon, JULIAN. Very soon.*

“Are you going to complain, or are you doing to do something?” The Commander asked dryly. “I would have expected you to do something dramatic, not berate my squad. Nervous?”

“Please, this is utterly pathetic,” an electronic equivalent of a snort. “It took me actual seconds. Incredible. I’m amazed ADVENT hasn’t cracked this sorry excuse for cyber security. Stand by. The city is about to go dark. How far, exactly can I go?”

“Whatever is necessary.”

“Duly noted.”

A second later, everything went dark. All of them watched as chunks of the city went off, one by one.

“I trust that is satisfactory?” JULIAN asked smugly. “I have also taken control of their outgoing communications. I am currently flooding them with spam callers.”

“Perfect, JULIAN,” the Commander pulled out his Mind Ray and hooked it up to his suit. “We’re all set. Stand by for further instructions. Amuse yourself as needed.” He looked to the rest of the squad. “The building has probably gone into lockdown. Move forward. Mangjol, set the Chryssalids hunting.”

“Yes, Commander.”

The kneeling psion didn’t gesture, but the quartet of alien creatures shot off into the night, each with a specific location in mind to go hunting. There were several law enforcement centers and military outposts. The Chryssalids would be unlikely to kill everyone in them – but they would kill enough to cause chaos.

And once people saw it was an alien causing carnage, that would be enough to poison public
sentiment against the aliens.

As the Hades Contingency intended.

The armored squad marched forward and there was no ceremony as they kicked in the front doors. There were a group of surprised people in the front, as well as several guards, all of whom reacted first with surprise, then brief fear before they were gunned down. Plasma and bullets ended their lives quickly.

A couple guards rushed forward, the Commander raised his Mind Ray and clicked the trigger.

Both fell down, dead.

Trivial how easy psionic technology had made killing.

He motioned for them to continue onward. Barbara stayed put, to kill any stragglers who retreated to the front. They split up, with the Commander and Casaus moving towards the offices of the President and Prime Minister. There was not much resistance expected, which was why splitting up had been judged as an acceptable risk.

The Collective was unlikely to risk themselves for a state not even in the SAS yet.

With each room they passed, they opened or kicked in the doors. Some of the rooms were empty, many of them were not.

A quick and brutal pattern was quickly established. The Commander was able to sense if there were people inside. The Titan armor Casaus wore could also detect life-signs. Plasma rifle shots ended whoever was inside quickly as the Infantry made short work of who was inside, while the Commander simply used the Mind Ray to painlessly eliminate those on his side.

Walls didn’t stop psionics.

A dozen guards rushed their position. Their simple ballistic weapons wouldn’t have done much to their armor, but the Commander didn’t waste time. With a practiced telekinetic movement, the steel balls in his hand shot with lightning speed, blasting through the heads of the guards and ricocheting back and killing those who were spared the first round.

With those he couldn’t eliminate in that second, he closed a fist and their hearts exploded. Almost as one, they tumbled to the ground as the steel orbs returned to him, the velocity cleaning them of blood and gore.

They continued inward.

“Commander, this is Mangjol,” the psion updated.

He lifted a hand to his ear. “Go ahead. Is there a development?”

“To an extent,” she said, as Casaus found and eliminated a few stragglers in hiding. “I’ve been scanning the city. I’ve located a number of Zararch Agents. Disguised from what I can tell. Also some Sectoid observers, believe it or not. I took control of a few and put them to sleep. Not sure what we should do with them.”

Well, wasn’t that a boon. It wasn’t a surprise the aliens had a presence here – ADVENT also had for a time, as well as XCOM Intelligence, but they could definitely make use of it here. “Move a few here and to the Parliament,” the Commander ordered. “The rest – set them on the population.
“Understood, it will be done,” a pause. “I’ve been gathering subjects to disperse the eggs. We are on track to city-wide dispersal.”

“Good. Commander out.”

They had reached their target zone. With a hand, the Commander sent a telekinetic blast that blasted the doors off their hinges, exposing the President who stood with a half dozen of the Republican Guard who raised their rifles. With a gesture the Commander sent the steel orbs into their skulls while Casaus shot the remainder.

President Arnaud Beka paled when he saw them. “XCOM…”

“Yes,” the Commander said. “XCOM.”

“Please…” he folded his hands together. “We surrender. Take what you want-“ He was abruptly cut off as the Commander closed a fist, the ghost hand around the throat of the President.

“We have what we want,” the Commander said, as the eyes of the President bulged. “And you brought this on yourself. You signed the death warrants of yourself and everyone here when you sold out your species to the aliens.”

“I…” He choked out.

But the Commander felt his alarm – and panic at that.

But not panic because he was lying. But because the Commander spoke the truth.

“Do not worry,” the Commander took a step towards him, speaking quietly. “Your country will endure, and one day it will be a thriving part of ADVENT. But you, nor your band of traitors, will live to see it.”

A final closed fist, and his neck snapped, killing him.

The Commander and Casaus stood over the corpses. “You didn’t talk to any of the others,” Casaus said slowly. “Why him?”

The Commander thought a moment before answering. “Because it is because of him that we are here. Few here are traitors in the outright sense, they deserve nothing but swift ends. But for men like him, I prefer him to know why he died today, and that in his final moments he knows that not only did he fail, he brought down everyone around him, and doomed those he tried to save.”

“Huh,” Casaus said. “I’ll be sure never to try anything like that on you, Commander.”

A thin smile appeared on the Commander’s face. “Don’t worry. I don’t expect that to ever be an issue with my soldiers.” He patted Casaus’s shoulder as he walked by. “We’ve still got a Prime Minister to find – and after that, a Parliament to finish off. You’ve done a good job so far. Let’s finish this up”

As far as he was concerned, the worst was over. It was always the first kill that was the hardest.

The squad was proving that it was capable.

The Hades Contingency would succeed once more.
Mars Observation Station – Mars Orbit

6/4/2017 – 6:27 A.M.

Clearly, no one had expected them.

Blackbag Squad materialized in the Hangar of the fabled observation station, and wasted no time in opening fire. Geist executed everyone around them with a surprise telepathic attack, while the rest of them opened fire at everything else that moved. Kane specifically targeted the exposed points on multiple starships and vehicles in the Hangar, along with fuel tanks and chemical vats nearby, eliciting more explosions around them.

Their two alien allies, Runi’alion’ borelia and Rava’xarian’ hegenmon also jumped into the fray, with the Borelian shooting the guards at the far end, while Xarian held his massive shield before Sylvia, who was unlocking her box of Shoggoths. A few seconds later and the latch was flipped open, and six of the Shoggoths crawled out.

“Go, my little ones,” Sylvia said as they trilled happily. “Be fruitful and multiply, and kill aliens while you’re at it.” She nodded to Kunio who concentrated, and manifested a portal before them. They knew the Hangar was likely to be vented or otherwise locked down momentarily, and it was important to get the Shoggoths out and into the rest of the station.

One by one the Shoggoths crawled into the portals he created. He had no idea where they probably were in the station, but he suspected that the Collective wouldn’t be able to lock all of them down – and the creatures were very sneaky. He was impressed with Sylvia’s ability to corral them into the portal, but as she’d said – they were smart.

The lights of the Hanger turned a solid blue, and the airlock behind them opened rapidly, and Kunio immediately felt the pull of the vacuum. “Knight! Anchor!” Geist commanded, and their telekin, Evelyn Knight angled a hand downwards, and Kunio felt like bonds manifested around his ankles, keeping him in place.

Geist focused, psionic power around him, and a massive psionic shield manifested where the airlock barrier had been – and split into the metal around it for good measure. The vacuum vanished, though Kunio wondered if it would hold. The Hangar was silent, only the flickering burning of fuel and bodies sounded.

“I doubt that is all,” Geist muttered. “I can maintain the shield. I presume the doors are locked?”

The squad moved towards the main exit, which, unsurprisingly, was locked. “Looks like it,” Knight confirmed. “Want me to weaken it.”

“Yes, please do so,” the massive machine which had also accompanied them said in the familiar voice of JULIAN. The machine was called a SPARK, and it looked rather intimidating – though Kunio wasn’t sure if the intimidation factor came down to the actual specifications, or that JULIAN himself was controlling it. “I would wish to break it down.”

“Aren’t you supposed to prefer hacking things open?” Kunio asked.

“Please, do not stereotype,” JULIAN said in an almost offended manner. “There is nothing quite as satisfying as using physical force to beat something into submission. I find there are advantages to having a physical platform.”
“And it is your digital skills we desire now,” Geist said, still facing the open airlock and maintaining the shield. “Collective systems need to be disrupted. Have you made progress on them?”

“Of course not,” JULIAN gave an electronic snort. “This is a military installation, there is no wi-fi here. Find me a port, and I will begin work.”

“Understood,” Geist said. “Chronicler?”

“Yes?” Their Agent and main teleporter here asked.

“Anything we should be aware of?” Geist demanded. “I’m having issues sensing anything on the station.”

“I sense the same,” the stone- armored Agent answered. “Possibilities include direct telepathic protection – or the station has incorporated Mosrimor orbs. I cannot tell yet, but it is an issue for us. Not insurmountable.”

“Agreed,” Geist glanced to Knight who had a hand put on the door. Kunio had never seen another Nanokine at work before, and while it looked like she was doing nothing, he knew the basic gist of what she was attempting to do. Moving things on a molecular level was not something which could be done quickly.

JULIAN’s SPARK suddenly turned on a heel. “Sensors detect movement. We are not alone.” Without waiting any longer, he raised his laser rifle and opened fire.

The air shimmered. “Operator!” Geist roared as a blue streak out of nowhere slammed into Alion, and the Borelian was just… gone. There was only chunks of armor and meat remaining. The blue streak went back, as Geist erected a second barrier around them. “JULIAN – follow my openings.”

“Understood.”

Through the shield, Kunio saw it. The black- armored Andromedon Special Operator. They’d known there was likely one near the station – perhaps more. There seemed to be an almost watery blue shield around the form, and it didn’t seem remotely perturbed by the shield before it.

“Knight! Hold and focus on the Operator,” Geist commanded, as Kunio heard hissing from above, and realized what oxygen was in the room was being drained. The Nanokine stopped her work, and turned as the Operator began channeling their strange powers, and absorbed the firepower JULIAN shot through the breaks in the barrier Geist allowed.

Kunio felt it before he saw it. In the center of their small squad, something akin to a black hole began manifesting. He tried firing at it, but that didn’t work, and he didn’t expect it to. He didn’t know what it was – only that the one in Beijing had done a similar thing – and that he believed that being pulled into it was not a good idea.

Knight was forced to keep them anchored, even as the Operator was using his skills to bring down more damage. Shears of blue corrosive power surrounded JULIAN’s frame, and to Kunio’s eye it looked like the SPARK was being barraged and ripped apart from every angle, chipping away at his armor and damaging the systems. The nanite repairs were working, but it was using them up fast.

“Releasing the shield!” Geist called, and he dropped the main shield, letting the vacuum return. The Special Operator simply locked in his position, and leapt into the air, locking himself onto the roof and beginning to fire down from the unknown weapon.
“Kunio, get him down from there,” Geist commanded, as the singularity that had pulled them seemed to run out. He kept the spherical barrier around them, even though he kept opening for JULIAN to fire from – for what little good that did.

The Chronicler glowed with blue power of his own, and manifested a psionic storm around the Operator, though the Andromedon simply shot all the way across the room with his odd teleporting capability. “They’re slippery,” the Chronicler muttered. “Minds impenetrable. They are not natural.”

“Knight, status?” Geist demanded.

“It’s easier if you keep him in one place,” the Nanokine grunted. “I have to find him each time. Not easy.”

“Alright, Chronicler, focus on protection,” Geist stated. “Let Knight do her thing. It seems to want to be targeted. Open fire.”

He made the opening larger, so more of them could fire. The barrier around the Operator held, but it likely couldn’t take sustained fire. The weapon it fired seemed gauss-based, though very accurate. Kunio himself took a few shots that hit hard, but were mostly superficial. It took him a few more seconds to lock down where he thought the Andromedon was.

One shot. I can do it.

“Geist! I have a lock!” He called.

A nod from the psion. “JULIAN, can you hit it?”

“Of course I can hit it,” the AI said in an annoyed voice. “The issue is it’s oddly durable shield.”

“Not from here,” Geist said as he glanced to Kunio. “Close range.”

“Close range?”

“Do I need to explain every step?”

“You are aware that Special Operators explode upon death, correct?”

“Of course,” Geist said. “Kunio, I presume you are fast enough?”

No choice. “I know – just make it quick!”

“Knight, is it primed?” Geist demanded.

“Yes – do it now!”

“Kunio!”

“Be ready JULIAN!”

Kunio opened the portal directly underneath the Operator, with the output directly next to JULIAN. The Operator fell through and directly in front of the SPARK. JULIAN lashed out with a fist into the face of the Operator, which would normally just send it flying backwards – but instead shattered completely thanks to Knight manipulating the integrity of the suit.

Kunio didn’t wait to see if it worked, and manifested another portal he moved through the body
and to a random spot somewhere else on the station before immediately closing the portal before any explosion could come through. But he felt the beginnings of it, which told him he’d just barely managed to get it through.

Silence.

Geist dropped the barrier after it seemed they were alone. “Well done Kunio.”

“A far too risky maneuver, however, your reaction time was commendable,” JULIAN said. “While I am in no danger of permanent death, I cannot say the same for you. I am pleased your impending death is a sufficient motivator to limit mistakes.”

Of course a JULIAN compliment sounded backhanded. But he’d take it. “No problem.”

“It is unfortunate Alion perished,” Xarian stated, looking at the remains of his alien comrade. “However, she perished to one of the most dangerous of the Andromedons. A worthy death.”

“Let’s hope there aren’t more of those,” Sylvia muttered. “One was bad enough.”

“Let’s move further in,” Geist said. “Knight, is the door primed?”

“It should be weakened enough,” Knight confirmed, stepping away from the door. “JULIAN? I think we should move to somewhere with oxygen.”

“A moment, then,” Knight moved aside as the massive SPARK stepped forward, and slammed a fist into the door, splintering it into fragile metal shards. All of them marched through, deeper into the station.

“Eyes up and weapons ready,” Geist advised as they marched down the hallway. “I doubt that is the worst we will face here.”

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Near Jakarta Airspace – Indonesia

6/4/2017 – 11:20 A.M.

The Valkyrie tore through the skies, having hit the sonic boom some time ago.

Behind her the small fleet of Firestorms followed.

Sierra wondered if this was how people who previously had been in fights wearing little to no protection felt when putting on armor. The Archangel suit she had once worn seemed so...fragile in comparison to the speed, durability, and power she felt with the Valkyrie now. It was such an upgrade in every possible way it was impossible to describe.

She was faster.

She was stronger.

She was deadlier.

It was beyond the simple feeling of protection, it was also the elevation and extension of herself into the suit which was simply impossible with the Archangel suit. She was the Valkyrie, and she could control every part of it instantly. She had only worn it a few times, yet it felt as natural as her own smaller shell.
It was a bit odd to consider her own body that way.

A shell.

But that was what it felt like.

She finally understood those MECs who said they only really felt normal when in their suits.

Clouds hung over Jakarta, though they were above them now. But they were about to descend into them, and into the warzone that awaited. Or so it would soon become. Jakarta wasn’t a true warzone, even if it was an important staging ground. One day the Collective would anticipate an attack.

Hopefully not this day.

“JAVELIN-1 this is STARCREAM-1, target site is in front of us,” Matthew said over the radio. “Prepare to descend.”

“Roger, STARCREAM-1,” Massilia Powers said. “SKYWALKER Wing standing by to follow.”

“Roger,” Sierra confirmed. “Angling for descent momentarily.”

She angled her MEC, and a few seconds later broke through the cloud cover and their target city was before them. It was immediately apparent where the Collective had invested resources, mostly into various launch points throughout the city. They were flat, large, and the surrounding buildings had been razed to clear a path for them.

“Targets sighted,” she said, automatically marking them with her internal targeting tools and uploading the coordinates to the Firestorm Wings. “Looks to be at least a dozen staging points. Probably more alien targets in the cities.”

“Copy that, sending data to ADVENT Wing Command,” Matthew said.

“JAVELIN-1, we’ve got multiple alien ships converging upon our position, from air and ground,” Powers interjected. Sierra saw that multiple Sectoid Fighters which were parked on the staging points began lifting up and heading towards them. They were still a good distance from the city, and there was time for a response.

It was still remarkably fast.

Sierra looked up and saw no less than two dozen fighters also descending from above. Probably from the Collective Moon base. That’s a lot of fighters. “Will you need support on this?” She asked. “There’s a lot of them.”

“Nah, Sectoid pilots are trash,” Powers assured her. “We’ve got the skies locked down for now. Keep their attention on the ground. STARCREAM, we’re executing Division Angle one.”

“Acknowledged, scatter and snipe them,” behind her, the Firestorm wings broke out of formation to better engage the oncoming Sectoid starships as Sierra angled her Valkyrie towards the ground. She was already in the first path of several of the Fighters, who were opening fire with their plasma weapons.

All of the schematics and weaknesses of the fighters were uploaded into her suit and mind, and there was no reason not to try and exploit it. Green plasma fire sprayed around her as she locked onto a vulnerability. With a thought, she launched one of her ClF3 Warheads towards it, and spun
underneath the Fighter as it hit directly on, and the hungry chemical began devouring it.

Firestorms above her dove, firing their own weapons and forcing the remaining UFOs to face them. She had a clear shot towards the city, with only the defenses themselves to contend with. There would certainly be many, but she had a good idea of what to expect. She was close enough now she could see alien infantry, Mechtoids, and alien AA defenses aiming towards her.

Unfortunately for them, she was faster. They launched missiles at her, which her laser countermeasures shot out of the sky. She returned fire by releasing a gout of napalm against the defense tower which had tried to kill her. She saw the explosions within, as the tools melted and ordinance exploded.

Hovering in the air, she turned her massive flamethrower towards the ground. Streams of fire hundreds of feet long streamed from the nozzle, cooking dozens of Collective soldiers alive as she moved it back and forth on the staging point. It truly was every capability of the Archangel, amped up tenfold.

Seeing the command center – or what she assumed the command center was – she marked it with her suit, and launched a plasma warhead into it. It exploded with a satisfying boom, and the building crumbled to the ground. Overhead the familiar sounds of Archangels rolled over.

“Didn’t bother saving some for us?” Ted demanded, circling her.

Sierra smiled. Things seemed normal already.

“Hold that thought,” she said as she looked to the next marked target on her HUD. “We’ve got a lot more work to do.”

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Zar’Chon’s Chambers, Mars Observation Station – Mars Orbit

6/4/2017 – 6:51 A.M.

It was an interesting feeling, sitting and watching a battle in his own station, while petting a cat which purred in his arms. He felt no fear or concern yet – not really. XCOM had barely managed to penetrate past the Hangar, and had already suffered a loss. The conflict had been highly informative.

Audio wasn’t perfectly captured, but enough dialogue had been captured to reveal some illuminating things. An Agent of T’Leth – the Chronicler specifically, two aliens – a Ravager of all things, and a now-dead Borelian, a psion with a micro-kinetic affinity, and a platform housing an AI.

How fascinating.

The teleporter had moved the Special Operator to a different section of the station – fortunately only a storage area, but one which stored weapons. The damage was…extensive in that part of the station, but manageable. It was validating to see that even one Special Operator was a strong match against a full XCOM squad.

The ADVENT Priests were likely to have a harder time of it in the next few months.

The CODEX was tracking all of their movements, and directing personnel as appropriate. XCOM’s cute trick of planting Shoggoths throughout the station was clever, but SPECTREs were being
dispatched to where each one was presumed to be. Unfortunately, it would likely be some time before they were exterminated.

“They have moved into the station proper,” he said, standing and setting the cat down. The hologram of the Overmind stared back at him. Ravarian was not fully comfortable around the enigmatic Elder; there was something fundamentally off about his power in a way it wasn’t with Quisilia.

The Overmind wore a deep orange robe, with his arms within and body shrouded. Two glowing orbs of fire looked out from the deep hood. The most disconcerting fact was that he did not speak – not physically. Every sentence he uttered appeared in his mind – which was something Quisilia did all the time.

But the Overmind was nowhere close to the system. He didn’t know where the Overmind was currently, but it was hundreds of systems away at minimum. And yet he was capable of finding his mind, and communicating directly to it.

He didn’t know why he really gave a verbal update, as the Overmind was doubtlessly reading his thoughts. Habit, presumably.

*Activate the Mosrimor Orbs.*

Ravarian nodded. “Already done when we noticed the Agent.”

*Good.*

“Should I send the SPECTREs to them?” Ravarian glanced to the video feed. “I would prefer they not penetrate too deeply into the station.”

*Unnecessary. I will handle XCOM. It is time they understand where they trespass.*

“The machine may pose complications,” Ravarian pointed out.

*One machine can be handled. I would prefer it is captured intact.*

“Very well,” Ravarian nodded. “I will let you handle it then. The station defenses will continue to stand by.”

He turned back to the feed, as the hologram behind him vanished.

He was very interested to see how the Overmind would handle this intrepid XCOM squad.

It promised to be informative.

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*Mars Observation Station – Mars Orbit*

6/4/2017 – 7:07 A.M.

The Collective was not making it easy for them. In each hallway, in each room they entered, there was obstruction every step of the way. From all the doors sealed, forcing Knight to weaken and break them, or he or the Chronicler to move everyone through. The oxygen was being pre-emptively vented out of each room and hallway.

They appeared to have underestimated how controlled the security systems were.
Oxygen was actually a concern, since they were clearly being monitored and predicted.

More to the point, Kunio felt something was wrong. All of them did to some extent.

“There should be something else,” Geist muttered as they cleared the small room. “They’re shuffling everyone around. We should have encountered more personnel by now.”

“Workstations have been disconnected from their network,” JULIAN stated, retracting his port tool and standing to his full height. “They are leaving no vulnerabilities. Powering on is useless when the connection has been cut. Clever. They are wise to not allow me a chance to break their system.”

“It’s clear that they are using Mosrimor’s own orbs,” the Chronicler said, pacing the room. “I can counteract the worst, and allow us to teleport away. But what I can do is limited beyond that. It is difficult enough holding back the passive influence of a Sovereign.”

Sylvia looked up, at an invisible camera – or a visible one, since there were certainly cameras throughout the station. “I feel like we’re being led into a trap.”

“The mission may be pointless,” Kunio wondered. “We can’t extract anything useful if they disconnected from the network. The Zar’Chon must be gone at this point.”

“Capturing or killing the Zar’Chon was a secondary objective,” Geist said neutrally. “We expected this as a possibility. As for data extraction, we are still moving towards the main datacenter. If they are willing to sever the connection, then it will disrupt their data flows Collective-wide here. Stations on Earth will experience it, and they do not want that. If we force that, it will be acceptable. Destroying them is also advised.”

At that, Kane fired, permanently taking the workstations offline.

Then it hit him all at once.

It was like a massive pressure had been placed upon his mind; a weight that was beyond anything he had ever experienced before. It was a migraine fare more intense than anything he had ever felt before, a splitting pain that had only one association he could think of.

Telepathy.

He’d never felt a telepathic attack like this though.

The soldiers around him were not faring any better. Sylvia and Xarian had frozen completely, a telltale sign that the Manchurian Restraints had kicked in and were locking their bodies down. The Chronicler gave a shout and waved his hand, and both of them disappeared into a portal, probably back to Earth.

Kunio immediately knew why.

They all knew too much. Whatever was attacking them couldn’t learn what they knew.

All it seemed to make Kane was angry, but that didn’t stop the Chronicler from moving him back too, leaving only the psions. The Chronicler put a hand to his head, as the pressure and attack intensified. There was an alien mind now; one which touched the outskirts of his mind.

Was that just the prelude?
There were only a small number of Ethereals – or psions for that matter – which had this kind of power. The Imperator – and Overmind.

The mind that extended itself was old.

It felt old.

Kunio blinked through the pain, putting everything he had into protecting his mind from the Ethereal pushing against him. His vision blurred, and when it cleared there stood the orange-robed Ethereal, doing little but appraising them. It was probably an illusion, but Kunio raised his rifle regardless and fired.

The bolts went right through the figure.

Futile. Much like your species.

He had heard the voice of the Overmind described as haunting and almost scratchy. It was the most alien voice he had heard from an alien; it was not welcoming or pleasant, it was the voice of something which did not know what it should sound like; the voice of something which had no mouth to speak.

The pressure intensified, forcing him to place a hand on his helmet to try and alleviate the pressure. Neither the Chronicler or Geist were faring much better, and the latter had power rippling around him. Knight was leaning against the wall, breathing heavily.

Pointless. Your vaunted technology is useless. Your nanoweapons. Your machines. You are reduced to shells through which I can use as I wish. And you believe that we fear you.

The voice was not mocking, just as neutral as stating a fact.

What threat do you pose to us?

“Enough that you had to intervene personally,” the Chronicler growled, standing up and blue power enshrining him. “You believe you can challenge a Sovereign and prevail?”

The pressure on his head decreased slightly. The Overmind illusion simply looked to the Chronicler, now fully merged with T’Leth.

Your kind prides itself upon being the dominant, Sovereign. Yet you struggle against me. Endemic of your failings. You are little more than a galactic pest, fleeing and hiding. You are an annoyance to your peers, a forever raging beast incapable of victory or long-term strategy.

The Overmind looked to Geist. Know this XCOM, the time will come when you shall fail, and when it happens, T’Leth will abandon you. He is a Sovereign, and has no interest in preserving anything but himself. As all Sovereigns do.

T’Leth laughed through the Chronicler. “You know nothing of me, Overmind. You and the Imperator fear me, it is why you have not invaded Earth yourselves.”

We shall not be goaded into action. We fear no Sovereign, puppet. We have done what no species has before – utilized two Sovereigns to carry out our agenda and will. Why should we fear the dubious claims of another?

“You are a fool,” the Chronicler faced the illusionary Overmind. “The Bringer uses you to his own ends. Mosrimor will abandon you when you crumble.”
Then we shall not crumble, Sovereign. Flee. You know you cannot stand against my power – not without sacrificing protecting your allies. You have no power here, flee little puppet. Take your pawns with you.

The pressure against his mind redoubled, and he gripped his helmet tighter, trying to alleviate the pressure. It felt like he was getting shot repeatedly in the head. He feared he was nearly ready to pass out.

“Geist,” Knight breathed, collapsing to the ground. “I don’t know if I can keep him out…” she let out a pained moan. Geist was standing stoically, tense and power rippling around him.

Make your choice, puppet. I know there are things you fear me learning. I will break their minds if they remain. A day, a week, or a month, it matters little to me. Time has no meaning to the immortal. I am the Overmind of the Ethereal Collective, I faced the hordes of the Synthesized. I stood before the combined power of the Hive Commanders.

The orange eyes seemed to glow brighter. You are only a puppet.

“Do not expect the future to be so forgiving, Overmind,” the Chronicler growled. “Do not think I don’t know how you are empowered now.”

I grow tired of this, puppet.

Kunio screamed and could swear he felt his skull crack. He heard something seem to break; klaxons and ringing in his ears as he hung onto his mind by only the barest of threads. Knight joined him in their shared torture. Make it stop make it stop make it stop make it stop.

He saw the Overmind wink in and out of existence, vision become blurry and clear, and everything in the room come into various shades of focus and fluidity. The last thing he saw was the Chronicler turn – was it to him? – and wave a hand and the world blurred around him and he found himself back in XCOM somewhere.

He didn’t pay close attention to where.

Kunio just collapsed to the floor, and passed out.

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Office of the Chancellor, ADVENT HQ – Switzerland

6/6/2017 – 12:12 P.M.

Saudia sat at the rounded table which had been set up in her office as her foreign guests sat opposite or to the sides of her. To say she was in a good mood would be…slightly inaccurate. But was she in a satisfied mood? That was fair to say. A stark message was being sent across the world because of her actions.

Today would be another message.

“Thank you all for agreeing to speak today,” she said, lacing her fingers together as she looked to each of them. Hans Ohlin, Kaisa Saarela, and Kjell Treschow, the Prime Ministers of Sweden, Finland, and Norway respectively appraised her in response. All of them bore stern expressions, and it was no secret that they did not particularly like her.

She’d been fully briefed on each of them long before they had set foot on ADVENT soil.
ADVENT Intelligence had put together profiles on them since the beginning, and as the war had gone on, only added more and more to them.

The most ‘reasonable’ of the three was Kjell, and only because he was heavily influenced by the military. If there was anyone who could be swayed to join ADVENT, it would be him. He didn’t approve of many actions ADVENT had taken, but in press conferences he had shown an understanding that the writing was on the wall, and ADVENT was inevitable.

He was the weak link here.

Hans and Kaisa were far more problematic. They were fully convinced that ADVENT was an enemy and were staunchly opposed to joining in any capacity. Even as their respective militaries pushed for something, each of them were firmly opposed to ADVENT. They had in fact internally designated ADVENT as the largest national security threat after Canada had been annexed.

Saudia found it highly ironic considering soldiers of both nations were serving in XCOM specifically. How short-sighted and selfish, and both of them went out of their way to criticize ADVENT domestic policy, and had gone so far as to declare their nations as ‘the last bastion of democracy’.

All very amusing. She was only half-surprised they’d agreed to come at all.

The impending economic and civil collapse had doubtless forced their hands.

And people believed sanctions didn’t work.

She did not consider herself overly vindictive, she was perfectly willing to work with all of these leaders, but it was a two-way street. If they continued to oppose her, she would be lying if she wasn’t going to take some satisfaction as their pride destroyed them. “Of course,” Kjell said. “It is past time we met in person.”

“Indeed,” Kaisa appraised her stone-faced. “You have much to answer for.”

So it was going to be like that.

Very well.

“As do you,” Saudia nodded. “Explanations are owed all around. You will forgive me for being occupied at times. There is a global war I am managing at the moment; the smaller issues I have been forced to delegate to the ADVENT Diplomatic Service. I hope there is no offense taken at that.”

“Your cultured words aren’t going to work on us,” Kaisa spat. “ADVENT has been waging a systematic campaign of destruction against our nations. And I am not naïve enough to believe it was authorized by anyone other than yourself, Chancellor.”

Saudia raised an eyebrow. “Destruction is a strong word, Prime Minister. I have seen destruction. I toured New York yesterday. I’ve visited the shelled ruins of bases and forts that came under alien bombardment. Can you please elaborate on the destruction ADVENT has wrought on your nations?” She looked to Kjell. “Prime Minister Treschow, has there been an invasion of Norway that has happened without my knowledge? If so, I promise that those responsible will be-”

“Enough, Chancellor,” Hans interrupted flatly, eyes staring hatefully at her. “You know exactly what we mean. The sanctions ADVENT imposed. You cut us off from the outside world.”
She allowed a smile. “Ah, that. Unfortunate, but necessary. Considering that ADVENT is working to protect the entirety of Humanity, we must consolidate our resources, and nations who refuse to participate in the protection of our species must take second priority.” She grew more serious. “I will be blunt with each of you – I do not respect cowards. Every hour there are hundreds of men and women who are dying to ensure we are not living under alien occupation. And you have ensured your nations sit on the sidelines and remain neutral.”

“Chancellor, with all due respect, this is not as simple as you make it out,” Kjell cleared his throat. “ADVENT has – multiple times – presented us with an ultimatum – join us or be cut off. I have been open to working militarily with ADVENT, but that is not good enough. We must join ADVENT or not at all.”

“In essence, what you want is us to protect you, arm you, and not be subject to the regulations and laws of ADVENT,” Saudia nodded. “I’m aware of this. It would be one thing if your military was useful, or had a practical use. The militias of each of your nations would be annihilated against the Collective, and are useless. To make your militaries worth anything, we would need to arm and equip you. You offer us little except manpower, and retain the trappings and norms of the old world. That is not acceptable.”

“Forgive us for not wanting to join your new world order,” Kaisa narrowed her eyes. “I will say what you are, Chancellor, you are an empire. ADVENT is an empire. You have no interest in protecting Humanity. That is simply a means to an end, you and your imperialist allies only care about the conquest of the rest of the world – willingly or otherwise.” She looked around the table. “We all saw it in the Middle East. We saw it in Canada. ADVENT only needs an excuse to conquer. Consent doesn’t matter.”

Saudia took a breath and rolled up her sleeve to the elbow where the prosthetic ended. “I am unsure where you got your assumptions,” she said in a low voice. “But there are few things I take offense to. Stating that I am in this for my own personal ambition, that I do not care about the war which threatens us, is insulting. I have stood against an Ethereal, and the scars on my neck prove it. I was nearly killed in Beijing as the Bringer cult descended upon the city. I have sacrificed in this war. Do not dare suggest otherwise. You have sacrificed nothing. You simply sit and complain, in your place of privilege. You have the luxury of critique and complaining without fear of death, assassination, and failure.”

Saudia leaned back. “Your reactionary and juvenile argument does you no credit, and displays your ignorance. I do not know if you know anything about ADVENT, or have elected to ignore it. If you knew even the most basic facts, you would know our rules for annexation and invasion. You would know of the Oversight Division. To call us an empire is to show the limits of your worldview; of simple black and white.”

Kaisa flushed red, though Hans interjected. “That does not change the fact that your intelligence agencies have free reign to spy on citizens, people are not even given lawyers, and your prison system is utterly inhumane and abhorrent.”

Saudia raised an eyebrow. “And?”

“And we are better than that,” Hans insisted. “You and the rest of ADVENT may not care, but we have some standards for how we view and treat others. You see citizens as commodities and tools. You don’t see those you believe as enemies or criminals as even Human. Your only justification is a vague belief in ‘the greater good’. We do not agree on a fundamental level, which you either do not understand, or do not want to.”

“I certainly understand, Prime Minister,” Saudia answered coolly. “And I do not dispute anything
you say. However, I feel far more confident in defending myself with data and logic than the moralistic foundations of your own arguments. I accept we disagree, and I firmly believe that you are simply wrong.” She cocked her head. “ADVENT, if you have not noticed, is doing as well as can be expected. We are aggressively eliminating homelessness. We are dropping crime significantly. We have provided healthcare, education, and shelter to all. We have done something no government has done in the history of our species. You may not agree with our philosophy, Prime Minister, but it is working.”

She leaned forward. “I have resolved to bring all of Humanity into the modern age, and I will do it even if I have to drag them kicking and screaming.”

“Enough, this is pointless,” Kjell sighed, lifting a hand. “We are here to discuss issues. Philosophy can be debated later, there are more practical problems and differences to resolve.”

“I agree,” Kjell being a voice of reason again. “I do not want to continue the sanctions. So what I wish to know is what it will take for you to join ADVENT. I do not particularly care for any of you, but that will not prevent me from making a deal which services Humanity and the war effort.”

“Remove the sanctions, first and foremost,” Kaisa immediately demanded. “And we will work with you. I, nor any in Finland, will join ADVENT. I will also insist that there is a binding agreement between us and ADVENT stating that there will be no infringement on our sovereign nation, and the agreement we come to is fully honored.”

Well, she was certainly ambitious. “And in return, what do we get?” Saudia asked.

“Proving ADVENT is not heartless and willing to drive a nation to collapse to satisfy their petty, childish tantrum that not everyone bows down to your empire?” She sneered, all veneer of composure gone. Not fully surprising, her mental state had worsened as riots were starting, and she was reluctant to tighten military control.

She was under a lot of stress.

Saudia was trying not to take it personally.

“Noted,” was all Saudia said in a calm voice. “Though I doubt our diplomats will be inclined to accept.”

“Mine are the same,” Hans said. “However…I will be willing to bring it to a vote. On the matter of ADVENT statehood. If ADVENT shows it is willing to negotiate, it may sway them. We are willing to allow diplomats to come and make their case before the legislature.”

“You give a hollow promise,” Saudia said bluntly. “Do you believe I am ignorant? A vast majority of your legislature has condemned ADVENT – many in the past month – and have stated their intentions to prevent your ‘assimilation into ADVENT’ as they call it. Clever, but I listen to what my Intelligence agency tells me.”

His face was stony. “That is the best I can do. It would be democratic malpractice to unilaterally bring a nation into ADVENT without even so much as a vote.”

“Then have one,” Saudia said. “The United Kingdom agreed to one, and they respected the will of the people. I am not unreasonable, if you wish to put it to a vote, then by all means do so. I will ensure that it is accepted, and the sanctions are lifted.”

“And then interfere in it!” Kaisa interjected. “We know that is what you will do.”
“Of course we will,” Saudia snorted. “We have an invested interest in the outcome. But I can assure you that it will be fully within the confines of the law. If more people are receptive to our sponsored messaging, is that not a problem with the opposition? Do you insult the intelligence of your voters so much that you believe they will vote based on incomplete information and not do their proper research for such an important decision?”

Kaisa gaped. Saudia smiled.

Go on, say it. I know you want to.

“A vote is out of the question,” Hans disputed with a shake of his head. “Not with the state of the nation. We are willing to bring it to a legislative vote and consider a vote if the legislature votes against ADVENT statehood. But not for months.”

Not expected from either of them. Unfortunate, but it was past time something was done. Saudia clicked a button on the table, and focused on Kjell. “And what of you, Prime Minister?”

Kjell ran a hand through his hair. “We disagree fundamentally on many issues, Chancellor. However, we are reaching a point where the current posture is unfeasible. The aliens are the largest threat to all of us, and we are not prepared. Our nation is not prepared. I agree with my colleague that I cannot unilaterally bring our nation into ADVENT, but I see no choice here.”

He looked to his colleagues. “ADVENT has done us a service, even if it has just been to distract the aliens. They have prevented the war from reaching us, but that will not last forever.”

“They’ve waged economic warfare on us instead!” Kaisa insisted. “Is that somehow better?”

“Oh of course they did,” Kjell snorted. “They don’t think like we do. It’s a matter of pragmatism for them. I know very well why they did it, and by their logic, it makes sense. I would never condone it, but I suppose it has worked, and beyond that, we cannot continue to sit on the sides doing nothing.”

He looked at Saudia. “Fine. Show me ADVENT is reasonable. Remove the sanctions – actively provide us with enough food, medicine, and supplies to make up for your months of starvation, and the moment that is signed, I will call for a referendum on ADVENT statehood and simultaneously introduce legislation asking the same thing. I cannot guarantee success for you in either, but I will give ADVENT a fair case to make to my citizens.”

At last, a reasonable person. Saudia nodded. “We can accommodate that. It will be done within the day, and approved by the time you return to Norway.”

“Kjell, ADVENT isn’t going to play fair,” Hans warned. “You’ve effectively given them control of your country.”

The Prime Minister sighed. “The world is changing. I have to do what is best for my citizens. If they choose to join ADVENT, then I have to respect that. Resisting change is failing, and the aliens will come. I will not have my nation become an alien stronghold because I clung to something that is dying.”

“Very well,” Hans looked to Saudia, not bothering to hide his disgust. “We have made our own demands clear, take them or leave them.”

“Understood,” Saudia responded. The door to the room suddenly opened, and an aide came up to her, phone in hand. “Excuse me for a second,” the aide handed her the phone.
A single sentence sounded. “It’s in motion. Conference is on now for both. Glad the Norwegian did the right thing.”

A click as he hung up.

“Are we done, Chancellor?” Hans asked.

She smiled. “Almost, I’ve received an update I think all of you should see.”

She stood and walked over to the hanging television, and it was right on a news station, where the breaking news banner displayed the latest development in all its glory.

**SWEDISH MILITARY ASSUMES CONTROL OF LEGISLATURE/FINNISH MILITARY HAS DECLARED A STATE OF EMERGENCY//LEGISLATORS OF BOTH NATIONS UNDER HOUSE ARREST//LAW ENFORCEMENT RUMORED TO BE SUPPORTING MILITARY ACTION**

Kaisa paled. Hans grew red and stood, almost shaking in rage. Kjell just looked to her, a clear question in his eyes.

Saudia just maintained her smile.

“The Supreme Commander of the Swedish Military is preparing to make a statement,” the anchor was saying. “We’re going live to that now.”

Supreme Commander Astrad Dahlman stood in front of a podium, all of the ranking officers of the Swedish military behind or beside him. His face was somber, but his voice firm as he spoke in words which were immediately translated. “[Citizens of Sweden, it is with a heavy heart that the actions we have taken today have been necessary, but for the past months we have seen our country descend further into chaos, with an inefficient legislature who lacks a clear understanding of the current difficulties, both within and beyond the country.]”

[We have been told that the greatest threat to our nation is not the aliens who threaten life and freedom for all Humans, but ADVENT, who has devoted themselves to fighting this extraterrestrial menace. We have attempted many times to emphasize the threat of the Ethereal Collective, to little or no avail. We cannot afford to wait any longer. When the aliens come to Sweden, we must be prepared to face and defend them. Our leaders have failed us, but we will not fail you, and we are immediately opening negotiations with ADVENT for aid relief and arms to defend our nation.]”

[We request that the Prime Minister and all current sitting members of the administration formally resign today, and help ease this transition process.]

Saudia noticed Hans storming over to her, and with a blur of his hand, slapped her across the cheek, utterly quivering with rage and fists clenched, even as he realized what he had done. Kaisa just sat in her chair, still as a statue and with a look of pure disbelief on her face.

Saudia rubbed her cheek. “I’ll allow that one, former Prime Minister,” she said quietly. “But I would advise you not to do that again.”

“You…you…” words failed him.

“I did nothing,” she told him. “But it is certainly heartening to see that some in your country have a firmer grasp of the big picture than the supposed leaders of a nation.” She softened her voice. “But I wouldn’t worry. You’ll see in the future that what you fear from ADVENT isn’t true. ADVENT will bring your nation prosperity, and even if it takes you years to see it, you will know it was the right thing to do.”
She had her gaze sweep to the other two. “Now if you will excuse me, it appears I have several nations to speak to – and likely a couple to welcome into ADVENT. Prime Minister Kjell, I look forward to working with you in the coming weeks.”

He just nodded, still as stunned as the rest of them, likely thinking of how close he might have just come to a military coup.

Saudia left the current and former heads of state in the room to themselves. They could stay there as long as they wanted, her work was done.

And it was certainly fine work, if she did say so herself.

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Palace Exterior, SAS Command – Nigeria

6/4/2017 – 9:12 A.M.

This was definitely one of the largest press conferences Betos had ever done. Every single permitted outlet was here, and there would doubtless be dozens more across the Internet and ADVENT. There was no chance that ADVENT would not be watching them, and just waiting to see what her reaction was.

Mox and her other advisors stood beside or behind her, with a line of SAS Soldiers before and behind, and at various checkpoints on the premises. She didn’t know what there was to fear yet, but it was almost certain that ADVENT would try and do something. Prior to the expulsion, Macula and the Zararch had done sweeps removing or eliminating XCOM and ADVENT Intelligence agents and sources, which she’d continued with the fledgling SAS Intelligence, though she knew it might not have been as effective.

There were unlikely to be a sudden influx of agents, at least not dangerous ones. Or enough that her people couldn’t catch them. But it only took one, and by the end of today they’d have Collective support once more.

Time to start.

“ADVENT has launched a nuclear strike against Lagos,” she began somberly. “We are still assessing the damage, but the casualties are already in the tens of thousands. We expect the numbers to rise as we begin cataloging the dead.”

Saudia liked showing images in her conferences to make a point. Betos only felt it appropriate to emulate. Let the ADVENT networks censor her and see how many took note. A screen nearby showed the collected images. “Lagos was not a military target,” she said as the many journalists and reporters fixated on the slideshow. “It was a thriving city, growing only more prosperous. Millions of people lived there. Families, women, children. Civilians.”

She took a long sigh. “There isn’t much that can be said. ADVENT has crossed a line that they have not before, which is surprising even to admit. Through this action they prove that their rhetoric is a lie. They are willing to target and kill anyone who they identify as an enemy, be they soldier or civilian. They do not make the distinction, and never have.”

Betos looked around the area. “I’ve prided myself and the SAS as being willing to hold even our allies to account. When Isomnum terrorized Beijing I supported the Collective in condemning them. When they indiscriminately bombarded ADVENT, and the Harbinger Trask attacked civilian cities, I took action. None of this mattered to ADVENT. I and the SAS have aligned with the
Ethereal Collective, and ADVENT does not consider us Human. We are and will remain traitors to them forever. Perhaps, in my naivety, I believed ADVENT could understand context; perhaps they could respect our choice.”

She bowed her head. “If this is not clear evidence that dissent and wrongthink is not tolerated in ADVENT, I do not believe anything will. They are not interested in coexistence, or peace, or tolerance. They only care about submission and control. Those who stand against them will be beaten into submission or exterminated.” She raised her head back up.

“It is time the world decides to take a stand. ADVENT has made their intentions clear. We stand opposed to ADVENT, and we will no longer be idle in bringing them to defeat,” she paused. “The Collective remains our ally, and has offered to provide assistance to the devastated city, which I have accepted. I will emphasize that I and the SAS will continue to hold our ally to account, but make no mistake – the Ethereal Collective is our ally, and we will need them to stand strong against the tyranny of ADVENT.”

There was an actual smattering of applause at that. The people here were torn between shell-shocked and furious. Some had tears in their eyes, and it wasn’t out of the question that some had people living in Lagos. “The Chancellor has-“

A gunshot sounded.

Betos instinctively ducked behind the podium and the crowd burst into pandemonium, with people dropping to the ground and fleeing. She pulled out her pistol and cursed the fact she wasn’t wearing armor. Her guard marched up and completely surrounded her. One gave her a bullet-proof helmet which she put on.

A few more shots rang out, and Betos saw the lone gunman from far back, who was now standing before Macula, who had emerged and had frozen him with a hand. Soldiers rushed the man, forcing him to the ground and cuffing him. Macula vanished, probably searching for any more assassins.

“Marshal…” one of the guards said quietly, and directed her to the ground near the podium.

Her heart and blood froze when she saw him.

No, no…

Mox lay sprawled on the ground, dead and in a puddle of bright red blood by his head. The bullet had been a direct hit into his temple, and there was not much left. He’d probably died instantly, but that was no comfort to her right now. All she could think of now was her movements before the shot.

The assassin had to have been aiming for her, and he’d missed.

And hit Mox instead.

She fell to her knees and placed one hand on one of the now-still hands, gripping it. They’d been together for so long, both of them starting on this journey since the beginning. She had imagined that whatever would happen to one, would happen to both. He’d been with her every step of this difficult, painful, and harsh journey.

It would be one thing if he died in battle, against an enemy. But…not like this. Not by a cowardly assassin. Not by accident. Not because of her.
She closed her eyes, and the tears welled up underneath.

She had to go on.

That was what he would want.

But for this, and all of their atrocities, ADVENT would pay dearly.

***

Medical Bay, Mars Collective Base – Mars

6/4/2017 – 8:12 P.M.

“What’s wrong?”

Hallian didn’t hear her at first. He was too focused on the tablet in his hand, reading the projected words and video playing. The last hours had been a whirlwind, from the attack against the Observation Station, to attacks all around the world, to now…this. He was even hearing rumors that a Sectoid shipyard had been attacked of all things.

What was happening?

It shouldn’t be happening like this. It shouldn’t be happening at all.

“Hey,” a hand rested on his shoulder, the tactile touch letting him look up at Yang’s concerned face. He didn’t know how he looked right now. Probably terrible. “What’s wrong.”

He shook his head. “What isn’t wrong seems to be the question.”

“Considering the past day, I don’t disagree,” Yang sat down beside him. “But I can feel when something is wrong. For you personally.”

“I checked news on Vitakar,” Hallian said. “I usually do. I saw this.” He handed the tablet to her. It might take her a few minutes to go through everything, so he leaned back and closed his eyes as she scrolled, read, and watched everything which had come out of the planet in the past day.

Just…why?

If there was any race who absolutely did not deserve to be targeted and killed, it was the Dath’Haram. Yes, they were often derided as pacifists and idealists, but they were all used to it at this point, and even took it as a point of pride. But if anything was known about their people, it was that they were open, friendly, and peaceful.

It…didn’t make sense.

The Nulorian had always hated them, and he didn’t know why. Just because they were peaceful citizens? Because they supported the Elders? Because the Nulorian wanted to wipe the Dath’Haram out of some horrific genocidal justification? This level of senseless hatred was anathema to everything any normal sapient being should believe.

Nulorian were terrorists, or so they were said, but he’d believed that some of them had reasons that could be understood. The Zararch could certainly be overzealous, but even if he could never condone terrorism, he could understand how they reached that point. But this was just too far of a line.
Had the Nulorian done anything worse than this?

He heard Yang set the tablet down. “I’m sorry.”

“I just wonder…why?” He said. “What did we do to them?”


“And that is reason to kill us?” He demanded.

“To them, simply living is worse than nothing,” she said quietly. “We’ve had our own share of radicals and terrorists in the world. Their worldview becomes so…warped that they become something they’re supposedly fighting against. The Nulorian seem to have reached this point.”

She sighed. “I’m not educated on your world. Or people, not truly. I don’t know what this means beyond the obvious, but I know that the deaths of thousands is wrong.”

“More will die in the fires,” Hallian shook his head. “Burning the forest is…difficult to describe to an alien. Or even a non-Dath’Haram. I grew up in that forest, it is teeming with unique life not seen anywhere else in the galaxy. We’ve melded with the forest, a true symbiotic relationship. It takes care of us and we do the same to it. To burn it – to attack it – is an attack on my whole people.”

He rarely felt true anger. But he did feel it now.

“What will your people do?” She asked.

“What little we can,” Hallian shrugged. “I can guess. We will rebuild. We will repair. But…so many have died. Our leaders were targeted. Many perished. I don’t think we can forgive or forget…not this time.”

“You will fight?”

“I don’t know,” he was silent a few seconds. “That is my instinct. That is what many I think will feel. We keep being targeted. Our schools, our leaders, our children, even the Crypt was attacked. The Nulorian keep coming after us, even when we have done nothing to them.” He looked at Yang helplessly. “How long can we go before we do something? We don’t have enough Bladedancers to protect us, clearly. We abhor war, but is our pacifism any better?”

Yang looked at her hands. “You are not asking the right person for that. I’m not a pacifist. Never have been. Never made sense in this world. Or this galaxy, I guess.”

“Unfortunately,” he said in a heavy voice. “I think you may be right.”

“What are you?” Yang asked.

“I don’t know right now,” he admitted. “I joined to save lives, to lessen the suffering of this war, even by a miniscule amount. I said I will never kill. Out of values I believed in; ones that were taught and I saw every day.” He let out a short bitter laugh. “And I wonder if those ever mattered. It doesn’t matter if we believe in something better if we can’t stop ourselves from getting killed by people who laugh at our beliefs.”

Yang just nodded. “I think a lot of people are reevaluating what they believe as this war keeps going on.”

“Including you?”
“Yeah,” she looked to him; eyes distant. “All I wanted was revenge and now that’s…nothing now.” She looked away, shrugging. “I don’t even hate ADVENT. Or XCOM. I hate the Imperator more than them for what he’s allowed and continues to allow.”

Hallian stiffened as she said that, and Yang shook her head. “No one is listening here. And I’m tired of lying. This whole war…what we’re up against…” her legs moved idly on the seat. “I don’t know anymore.”

He wasn’t sure what to really think of how open the Battlemaster’s Harbinger was being. They were certainly friends now – a surprise, but not necessarily a welcome one – and it was clear she was not as happy or content as he would expect. He wasn’t fully sure how best to read Humans beyond the obvious, but she wasn’t a typical one.

She’s away from her people, surrounded by aliens, and caught up in something she doesn’t even believe in. Of course she’s not typical.

“Then…” he wondered how to choose his words. “What are you fighting for now, if not victory?”

She propped her chin under a fist, and gave it some thought for a few seconds. Her eyes stared ahead sightlessly, the light of the room shining off her darkened skin with an almost shimmering coloration to it. The words that came were halting, but with conviction behind them.

Words she meant.

“Change,” she looked at him. “And change will come. One way or another.”

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To be continued in Chapter 63

Sever the Head

Chapter End Notes

Well, there’s been a little while since the last update, and quite a few things that are worth highlighting since that point that I’m not sure I’ve mentioned before. If you haven’t, be sure to check out the two spin-off stories for this series that I and the Editing Team have gone over, which are OfficialWeedTester’s XCOM: New Blood, which follows Dawn Conley and her journey joining XCOM, and Areleh’s XCOM: Pantheon Rising, which follows the origins, foundation, and exploits of the Pantheon.

Second, you have probably noticed that there has been some actual cover art for the trilogy (Yes, not just Advent Directive), which was made by HailtotheKing who has been making emblems and seals for the series. There’s also been artwork done of various characters from artists I’ve commissioned.

Cover Art: https://imgur.com/a/7WzAd07
Seals and Emblems: https://imgur.com/a/FEetyZ4
ADVENT Legions: https://imgur.com/a/X43XiuO
Third, Aberron is the newest member to join the Editing Team, and I’m very much looking forward to his impact on this project going forward.

Thanks for reading, as always. There is likely to be interesting stuff that will be happening in the future as well. When anything does, I’ll be sure to make a note here.

A final thing to say is that the COVID-19 pandemic is continuing to spread pretty fast across the US, and the rest of the world for that matter. Please be sure to take precautions, wash your hands, don’t go to work if sick, and stay in for a few days to limit the spread. I am aware that this isn’t feasible for everyone, but please do what you can to take care of yourself, and the others around you.
Sever the Head

Shooting Range, Abuja – Nigeria

6/5/2017 – 8:00 A.M.

The rifle felt good in her hands. Familiar. Simple.

Cathartic.

She’d never been the greatest marksman, either in Israel or later in ADVENT. The shooting, the killing; that had never been her primary motivation for military service. Patriotism, leadership, brotherhood; all of that was more important and consequential than shooting guns. Some people memorized gun types, and could list off the minute details of each, and had the perfect one for each situation. No shortage of those people.

Not her though.

She hadn’t done it regularly for weeks now. Some evenings she and Mox had gone out, had some light banter and a shooting competition, before discussing what had to be done next. Never serious, and she’d privately wondered if she’d ever truly be on a battlefield again. She was head of a multi-state power bloc now.

Those kinds of people didn’t go into battle.

How quickly things could change.

She couldn’t decide why she was going to do this. On paper it was simple. It was to send a message of resilience, the leader of the SAS on the front lines to defend their nations. It was to contrast Saudia who would never risk herself like this. Saudia was not a soldier, and had probably never contemplated it.

But on a deeper, personal level, this was something she needed.

Perhaps she privately wanted it to end.

But not before she made them hurt.

She needed to make ADVENT somewhere, somehow, feel the persistent pain she felt now. It was more than just Mox being assassinated. That had been the catalyst for her pain she felt now, but it had exposed just how…fragile everything was.

She’d sunk every waking moment since deciding to take a stand against ADVENT, trying to do something to make it better. To show there was an alternative to what ADVENT was imposing over the world. And at every single obstacle she faced hardship, hurdles, cowards, and tyrants.

There seemed to be no good people left to hold power.

*And I am somehow better?*

One shot, one kill.
Not anymore.

It seemed…pointless now.

What was the point of trying to be better, to stand for something, if all it did was make you weak and cause you to lose your friends. This was *her fault*. Because of her stupid insistence on trying to impose some kind of accountability to ally and enemy alike, the aliens had withdrawn – at her order – and ADVENT had probably laughed themselves silly as they sent in the assassins

She had no one – *no one* to blame but herself for that.

Betos had watched the video of the shot; more times than was healthy. She didn’t think the assassin had been aiming for her at all. There’d been nothing obscuring the shot. The sniper was either utterly incompetent – or she’d never been the target in the first place. ADVENT didn’t send the incompetent.

Mox had been the target. It made perfect sense as she’d thought about it. Why exactly would ADVENT want to kill her? She was just making it easy for them.

*Exploitable. Naïve.*

*Why tamper with a useful idiot?*

She fired again.

One shot, one kill.

She’d known ADVENT was ruthless. They were driven by a machine’s logic. But this simply seemed…cruel. Done for no other reason than to hurt her.

Then again, what had she truly expected? For ADVENT to approach an assassination with dignity and respect? That ADVENT was somehow not cruel to begin with? When they annexed countries? Sanctioned and starved others? Conquered the Middle East in a modern-day crusade? ADVENT was not moved by the plight or consequence their actions caused.

All in service to Humanity.

What exactly did they care if they killed her one friend? Her one constant anchor in this madness?

*They didn’t care.*

She fired.

The gun clicked.

She peered down at it and sighed. New magazine needed. She had no intention of stopping, but had no more magazines on her. No more tears, she had shed all of those at the small, private funeral they had held. A few more had come afterwards at the realization that she was now well and truly alone. The aliens would help, but she didn’t implicitly trust them.

Even within her own soldiers, there were none whom she had a bond with like Mox. Maybe in the future that would change, but she didn’t know. All she knew was that she had to move on, and make ADVENT hurt. Somehow. Some way.

She turned to go to the tables with clips laying on them and froze in place.
“Hello, Marshal Betos,” Patricia Trask said.

Beyond the fact that she towered over Betos – it was intimidating just how large the Harbinger was in person – she almost seemed somewhat ordinary. She didn’t wear any armor, only some kind of Collective officer uniform of white and gold, with the Collective emblem embroidered on the chest.

Her chestnut hair fell sharply to her shoulders, and her face was, surprisingly, sympathetic. Both hands were clasped before her. Betos was almost surprised she was here, considering she was thought to be badly injured in New York. But then again…she was the Imperator’s Harbinger. Nothing could keep her down for long.

Normally this kind of visit would have been…terrifying.

Now though, she just felt…apathy. She didn’t know what Trask could have come for. To chew her out for kicking out Keeper? To say, justifiably, ‘I told you so’ in regards to ADVENT? She doubted Trask could make her feel worse than she felt right now. “Harbinger,” she said in a dull voice. “I wasn’t aware you were coming.”

“I made an impromptu decision,” Trask answered, slightly nodding her head behind her. “Macula informed me what had happened.”

That made sense. “I see.”

“I’m sorry,” Patricia shook her head. “The area should have been secured beforehand. That should not have happened. I wanted to apologize for that.”

“Accepted, but unnecessary,” Betos sighed, walking over to the table and laying the rifle down. “I’m aware it’s my fault. You don’t need to dance around it.”

Patricia almost looked at her with a grim knowingness. “I lost my best friend too. Early in the war.”

Betos paused what she was doing and listened as she continued. “Her name was Paige. We’d been friends for…” she allowed a slight smile, thinking back. “A long time. Inseparable. We did everything we could together, no matter where we went, it was done together. We didn’t have secrets, we had a close, unbreakable bond. In a way that’s difficult to understand for people who don’t experience that.”

Patricia sighed. “We came into XCOM together as well, obviously. And she died to an alien. Something we didn’t understand. A mistake. In retrospect, I know what could have saved her – or at least given her a better chance of living. But at the time…it did feel like my fault. Losing that part of me she’d become was…hard.”

Betos hadn’t…expected this. The way she spoke; the same things she was saying, it was definitely real. “And how did you get past it?”

Patricia gave a wan smile. “You don’t ever forget, nor should you. But I had people who made it easier. The Commander himself actually helped me. He listened. I talked.” She paused. “You don’t have anyone to talk to here, do you?”

Betos shook her head. “Just him. There’s no one else I can really be…open with.” She indicated the area around her generally. “I’m leading the SAS. They need a leader. Someone to rely on. They don’t see me as a friend, not truly. Which is fine. Preferable in situations like this. But with him gone…” She breathed heavily, briefly closing her eyes.
Patricia nodded once. “You’re under more pressure than I was. I was just a soldier in XCOM then. The decisions were made by people above me. You don’t need to say how hard it is, I can feel it very acutely.”

Right, she was a psion. “I guess that’s something I can’t control.” Betos shrugged.

“Nor should you,” Patricia said. “It’s not healthy and doesn’t help. You have the right idea with… this. Taking it out on something.”

“Is there a better way?”

“I can only suggest what the Commander told me,” Patricia answered. “It helps to talk about it. Just saying it out loud. Remembering memories. Honoring them in a way, passing on what made them special.” She appraised Betos. “I don’t necessarily have the Commander’s… skill when it comes to things like this. But I didn’t come here to berate you, Betos, I came to help if I could.”

Betos had felt a lot of emotions regarding Patricia. Negative ones, because of the decisions she’d been attached to, and the orders she’d given. But those all just seemed to… fall apart now that the woman was standing before her, giving her support and a sympathetic ear when she needed it.

Whoever this woman was, she couldn’t be completely terrible. She couldn’t be a true monster like ADVENT said and what she’d privately wondered about – though why one would believe ADVENT was a question for another time.

And right now, she needed something. If the Harbinger was sincere…

“I wouldn’t know where to really start,” she said haltingly. “It’s… a lot.”

The Harbinger nodded as if knowing what she meant. “Let’s walk, and take your time. I don’t need to be anywhere, and I will be sure that no one disturbs us.”

***

Throne Room of the Imperator – Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

6/5/2017 – 11:00 P.M.

In the past few days she’d come to like this part of the ship.

There were other places of peace and quiet, but it felt more natural here.

A place to kneel, mediate, and think.

Quiet.

Focus.

Recover.

She had almost died. There was no avoiding this fact. She’d been beaten wholly and utterly. Partially due to her own arrogance, and partially due to the skill of her opponent. She was certain that she could have beaten Fiona – but all was easy in retrospect. Fiona had known who she was about to fight.

While she had not.
Not truly.

Even with the unknown capabilities of the woman, it was not an obstacle that could not be overcome. Yet those…capabilities…those had stuck with her. Telepathy or something else, she wasn’t sure. Her dreams after she had passed out had been confusing. Her life in endless branches; disorienting; disturbing; unyielding.

The Overmind himself had to be brought in, and return her mind to a state of comprehension, anchored to reality.

Echoes lingered.

Images of herself in other places. A doctor, a lawyer, a teacher. Images of herself looking slightly different. Some her hair color was different; altered. Cut short or left to grow long. In some she was married to a man she did not know, sometimes with children who had her features. Images alone would have been disconcerting, but it was the emotions tied to them which made them feel real.

It unsettled her. Feeling for people she did not know, over memories of things which did not happen.

The echoes lingered.

It forced some kind of retrospection. There had to be retrospection.

She realized that she missed having a Human connection; one which had frayed over time. People to talk to often. She’d had that in XCOM; she’d had that with Creed; the rest of the Internal Council.

Here it was…different now. The Imperator did not fully count, as they were joined on a far closer level. The aliens were either unsure of what to think of her, or did not like her. The few Humans here were apathetic or against her for her stances and actions, mostly those which echoed the Imperator.

Her talk with Betos had been one which she appeared to have needed as much as the mourning woman. It had been…good. Something beyond the disconnect between the scale of the Sovereign conflict and the everyday war millions experienced. With power like this it was easy to be…detached.

Easier.

Until retrospection was forced and what had been abandoned along the way was clear.

Perhaps abandoned for valid reasons, but the slide had occurred nonetheless.

She missed Creed.

It hurt now in a way it hadn’t before.

He’d listened when she’d had the dreams and visions from the Imperator.

He would have said the right things after this. She wanted that right now. It was something that even the Imperator couldn’t convey.

She’d tried reaching out to him. But the psionic shroud over the Praesidium prevented any from penetrating. So all she could do was look towards it, wishing she could speak to him. Let him yell
at her, hate her, whatever he would do. But it would be something.

But it was not permitted, not by T’Leth.

Perhaps with him gone, she could try again later.

In a way, she maybe owed Fiona a favor. She’d reminded her that she was still mortal. Still Human. The Imperator allowed her enormous power, but she needed to do more than wield power. More than that would be needed to succeed. The Commander would not surrender. Saudia would not yield. ADVENT would not fall from a simple push.

The actions which had been taken in the aftermath had been eye-opening – and yet not at the same time.

ADVENT was dangerous. The Commander was dangerous. T’Leth was dangerous.

All in their own way.

This was larger than just the Sovereign One. Should the Sovereign fall, ADVENT would still not give in – that was not how the Commander worked. The change in strategy she had been contemplating was now more and more justified.

Retribution followed retribution.

So it would be.

It had to be.

She felt him enter the Throne Room. The imposing, enveloping presence which she had grown comfortable around in these long months. It was not Creed, but it was…something. Something more than tepid words of comfort. There was very little that needed to be said, for the bond communicated it more quickly and honestly than words could suffice. Even without the mask, she knew it was something that grew stronger as time had gone on.

A comforting thing in times like this.

It is time to move forward.

Bring forward the end of the conflict.

The end of this war.

She could not agree more.

And she knew the steps she needed to now take.

***

Miridian’s Office, Nulorian Outpost – Borelian Wastes

6/5/2017 – 9:17 A.M.

The knife-slits of the Vitakarian bored into both of them.

Yet Miridian’s voice was measured. “I see.”
Nartha crossed his arms. “I don’t know if you really do.”

“Presuming I take your word at face value, which I have no reason not to, then I have a better idea than you think,” Miridian answered evenly. “I did not anticipate the Crypt would have one of the Faceless protecting it. I was unaware that there was another that existed.”

Nartha blinked at the term. “You knew this exist[ed]?”

“Not specifically this,” Miridian pursed his lips and paced around, clearly thinking. Trying to articulate something. “The Dath’Haram had been heavily involved in genetic modification prior to the Plague – which you are aware of. While the Zararch did not have complete access to the Crypt – they knew some of what was produced. Among them were the Faceless. I do not know the original name of the project, or even if that term is one used still.”

Shun, who stood beside him, asked the question. “What are they?”

“Organic automatons,” Miridian answered. “Or at least that was the best description which had been provided. Cultured Dath’Haram brains within an artificial shell from which a skeleton is built around. The Zararch believed it to be a true immortality project of some kind; a tribute to the vanity of expression. Infinitely modifiable. A Faceless could be anyone and look like anything. Vitakarian, Borelian, Human, Ethereal.”

“Transspecies,” Nartha finished slowly. “We were truly on that verge?”

“Closer than anyone knows,” Miridian humphed. “The Plague broke out before the idea could be refined and ‘produced’. At the time, it did not occur to me that this kind of immortality would also render them immune from conventional wounds. All that is natural is the brain.”

“One moment,” Shun lifted her hand. “How do you know this?”

“Because the Zararch have a Faceless,” Miridian answered tightly. “One - kept in an isolated station accessible only by Gateway. I never met the thing, and by all accounts it is very intelligent, and very dangerous. Even the Zararch know better than to try using it. I suspect they only kept it to study it.”

He frowned. “But the fact that there is – presumably – another, makes me wonder how many more are out there.”

It took a moment before Nartha caught on. “If there are more out there…then we wouldn’t know about them.”

“No, we would not,” Miridian confirmed. “And that is…disturbing.”

“But we know about them,” Shun pointed out. “Blood tests, genetic tests, we could likely find any infiltrators easily enough.”

“Filhallan has verified blood and genetic tests spanning hundreds of years,” Miridian answered flatly. “He is, for all intents and purposes, a Dath’Haram. A real one. But real Dath’Haram die, and he does not. This also explains his unnatural lifespan, and non-Dath’Haram outlook compared to the rest of his kind.”

“Is he a Collective agent then?”

“I’m unsure,” Miridian rubbed his chin. “I’m inclined to say he has his own agenda, given that the Zararch still does not have access to the Crypt. But that is a very risky assumption – and I do not
know what his agenda could be. If it is guarding the Crypt, he is a non-factor. But if additional
Faceless are being produced, that has significantly larger implications.”

Nartha closed his eyes. *Wonderful.*

“He was able to kill Sorras, one of the best Bladedancers who lived,” Miridian continued. “A
significant loss. But he at least forced the Bladedancer to reveal himself. His sacrifice will not be in
vain. But we will need to determine a means of containing the Crypt.” He looked to Shun. “XCOM
may be required. I presume you will inform the Commander of this.”

“Yes, I will,” Shun nodded, though narrowed her eyebrows. “I don’t suppose there are any other
things you want to mention that the Collective may have, or otherwise could cause us problems.
People died today. If we’d known this was possible—”

“It would not have made any difference,” Miridian interrupted neutrally. “But in response to your
question, none which come to mind. I had truthfully forgotten the project even existed until you
explained what had happened. However, I will review what I know in the archives.” He rested a
hand on the table. “Siaru will scour them for potential references.”

“Right.” Nartha was unsure how he felt about that machine performing such a task, but it was
better than nothing. “I presume we can expect retaliation for what happened.”

“Absolutely, but this was anticipated,” the lips of Miridian thinned. “Outside of the Crypt, the
operation was a success. Fires burn all over the forest, and chemicals choke the vegetation and soil,
and will persist for months thanks to our operatives. Half the Council of Dath’Haram are dead, and
thousands joined them.”

Shun audibly sighed. “Terror won’t solve the problem.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Miridian tapped a finger on the table. “And terror is ultimately only
a tool. The Zararch can be…overzealous in their operations. It is remarkably easy to frame
someone as deviant. Easy to trip triggers on the CODEX network to force investigations. The
Speaker will want to have a show of force; a tangible response to this ‘terrorism’. He’ll find it easy,
thanks to us.”

Shun paled slightly at the implication. “How many people did you frame?”

“Enough.”

“How many is *enough*?”

“Enough to brag about, not enough that it can’t be covered up,” Miridian explained, taking a seat.
“The flaw of the Zararch is that they believe they can do no wrong. They are brutal. Efficient.
Targets disappear in the dead of night, with only a cursory notification to the family. Now will they
learn they were fooled? Of course, but you were with the Zararch, Nartha. Would they admit to
fault? Would they let them go, innocent or not?”

A pause. “Unlikely.”

“And that is all that is needed,” Miridian finished. “We know they are innocent. The Zararch will
know – and the families will know. All the rage against the ‘Nulorian terrorists’ will fade, if not
pale in comparison to the anger they will feel at the Aui’Vitakar.” He smiled. “Especially when we
begin releasing proof that they were framed. Siaru can impersonate a CODEX signature quite
well.”
“The Zararch will just clamp down harder,” Nartha warned.

“Good. The more they are focusing on the citizens, the more they will be revealed, and the less they will be focused on us,” he answered curtly. “People will wake soon enough. I’ve heard that the Aui’Vitakar are already holding a session to publicly expand Zararch powers to find the terrorists, and potentially abolish the local governments for good.”

Nartha was stunned. The shock surged through him like a lightning bolt. Shun seemed equally surprised, even if she couldn’t comprehend the full scope of what might be happening.

“Impossible. The Authoritative Council, the Sar’Manda; they would never accept it. Even the Hegemony…”

“Quisilia himself is set to address the Aui’Vitakar,” Miridian lifted a hand in interruption. “The Ethereals will make their personal support clear, and the Aui’Vitakar will go along with it like the hapless puppets they are.”

He cocked his head. “And as you know, the Cobrarian Hierarchy is effectively gone. Purged due to treason. Half of the Council of Dath’Haram is dead, and the forest is burning. They can persuade the Republic and the Authoritative Council for reasons of safety. The Hegemony’s support will be sealed thanks to the Ethereals. As for the Sar’Manda…” he shrugged, smiling. “I await their attempts to force their will upon the Empire. More likely they will ignore them, as they always do.”

“So one government,” Nartha said numbly. “It is happening.”

“So it would seem,” Miridian confirmed with a nod. “Admittedly faster than I anticipated. The Speaker is wasting no time it seems – a crisis is not squandered. A centralized Vitakara government fully under the Aui’Vitakar would grant extensive powers to the Zararch – removing the few restrictions they had. It will not be long before a militarized peacekeeping force is deployed.”

“Were there any restrictions to begin with?” Shun looked to him, a question in her eyes. “The Zararch has always been in control, yes?”

“Technically, yes,” Nartha sighed. “But there were some things which weren’t touched. The Hierarchy, the Dath’Haram…the Zararch have chafed at not tampering with them significantly for years. If it were up to them…neither culture would have endured as long as it has. Both had their problems, but…this is how they should be solved.”

“It is a significant measure,” Miridian continued. “One I believe the Speaker is miscalculating. The public backlash will be swift if mishandled, and that would go against his image of racial unity. The crackdown will be harder. And when it happens, we will cultivate this anger and hatred against the Aui’Vitakar, before we move to slay them as well.”

Nartha stared, hearing the words but still needing to ask: “You will kill the Aui’Vitakar?”

“Of course I will,” Miridian said flatly. “Are you surprised? They have been responsible for the state our species finds themselves in. Alien puppets at best, or gutless sycophants at worst. Should they vote for the consolidation of the races, they will be condemning us to eternal alien rule. They are the definition of traitors.”

Nartha was silent for a moment. “You know my father is in the Aui’Vitakar, yes?”

“I did not,” Miridian answered blandly, but without emotion. “And why does that matter to me? If my family were traitors to my species, I would gladly end their lives. If that will be an issue, I
suggest you either ensure your father changes his course or stands against the Ethereals. But he is not innocent, Nartha. None of them are.”

“But he does not deserve to die!”

“On that we disagree,” Miridian shook his head. “And you will not change anything for this operation. His fate is in his hands – or yours – but you will not risk it. Is that clear?”

“Clear,” he ground out.

“Good,” Miridian nodded once. “That’s all I need from you. Despite the outcome, your team did the best they could. Sorras will be remembered, and the overall operation was successful.”

He turned away as both of them moved to leave. “As of now, everything is still following the plan.”

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Medical Ward, the Praesidium – Classified Location

6/6/2017 – 10:11 A.M.

She looked better.

Not healed yet; not even XCOM medical tech was to the level of fixing a body which had been ravaged as Fiona’s in just days. But she at least looked like she was resting…peacefully. Her body was propped on the bed, with her wounded limbs kept still. Uncomfortable perhaps, but from what he’d been told, she’d been out.

Only recently had she woken up.

Well enough to receive visitors now, and outside of Crevan and the Chronicler, he was fairly sure he was the first. Kunio sat on a chair near the bed, the odd medallion dangling from the chain he held. It was still warm and almost intangibly vibrating, which was why he wasn’t holding it directly. Too much of a distraction.

Still, while waiting and looking over her injuries, there were details about her he hadn’t noticed before.

The scar over her face glistened from the light above. It was a much deeper scar than he’d thought it was. Nor was not really the type of scar one got by accident. He belatedly realized that she’d never explained where she’d gotten it, or even acknowledged it at all. Perhaps in a battle after she’d joined T’Leth. Perhaps something else.

Her hair almost looked more silver in the light. More so than the ashen grey it normally looked. It suited her, odd as the color she’d chosen was. He wondered what it had originally been. Probably blonde, maybe brown. Those would fit her most naturally, but the grey was certainly unique.

She stirred, and her eyes opened. Kunio stood. She saw him and gave a faint smile. “Hello there. Glad that you’re alive.”

“I’m pretty sure I should be the one saying that, given what happened.”

She released a faint chuckle. “Fair.”

Kunio breathed heavily and Fiona lifted an eyebrow. “You look like you want to yell at me. Close
to the same look Crevan gave me.”

His lips twitched. “Not…yell. But really Fiona, what were you thinking?”

Her head fell back onto the pillow and her eyes closed. “To be honest, Kunio, I wasn’t. I saw Patricia invading New York; heard her speech and I just…snapped. I’ve just been feeling like I’ve held back this whole war. I could have killed her. I know I could have so long ago. All of them. I could do it. But I didn’t. Because I was afraid. And when I saw her doing this…I just couldn’t let it happen anymore.” She paused. “So, like a fool, I took matters into my own hands.”

“Well…hopefully you don’t do that again.” He gave a faint smile. “Next time you go with us.”

“Don’t worry,” Fiona gave a pained smile. “Crevan…he made it very, very clear that I wasn’t going to do this again. And he’s right. This almost got me killed or worse.”

“He told you what happened.”

She grimaced. “He did. We’re lucky it ended the way it did.”

“I don’t suppose you could explain some of it?”

She sighed. “It’s…complicated. Sorry.”

Not really the answer he’d been looking for, but right now probably wasn’t the time to push that. She looked at his hand. “He said you have something from me.”

“Yes, this,” he handed her the medallion which she took with one hand, her features morphing into an expression of shock. “I assume Crevan told you who we…encountered. He gave this to me. He said you would know what it meant.”

“Yes…” she almost whispered. “I’ve not seen this in…a long time.”

Kunio cocked his head. “What is it?”

“A promise…” she said slowly. “This shouldn’t be possible.”

“Why?”

She hesitated briefly, and both of them said the same thing:

“It’s complicated.”

Both of them found that funny, despite themselves.

“In that case,” Kunio paused. “I’ll just have to wait.”

“For now,” Fiona said, sinking back into the pillow. “I don’t suppose anything else has happened since then?”

“About that…” Kunio pulled the chair up behind him and sat back down. “Quite a bit, actually. And I have a feeling it’s just starting.”

***

Mount Olympus – Classified Location
The headquarters of the Pantheon was certainly an interesting one. A quite fitting name too – Mount Olympus was one he could definitely approve of. The massive facility consisted of at least a barracks, command center, and several training areas from what he saw. A few particularly large training areas, which were easily the equivalent to anything at the Praesidium.

Even as he, Creed, and Vahlen walked the halls, he could see most of them training in the distance. Some were unleashing destruction upon dummies or against the shields of others, some were hurling massive barge crates about telekinetically or moving several targets with coordinated, practiced precision. It was a testament to their training, and the frequency of it, that many parts of the ground bore the telltale signs of persistent psionic exposure.

No rest, even after they’d just completed one of the most dangerous and groundbreaking operations of the war thus far. It said something about their training as the most elite psionic force within ADVENT that their training did not stop, not even for a mission well-done. Though from what Axis had reported, not everything about the mission went according to plan.

Which was why he was here.

Awaiting him in the central command of Mount Olympus were those he’d come to see. Commander Christiaens was standing at attention, and by her side were Kwon Seul-Gi, the Pantheon’s command strategist and the primary mastermind behind the Olganar-2 operation. Neither of them had interacted directly before, so this would be a first for both – which went for the Pantheon as a whole.

Beside her was a lean man who stood a full head taller than her. Black, with short hair to match, he seemed like an easygoing individual from the wide smile and relaxed posture. Although there was definitely a wary glint in his eye. Jude Davies, HERMES, the Pantheon’s official public relations representative.

Interestingly, he’d not had a military background. Nonetheless the Pantheon didn’t recruit just anyone, and it was a given that he’d undergone training by ADVENT Intelligence and probably from the Public Relations Division as well. What he was doing in this meeting was a good question, but one he supposed he’d find out the answer to soon enough.

The final individual was one of the actual squad which had participated in the operation – Dr. Harold Rivers, DIONYSUS to the Pantheon. An older Asian-American man who was nonetheless a noticeable presence – though slightly less so than his North Korean superior despite her shorter stature and lack of psionics. The Commander didn’t know much about him other than that he was a powerful telepath.

“Commander, Mr. Creed, Dr. Vahlen, good to see all of you again,” Laura greeted, giving all of them slight nods.

“Of course,” the Commander answered, facing Kwon and her Pantheon counterparts. “A pleasure to meet you properly, Strategist Seul-Gi; Operative Rivers. It appears we have you to thank for the operation going as well as it did.”

She took his extended hand and gave a firm shake. “Appreciated, Commander. Axis was essential to its success, and we’re grateful that you allowed him to participate in the operation.” Harold took the hand as well, but didn’t say much to start with outside of a standard greeting.

“We’re all in this together,” he said as they gathered around the holotable. “For missions like this,
we need to do all we can to make sure they succeed. And based on what Axis said, the majority of the objectives were achieved.”

“Key word being majority,” Jude agreed. “Operationally, we consider the operation a success, one which we’ve ensured that the Public Relations Division will use to its fullest potential. We have no shortage of explosions, psionic maelstroms, and multiple alien corpses to play off. The rest of ADVENT will see it as a resounding success.”

“There is a ‘but’ coming,” Creed predicted dryly.

“But there were unforeseen complications,” Laura finished, lips pursed. “One which heralds unpleasant implications for the future.”

“Axis gave me his breakdown,” the Commander said, clasping his hands behind his back. “I want yours. Strategist?”

“Very well. I will be brief,” Kwon said, expression grim. “The team responsible for the elimination of Hive Commander 666 encountered him and engaged shortly after arrival, as expected. While a difficult fight – the previous documents concerning the engagement of Hive Commanders were useful in preparing for this – we were able to defeat 666. However, the moment we penetrated his mental defenses to capture him, an automated turret terminated him.”

Creed cocked his head. “That seems odd.”

“But not necessarily unexpected,” Harold interjected for the first time. “We had anticipated that the Hive Commander may have preferred death to interrogation. We intended to perform a field interrogation in the event it was too risky to extract him. This did not happen, though in retrospect it should have been realized that there was something else going on with how 666 was acting.”

“Axis said that the turret shot him, but he didn’t die.” The Commander said. “Please elaborate.”

“666 had been telepathically fighting us from almost the moment we stepped on the station,” Harold continued. “It worked to our advantage in a way, since we were able to pinpoint him without any effort and the team went to deal with him. But the consequence was that we were all very familiar with how his mind felt. When he died, his psionic presence vanished as expected – and a few minutes later it came back.”

He shrugged. “Each member on the retrieval team has been psionically examined to ensure nothing was wrong. Everything looks right, and it’s left us with one ugly truth; Hive Commander 666 is not dead.”

They took a moment to absorb that declaration. Creed asked the next question.

“Then what did you fight?”

“That is a good question,” Kwon shot a glance at Vahlen. “We have several theories that have been presented to the PRIEST Division.”

“I’m listening,” Vahlen nodded, her tablet ready to take notes.

“The current prevailing theory is that the Hive Commander we fought was a decoy, a meat puppet as you designate them,” Harold said. “We know that telepathic possession is possible thanks to the Ethereal Harbingers, so it could have been that 666 used an avatar of his own against us.”

“Feasible,” Vahlen frowned with a nod. “But there are telltale signs of outside possession or
control. It is difficult to obscure, at least to telepaths; the mind is noticeably off. Did you sense any of these indicators?"

“No, and that’s the obvious weakness in the theory,” Harold admitted. “I wasn’t with the team that attacked 666, but I could feel his mind clearly. It certainly felt like the real Hive Commander. If it was possession, it was utterly flawless.”

“The other theory is that the Hive Commander performed some kind of consciousness transfer to a clone or other body to possess,” Kwon continued. “The obvious issue with that is that, to my knowledge, that kind of ability isn’t actually possible to do. Unless I am mistaken?”

“It shouldn’t be,” Vahlen agreed, tapping her stylus on the tablet idly, thinking. “To achieve such a feat… It would likely take time to perform such a feat. Perhaps a minute or so – possibly longer – to transfer a consciousness, though I will note that this is just speculation. Furthermore, assuming the transfer was successful, the original body would most likely enter a comatose state, if not expire outright. Was there anything like that evident?”

“No,” Harold confirmed. “He was very much alive—”

“Until he wasn’t.” Jude finished dryly.

“Funny,” the Commander said neutrally, not quite in the mood for amusement right now. “But you’re certain that Hive Commander 666 is still alive.”

“As sure as we can be. When he reappeared, it wasn’t on the shipyard. It was deep within the Hive below. We didn’t get another chance at a physical encounter with him after that.” Harold radiated frustration as he spoke. “There was a clear period when he was gone. And then… he was back. Exactly the same.”

“The point being that the Hive Commanders appear to have some means of cheating death,” Kwon finished. “Which will be problematic, given how powerful they are.”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. “That is making the assumption that this is something which applies to all Hive Commanders. It couldn’t just be a skill that 666 possesses?”

“Unlikely,” Kwon disagreed immediately. “If 666 were a telepathic specialist or had a particular focus on experimental psionics, I might believe otherwise. But 666 was… is primarily an engineer. If he is able to do this, it seems very likely that the others could as well. The Hive Commanders have no internal division. This is not something that would be kept secret from the others.”

Creed looked very unhappy at that.

The Commander couldn’t blame him. Assuming that it was universal, and not just something applied to 666, then that meant that the Hive Commander they’d killed when they’d first assaulted the Sectoid Hive wasn’t actually dead – and Creed understandably had very bad memories around that incident.

And that Hive Commander that had attacked the Citadel? Also might not actually be dead.

How could that work though? That the Hive Commanders had managed to do this while the Ethereals had not? Something wasn’t right about this.

“And there’s more,” Harold said with clear unease. “I think that killing 666, whether he stayed dead or not, kicked the hornet’s nest even more than we already have. Once we felt 666 come back, this was deployed against us.” He turned on the holoprojectors to show an armored Sectoid,
wielding a host of unknown psi-tech.

It seemed to be larger than the Vanguard, and retained the sleek-looking armor that they wore. But this time the armor was clearly augmented with psi-tech much more intricate and extensive than previously known. The skin of the Sectoid was also more reddish, a contrast to the Vanguard and most Sectoids.

“Axis said it was as powerful as one of you,” the Commander recalled.

“It was powerful enough to kill one of us,” Kwon said grimly. “No small feat.”

“The psi-tech,” Vahlen fixated on that detail, staring intently at the projection. “What did it do?”

“The ones recovered were specifically tuned to Dynamo psionics,” Harold answered. “It was a natural telepath. Since it only displayed those two fields, we’re left to assume that all the psi-tech it had was tuned to Dynamo. There were others that showed up later that showed evidence of Aegii and Telekine psi-tech, but we weren’t able to retrieve examples of those. Once it became clear that this was something new and not just a Vanguard with the element of surprise, we retreated.”

“Smart,” the Commander nodded. “Best to retreat until we know more about what these are.”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to make more determinations from the recovered corpse and technology,” Vahlen nodded. “Artifact Recovery will come for transport shortly.”

Jude cocked his head, and Kwon frowned. “Respectfully, Dr. Vahlen, we’re not planning on releasing the body to XCOM,” Jude said, diplomatically but firmly. “We asked you here in order to share what we’ve learned – essential considering the implications. It was not to give you artifacts we are currently researching.”

“We have experience with this, Mr. Davies,” the Commander pointed out. “And given the singular corpse, I don’t think we should be taking risks with taking it apart.”

“ADVENT specialists are more than capable of doing their jobs,” Kwon pointed out. “This isn’t the first alien corpse they’ve taken apart either.”

Vahlen furrowed her eyebrows. “Given their lack of experience with psi-tech, they’ll almost certainly damage the equipment it is using. More than it already is. We have extensive experience with psi-tech, and a far stronger grasp on the mechanics of it than ADVENT.”

“Then I would suggest you share it with ADVENT to be sure there is no unnecessary damage,” Kwon answered coldly, meeting Vahlen’s eyes. “I lost two good soldiers in this operation, and this was the one prize we were able to bring back. I highly doubt this will be the last time we encounter this enemy. XCOM will live in not being the first to pick something apart.”

“This is not a good time to be taking offense to our methods,” Vahlen’s eyes hardened, as did her voice. “There is a reason XCOM is on the front lines of alien research - because it is critical that we are able to determine everything possible about this enemy - accurately. XCOM is the best; ADVENT is skilled, but they are not us. Given that these new Sectoids are now active, and will be encountered in larger numbers soon, holding onto it is selfish.”

“Dr. Vahlen, with all due respect,” Harold said evenly. “Just because we weren’t the first to dissect a Sectoid or a Muton doesn’t mean we didn’t learn just like you did. We’re not incompetent. I’m sure we take the same care with our procedures that you do. You say we’re being selfish, I think you’re being a bit egotistical to think that only you can do a dissection properly.”
Much as the Commander saw why they might be offended, the fact was that this was something XCOM had extensive experience in. Technically, XCOM could demand the corpse under the Advent Directive itself, but the Commander felt that would be unnecessarily controversial. Laura knew that perfectly well, but she was looking at him, silently asking him not to press the issue. He wouldn’t – not completely, but he wasn’t going to let ADVENT off the hook here.

“We won’t take the corpse to the Praesidium,” he finally said. “However, Dr. Vahlen will lead the autopsy and initial research on it. This can be done at an ADVENT facility of your choice, but given that we also had a crucial operative on this operation, we similarly have a claim to it, and under the Advent Directive, we are permitted to intervene in all matters involving extraterrestrial research and threats to Humanity. This qualifies as one, and as much as you dislike it, I, and everyone else, want this done properly, and XCOM is best suited to carrying this out.”

He looked at Laura. “Is this permissible, Commander?”

Laura didn’t seem to like being put on the spot, but gave a curt nod. “We can work with that.”

“I’ll make preparations to begin,” Vahlen nodded to him, and then to Jude. “Inform me of the location and I will arrive as soon as possible.”

Jude gave a thin smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “You will be informed.”

None of the Pantheon seemed particularly pleased with the compromise, but the Commander knew they wouldn’t directly contradict Laura, and they would get past it at some point. Best they learn how to negotiate with XCOM, and what they were permitted to acquire and receive, now rather than later.

“I believe the only remaining topic is one of information sharing,” the Commander said, looking around. “I presume the Pantheon has written reports of the operation, as well as armor cam footage. We will need that for our own review. We will of course, share our own reports and Axis’s footage. Is that settled.”

“We will get it to you, Commander,” Kwon said tightly. “Beyond that, I do not believe there is anything else of note.”

“Then I think we’re finished for now,” the Commander nodded. “Good work on the operation. Vahlen and Jackson will be in contact regarding what we discussed.”

“We will be ready, Commander,” Kwon stated, looking to the others, and Laura. “Are we done?”

“Yes,” Laura confirmed. “Dismissed.”

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Throne Room of the Imperator – Temple Ship of the Imperator of the Ethereal Collective

6/6/2017 – 10:00 A.M.

Ravarian swallowed as he stood before the Imperator.

Always acting through intermediaries, the fact that he had been personally requested to step foot upon the elusive Temple Ship was an honor in and of itself – or potentially a prelude to his removal. The Imperator would not have done this without reason. He sat upon the Throne, presence overwhelming even though Quisilia was shielding his mind.
Ravarian steeled himself as much as possible, and stood to the side of Quisilia. Before the Imperator stood Patricia in her ornate Ethereal dress of white silk and symbols, and beside her stood Sicarius and her own shadowed Harbinger. The Ethereal with the eyeless orb for a helm stood silent, and her counterpart was equally mute.

“Zar’Chon,” the Imperator stated. “You have fully compiled the results of the attacks by XCOM and ADVENT against us, correct?”

“Yes, Imperator,” he nodded, knowing it was a partial formality. “The report was forwarded to you. On Earth we suffered a fair number of losses, multiple African states have descended into chaos, and we believe that ADVENT and XCOM are now aware of the intimate defenses of the Observation Station.”

“But they were driven off.”

“Yes, Imperator. And we were able to acquire some interesting data on composition. Aliens are now in the ranks of XCOM.”

“Not surprising,” Patricia nodded. “The Commander wouldn’t have forbade them from participating – provided they could be trusted.”

“However,” Ravarian continued grimly. “It’s ADVENT which has likely caused the largest long-term damage. Olganar-2 was directly attacked by the Pantheon. We are waiting on a full autopsy, but initial estimates that the Hive Commanders have released are that the majority of the Hive was neutralized, over a third of the shipyards were destroyed, and Hive Commander 666 was killed.”

The massive helm of the Ethereal nodded. “Quisilia. Tell him.”

“Certainly,” Quisilia turned to him. “The Hive Commanders are more…savvy than many give them credit for. Quite arrogant, soulless creatures, but let none say they are not intelligent. It is indisputable that ADVENT hurt the shipyards – however, they were not quite as effective as the Zararch believes.”

Ravarian frowned. “In what way?”

“To begin with,” Quisilia flipped one of his blades in his hands. “Hive Commander 666 is not dead. The Pantheon managed to kill his body, but the Hive Commanders have a rather…ingenious system which allows them to endure, in a sense.”

Ravarian stiffened. “That cannot be. Two Hive Commanders have already died in this war. 072 on the Hive on Earth, and 043 during the failed Citadel attack.”

“Yes, about that,” Quisilia nodded. “They aren’t dead.”

“How?”

“Well, I suppose the more accurate term is that they aren’t dead in a sense,” Quisilia corrected a moment later. “Hive Commanders have multiple clones of themselves carefully grown. Dozens at a time. They quite frequently…” he waved a lower arm absentmindedly. “Upload copies of their minds into them. So in the event of their death, a new clone emerges, who is effectively the same. Same mind, same motives. Missing some amount of memory, but very much the equal.”

Once the initial surprise of the revelation faded, Ravarian had to conclude that the system was… quite clever. Very much something the Hive Commanders would come up with – and what would definitely be a massive problem for ADVENT and XCOM. Especially now that they’d ‘killed’
some of them.

“Do the Andromedons know?” He asked.

“Of course not,” Quisilia snorted. “That might trigger a war out of pure fear. The Andromedons, as arrogant as they are, believe that the Hive Commanders are incapable of contingency or subtlety. I fear that they underestimate our little grey allies. However, the Federation will keep them in line for now. That isn’t relevant.”

“What is relevant is that ADVENT knows now,” Ravarian nodded. “Though they won’t be able to do much.”

“It’s unlikely they know for sure,” Patricia corrected. “Hive Commander 666 did not reengage with the Pantheon physically following his initial body being destroyed. But they likely felt his mind, or something familiar to it. They will put the pieces together. What is actually relevant is that ADVENT and XCOM forced 666 to activate a project prematurely.”

Ravarian nodded. “Which was what?”

Sicarius pulled out a holodisplay, which portrayed a lanky Sectoid clad in sleek black armor, with various unknown gadgets of psi-tech attached to them. They were like the Vanguard, if the Vanguard had been bulked up further. This one stood as tall as a fairly tall Human – six feet roughly – and had skin more reddish than the orange of the Hive Commanders.

“This is the Lesser Hive Commander,” Patricia said. “The answer of the Hive Commanders to the PRIEST Division and XCOM. Semi-autonomous by Sectoid standards, and grown from the genetic material of a Hive Commander. Designed to command the Sectoid legions, and also well-adjusted to being hijacked by the Hive Commander in question for direct control.” She paused. “In a sense, it is their own implementation of the Avatar Project.”

Ravarian couldn’t help but feel some relief at that. Psions were already going to be a major issue as the war progressed. Actual, tangible counters to them were welcome. Fantastic that the Hive Commanders hadn’t been idle. He did wonder if this had been done on their own initiative or if they were being pressured by the Imperator.

It perhaps did not matter.

“It is very likely you will be seeing mentions of this in intercepted ADVENT reports,” Quisilia stated. “It’s ideal if you are aware of the context before wondering what ADVENT is referring to. With this understood, the Hive Commanders are finalizing the first batches. The ones activated to deal with the Pantheon were not supposed to be ready, but circumstances required them.”

“Understood,” Ravarian nodded. “I will ensure appropriate classifications.”

“Good, let us continue with the matter at hand,” the Imperator stated. “Your report was an acceptable overview of our losses. I do not intend to let this be tolerated. XCOM has had a hand in the events on Vitakar and the collapse of the African states primed to join the SAS. They have struck at us. It is time to respond.”

“Of course,” he nodded. “There are a number of actions we can take to reinforce-“

“He is not speaking of reinforcement,” Patricia interrupted, stepping forward. “Retaliation. The leaders of ADVENT are pushing the strategy; the response. They used a nuclear weapon on an ally of ours. They are supporting terrorists on Vitakar. T’Leth has flaunted his reach on Mars.”
Ravarian pursed his lips. “I’m framing my strategy within the confines of the Battlemaster’s directives. No assassinations.”

“The battlefield has shifted,” the Imperator stated. “His objections are overruled.”

Well then. About time the gloves came off. “In which case, there are a number of high-profile targets I recommend be targeted and eliminated. Removing these individuals – while others would replace them – would shake civilian faith in ADVENT as an institution capable of protecting themselves and others. It would also significantly disrupt and halt policy writing within various organizations.”

“Names?”

“Many. Some easier than others. Leadership, military, and intelligence are the most relevant. Chancellor Vyandar, Commander Christiaens, Ian Powell. National leaders, Legion Generals, all of those are applicable targets. The removal of figures such as the resurgent Japanese Empress would be directed to hurt morale. I would reserve others such as defected aliens as a minimal operational priority, but such would certainly send a message.”

“There are a few others,” Patricia noted. “Chief Stein. Chief Lancer Weekes.”

“I would not put Chief Stein on the list,” Ravarian disputed. “She is one of the more controversial high-profile figures in ADVENT. She is more useful alive than not. She is a rare source of hatred from within ADVENT by citizens and media. Her removal would likely benefit ADVENT more than hurt them, even if they continue her policies.”

“If I may, Zar’Chon,” the boy, Nico spoke up, stepping forward. “I would not target most high-profile figures at all.”

Ravarian cocked his head. “Your reasoning?”

“Humans do one of two things when faced with hardship,” he said. “They rally or they break. What do you intend to achieve with mass assassinations?”

“Sow fear and reduce operational capacity.”

“Right,” he nodded. “If that’s your goal, then I would suggest a…refinement. You are unlikely going to be able to assassinate Saudia, or another high-profile figure. But there are hundreds of people the public has never heard of. Figures who set policy and law. People whose loss would hurt ADVENT. People would hear their names, but not know them. They can rally around the loss of Saudia, or Yamato, or another figure of the ADVENT class. But the many Generals, Admirals, officials…their removal would hurt more than someone like Saudia. She can be replaced. And she is one Human. The loss of one will change nothing.”

The boy had a point…a good one. “Noted. Harbinger, I appreciate your input. I believe it can be refined…upon the direction of the Imperator or Quisilia.”

The Imperator inclined his helmet. “I will let you set the operational parameters. Execute it as you see fit. But I expect success. You will coordinate with Patricia, as she will be in charge of a more direct response to ADVENT and XCOM. You will be provided with whatever you need.”

He gave a short bow. “At your command, Imperator.”

“Then we are finished for now,” the Imperator straightened. “Go. I will await your success.”
Much had happened.

ADVENT had retaliated for the New York incursion in a quite effective fashion.

*Mechanical. Precise. Merciless.*

Nemo found it quite fascinating to see the coordinated efficiency this species could bring to bear. Impressive. More so than it had initially given it credit for. The fact that it had been forced to abandon a long-term mission was…unfortunate. Nemo was not pleased it had happened, but there was little to be done about it now.

It would adapt. Remember for the future.

ADVENT represented something that had been absent it’s long, dull life.

*Challenge.*

The naked, blank, and faceless thing stood in front of a mirror, a conundrum turning in the gears of its engineered mind.

It needed a new face to wear. The alien one it had worn was useless following the mission and it had grown tired of it; a reminder of its failure. Yet a new appealing one did not come to it easily – though not for lack of options, of course. There were many faces that could be taken, bodies to be sculpted, and it was a combination of indecision and the knowledge that it was likely to be used soon.

An idea struck.

It curled its lipless mouth in the mirror, not out of amusement or pleasure, but to compare to the face that would be forged. Yes, it was insufficient.

It grabbed the scalpel, the face clear in the mind’s eye.

This face was unlikely to be relevant for the immediate future, but Nemo suspected that having the capability to wear it would be…needed in the future. The person whose face it was taking could almost be proud they had captured its attention.

Imitation was the sincerest form of flattery, after all. He found some truth in that saying.

Most were too inconsequential to matter. Dust in the cosmic wisps of the universe.

Humans had quite a useful and surprisingly poignant collection of sayings and proverbs. A pity that such a minority were true intellectuals – though admitted far more than any of the Collective species. Too much focus on the physical world and laws within, on comfort and rule, instead of the state of existence itself – a far more fascinating topic. The Oyariah, despite their foolish fanaticism, at least understood the concept of something greater.

Something more.

*Transcendence.*
Beyond norms.
Beyond laws.
Beyond binaries.
Beyond.
Beyond.

It began cutting as it contemplated.

News of the Nulorian attack against the Dath’Haram had been especially interesting. Such an expected action from the finely tuned mind of Miridian. A true predictable terrorist, though Nemo could not blame him, for he was accurately playing the Zararch and the illustrious Speaker of the Elders to his advantage.

The Zararch knew only one path – oppression and control.

Effective tools, though only if an enemy was not smart enough to understand how to exploit them.

Miridian was skilled at that.

The skin was off. The bones needed to be arranged properly. Cutting tools were needed. Nemo brought up an image of the face for reference. Yes, like that.

Pieces of the bone-like substance joined the soupy skin-liquid on the floor.

Nemo did not care about Miridian. Nor the Nulorian. Nor the Vitakara. Such activities were academic, viewed with all the passion of an apathetic, yet slightly interested bystander. Less interested in picking a side so much as observing the outcome – and the outcome promised to be very interesting indeed.

Ravarian was intelligent. Despite the single-mindedness of the Zararch, they could easily emerge from the conflict victorious – but perhaps defeat was what they deserved. The Zararch had not been properly challenged. Defeat would lead to growth. Such may be necessary. Or the monotony of the status quo would prevail.

It was ultimately irrelevant, as the outcome would not be decided by the power players, but outside forces. XCOM. ADVENT. The Nulorian were pawns even if Miridian did not realize it.

Just as the Vitakara were pawns of the Ethereals.

_A s o t h e c o s m i c c y c l e s r e p e a t._

It ran a hand under the jawline, judged the facial structure was largely accurate, and moved to the next stage.

What had been interesting to note about the Nulorian attack was there was no mention of the Crypt. How very curious. Miridian doubtless knew it was there, and any attack against the Dath’Haram would have included it.

The fact that it had heard nothing indicated that it had failed miserably.

It smiled with its skeletal face again.
Much better.

It would have amused him to see Miridian’s reaction at hearing the thing that guarded the tomb. So obvious, hidden in such plain sight, and yet the simple, blind Vitakara had never put the pieces together.

Ah well, let the Vitakara believe the whitewashed history of the Dath’Haram. It did not affect it in the slightest.

The next stage was rather delicate, and Nemo let the idle thoughts fade as it worked on the face. Only several hours passed as the face took shape, one with feminine features which would be framed by long hair. An imposing, imperial presence. It had yet to be colored or voice-practiced, and was half-finished when the visitor appeared.

Nemo heard him enter. “A new assignment already?”

“Yes,” it answered in its dead voice, then turned around to face Ravarian fully, who barely reacted to the half-finished undead ghoul before him. All Ravarian did was cock his head. “That face will be for nothing. You will likely want something less high-profile.”

“Indulge me, Zar’Chon. It is good to have practice. I will change if necessary.”

“So long as it is done.”

“What do you wish from me?”

“ADVENT has performed their retaliation. Our response has been determined.”

“Individuals to be removed?”

“Correct.”

Nemo set the tools on the nearby table gently as it processed the news. “Unfortunate long-term operations are so…difficult against ADVENT. I would have liked to see how far they could be tricked.”

“You may yet have your opportunity.”

“My target is whom?”

“General Imraam,” Ravarian answered. “A rather skilled military commander who has been an issue in Malaysia. He is a significant reason why our progress in the region has stalled. Remove him. Subtly, if possible.”

The name was unfamiliar to it, but it was no matter.

An assassination was trivial, and the fact that he had not heard of him before also meant that the majority of ADVENT likely had not either. Still, he was a General, presumably of the Malaysian Legion. He would likely have some degree of protection. As if reading its thoughts, Ravarian frowned. “You’re being assigned this because of its difficulty. General Imraam will not be killed easily. All Generals have PRIEST Division guards now.”

“I am aware.”

“Good. I expect you to succeed.”
“I will need access to the Desolan Vault.”

“It will be granted.”

“Excellent. And the timeframe?”

“Sooner than later. Within a week.”

“Understood.”

Ravarian left, and Nemo was left alone once again, with only itself as the face which stared at it from the mirror. Despite the fact that it was unlikely to be a face useful on this operation – an assassination operation gave some flexibility. It would be…interesting to see the reaction should this face be kept.

It continued working on it.

It smiled again.

_Perfect._

The body was next. It sculpted the feminine parts with the shaping tools, and after hours of work it became lost in, stood, the naked form indistinguishable from a real Human woman in function and appearance.

It flexed the digits, arms, legs, all to make sure it was working properly. Not a surprise that it was. It cleaned off the darkened skin of the fluids and chunks which flowed into the drains. Now it was time to practice the voice. The voice was important. Facing the mirror, it assumed a serious expression it had seen displayed many times.

Time to give a speech.

That was what this individual would do, yes?

“Citizens of ADVENT, this is Chancellor Saudia Vyandar.”

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_Volk’s Quarters – Mars Collective Base_

6/6/2017 – 9:22 A.M.

They had not seen Nemo since the extraction. Just as well for everyone involved.

They hadn’t been assigned any new tasks either, as of yet, and instead they’d just watched as events had unfolded before them, with both wondering at just how long this was going to go on. It seemed to him that the escalation would continue ramping up and up until one side obliterated the other.

Patricia was also proving herself to be a right proper villain.

Elena actively hated her. Volk really, really hoped that she never came by.

Though Patricia’s actions may not have been without warning.

_Is it really surprising? They willingly utilized Isomnum._
The difference being, everyone was quick to wash their hands of the Dread Lord. The Collective seemed less keen to even remotely distance themselves from Patricia. Which was understandably impossible, given that she was the Imperator’s voice and will. That didn’t mean he was happy with it.

Nor did many people in the base itself.

They’d not been here when…there’d been some kind of telepathic attack that hadn’t been explained, but it was another odd occurrence in a series of odd occurrences. There was something utterly off about the whole conflict the more he thought about it. He’d done quite a lot of extensive reading of the Collective archives in the downtime; learning the quite fascinating history within.

It only raised more questions.

Sectoids? Approached and formed the Collective.

Vitakara? Cured their disease and they joined the Collective willingly.

Andromedons? Negotiated and willingly joined the Collective.

Mutons? Conquered by the Battlemaster alone following their own customs. Still nowhere close to a fair fight, truthfully, but it was more respect than they could have shown. And subsequently engineered genius-level iterations of the species which held legitimate command.

Humans? Invaded and killed.

Something seemed wrong with that shift. Even if the Mutons arguably signaled they were capable of this, there was a very distinct difference between them and the other alien species. Each of the latter were an intelligent, modern, civilization conversing in dialogue, as opposed to the Mutons which were engaged in primitive civil wars.

Humans, as violent as they could be to each other, were definitely in the ‘more advanced’ category, and if past actions were enough to refuse someone on, then the Andromedons definitely shouldn’t have been admitted. On a strategic level it didn’t make sense either – he could almost guarantee that if the Collective had come peacefully, Humans would have joined in very short order – no military, no ADVENT, no XCOM. Hell, even telepathy could have been used to control them.

But instead they had invaded.

The militant shift the Collective had dramatically slid towards didn’t make sense.

He suspected that answer was well above his pay grade here.

But he didn’t like it.

Elena hadn’t taken long to come to a conclusion - That the war had been started under false pretenses. Now, he certainly wasn’t one to trek in conspiracy theories…but there was more than enough evidence that the war hadn’t been started for the reasons most thought it was. The Zararch distributed a story about how the Humans had declared war, and thus it was accepted.

Except, it seemed, the story was starting to be questioned.

Not obviously, mind you. But there were enough aliens who were starting to wonder if there was something else going on. According to everyone, the war should have been won by now. But it was still ongoing.
Why isn’t the Collective bombarding the planet to oblivion?

Why isn’t there an overwhelming land invasion?

Why hasn’t the Imperator himself ended it personally?

It couldn’t have been Aegis or Caelior. The Imperator was more powerful than both. His Avatar was more powerful than Caelior. The Collective had billions of soldiers. Humanity had millions at most. This, in theory, should not be a close contest – even a war of attrition would end in a clear Collective victory.

And while the land war was worldwide and sustained, it wasn’t nearly at the level it could be.

So, what is it really?

What secrets do you hide, Ethereals?

He hadn’t brought it up with Asaru, the few times they’d seen her. Asking that kind of question seemed like a bad idea. Of course, she probably knew he was thinking it, but had not commented on it. Or she hadn’t noticed. There was a lot going on.

All culminating in the newest assignment today. To which he had a clear answer for his guest.

“No.”

The figure of Asaru in her Human form cocked her head. “I’m sorry?”

Volk shook his head. “No.”

“Elaborate.”

Volk set the tablet on the table. “Well, you know why I decided to assist you and your Collective in the first place?”

“I remember what you told me.”

“Good. Now I realize some things may have slipped your mind, but I don’t target civilians. That is quite a deviation from what little I’m trying to do here, which your friend Patricia keeps making more difficult.” He lifted a hand. “Nonetheless, I’m not sure why you thought that giving me a list of names of medical professionals was something I’d be jumping for. I’m fine with removing soldiers, heads of state, and people who are actively running ADVENT.”

“Medical professionals are implicitly contributing.”

Volk snorted. “Yes, and so are grocery store clerks, farmers, and cooks. Following that logic every person is ‘contributing to ADVENT’.”

“These individuals are actively assisting military forces.”

“Yes, and plenty of civilians too,” Volk rolled his eyes. “I don’t like ADVENT, but I’m not completely blind to think that every person in it is evil. Helping heal people is their job if you didn’t know.”

“We are aware, that is why they are targets. This is a war, Volikov.”

“And you know my conditions for fighting in it.”
Asaru smiled. Coldly. “Is this a refusal to follow orders?”

He met her stare. “Is this an order?”

“We’ve suffered a bout of attacks and assassinations of our own, Volikov,” Asaru said. “The Imperator is displeased. There will be retaliation. We are all doing our part, and as you have agreed to help us, this is the assignment the Zar’Chon has designated for you.”

Ah, the Zar’Chon. That suddenly made more sense.

A loyalty test of sorts.

Well then.

The situation now was somewhat precarious. More so than it had been otherwise – because that told him that this wasn’t going to be something that he could refuse to do without consequences. If it was Asaru pushing it, maybe he could push back since she was somewhat of a pushover on some topics.

But the Zar’Chon…

Not so much.

Asaru seemed to be making it clear that he was at the crossroads here.

“You’ll have several days to plan and more to execute,” she said gently, seeming to imply that she understood the implications as well. “They will die regardless. The sooner ADVENT falls, the sooner the war ends. Will there be issues?”

He was silent, but the silence indicated his answer easily enough.

“Good,” she gave a slight nod. “I wish you well in your assignment. Make it swift.”

When he looked up, she was gone, leaving him alone, and with a dangerous dilemma.

Elena would not be happy.

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The Abyssal Plains, near the Mariana Trench

6/5/2017 – 10:22 A.M.

No matter what happened, Loke would always feel privileged to be able to walk the floor of the deep ocean.

The times when he wasn’t having a heart attack, that is.

Air bubbles rose from around him as the small team of black-armored soldiers walked the ocean floor. Their steps were ponderous and deliberate. Sand blasted up at each step, and what little ocean life was around fled as they walked. Loke felt they were sometimes in a horror movie – but with them as the monster.

Something unnatural which shouldn’t be here.

However, as this was their time for the weekly Depthtrooper armor tests, he was getting more and
more accustomed to it. It was a wholly odd sensation. He could almost feel the weight of the tons of water above him; pressing against him; threatening to smother and crush him. Half of it seemed psychological, the other half seemed real.

It was not easy to move in the suit – initially. The suit was heavy, more so than other suits since it had weights. To keep them firmly on the desolate ocean floor. It was like walking in a mech suit, if the suit was ponderously slow. However…slow seemed the wrong word. Again, it seemed to be a psychological effect to some degree.

He could move smoothly, yet it was almost as if they were in molasses or another liquid which let them move – if everything was in slow motion. But also not in slow motion. It was weird, but something they’d gotten used to. In the unlikely event of an attack, Loke did wonder how they would actually fare.

If so, it might be the slowest fight of all time. He’d chuckled at the mental image of Human and alien fighting in slow motion, ponderously aiming their weapons and firing. They were armed with both sonic and physical projectile weapons, so it wasn’t as though they were defenseless.

Today though, this mission was more than tests. There was a purpose.

“It’s a new type of element,” Zhi Xue was saying, the Neptune Scout who was one of many who were making daily trips to map the ocean floor. “It seemed odd, and the geologists couldn’t determine what it was. They don’t think it’s alien, but I don’t want to collect samples without taking precautions.”

“Anytime,” Loke said. “The more we get used to these suits, the better. Besides, I’m always up for a trek on the ocean floor.”

“It is something, isn’t it,” Zhi floated above them, not bound to the ground like they were, and propelled by her movements and motorized water streams. “It’s incredible. A bit isolating, but I enjoy it. There’s so much of the world we still haven’t explored that we can now.”

“We’re getting a bit far from Atlantis,” Orla said, glancing behind them at the fading lights of the base. “Let’s hope we don’t get lost.”

Zhi laughed. “I’ve been coming this way for days. Trust me, we’re all on timers. Take too long, and search parties get sent out. Standard Neptune protocol. Ah, here we are.” They stopped at a built platform, which held a small platform vehicle used by the Scouts for long-distance exploration.

“This isn’t going to be fast, but I’d still hold onto something,” Zhi advised as she took the controls. Lights turned on as the vehicle started up, and they moved out into the blackness. Before Zhi and situated just above the controls was a highly detailed map of the ocean floor.

“How far is this?” Loke asked.

“A fair ways,” she admitted. “It’s not so much far as deep. We’re going to be going down shortly. Be ready.”

True to her promise, the vehicle began dipping and it wasn’t long before the complete blackness enveloped them. This was the part where he really became uncomfortable. The white lights of the vehicle seemed so completely inferior to the oppressive blackness. Still, he comforted himself with knowing that, truthfully, there wasn’t anything down here but a jump scare.

He still hated jump scares though.
“So how did you find it?” He looked around. “Not through exploring personally, right?”

A snort. “Not this time. Scans taken of the area from Atlantis, which were verified by some others I’d taken of the general area, and now we’re exploring ourselves. We didn’t even get any hard images, only readings of the odd element. Not the first time this has happened, but definitely the closest.”

“When you say-“

Orla’s words died in his throat as they seemed to cross some invisible threshold and Loke stiffened as still as a statue, completely paralyzed without being able to move so much as move an eyelid. Invisible bonds wrapped around his body, pinning it in place like a pin at a bowling alley. Orla and Zhi were similarly incapacitated, although the vehicle itself still went forward.

But with them no longer anchored to it, it just kept going.

Down and down it went, and the light faded with it as they floated in the black.

In one of the few times in his life, he was terrified.

His heart pounded rapidly - and if he could have screamed, he would have. He frantically tried to reassert control of his emotions – a difficult task given he was surrounded by nothing but blackness and his wholly useless light – not to mention wholly cut off from Atlantis in a suit not designed to get back.

Then it got worse.

Something touched his mind.

He’d never been under a psionic attack before, but he knew this is what one must feel like. But it was more than something foreign, something formless touching it. There was such an immense presence to it, it was like comparing an ant to a giant. What little shield of his mind existed crumpled under the simplest touch of the thing.

He felt it go into his mind, ignoring the Manchurian Restraints which only prevented voluntary sharing of the information. Of course, they protected against mind control – only by preventing his body from moving.

Very useful right now. Truly.

The Thing went deep into every thought and memory; he saw many flash before him in a rapid-fire manner, many he’d forgotten, many he’d not. It happened immediately, and simultaneously seemed to take forever. The Thing kept poring through his thoughts, picking out each and every crevice until it was satisfied with…something.

Then there was a tangible shift as if the world was blurring, and they found themselves in… something. A blue-green light seemed to come from above, and Loke found he could move, and it actually seemed like there wasn’t water around him.

“Breathe.”

He exhaled. His heart rate lessened.

Calm set in.
The fear did not fade.

The commanding voice sounded from the Nothing, heard with his ears and within his mind itself, formed from the manifested thoughts of the Thing.

Helmets still on, they glanced at each other, terrified of saying anything.

“You should not have come this way.”

A pause.

“Why do you come?”

Loke found his voice, trying to keep it steady even as pathetic as it sounded before the voice.

“We...were exploring. Following some readings. We didn’t mean to intrude...”

The air rumbled.

“This will not happen again, Humans. Be thankful for the agreement I have forged with your species.”

What?

“You will speak of this to none. You shall ensure no operations are conducted. What led you here will be purged. This shall be done. Now go.”

Each word spoken echoed deep into his mind, entrenching itself into reality inside his head as real as anything ADVENT had done to him. He didn’t fully know what it meant, nor what the Thing had been implying – but he was certainly going to make sure that whatever it was, it wasn’t ever disturbed again.

They found themselves a short distance from Atlantis, out of visual range, but able to walk it. They also saw the pad where they had launched for – with the transport resting atop it. As if they’d never left.

All of them looked at each other wordlessly.

“I think,” Zhi said, her voice shaking. “We should do what the voice said.”

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Salt Lake City Garrison, Utah – United States of America

6/6/2017 – 5:19 P.M.

“So,” Glen Dalton leaned forward, resting a forearm on the table. “I’ve got a theory.”

Angela Blackburn resisted a sigh, because just from the smirk of their medic, she knew that whatever was coming next was going to be something ‘funny’. “You’re not going to ask me if I want to hear it?”

He leaned back in mock surprise. “Are you saying you don’t want to hear my theories, Angie? I’m heartbroken.”

She raised an eyebrow, a smile twitching on the corners of her lips. “Completely and truly?”
“Without question,” he put a hand over his heart for good measure. “Cecilia! Did you hear how she insulted me?”

The Venezuelan woman rolled her eyes from the nearby couch. “Yes, Glen, I did. Angela, be nice to our medic, you know how he likes to get his ego massaged.” Her eyes nonetheless glittered with amusement from her scarred face she’d gotten from a plasma grenade. Still was in good spirits all the same.

“Ooh, what’s this?” Bradley Kerr walked into their barrack quarters, their group meal in hand. “Glen has a theory?”

Angela looked at the food, different than what he normally brought them. “What is this?”

“Thought I’d try something different,” he said, taking a seat. “ADVENT’s been rolling out their restaurants and meat production. So I got us all a fresh, patented ADVENT burger. Oscar! Young! Come over and get your food before Cecilia eats all of it.”

Angela smothered another chuckle at that. Despite being a Shieldbearer, Cecilia was easily the smallest of the squad, and ate as much as one would expect. Oscar Schwartzman and Young-Mi Cho got up from their long-running chess match which neither of them ever seemed to win or finish and joined at the table.

All of them were in good spirits, which Angela could have sensed without her telepathy. Good reason to be. Word was getting around about how the Collective had been hit worldwide and the Pantheon had somehow pulled off a direct strike at the Collective shipyards. XCOM had hit the Collective hard in Oceania too, which Bradley had been gloating about all day.

Their resident Australian held out permanent hope that his nation would be freed. Indonesia wasn’t Australia, but it was a step closer. It was good that he was happy for now, as he was a lot more focused most of the time, a regular trait of a sniper.

“Where’s Joel?” Oscar asked as they began eating. “Not going to join us this time?”

“Officer meeting,” Angela told them, glancing at the clock. “He said he had one. Probably just ran over time.”

What she didn’t think it appropriate to mention was that it was likely a contingency meeting. No matter how well ADVENT had done some days ago, the Collective was probably going to strike back – and Utah was right on the front lines of a push from the West Coast. Not unexpected that they could be targeted.

“I don’t suppose you could…ask him where he is?” Glen asked, making a circular motion with his head. “I mean, you could find him?”

“Wh-? No!” She sputtered. “Do you want the spooks to arrest me for ‘abuse of psionic power’?”

“Hey, dinner is serious,” Glen shrugged. “But really. Meetings aren’t usually this late. At least not Officer ones.”

Angela decided it was best to continue the lighthearted tone before they thought too much about why their Officer was late. She bit into the ADVENT burger. Huh, it was surprisingly good. Much better than normal fast food. “Well, don’t keep us in suspense, Glen. You clearly want to tell us your theory.”

“Ah, right,” he set a mostly-eaten burger down. “Now, here it is – Patricia Trask is actually dead.”
Angela, and most of the others, raised their eyebrows; physically and mentally.

“Please,” Oscar said dryly. “Do go on.”

“So, I remembered some things you said, Angela,” Glen nodded to her. “Way back when you were explaining the psionic theory around the Bringer. Or what we knew, anyway. Or what’s public, I should say. So fact – we know that you can control someone telepathically – correct?”

Angela sighed, but said: “Correct…”

“And the aliens have clearly shown they can clone things quickly,” Glen continued. “So – fact – they could mock up a Patricia lookalike. Or not. I don’t think she was that tall. Plus she hides herself in a mask pretty often.”

“ADVENT and XCOM seem to be treating her like the real thing,” Cecilia pointed out. “I don’t think they’d make it up.”

“Plus, we’ve heard her talk,” Bradley added. “It definitely sounds like her.”

“Hey now, let me finish,” Glen finished his burger. “I have an explanation for that. So – what the Ethereals did was extract her mind telepathically, and are storing it somewhere, and then temporarily putting it in her body when they want her to say something.”

There were a series of groans. “Very funny, Glen,” Young drawled. “I almost thought you had something serious. Angela, please confirm that’s not possible.”

She added an apologetic note to her voice. “You cannot do that Glen, sorry.”

“Gah, skeptics all around,” he wiped his hands. “That said, I’m pretty sure that’s not actually her. Don’t ask me how, just a feeling. Because I still don’t believe Patricia fucking Trask would go over to the enemy.”

“She probably didn’t,” Angela said. “Not really. What we know of the Imperator is that…well, he could easily force her to turn.” She shrugged. “It’s simple theory, actually. It’s what makes telepathy so terrifying for a lot of people. I doubt she realized what she was becoming.”

“I’m almost sad your theory isn’t possible,” Bradley said with a slight smile to Glen. “Because when we win, we get to free her spirit-mind and I wanted to ask what the afterlife was like.”

“You know we could ask our resident PRIEST,” Glen said with a smile, nodding to Angela. “Oh seer of the Psionosphere, what secrets of the beyond can you share with us mere mortals?”

Angela chortled. The squad never hid their amusement at the (admittedly extensive and arguably excessive) names of the various PRIEST Division ranks. Which she contributed to as well. Still, she liked the atmosphere when she’d been training, and people stopped laughing when they saw what the PRIESTs could do.

“Well, humble pilgrim,” she began somberly. “What questions do you have and what offering you bring?”

“My question is but a simple one,” Glen bowed his head. “Where do our spirits dwell when our souls break our mortal shell?”

“God you’re laying it on thick,” Cecilia facepalmed.
“Do forgive her,” Glen emphasized. “She is but a non-believer. As for my tribute, I offer you nourishment of the body.” He picked up a single french fry and left it before her. She plucked it up and pretended to appraise it as if it was a gemstone.

“It shall suffice,” she said seriously. “The answer to your question is – I don’t know.”

“Boo,” Glen said, ending the façade. “Sad no one knows yet. Seriously though, has that ever been asked in training?”

“Not when I was there,” Angela said. “The Magisters were more focused on making sure each of us didn’t accidentally kill someone else. The spirituality questions didn’t come up. Wouldn’t be surprised if they do at some point though.”

“Psionics isn’t really spiritual though,” Oscar said. “Doubt ADVENT will go for it.”

Angela thought back to some of the things they knew about the Bringer. “I’m not sure about that. Telepathy itself is…odd in that respect. It’s difficult to describe, but navigating the Psionosphere with minds gives a…perspective. Not really religious, but definitely…ethereal, I guess.”

“Ethereal doesn’t sound good,” Glen said deadpan.

“You know what kind of ethereal I meant,” Angela retorted. “But yeah. Any questions about the afterlife are going to have to wait.”

“A shame, that’s something I’d like to know about before I die,” Young said.

“I’d prefer not having anyone in that situation at all,” Angela finished, taking a sip of her water as she felt a familiar mind coming up. “Joel’s back.”

A few seconds later their commanding Officer strode in, as serious as usual. Angela had been somewhat intimidated by the man the first time she’d met him. The scar added a lot, a thick one going over his right eye deep in his dark skin. But he was a very nice, if somewhat overly serious man.

Glen waved a hand. “Glad you made it to dinner. Bradley picked up some ADVENT burgers – they’re pretty good.”

“Appreciated,” Joel came and picked one up, but didn’t sit down. “News from command. We’re to receive a visit from the Japanese Empress.”

Everyone, Angela included, was surprised. Not that it was a bad thing – Angela was quite impressed with the woman from what she’d seen – but the circumstances seemed odd. “Why’s she coming here?” Oscar asked, a frown marring his otherwise unblemished pale face.

“Officially, to help recruitment in Salt Lake and give a speech to us,” Joel said, beginning to eat. “Unofficially – and I’ll stress that this is something the Lieutenant just suspects – ADVENT’s expecting things to heat up a lot here. We’re in a dangerous spot, and the Empress could act as a deterrent. If anything happens…” he shrugged. “Well, she’s right here and can help.”

“Wonderful,” Bradley said. “I hope nothing happens then. I’d like to meet her.”

“She’s not going out with you,” Glen teased. “Don’t get your hopes up.”

“Glen…” Bradley rubbed his forehead, with Angela catching his embarrassment. “You do realize I can admire a woman for her feats and not just because she’s moderately attractive.”
Angela hid her smile with another drink from her glass, and exchanged a look with Cecilia and Young. The three of them knew very well that the Empress was definitely not considered just ‘moderately’ attractive by the overwhelming majority of the single male population. “Whatever you tell yourself at night,” Glen finished, rolling up his burger wrapper and shooting it into the trash bin. “So do we have a role in this, or just attending?”

“We’re on security,” Joel looked to Angela. “Since we have a psion, they want us making sure there’s not anything out of the ordinary. So we’re going to be her unofficial escort, with several other PRIEST-integrated squads.”

“Any dedicated PRIEST squads?” Angela wondered.

“A couple,” Joel confirmed. “I saw several Protopriests named as tertiary escorts. ADVENT’s taking her security seriously.”

“Sounds fun,” Glen said. “Nobody jinx it.”

Angela hoped he was right, but another part of her wondered. Given what had just happened, and what could very easily happen, she had a feeling that the next few days were going to be… interesting.

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*Situation Room, SAS Command – Nigeria*

6/8/2017 – 11:14 A.M.

Three different aliens stood in the same room, looking at a holotable. The Ethereal stood silently observing as the Human and Vitakarian discussed the latest developments. Ones which heralded the true war for Africa to start. Though the actions ADVENT was taking were certainly… bold.

“A fleet.” Betos said flatly, a note of disbelief still in it, while looking at the holotable. “A naval fleet for that matter.”

“So it would seem,” Keeper agreed, rubbing his chin. “Curious.”

“There must be something more,” Betos muttered, furrowing her brow. “What do we know about the fleet?”

“That it’s very well armed and armored,” Keeper recalled from the Zararch reports Betos had briefly gone over. “Much of the ADVENT wet navy had been overhauled once the shipping raids started. They’ve been moderately successful in defending the supply lines. Augmented with AA defenses, reinforced hulls, and gauss, laser, and plasma weapons.”

“Dangerous then,” Betos nodded slowly. “We knew that. But assuming they’re coming here – why? A naval attack is one of the least effective.”

“The SAS doesn’t have a modernized or large enough navy,” Keeper pointed out. “Although if that is truly their rationale, then they failed to account for a mass deployment of Andromedon Aquatic Forces. Which seems like the obvious response should they be moving this way.”

“Could it be a trap?” She wondered aloud.

“If it’s a trap, it’s a very poor one,” Keeper narrowed his eyes. “Which makes me believe it’s not a trap, and instead a clear signal which will be followed – or preceded by – a land invasion. A
compliment to an attack, not something else. However, the size of the fleet is irregular. Far too large for us – or what I would expect. Alternatively, it could be misdirection for something else.”

“If ADVENT is to invade us, they would want to send a message,” Betos said grimly. “Literal overkill. They used a nuclear weapon. An overwhelming fleet wouldn’t make them flinch. I assume there are submarines accompanying them?”

“Of course, some,” Keeper nodded. “But this primarily seems to be a ship-based fleet. If the submarines were similarly mobilizing for this fleet, we would know about it.”

Betos looked to Macula. “If they’re headed our way, we’ll need the Andromedons.”

A nod from the helmeted alien. “They will arrive swiftly. If ADVENT wishes to use an overwhelming wet naval fleet, we can exceed them and send their soldiers to the bottom of the sea.”

“It might not be easy,” Keeper warned. “Crew compositions include ADVENT special forces and PRIESTs. They’re preparing for us. Nonetheless, with an even larger fleet we should emerge victorious without much difficulty.”

Betos still felt like they were missing something. “We should know of an equivalent land mobilization – and to my knowledge we haven’t seen that.”

“We have, actually,” Keeper amended, shifting the holotable to Africa. “ADVENT has been mobilizing and steadily moving Legions to Egypt and European nations close to Africa. All of them are stuck in limbo until the sandstorms in the Sahara calm down. ADVENT clearly doesn’t want to risk going through them.”

“How long are the storms supposed to last?”

“At least several days more, according to forecasts,” Keeper answered. “Probably a week before they calm down enough for ADVENT to effectively move through them.”

Betos did find it somewhat amusing that a simple series of sandstorms was all it took to keep ADVENT at bay. “Maybe we should invest in a weather machine,” she said dryly. “That seems to keep ADVENT at bay. A hurricane would be useful right now.”

“Indeed it would,” Keeper offered a thin smile. “However, that gives us time to prepare. We’ve estimated the places where ADVENT will strike once they mobilize. They should be prepared by the time ADVENT moves out. No more than one week.”

“Good.”

“We have half a million Collective reinforcements almost being deployed over that same period,” Keeper added. “And considering the state of some of the nations XCOM so helpfully destabilized, we should move in and restore order. There is no government to speak of right now, and if we don’t act, ADVENT will.”

Betos didn’t like the idea of the SAS effectively invading a country…but the fact was that there was no more government since XCOM had removed it. They needed to do something, and they were better equipped than ADVENT to restore order before military dictatorships happened or criminals carved up what was left.

“Unfortunately, that’s true,” she admitted. “Send in our soldiers. No aliens yet. XCOM tried framing the Collective, and people won’t react well. We need food, medicine, aid first. I’ll work
with the acting heads of state to establish some kind of government. The sooner we start this, the better. All simultaneous. We can manage that, correct?”

“Correct, Marshal.”

“Then I would suggest we start doing that,” Betos drummed her fingers on the edge of the holotable, fixated on the image. “We have a short window before ADVENT strikes. Let’s move as fast as we can.”

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_Nartha’s Quarters, Nulorian Outpost – Borelian Wastes_

6/5/2017 – 2:20 P.M.

He felt better now.

It took a few hours, but some time to think and sharing a morning stimulant (in the afternoon) with Shun helped get his mind focused beyond Miridían’s ruthless plans. Now they both sat on a couch in his largely sparse quarters, both of them seated basically right next to each, a proximity neither felt the need to comment on or change.

Shun swirled the drink in her mug. “We’ll get them out.”

Nartha pursed his lips. “I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

He sighed. “He’s part of the Aui’Vitakar. He probably sees me as a traitor. Mother too.”

Shun shrugged. “You’re still his son. And your sister is in XCOM.”

“What means he is probably trying his hardest to prove his loyalty,” Nartha finished grimly. “But he’s like so many others. They don’t see the Collective; the Zararch; the Ethereals as the _enemy._”

Shun nodded. “Propaganda.”

“More than that,” Nartha added. “They have good lives. If you get sick, you go to a hospital and get better. You are educated. You always have a job. No war, no hardship. Why would you want to get rid of that?” He lifted a hand. “Yes, I know. But most people are never negatively touched by the Zararch knowingly. All of what’s happening just…doesn’t affect them.”

“No, I get it,” Shun briefly closed her eyes. “Reminds me of China, in a way. Minus the guarantee of a comfortable life. But historically, we’d been taken advantage of by other nations. Then when it was our turn…we’re more comfortable trusting our leaders who at least we knew were _us._ Belief because if we didn’t, we’d have nothing.”

She paused several seconds. “Then later throw in propaganda for several generations, an isolated internet, and control over education, and you got the pre-ADVENT Chinese state. And even then, it’s not like we didn’t know there was something _outside_ what the CCP taught, we just thought we were better. Easier to stay with something familiar than fight for something better. So I get that.”

“And now ADVENT fixed that.”

“Fixed?” She snorted. “Not completely. Not for years at least. You can’t change a mindset overnight. I was lucky; I got regularly exposed to others who made me think a bit more critically.
Not everyone is in that position, or open-minded enough to change their minds like I was. But… ADVENT will make it better. You’ll make it better for your people too.”

He gave a wan smile at her. “Assuming Miridian leaves any alive.”

She rolled her eyes. “No mass killings on my watch, or the Commander’s. If there’s one person I think he fears, it’s him.”

“Fears?” Nartha shook his head, amused. “I doubt that. Not when he has his pet machine around him. Miridian isn’t the type of person who is ‘afraid’. Which, I will say, is not necessarily a smart thing.”

“Fear can keep you from making stupid decisions,” Shun agreed. “Then again, it can also stop you from making smart ones.”

“The line between healthy and unhealthy fear is thin,” Nartha noted. “And I think Miridian may fall more on the latter – though the Commander can likely keep him in check.”

“We can only hope,” Shun said. “But I’m serious. You’re not only the first Vitakara to realize something was wrong, and defect, but the first alien. If anyone’s going to have a role, it’ll be you.”

“I almost hope not,” Nartha said slowly, resisting a shudder. “I’m not a good person to lead. I’m much better at following orders; working within a box to get something done. I have no idea how to set up a government. I also don’t want to be Speaker of the Vitakara 2.0. I don’t think a former Zararch leading the new enlightened Vitakara would play well.”

“No, no, not necessarily lead, but you can help the people adapt,” she insisted. “Like you said, it’ll take time – and people along the way. You know what they will be going through, and how you can help.”

“Maybe if I have a few dozen defectors and ADVENT psychologists helping,” he glanced at her. “You too. You’d probably be better suited than I am.”

“Hey, I’m just a soldier too,” she smiled, and took his hand resting on the couch fabric. “But I’d be more than happy to be the official XCOM liaison for this project. For purely professional reasons, of course.”

He met her eyes. “No doubt.”

There was a brief, very charged moment of silence between them.

“I’ve been thinking,” Shun finally said, not looking away. “A while, actually, but really when you almost died to Quisilia. Things that…well…both of us may be avoiding, assuming you’re picking up what I’m saying, yes?”

“I…think I am.”

“Right,” she nodded, taking a shaky breath. “Well then. Yes. I like you, romantically I mean, which is really odd to say that to an alien, but, well, it seems really dumb to deny it. Things are getting a lot more dangerous, and I don’t want you to die and I never told you how I feel.”

On some level, over some time, he’d wondered about this. Little hints which may or may not be indications. Something they kept more or less dancing around as they worked, talked, and fought together. He’d been confident…but not confident enough to really confirm. Not until now.
And the confession was enough to turn his previously stressful day around.

And he had, of course, done some research on Human romantic relationships. Initially very long ago when he’d been preparing to infiltrate XCOM, and more recently, just in case he was right about her interest. And if the movies and books were any indication, now was the time for the next step.

So he leaned down and kissed her.

He didn’t know how long it lasted, but it was as long as both of them wanted.

When it finally broke, the euphoria both felt didn’t abate.

It was certainly different from Vitakarian women – but in a good way.

She tried to sound accusatory, but it came out almost as a giggle. “You’ve been waiting to do that.”

He smiled, looking down at her. “I’ve been thinking about it for a while.”

“We could have done this so long ago,” she groaned, closing her eyes briefly before opening them and looking at him intently. “Well then, what are you waiting for – do it again.”

***

Salt Lake City, Utah – United States of America

6/10/2017 – 4:22 P.M.

Kaya was thankful that ADVENT was doing something to not make her tours completely superfluous. On some level she knew it was selling herself short, but on another, she didn’t like the idea that she was getting out of the front lines of battle. Then again, right now, there weren’t any major battles going on.

Though they were assuredly coming.

Probably after this PR event, actually.

“Africa,” she grunted in the back room, which her squad was staying in before going out to the throngs of people. “I guess ADVENT is not going to tolerate them anymore.”

“Apparently not.” Genevieve tossed the tablet to the side after she finished reading. “Very vague though. ‘SAS offensive’ can mean quite a few different things. Either way, I admit, it will feel good to actually get back to killing aliens.”

“Nah, it’ll feel better,” Vicki interjected. “If there’s one thing worse than an alien, it’s a traitor Human.”

“Here, here,” Fletcher nodded. “But in the meantime, we get to play bodyguard, so it’s a nice change of pace. Beijing was honestly enough to give me my fill of fighting for a while.”

“And I’m glad all of you are here, uneventful as it’s been,” Kaya smiled, glancing to the clock. “Speaking of which, we’ve got to move in a few minutes.”

All of the squad moved to get up and ready themselves, putting on helmets and clicking on the safeties of weapons. Public event it may be, they were cognizant of Kaya’s increased public profile, and it wasn’t out of the question that the Zararch or another alien faction would try and
especially given that they’d technically already tried.

Suited up, they marched out to significant PRIEST protection, many seen, a number unseen. PRIEST-embedded ADVENT Army squads were also deployed around the city. It was definitely a lot of work just for her, but she did take some solace in the fact that if something were to happen, it probably wouldn’t just be an assassination, and the garrison would be ready.

There was, in fact, a good chance that the Collective was planning something from the West Coast. If it would come today, tomorrow, or a week from now was unknown – but it was likely to come soon; all in a wave of retaliation from the aliens after ADVENT had struck back.

But they would see.

The event was a relatively simple one, go to a venue, give a short speech, and then an afterwards discussion with a smaller group, usually a mixture of high-school and college-age people. If there was a Japanese population, they would also be directly spoken to. She preferred that, much less formal and she felt it helped dispel her as some mythical figure ADVENT was presenting her as.

ADVENT wanted her to primarily improve military recruitment, which was not something she really believed in. Not everyone was cut out to be a soldier. Instead she preferred encouraging them to work for ADVENT in some capacity. Intelligence, Medical, Science, Engineering, the Militia, to do something to contribute.

That struck her as a more balanced approach than solely military. ADVENT hadn’t commented on it, so she assumed that they were satisfied by her approach. Data after her recruitment tours showed that she was having a tangible impact on hiring numbers, and that was all that mattered.

She was still somewhat surprised at how much interest she generated. No matter where she’d gone, there’d been a packed house. In Japan or Asia that would be one thing, but Americans and Europeans? They theoretically shouldn’t care as much. She knew part of it was due to ADVENT, but it might be simpler than that. People liked a good comeback story.

Or a revenge story.

Both were applicable.

One thing which struck her as she talked with people all over the world was that there was, truly, no one who was untouched by the war. Everyone mentioned that a friend, or a sibling, a parent, an uncle, someone they knew had died, or they knew someone who knew someone who died.

There were way too many families which were now being managed by single mothers or fathers, or worse, the oldest siblings. Civilian PTSD was skyrocketing, as were other mental conditions made worse by the stress of war. There was no safe place on Earth, not really, and she saw it in their eyes.

A weary fear, as if they were waiting for the sirens to sound and the bombardment to begin.

It was always emotionally exhausting, but it did make these long events worthwhile. Thank goodness ADVENT existed and was managed by competent people. She didn’t want to think about how the world would have dealt with a crisis like this without a strong, decisive government.

It would have been bad. It was also generous assuming that the world would have held on this long.
“Think that’s another one down for today,” Genevieve yawned as the last people trailed out. “That makes-“

The muffled sound of an explosion sounded, rattling the building’s foundation as the squad immediately formed up around her, weapons up. Kaya immediately flung her own helmet on, and reached for her sword as the PRIEST squad nearby burst in and encased them in a psionic shield.

“What’s going on?” She yelled.

“We’re assessing, Empress,” the Protopriest stated, “But there’s been an explosion. Seems to be someone in the crowd who was intercepted. There are several suspects, ADVENT squads are moving out now. Stay put, we’ll ensure they get no further.”

***

Salt Lake City, Utah – United States of America

6/10/2017 – 4:02 P.M.

Angela was convinced that the best training that any telepath could do was to go outside, sit down, and listen.

Not listen, listen, since the Manchurian Restraints would prevent spying on people’s thoughts without good reason, but what it couldn’t stop was the picking up of emotions. Even that would be initially overwhelming for a young or inexperienced telepath, and at first it would be a soup of everything. Good luck picking out specific emotions, much less who said emotions could be connected to.

But with experience, it would eventually start to work itself out. Things would become clearer; the mind would be able to start separating and picking out what it wanted to. You could ignore or focus on specific emotions, and then tie them to people walking around you. It was enormous power, even if not ultimate, and she suspected that if people even knew that, it would make them uncomfortable.

It never made guard duty boring, that was for sure. The emotions always acted as adrenaline in some way; it required some degree of empathy to feel what they felt, and one would feel the emotions just as they did. Those were the most effective telepaths, in her opinion. Telepaths who were too clinical in their approach seemed to have more difficulty picking out specific entities.

Telepathy required connection, and that would always go both ways to a degree.

Hundreds of people milled around outside the event area, going about their business or waiting to get in or for the Empress to emerge. Angela and her squad were one of the many ones which were scattered around for protection and observation. Thus far, nothing but crowds. A lot, but not something that they couldn’t handle.

Angela stood behind Oscar and Young. Bradley was stationed in a balcony above, sniper rifle at the ready. Glen, Cecilia and Joel were patrolling in sync with the movements of a dozen other squads, giving a permanent presence to the entire event. Oscar hated these kinds of events, and found guard duty very, very dull.

Young was a little more interested, but she much preferred to be in a team which was at least moving. Angela couldn’t really blame them; they weren’t telepaths and without as much stimuli as she was receiving, it would admittedly be very boring. So she’d also gotten good at talking to them while also being able to properly monitor everything.
And also used her telepathy to passively sharpen them. A Solii needed to always help her squad, and throughout this entire rotation, neither of them would feel tired or exhausted. And in the unlikely event something did happen, they would be able to react immediately. Both probably knew, even if they didn’t comment on it.

“She’s a good speaker,” Oscar was saying. “I can see why Bradley is so infatuated with her.”

“You both realize I can hear what you’re saying?” The sniper muttered from atop.

Angela smiled, but didn’t comment. “Yes, yes,” Oscar said. “I’m saying you have good taste, man.”

Bradley grumbled something unintelligible into the comms. “She is,” Young agreed. “She did always strike me as a smart one. Kind of surprised she was actually able to get into the Order without anyone recognizing her.”

“You’ve seen her before?” Oscar glanced over to her.

“I lived in Korea my whole life,” Young reminded him. “We’re pretty close to Japan. Not superfans or anything, but they were close enough where we generally followed if the Japanese imperial were doing something. Never thought it would turn into anything like this though. But good for her.”

“Still, I wonder,” Oscar mused. “Think she’s writing her speeches on her own, or some ADVENT writing team is doing them?”

“Nah, I think she is,” Young insisted. “You can tell if someone’s speaking their own words or someone else’s. You can tell, no matter how good of a speaker they are.”

“If that were the case, Saudia would be writing her own speeches,” Oscar pointed out.

“She actually does,” Bradley interjected. “Said so quite a few times.”

“Oh, come on,” Oscar snorted. “Like the fucking Chancellor doesn’t have a team of the best writers crafting her own Independence Day “We will not go quietly into the night” speeches. No way she’s coming up with that on her own.”

“Hey man, if she isn’t, she’s a really good actor.”

“I’m not saying they’re bad,” Oscar protested. “They’re great! But come on, that isn’t how politics like that works. She probably practices a lot.”

“She’s a good speaker,” Angela added. “A good leader. Like Treduant.”

Despite the fact that she’d come from nowhere.

All these months later, there was a lot about how ADVENT came about that still made her uncomfortable. She, like pretty much everyone else, found it difficult to believe that ADVENT coming around had been a great Coming Together™ of Humanity for the greater good. There was a mechanical calculation around it, with Saudia being the top of it.

A void with no past or history.

And the only answers were found in conspiracies, a rabbit hole she was definitely not going to go down. Glen would do that, and on occasion would share some of the more outlandish ones, but
underneath his excuse of humor, he was just as curious about the origins of the new world order as the rest of them.

Not that it was wholly a bad thing. ADVENT was indisputably needed and it was good to have competent leaders right now. At the same time, there was a lot about ADVENT which could generously be considered questionable.

Oscar and Young were still chatting. Angela let their conversation happen in the background as the crowds still moved. Until Oscar brought her up again. “Angela, I don’t suppose you’ll have stuff going on tonight?”

Angela raised an eyebrow under her helmet. “I don’t think so?”

“Well…” he slightly glanced back to her. “You think you might?”

“Oscar…” Young sighed.

“She’s a telepath! She can understand subtlety.”

“You’re about as subtle as the Battlemaster in a street of Humans,” Bradley commented dryly.

Indeed he was. “Well,” Angela said slowly. “Perhaps I will go get some target practice. I’m sure Bradley would love to come with me, and Glen too. Joel will probably be in a meeting.”

“Oh, fine. You owe me, Oscar.”

Oscar was likely grinning under his helmet. “Don’t worry, I’ll put in a word for you with the Empress. I’ll try to get an autograph if they have them.”

“One with a kiss too, if she’s comfortable doing that.” Young added with a giggle.

“I hate you all.”

But he didn’t, even if he was slightly embarrassed with all of the teasing. And Angela didn’t have a problem letting Oscar and Young conveniently have the squad room to themselves for a few hours. One could only imagine what they wanted it for. Not that either of them had been especially subtle about it; Angela had figured it out pretty easily after the first time. Emotions were a dead giveaway, but all she’d done was give them a knowing look which they’d sheepishly returned and let them go more public at their own pace.

It was cute.

Though Joel had just rolled his eyes when he’d found out, muttering about the ‘indiscretion of youth in war’. But she’d known he didn’t have an issue either. With a war going on, there were more important things to worry about.

However her good mood quickly crystalized as she noticed something peculiar. She wasn’t sure what had caught her attention, but there was a woman who was sitting and reading a newspaper nearby. She looked pretty normal, and not really even interested in what was going on around her. But she had no emotional signature. None. There was a difference between having tight control, and not having any emotions at all. And she had nothing. “Bradley, see the woman across the street. Newspaper, black hair, white, jeans, green shirt?”

“Yep. Why?”
“She doesn’t have any emotional signature.”

A pause. “Well, that’s not good. One of the Zararch infiltration machines?”

“Only one way to find out,” Angela switched her frequency. “Salt Lake Local Command, this is PRIEST Blackburn. Possible location of a Zararch REPLICA unit. Request backup and permission to proceed.”

“Stand by. Please provide description and location.”

Angela complied, then waited a few minutes, and subtly noticed a number of other squads had entered the area. “Soldiers on standby, as well as applicable sniper and PRIEST units. Approach with caution.”

“Copy that,” she nodded. “Joel, did you get that?”

“I did,” he confirmed, also now on their frequency. “Proceed. I’m heading back now, but if it’s a REPLICA we want to take it out now. Be careful.”

“Alright, let’s go,” she said, taking a lead before Oscar and Young who flanked her as she approached the woman. Said target looked up as they approached, though apparently judged to play it cool.

“Hello, is there an issue?”

“We hope not,” she definitely looked and sounded Human. “Identification please?”

“Oh, of course,” the woman fumbled around in her purse. A good actor, but now that she was up close, Angela knew that it was a façade. She made a show of looking at the ID – which did seem legitimate – before putting it in one of her pouches.

“There seems to be a small issue with it,” she said. “I’m sure it’s nothing, but you’ll have to come with-“

She wasn’t able to finish as the woman’s face turned fully still and she leapt forward, pushing Angela with enough force to send her back into Oscar, and bolted through the crowd. A sniper shot rang out, which hit the woman in the arm, but didn’t stop her. The crowd burst into pandemonium at that, and scattered in all directions at the shot.

But the line of ADVENT soldiers who’d formed had closed all exists. The REPLICA seemed to realize that, and briefly stood frozen, trying to plot a way out. “Cage coming up.” One of the PRIESTs said over the comms. A small psionic box appeared around the REPLICA, who looked around it.

“Try to not damage it,” Joel was saying. “We’d prefer it-“

The REPLICA exploded.

The blast rocked the ground, and the psionic shields weren’t able to contain the full blast, which blew a number of bystanders back, though thankfully at first glance it didn’t seem to have killed anyone. But the REPLICA was fully vaporized. Only shrapnel and ash remained. Angela breathed heavily.

That could have been much worse.
“Well,” Oscar coughed, standing up. “I think that’s enough excitement today.”

Angela agreed, but she had a feeling that Oscar and Young weren’t going to get their private time tonight. If there was one REPLICA, there were almost certainly others, and ADVENT wasn’t going to let things return to normal until each one had been found and terminated.

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Residence of General Imraam, Kuala Lumpur ADVENT Base – Malaysia

6/11/2017 – 9:02 P.M.

Subtle.

That was what the Zar’Chon wanted.

Easier said than done.

Penetration of the military base itself was trivial. It was a simple matter of tailing one of the soldiers who commuted each day from the city itself, breaking into their home, taking scans and data of their badge, then leaving. The data was transmitted to the Collective, who were able to fabricate a copy without issue.

The guards only really cared about the ID card being scannable or even just looking accurate, so flashing it was usually all that was needed. Nemo had done some modifications to the face to make it look not completely like Saudia, such as adding a small scar, cutting the hair far shorter, and adding glasses.

It was amazing how much a simple prop like glasses could change a face.

Not that anyone was paying attention to what it was doing here, nor was Nemo making their actions obvious. Simple observation for several days, learning patterns and keeping track of important people – its target included. General Imraam lived on-base – a smart decision, but military housing was still vulnerable.

It just happened to reside within a higher-risk area.

Simple.

Around the exterior of the house were three squads, and a full PRIEST Squad led by an actual Protopriest. One of the days Nemo had paid special attention to them. Three telepaths, two aegii, and one telekine. Mental and physical bases covered. Assassination by sniper rifle would be practically impossible given how thoroughly he was surrounded whenever he walked outside.

Scans taken of the residence revealed that it was not made out of regular material. Stronger walls, bulletproof glass, SHIVs which patrolled, along with MDUs. They really did not want anyone to touch this guy. Unsurprising, but it was not something which could not be overcome.

And it was time to act.

A frontal attack was obviously suicide. A stealth approach luring and taking out guards one-by-one was infeasible due to the psions and machines. Compromising the machines was equally impossible since its credentials weren’t tuned for engineering, nor was Nemo confident that certain contingencies weren’t hardcoded to prevent hacking. ADVENT would have likely done that.
It also didn’t help that the entire residence was wired up with so many sensors that there was a high likelihood that the moment any movement was detected past the threshold, the door would slam open and alarms would go off. It was incredible just how paranoid ADVENT was being. No one could also enter without a psionic evaluation and verification.

They had learned quite a lot since the assassination of the Japanese Imperials. And presumably after they’d found its previous target dead.

Admirable, in a way.

With all of these factors, Nemo had come to the conclusion that breaking into the residence was impossible. Even something like compromising the ventilation wouldn’t likely work since there were almost certainly sensors that would detect air changes, and there was even an anti-nanite contingency based on scans.

ADVENT wanted to play, as they would say, ‘hardball’.

Well, that could certainly be done.

It wouldn’t be…*subtle*…but it could be done.

Nemo clicked a finger to its ear. “Is it in position?”

The synthesized Andromedon voice answered promptly. “*Standing by. Awaiting coordinates.*”

Nemo lifted the carefully tuned tracking rifle and took aim at the house. The laser was still risky because it could still be intercepted by the MDUs or SHIVs even if Humans couldn’t see it. But from up high, it had a lessened chance of detection…for the first few minutes. A conventional airstrike was impossible due to ADVENT detecting such beforehand.

Missile strikes or other projectiles had the same issue.

Thus, unconventional technology had to be employed.

Union Omega was responsible for some of the most sophisticated pieces of technology that existed today. The Federation’s own black operations Union had outdone themselves with this particular device. Even if the Shatterpoint Satellite was, by all metrics, a major waste of expensive resources.

A stealth satellite which could be inserted covertly into an orbit, designed to be invisible to scanners and radar. Over three months to meticulously put together, loaded with several hundred metal spikes, each approximately one foot long, specially forged and designed to be released and fly to the ground at terminal velocity, and impact a very targeted and specific point.

No engine, no thrust, no detection. Too small to be taken out by AA defenses. No signature to be detected beforehand. Shields would be the only tool capable of stopping it, but this particular base didn’t have it. The impact would be more than enough to level the target structure and kill anyone caught in the radius.

Afterwards, the satellite would activate its nanoconsumer, and eat itself, leaving no trace it ever existed. The perfect assassination weapon, though due to the exceptional cost, the Collective only had a few on hand. It didn’t help that due to the small size of the spikes, it wouldn’t be equally effective against everything. It wouldn’t take out a skyscraper, let alone a place like the Chancellor’s residence.

But against a slightly-improved home to a military commander?
“Synchronized. Firing. Maintain laser.”

In theory, all Nemo had to do was upload the actual coordinates, but with ADVENT’s AI in play, risking their networks was not acceptable. This carried its own risks, but they were more manageable. Not to mention that the precise nature of the weapon meant that a wrong coordinate could throw off the entire attack.

“Firing complete. Severing and self-destructing.”

Nemo turned off the laser. The machines hadn’t seen anything.

It allowed itself a smile.

Time to watch the fireworks.

So Nemo sat back, and first saw the little orange bolts fall from the sky. ADVENT seemed to notice them as well – just as they heard the shriek and the first spikes slam into the house. It was fascinating to see the hundreds of spikes reduce the house to shreds like being shot point-blank with a flechette weapon.

Which was, in essence, what the Shatterpoint Satellite was.

Everyone and everything near the house was instantly killed.

Alarms blared.

Time to go. Mission accomplished.

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Near Field Hospital – Brazil

6/12/2017 – 8:42 P.M.

They’d spent the last few days observing; watching patterns and routines the medical staff performed. It was a challenge that Volk, even now, still didn’t want to complete. A small part of him was hoping that ADVENT would catch onto something and give him an excuse for not going through with it.

Unfortunately, they had not.

The field hospital was a fairly minor one, which was a good distance from the front lines of the South American conflict, near a city he didn’t know the name of, though had been built beyond it for safety and expansion reasons. Wartime injuries, mostly, so as not to overburden the city hospital which still handled routine injuries.

Civilians, soldiers, anyone hurt as a direct consequence of the war was taken here. Large enough to provide care, and small enough to only have a small guard and still largely composed of tents and only a couple solid buildings.

And there was a routine the staff had every week, which was to gather in the main hall as something of a social event and morale booster. Everyone from the Hospital overseer to the medics themselves attended. Fish in a barrel, and the guards were minimal. ADVENT either didn’t have the manpower or didn’t believe that those kinds of locations would be attacked.
To be fair to them – this was a wholly out-of-the-way target.

Though in truth, it was clearly a test by the Zar’Chon.

“Time to move in,” Volk ordered, as he and his soldiers coalesced around the hall where they were gathered. The guards had been taken care of, but there was only a limited time before people were sent to investigate. A dozen of them were spread out now; Volk motioned for a couple to cover the exits.

When they entered, some would likely try to escape that way.

“How are we doing this?” Came the question from one of his men, Arthur.

Volk pursed his lips under his mask. There was a plan they had come up with; several in fact, but he decided not to pursue those. Instead all he said was: “Follow my lead.”

And so they flung the doors open, and entered, weapons raised. There were a few yelps of surprise and sputtering, as well as dishes and drinks falling to the ground as those gathered beheld the armored intruders. There weren’t any others than they’d expected. Just medics, administrators, managers, and a few patients which had recovered enough to take part in this social event.

There were tables set out with food, from chips, salsa, and soup, and punch bowls with different colored liquids in them. Paper plates and plastic forks were set out at the ends, and small round tables were set up with some groups gathered around. Some smooth background music played at a low volume, which became the overriding sound as everyone got quiet.

He should have given the fire order then.

But he didn’t.

Not yet.

“Up and against the wall!” He ordered, moving his plasma rifle to emphasize. They quickly complied, some tripping over each other. A healthy portion of them were holding in tears or expelled muffled sobs, all of them believing that they were going to die very soon. He shouldn’t be giving these people hope.

He moved throughout the room, with his soldiers forcing compliance and making sure they didn’t move. They complied; none of them tried breaking free or making a run for it. Smart. Except one man; a figure who was seated at one of the round tables with a bowl of soup. He was a doctor judging from his coat, and seemed to be middle-aged. Perhaps in his late thirties or early forties if Volk had to guess.

A day’s worth of stubble had grown around his chin and mouth over slightly-tanned skin, perhaps he was a military doctor judging from the buzz cut, which was so close it was close to indistinguishable from him being bald. What was exceptionally odd about him was how unconcerned he seemed to be, simply appraising the intruders while eating spoonfuls of his soup.

“Against the wall,” Volk ordered.

The man looked up at him. “Rather blunt. You could ask a bit nicer, considering the circumstances.”

His voice was equally baffling; no trace of concern or fear. It was almost chastising him for a lack of manners like a stuffy aristocrat. Not someone who was now in a hostage situation with his life
very much on the line. Volk aimed the weapon in his general direction. “Do you want to be shot?”

“Preferably now, than later,” another spoonful of soup. “Although I can certainly see the appeal of such drawn-out executions. There’s something so intoxicating about the feeling of power in your hands. The power over life and death; such control. A rush like no other. And right now, we could all use a little more control in our lives, wouldn’t you agree?”

Volk frowned at the man who was smiling up at him knowingly, not expecting the conversation. “What are you talking about?”

The man smiled. “What else could I be referring to?” He gestured around him. “Please, do not try and fool me. Don’t worry, I know about the Collective’s orders. Killing the helpless medics – a test of loyalty for their Human collaborators. But that is a step just too far for you, so you’re desiring control. Hence this current…situation.”

Volk had a very bad feeling about the man, who stood up a moment later. He wanted him to stop talking. “Shut up and get against the wall.”

“You will not be able to control this situation forever,” the man almost taunted. “Indecision kills men just as surely as weapons. And it can happen in an instant.” He followed up with the snapping of the plastic spoon he had held in his hands.

“Volk?” One of his men asked. “What are we doing?”

What were they doing? What he should do was shoot this man who definitely knew more than he should have, and was acting like he was expecting him, but…this whole mission was not something he had agreed to. And if he did follow through on this, then he couldn’t hide from himself that he was now just an indiscriminate assassin of the aliens. It’s not like this will stop Patricia from doing her own thing.

And for what? To make it easier for them to do this again.

He pursed his lips. “Knock them out and take their IDs and access cards. We might as well get the supplies here.”

“But…” his men didn’t seem convinced. “Asaru…”

“I’ll deal with her,” Volk muttered. “Do it.”

Elena gave a slight nod from beside him. At least she would be on his side, for what it was worth. “Except you,” he looked at the man. “You’re coming with us.”

The man raised an eyebrow, not bothering to hide his amusement. “A prisoner of war? What an interesting turn this has taken, yet all the same, I must refuse.” He shook his head in mock sadness. “I would suggest you leave now,” the man said, his voice a mixture of sympathy and warning. “Else your losses will be painful.”

“We’ve got the locations,” Elena stated. “We can go. Leave him.”

“I don’t think he’s a medic,” Volk said slowly, narrowing his eyes. “ADVENT Intelligence, probably.”

“He’s not,” Elena shook her head. “But I do not like him. I cannot read him. We should go.”
“I do admire a perceptive woman,” the man smiled. “Hold her close, Konstantin Volikov.”

Volk gritted his teeth. If there was ever a red flag, it was Elena being unable to read someone. The only ones she couldn’t were Ethereal apparitions and Nemo. Everything screamed that this person was not to be trusted, and that letting him go just like that was a bad idea. At the same time, it seemed like the man was willing to risk provoking and testing him.

He was far too confident. Suicidal almost, unless he knew something.

“Knock them out,” he ordered. “And-“

There was an explosion outside, and the sounds of gauss and plasma fire. The ground shook and people fell to the floor, including some of his own. The man glanced to the sound of the explosion and his balance never wavered. Fingertips pressed together, he just appraised them with an amused expression.

Volk’s weapon came up, and he immediately began moving back. Too late to deal with the mysterious man. “Retreat!”

Either ADVENT had prepared this as an ambush, or someone had decided to investigate the guards earlier than expected. The man had probably somehow known he was coming, and this entire event was a trap.

They burst out the door, and found themselves in the middle of a firefight.

He almost froze in place when he saw who it was. It wasn’t ADVENT which was moving in. It was XCOM.

What?

How?

Why?

One of his soldiers fell back as a plasma bolt slammed into her head. Green projectiles flew around him. They were not prepared for ADVENT special forces, let alone XCOM. They didn’t bother fighting when they were so outmatched, and they retreated as fast as they could, falling back, taking cover and firing stray projectiles as the unknown number of XCOM soldiers advanced.

More of his people fell. He maybe got a few glancing blows on some of the black-armored XCOM soldiers.

No psions, thankfully was what it looked like.

“Volk!” Elena shouted, and pushed him to the ground as a rocket flew past and impacted close to them. His eardrums rang and he was flung against a tent, ripping a hole through it. Panic gripped him as he looked for Elena, and thankfully saw her a short distance away, stunned, but still visibly breathing.

Then went cold again as one of the XCOM soldiers reached her and a glove slammed into her head, knocking her out. The second wind coming to him, he pushed himself up – only to be thrown back to the ground as another explosion lifted him off his feet, and this time when he hit the ground, his consciousness faded.
The only thing left was panic, which persisted into his dreams.

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Office of the Chancellor, ADVENT HQ – Switzerland

6/12/2017 – 11:25 P.M.

Saudia looked at Powell, her face set in a frown. “This is not acceptable.”

“No, Chancellor, it is not,” Powell conceded. “We’re adapting as we speak. Coordination within applicable agencies is commencing.”

“Useful after the fact,” Saudia said pointedly. “But this was something we should have anticipated.”

Reports had been coming in. Suicide bombings, murders, assassinations. At first she’d thought they were random attacks unleashed by the Zararch, but autopsies and breakdowns of them revealed a very clear pattern, far more subtle than she had expected, and an action which she’d wondered if the Collective would pursue at all.

The targeting was not random.

But the targets were not high-profile figures. The dead included low-key, but important scientists, medics, engineers, community leaders, and individuals which didn’t have around-the-clock security details around them. A critical part of the war effort, but not one which was publicly known or ‘important’ enough to warrant individual protection.

Even if they were around known figures like the Empress, the violence only seemed to sprout because they’d been found out, and forced to defend themselves. Surveillance operations against them. The one piece of good news seemed to be that the measures taken to prevent another assassination of the Imperial family were working, with some exceptions.

“I suppose this means that the Battlemaster is no longer in charge,” Powell rubbed his chin. “He wouldn’t sanction assassinations against an enemy, even military targets – and the number of dead go far beyond the military.”

“Unlikely,” Saudia conceded, lacing her fingers together. “Not that it matters much. He’ll go along with it. This likely was authorized by the Imperator, and there is a line that the Battlemaster will not challenge.”

“He is unlikely to take any part in it,” Powell nodded. “Nonetheless we’ll be able to use it against them, as he is the face of the Collective – for better or worse.”

“I’m not concerned with that right now,” Saudia stood. “What I am concerned about is that the Zararch are mobilizing to target and cripple our best and brightest. They are one major reason we are holding our own right now. Even several of the Generals are being taken out, and that is to say nothing of the sabotage which has happened.”

“It’s not been wholly successful,” Powell reminded her, leaning back in his chair. “There’s been multiple thwarted attempts, especially against our military forces. But I agree – too many got through. I believe the consensus is that our science and engineering leads need protection. Same with state and community leaders.”

“And too many have been infiltrated,” Saudia muttered, standing by the window, looking out.
“And we don’t have enough personnel or psions to perform a sweep like what you did to ADVENT Intelligence.”

“Not everywhere,” Powell agreed, consulting his tablet. “But PATRIOT put together an interesting interpretation of the data. It might give us indication of where the Collective may be planning to strike next. South America, the Midwest of America, Southeast Asia. Not that other areas were untouched – but there’s been a concerted effort to weaken us there.”

“And just as Scipio is about to commence,” she rubbed her chin. “Fortunately they seem to have not discovered that yet – though the SAS is being more decisive than we anticipated.”

“Agreed,” Powell adjusted his glasses. “It seems the Collective judged correctly that they could push Betos in that direction. Very easy to kill her confidant and pin it on us. It will make Scipio somewhat more difficult, but still doable. They’re inheriting nations which have collapsed. The scope can be expanded as long as we account for it.”

“So long as Laura is prepared,” Saudia nodded. “Because it sounds like the Collective is signaling that more attacks are coming. This plus Scipio will be…chaotic. And I doubt the Zararch will stop their assassinations in the meantime.”

“No, they will not.”

“Then they must be mitigated.”

“Of course, Chancellor,” Powell stood. “And we have a plan to do so.”

“Present it then,” she turned back to him. “Because I will have to address this – and I’d prefer it be sooner than later.”

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Outside Busan – Korea

6/13/2017 – 7:24 A.M.

Busan, the site of continuous defeats for the Collective.

Today that would change.

Patricia stood outside of the long empty shelled plains of the no man’s land, with the legions of Collective soldiers straight from Desolan. There was a slight sense of déjà vu from New York, but there were numerous differences. Namely that she was far outside the city which was doubtless preparing for the surprise army.

Sectoid transport ships had entered through the atmosphere and had been setting down behind her. Executors and Heralds had moved into positions; out of effective range, but at the ready. The objective right now was just to wait and watch. Let ADVENT prepare themselves as the Reinarm Cannon moved into position.

Patricia closed her eyes and reached out.

There were psions spread out throughout the Busan lines. The moment she touched their minds they recoiled and sounded an alarm that spread as fast as their minds could carry it. That she was here, and she was going to attack. With some effort she could have broken through, and then unexpectedly a shroud manifested.
T’Leth. Unsurprising that ADVENT and XCOM had augmented the front lines with the Sovereign’s poison. No doubt they argued it was necessary, and if the goal was to stop her, it was. Regardless, T’Leth would not save them today.

Watch well, ADVENT.

The end begins now.

“The Reinarm Cannon is in position,” the Andromedon informed. “We are prepared to fire on your command.”

No sense in waiting any longer.

“Fire.”

The thousands assembled from far away watched the destruction unfold. Streams of elerium-laced nuclear lava which fell from the sky, directly onto the strong fortifications of Busan which had withstood countless shells, bombardments, and even an Ethereal attack. Each droplet of nuclear fire destroyed vast swathes, leaving only radioactive sludge in its wake.

The trenches were flooded with liquid annihilation, and Flak Towers melted under the nuclear heat. Swaths of structures were swept away as the foundations dissolved. Nothing could stand against it or stop it. Patricia and the aliens watched as the city crumbled before them. Nothing would be preserved.

It would be razed and something new built atop it.

The bombardment took place for long minutes. The protection T’Leth had imposed was gone, either from him realizing it was pointless, or because not even the Orbs could resist being destroyed. Then the streams of fire from the sky stopped, leaving only ruin and smoke in the aftermath.

“Reinarm Cannon reserves depleted, Harbinger. We confirm the city defenses have been destroyed.”

It wasn’t a complete destruction, there was simply not enough nuclear lava to melt the whole city, but that wasn’t necessary. All the defenses were gone, dozens of skyscrapers had been razed, and the devastation had swept throughout the city. Those who hadn’t been killed instantly would have been killed now due to the radiation – or would be dying a painful death right now.

Patricia lifted a hand, and performed a telekinetic pull over the entirety of the no man’s land. Mines and ordinance which had been placed underground were lifted into the air and promptly exploded, though the shrapnel was caught in the telekinetic bubble. She let the pieces fall back to the ground, which was now safe to traverse.

“March.”

Seekers and drones flew forward first, to scout and report. Together the armies marched to the ruined city of Busan, this time unable to be stopped or halted. But as they got closer, there was something which was…odd. It was faint, but she realized that the shroud had fallen over the city again.

Blocking her.

Why?
There was definitely no counterattack coming, nothing indicated that. Collective teams were already moving deeper into Busan to gain control of the land itself. The radiation would be an issue for hours yet, which was why only Vitakara teams in radiation suits and Andromedons were moving deeper in.

Her suit was also treated to enter hazardous zones.

An incoming message sounded. From one of the teams. “Enemy contact, Harbinger, we’re putting them down.”

“Contact?” She demanded. “Who?”

“Survivors.”

She determined where the strike team was, and teleported to them – and entered the center of a full-blown firefight. One side superior, but on the back foot by an enemy which was only driven by hate. Somehow, the surviving ADVENT soldiers were still alive – and not just alive, but fighting back.

They should have been killed by the radiation.

Though she saw they weren’t unaffected. Many of them had thrown their helmets off, chunks of armor were missing from others. They looked pale, sickly, and sweating. Telltale signs of the radiation poisoning. It would be minutes or hours until they expired. Dead men walking, who were stopping to throw up every few minutes.

But with bile and puke smeared on their faces and lips, they got back up, clutching their weapons and charging forward, fury in their eyes. They were dead, the only thing left was to kill as many aliens as possible. The Andromedons were not prepared for this sudden suicidal charge. A few had fallen, and the Vitakara seemed shocked it was happening at all.

Shots in the arms or chests only slowed them down; an injury which would have incapacitated only slowed. It didn’t stop one soldier from throwing herself at a Vitakara, holding a plasma grenade and then detonating it. It didn’t stop the man with no arm from firing his sidearm into an Andromedon suit tank, causing a rupture.

Was this T’Leth? Puppeting all of these soldiers?

No.

That she would have been able to tell, and the only thing she knew for sure was that the Orbs were preventing her from penetrating the minds of all of them. It was T’Leth letting them take their last revenge.

Unexpected, but they would be dealt with.

As her mind processed this in seconds, her wrist flung up and all of the immediate ADVENT survivors were sent into the air. A fist closed and their bodies imploded in on themselves. Now they were dead.

More messages had come in. Pockets of suicidal survivors who were assaulting other teams and causing more unanticipated casualties.

She sighed, and set her lips in a thin line.
This was, unfortunately, going to take longer than she had expected.

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*Situation Room – Mars Collective Base*

6/12/2017 – 9:25 A.M.

“This is not acceptable.”

Quisilia released a sigh. “Well, to be fair, it has been a full year since the conflict began.”

“Considering that very important context was withheld from me, as well as information about our objectives and enemy, one could argue I was misled from the beginning.”

“Circumstances have changed.” Quisilia shook his head. “I dislike that it has become necessary, but the longer ADVENT remains on Earth, the stronger they will become. Their removal must be accelerated, and all methods are on the table.”

The Battlemaster appraised the Ethereal opposite him. This was a step which he had wondered if the Imperator would take, but had been uncertain if he would go through with it. It was not a relieving of command – not fully – but it was a clear signal that his authority was no longer final.

It was not good, for a multitude of reasons.

It was insulting, if not fully unexpected. “The war could be won without resorting to assassinations. Let ADVENT fall in the field of battle, or do you believe that our forces are incapable of facing ADVENT?”

“Of course not,” Quisilia flipped a hand. “However, ADVENT is quite resilient, as you know, and that will take time. With T’Leth becoming more directly involved, time is something which is a critical factor. This cannot be won through a normal conquest. All strategies are being considered, and while I am aware that some of them you consider distasteful – they are justifiable.”

“And how far will it go?” The Battlemaster demanded. “The Reinarm Cannon will do nothing but escalate further. You still intend to utilize the Bringer. That will never receive my support.”

“And this is why the Imperator has superseded your authority,” Quisilia reminded him. “If you cannot bend on this matter, then there isn’t much he can do but authorize the Zar’Chon and Patricia to act as they see fit. At times it seems you are reluctant to fight this war at all.”

“It has certainly faded as the Imperator’s lies have been exposed,” the Battlemaster hissed coldly. “He lied about why we were fighting. He lied about the Sovereign Ones. He lied about the Bringer. All for a plan which is unnecessary, and poses a direct threat to everything that I have built.”

“You?”

A telekinetic pulse bent the equipment around them. The Battlemaster took a step towards Quisilia. “Yes, what I have built, Quisilia. I have been working to build the Collective military into what it is. I built it to protect what I thought was our mission. Our Collective to combat the Synthesized. Yet me, Sana, even Aegis did more to build the Collective than the Imperator did.”

The Battlemaster spun to the side. “The Collective was a means to an end for him. It always has been, and so long as he is not threatened, it does not matter what comes of it. That is unacceptable
to me, Quisilia. I cannot stop or countermand him, but do not expect my cooperation in these efforts.”

“That would be…unwise.”

“I do not care,” the Battlemaster shook his head. “The military follows me. Not you. Not the Imperator. I will continue as I planned, but I will not condone what the Zararch and Patricia have begun. I will ensure ADVENT knows of it as well.”

Quisilia sighed. “I will convey this to the Imperator,” he flipped a weapon in his hand. “However, you are not making it easier for yourself so long as you persist.”

“I understand.”

“I certainly hope you do, Battlemaster.”

Quisilia vanished through a portal after that, leaving him alone.

Things were moving fast now.

Very fast.

The Imperator was making it clear that he was out of favor. The Battlemaster suspected that it was only a matter of time before a more serious discussion about his role took place. The Imperator couldn’t remove him from control over the Collective military, but he might try. Later, though, all he needed to do was find a reason.

And he was sure that the Imperator did not know how to truly fight a Sovereign One. Using the Bringer was far too risky, and if they were pressed too hard, T’Leth may just rapidly improve Humanity. And the Imperator’s own distrust of Mosrimor meant they would be unprepared.

On this path, the Collective would be headed to collapse.

Concrete steps needed to be taken to prevent this. Not just words. The only way this worked to his advantage was that the Imperator almost certainly had the wrong read on him. Right now he considered him insubordinate – not treasonous. That was something he could manage.

But very carefully. He sensed Yang, and indicated that she should come meet him.

It was time for another meeting with the insurgent Andromedons.

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To be continued in Chapter 64

The Vow and the Wish

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